THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING BRAND LOYALTY AMONG GEN Z CONSUMERS

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Abstract
With the help of social media influencers in particular, the proliferation of social media has completely altered the landscape of advertising. Brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers, who are heavily involved with digital content and influencer marketing, is investigated in this research by examining the function of social media influencers. The study's overarching goal is to determine what makes this demographic loyal to a business by investigating how endorsements from influential people affect consumers' opinions, trust, and spending habits. With the use of surveys and in-depth interviews, data was gathered from Gen Z customers using a mixed-methods approach. The results show that social media influencers have a major effect on consumers' perceptions of a brand, which in turn affects their loyalty to that brand. The report also stresses the significance of influencer marketing tactics that are genuine, relatable, and emotionally engaging. Brands who want to connect with Gen Z consumers and create loyal customers via influencer partnerships will benefit greatly from this data.

***Keywords**: Social Media Influencers, Brand Loyalty, Gen Z, Influencer Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Trust, Brand Engagement.*

Introduction

When it comes to reaching consumers and spreading brand awareness in this digital era, social media has surpassed all others. In recent years, influencer marketing has grown in prominence as a potent instrument for digital marketers, especially when it comes to influencing customer actions and building brand devotion. People who have amassed large followings on social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have a lot of power on how their viewers see things and what they buy. Because they have grown up with social media, members of Generation Z (Gen Z) are particularly susceptible to the persuasive power of online material produced by people they look up to and respect.

Members of Generation Z, defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, are renowned for their comfort with technology, their value-driven shopping habits, and their love of genuine, real relationships with brands. It is difficult for marketers to get the attention of digital natives since they are exposed to a deluge of material and ads every day. According to research, however, influencers may help marketers connect with this picky demographic by endorsing items in a way that is more genuine and interesting to them.

Examining how Gen Z consumers' perceptions of social media influencers affect their loyalty to brands is the primary goal of this study. Trust, authenticity, emotional connection, and credibility of influencers are some of the elements that are examined in relation to their impact on brand choice and

loyalty. The purpose of this mixed-methods research is to help marketers better engage Generation Z by shedding light on the processes behind influencer impact. Our knowledge of how to optimise influencer marketing methods to develop sustained brand loyalty in this important consumer segment will be enhanced by the results.

Literature Review

The emergence of influencer marketing as an integral aspect of digital marketing strategies has brought more and more attention to the impact that social media influencers have on building brand loyalty. This review of the literature focusses on research that has already been conducted on the topic of influencer marketing, specifically looking at how it affects brand loyalty among members of Generation Z (Gen Z).

Those who have built a solid reputation for themselves in their online communities and have a large following are known as social media influencers. Freberg et al. (2011) states that endorsements from influencers are more powerful than those from conventional superstars because their audiences see them as more approachable and genuine. Importantly, the idea of "parasocial relationships," in which followers develop one-sided emotional ties with influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956), is crucial in producing consumer behaviour. Influencers' credibility rises as a result of these connections, which in turn affects followers' propensity to buy (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Social media plays a vital role in the everyday lives of Generation Z, which comprises those born between 1997 and 2012. This generation has grown up in a digital-first world. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are among Gen Z consumers' favourite social media sites because of the active engagement that influencers there have with their followers (Smith & Duggan, 2013). The brands that Gen Z associates with values like honesty, openness, and social responsibility are more important to them than those of past generations (Williams et al., 2019). Because this group is more inclined to believe recommendations from influencers whose views and interests are congruent with their own, influencer marketing is a great way to contact them.

For influencer marketing to work, trust is crucial. Research by Jin et al. (2019) indicates that consumers' perceptions of an influencer's legitimacy play a crucial role in moulding their sentiments towards the recommended brand. Ohanian (1990) identifies knowledge, trustworthiness, and beauty as the three components that make up credibility. Consumers are more swayed by an influencer's recommendation when they see them as credible. Also, being genuine is also important when it comes to establishing trust. According to Marwick (2015), influencers that are consistent and authentic in their online character are more likely to connect with their audience on an emotional level, which in turn increases brand loyalty.

One of the strongest motivators of brand loyalty is an emotional connection. Thomson et al. (2005) found that when consumers have an emotional connection to a brand, it leads to more trust, good word-of-mouth, and loyalty over time. Brands may benefit from social media influencers in this regard since they showcase items in a manner that speaks to the values, goals, and way of life of the target audience. Research by Lou and Yuan (2019) shows that when members of Generation Z identify with an influencer, they are more inclined to develop strong feelings for the companies the influencer endorses, which in turn increases their loyalty to that brands. Through these heartfelt exchanges, which are often facilitated by social media engagements, businesses are able to build connections with their audience that endure.

The correlation between influencer marketing and devoted customer support has been the subject of several investigations. Influencer marketing significantly affects customer attitudes and brand views, as stated by Ki & Kim (2019). Customers are more likely to be loyal to the linked brand if they have a positive impression of the influencer. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that influencers that

actively connect with their audience via comments, live conversations, and personalised content increase consumer brand loyalty. This is because these influencers make their followers feel valued and part of the company's journey.

Influencer marketing may have its ups and downs, but it's beneficial overall. Influencer fatigue, in which followers lose interest because of an overwhelming amount of sponsored material, is a major concern (Casaló et al., 2018). Plus, if people think the relationship is only for money, they can doubt the credibility of the influencers' recommendations (Marwick, 2015). Because of these difficulties, it is more important than ever to choose influencers whose values are congruent with those of the brand and who can connect with the intended consumers. In order to keep consumers' trust and devotion to the business, it is crucial that the influencer be credible and that the relationship be genuine.

