Authenticity and Influence: Interactions Between Social Media Micro-Influencers and Generation Z on Instagram

The Power of Connection: How Micro-Influencers Build Trust and on Instagram

by

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Abstract

Title: Authenticity and Influence: Interactions Between Social Media Micro-Influencers and Generation Z on Instagram

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Thesis purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how Generation Z perceives authenticity in the content shared by micro-influencers on Instagram and to identify the specific aspects of authenticity that influence their engagement with those influencers.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative methodology grounded in social constructionist and relativist philosophical approaches, utilizing an abductive strategy for thematic analysis. To gather the necessary insights for our research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten research participants.

Theoretical perspectives: The two principal theoretical frameworks guiding this research are the Uses and Gratification Theory and the Source Credibility Model. These theories were selected after a thorough examination of relevant literature, forming the basis for a conceptual framework designed to steer the study's direction.

Findings: Our findings indicate that content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust significantly contribute to the perception of authenticity in micro-influencers' content on Instagram among Gen Z. These elements closely align with the attributes of authenticity outlined in our literature review, such as performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping the perceptions of this demographic.

Managerial Implications: This study highlights several managerial implications for leveraging micro-influencer marketing on Instagram, particularly with respect to targeting Generation Z. Key takeaways include prioritizing authenticity, building trust through transparency and shared values, creating emotionally resonant content, tailoring content to Gen Z's interests, and maintaining consistency in branding. By following these guidelines, managers can effectively engage Gen Z through micro-influencers.

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1 Introduction

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the thesis by outlining the research problem and defining the study's aims within its overall framework. It begins with a detailed examination of the study's focal point: interactions between social media micro-influencers and Generation Z on Instagram. This section highlights how these dynamics contribute to the broader field of influencer marketing. Subsequently, the chapter addresses the research challenges and objectives, clearly specifying the study's contributions and its scope. The introduction concludes with a comprehensive overview of the thesis structure, providing a clear roadmap for the reader.

1.1 Background

Recent shifts in the social media landscape have marked the emergence of micro-influencers as key figures captivating both brands and consumers. This shift is notably profound among Generation Z—the first to experience a fully digital upbringing. The research of Lee et al. (2021) emphasizes this change, pointing out the critical role of platforms such as Instagram in contemporary marketing tactics. Influencer marketing, a method outlined by Campbell & Farrell (2020), typically involves compensating individuals who promote products or services through social media platforms. This strategy has gained traction across diverse demographic segments.

Among these, Generation Z stands out for its tech-savviness and a strong preference for authenticity in online interactions, as noted by Wandhe (2024). This transition underscores the unique appeal of micro-influencers on platforms like Instagram, catalyzing a paradigm shift in advertising. Atiq et al. (2022) note that digital influencers are now viewed as more trustworthy than traditional media. Influencers who mirror Gen Z's values resonate deeply, reshaping brand-consumer interactions, as observed by Wolf (2020).

Micro-influencers, characterized by having smaller but highly engaged follower counts (usually ranging from 1,000 to 100,000), have established a marketing niche through authenticity and peer-like connections, influencing consumer choices (Jin, S. V., et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2024). Their genuine rapport and close-knit communities offer unique value,

contrasting with broader-reaching influencers by creating personal connections with their audience (Wang et al., 2023). This dynamic is particularly pertinent for engaging with Gen Z.

Illustrating this trend, Gillette, a well-known razor manufacturer among older generations, recognized the importance of connecting with Generation Z. To achieve this, they shifted their marketing efforts towards sponsoring beauty micro-influencers. The success of their #ChooseToSmooth campaign stemmed from the authenticity conveyed by these influencers through their photos, GIFs, and videos. With less than 1,000 tagged Instagram posts, the influencers collectively reached over 476,000 followers, boasting an impressive 2.2% average engagement rate (Carroll, 2021). Similarly, beauty brand Glossier's micro-influencer collaborations have enhanced its brand visibility and cemented its presence among a dedicated Instagram community, underscoring the effectiveness of such partnerships (Influencity, 2023).

The rise of micro-influencers is propelled by several factors: their authentic content, expertise, and engaging communication styles, which align with Gen Z's values. Hill (2023) points out that Instagram's algorithms favor content that elicits strong engagement, often amplifying the reach of micro-influencers within their target segments. This algorithmic preference boosts their visibility, maintaining the genuine engagement that appeals to Gen Z and signifying the evolving dynamics of influencer marketing towards authenticity.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the significance of these influencers in defining marketing strategies and shaping consumer preferences becomes increasingly apparent. Their ability to authentically engage with Gen Z presents a promising paradigm for the future of online marketing, reflecting a broader shift towards authenticity and tailored communication in consumer relations. What distinguishes micro-influencers is their ability to embody genuineness, offering an alternative to the often distant celebrity or mega-influencer (Park et al., 2021). This authenticity resonates with Gen Z, who value transparency in marketing. By providing honest reviews and recommendations, micro-influencers build a foundation of trust and openness, appealing to Gen Z's discerning preferences (Singer et al., 2023).

Gerlich (2023) highlights that micro-influencers' impact reaches beyond endorsing products; they also lead trends, shape public opinions, and play key roles in advancing social movements. Their platforms become arenas for dialogue, learning, and community, vital for Gen Z's engagement with social media. The interactive nature of platforms like Instagram fosters a two-way conversation, deepening the personal connection with influencers. Brands, recognizing the

diminishing efficacy of traditional advertising with this demographic, are increasingly turning to collaborations with micro-influencers to target diverse groups and interests more authentically and interactively.

Looking ahead, the landscape of influencer marketing is poised to evolve further, emphasizing collaborations with micro-influencers. This strategy not only allows brands to target diverse groups and interests more precisely but also fosters a more authentic and engaging exchange with their audience. With Gen Z driving changes in the consumer market, micro-influencers are becoming increasingly essential in modernizing marketing strategies, emphasizing the ongoing need for genuine interactions in the digital era.

1.2 Problematization

The authenticity of content has emerged as a crucial factor that influences consumer engagement and trust, especially among Generation Z—digital natives with a keen understanding of social media dynamics (Singer et al., 2023). This demographic's brand engagement is increasingly influenced by micro-influencers, whose perceived genuineness and relatability make them more impactful than traditional celebrities (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). Despite the extensive research on influencer marketing, there remains a nuanced gap in understanding how Generation Z specifically perceives authenticity in the content of micro-influencers on platforms such as Instagram (Pradhan et al., 2023).

This gap is significant, considering Instagram's role as a primary social media platform for influencer marketing, with over two billion active users and a vast array of influencer engagements (Sprout Social, 2024). Generation Z's perception of authenticity affects not only their engagement with content but also their trust in and loyalty to brands endorsed by influencers (Jose, Ignatius & Thomas, 2024). Thus, exploring this perception can provide valuable insights into effective marketing strategies tailored to this key demographic.

Moreover, authenticity in influencer marketing is linked to concepts of transparency, genuine interaction, and relatability, which are prioritized differently by various demographics, particularly Generation Z (Rome Business School, 2023). Understanding these nuances is crucial for brands and marketers aiming to foster a genuine connection with their audience, ensuring that their strategies resonate well with the values and expectations of Generation Z.

This research aim to delve into the perception of authenticity among Generation Z towards their engagement with micro-influencer content on Instagram, and to examine which specific aspects of content authenticity contribute to Gen Z's engagement with influencers. It seeks to unravel the components of authenticity as perceived by Generation Z, examining how these perceptions influence their engagement levels, trust in micro-influencers, and the persuasive power of such content in their purchasing decisions. By doing so, the study aspires to offer brands and marketers insight into harnessing the authentic appeal of micro-influencers to foster a genuine connection with this key demographic, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their influencer marketing strategies.

1.3   Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how Generation Z perceives authenticity in the content shared by micro-influencers on Instagram and to identify the specific aspects of authenticity that influence their engagement with those influencers.

By pinpointing these key aspects, the research offers actionable insights for marketers and brands seeking to strengthen their influence and effectiveness in the competitive social media landscape.

Thus, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: How does Generation Z perceive the authenticity in the content posted by micro-influencers on Instagram?

RQ2: What are the specific aspects of authenticity that contribute to Gen Z engagement?

1.4   Intended Contributions

This study seeks to elucidate the intricate relationship between Generation Z's perceptions of authenticity and their engagement with micro-influencers on Instagram. In doing so, it aims to enrich the academic dialogue surrounding influencer marketing, authenticity, consumer behavior, and brand engagement, particularly within the digital-native demographic. The findings aim to offer dual contributions: theoretically, by integrating and expanding upon

existing frameworks in influencer marketing and authenticity; and practically, by providing marketers and brands with actionable insights to tailor their strategies more effectively for engaging Generation Z through micro-influencers. This integrated approach promises to shed light on the underexplored facets of authenticity in influencer marketing, providing a robust foundation for future inquiries and strategic formulations.

1.5 Delimitations

This study is delimited to exploring how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of Instagram content posted by micro-influencers and examining which specific aspects of content authenticity contribute to Gen Z's engagement with influencers. The research will not address other social media platforms or broader categories of influencers beyond micro-influencers. It will specifically focus on Generation Z individuals aged 18 to 27, excluding younger members of Gen Z and other generational cohorts. These boundaries are set to ensure a detailed and concentrated examination of content authenticity and its influence on engagement within this specific demographic and platform context.

1.6 Thesis Outline

This section serves as a roadmap to guide the reader through the chapters and their corresponding investigative foci. The master thesis comprises six chapters, each deliberately structured to facilitate answering the research purpose.

Chapter 1: Introduction - This chapter introduces the reader to the research subject of the thesis. It includes a background of the topic, problematization, and the purpose and research questions. Additionally, it outlines the delimitations of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review - The second chapter provides a thorough overview of existing literature on the key concepts relevant to this thesis. It presents a conceptual framework. This foundation aids in contextualizing the research within the broader academic discourse.

Chapter 3: Methodology - Utilizing a social constructionist epistemology, this chapter outlines the qualitative research approach used, describing the abductive reasoning process that

integrates theoretical frameworks with empirical data from semi-structured interviews for in-depth analysis.

Chapter 4: Analysis - This chapter presents the empirical findings, structured around key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. It offers a detailed examination of how interactions with micro-influencers can influence brand perception among Generation Z on Instagram.

Chapter 5: Discussion - In this chapter addresses the implications of the empirical data, adjusts the initial conceptual framework accordingly, and highlights the insights gained from the study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion - The final chapter draws conclusions from the main findings, addressing the research questions, and discussing theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future research opportunities in influencer marketing.

2 Literature Review

This chapter conducts a systematic literature review and lays the theoretical groundwork essential for this thesis, which focuses on the authenticity that Generation Z perceives in micro-influencers on Instagram and how it influences their engagement. The review explores key topics such as the rise of micro-influencers, social media marketing, authenticity, Generation Z, and Instagram. Additionally, we introduce a conceptual framework based on the literature review and theory.

2.1 Gen Z: Digital Natives Redefining Engagement

The swift transformation of social media platforms has significantly influenced marketing strategies, ushering in an era where micro-influencers with niche followings hold sway. This transition is particularly evident among Generation Z, a demographic immersed in digital culture from birth, exhibiting distinct preferences compared to earlier generations. This literature review seeks to delve into this transformation, examining the influence of social media, the rise of micro-influencers, the unique traits of Generation Z, consumer engagement dynamics, Instagram's profound role in influencer marketing, and the crucial significance of authenticity in fashioning Gen Z's views and actions.

Social media platforms are by design crafted to support the creation, sharing, and mutual exchange of content, thus fostering expansive global networks and interactions (Khan et al., 2021; Weismueller et al., 2020). Instagram stands out as a key platform for influencer marketing, drawing a diverse audience with its emphasis on visual content, especially appealing to the crucial demographic of Generation Z (Gerlich, 2023).

Micro-influencers, known for their smaller but highly engaged audiences, have risen in prominence because of their perceived authenticity, niche expertise, and capacity to foster authentic connections with their followers (Ryding et al., 2023; Shen, 2021). Their influence extends beyond mere product endorsements, shaping opinions, setting trends, and fostering communities around shared interests and values.

Generation Z's interaction with social media and micro-influencers is marked by a quest for authenticity, transparency, and relatability. This demography values genuine, unfiltered content and is more likely to engage with brands and influencers that embody these traits (Vrontis et al., 2021; Monacho & Slamet, 2023). Their preferences and actions on social media highlight the crucial role of authenticity in influencer marketing strategies.

The engagement of consumers, a crucial indicator of the success of online marketing initiatives, is significantly affected by the authenticity of influencer-shared content. Content that strikes a chord with the audience's principles and interests can cultivate a sense of community and loyalty among followers, boosting brand visibility and trustworthiness (Pradhan et al., 2023; Kim, 2020).

Instagram's role as a leading platform for influencer marketing is undisputed, with its vast user base and array of features supporting diverse content creation, sharing, and interaction. Its algorithmic preferences further amplify the reach of micro-influencers, making it a critical platform for brands aiming to connect with Generation Z (Hill, 2023).

The concept of authenticity, integral to the success of micro-influencers, encompasses transparency, sincerity, and relatability in content creation and interaction. Authenticity not only enhances the influencer's credibility but also fosters trust and loyalty among followers, underpinning the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies (Lee et al., 2021; Scholz, 2021).

This literature review explores the interactions among micro-influencers and Generation Z, as well as highlighting the paramount importance of authenticity in defining the trajectory of influencer marketing. It lays the groundwork for further investigations into how Generation Z's perception of authenticity influences their interaction with micro-influencers and their content on Instagram.

2.1.1   Social Media

According to Khan et al. (2021), social media platforms are digital spaces designed specifically for creating, sharing, and exchanging information, including text, photos, videos, and links. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn. These platforms enable real-time connection, interaction, and engagement globally (Weismueller et al., 2020). We

chose Instagram for our research because the Indian government banned TikTok on 29 June 2020 (Germain, 2024), and some of our interview participants reside there. This made Instagram the most relevant platform for our study.

Ki & Kim (2019) describe social media as environments that facilitate communication, engagement, and content sharing, connecting users with friends, family, and communities regardless of physical location. Users can create profiles, post updates, and interact with content, fostering a sense of community (Lee et al., 2021).

Lin et al. (2019) argues that social media platforms accommodate various content types and engagement levels. For instance, Facebook and LinkedIn focus on building networks, while Twitter (now X) enables users to post brief messages or tweets to followers (Wansi, 2020). Instagram and TikTok are geared towards visual content, such as photos and videos, often accompanied by captions or music. LinkedIn serves as a professional network where users can showcase expertise and explore career opportunities. Platforms like Reddit and Quora are forums for sharing knowledge and engaging in discussions about specific topics (Shobowale, 2022).

Mishra and Ashfaq (2023) note that social media tools allow users to create, customize, and share various content forms, from text updates to videos, which can entertain, educate, or inspire. Users can also share links to provide additional context or resources (Gerlich, 2023). Features like live streaming and direct messaging enhance real-time interaction and private communication (Fonseca, 2019).

Martínez-López et al. (2020) state that social media has fostered an environment that enables more direct and interactive communication with consumers, cultivating a more creative and informal relationship.

Finally, while social media platforms offer powerful tools for information dissemination, activism, marketing, customer service, and community building, they also present challenges such as misinformation, privacy issues, and digital overexposure. Users must navigate these platforms thoughtfully and responsibly (Koay et al., 2021). Social media, particularly Instagram, remains central to modern communication, offering myriad opportunities for connection and interaction in an expanding digital world (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Atiq et al., 2022).

2.1.2 Micro-Influencers

According to Ryding et al. (2023), Micro-influencers have cultivated a committed and actively involved audience on various social media platforms, generally within a particular specialty or domain of interest. In contrast to macro-influencers or celebrities with many followers, micro-influencers possess a narrower yet more targeted audience, typically consisting of 1,000 to 100,000 followers (Shen, 2021; Chen et al., 2024). Micro-influencers frequently position themselves as authoritative figures or experts in their field, disseminating content that aligns with their audience's interests, passions, and requirements. Micro-influencers are commonly regarded as more relevant, honest, and trustworthy by their followers than prominent influencers, owing to their more minor yet highly engaged following (Pick, 2020).

Micro-influencers typically exhibit more significant engagement levels than more prominent influencers or superstars. Their limited yet concentrated audience facilitates more substantial engagements, cultivating a feeling of camaraderie and affiliation. Followers regard micro-influencers as more relatable and real. The individuals frequently share personal anecdotes, experiences, and ideas, establishing an authentic rapport with their audience (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021; Atiq et al., 2022).

Their genuineness and openness in generating content enhance the establishment of trust and credibility among their fans. Micro-influencers focus on particular subjects or specialized domains of interest, serving a specific audience with similar interests or preferences.

