

REVIEW PAPER

APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Between Admiration and Skepticism: A Generational Comparison of Psychological Responses to Influencer Content on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

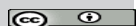
The rise of social media influencers has transformed digital communication, marketing, and consumer behavior. Influencers occupy a unique position between celebrities and peers, enabling them to shape opinions, purchasing decisions, lifestyle preferences, and social attitudes across diverse audiences. However, psychological responses to influencer content vary significantly among generations due to differences in media literacy, technological exposure, social values, and trust mechanisms. While younger generations often demonstrate higher levels of engagement and identification with influencers, older generations tend to exhibit greater skepticism and critical evaluation of sponsored content. This study examines the psychological dynamics underlying generational differences in responses to influencer content on social media platforms. Through an analysis of existing literature and theoretical perspectives, the paper explores admiration, trust, parasocial interaction, social comparison, skepticism, and consumer resistance across Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. The findings suggest that generational characteristics play a critical role in shaping perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and persuasive influence. The study contributes to understanding how social media marketing strategies can be adapted to diverse demographic groups while highlighting the psychological implications of influencer culture in contemporary digital society.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Generation Z, Millennials, Consumer Psychology, Parasocial Relationships, Social Comparison, Digital Marketing, Media Trust.

Social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped communication patterns and marketing practices worldwide. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) have facilitated the emergence of social media influencers who possess the ability to affect audience attitudes,

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behaviors, and purchasing decisions through digital content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often establish stronger perceptions of authenticity and relatability, creating closer emotional connections with their followers (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

The influencer economy has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry, attracting brands seeking effective ways to engage consumers through personalized and credible communication channels (The State of Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, 2024). Research indicates that consumers frequently perceive influencers as trustworthy sources of information because they appear more accessible and genuine than conventional advertising figures (Kim and Benbasat, 2009). However, the psychological mechanisms driving these perceptions differ substantially across age groups.

Generational cohorts are shaped by unique historical, cultural, and technological experiences that influence their attitudes toward media consumption. Generation Z, born into a digitally connected world, often exhibits high levels of engagement with influencer content and relies on social media as a primary source of information and entertainment (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017.). Millennials, who witnessed the transition from traditional media to digital platforms, demonstrate strong participation in influencer-driven communities and online purchasing behaviors (Schouten *et al.* 2020).

Conversely, Generation X and Baby Boomers tend to approach influencer content with greater caution. Their media experiences were largely formed through traditional channels such as television, newspapers, and radio, resulting in different expectations regarding credibility, authority, and advertising transparency (Kotler *et al.* 2021). Consequently, older generations may be more skeptical of influencer endorsements and more likely to question commercial motivations behind online recommendations.

This study seeks to explore the psychological responses elicited by influencer content across different generations. Specifically, it examines the balance between admiration and skepticism and investigates how these contrasting responses shape engagement, trust, and consumer decision-making.

The objectives of this study are to examine the psychological factors influencing audience responses to influencer content, compare admiration and trust levels across different generational cohorts, analyze the role of skepticism in evaluating influencer credibility, and explore the implications of these findings for marketers and social media practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(A) Evolution of Influencer Culture

The concept of influence has existed throughout history; however, social media has democratized influence by enabling ordinary individuals to build substantial audiences and become opinion leaders (Freberg *et al.* 2011). Influencers differ from traditional celebrities because their popularity often emerges from niche expertise, personal storytelling, and interactive communication rather than mass-media exposure.

According to influencer marketing research, followers frequently perceive influencers as peers rather than distant public figures, increasing the effectiveness of their recommendations (The State of Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, 2024). This perceived accessibility contributes to higher levels of trust and engagement compared with traditional advertising methods.

The influencer ecosystem encompasses several categories, including mega influencers with over one million followers, macro influencers with 100,000 to 1 million followers, micro influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, and nano influencers with fewer than 10,000 followers.

Studies suggest that micro and nano influencers often generate stronger audience trust due to perceptions of authenticity and closer community relationships (Campbell and Farrell, 2020).

(B) Psychological Foundations of Influencer Influence

1. Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships refer to one-sided emotional bonds that audiences develop with media personalities (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Social media platforms intensify these relationships through frequent updates, personal disclosures, and interactive communication.

