

REVIEW PAPER

APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

The Influence of Digital Opinion Leaders on Brand Attitudes: Evidence from Polish Millennials and Gen Z Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Digital opinion leaders have emerged as powerful actors within contemporary consumer ecosystems, shaping attitudes, preferences, and purchasing behaviors through social media interactions. While traditional advertising relies on institutional credibility, digital opinion leaders influence audiences through perceived authenticity, interpersonal trust, and psychological identification. This article examines how digital opinion leaders affect brand attitudes among Polish Millennials and Generation Z consumers through the lens of consumer psychology. By integrating theories of social identity, trust formation, parasocial interaction, and cognitive processing, the paper explores the psychological pathways through which influencer-generated content impacts consumer evaluations of brands. Particular attention is given to generational differences in information processing, emotional engagement, and digital trust. The analysis reveals that Gen Z consumers are more likely to develop emotionally driven brand perceptions through parasocial attachment, whereas Millennials demonstrate stronger reliance on expertise, informational quality, and perceived credibility. The findings contribute to understanding how digital influence mechanisms operate within emerging European consumer markets and provide implications for ethical digital marketing practices.

Keywords: Consumer Psychology, Digital Opinion Leaders, Influencer Marketing, Brand Attitudes, Social Identity, Trust Formation, Generation Z, Millennials, Poland

(I) THE RISE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER CULTURE

Over the past decade, social media has evolved from a communication tool into a primary environment for social interaction, identity construction, and consumer decision-making. Within this environment,

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digital opinion leaders have acquired unprecedented influence over how individuals perceive products, services, organizations, and lifestyles (Freberg *et al.* 2011).

Unlike traditional advertising models that depend on one-way communication, digital opinion leaders cultivate relationships with followers through ongoing interaction, personal storytelling, and community engagement. These relationships blur the distinction between friendship, mentorship, and commercial persuasion. As a result, consumers increasingly rely on digital creators when evaluating brands and making purchasing decisions (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

In Poland, social media adoption has expanded rapidly among younger demographics. Millennials and Generation Z consumers spend substantial amounts of time engaging with content creators across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and emerging digital platforms. Consequently, digital opinion leaders have become important psychological reference points that influence attitudes toward consumption, identity, and social belonging (Wąsowicz-Zaborek and Bilińska-Reformat, 2021). The significance of this phenomenon extends beyond marketing effectiveness. It raises fundamental psychological questions concerning trust formation, cognitive evaluation, emotional attachment, and social influence in digitally mediated environments.

(II) UNDERSTANDING BRAND ATTITUDES FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Brand attitudes represent enduring evaluations that consumers hold toward products, organizations, or services. These evaluations are shaped through a combination of cognitive beliefs, emotional experiences, and behavioral intentions (Aaker, 1991). Psychological research suggests that consumers rarely evaluate brands solely on objective characteristics. Instead, attitudes are influenced by symbolic meanings, social associations, and emotional experiences connected to the brand (Keller, 2020). Digital opinion leaders play a critical role in this process by acting as interpreters of brand meaning. Through narratives, personal experiences, and recommendations, influencers provide psychological frameworks through which consumers understand and evaluate brands.

Three dimensions are particularly important in consumer evaluation: cognitive evaluation, emotional evaluation, and social evaluation. Cognitive evaluation involves consumers assessing product quality, usefulness, functionality, and reliability. Emotional evaluation refers to the development of affective responses based on experiences, feelings, and symbolic associations. Social evaluation involves consumers assessing how brands contribute to social identity, group membership, and self-expression. Digital opinion leaders influence all three dimensions simultaneously, making them particularly effective agents of persuasion.

(III) TRUST AS THE FOUNDATION OF DIGITAL PERSUASION

Trust represents one of the most influential psychological mechanisms in influencer marketing (Munnukka *et al.* 2021). Traditional advertising often encounters consumer skepticism because audiences recognize its commercial intent. In contrast, digital opinion leaders frequently present recommendations within personal narratives, reducing perceptions of overt persuasion.

Trust formation typically develops through several stages, beginning with perceived authenticity, as consumers are more likely to trust influencers who appear genuine, transparent, and consistent in their

communications. The second stage involves perceived expertise, whereby influencers who demonstrate knowledge and competence within a specific domain are viewed as more credible. Relationship consistency also plays an important role, as regular interaction and long-term content creation strengthen audience confidence and perceptions of reliability. Finally, value congruence contributes to trust formation when consumers perceive alignment between their personal values and those expressed by the influencer. Research consistently demonstrates that trust functions as a mediator between influencer credibility and positive brand attitudes (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

(IV) PARASOCIAL ATTACHMENT AND CONSUMER IDENTIFICATION

One of the most distinctive features of digital influence is the development of parasocial relationships. These one-sided emotional bonds allow followers to feel connected to individuals they have never met personally (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

Social media intensifies parasocial attachment through daily content exposure, personal disclosures, interactive communication, livestream engagement, and behind-the-scenes storytelling. From a psychological perspective, parasocial relationships satisfy several fundamental human needs, including the need for belonging, social connection, guidance, and identity validation. As emotional attachment strengthens, followers become more receptive to influencer recommendations and associated brand messages.