Gerlich (2023), research suggested they have extensive knowledge, competence, or personal experience in their specific field, establishing them as reliable authorities or influential figures. Micro-influencers generate substantial and valuable content that caters to their audience's particular interests, worries, or challenges (Shobowale, 2022). Through the strategic emphasis on specialized subjects, micro-influencers can cultivate a distinct and individualized persona, thereby distinguishing themselves within the highly competitive realm of social media influencers. Although micro-influencers have fewer followers, they substantially influence their audience (Gupta et al., 2020).

Vanha-Aho (2023) notes that individuals' endorsements, opinions, or suggestions hold significant power and impact their followers' purchasing decisions, brand perceptions, and behaviors. Micro-influencers frequently partner with businesses to provide sponsored content, product evaluations, or promotions that align with their specific area of expertise and effectively

connect with their target audience. Brands acknowledge the significance of collaborating with micro-influencers to effectively reach highly engaged and specific audiences, utilizing their genuineness and credibility to stimulate substantial engagement and conversions (Javed et al., 2021).

Micro-influencers are essential in influencer marketing since they utilize their specialized knowledge, genuineness, and actively involved audience to produce influential and pertinent content. Even though micro-influencers have a lesser number of followers, they exert a substantial impact on consumer behavior and brand engagement (Vanha-Aho, 2023). This makes them essential collaborators for brands that connect with particular demographics or specialized markets on social media platforms (Jin et al., 2019).

2.1.3   Micro-influencers Digital Influence Dynamics

According to Grácio (2021), influence is defined as an individual's ability to affect the perspectives, behaviors, and actions of others. Micro-influencers hold significant sway over their audience, attributable to their knowledge, credibility, authenticity, and rapport-building capabilities. They influence more than just product promotion; they shape their audience's views, preferences, and attitudes (Scholz, 2021). Micro-influencers often use their influence to boost engagement, foster a sense of community, and facilitate meaningful interactions, thereby affecting consumer choices and brand perceptions. Essentially, their impact on social media stems from their ability to authentically engage with a specific audience.

The appeal of micro-influencers for Generation Z extends beyond mere numbers to include nuances of genuine engagement and perceived authenticity (Jin et al., 2019). This demographic, skeptical of traditional advertising, prefers influencers who seem more like a friend-next-door than an untouchable celebrity (Wansi, 2020).

Micro-influencers often specialize in particular topics, which allows them to provide valuable insights and knowledge to their followers. They build trust and credibility through honesty, openness, and integrity. Their authenticity significantly enhances their influence, as their genuine and relatable content resonates deeply with their audience, fostering trust and loyalty. By consistently interacting and being responsive, micro-influencers create strong connections with their followers (Andonopoulos, 2021).

Their engagement—characterized by higher interaction rates compared to mega-influencers—translates into powerful influence, especially in purchasing decisions. For Gen Z, a micro-influencer's recommendation is as impactful as advice from a friend, making them valuable to brands targeting this demographic (Singer et al., 2023).

Elhachadi and Karaduman (2019) note that micro-influencers use their influence to increase public participation, create community, and encourage meaningful interactions. Through authentic engagement and content creation, they influence consumer choices with recommendations, reviews, and endorsements that resonate with their target audience. Additionally, they influence brand perceptions by aligning themselves with brands that reflect their values and resonate with their audience's interests, thereby boosting brand credibility and affinity (Duh & Thabethe, 2021; Chung, Ding & Kalra, 2023). By generating content that reflects their specialized knowledge and personal interests, they establish a genuine connection with their followers (Shen, 2021). Platform like Instagram enable micro-influencers to effectively connect with and captivate specific audiences authentically. This enables them to foster significant connections and influence opinions, behaviours, and actions within particular domains (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

In summary, the impact of micro-influencers on social media is multifaceted, involving elements such as expertise, trustworthiness, genuineness, and engagement. They influence their followers by actively engaging with them and creating relevant content, shaping opinions, behaviors, and actions within specific niches, ultimately affecting consumer decisions and brand perceptions (Tschirpig, 2020).

2.1.4 Generation Z

Generation Z, encompasses those born roughly from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, though the exact birth range can vary depending on different sources and definitions (Jayatissa, 2023). This cohort succeeds Generation Y, commonly called Millennial, and precedes Generation Alpha, encompassing individuals born from the mid-2010s onwards (Tobias, 2020). The Generation Z cohort is distinguished by its unparalleled knowledge and ease with digital technology, social media platforms, and the internet. In contrast to preceding cohorts, who experienced the emergence of technology during their formative years, Generation Z was raised in a society characterized by the pervasive presence of cell phones, social media platforms, and digital devices. They are commonly known as digital natives due to their early exposure to

digital technology and proficiency utilizing many digital tools and platforms (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Sigdel (2021) claims that Individuals utilize various social media sites, including Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube, as their principal means of communication, entertainment, self-expression, and information intake. Generation Z is recognized for its inclination for visual content, concise video formats, and genuine, relatable content disseminated by peers and influencers on various social media platforms (Monacho & Slamet, 2023). Generation Z exhibits significant interconnectedness and social engagement, but frequently within virtual environments. Individuals heavily depend on digital communication technologies, including messaging applications, social media platforms, and video calls, to establish connections with their acquaintances, relatives, and colleagues (Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021).

Social media functions as a medium for Generation Z to articulate their thoughts, exchange personal encounters, participate in societal advocacy, and establish groups centered on shared interests and objectives (Kersbergen & Antheunis, 2020). In their engagements with brands and society, Generation Z has a tendency to prioritize authenticity, diversity, and social responsibility. Consumers exhibit a higher propensity to endorse products and causes congruent with their beliefs, exhibit transparency, and actively contribute to social and environmental concerns. Generation Z anticipates tailored and engaging encounters with brands, accompanied by genuine narrative and significant interaction on social media channels (Wolf, 2020; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021).

2.1.5   Content Marketing

According to Bubphapant and Brandão (2023), content marketing represents a crucial and prevalent tactic that consists of the creation and distribution of valuable information, primarily through online channels. This strategic approach is meticulously designed to attract and engage a specifically targeted audience, thereby fostering profitable interactions. As the digital environment progresses, content marketing has proven indispensable for brands eager to generate leads and achieve authentic engagement. The effectiveness of content marketing stems from its ability to deliver compelling and resonant content to consumers.

In today's digital era, consumers demand authenticity and trust, attributes that content marketing enables brands to develop. Despite the crowded online space, there remains a critical question:

how can brands distinguish themselves? The solution involves harnessing the potential of micro-influencers—social media figures renowned for their targeted, engaging content.

Micro-influencers have become a formidable force in the domain of content marketing, creating distinct niches that deeply connect with their audiences (Park et al., 2021). Unlike traditional celebrities, micro-influencers are everyday individuals with profound knowledge and passion for particular subjects. This specialized focus not only cultivates a robust sense of community and trust but also amplifies the impact of their content marketing initiatives. The perceived authenticity and relatability of their content make micro-influencers particularly effective. They are commonly regarded as more relevant, honest, and trustworthy by their followers than prominent influencers, owing to their smaller yet highly engaged following (Pick, 2020).

Incorporating micro-influencers into content marketing strategies offers brands a distinctive avenue to engage specific audience segments in a personal and compelling manner. Their ability to foster deeper connections and elicit significant engagement rates renders them indispensable in modern marketing strategies. By leveraging the authenticity and expertise of micro-influencers, brands can markedly enhance their influence, deepen consumer relationships, and ultimately elevate their market presence and profitability.

2.1.6   Instagram

Rogers (2021) highlights that Instagram is a prominent social networking, focusing predominantly on visual media, such as photos and videos. The platform is a popular choice for individuals, brands, and influencers for distributing content, engaging with audiences, and promoting products.

Instagram commands a substantial presence with over 2 billion monthly active users, making it the fourth largest social network worldwide (Oladipo, 2024). The user base constitutes about one-quarter of the global monthly active internet users (Mortensen, 2024).

The platform's utility as a robust marketing and promotional tool allows businesses to effectively connect with and captivate their target demographics. Instagram is crucial for displaying products, launching advertising efforts, increasing online and physical store traffic, and is particularly noted for its efficacy in influencer marketing. This strategy involves collaborations between companies and influencers to extend their reach across diverse

consumer bases, amplifying the platform's commercial value (Setiawan & Salim, 2024).

2.1.6.1 Micro-Influencers and Instagram Takeovers

In the dynamic realm of social media marketing, brands are continuously exploring innovative ways to engage their target audiences. A popular strategy that has gained traction is the Instagram takeover, where an influencer assumes control of a brand's account for a specified period (Penttinen, 2022). Fonseca, (2019) explains that during such a takeover, the guest influencer creates and shares content on behalf of the brand, interacting with the audience and injecting a fresh perspective or experience. These takeovers are strategically used to spark excitement, spotlight special events or campaigns, and forge authentic connections with the audience.

Amid a vast landscape of influencers, brands are increasingly opting for micro-influencers to helm these takeovers. Barron (2019) highlights how the boutique hotel chain Kimpton integrates Instagram takeovers into its strategy to collaborate with micro-influencers. In these instances, micro-influencers not only create but also post content as themselves on the brand's Instagram, adding a personal touch.

As social media platforms continue to evolve, such strategies are poised to become even more sophisticated and crucial to marketing success. The emphasis on authentic, user-generated content is key to driving deeper consumer engagement.

2.1.7 Cultivating Authentic Engagement

The examination of consumer engagement in marketing unveils its intricate nature that transcends mere transactions to embrace the development of substantial relationships between consumers and brands. According to Lee et al. (2021), this complexity is especially pronounced in the interactions with Generation Z, a demographic known for their digital proficiency and insistence on authenticity. Studies, including those cited by Wansi (2020), highlight that Gen Z places a high premium on content that is both authentic and relatable, particularly when propagated by micro-influencers on platforms such as Instagram.

According to Pradhan et al. (2023), consumer engagement encompasses not only the initial interaction but also the ongoing connections that consumers form with a brand or product. This expanded view underscores the continuous nature of engagement that extends beyond the first point of contact, fostering long-term relationships and loyalty.

The ascendancy of social media has catalyzed the prominence of influencer marketing, a domain where micro-influencers, characterized by their smaller yet highly active follower bases, are often deemed more genuine and trustworthy than their celebrity counterparts (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). This perceived authenticity is pivotal for authentically engaging Gen Z consumers who favor influencers that project honesty and relatability (Park et al., 2021). The authenticity in question encompasses not only the veracity of the content but also the sincerity embedded in the endorsements of the micro-influencers, fostering a genuine engagement within this demographic. Micro-influencers are transforming the principles of successful marketing with their specialized content and genuine interactions. Their tight-knit communities hold them in high regard, fostering a more personal and credible form of authentic engagement.

Delving deeper, 'authentic' consumer engagement within social media contexts can be described through facets such as rational loyalty—which involves satisfaction, intent to repurchase, and advocacy—as well as emotional attachment, which includes confidence in a brand, trust in its principles, and a profound connection marked by pride and passion (Appelbaum, 2001, cited in Dolan, 2015). These dimensions extend beyond conventional metrics like likes and comments to cover deeper indicators of a consumer relationship, such as trust, emotional attachment, and brand loyalty (Kreling, Meier & Reinecke, 2022; Jun & Yi, 2020). The engagement here is driven by content perceived by Gen Z as authentic and reflective of their values, fostering a robust community sense and belonging. Such connections are essential as they contribute to a sustained interest and deeper loyalty towards a brand, turning casual followers into active promoters and committed patrons (Kim, 2020).

This thesis further explores how authenticity in micro-influencer content influences Gen Z's interaction patterns with brands, their brand perceptions, and their purchasing behaviors. It leverages existing literature that outlines the evolution of consumer engagement from basic transactions to sophisticated relationships marked by emotional and rational loyalty, underscoring the role of micro-influencers in enriching consumer experiences and enhancing brand loyalty (Kääpä, 2021; Jun & Yi, 2020).

The research seeks to offer insights into effective strategies for brands aiming to leverage the influence of micro-influencers to forge genuine connections with Gen Z, thereby not only augmenting brand loyalty but also promoting sustainable business growth in the contemporary digital landscape.

2.2 Concept of Authenticity

Authenticity, as a construct, has evolved significantly across various fields of study, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and marketing. This multidimensional concept is pivotal in understanding consumer behavior, particularly in the context of social media engagement. This section delves into the complexity of authenticity, examining its facets and relevance to the engagement of Generation Z with micro-influencer content on Instagram.

2.2.1 Historical and Philosophical Roots

The notion of authenticity can be traced back to Greek philosophy, encapsulated in the Delphic maxim "know thyself" (Gardner et al., 2011). Heidegger (1962 cited in Igwe & Ekemezie, 2023) later expanded the idea, linking it to the essence of being and the pursuit of an 'authentic' life as one's true self, distinct from societal impositions. In the mid-20th century, existentialists like Sartre explored authenticity as demonstrating 'true fidelity' to oneself by 'experiencing one's freedom' (Tate, 2004). This philosophical journey underscores authenticity as self-awareness and congruence between one's actions and beliefs.

2.2.2 Psychological Perspectives

From a psychological standpoint, authenticity is often associated with self-actualization, a concept Maslow placed at the apex of his hierarchy of needs, describing it as the realization of one's potential (Goldhill, 2016). Ilicic and Webster (2016) elaborate on the concept of authenticity by highlighting that it involves maintaining one's true self and fostering genuine connections in relationships with others.

Building upon this definition, recent research suggests that the pursuit of authenticity should be viewed as a dynamic and ongoing process, rather than a static state (Dammann et al., 2021). It

involves continuous exploration and reaffirmation of one's personal identity, adapting in response to changing circumstances and experiences. This adaptive approach is echoed by Ryan and Ryan (2019), who note that maintaining authenticity requires openness to experience and a willingness to embrace one's true thoughts, feelings, and desires, thereby allowing individuals to grow and evolve as they navigate life's complexities.

Further emphasizing the practical implications of authenticity, it is also crucial for fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships and enhancing psychological well-being. When individuals are authentic, they engage more deeply with their own identities and create an environment of greater trust and openness in their relationships. Such transparency not only strengthens personal connections but also supports a more cohesive social environment, where people are encouraged to express their true selves without fear of judgment or rejection.

2.2.3 Authenticity in Marketing

In marketing, authenticity is seen as a critical factor in shaping brand perception and cultivating consumer loyalty. Gilmore and Pine (2007) highlight how businesses strive to project "authenticity" to meet consumer expectations for genuineness and originality. This pursuit is particularly vital in the digital age, where traditional markers of cultural capital are met with increased skepticism, and consumers favor brands that resonate with their personal identity and values (Wolf, 2020).

Expanding on this concept, Bertilsson and Tarnovskaya (2017) emphasize that authenticity is crucial for consumers in forming brand meanings, a perspective that gains additional relevance on social media platforms like Instagram. Here, authenticity involves micro-influencers demonstrating genuineness, sincerity, and transparency in their content and interactions (Lee et al., 2021).

Scholz (2021) and Vrontis et al. (2021) further detail how micro-influencers embody authenticity by engaging with their audience in a manner that is both transparent and intimate. This includes addressing comments and inquiries personally, which helps establish trust and fosters a positive relationship through consistent and open communication (Tschirpig, 2020).

Khan et al. (2021) discussed the importance of transparency in dealings with sponsored content and brand collaborations, noting that honesty in these areas enhances credibility and minimizes

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the risk of perceived deception (Ki & Kim, 2019; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Additionally, the ability of micro-influencers to connect through relatable content further underscores their authenticity. By sharing personal stories and experiences that align with their followers' interests and challenges, they strengthen the sense of connection and empathy (Koay et al., 2021).

Authenticity also demands consistency in the branding and messaging of micro-influencers. Maintaining a coherent brand identity and narrative across all content, while staying true to their genuine selves, reinforces authenticity and solidifies the bond with their audience (Weismueller et al., 2020).

2.2.4 Authenticity on Social Media

The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the perceptions and expressions of authenticity. Kim and McDonald-Liu (2023) discuss how social media platforms, like Instagram, compel users to perform authenticity, crafting personas that are simultaneously genuine and curated to attract followers and engagement. This performance is paradoxical—it requires maintaining an appearance of authenticity while often engaging in inauthentic behaviors like selective sharing and image manipulation.

On these platforms, authenticity is not just about being true to oneself but also about crafting an image that resonates with an audience. Users often find themselves in a bind between displaying their real lives and enhancing aspects of it to meet the expectations of their followers. This tension leads to behaviors that can seem contradictory. For instance, while users strive to appear unfiltered and spontaneous, they might simultaneously engage in meticulous planning of their posts, editing photos, and carefully timing their interactions to maximize visibility and engagement.

Moreover, the pressure to maintain a consistently appealing online persona can lead some users to downplay or omit aspects of their lives that might not align with the idealized image they wish to project. This selective sharing contributes to a culture where authenticity is both highly sought after and deeply challenging to achieve. It raises questions about the sustainability of such practices and the psychological impact on individuals who continuously manage their online identities in this way.