Followers often feel connected to influencers despite never meeting them in person. This perceived intimacy increases trust and can significantly affect attitudes and behaviors. Younger audiences, particularly Generation Z, demonstrate stronger parasocial engagement because they spend more time interacting with digital content creators (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

Research suggests that parasocial relationships can influence brand preferences, consumer purchasing behavior, lifestyle aspirations, political attitudes, and social identity formation. The emotional closeness established through influencer content often contributes to admiration and loyalty among followers.

2. Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory proposes that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes, achievements, and lifestyles with others (Festinger, 1954). Social media environments provide constant opportunities for upward social comparison, especially through influencer content showcasing idealized lifestyles, beauty standards, and professional success.

Younger generations are particularly susceptible to social comparison because social media forms a significant component of their identity development process (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Exposure to curated influencer content can produce both positive and negative outcomes.

Positive outcomes include inspiration, motivation, goal setting, and skill development, while negative outcomes include reduced self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and fear of missing out (FOMO). Consequently, admiration toward influencers may coexist with psychological distress, creating a complex relationship between audience engagement and well-being.

3. Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory suggests that persuasive communication effectiveness depends largely on perceptions of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Influencers frequently leverage these dimensions to establish authority within specific niches such as fashion, fitness, technology, finance, and education.

Generational differences significantly affect credibility assessments. Younger audiences may prioritize relatability and authenticity, whereas older audiences often emphasize expertise and factual accuracy.

(Kotler *et al.* 2021). These distinctions influence how different age groups respond to sponsored content and product endorsements.

(C) Generational Characteristics and Media Consumption

1. Generation Z (Born Approximately 1997–2012)

Generation Z represents the first cohort of true digital natives. Having grown up with smartphones, social media, and high-speed internet access, they demonstrate high familiarity with influencer culture (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

The characteristics include extensive social media usage, a preference for visual content, strong engagement with creators, high responsiveness to peer recommendations, and increased acceptance of influencer marketing. Studies indicate that Gen Z values authenticity and transparency but remains highly influenced by perceived social proof and community validation (Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey, 2024).

2. Millennials (Born Approximately 1981–1996)

Millennials experienced both traditional and digital media environments. As early adopters of social networking platforms, they are highly active participants in influencer-driven ecosystems (Schouten *et al.* 2020). Key characteristics include strong online purchasing behavior, high reliance on reviews and recommendations, significant engagement with lifestyle influencers, and a preference for experiential consumption. Millennials generally demonstrate high trust in influencers who consistently provide valuable and authentic content.

3. Generation X and Baby Boomers

Generation X and Baby Boomers typically exhibit more cautious attitudes toward influencer marketing (Kotler *et al.* 2021). Their media habits developed before the emergence of social media, resulting in different expectations regarding information credibility. Common characteristics include a preference for expert opinions, greater skepticism toward endorsements, lower parasocial engagement, and higher sensitivity to advertising disclosure. Research suggests that older generations are more likely to critically evaluate influencer motives and question commercial sponsorships (Pew Research Center, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates Parasocial Relationship Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Source Credibility Theory to explain generational differences in psychological responses to influencer content. The proposed framework assumes that influencer content stimulates admiration through perceived authenticity and relatability, parasocial interaction strengthens emotional attachment, social comparison influences self-perception and behavioral intentions, skepticism emerges through the critical evaluation of commercial motives, and generational characteristics moderate the intensity of these psychological processes. The interaction of these factors determines whether audiences respond primarily with admiration, skepticism, or a combination of both.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

(A) Research Design

This study adopts a comparative and descriptive research approach to examine generational differences in psychological responses to influencer content on social media. The research synthesizes findings from existing scholarly literature, industry reports, and empirical studies focusing on influencer marketing, consumer psychology, and digital media behavior. The comparative framework enables the identification of patterns across four generational cohorts: Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers.

The study investigates two primary psychological dimensions: admiration-oriented responses and skepticism-oriented responses. Admiration-oriented responses encompass trust, parasocial attachment, inspiration, and brand engagement, whereas skepticism-oriented responses include advertising awareness, critical evaluation, resistance to persuasion, and concerns regarding authenticity. The analysis seeks to understand how these dimensions interact within different age groups and influence consumer decision-making.

(B) Conceptual Model

The conceptual model proposes that influencer content serves as an external stimulus that triggers psychological responses among social media users.