For many Gen Z consumers, influencers occupy roles traditionally held by celebrities, community leaders, or even peer groups. Consequently, influencer endorsements often carry significant emotional weight.

(V) GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN DIGITAL TRUST

Although both Millennials and Generation Z actively engage with social media, notable psychological differences exist between these cohorts.

Generation Z: Emotionally Integrated Digital Consumers

Generation Z has grown up in an environment where social media forms an integral part of everyday life. Their online and offline identities frequently overlap, resulting in stronger integration of digital experiences into self-concept development (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

The characteristics include high influencer engagement, strong parasocial attachment, a preference for visual communication, community-driven decision-making, and greater emotional investment in digital relationships. As a result, brand attitudes among Gen Z are often shaped through emotional and social mechanisms rather than purely rational evaluation.

Millennials: Information-Oriented Digital Consumers

Millennials experienced the transition from traditional media to social media and therefore tend to maintain stronger critical evaluation skills when engaging with influencer content (Schouten *et al.* 2020).

The characteristics include a higher emphasis on expertise, greater information seeking, more deliberate decision-making, increased concern regarding credibility, and a strong preference for evidence-based

recommendations. Millennials are influenced by digital opinion leaders, but their persuasion process typically involves more cognitive scrutiny than that of Generation Z.

(VI) SOCIAL IDENTITY AND CONSUMER SELF-CONCEPT

Social Identity Theory provides another useful perspective for understanding influencer effectiveness (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Individuals derive portions of their identity from membership in social groups. Digital communities formed around influencers create opportunities for followers to establish group affiliations and reinforce desired identities. Examples include sustainable lifestyle communities, fitness communities, technology enthusiast groups, entrepreneurial networks, and fashion and beauty communities. Consumers frequently adopt brand preferences associated with these groups because such preferences reinforce identity consistency and social belonging. For Polish Millennials and Gen Z consumers, influencer communities increasingly serve as environments where personal values, aspirations, and consumption behaviors intersect.

(VII) COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL PATHWAYS TO BRAND ATTITUDE FORMATION

The influence of digital opinion leaders operates through two complementary psychological pathways.

Cognitive Pathway: Influencers provide information that affects product beliefs, quality perceptions, risk assessments, and purchase evaluations.

Emotional Pathway: Influencers evoke feelings that affect brand liking, emotional attachment, trust perceptions, and purchase motivation.

The interaction of these pathways ultimately determines brand attitudes. Generation Z consumers tend to rely more heavily on emotional pathways, while Millennials often incorporate stronger cognitive evaluation mechanisms.

(VIII) PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL OPINION LEADER INFLUENCE

The growing influence of digital opinion leaders extends beyond consumer purchasing decisions and enters broader domains of psychological functioning. Social media influencers increasingly shape how individuals perceive themselves, evaluate others, and construct social identities. Consequently, understanding their impact on brand attitudes requires consideration of the underlying psychological processes that influence cognition, emotion, and behavior.

(A) Self-Concept and Identity Construction

Self-concept refers to the collection of beliefs individuals hold about themselves. During adolescence and early adulthood, individuals actively construct and refine their identities through interactions with social environments (Erikson, 1968).

Digital opinion leaders frequently become symbolic models that followers use to define their personal values, lifestyle aspirations, consumption preferences, career ambitions, and social identities. Consumers often select brands endorsed by influencers because these brands become associated with desirable

identities. The psychological appeal of influencer marketing therefore lies not merely in product promotion but also in identity reinforcement. For Polish Generation Z consumers, whose social experiences are heavily integrated with digital platforms, influencers often function as reference groups for identity development.

(B) Emotional Contagion and Attitude Transfer

Emotional Contagion Theory suggests that emotions can spread through social interaction and observation (Hatfield *et al.* 1994). In social media environments, positive emotions expressed by influencers may transfer to the brands they endorse. For example, enthusiasm toward a product may increase brand attractiveness, happiness associated with product use may enhance consumer evaluations, and confidence displayed by influencers may strengthen perceptions of product effectiveness. This process helps explain why emotionally engaging content frequently produces stronger brand responses than purely informational advertising. The emotional transfer mechanism is particularly effective when followers already possess strong parasocial attachments to influencers.

(C) Social Comparison Processes

Social Comparison Theory proposes that individuals evaluate themselves through comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). Influencer content frequently presents idealized lifestyles, professional success, physical attractiveness, material achievements, and social recognition. These portrayals can inspire motivation and aspiration; however, they may also create dissatisfaction, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem. Research suggests that Gen Z consumers experience stronger social comparison effects than Millennials due to higher levels of social media immersion and digital engagement (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Consequently, positive brand attitudes may sometimes emerge from aspirational motivations rather than objective product evaluations.

(IX) EVIDENCE FROM POLISH MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z CONSUMERS

Poland represents one of Central Europe's fastest-growing digital consumer markets. High smartphone penetration, extensive internet accessibility, and widespread social media usage have contributed to the growing influence of digital opinion leaders across multiple industries (Statistics Poland (GUS), 2024).