Thus, the advent of social media has introduced a new paradigm of authenticity that is both performative and paradoxical, requiring individuals to navigate the fine line between authenticity and inauthenticity in their digital interactions.

2.2.5 Complexity of Authenticity & Micro-Influencers

Micro-influencers, typically characterized by their smaller but highly engaged following, are perceived as more authentic compared to their macro counterparts. This perceived authenticity often arises from their capacity for more personalized interactions and content that seems less driven by commercial interests, compared to their macro-influencer counterparts (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu, 2019). For Generation Z, these traits are particularly significant; they not only look for, but actively prioritize authenticity and personal connection, qualities they find in micro-influencers. This demographic values trust and seeks relationships with brands and personalities that exhibit transparency and sincerity, making the genuine engagement of micro-influencers highly effective.

In the evolving landscape of social media marketing, the role of micro-influencers is nuanced by the intricate balance they must strike between authenticity and their commercial pursuits. While they share aspects of their personal lives, micro-influencers also weave in sponsored content, navigating the delicate intersection of staying true to their personal brand while meeting business objectives (Elhachadi & Karaduman, 2019). This balance is critical as it directly impacts Generation Z's perception of an influencer's authenticity. Research indicates that this demographic's trust, loyalty, and consequent engagement with content on platforms like Instagram are heavily influenced by their perceptions of authenticity. This has been documented in studies which suggest a direct correlation between perceived authenticity and consumer engagement behaviors, underscoring the strategic importance of genuine influencer interactions (Singer et al., 2023; Hill, 2023).

2.2.6 Aspects of Authenticity in Micro-Influencer Content

The authenticity of micro-influencer content is richly multi-dimensional. Drawing on the work of Chen et al. (2024), and Singer et al. (2023), this study identifies four key dimensions of authenticity: performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility. In the

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subsequent subsections, we will explain each dimension, providing an understanding of what makes the micro-influencer content attributes authentically resonate with audiences.

2.2.6.1 Performable Authenticity

Performable Authenticity in the context of content created by micro-influencers refers to the strategic expression of authenticity that is crafted to resonate effectively with their audience while still remaining true to the influencer's persona (Chen et al, 2024). Taylor (2022) discusses how influencers on Instagram are shifting towards using more candid, disposable-style photos to project performative authenticity. They strive to resonate with everyday users by appearing more genuine and less concerned with perfecting their images through filters. This trend towards seeking authenticity paradoxically makes their content seem even more staged and performative.

Micro-influencers, typically known for their niche expertise and closer relationships with their audience, use performable authenticity to enhance their credibility and relatability. They carefully select which aspects of their personality, experiences, and insights to share, aiming to present these traits in the most authentic yet appealing manner possible. This isn't about fabricating a persona, but rather about emphasizing certain true elements of themselves that align with both their own values and the expectations of their followers. This concept combines genuine self-presentation with an awareness of how it will be received by followers.

2.2.6.2 Affinity

Micro-influencers excel at cultivating deep connections with their audience, thereby fostering a powerful sense of affinity. This unique bond is primarily built on two pillars: consistency and transparency, which set them apart from celebrity influencers who may endorse a broad range of products (Chen et al., 2024). Micro-influencers prioritize authenticity, consistently delivering content that aligns with their personal values and interests. This approach creates a sense of familiarity and trust with their followers, resonating strongly with Gen Z—a demographic that values genuine content and tends to distrust overly polished advertising (Gerlich, 2023; Belanche et al., 2021).

Micro-influencers are also noted for their transparency in disclosing sponsored content and sharing genuine experiences with products. This honesty enhances their genuineness, giving

their audience the impression of receiving an unfiltered perspective (Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020).

Furthermore, by catering to specific niches, micro-influencers attract a community of followers with similar interests. This targeted approach ensures that their recommendations are highly relevant and personalized. Imagine receiving product suggestions from a close friend who shares your taste in fashion or your passion for a specific video game genre—this is the essence of micro-influencer affinity. Followers perceive them not as distant celebrities, but as trusted friends making recommendations based on shared interests. This sense of community encourages a two-way dialogue that further strengthens their bond (Gerlich, 2023).

Ultimately, the strength of these connections depends on the influencer's ability to engage with topics that resonate deeply with their audience and to foster a meaningful interaction during their communications (Belanche et al., 2021).

2.2.6.3 Uniqueness

Uniqueness here refers to a influencer's apparent originality. It is characterized by their autonomy, creativity, and distinctiveness (Zniva, Weitzl & Lindmoser, 2023). Chen et al. (2024) suggest that the way micro-influencers present themselves is not just a marker of social status but also communicates a distinct sense of personal identity and the uniqueness of the products they represent, a concept referred to as self-branding practice. This approach enables them to stand out in a crowded market by aligning their personal image with the distinctiveness of the brands they endorse. By crafting a unique personal brand that reflects their individual traits and lifestyle, micro-influencers effectively differentiate themselves from competitors, attracting a more engaged and loyal audience.

Building on this idea, Vrontis et al. (2021) highlight that the perception of originality and uniqueness in content significantly enhances consumers' likelihood to engage with the influencer. More specifically, it increases their propensity to follow the influencer's recommendations and to advocate for others to follow suit.

Furthermore, this unique content not only captures attention but also fosters a deep sense of trust and credibility, which encourages followers to become advocates for the influencer. This dynamic illustrates that the uniqueness in an influencer's content is crucial for forging a stronger, more personal connection with the audience—a key component in today's influencer marketing strategies

2.2.6.4 Message Credibility

Micro-influencers hold an advantage when it comes to message credibility. Unlike celebrity influencers with broad appeal, micro-influencers often cultivate a niche audience. They focus on specific areas like sustainable beauty products, gaming peripherals, or parenthood hacks. By consistently delivering content within this niche, they establish themselves as authorities in their field (Ryding et al., 2023). Their deep knowledge and targeted content resonate more strongly with their audience, making their recommendations more persuasive.

The impact of micro-influencers on consumer behavior is particularly significant. According to Gerlich (2023), their endorsements often result in higher conversion rates because followers regard their recommendations as credible and trustworthy. Consumers perceive their recommendations as credible and trustworthy because they view micro-influencers as more relatable than celebrities. This relatability is further bolstered by the personalized approach micro-influencers take with their followers. Unlike larger influencers who may struggle to maintain a two-way dialogue, micro-influencers frequently engage with their audience. This interaction fosters a sense of community and makes followers feel valued, which strengthens the influencer's credibility in their eyes.

2.2.7 Generation Z Perceived Authenticity

For Generation Z, authenticity is not just a preference but an expectation. Studies indicate that Gen Z values authentic expressions and can detect inauthenticity swiftly (Cavanaugh, 2019). This generational cohort, having grown up with digital technology, is adept at navigating between genuine and curated content, which significantly influences their engagement with social media.

Growing up in an era dominated by social media, Gen Z has developed a keen ability to discern between content that is genuinely reflective of real experiences and that which is heavily curated to project a certain image. Their familiarity with digital platforms means they are not only consumers of content but also critics of its authenticity. This critical eye affects how they interact with brands and influencers online. For instance, they tend to favor brands that engage in transparent communication and demonstrate a commitment to social and ethical issues, aligning with their broader values (Kim & Austin, 2019).

Furthermore, this generational group often seeks deeper meaning and connection through the content they consume. They appreciate narratives that resonate with their personal experiences and worldviews, preferring interactions that feel personal and sincere over those that seem contrived. As such, their engagement with social media is heavily influenced by how trustworthy and reliable they perceive the content and its creators to be.

Thus, for marketers targeting Gen Z, understanding and integrating the nuances of authenticity into their strategies is not just advantageous but essential. Brands that successfully communicate their authenticity and maintain consistency in their messaging can foster a loyal following among this discerning cohort, translating into enhanced brand loyalty and engagement (Kevin, 2019; Stock, 2020).

Agnihotri et al. (2023), Balaban & Szambolics (2022), and Pick (2020) indicate that followers of social media influencers equate authenticity with the demonstration of specific interpersonal traits, communication methods, and digital behaviors. According to Ebben and Bull (2023), key attributes such as sincerity, trustworthiness, accuracy, originality, spontaneity, and visibility are essential components of this perception. Each of these aspects resonates deeply with the values and expectations of Generation Z. As micro-influencers on platforms like Instagram strive to balance commercial interests with personal authenticity, their success in maintaining genuine relationships with their followers is crucial. The interplay between authenticity and engagement demonstrates a reciprocal relationship, where each element enhances and sustains the other, contributing to a social media environment that values depth, sincerity, and mutual respect. This exploration of authenticity not only enriches our understanding but also sets the stage for further studies on how authenticity can be strategically managed and optimized by micro-influencers to enhance engagement among Generation Z.

2.2.8 Authenticity and Its Implications for Engagement

The relationship between authenticity and engagement is pivotal in the realm of social media influencing, particularly with micro-influencers. As Vrontis et al. (2021) illustrate, when these influencers engage in genuine interactions with their followers—such as responding to comments, addressing messages, and participating in conversations—they foster stronger, more trusting relationships. This engagement transcends mere transactional interactions and is rooted in shared values and interest (Fink, 2021). These qualities are especially valued by Generation

Z, a demographic known for prioritizing authenticity and transparency, as highlighted by Liu, Bernardoni and Wang (2023) and Rome Business School (2023)

Further underscoring the importance of authenticity, research suggests that audiences view authentic communication as more credible and trustworthy. This perception enhances the sense of connection between influencers and their followers, particularly among Generation Z, who are known for their appreciation of genuineness. Such authenticity not only fosters stronger relationships but also boosts engagement levels with content that resonates as genuine.

The influence of authenticity extends to the coherence and consistency of an influencer's brand narrative. Weismueller et al. (2020) emphasize that maintaining a consistent tone and style is crucial for reinforcing an influencer's authenticity. This consistency helps set clear expectations for the audience, which strengthens trust and fosters loyalty over time.

2.3 Uses and Gratification Theory

Given the context of the study, Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a useful lens for understanding why individuals actively choose specific media sources to satisfy particular needs and desires. This perspective is particularly relevant in exploring how Generation Z engages with micro-influencers on Instagram, as it considers the proactive nature of media consumption where users seek content that meets their psychological and social needs.

UGT posits that media consumers are active participants in the communication process, selecting media sources and content that meet their diverse needs and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973).

Generation Z turns to micro-influencers for more than just passive consumption; they seek active engagement that provides personal gratification. This can be categorized into several key areas: entertainment, information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and escape. Sundar and Limperos (2016) explain that the uses and gratifications theory has evolved with digital media, emphasizing that users seek media for interactive experiences as much as for content consumption. On Instagram, this might manifest as following micro-influencers for their unique content that entertains, informs, or provides a form of escapism.

The authenticity of a micro-influencer plays a significant role in how followers perceive and engage with their content. Taneja, Webster, Malthouse, and Ksiazek (2012) found that authenticity could significantly enhance user engagement and satisfaction because it aligns with the followers' expectations and values, leading to a more meaningful media consumption experience. For Generation Z, who values transparency and authenticity, the genuine nature of micro-influencers can deepen the connection and increase the personal relevance of the content, thus fulfilling their need for authenticity. The authenticity of micro-influencers significantly impacts the trust and loyalty of followers. As pointed out by Jenkins et al. (2018), in the digital age, the perceived sincerity and authenticity of online personalities correlate strongly with audience engagement levels. Generation Z, in particular, values authentic exchanges that resonate with their personal experiences and expectations, making them more likely to trust and engage with influencers who exhibit these qualities.

Generation Z uses Instagram not just for consumption but as a platform for self-expression and social interaction. They gravitate towards micro-influencers who provide a sense of community and shared values. Wohn and Bowe (2016) discuss how social media platforms facilitate parasocial interaction, where followers feel a sense of friendship or companionship with influencers. This interaction satisfies their social needs and helps in expressing their identity, which is often aligned with the communities and values represented by the influencers. The social connectivity offered by Instagram provides Generation Z with avenues for peer influence and community building. Chen et al. (2017) noted that the advent of Internet communication has altered the traditional sender-receiver model to some extent, thereby amplifying the significance of utilizing Uses and Gratifications theory. Micro-influencers often act as central nodes in these networks, significantly influencing how ideas and trends spread within and across communities.

2.4 The Source Credibility Model

The source credibility model aims to elucidate how various aspects of an information provider can impact the reception and utilization of the information conveyed (Liew & Tan, 2021). Building upon this idea, Lajnef (2023) underscores the pivotal role that the source of information plays in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions, particularly in the realm of social media. In the context of social media, influencers serve as sources, and Gen Z, the

receivers, evaluate the information (product endorsements, reviews) based on their perception of the influencer's trustworthiness and expertise (Kaabachi et al., 2021). In light of Generation Z's engagement with micro-influencer content on Instagram, this theory assumes paramount importance due to the generation's distinct preferences and behaviors regarding authenticity and trustworthiness in digital interactions.

Expanding on this concept, there is a unique synergy between source credibility theory and Gen Z's approach to social media. Having come of age in a digitally saturated world, Gen Z is adept at recognizing inauthenticity and possesses a healthy dose of skepticism towards traditional advertising tactics. They crave genuineness and relatability in the influencers they follow. Micro-influencers, often seen as more down-to-earth and approachable compared to mega-influencers, have the potential to resonate more strongly with Gen Z.

This demographic cohort, characterized by its tech-savviness and digital fluency, tends to approach social media content with a discerning eye, often scrutinizing the credibility of sources before engaging with the information presented. In essence, Generation Z values genuine connections and relatable narratives, seeking out influencers who embody these qualities in their online personas.

By applying source credibility theory to the examination of Generation Z's perceptions of micro-influencer content on Instagram, we gain valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms driving consumer engagement and behavior in the digital landscape. The theory suggests that the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and likability of influencers significantly influence how their content is received and acted upon by consumers (Khan et al., 2023). Thus, understanding the dynamics of source credibility becomes instrumental in elucidating the factors that shape Generation Z's interactions with micro-influencer content and their subsequent engagement with these influencers.

Moreover, source credibility theory provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the multifaceted nature of authenticity in influencer marketing. Authenticity, a cornerstone of Generation Z's online ethos, encompasses not only the sincerity and genuineness of content but also the perceived credibility and integrity of the individuals behind it. As such, the theory helps researchers deconstruct the various dimensions of authenticity that resonate with Generation Z and elucidate how these dimensions contribute to the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies on Instagram.

In a study conducted by Han and Balabanis (2023), it was found that Generation Z's trust in influencers is contingent upon factors such as perceived credibility, expertise, honesty, and alignment of values between the influencer and the audience. This aligns with the tenets of source credibility theory, which posit that credibility is predicated on the perceived competence, trustworthiness, and credibility of the source (Lajnef, 2023). Thus, the theory serves as a lens through which researchers can investigate the nuanced interplay between source attributes and audience perceptions in the context of micro-influencer marketing on Instagram.

Furthermore, source credibility theory underscores the importance of congruence between the message and the messenger in influencing audience attitudes and behaviors (Rifon et al., 2004). In the context of Instagram micro-influencers, whose appeal often lies in their perceived authenticity and relatability, this congruence becomes particularly salient. Generation Z gravitates towards influencers whose content resonates with their values, interests, and aspirations, thereby fostering a sense of authenticity and trust in the influencer-brand relationship.

In conclusion, source credibility theory provides a robust framework for understanding Generation Z's perceptions of authenticity in micro-influencer content on Instagram. By examining the influence of source attributes on consumer attitudes and behaviors, researchers can gain valuable insights into the mechanisms driving engagement with influencers and identify strategies for enhancing the authenticity and effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns targeted towards Generation Z.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study is to explore how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of content posted by micro-influencers on Instagram, examine how this perceived authenticity fosters authentic brand engagement, and identify the specific aspects of authenticity that contribute to Gen Z's engagement.

Drawing from the literature review and theories discussed in the previous section, this study examines key aspects of authenticity in micro-influencer content: performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility. It is important to note that although these attributes may be interrelated, not all are crucial for Gen Z to perceive authenticity in their

engagements with micro-influencers. The conceptual framework of this study aligns with earlier research by synthesizing and linking various theoretical concepts found in the literature.

This schematic provides a visualization of our initial perception of the relationships between these concepts. It serves to offer a comprehensive overview of the entire sequence and its connection to the previously discussed literature.