The proposed framework illustrates a sequential relationship in which influencer content influences psychological processing through parasocial interaction, social comparison, credibility assessment, and authenticity evaluation, which subsequently shape audience responses, including admiration, engagement, trust, skepticism, and resistance, ultimately leading to behavioral outcomes such as purchase intentions, brand loyalty, content sharing, and information-seeking behavior. Generational characteristics moderate every stage of this process.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GENERATIONAL RESPONSES

(A) Admiration toward Influencers

Admiration represents a positive psychological response characterized by respect, emotional attachment, and aspiration toward influencers. Research indicates that admiration is strongest among younger generations due to greater social media immersion and stronger identification with digital creators (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

1. Generation Z

Generation Z exhibits the highest levels of admiration toward influencers. Many members of this cohort view influencers as role models who provide guidance on lifestyle choices, education, career development, and personal identity formation (Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey, 2024). Several factors contribute to this admiration, including constant exposure to influencer content, the desire for social belonging, strong parasocial relationships, and a preference for peer-like communication. Unlike traditional celebrities,

influencers often appear approachable and relatable, increasing emotional connection. Furthermore, Gen Z frequently follows influencers who share similar values regarding sustainability, diversity, mental health awareness, and social justice. This value alignment strengthens admiration and trust.

2. Millennials

Millennials also demonstrate substantial admiration toward influencers, particularly those who provide practical information and lifestyle recommendations (Schouten *et al.* 2020). Millennial admiration is often driven by expertise, consistency, authentic storytelling, and the sharing of personal experiences. Rather than merely following influencers for entertainment, Millennials frequently seek guidance on travel, finance, parenting, entrepreneurship, and wellness. This generation tends to reward influencers who maintain transparency and demonstrate long-term credibility.

3. Generation X

Generation X exhibits moderate levels of admiration. Unlike younger generations, admiration is typically conditional upon demonstrated expertise and professional knowledge (Pew Research Center, 2024). Generation X audiences are more likely to admire industry specialists, educational creators, subject-matter experts, and professional reviewers. Emotional attachment tends to be weaker than among younger cohorts.

4. Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers generally demonstrate the lowest levels of influencer admiration. Their trust often remains concentrated on traditional experts, such as journalists, medical professionals, academic researchers, and established public figures. While some Boomers follow influencers, admiration is usually based on expertise rather than personality-driven content.

(B) Trust and Credibility Perceptions

Trust represents one of the most important determinants of influencer effectiveness.

1. Generation Z

Generation Z tends to associate credibility with authenticity rather than institutional authority (Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey, 2024). Factors that increase trust include honest communication, behind-the-scenes content, personal experiences, and interactive engagement. However, Gen Z is also highly sensitive to perceived inauthenticity. Influencers who excessively promote products risk losing credibility rapidly.

2. Millennials

Millennials evaluate trust using both emotional and rational criteria. They frequently examine product reviews, audience feedback, influencer expertise, and previous recommendations. This generation often develops long-term trust relationships with influencers who consistently provide valuable content.

3. Generation X and Baby Boomers

Older generations generally employ stricter credibility standards. Trust is often based on professional

qualifications, evidence-based information, reputation, and transparency. These groups are less likely to trust influencer recommendations solely because of popularity or follower count.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Parasocial relationships constitute one of the strongest psychological mechanisms underlying influencer influence.

(A) Generation Z

Generation Z demonstrates the strongest parasocial engagement among all cohorts (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Influencers often become role models, mentors, lifestyle guides, and sources of emotional support. Frequent interaction through comments, livestreams, and direct messaging creates an illusion of friendship. The result is increased susceptibility to influencer recommendations and endorsements.

(B) Millennials

Millennials also form meaningful parasocial relationships but tend to balance emotional connection with practical evaluation. Influencers often function as trusted advisors, community leaders, and information providers. Millennials frequently participate in influencer communities and online discussions, strengthening engagement.

(C) Generation X and Baby Boomers

Parasocial attachment is considerably weaker among older generations. Although they may follow influencers for information, they are less likely to perceive creators as personal friends or emotional companions. Consequently, influencer persuasion tends to be less emotionally driven and more cognitively evaluated.