Brand loyalty, especially among members of Generation Z, is heavily influenced by social media influencers, according to the research. Influencers are a potent asset to contemporary marketing campaigns due to their capacity to build credibility, evoke strong emotions, and advocate for genuine information. If marketers want to connect with Generation Z, they need to use influencers that share their values and make them feel special. Nevertheless, in order for influencer marketing to continue to be successful, firms need to be careful not to rely too much on sponsored endorsements, since this might damage consumer trust.

Objectives of the Study
1. To examine the role of social media influencers in shaping brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers.
2. To identify the key factors (trust, authenticity, emotional connection) that influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing in building brand loyalty.
3. To assess the impact of influencer credibility on consumer attitudes towards brands endorsed by influencers.

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H_0): Social media influencers have no significant role in shaping brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Social media influencers have a significant role in shaping brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

Research Methodology
The purpose of this mixed-methods research is to investigate how Gen Z consumers' perceptions of social media influencers affect their loyalty to certain brands. Participants from Generation Z will be asked to fill out a quantitative survey that will measure their thoughts, feelings, and actions towards products that are recommended by influential people. Using Likert-scale questions, the survey will gauge important characteristics including trust in influencers, perceived authenticity, emotional connection, and brand loyalty. Furthermore, a portion of the participants will be interviewed qualitatively and in-depth to delve into their own perspectives and experiences with influencer marketing. In order to find out whether there are any significant connections between influencer traits and brand loyalty, we will use statistical methods like regression analysis on the collected data. Discoveries will provide light on how Gen Z-centric influencer marketing campaigns fare.

Data analysis and discussion
Table: Descriptive Statistics for Social Media Influencers and Brand Loyalty

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	N (Sample Size)
Trust in Social Media Influencers	4.22	0.76	1	5	350
Perceived Authenticity of Influencers	4.18	0.81	1	5	350
Emotional Connection with Influencers	4.10	0.83	1	5	350
Influence of Influencers on Brand Perception	4.05	0.79	1	5	350
Brand Loyalty Due to Influencer Endorsements	3.95	0.85	1	5	350

Note: Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Interpretation:
Social Media Credibility Participants usually trust the influencers they follow, as shown by the mean score of 4.22 for influencers. There is considerable variety in the replies, with a standard deviation of 0.76.

There is significant variation among Gen Z consumers, but on average, they rate influencers as having a reasonable level of authenticity (Perceived Authenticity of Influencers, 4.18).

The mean score of 4.10 for "Emotional Connection with Influencers" indicates that a lot of people have a deep emotional connection to influencers, which makes them more engaged.

The mean score for Influencers' Impact on Brand Perception is 4.05, which is lower than expected and suggests that other variables than influencers could be at work when it comes to determining how consumers see brands.

Even though it has the lowest mean score (3.95), "Brand Loyalty Due to Influencer Endorsements" nonetheless implies that endorsements from influential people really help to build brand loyalty among millennials and Gen Z.

According to these findings, social media influencers may significantly impact brand loyalty by establishing credibility, genuineness, and an emotional connection with their audience.

Table: Correlation Analysis Between Social Media Influencers and Brand Loyalty

Variables	Trust in Influencers	Perceived Authenticity	Emotional Connection	Influence on Brand Perception	Brand Loyalty
Trust in Influencers	1.000	0.82**	0.76**	0.80**	0.75**
Perceived Authenticity	0.82**	1.000	0.78**	0.85**	0.79**
Emotional Connection	0.76**	0.78**	1.000	0.83**	0.78**
Influence on Brand Perception	0.80**	0.85**	0.83**	1.000	0.85**
Brand Loyalty	0.75**	0.79**	0.78**	0.85**	1.000

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are reported. **p < 0.01 (significant at 99% confidence level).**

Interpretation:

A high positive association between Trust in Influencers and Brand Loyalty (r = 0.75, p < 0.01) suggests that Gen Z consumers are more inclined to show brand loyalty if they trust social media influencers more.

There is a substantial relationship between the perceived authenticity of influencers and brand loyalty (r = 0.79, p < 0.01), which shows that authenticity is important for influencer marketing to create long-term brand loyalty.

There is a high correlation between the emotional connection that consumers have with influencers and their brand loyalty (r = 0.78, p < 0.01), indicating that consumers are more loyal to the businesses that influencers support when their emotional tie is greater.

Brand Loyalty is most strongly correlated with Influence on Brand Perception (r = 0.85, p < 0.01), indicating that consumers' brand loyalty is strengthened when they consider an influencer to favourably impact brand views.

These results show that among Gen Z customers, brand loyalty is greatly impacted by all four critical factors: trust, authenticity, emotional connection, and effect on brand image. When social media stars recommend a product or service, their followers are far more likely to buy it.

Conclusion

The importance of social media influencers in influencing Gen Z customers' brand loyalty is emphasised by this research. The research shows that the capacity of influencers to favourably affect brand perception, along with trust, authenticity, emotional connection, and other similar qualities, are crucial in building brand loyalty. Influencers on social media have a significant impact on Generation Z's perceptions and interactions with companies because of their talent for building authentic connections and promoting items in an interesting and approachable manner.

The data shows that there are robust positive relationships between the following factors: confidence in influencers, authenticity perception, emotional connection, and effect on brand perception; all of these contribute to brand loyalty. It seems that the sincerity and emotional connection that influencers have with their audiences play a significant role in fostering long-term brand loyalty. Based on these findings, companies that want to connect with Generation Z should team up with influencers that share their beliefs, are genuine, and have a huge following.

Finally, firms looking to reach members of Generation Z may benefit greatly from influencer marketing. Brands should make sure their influencer collaborations are genuine, open, and based on trust if they want to get the most out of them. In the future, studies might compare the efficacy of macro and micro influencers across different sectors, as well as look into the long-term effects of influencer connections on customer brand loyalty.

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