Micro-Influencers' Authentic Content Attributes

Performable authenticity
Affinity
Uniqueness
Message credibility

⟷ Authentic Engagement ⇠⇢ **Gen Z's Perception of Authenticity in Micro-Influencer' Content?**
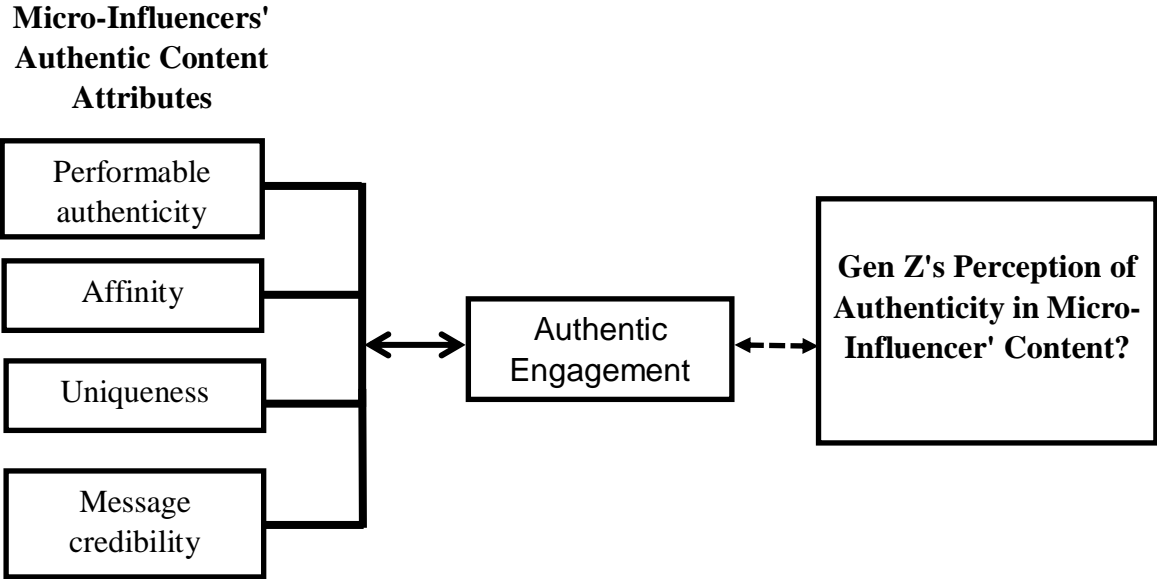
Figure 1 Conceptual framework

2.6 Chapter Summary

This literature review explores how Generation Z perceives authenticity in Instagram micro-influencers and how this influences their engagement. As digital natives, Gen Z values authenticity, transparency, and relatability, preferring micro-influencers over traditional celebrities for their genuine and trustworthy content, which effectively fosters authentic engagement.

Instagram plays a vital role in content creation and interaction, with its visual emphasis making it significant for Gen Z influencer marketing. Micro-influencers leverage niche expertise and genuine interactions to build trust and credibility, influencing consumer brand perceptions.

Authenticity is examined from historical, philosophical, psychological, and marketing perspectives. It requires balancing genuine self-presentation with audience expectations. Micro-influencers blend personal authenticity with commercial interests to maintain Gen Z's trust and engagement. Key dimensions include performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility.

Gen Z can quickly detect inauthenticity and values transparent communication and alignment with their values. Authentic interactions foster stronger relationships and higher engagement, making consistency in an influencer's brand narrative crucial for maintaining trust.

The Uses and Gratification Theory explains why Gen Z engages with specific media, emphasizing their desire for authentic content. The Source Credibility Model highlights the importance of an influencer's trustworthiness and expertise. These theories support the study's exploration of how perceived authenticity influences Gen Z's interaction with micro-influencers on Instagram.

Drawing from the literature review and theoretical foundations, a conceptual framework was developed to guide empirical research.

3   Methodology

This chapter delineates the methodologies and approaches employed within this research. It scrutinizes the core tenets underlying the philosophical foundation of the research, thereafter delineating the choice of research methodology. Ensuing segments elaborate on the techniques utilized for gathering and analyzing data. The chapter concludes by providing a comprehensive explanation of the various indicators of reliability, validity, and ethical guidelines in research.

3.1   Research Philosophy

A research philosophy encompasses fundamental principles that direct the planning and implementation of a study, according to Tamminen and Poucher (2020). In this section, we will explore the two philosophical perspectives of ontology and epistemology, which will help define our position and establish the foundation for our methodological decisions.

3.1.1 Ontology

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) define ontology as a branch of philosophy that focuses on the fundamental nature of existence and reality. They outline four distinct positions: realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism. Al-Ababneh (2020) expands on this by noting how individuals' perceptions of reality are influenced by their social environments, experiences, and personal insights. This perspective challenges the notion of an objective reality, proposing instead that reality is a subjective interpretation shaped by our interactions with the world and others within it. Echoing this, Scotland (2012) asserts that each individual constructs their own reality.

In line with these concepts, this study adopts a relativist ontology to better understand the varied perceptions and experiences of consumers in digital settings. The relativist approach is especially relevant for exploring phenomena like consumer behavior on social media platforms, which are profoundly affected by individual backgrounds, contexts, and subjective interpretations (Naeem, 2021). By adopting this stance, researchers can recognize that each

participant's view of Instagram micro-influencers is influenced by their unique personal experiences and cultural contexts.

This relativist ontological approach is crucial for this research as it enables a thorough exploration of the diverse realities encountered by consumers. It emphasizes the significance of subjective experiences, facilitating a deeper and more detailed understanding of the social phenomena being studied.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) define epistemology as a broad set of beliefs about the methods used to investigate the nature of the world, distinguishing between two main perspectives: positivism and social constructionism.

Andrews, T. (2012) notes that social constructionists understand the social world by considering knowledge as constructed rather than inherently created. This perspective values subjective experiences and the interpretive practices individuals use to make sense of their social environments, which is echoed by Boyland (2019).

In this study, we have opted for social constructionism to examine how consumer behaviors and perceptions are shaped by societal norms, media narratives, and peer interactions—crucial elements in constructing beliefs and actions within digital environments.

Adopting social constructionism as our epistemological stance also influences our research methodology, steering us towards qualitative methods. These methods are particularly adept at uncovering the processes through which social meanings are constructed and disseminated, as highlighted by Schwandt (2015).

By embracing a social constructionist epistemology, this thesis aims to dissect the complex web of social interactions that define consumer perceptions in the digital era. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the social contexts and communicative practices that articulate and interpret digital consumer behaviors. The insights gained from this research are expected to significantly enrich the discourse on digital consumer behavior by clarifying how social influences mold consumer perceptions and actions.

3.2 Research Approach

This study aims to investigate how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of content posted by micro-influencers on Instagram, focusing on how this perceived authenticity contributes to authentic brand engagement.

To achieve this, we employ a qualitative research methodology, which is well-suited for delving into the complex and nuanced perceptions and experiences of consumers in digital settings. According to Flick (2022), qualitative research offers a comprehensive understanding of participants' behaviors, attitudes, and interactions within their actual environments. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) emphasize that this approach facilitates a deeper grasp of social phenomena through direct interaction and is particularly attuned to contextual nuances, capturing insights in words rather than numbers.

The flexibility of qualitative methods, as noted by Denscombe (2014), allows researchers to adapt their investigative strategies as new insights emerge during the course of data collection. This adaptability is vital for exploring intricate topics like the interactions between social media influencers and their audiences, where not all influencing factors are immediately evident.

Furthermore, this research integrates abductive reasoning as its methodological framework, characterized by a dynamic interplay between theory and data, as described by Timmermans and Tavory (2012). This iterative process is ideal for our study's objectives, as it supports the continuous refinement of theoretical frameworks in response to new findings. Dubois and Gadde (2002) highlight the inherent dynamism and iterative nature of the abductive approach, which accommodates the integration of unexpected results that may not initially align with pre-established models.

By employing abductive reasoning, this study not only interprets the interactions between micro-influencers and Generation Z on Instagram within the context of existing theories but also remains open to evolving or creating new theories based on empirical data (Reichertz, 2019). This approach is particularly effective for enhancing and expanding upon existing theoretical frameworks, focusing more on theoretical development than on deriving universally applicable conclusions.

3.3 Data Collection

This section presents the framework that will be utilized for data collection. It includes a detailed explanation of the qualitative interviews process, the sampling methods used, the structure of our interview guide, and the transcription techniques for the interviews.

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method for this research involved semi-structured interviews, which strike a balance between structured and flexible approaches necessary for exploring complex consumer behaviors. This technique enabled interviewers to delve deeper into participants' responses and to address emerging topics during the discussions, making it an ideal approach for capturing rich, qualitative data (Galletta, 2013).

Zawacki-Richter et al. (2020) note that semi-structured interviews can shed light on crucial aspects of human behavior, aligning with our study's focus on the impact of social media micro-influencers on Generation Z's consumer engagement. These interviews were conducted in a manner that encouraged researchers to actively participate and guide the process, facilitating the development of the research.

To enhance the diversity and representativeness of the data, interviews were conducted both in person and remotely, accommodating the varied locations and preferences of participants. Remote interviews utilized communication tools such as WhatsApp and Zoom to ensure high levels of interaction and engagement. Participants were recruited through posts about the study on our WhatsApp status. By allowing participants to choose their preferred method of communication, we created a comfortable environment for discussing sensitive topics. With the consent of the participants, all interviews, whether conducted face-to-face or remotely, were recorded. Each session lasted between 8 to 23 minutes. The recordings were essential to ensure the precise transcription of the interviews, which in turn facilitated a detailed analysis of the data collected.

During the interviews, we employed "what," "who," "when," "where," "why," and "how" questions, a strategy recommended by the Wang and Yang (2012) for encouraging deeper engagement and allowing participants to thoroughly express their thoughts and opinions. This approach also simplified the questions, avoiding unnecessary complexity and jargon.

Additionally, the "laddering up" technique was used to uncover the underlying values of the participants. This method involves asking progressively more abstract 'why' questions to transition from specific descriptions to deeper insights. Reynolds and Gutman (1988) suggest that laddering effectively reveals the personal values that underpin consumer choices, which is particularly relevant for studies aiming to understand the motivations behind behaviors. In our research, laddering helped in a deeper exploration of how participants perceive and interact with micro-influencers, aiding in mapping their value hierarchies and how these influence their consumer decisions.

3.3.2 Interview Guide

Before conducting the interviews, a structured guide was developed. According to Bird (2016), an interview guide is essentially a list of major topics intended to be addressed during the interview, along with key questions aimed at exploring each topic. It provided the interviewer with a format that balanced structured inquiries and the flexibility to delve deeply into relevant topics.

The guide was crafted using themes and potential questions drawn from the literature review and the conceptual framework, focusing on areas such as customer judgment, customer feelings, and customer brand resonance.

To specifically address the research questions, the guide was organized around key themes identified from the conceptual framework and literature review, emphasizing critical aspects of micro-influencer content authenticity on Instagram, such as authority, trustworthiness, and transparency.

The interview guide was divided into three main sections: initial questions, inquiries about essential subjects, and concluding questions. The initial questions aimed to create a comfortable atmosphere, possibly asking about the participant's background, expertise, and familiarity with the research topic.

The middle section targeted essential topics relevant to Gen Z's online behavior. The aim was to elicit detailed responses and gain a deeper understanding of various facets of online engagement, such as motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes. Questions in

this section might have addressed issues like engagement frequency on Instagram and factors influencing interactions with micro-influencers.

The final questions were intended to summarize the discussion and allow participants to offer additional thoughts or insights. This segment could include questions about the participant's overall impression of the interview, suggestions for further research, or any closing remarks. A mix of closed and open-ended questions was used throughout the guide to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, with follow-up questions, probes, and prompts included to encourage participants to elaborate on their answers.

Overall, the interview guide was an effective tool for guiding the interview process, ensuring consistency in data collection, and facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. The guide can be found in Appendix A.

3.4 Sampling

The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, as specified by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021). This method is particularly effective in qualitative research for gaining in-depth insights from specific groups likely to have important information about the phenomenon being studied (Robinson, 2023).

Due to the limited sample size, purposive sampling was employed, specifically a homogeneous sampling approach. This technique allowed for a focused examination of a particular subgroup characterized by similar demographic backgrounds, viewpoints, knowledge, or experience, as highlighted by Palinkas et al. (2013).

Expanding on this method, participants were chosen based on their active engagement with Instagram and their experiences with micro-influencer marketing. This selection criterion ensured that the sample was both relevant and knowledgeable, providing rich, pertinent, and varied perspectives that enhanced the study's depth and breadth of understanding.

This selection strategy is part of non-probability sampling, where the researcher's judgment plays a critical role in choosing the units to study, such as individuals, groups, or settings (Palinkas et al., 2013). This method is particularly beneficial for targeting specific traits that are uncommon or challenging to find in a broader population.

The study's participants were Generation Z individuals between the ages of 18 and 27. The table below presents essential demographic information about the participants, including their age, gender, nationality, occupation, and the length of their interviews.

Tables will be extensively utilized in other sections of this research to ensure and reinforce trustworthiness in qualitative studies, as stated by Cloutier and Ravasi (2020).

Table 1 Participant Profiles — Nationality, Daily Instagram Usage, Motivational Insights, and Interview Duration

Participant	Age	Nationality	Instagram Daily Usage	Motivation for Using Instagram	Interview Length in minutes
A	23	Nigeria	*Frequently*	Information, entertainment, social interaction	15:51
B	23	Nigeria	2 hours	News, business	14:23
C	18	Nigeria	2 hours	Information, entertainment	15:57
D	20	Kenya	2 hours	Information, entertainment, social interaction	13:07
E	27	Nigeria	3 - 4 hours	Information, entertainment, shopping	18:28
F	20	Nigeria	3 hours	Information, entertainment	23:48
G	18	India	*Often*	Information, entertainment, fashion, social interaction	16:05
H	19	India	*Daily*	Entertainment, fashion, lifestyle	15:35
I	21	India	*Often*	Information, social interaction	20:01
J	20	India	*Several times daily*	Information, health	16:20

Table 1 Participant Profiles — Nationality, Daily Instagram Usage, Motivational Insights, and Interview Duration

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was selected as the ideal method for data analysis because it enables researchers to pinpoint empirical findings by identifying themes that are frequent, dominant, or significant within the data, according to Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019). TA is highly effective for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, facilitating a flexible and rich exploration of the datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Okoko, Tunison & Walker, 2023).

Thematic analysis is a research technique employed to pinpoint and analyze patterns or themes within a dataset, frequently resulting in fresh insights and deeper understanding (Naeem et al., 2023). This versatility makes TA an indispensable tool in qualitative research, providing detailed accounts of the data while allowing for the identification of underlying patterns and themes.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is an iterative process that consists of six distinct steps. These are: (1) Getting acquainted with the data, (2) creating initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) examining themes, (5) defining and naming key themes, and (6) writing the report. Each step builds upon the previous, allowing for a comprehensive and structured approach to analyzing qualitative data.

To demonstrate how the thematic analysis was conducted in practice, we broke down the process into specific, actionable steps. Below is a detailed description of each phase, reflecting the practical implementation of the analysis:

Phase 1: Getting Acquainted with the Data

The thematic analysis began with an in-depth engagement with the data, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). Since interviews were the primary data collection method, the first step was to transcribe all interview recordings verbatim. This transcription process was crucial for becoming intimately familiar with the content. As we listened and transcribed, we made extensive notes on our initial impressions, key points, and potential insights. These notes ensured that no initial themes were overlooked and provided a foundation for subsequent analysis.

Phase 2: Creating Initial Codes

The second phase involved identifying potential codes within the data. This process was iterative and guided by both the raw data and the conceptual framework underpinning the study. Practically, we implemented coding by color-coding the interview transcripts. Each segment of data that appeared significant was highlighted with a different color, representing various preliminary codes. We explored a wide range of codes but only retained those that were relevant to our study's focus on authenticity in micro-influencer content. This phase saw the merging of related codes into broader categories, setting the stage for theme development.

Phase 3: Identifying Themes

During this phase, we began to crystallize the initial codes into themes. We combined various related codes into coherent categories, which formed the basis of our themes. For instance, codes such as "Creative integration" and "Fresh perspective" were merged under the broader theme of "Content Originality." Some themes emerged as more substantial and evolved into sub-themes, reflecting more nuanced aspects of the data. This step was critical for organizing the data into meaningful patterns.

Phase 4: Examining Themes

The next step involved a thorough review of the developed themes. We assessed each theme's validity by cross-referencing it with the original data and the conceptual framework. Themes that were well-represented and aligned with our research objectives were retained. Those lacking sufficient data support or relevance were discarded. This review process was iterative, requiring multiple rounds of evaluation to refine and ensure the accuracy and clarity of each theme. We focused on distinguishing themes from one another and capturing their core essence within the context of our study.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this phase, we carefully defined and named each theme to reflect its underlying meaning and significance within the study context. This involved synthesizing insights from the data and ensuring that each theme was described clearly and accurately. The goal was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the themes, making them easily interpretable for readers. Each theme was assigned a provisional title, which was refined to ensure precision and creativity before finalization.