SOCIAL COMPARISON AND SELF-PERCEPTION

(A) Generation Z

Generation Z experiences the strongest effects of social comparison due to intensive social media usage (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Influencer content often presents idealized lifestyles, physical attractiveness, financial success, and professional achievements. These portrayals can generate motivation but may also contribute to anxiety, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and fear of missing out (FOMO). The coexistence of admiration and psychological pressure represents a defining feature of Gen Z's relationship with influencers.

(B) Millennials

Millennials also engage in social comparison but often focus on career advancement, entrepreneurship, family success, and financial stability. Comparisons are generally more achievement-oriented than appearance-oriented.

(C) Generation X and Baby Boomers

Older generations show lower susceptibility to influencer-driven social comparison. Greater life experience and more established identities reduce the influence of idealized online portrayals. Consequently, social comparison exerts a weaker psychological effect among these cohorts.

SKEPTICISM TOWARD INFLUENCER CONTENT

While admiration can increase influence effectiveness, skepticism serves as an important psychological counterbalance.

(A) Understanding Skepticism

Consumer skepticism refers to the tendency to question persuasive intentions and evaluate marketing claims critically (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998). Skepticism increases when audiences perceive hidden sponsorships, exaggerated claims, inauthentic behavior, or commercial manipulation. Generational differences significantly affect the intensity of skeptical responses.

(B) Generation Z: Selective Skepticism

Although Gen Z strongly engages with influencer content, it simultaneously demonstrates high awareness of influencer marketing practices. Members of this cohort frequently recognize sponsored partnerships, affiliate marketing, brand collaborations, and promotional tactics. Their skepticism is selective rather than universal. They remain receptive to recommendations from influencers perceived as authentic.

(C) Millennials: Balanced Evaluation

Millennials often occupy a middle position between admiration and skepticism. They tend to compare multiple information sources, read user reviews, evaluate product experiences, and investigate authenticity claims. Their purchasing decisions are influenced by influencers but rarely determined solely by them.

(D) Generation X and Baby Boomers: Strong Skepticism

Older generations generally demonstrate the highest levels of skepticism [15]. Common concerns include commercial motivations, lack of expertise, hidden advertising, and information reliability. These consumers frequently seek independent verification before accepting influencer recommendations.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR OUTCOMES

The interaction between admiration and skepticism ultimately shapes consumer behavior. High admiration combined with low skepticism results in increased engagement, strong purchase intentions, greater brand loyalty, and content-sharing behavior. Moderate admiration combined with moderate skepticism leads to careful product evaluation, selective purchasing, and balanced decision-making. In contrast, low admiration combined with high skepticism results in resistance to persuasion, reduced purchase intentions, and a preference for traditional information sources. These patterns align closely with generational characteristics observed throughout the literature.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that psychological responses to influencer content are shaped by a complex interaction of generational experiences, media literacy, trust mechanisms, and social values. While all generations encounter influencer content in contemporary digital environments, the manner in which they interpret and respond to such content differs significantly.

The results indicate that younger generations, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, are more likely to form emotional connections with influencers through parasocial interactions. These relationships enhance admiration, trust, and engagement, making influencer recommendations particularly persuasive (Lou and S. Yuan, 2019; Horton and R. Wohl, 1956). For these cohorts, influencers often function as role models, community leaders, and sources of lifestyle guidance.

At the same time, younger users are not entirely uncritical consumers of influencer content. Growing awareness of sponsorship disclosures and commercial partnerships has led to the development of selective skepticism. Rather than rejecting influencer marketing altogether, younger audiences evaluate authenticity and consistency when determining trustworthiness (Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey, 2024).

In contrast, Generation X and Baby Boomers demonstrate stronger skepticism toward influencer content. Their trust is more likely to be based on expertise, credentials, and evidence rather than personal relatability (Kotler *et al.* 2021). As a result, older audiences tend to engage in more deliberate information processing and are less susceptible to emotional persuasion.

The study also highlights the dual nature of influencer admiration. While influencer content can inspire motivation, learning, and community participation, excessive exposure to idealized portrayals may contribute to negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and social comparison pressures, especially among younger audiences (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016).

Overall, the findings support the notion that admiration and skepticism are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they coexist as complementary psychological responses that shape how audiences engage with influencers and their content.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

(A) Generation-Specific Marketing Strategies

The findings suggest that influencer marketing campaigns should be tailored according to generational characteristics.