(A) Social Media Consumption Patterns

Polish Millennials and Generation Z consumers exhibit high levels of engagement across several social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, and X (formerly Twitter). However, notable differences exist between the two generations in terms of platform preferences, usage patterns, and engagement behaviors.

Generation Z

Generation Z consumers primarily engage with short-form video content, interactive media, influencer livestreams, and user-generated content. They demonstrate strong engagement with creators who provide authentic, relatable, and personally meaningful experiences.

Millennials

Millennials show greater interest in product reviews, educational content, long-form videos, and professional expertise. Their interactions with influencers are often more information-oriented and goal-directed. These generational differences affect how each cohort forms attitudes toward brands and evaluates influencer content.

(B) Trust and Credibility Evaluations

Studies examining Polish social media users indicate that trust remains one of the strongest predictors of influencer effectiveness (Digital Consumer Trends in Central Europe, 2024). Among Generation Z consumers, trust is primarily influenced by authenticity, relatability, transparency, and value alignment, whereas among Millennials, trust is more strongly associated with expertise, consistency, professional competence, and informational quality. Although both cohorts value authenticity, Millennials tend to scrutinize influencer claims more critically before adopting brand attitudes.

(C) Influence on Purchase Intentions

Positive brand attitudes frequently translate into purchase intentions. Research indicates that Polish consumers are more likely to purchase products when the influencer has demonstrated personal use of the product, product recommendations appear natural and unscripted, the influencer possesses recognized expertise, and followers perceive a high level of authenticity. Generation Z consumers generally report a higher willingness to experiment with new brands introduced through social media recommendations, whereas Millennials tend to prefer verification and comparative evaluation before making purchase decisions.

(X) DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the importance of psychological processes in explaining the effectiveness of digital opinion leaders. Influencer marketing cannot be understood solely through traditional advertising frameworks because it operates through complex interpersonal and social mechanisms.

Several key observations emerge from the analysis. First, trust serves as the central psychological driver of influencer effectiveness, as consumers across generations are unlikely to develop positive brand attitudes when trust is absent. Second, parasocial relationships significantly enhance persuasive influence because the emotional bonds formed between influencers and followers create favorable conditions for attitude formation and behavioral change. Third, generational differences influence the pathways through which persuasion occurs, with different cohorts responding to influencer content based on their distinct psychological characteristics, media consumption patterns, and evaluation processes.

Generation Z consumers tend to rely more heavily on emotional engagement, social identification, community belonging, and parasocial attachment. In contrast, Millennials rely more heavily on cognitive evaluation, expertise assessment, information quality, and credibility verification. These distinctions suggest that influencer effectiveness depends not only on the characteristics of the influencer but also on the psychological characteristics of the audience. Furthermore, the Polish market demonstrates patterns consistent with broader international research, indicating that digital influence mechanisms may operate similarly across many developed digital economies.

(XI) PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings have important implications for marketers, psychologists, educators, and policymakers.

(A) Implications for Brands

Organizations should select influencers whose values align with the brand identity and target audience expectations. Successful influencer partnerships should emphasize authentic communication, long-term collaboration, transparent sponsorship disclosure, and audience relevance. Overall, authenticity appears to be a more valuable asset than audience size alone, as audiences are more likely to respond positively to influencers who demonstrate credibility, consistency, and genuine alignment with the brands they promote.

(B) Implications for Consumer Well-Being

The increasing influence of digital opinion leaders highlights the need for improved digital literacy. Consumers should be encouraged to critically evaluate sponsored content, recognize persuasive intentions, assess information credibility, and develop healthy social media habits. Such skills can reduce susceptibility to misleading marketing practices and excessive social comparison while enabling consumers to make more informed and responsible decisions in digital environments.

(C) Implications for Psychological Research

The findings suggest that influencer marketing provides a valuable context for studying trust formation, identity development, parasocial relationships, social influence processes, and digital behavior. Future psychological research should continue examining how emerging technologies transform consumer decision-making, interpersonal influence, and the ways individuals form relationships with digital opinion leaders.

CONCLUSION

Digital opinion leaders have become influential actors in shaping consumer perceptions and brand attitudes within contemporary digital environments. Through mechanisms of trust, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and social identification, influencers significantly affect how consumers evaluate products and brands.

This study examined these processes among Polish Millennials and Generation Z consumers and found meaningful generational differences in the psychological pathways underlying persuasion. Generation Z consumers tend to develop brand attitudes through emotionally driven mechanisms characterized by strong parasocial attachment and social identification. Millennials, while also influenced by digital opinion leaders, demonstrate greater reliance on expertise, credibility, and informational quality.

The findings reinforce the importance of understanding digital influence as a psychological phenomenon rather than merely a marketing strategy. As social media continues to evolve, digital opinion leaders are likely to play an increasingly significant role in shaping consumer behavior, identity construction, and brand perception across generations.

GENERATIVE AI DECLARATION

The author(s) confirm that there was no use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for assisting in the writing or editing of the manuscript, and no images were manipulated using AI. The authors developed and verified all scientific content, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work presented, and no AI tool was listed as an author.

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