Phase 6: Writing the Report

In the final step, we selected specific pieces of data, such as interview excerpts and quotes, to illustrate each theme. These excerpts served as concrete examples, highlighting the essence and relevance of the themes. By presenting these illustrative quotes, we provided clear evidence to support the thematic conclusions drawn from the analysis. This step was crucial for demonstrating the practical manifestations of the themes within the data, helping to clarify and define the meaning of each code.

Table 2 Thematic Analysis Process

Phase	Description	Practical Implementation
Getting Acquainted with the Data	Engaging deeply with the data, transcribing interviews, and recording initial impressions.	Transcribing interviews verbatim, noting initial insights.
Creating Initial Codes	Identifying potential codes for data analysis.	Color-coding transcripts, highlighting significant data segments.
Identifying Themes	Combining code categories to form initial themes and sub-themes.	Merging related codes into broader themes like "Content Originality".
Examining Themes	Evaluating the validity and relevance of themes; refining and discarding as necessary.	Iterative review, ensuring themes are well-supported by data.
Defining and Naming Themes	Articulating and naming each theme to reflect its meaning.	Defining themes clearly, assigning and refining titles.
Writing the Report	Selecting data excerpts to illustrate themes, providing clear evidence.	Including quotes to support and exemplify each theme.

3.6 Data Quality

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) emphasize that one of the primary reasons for conducting research is that it produces outcomes that are more precise and credible than routine daily observations.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research frequently triggers concerns regarding the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the results, as noted by Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019). In response to these concerns, this thesis has enhanced its credibility and relevance. Additionally, by critically assessing the collected data, this work has achieved greater transparency, thereby yielding findings that are more reliable and trustworthy. Furthermore, a thorough evaluation of the sources used has also been conducted to bolster the thesis's credibility. The following sections will delve into these concepts in greater detail.

3.6.1 Credibility

Credibility pertains to how trustworthy and dependable the research outcomes are regarded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The task entails providing evidence that the procedures for gathering and analysing data were carried out meticulously and with a high level of reliability. To enhance credibility, this study will employ several strategies: extended engagement with participants to ensure deeper data collection, member checking where participants are invited to review the findings to validate the interpretation (Stahl & King, 2020). These methods help in validating the accuracy and resonance of the results with the experiences of the participants.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which findings or theories developed in one setting can be relevant and applied to other settings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Transferability will be addressed by incorporating a variety of perspectives, which broadens the understanding of the subject and improves the transferability of the findings (Svensson, Jönsson & Martinsson, 2023). This comprehensive description enables others to assess the applicability of the conclusions to different contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Sample quotations and scenarios will also be included to enable readers to see how we connected the data to the interpretations and conclusions.

3.6.3 Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings could be corroborated by others, demonstrating that the results are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Singh, 2022). This research will enhance confirmability through several methods:

maintaining a detailed audit trail to comprehensively record decisions, procedures, and modifications throughout the research; practicing reflexivity by reflecting on the researcher's position and potential biases; and engaging in peer scrutiny by involving impartial evaluators to assess the research methodology and interpretations (Firdaus et al., 2021).

3.7 Research Ethical Considerations

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) states that research ethics comprise a series of guidelines that shape the design and execution of studies. These guidelines function as a behavioral framework that researchers must follow when gathering data from individuals.

This research was conducted in strict accordance with ethical principles to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being.

Informed Consent

Participants were thoroughly briefed about the study's objectives, methodologies, their rights, and the use of their data before they agreed to participate. This briefing ensured participants were well-informed and could make a knowledgeable decision about their involvement, following the guidance of Sieber and Tolich (2013) on the necessity of transparency in research engagement.

Legal Age Requirement

All participants were required to meet the legal age of adulthood, which is eighteen years or older, to participate in this study. This age criterion ensured that all participants had the legal capacity to consent and participate independently in the research.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

To protect the personal information of participants, all identifiable data were anonymized. This action preempted any association between the collected data and the participants' identities, thereby securing their privacy as recommended by Sieber and Tolich (2013). Such precautions are critical to avoid any possible discomfort or harm resulting from privacy infringements.

Voluntary Participation

Emphasized by Israel and Hay (2006), the participation of individuals in this study was wholly voluntary. All participants were reassured that they could disengage at any point without any repercussions. This commitment to voluntary participation respects each individual's autonomy and control over their involvement in research activities.

Data Security

Following the protocols advocated by Mertens and Ginsberg (2009), stringent measures were implemented to protect both digital and physical data. Digital data were encrypted and password-protected, and physical data were securely stored. These security practices were crucial in preventing unauthorized access and ensuring the integrity of the research data.

In essence, this research was conducted with a steadfast commitment to ethical principles, prioritizing the dignity and welfare of participants. These ethical practices not only reinforced the trust of the participants but also bolstered the validity and ethical integrity of the research findings.

3.8   Methodological Limitations

In-person interviews often facilitate more nuanced and rich communication compared to remote interviews, which can be impacted by factors such as internet connectivity issues, participants' familiarity with the technology, and differing levels of comfort with remote communication tools like WhatsApp and Zoom.

The recruitment of participants through WhatsApp status posts might have introduced a selection bias. This method predominantly reaches individuals already within the researchers' network, potentially limiting the diversity of the sample and not fully representing the broader Generation Z population.

With only 10 participants, the sample size restricts the generalizability of our findings to the larger population of Gen Z.

We selected Instagram for our research due to the Indian government's ban on TikTok, which was implemented on June 29, 2020 (Germain, 2024). However, since the study focuses solely

on Instagram, Gen Z's perception of authenticity might differ across other social media platforms.

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the study. Future research could benefit from standardized interview settings and more diverse recruitment strategies to mitigate these issues and ensure more consistent and representative data collection.

3.9   Chapter Summary

This research investigates how Generation Z perceives authenticity in content created by micro-influencers on Instagram and how this perception leads to authentic brand engagement. Using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews, the study explores participants' experiences. The data is analyzed thematically, and the credibility of the findings is ensured through methods like member checking. The research acknowledges limitations, including the use of remote interviews and a small sample size.

4   Empirical Findings & Analysis

In this chapter, we present the empirical findings on how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of Instagram content posted by micro-influencers. We also explore which specific aspects of content authenticity enhance Gen Z's engagement with influencers, based on data from semi-structured interviews.

Using a thematic approach in our data analysis, we first transcribed and coded the data before organizing it into themes. The empirical findings are analyzed and presented across four key themes that influence Gen Z's perception of micro-influencer authenticity on Instagram. For the theme of content originality, the sub-themes are novel content appreciation, unique stylistic content, and relatable and relevant content. Within the theme of influencer persona, the sub-themes include personal vulnerability, enhancement of authenticity through humour, and consistency in tone. The themes of emotional value and transparency and trust do not have sub-themes.

All these themes and sub-themes will be introduced through direct quotes and excerpts from the participants to illustrate our findings concretely. Finally, we will conclude by presenting an updated conceptual framework based on our findings.

Table 3 An Example of the Thematic Coding Analysis

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Description	Quotes and Excerpts Supporting the Themes
Content Originality	- Novel content appreciation - Unique stylistic content - Relatable and relevant content	- Creative integration - Fresh perspective - Unconventional formats - Personal signature	This theme focuses on the originality and uniqueness of the content that micro-influencers post, which Generation Z perceives as a	*"... I do follow his content for tech specification, anything tech, be it gaming, be it laptops, be it systems, he's always giving us content, real content."* *– Participant F*

			significant marker of authenticity.	
Emotional Value		- Empathy induction - Inspirational appeal - Emotional resonance	This theme highlights how emotional connection and the ability to tell compelling, personal stories contribute to the perceived authenticity of micro-influencers.	*"There was this influencer online that posted one particular content like that. It was about some two young children on the streets... it took me down memory lanes when I was a child. I remember back then how I used to go out to hawk after school so that I can support my parents."* *- Participant A*
Influencer Persona	- Personal vulnerability - Humour enhances authenticity - Consistency in tone	- Consistency - Expertise - Likeability - Charisma - Uniqueness	This theme explores how the personal characteristics, behaviors, and presentation styles of influencers influence audience perceptions of their authenticity and relatability.	*"I feel love in some way... for an influencer to share some of their personal experience and their vulnerable moments with their audience, I feel they are very, very close to their audience... Like there is a bond there."* *- Participant F*
Transparency and Trust		- Disclosure practices - Honest communication - Consistency in messaging - Ethical conduct	This theme captures the importance of openness and honesty in building trust between	*"... when it comes to influencing, I think influencers also need to be honest and also do a background check of any brands they are trying to influence."*

			influencers and their followers, which is crucial for perceiving content as authentic.	*- Participant E*

4.1　Content Originality

Content originality refers to the uniqueness and innovativeness of the content posted by Instagram micro-influencers. Our interviews revealed that Gen Z values originality as a key indicator of authenticity, and they are more likely to engage with and follow influencers who consistently post original content, viewing it as a marker of the influencer's commitment to quality and authenticity.

Content originality plays a crucial role in influencing Generation Z's perception of micro-influencers on Instagram, significantly interacting with several key themes identified in our research:

To further unpack the theme of Content Originality, we explore three key sub-themes that illuminate how Gen Z on Instagram finds unique, stylistic, and relatable content to be particularly engaging. These sub-themes are *novel content appreciation, unique stylistic content, and relatable and relevant content*, which will be discussed in the following sections.

In a nutshell, our findings show that content originality acts as a cornerstone, enhancing emotional engagement, building trust through perceived transparency, and increasing the value and utility of an influencer's content. However, it is crucial to balance originality with realness and relatability to maintain effective engagement.

4.1.1　Novel Content Appreciation

A recurring sub-theme (identified through coding) among all interview participants was the importance of influencers maintaining the audience's appreciation for novel content. Novel

content appreciation focuses on Generation Z's value for innovation and uniqueness in the content provided by Instagram micro-influencers. The appreciation for novel content indicates a deeper engagement level, as Gen Z audiences continuously seek content that stands out from the conventional social media clutter.

Data from our semi-structured interviews revealed that Gen Z appreciates influencers who offer new perspectives, explore less-trodden trends, or showcase innovative approaches to familiar topics. This desire for novelty suggests Gen Z craves content that feels like a discovery, a departure from the repetitive nature of some social media feeds.

The response from Participant A captures the emotional and experiential value that Generation Z associates with discovering unique content:

"Finding something truly novel on social media feels like uncovering a treasure." - Participant A

This quote vividly encapsulates the thrill and satisfaction that Generation Z experiences when encountering unique content, which they view as a rare and valuable find amid predictable social media patterns. The metaphor of uncovering a treasure conveys a sense of rarity and value, suggesting that such content is both scarce and highly prized.

For example, participant F praised an influencer for providing practical guidance on technology:

"... I do follow his content for tech specification, anything tech, be it gaming, be it laptops, be it systems, he's always giving us content, real content." – Participant F

This quote highlights the importance of content originality, particularly the appreciation of novel and relevant content that offers genuine value to the audience, and demonstrates how authentic engagement with followers can enhance perceptions of authenticity.

Another participant, Participant E, notes the impact of uniqueness on engagement:

"...this street food show about the street food in Asia, they focus not just on the food itself, but more on the chef's personal life. It's unique and it stands out..." - Participant E

This excerpt highlights how focusing on the chefs' personal lives, rather than just the food, makes the content stand out. It draws viewers like Participant E closer to the micro-influencer, sparking curiosity and a desire to see what will be shared next.

Similarly, Participant D's feedback underscores the broader implications of unique content:

"...unique approach is also a statement of sustainability... that was very, very unique and very real." - Participant D

This response highlights how a unique approach not only captures attention but also conveys authenticity and sustainability, attributes highly valued by Generation Z. It suggests that influencers who consistently create fresh and original content are seen as more credible and trustworthy.

Overall, these insights reflect a strong preference among Generation Z for influencers who can deliver original insights and perspectives, distinguishing themselves from the broader content ecosystem on social media. This sub-theme of novel content appreciation underscores the importance of originality and how it enhances engagement and fosters a sense of loyalty and trust among followers.

4.1.2   Unique Stylistic Content

Unique stylistic content represents a critical sub-theme within the broader theme of Content Originality. It focuses on the distinctive visual and expressive styles adopted by Instagram micro-influencers. This sub-theme emerged from data derived from semi-structured interviews with Gen Z participants, who frequently cited visual uniqueness as a significant factor in determining an influencer's authenticity and appeal. Specific stylistic elements—ranging from unique photography techniques to personalized graphic designs—help set influencers apart in a saturated media space.

Our analysis reveals that Generation Z not only appreciates, but actively seeks out influencers who consistently present content with a unique stylistic signature. This preference underscores a broader cultural trend towards individuality and self-expression among younger consumers.

Consider this quote from a participant who expressed admiration for an influencer's distinct photography style:

"Well, I love the influencer's quirky style of photography. It is so fresh and inspiring." - Participant A

This enthusiasm highlights how innovative stylistic choices can resonate with followers, imparting a sense of freshness and inspiration. The use of 'quirky' suggests a deviation from the mainstream, aligning with Gen Z's preference for non-conformity, while 'fresh' and 'inspiring' indicate that such unique styles not only attract visually but also motivate followers to see the world differently, possibly influencing their own creative expressions.

However, we observed a dynamic tension between unique styles and relatability. While quirky or unconventional styles can be visually arresting, excessively unique content may sometimes feel distant and less accessible. This creates a challenge for influencers to balance attracting attention with novelty while maintaining a relatable persona.

Engaging with Gen Z's perspective, it becomes clear that the influencers who manage to strike this balance effectively can cultivate a loyal and inspired following. The data suggests that the key lies in blending creativity with authenticity, ensuring that followers not only admire the unique content but also feel a genuine connection to the influencer. This delicate balance is what ultimately drives deeper engagement and long-term follower loyalty.

For instance, Participant D highlights the importance of considering the real world and social context when crafting content:

"...you cannot be showing me a lot of designer clothes and designer handbags when all around the world there's so many calamities, people are suffering, people need food." - Participant D

This statement emphasizes that showcasing excessive wealth or luxury can feel insensitive or out of touch, especially when juxtaposed against global struggles.

By effectively navigating this tension, influencers can leverage the power of unique styles to attract attention while simultaneously fostering genuine connections with their audience through relatable content. This might involve grounding their unique style with themes that are relatable or acknowledging the realities of the world alongside their creative expression.

Unique stylistic content significantly influences how Generation Z perceives and interacts with content from Instagram micro-influencers. By offering a unique visual and expressive style, influencers can distinguish themselves in a crowded market, catering to Gen Z's desire for

authenticity and innovation. This sub-theme underscores the importance of aesthetic originality in building meaningful connections with an audience that values individuality and creativity, while also navigating any tensions that may arise from content that feels out of touch with social realities

4.1.3 Relatable and Relevant Content

Gen Z craves more than just eye-catching novelty in their influencer content. They seek micro-influencers who create content that feels relatable and directly applicable to their own experiences. This focus on relatability suggests Gen Z prioritizes authenticity in a more personal and practical sense.

Our analysis yielded several key insights into how relatable and relevant content shapes Gen Z's perceptions and engagement:

Gen Z values content that reflects their personal experiences and aligns with their worldview. They are drawn to influencers who share stories that mirror their own realities, making them feel seen and understood.

Participants highlighted their appreciation for content that provides actionable advice, such as fitness tips, sustainability practices, and DIY projects. These offer tangible benefits they can apply in their lives.

Gen Z favors content that supports their core values, such as environmental sustainability and wellness. Content that aligns with these values establishes a more profound and meaningful connection.

For instance, Participant H underscores the importance of relatability in influencer content. Their response indicates that personal stories and real-life scenarios foster a sense of connection:

"...I really feel more connected with the content that includes day-to-day life hacks and personal stories.. these feel more relatable and useful in my own life." - Participant H

The phrase *"day-to-day hacks"* suggests that Gen Z seeks content grounded in everyday experiences, which allows them to relate directly. By sharing their personal stories, micro-influencers can create content that feels *"useful"* and applicable to their followers' lives. The

relatability of such stories makes followers feel that influencers are accessible and genuine, building a stronger connection.

Participant J articulates the value of practical advice delivered through relatable content:

"I appreciate practical and how-to-do content, especially related to fitness routines and outdoor survival skills. This sort of practical advice can be directly applied to my hobbies as well and that's how it resonated with me." - Participant J

This quote highlights Gen Z's desire for content with practical utility. Influencers who offer actionable advice or tutorials on topics relevant to Gen Z's interests (e.g., fitness, hobbies) are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy. This practical value enhances the overall authenticity of the influencer in Gen Z's eyes.

Another participant emphasizes how sustainability content resonates by aligning with their values and offering practical solutions:

"I really connect with content that deals with everyday sustainability practices like zero-waste recipes and eco-friendly home products. It resonates because it is actionable and practical. It offers simple solutions I can implement in my daily life, which makes me feel like I'm making a positive impact." - Participant G

This quote showcases the importance of content that aligns with Gen Z's values and aspirations. Micro-influencers who promote causes or lifestyles that resonate with Gen Z (e.g., sustainability) create a stronger sense of connection and authenticity. This relatability goes beyond shared experiences to include shared values and goals.