1. Generation Z

Effective strategies include authentic storytelling, interactive content, short-form video communication, community engagement, and transparency in sponsorships. Brands targeting Generation Z should prioritize authenticity over polished advertising because younger audiences are highly sensitive to perceived insincerity.

2. Millennials

Marketing efforts should emphasize expertise and value creation, product demonstrations, educational

content, experience sharing, and long-term brand partnerships. Millennials tend to respond positively to influencers who provide useful information and demonstrate real-world experience.

3. Generation X

For Generation X, influencer selection should focus on professional credibility, subject-matter expertise, detailed product information, and evidence-based recommendations. Influencers with recognized qualifications are likely to be more persuasive than entertainment-focused creators.

4. Baby Boomers

Marketing campaigns aimed at Baby Boomers should prioritize trustworthy experts, professional endorsements, clear disclosures, and informational content. Older consumers generally require stronger evidence before accepting influencer recommendations.

(B) Authenticity as a Strategic Asset

Across all generations, authenticity emerged as a critical determinant of influencer effectiveness. Authenticity is reinforced through honest communication, consistent messaging, transparent sponsorship disclosure, genuine product usage, and meaningful audience engagement. As influencer marketing continues to mature, authenticity may become an increasingly valuable competitive advantage.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The growth of influencer culture extends beyond marketing and has broader societal consequences.

(A) Identity Formation

For younger audiences, influencers increasingly contribute to identity development by shaping attitudes toward appearance, career aspirations, lifestyle choices, consumption patterns, and social values. While positive role models can encourage growth and self-improvement, unrealistic standards may create psychological pressure and dissatisfaction.

(B) Mental Health Considerations

Research suggests that frequent exposure to idealized influencer content may contribute to social anxiety, body image concerns, reduced self-esteem, fear of missing out (FOMO), and emotional dependency. The effects are particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults who are still developing personal identities (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016).

(C) Digital Literacy

The findings highlight the importance of digital literacy education. Consumers should be equipped to identify sponsored content, evaluate information credibility, recognize persuasive techniques, understand algorithmic influence, and critically assess online information. Improved digital literacy can help audiences maintain a healthy balance between admiration and skepticism.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The increasing influence of social media creators raises several ethical concerns.

(A) Transparency and Disclosure

Influencers have an ethical responsibility to disclose paid partnerships and sponsorships clearly. Failure to do so can undermine audience trust and violate advertising regulations (Hovland and Weiss, 1951).

(B) Authenticity versus Commercialization

As influencer marketing becomes increasingly commercialized, creators face pressure to monetize their audiences. Excessive promotional activity may reduce credibility and damage long-term trust.

(C) Responsibility toward Vulnerable Audiences

Influencers frequently reach young and impressionable audiences; consequently, they bear a responsibility to promote accurate information and avoid harmful content related to health, finance, mental well-being, nutrition, and social issues. Ethical influencer practices are essential for maintaining healthy digital ecosystems.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several opportunities exist for future investigation. Future studies should conduct large-scale cross-cultural comparisons of influencer perceptions, examine psychological responses across different social media platforms, investigate gender-based differences in influencer engagement, explore the impact of artificial intelligence-generated influencers, analyze the long-term mental health consequences of influencer exposure, study emerging influencer categories in education, healthcare, and professional services, and evaluate the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in reducing susceptibility to misinformation. These research directions can contribute to a deeper understanding of evolving digital communication environments.

CONCLUSION

Social media influencers have become powerful actors in modern communication ecosystems, influencing consumer behavior, identity formation, and social interactions across generations. This study examined the psychological responses of Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers toward influencer content, focusing on the balance between admiration and skepticism.

The findings reveal that younger generations generally exhibit stronger admiration, trust, and parasocial attachment toward influencers, while older generations demonstrate greater skepticism and critical evaluation. Nevertheless, all generations assess authenticity as a key determinant of credibility. The study further demonstrates that admiration and skepticism are not opposing forces but interconnected psychological mechanisms that jointly shape audience behavior. Admiration fosters engagement and influence, whereas skepticism promotes critical thinking and informed decision-making.

As influencer marketing continues to evolve, organizations, policymakers, educators, and content creators must recognize these generational differences to develop ethical, effective, and socially responsible communication strategies. Understanding how admiration and skepticism coexist in digital environments remains essential for navigating the future of social media influence.

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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