As highlighted in these quotes, relatable content often offers practical value to Gen Z. Whether it is actionable advice, tips for hobbies, or information on relevant social issues, relatable content provides something Gen Z can use in their own lives.

Relatable and Relevant Content plays a pivotal role in shaping Gen Z's perception of authenticity and engagement with micro-influencers. It ties into broader themes of emotional engagement, trust, and value, providing insight into how authenticity is constructed and maintained in digital spaces. This sub-theme underscores the significance of personalized content that resonates with an audience's interests and values, reinforcing the need for influencers to present themselves as genuine and approachable.

By incorporating personal stories, practical advice, and content that aligns with Gen Z's interests, micro-influencers can build stronger connections, foster trust, and ultimately enhance their influence.

4.2 Emotional Value

Emotional value represents the connection that followers experience when micro-influencers share personal stories and emotionally charged content. Emotional engagement plays a crucial role in connecting followers with influencers on a deeper level, moving beyond surface-level interactions.

While high-quality visuals are important, Gen Z craves content that evokes genuine emotions and feels relatable. A perfectly curated feed might be aesthetically pleasing but fail to resonate if it lacks emotional depth.

By sharing personal stories, struggles, and triumphs, micro-influencers can bridge the gap between themselves and their audience. This emotional vulnerability creates a sense of shared humanity and fosters a perception of authenticity.

"I recall seeing a video where the influencer opened up about their journey to overcome anxiety. It was so hurtful that it made me feel less alone in my struggles. That honesty made me trust her more." - Participant I

In this instance, the influencer's vulnerability about anxiety created a sense of connection with Participant I, fostering trust and perceived authenticity. By sharing this personal struggle, the influencer offered a sense of solidarity, making Participant I feel "less alone" and strengthening their emotional connection. This honesty creates a perception of authenticity that builds trust.

Gen Z doesn't seek content that evokes emotions. Participant A provides insight into how emotional storytelling evokes personal memories and empathy.

"There was this influencer online that posted one particular content like that. It was about some two young children on the streets... it took me down memory lanes when I was a child. I remember back then how I used to go out to hawk after school so that I can support my parents." - Participant A

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By sharing the story of two children on the streets, the influencer evoked powerful emotions in Participant A, who related the content to their childhood memories. This emotional resonance highlights the power of storytelling in bringing to light shared experiences and building deeper connections.

The quotes above all point to the importance of emotional storytelling in fostering a connection with Gen Z. Participant E furthers this point by demonstrating how emotional engagement can lead to concrete action:

"This particular one (influencer) actually helped a widow... He met her, and by telling her heartfelt story, money was raised within 24 hours to help her move out of a bad living situation and set up a business. It was touching and emotional for me. I found myself also trying to donate, no matter how little it is." - Participant E

The influencer's emotional storytelling not only resonated with Participant E but also motivated them to take action, highlighting the potential impact of emotional engagement. Our findings shows that emotionally charged content can move followers to support social causes or participate in campaigns led by influencers. Whether raising funds for charity or advocating for mental health awareness, emotional engagement can inspire tangible action.

The ability to connect with the audience on an emotional level can build trust with Gen Z. It suggests the influencer is genuine and willing to be vulnerable, which fosters a sense of transparency. Emotional storytelling is a core element of realness and relatability. By sharing personal experiences and vulnerabilities, micro-influencers appear more genuine and relatable to Gen Z.

Emotional value significantly influences how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of Instagram micro-influencers. By sharing deeply personal stories and emotional content, influencers can forge strong connections with their audience and inspire action. The collective impact of this theme on authenticity lies in its ability to foster trust and transparency through genuine storytelling.

4.3   Influencer Persona

This theme is divided into three critical sub-themes: personal vulnerability, humour enhances authenticity and consistency in tone. Personal vulnerability connects on a deeper emotional level, suggesting authenticity and transparency, while humour is often associated with charisma and likability, making the persona more approachable and engaging.

This theme underscores the importance of a well-developed influencer persona that resonates with Gen Z's perception of authenticity. According to our data, Gen Z seeks influencers who are willing to be vulnerable and relatable.

By sharing personal struggles and experiences, influencers can create a sense of shared humanity with Gen Z, fostering a perception of authenticity and building trust. Meanwhile, using humour effectively can make an influencer appear more relatable and down-to-earth, which is highly valued by Gen Z.

However, the combination of vulnerability and humour in an influencer's persona requires a delicate balance. While vulnerability may endear them to their audience, excessive sharing can risk over-saturation or perceptions of seeking sympathy. Conversely, while humour can lighten interactions, over-reliance on humour may undermine the seriousness of the influencer's content or expertise.

There are no inherent contradictions between the influencer persona and other themes, but tensions might arise if an influencer's persona feels inauthentic or forced. Gen Z is adept at spotting disingenuous behavior, and a persona that clashes with the influencer's overall content or actions will likely backfire. The key is for influencers to develop a persona that feels genuine and resonates with their target audience.

The Influencer Persona theme, particularly through its sub-themes of Personal Vulnerability and Humour Enhances Authenticity, which will be discussed in the next subsection, plays a pivotal role in shaping how Generation Z perceives authenticity on Instagram. These aspects significantly influence engagement by fulfilling emotional and psychological needs, establishing trust, and enhancing relatability."

This version aims to provide a smoother transition between ideas, ensuring that each point builds logically on the last while maintaining a clear focus on the central argument about the importance of influencer persona in shaping perceptions of authenticity among Gen Z.

4.3.1 Personal Vulnerability

This emphasizes the importance micro-influencers placing themselves in a vulnerable position within their content. It encapsulates the inclination of influencers to share their personal struggles, weaknesses, and emotional lows with their audience, a practice highlighted through participants' responses as enhancing the influencers' authenticity and trustworthiness.

Personal vulnerability allows followers to glimpse the 'real' person behind the influencer persona, enhancing trust between influencers and their audience. By opening up about their personal experiences, challenges, and even failures, micro-influencers create a sense of shared humanity with Gen Z. Participant B notes:

"I applaud those that come out to actually share their experiences. It also helps a lot... It makes them trustworthy." - Participant B

This quote underscores the link between personal disclosure and increased trust. By sharing their life beyond the camera, influencers break down the barrier of perceived celebrity, making them more relatable and trustworthy. Vulnerability is viewed not as a weakness but as a commendable strength that garners admiration and deeper follower engagement.

Participant D further associates personal vulnerability with trustworthiness:

"It means that the influencer is authentic because I just don't want to see you on the video or on the camera, for you to share your vulnerable moment it shows me that you also are a real person, I'm able to connect with this influencer and that feels more genuine and more authentic." - Participant D

Here, vulnerability is directly linked to authenticity. This sharing transforms the influencer from a distant figure into a 'real person,' enhancing the genuineness of the digital relationship. When influencers are willing to be vulnerable, it suggests they are genuine and relatable, leading to increased trust from Gen Z.

Participant I values the transparency of an influencer who discusses both successes and failures:

"... there's one influencer who shares his real workout routines and discusses his own fitness challenge and doesn't shy away from talking about his failures... sharing his success and failures and his experience gives us more connect towards the content." - Participant I

This narrative about sharing fitness challenges illustrates how influencers can influence and inspire by being open about their own difficulties and failures. It shows that the path to achievement is not always smooth, which can be motivational and relatable for followers pursuing similar goals.

Participant F touches on the emotional bond that can form when influencers share personal and vulnerable moments:

"I feel love in some way... for an influencer to share some of their personal experience and their vulnerable moments with their audience, I feel they are very, very close to their audience... Like there is a bond there." - Participant F

This deep, emotional connection goes beyond typical follower engagement, highlighting the powerful impact of vulnerability on relationship building within social media contexts.

However, it's important to note that vulnerability can backfire if it feels forced or inauthentic. Participant J's comment highlights this risk:

"Sometimes influencers share overly personal things that feel forced or dramatic. It makes me question their motives and makes it hard to connect with them." - Participant J

This underscores the importance of genuine vulnerability that arises organically from the influencer's personality and experiences.

Overall, Personal Vulnerability significantly shapes the dynamics of authenticity and influence in the relationship between micro-influencers and Generation Z on Instagram. This sub-theme deepens our understanding of how authenticity is constructed and perceived in digital spaces, highlighting the critical role of genuine personal expression in building trust and fostering meaningful connections.

4.3.2 Humour Enhances Authenticity

This theme is a significant sub-theme that emerged from the broader theme of Influencer Persona in our study on the interactions between social media micro-influencers and Generation Z on Instagram. This sub-theme underscores how the strategic use of humour by influencers contributes to their perceived authenticity and relatability. Identified through participant feedback during semi-structured interviews, humour was frequently mentioned as a key factor that makes influencers appear more genuine, approachable, and engaging.

From our interviews, we gained deeper insight that humour breaks down barriers between influencers and their audience, making the former appear more accessible and less curated. When influencers use humour effectively, it enhances their relatability, as followers perceive them as more genuine and down-to-earth. However, we also found that the use of humour must be natural and appropriate to the content and context; otherwise, it risks seeming forced or insincere, which can detract from the influencer's credibility.

Participant F reflects on how an influencer's use of humour contributes to their authenticity:

"...their humourous personality makes them seem more genuine." - Participant F

This quote suggests that humour is not just a tool for entertainment but also a significant authenticator. When influencers incorporate humour that aligns with their personality and content, it enhances their genuineness, making them appear more human and less like a distant media figure. This natural integration of humour can effectively bridge the gap between online personas and real-life personalities.

Participant H emphasizes the dual impact of humour on genuineness and relatability:

"...humour makes them more genuine definitely... it enhances trust because it feels like they are sharing as a friend would..." - Participant H

Here, humour is seen as enhancing both the authenticity and approachability of influencers. It plays a crucial role in how followers perceive and connect with online personalities, creating a feeling of shared understanding and camaraderie.

Participant I discusses how humour can signal an influencer's comfort with themselves and their audience:

"Humour shows they are comfortable with themselves and their audience which makes them more relatable and trustworthy." - Participant I

This perception that humour indicates self-comfort and ease in interactions contributes significantly to building trust. When influencers display humour, it suggests a level of openness and self-assurance that can make them more trustworthy in the eyes of their followers.

However, Gen Z is quick to spot disingenuous behavior. Participant E expresses a downside to forced humour:

"I don't like someone that tries so hard to be funny..." - Participant E

This quote highlights the risks associated with inauthentic or forced humour. When humour does not naturally fit into the content or the influencer's personality, it can backfire by making the influencer appear disingenuous or desperate for attention.

While natural humour builds transparency and trust, forced humour can undermine these qualities, creating tension. Humour can significantly boost emotional engagement by evoking happiness and a sense of fun, which enhances content enjoyment. Effective humour enhances the perception of realness and makes influencers more relatable, reinforcing their connections with followers.

The sub-theme "Humour Enhances Authenticity" plays a crucial role in shaping the interactions between micro-influencers and Generation Z on Instagram, highlighting the power of humour to make influencers appear more authentic, relatable, and trustworthy. However, the use of humour must be carefully managed to maintain credibility and genuine connection.

4.3.3   Consistency in Tone

Consistency in Tone is a crucial sub-theme that emerged from the broader theme of Influencer Persona. It highlights the importance of maintaining a consistent voice and emotional expression across Instagram content. This consistency is identified through analysis of participant responses as essential for fostering a reliable and engaging influencer persona, creating a coherent identity that resonates with authenticity.

A consistent tone is pivotal in building trust with the audience, as fluctuations may lead to perceptions of unpredictability and insincerity. A steady tone reinforces the authenticity of an

influencer, suggesting that the persona presented is a genuine reflection of the influencer's character rather than just a facade tailored for varied contexts.

Participant J emphasizes the critical role of emotional consistency in establishing trust:

"...Consistency in emotional expression is key for me to maintain trust in the content." - Participant J

This perspective suggests that a consistent voice and emotional expression convey genuineness and build trust with Gen Z followers. For example, imagine your favorite comedian suddenly delivering serious political commentary. Such a shift in tone would likely feel jarring and inauthentic. Consistent emotional expression, as seen by Participant J, signifies that the influencer is sincere and reliable, making their content more credible and engaging. This consistency allows Gen Z to perceive the influencer and the brand as a unified entity, fostering trust and authenticity.

However, frequent shifts in tone or emotional expression can be perceived as disingenuous by Gen Z. This inconsistency can create confusion and raise doubts about the influencer's genuineness. Participant C's comment underscores the potential negative impact:

"It raises questions like maybe what's going on in his life or something. If the same action continues over time, I might just unfollow the influencer." - Participant C

This insight highlights how unexpected changes in tone can prompt speculation about the influencer's personal life or authenticity, potentially leading to discomfort and disengagement if the inconsistency persists.

In contrast, Participant B offers a differing perspective on tone inconsistency, acknowledging the human aspects of influencers:

"...occasional inconsistencies are understandable." - Participant B

While Gen Z generally prefers a consistent tone, this acknowledgment suggests that some followers allow for human error, recognizing that occasional inconsistencies can occur.

Our findings show that maintaining a consistent tone contributes to transparency and authenticity. It suggests the influencer is not trying to be someone they are not. When an influencer's voice feels authentic, it allows Gen Z to connect more deeply with the person

behind the persona. Knowing what kind of emotional response to expect from an influencer's content can enhance emotional engagement. For instance, following an influencer known for their optimistic and uplifting approach allows Gen Z to anticipate a mood boost when viewing their content.

Overall, Consistency in Tone underscores the importance of developing a unique voice and maintaining its consistency to build trust and foster genuine connections with Gen Z followers. Furthermore, it reveals a nuanced perspective within Gen Z: while consistency is prioritized, occasional inconsistencies, viewed through the lens of human error, are also understood and accepted.

4.4   Transparency and Trust

Transparency and Trust emerged as a pivotal theme from our qualitative research examining the dynamics between social media micro-influencers and Generation Z on Instagram. This theme highlights how openness, honesty, and clarity in communication influence Gen Z's perception of an influencer's authenticity and their willingness to engage with them. Identified through patterns in participant responses, this theme underscores Gen Z's core expectation for genuine interaction and ethical behavior from influencers.

Our analysis revealed that transparency is foundational to building credibility; without it, trust is difficult to establish. All participants were drawn to influencers who displayed vulnerability, honesty, and trustworthiness, underscoring the strong link between transparency and the ability to form authentic connections.

For example, Participant G appreciates a fitness influencer who openly discussed her body image issues:

"A fitness influencer once shared a very candid post about her struggles with body image. Her vulnerability and honesty made me trust her fitness advice more because she wasn't pretending to be perfect..." - Participant G

This quote illustrates how vulnerability enhances trust. The influencer's willingness to share personal challenges not only humanizes them but also boosts the credibility of their advice.

This transparency fosters a deeper connection and trust, aligning the influencer's online persona with real-world authenticity.

Participant C discusses how documenting real-life experiences enhances an influencer's trustworthiness:

"It makes them more trustworthy. When you document what is happening to them, everybody can see the originality of the content. It makes them more trustworthy." - Participant C

By sharing genuine experiences, influencers move beyond the perfectly curated facade often associated with social media. This transparency allows followers to witness the authenticity of their narratives, the struggles and triumphs that lie beneath the glossy surface. This relatability fosters a sense of connection, a feeling that the influencer is more than just a picture on a screen. This deeper connection, built on shared experiences and perceived honesty, reinforces trust and encourages followers to engage more meaningfully with the influencer's content. They become invested in the influencer's journey, more likely to not only consume their content but also react to it, share it, and potentially even endorse the products or services they recommend. This kind of engagement transforms passive followers into an active, engaged audience who feels a personal connection to the influencer, driving higher levels of interaction and loyalty.

Participant B values an influencer who integrates his private life into his public content:

"He's a funny skit maker... He goes out of his way to do a lot of things and also lets us know about his private life. So, I feel he is trustworthy." - Participant B

This insight reveals that transparency about personal life can augment an influencer's trustworthiness, particularly when it complements their public persona. Sharing personal details responsibly helps build a holistic image that is both relatable and trustworthy.

Finally, Participant E emphasizes the responsibility influencers have toward their audience when endorsing products:

"... when it comes to influencing, I think influencers also need to be honest and also do a background check of any brands they are trying to influence." - Participant E

This quote underscores that transparency extends beyond personal storytelling to encompass ethical practices like verifying the credibility of promoted brands. This broader form of

transparency acts as a safeguard for both the influencer and their audience. By ensuring that endorsements are for trustworthy brands, influencers protect their own integrity and reputation. At the same time, this ethical behavior fosters trust with their audience, who perceive the influencer as someone who prioritizes authenticity and honesty, not just in their personal life but also in their business dealings. This builds a stronger foundation for a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship between the influencer and their Gen Z followers.

Overall, the theme of Transparency and Trust highlights the importance of micro-influencers being open, honest, and willing to share their vulnerabilities with their Gen Z audience on Instagram. This transparency fosters trust, strengthens perceptions of authenticity, and ultimately lays the foundation for genuine connections between micro-influencers and their followers.

4.5   Final Framework of Analysis

The purpose of this study is to explore how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of Instagram content posted by micro-influencers, and to examine which specific aspects of content authenticity contribute to Gen Z's engagement with influencers. The findings from our analysis clearly illustrate that content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust significantly contribute to the perception of authenticity in micro-influencers' content on Instagram among Gen Z. These elements closely align with the attributes of authenticity outlined in our literature review, such as performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping the perceptions of this demographic.

In response to these insights, the initial conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, which informed the conduct of this study, has undergone significant modifications. The updated framework, visible in Figure 3, effectively merges these critical factors into a unified model that elucidates the relationship between perceived authenticity in micro-influencer content and authentic brand engagement from Gen-Z. Each element interacts with the others; for example, content originality enhances trustworthiness, and relevance can heighten the emotional impact of the content.

It is crucial to understand that Gen Z views these aspects of perceived authenticity (content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust) as interrelated. They consider each aspect vital for micro-influencers to be seen as authentic. None of these attributes exist in isolation; all significantly contribute to the authenticity valued by this demographic. For example, Generation Z may view "performable authenticity," which involves appearing genuine, as a key factor in an influencer's trustworthiness. In a similar vein, "affinity," defined as having shared interests with the audience, may lead to content that holds significant emotional value for Gen Z.

In essence, this enhanced analysis furnishes a nuanced perspective on the mechanisms of authentic engagement in today's digital landscape, offering invaluable insights for brands striving to forge meaningful connections with this key demographic. This study underscores the complex interplay of factors that influence Generation Z's engagement with branded content through micro-influencers.

Micro-Influencers' Authentic Content Attributes

Gen Z's Perception of Authenticity in Micro-Influencer' Content

Performable authenticity

Affinity

Uniqueness

Message credibility

Authentic Engagement

Content originality
- Novel content appreciation
- Unique stylistic content
- Relatable and relevant content

Emotional value

Influencer persona
- Personal vulnerability
- Humour enhances authenticity
- Consistency in tone

Transparency and trust

Figure 2 Final Framework of Analysis

4.6   Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the researchers used thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews to identify four key themes: content originality, influencer persona, emotional value, and transparency and trust. Content originality involves unique and novel content, while influencer persona includes personal vulnerability, humor, and consistent tone. Emotional value focuses on the impact of personal stories and emotional connections, and transparency and trust emphasize honesty and ethical behavior. These findings, supported by participant quotes, form a revised conceptual framework showing how these interconnected aspects of authenticity drive genuine brand engagement among Gen Z.

5 Discussion

In this chapter, we discuss how Gen Z's perception of the authenticity of micro-influencer content is linked to authentic engagement. We examine the results of our analysis, situating them within the context of existing academic literature.

The discussion is organized around key themes emerging from our empirical findings. Specifically, we explore how Gen Z's perception of the authenticity of micro-influencer content—encompassing elements like content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust—intersects with established authenticity attributes identified in our literature review, including performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility. Our primary goal is to shed light on findings that corroborate contemporary research, identify any potential contradictions, and unveil new insights that contribute to or expand upon existing theoretical frameworks..

5.1 Content Originality and Authentic Engagement

Our findings highlight 'content originality' as a pivotal attribute influencing Gen Z's perception of micro-influencer authenticity, introducing a fresh perspective to the discourse on micro-influencer content and its impact. We integrate these findings within the authenticity attributes of micro-influencer content, specifically exploring performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility as outlined in our literature review. According to Leung et al. (2022), influencers who consistently share original content not only stand out but are also perceived as more credible and engaging. Synonymous with creativity and uniqueness, originality requires influencers to produce content that is not only distinctive but also expressive and culturally relevant, aligning with the interests and values of their audience (Duh & Thabethe, 2021).

Content Originality and Performable Authenticity

Our analysis underscores the significant role of content originality in what Chen et al. (2024) describe as 'performable authenticity.' This concept refers to the influencer's ability to authentically enact a persona that resonates with the audience. We found that Gen Z values

influencers who not only present themselves authentically but also deliver unique and original content that avoids appearing staged or overly scripted. Such originality conveys genuineness and a personal stake in the content, aligning with Gen Z's preference for authentic interactions. This alignment fosters authentic engagement, creating a bond between influencers and their followers that is grounded in mutual respect and genuine interest.

Content Originality and Uniqueness

As noted by Vrontis et al. (2021), the attribute of uniqueness is integral to distinguishing content amidst the vast array available on social media. Our findings reveal that originality not only garners attention but also differentiates micro-influencers from the often commercialized and repetitive content on platforms like Instagram. This unique positioning is essential for micro-influencers striving to carve out a distinct presence in a crowded market.

In agreement with Lajnef (2023), who argues that tailored and distinctive material enhances the perceived originality of digital content, we observe that an influencer's content gains originality through unique and exclusive material tailored to their personal brand. This distinctiveness not only differentiates them from others but also amplifies their appeal. By focusing on content that has not been widely circulated, influencers foster a sense of novelty and authenticity crucial for engaging and retaining followers. This approach is vital for building a loyal and committed audience through authentic engagement that reflects a genuine connection to their followers' interests and values.

Arriagada and Bishop (2021) highlight the strategic importance of originality and uniqueness in shaping content strategies that appeal to user-generated aesthetics and fresh perspectives. This preference enables brands and influencers to develop less scripted, more engaging content strategies. Moreover, influencers' ability to influence their followers' views and actions makes them attractive partners for advertising agencies, who select influencers based on their engagement levels, lifestyle, and content reach.

Content Originality and Message Credibility

Balaban & Szambolics (2022) discuss how message credibility involves the perceived integrity and reliability of content, which is bolstered by originality. Original content is often viewed as more honest and less susceptible to manipulation, enhancing the credibility of information shared by influencers, especially in expertise-driven fields like fitness or health.

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In synthesizing these authenticity dimensions, it is evident that content originality is not just an aesthetic or engagement tactic but a fundamental component of establishing a trustworthy digital persona. Our study enriches the existing literature by emphasizing that Generation Z values originality not only for its novelty but also for its ability to convey authenticity, bolster credibility, and assert uniqueness in the competitive influencer landscape. This emphasis on originality underscores the necessity for micro-influencers to cultivate authentic engagement with their audience, thereby establishing lasting connections that are both meaningful and influential.

5.2   Emotional Value and Authentic Engagement

Our research identified emotional value as a critical element influencing Gen Z's perception of micro-influencer authenticity, underscoring the importance of a connection based on genuine emotional engagement. Our finding aligns with the study by Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo (2021), which indicates that the emotional connection people have with influencers, along with the value of the information they provide, plays a crucial role in initiating persuasive processes that ultimately influence behavioral intentions. This authentic engagement fosters deeper connections and trust between influencers and their audience.

We will delve deeper into how these crucial findings about emotional value are connected to recognized authenticity attributes, including performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility in micro-influencer content. This exploration will enhance our understanding of how Generation Z views authenticity within the realm of micro-influencer marketing.

Emotional Value and Performable Authenticity

Our findings show that content evoking emotions, resonating with Gen Z's experiences, or creating a shared feeling is perceived as more genuine and relatable compared to content lacking emotional depth. This supports the concept of performable authenticity, which involves not only an accurate self-portrayal but also an emotional connection with the audience (Chen et al., 2024). This suggests that authenticity is enhanced when influencers present themselves in ways that feel genuine and relatable, aided by emotional value that fosters a sense of connection and shared experience, thereby facilitating authentic engagement.

Emotional Value and Affinity

Our research reveals that the emotional value of content significantly strengthens the affinity between influencers and their followers. According to Belanche et al. (2021), affinity emerges from a perceived closeness or personal connection that develops through shared emotional experiences. This is echoed by Gerlich (2023), who notes that influencers who tailor their content to resonate with followers' emotions or life experiences tend to forge stronger bonds and enhance the perceived authenticity of their content. Further supporting this notion, Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard (2020) argue that the emotional honesty of micro-influencers fosters a sense of intimacy and trust, effectively bridging the gap between influencers and followers.

Emotional Value and Uniqueness

In line with Zhang and Choi (2022), our study finds that the emotional depth of content not only captures attention but also sets influencers apart from their peers by providing a uniquely engaging emotional perspective. This distinctiveness is essential for sustaining follower interest and trust in an oversaturated media landscape. Moulard, Garrity, and Rice (2015) note that authenticity is often perceived through sincerity, which, in digital communication, is manifested by an influencer's consistent emotional expression across various posts and interactions. Such consistency fosters a narrative of sincerity and reliability, contributing to authentic engagement with followers.

Emotional Value and Message Credibility

Lastly, our research supports the link between emotional value and message credibility. Liu and Zheng (2024) note that authenticity in messaging significantly increases when influencers present content with genuine emotion. This sincerity enhances the believability and credibility of the influencer's endorsements (Belanche et al., 2021; Jun & Yi, 2020). Authentic engagement is thus reinforced through genuine emotional expressions, making the influencer's messages more trustworthy and effective.

In conclusion, our discussion demonstrates how emotional value intricately connects with key attributes of micro-influencer content authenticity. By exploring how emotional expressions influence perceptions of authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and credibility, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in influencer marketing, especially among

Generation Z audiences. This insight is pivotal for brands looking to leverage influencer partnerships effectively, as it highlights the importance of fostering authentic engagement to build lasting connections and trust with the audience.

5.3   Influencer Persona and Authentic Engagement

Our research has pinpointed influencer persona as a crucial determinant in influencing Gen Z's perceptions of micro-influencer content authenticity. Specifically, our findings highlight personal vulnerability, humour, and consistency in tone as sub-themes, which are essential components of an authentic persona that resonates with this demographic. Additionally, our study emphasizes the importance of authentic engagement, where influencers genuinely interact with their followers, creating a sense of connection and trust.

Our findings also shows that Gen Z views micro-influencers as representative of the brands they promote, perceiving them as one single entity. This seamless association highlights how pivotal a consistent and authentic persona is for influencers in garnering trust and recognition from this demographic. Just as a brand's signature style fosters recognition and trust, a micro-influencer's consistent voice acts as a defining characteristic, akin to a favorite musician whose music is instantly recognizable due to a unique blend of genre, lyrical style, and vocal delivery. Similarly, a micro-influencer's voice, characterized by their tone, language style, and content themes, becomes a hallmark of their personal brand and, by extension, the brands they represent. This distinctiveness not only differentiates them from others but also amplifies their appeal, reinforcing their influence among Gen Z consumers. Maintaining consistency in these elements cultivates a sense of familiarity and authenticity, meeting Gen Z's desire for genuine connections with the influencers they follow (Kevin, 2019; Stock, 2020).

Performable Authenticity and Influencer Persona

Personal vulnerability plays a key role in enhancing performable authenticity. Influencers who openly share their personal struggles and emotional experiences are often seen as more genuine. For instance, when influencers discuss personal setbacks or fitness challenges, they project a persona that is both relatable and authentic. This aligns with the notion of performable authenticity in the digital space as defined by Chen et al. (2024).

Affinity and Influencer Persona

Affinity is about the emotional bond that influencers forge with their audience. Humour is particularly effective in this context as it breaks down barriers and increases the influencer's likeability, thereby nurturing a closer relationship with the audience (Feng, Chang & Sun, 2023). When humour is executed well, it not only matches the influencer's persona but also boosts engagement and affinity, as followers enjoy and relate to the lighthearted content (Martikainen & Pitkänen, 2019). Authentic engagement through humour allows influencers to connect on a deeper level with their audience, making their interactions feel more personal and genuine.

Our study indicates that humour can misfire, particularly when it does not align with the influencer's persona or the audience's values. As highlighted by Participant E, misjudged humour may come across as *'trying too hard to be funny,'* which can alienate the audience instead of drawing them closer. Furthermore, inappropriate humour can lead to disengagement and negative perceptions, while aggressive humour is especially likely to provoke strong emotional responses, such as anger (Ning et al., 2022).

Uniqueness and Influencer Persona

Consistency in tone not only enhances an influencer's uniqueness by establishing a recognizable and distinctive style, but also supports a unique brand voice that stands out from others and is memorable to followers. Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal (2018) highlight how this consistent tone contributes significantly to the perception of uniqueness. Building on this idea, a study by Alves de Castro (2023) found that Gen Z actively seeks out influencers who are perceived as genuine and relatable on platforms like Instagram. This finding aligns with our observations that a consistent voice not only marks an influencer's distinct style but also enhances a sense of genuineness, enabling deeper connections between Gen Z audiences and influencers. Thus, maintaining a consistent tone is crucial for influencers aiming to establish trust and authenticity with their audience. Authentic engagement, characterized by consistent and meaningful interactions, further solidifies this trust and authenticity.

Message Credibility and Influencer Persona

The credibility of messages conveyed by influencers is significantly enhanced by elements such as personal vulnerability, humour, and consistency in tone. Weismueller et al. (2020) emphasize

that these elements not only help authenticate the messages, making them appear more honest, but also build trust with the audience over time. Further emphasizing the role of humour, participant responses indicate that creating entertaining content that evokes positive emotions can deepen connections with Gen Z. In alignment with this, Akbar and El-Gohary (2021) identify an additional strategy for achieving authentic branding: leveraging satirical humour and irony. This approach helps to critique and accept the notions of vanity and self-commodification that are prevalent on social media, thus enhancing the perceived authenticity of influencers.

The exploration of the influencer persona through the lenses of performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility illustrates the intricate dynamics that influence Gen Z's perception of authenticity in micro-influencer content. This study not only validates but extends existing theories in digital marketing and consumer behavior, offering valuable insights for influencers and marketers alike in engaging with this pivotal demographic. Authentic engagement, marked by genuine and meaningful interactions, emerges as a key strategy for influencers to build and maintain trust with their audience.

5.4   Transparency, Trust, and Authentic Engagement

Our study has identified transparency and trust as pivotal factors influencing Gen Z's perception of micro-influencer content authenticity. When influencers are transparent about sponsorships and their relationship with brands, it suggests honesty and a willingness to be genuine, potentially leading to a perception of authenticity. Similarly, when Gen Z trusts the influencer, they are more likely to believe that the influencer's opinions and recommendations are genuine, reinforcing the perception of authenticity (Pick, 2020; Tschirpig, 2020).

We will further discuss how these key findings on transparency and trust relate to established authenticity attributes such as performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility in micro-influencer content. Exploring these connections provides a deeper understanding of how Generation Z perceives authenticity in the context of micro-influencer marketing.

Transparency and Trust in Relation to Performable Authenticity

Performable authenticity, as defined by Chen et al. (2024), involves the influencer's ability to convincingly portray a persona that resonates as genuine. Our findings suggest that transparency about the realities of their lifestyle and the honest expression of personal experiences enhance the perceived authenticity of this persona (Vrontis et al., 2021; Monacho & Slamet, 2023). For instance, when influencers are transparent about their struggles and not just their successes, it lends credibility to their public persona and fosters authentic engagement.

Transparency and Trust in Relation to Affinity

Affinity refers to the emotional connection that influencers forge with their audience. Our findings align with Chen et al. (2024) in demonstrating that transparency and trust are key factors in building "affinity" with Gen Z. Transparency fosters this connection by building a foundation of trust that makes the relationship feel more genuine and less like a mere transaction (Jin, S. V., et al., 2019; Fink, 2021). When influencers share their true selves and are upfront about their content on Instagram, whether sponsored or not, it creates a bond that resonates with Gen Z's values of honesty and integrity, thus encouraging authentic engagement (Chung, Lee & Kim, 2023; Chung, Ding & Kalra, 2023).

Transparency and Trust in Relation to Uniqueness

Uniqueness in the influencer marketing context is about differentiating oneself from others. Our study found that Gen Z values influencers who not only present unique content but also are transparent about their content creation processes and personal life, which adds a layer of uniqueness by humanizing the influencer (Vrontis et al. 2021; Chung, Lee & Kim, 2023; Atiq et al., 2022). This approach distinguishes them from those who only present polished personas and promotes authentic engagement.

Transparency and Trust in Relation to Message Credibility

Message credibility concerns the reliability of the influencer's content. When Gen Z perceives an influencer as transparent and trustworthy, they are more likely to believe the messages being communicated, even if it's a sponsored endorsement (Pick, 2020; Tschirpig, 2020; Khan et al., 2021). This reinforces the overall perception of authenticity for the influencer and the brand, facilitating authentic engagement.

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In summary, this discussion has illustrated the profound influence of transparency and trust on enhancing the authenticity of micro-influencers as perceived by Generation Z. By connecting these findings with established authenticity attributes, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of influencer marketing dynamics, emphasizing the importance of authentic engagement.

5.5 Gen Z Perceived Authenticity Attributes and Authentic Engagement

For Gen Z, originality is synonymous with authenticity. They crave unique and creative content that stands out from the ubiquitous, often repetitive posts saturating their feeds (Vrontis et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2024). Micro-influencers excel in this area by producing niche content that reflects their personal experiences, hobbies, and passions. Unlike mega-influencers, whose content may sometimes feel commercialized or impersonal, micro-influencers tend to offer a fresh perspective, making their posts more relatable and engaging.

Original content captures the attention of Gen Z by providing a sense of novelty and individuality. It breaks through the noise, compelling followers to engage with posts that feel distinctive and genuine. This engagement creates deeper connections and conversations that such content sparks. When followers perceive content as truly original, they are more likely to interact with it, share it, and become loyal supporters of the influencer.

Emotional value is another critical attribute that drives authentic engagement. Gen Z values content that evokes feelings, whether it's joy, empathy, inspiration, or even nostalgia. Micro-influencers who can tap into these emotions create a powerful bond with their audience. By sharing personal stories, struggles, and triumphs, these influencers make their content more human and relatable (Koay et al., 2021; Alves de Castro, 2023).

The emotional resonance of a post can significantly enhance its impact. When followers feel an emotional connection, they are more likely to engage authentically. This goes beyond superficial interactions; it leads to meaningful exchanges where followers share their own experiences, offer support, and build a community around shared sentiments. Emotional value thus acts as a catalyst for deeper, more genuine engagement.

The persona of the influencer—their personality, style, and values—plays a crucial role in fostering authenticity. Gen Z is particularly attuned to the nuances of personal branding and seeks influencers who align with their own identities and beliefs (Elhachadi & Karaduman, 2019; Wolf, 2020). Micro-influencers often present a more approachable and relatable persona compared to their more famous counterparts. They tend to be seen as peers rather than celebrities, which bridges the gap between influencer and follower.

A well-crafted influencer persona enhances the sense of trust and relatability (Alves de Castro, 2023). When followers see themselves reflected in the influencer, it fosters a sense of community and belonging (Pradhan et al., 2023; Kim, 2020).. This connection encourages followers to engage more actively and authentically, as they feel they are interacting with a friend rather than a distant figure.

Transparency is the bedrock of trust, and for Gen Z, it is non-negotiable. Micro-influencers who are open about their processes, partnerships, and even their personal lives can build stronger, more trusting relationships with their followers (Vrontis et al., 2021; Monacho & Slamet, 2023; Pick, 2020). Whether it's being honest about sponsored content, sharing the reality behind curated posts, or openly discussing their values and beliefs, transparency ensures that followers know they are getting the real deal.

Transparent practices demystify the influencer's world and create a sense of authenticity that resonates with followers. This openness makes followers more likely to engage, as they feel they are being included in the influencer's journey rather than being marketed to. Transparent content encourages dialogue, questions, and discussions, all of which contribute to a richer and more authentic engagement.

The interplay between content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency creates a potent mix that drives authentic engagement on Instagram. For Gen Z, these attributes are not just desirable—they are essential. Micro-influencers who master these elements can cultivate a loyal and engaged following, setting the stage for meaningful interactions that go beyond mere metrics. In the age of Gen Z, authenticity isn't just a trend; it's the cornerstone of social media success. By embracing these attributes, micro-influencers can forge deeper connections and create a lasting impact in the digital landscape.

The table below illustrates how various perceived authenticity attributes (themes and sub-themes) of Generation Z regarding micro-influencers' content contribute to authentic engagement.

Table 4 Linking Perceived Authenticity Attributes to Authentic Engagement

Perceived Attributes of Authenticity	Character of Engagement
Content Originality	
- Novel content appreciation	Fresh and innovative content drives authentic engagement by offering something new and exciting to followers.
- Unique stylistic content	Showcasing unique personal styles creates a distinct brand that followers perceive as authentic.
- Relatable and relevant content	Content that resonates with followers' experiences and interests fosters authentic engagement.
Emotional Value	Emotional connection through compelling stories enhances perceived authenticity.
Influencer Persona	
- Personal vulnerability	Sharing personal and vulnerable moments strengthens the bond with followers, thereby creating authentic engagement.
- Humour enhances authenticity	Using humour to engage followers builds likability and a sense of authenticity.
- Consistency in tone	Maintaining a consistent tone ensures reliable and recognizable content, reinforcing authenticity.
Transparency and Trust	Transparent and honest interactions build trust and are perceived as authentic.

5.6   Chapter Summary

This chapter shows that Gen Z prioritizes originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust. They value unique and creative content that resonates with their experiences. Micro-influencers who share personal stories, cultivate a relatable persona, and are honest about sponsorships are seen as more authentic. These factors all contribute to authentic engagement between Gen Z and the micro-influencers they follow on Instagram.

6 Conclusion

This concluding chapter wraps up our study by examining whether the intended goals were achieved and the research questions were adequately addressed. It explores the managerial implications of the findings, assesses the limitations of the study, and proposes areas for future research.

6.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how Generation Z perceives the authenticity of Instagram content posted by micro-influencers, and to examine which specific aspects of content authenticity contribute to Gen Z's engagement with influencers.

To fulfill the purpose of this research, the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Source Credibility Model have been applied as useful frameworks to understand authentic interactions between micro-influencers and Gen Z on Instagram. These theories guide the investigation of the following research questions (RQ).

RQ1: How does Generation Z perceive the authenticity in the content posted by micro-influencers on Instagram?

RQ2: What are the specific aspects of authenticity that contribute to Gen Z engagement?

To gather the necessary data and insights for our research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants.

Our findings indicate that content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust significantly contribute to the perception of authenticity in micro-influencers' content on Instagram among Gen Z. These elements closely align with the attributes of authenticity outlined in our literature review, such as performable authenticity, affinity, uniqueness, and message credibility, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping the perceptions of this demographic.

Building on this, it becomes evident that Gen Z does not perceive these aspects as isolated factors but rather as interconnected elements that collectively enhance a micro-influencer's authenticity. This interconnectedness highlights the need for micro-influencers and marketing

managers to skillfully integrate these aspects into their content strategies. Each attribute is crucial in its own right; however, when combined, they form a robust foundation of authenticity, highly valued by Gen Z.

6.2   Theoretical Implications

This study enhances the existing literature on influencer marketing by highlighting the multidimensional nature of authenticity as perceived by Generation Z. By examining the combined effects of content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust, this research offers a holistic view of the factors that influence authenticity among micro-influencers on Instagram. Unlike previous research which typically explored these attributes individually, our study examines their collective impact on Gen Z's perception. Consequently, literature on influencer marketing should incorporate these complex interplays when developing theories around authentic engagement.

Aligning with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this study demonstrates that Gen Z actively seeks specific gratifications such as emotional connection and trust from their interactions with micro-influencers. The identified authenticity attributes—content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust—are shown to fulfill these needs, thereby influencing Gen Z's perception and ultimately their decision to engage with the influencer's content.

Additionally, our findings support the Source Credibility Model by demonstrating that Gen Z evaluates micro-influencers based on their perceived expertise (content originality), trustworthiness (transparency and trust), and likeability (influencer persona). The interplay between these attributes significantly affects Gen Z's overall assessment of an influencer's credibility and authenticity.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable theoretical implications for understanding how Generation Z perceives authenticity in micro-influencer marketing. It underscores the importance of moving beyond examining isolated attributes to consider the complex interplay among content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust. This refined understanding can inform the development of more nuanced theoretical frameworks for fostering authentic engagement in the evolving media ecosystem.

6.3 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for managers and marketers aiming to leverage micro-influencer marketing on Instagram, particularly for targeting Generation Z. In this section, we discuss several key managerial implications derived from this study.

6.3.1 Leveraging Content Originality: Enhancing Brand Integration

Content originality is a critical driver of authenticity that resonates deeply with Generation Z. This demographic values innovation and uniqueness, which suggests that traditional, formulaic marketing approaches may be less effective. Managers should encourage micro-influencers to develop and share content that showcases their unique creative skills and personal interests. Authentic engagement is essential in this process, as it helps build genuine connections between influencers and their audiences. This could involve creating content that ties the product into the influencer's daily activities or personal stories in an organic way. For example, a tech brand could encourage influencers to integrate their gadgets into a "day in the life" video, demonstrating the product's real-life application beyond typical advertising.

6.3.2 Cultivating Emotional Value: Connecting Beyond the Product

Emotional value significantly influences Gen Z's engagement with content. Marketers should guide micro-influencers to craft stories that evoke specific emotions, such as joy, trust, or anticipation, which can create a lasting impression. Authentic engagement is critical in this context, as it fosters genuine connections and emotional resonance with the audience. Emotional storytelling can be facilitated by aligning product features with real-life benefits, as seen through the eyes of the influencer. For instance, an outdoor apparel brand could work with influencers to share personal anecdotes about how the clothing has enhanced their outdoor adventures, thus building an emotional narrative around comfort, safety, or enjoyment.

6.3.3   Authenticating Influencer Persona: Consistency and Relatability

The influencer persona is instrumental in establishing authenticity through genuine engagement. Marketing managers must carefully select influencers whose personal brands align closely with their corporate values and image, ensuring that all interactions resonate authentically with the audience. Maintaining consistency in the manner influencers present themselves and communicate with their followers is critical for sustaining credibility. Periodic training sessions are advisable to help influencers adhere faithfully to their established personas while seamlessly integrating brand messages. For instance, if an influencer is recognized for their humourous interpretation of life's challenges, it is advisable for brands to permit the natural integration of this humour into promotional content. This method promotes a level of engagement that is perceived as authentic, fostering trust and loyalty among the audience.

6.3.4   Building Trust through Transparency

To foster a genuine connection between influencers and their audience, transparency and trust are essential. Marketers should ensure that all sponsored content is clearly labeled and that influencers are transparent about their partnerships with brands. Additionally, encouraging influencers to openly discuss the selection process behind their endorsements can add an extra layer of authenticity. Transparency about how products are chosen and what values guide these choices can significantly boost trust among Gen Z, who are often skeptical of overt marketing tactics. This level of honest communication fosters authentic engagement, which is crucial in maintaining a credible and trustworthy influencer-audience relationship.

This study highlights the need for a sophisticated approach to influencer marketing, one that goes beyond traditional product placement tactics which can often fall flat or even backfire. By adopting strategies that emphasize content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust, marketers can significantly improve their engagement with Generation Z. The strategic blueprint provided by this research encourages marketing managers to empower micro-influencers to seamlessly integrate brands into their authentic content narratives. This approach aims to foster deeper, more genuine connections between brands and their audiences through micro-influencer collaborations on Instagram.

6.4   Limitations and Future Research

The current study provides valuable insights into micro-influencer authenticity and its implications on Gen-Z brand engagement, but does have limitations that pave the way for future research. One of the primary constraints is the study's exclusive focus on Gen Z individuals aged 18 to 27. While this age range is a significant segment of Instagram users, it does not include the entire Gen Z demographic, particularly the younger members who might interact with micro-influencers differently due to their developmental stages and varying social environments. Exploring perceptions of influencer authenticity across broader age groups, including millennials, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different generations value authenticity in influencer content.

Furthermore, the research was confined to the Instagram platform. Although Instagram is a major venue for influencer marketing, other platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube also hold substantial sway, particularly among younger users. Each platform's unique features and engagement methods could influence how authenticity is perceived and valued. Investigating micro-influencer authenticity across these diverse platforms could offer deeper insights into the evolving landscape of influencer marketing.

The study also focused exclusively on micro-influencers. Examining the perceptions of authenticity among macro-influencers with larger followings could provide a more complete picture of influencer dynamics.

Methodologically, the research utilized qualitative techniques, specifically semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling, which, while yielding rich data, limit generalizability. Future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods, such as surveys with larger, more diverse samples, to explore the prevalence and generalizability of the identified themes. A mixed-methods approach would provide a nuanced understanding of how Gen Z perceives micro-influencer authenticity and its impact on brand engagement.

Lastly, the use of purposive sampling targeted participants who are already engaged with micro-influencers on Instagram, potentially excluding diverse viewpoints. Employing a broader sampling strategy, such as random sampling, could capture a more representative sample of the target population.

By addressing these limitations, future research can build on this study's findings, investigating different age groups, social media platforms, and influencer types through varied methodological approaches. Such efforts would enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between micro-influencer authenticity, brand engagement, and the dynamic social media environment.

6.5   Chapter Summary

This concluding chapter evaluates the study's success in achieving its goals and addressing its research questions, highlighting managerial implications and suggesting future research areas. The study reveals that Gen Z perceives Instagram micro-influencer authenticity through content originality, emotional value, influencer persona, and transparency and trust. These interconnected elements enhance authenticity and engagement. The findings offer practical strategies for marketers, emphasizing originality, emotional storytelling, consistent personas, and transparency. Limitations include the focus on a narrow age range, a single platform, and micro-influencers only. Future research should explore different age groups, platforms, and influencer types, using varied methodologies for broader insights.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Pre-Interview Setup

- Ensure recording equipment is functioning.

- Ensure consent is given for recording.

Introduction

- Greet participant and thank them for their time.

- Introduction of ourselves

- Briefly explain the purpose of the study: to understand how Gen Z perceives the authenticity of micro-influencer content and what factors contribute to engagement.

- Explain how the data will be used and anonymized.

- Appeal to participant to answer truthfully, no right or wrong answers, we want to hear about your experiences etc.

Familiarization:

- Can you tell me your name (or a pseudonym)?

- How old are you?

- What is your nationality?

Background with Micro-Influencers:

- Do you use Instagram?

- How often do you use Instagram, and what do you mainly use it for?

- Do you follow any micro-influencers on Instagram?

Content Resonance & Originality

● When you follow a micro-influencer, what kind of content resonates most with you? (Follow up based on answer)

● Can you elaborate on why this type of content resonates with you?

● Can you describe an instance where a micro-influencer impressed you with their original content?

● What specifically made the content feel original to you?

● On the other hand, what are some red flags that make you think an influencer's content is not original?

Emotional Connection & Authenticity

● Can you describe a moment when an influencer's content genuinely affected you emotionally?

● How did the content make you feel? Why do you think it resonated with you?

● Have you ever stopped following an influencer because you felt they were not genuine?

● Can you describe what made them feel inauthentic? (Follow up based on answer)

● What does it mean to you when an influencer shares personal or vulnerable moments with their audience?

● Does it make them seem more or less trustworthy? Why?

Influencer Personality & Trust

● Could you mention an influencer whose content seems authentic to you?

● Why does this influencer feel genuine?

● How does an influencer's personality influence your perception of their content authenticity?

● For example, does a humourous personality make them seem more or less genuine?

● How do you react when you perceive a mismatch between an influencer's usual emotional tone and a specific post?

● Does it affect your trust in their recommendations?

● Can you describe a specific instance where an influencer's emotional expression made you trust their recommendation?

Wrap-up

Is there anything else about your interactions with micro-influencers on Instagram that you think is important to share?

Thank the participant for their time and insights.

Briefly answer any questions they may have about the study (without compromising anonymity).

Appendix B - An Example of the Thematic Coding Analysis

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Description	Quotes and Excerpts Supporting the Themes
Content Originality	- Novel content appreciation - Unique stylistic content - Relatable and relevant content	- Creative integration - Fresh perspective - Unconventional formats - Personal signature	This theme focuses on the originality and uniqueness of the content that micro-influencers post, which Generation Z perceives as a significant marker of authenticity.	*"... I do follow his content for tech specification, anything tech, be it gaming, be it laptops, be it systems, he's always giving us content, real content."* *– Participant F*
Emotional Value		- Empathy induction - Inspirational appeal - Emotional resonance	This theme highlights how emotional connection and the ability to tell compelling, personal stories contribute to the perceived authenticity of micro-influencers.	*"There was this influencer online that posted one particular content like that. It was about some two young children on the streets... it took me down memory lanes when I was a child. I remember back then how I used to go out to hawk after school so that I can support my parents."* *- Participant A*
Influencer Persona	- Personal vulnerability	- Consistency - Expertise - Likeability	This theme explores how the personal	*"I feel love in some way... for an influencer to share some of their personal*

	- Humour enhances authenticity - Consistency in tone	- Charisma - Uniqueness	characteristics, behaviors, and presentation styles of influencers influence audience perceptions of their authenticity and relatability.	*experience and their vulnerable moments with their audience, I feel they are very, very close to their audience... Like there is a bond there."* *- Participant F*
Transparency and Trust		- Disclosure practices - Honest communication - Consistency in messaging - Ethical conduct	This theme captures the importance of openness and honesty in building trust between influencers and their followers, which is crucial for perceiving content as authentic.	*"... when it comes to influencing, I think influencers also need to be honest and also do a background check of any brands they are trying to influence."* *- Participant E*