Differences in perceived influencer authenticity: a comparison of Gen Z and Millennials’ definitions of influencer authenticity during the de-influencer movement

Abstract

Purpose: Authenticity is a trait that is considered by both Gen Z and Millennials as an integral part of the social media influencer persuasive episode. This research uses thematic analysis to deconstruct how both Gen Z and Millennials develop their perceptions of social media influencer authenticity.

Design/methodology: This study conducted four focus groups with a total of 15 members of Gen Z and 13 members of Millennials. Participants were screened to ensure they followed lifestyle social media influencers and have made purchases based on influencer recommendations. The online focus groups discussed how participants from each generation evaluate the authenticity of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) using a six-factor cumulative model (Nunes, Joseph C., Andrea Ordanini & Gaia Giambastiani. 2021. The concept of authenticity: What it means to consumers. Journal of Marketing 85(4). 1–20).

Findings: The research findings show that Gen Z considers SMIs to be highly educated friends with whom they can seek advice and opinions, while Millennials see social media influencer as a profession that needs to be done in an ethical and transparent manner.

Article note: This article underwent double-blind peer review.
Practical implications: These findings are useful in understanding the psychology between both Gen Z and Millennials so appropriate producer messaging can be used to reach them.

Originality/value: As the concept of authenticity has been defined differently by multiple entities, this research seeks to fill the current research gap in the literature analyzing generational definitions of perceived authenticity, specifically between the two largest online consumer cohorts, Gen Z and Millennials.

Keywords: authenticity; influencers; Gen Z; Millennials; eWOM

1 Introduction

In 2022, many global companies and brands allocated a large portion of their marketing budgets and paid over $16.4 billion to Social Media Influencers (SMIs), up from $13.8 billion in 2021 and $1.7 billion in 2016 (Enberg 2022; Santora 2023). Influencer marketing strategies are highly effective, particularly with Gen Z and Millennials (Meta 2022; TikTok for Business 2023), and rely on an audience’s perceived authenticity to be deemed credible and trustworthy to remain marketable for brands and companies (Banet-Weiser 2012; Walsh 2018). Gen Z and Millennials look for influencers they feel they can trust, with 63% stating they trust influencers over brands. The researchers concluded with the thought that “Influencers are only as effective and compelling as the trust they receive from the consumers who support them” (Greib et al. 2019).

The current digital landscape suggests that the largest groups of consumers responsible for online purchases are the Gen Z and Millennial cohorts (Nielsen 2017). In 2021, Gen Z, quickly gaining the most purchasing power of any generation, holding over $360 billion in disposable income in 2021 and over 25% of the global income by 2030 (Winck 2020), more than double the pre-COVID19 estimates (Pollard 2021). This number is expected to increase to $33 trillion by 2030 as the generation ages and more join the workforce (Winck 2020). As such, marketers and companies need to understand how the largest population of consumers perceive influencers, and it is particularly important to understand how these two generations differ in their view of authenticity as perceived influencer authenticity is central to their ability to connect with and persuade their followers (Audrezet et al. 2020; Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Becker et al. 2019; Beverland et al. 2008; Casaló et al. 2020; Duffy 2020; Holt 2002; Hund 2019; Pöyry et al. 2019).

Prior research has investigated various traits and characteristics of influencers, including how influencers create a self-perceived definition of authenticity
(Balaban and Szambolics 2022), as well as audiences’ perceptions of the influencer's message (Pöyry et al. 2019), the importance of authenticity in developing trusting relationships with followers (Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Pöyry et al. 2019; Shareef et al. 2019), as well as the antecedents to consumer purchase intention based on SMI content (Li and Peng 2021; Ren et al. 2023). Additionally, research has investigated how SMIs cultivate consumer expectations (Wang 1999), conformity (Grazian 2005; Nunes et al. 2021), sincerity (Carroll and Wheaton 2009; Trilling 2009), credibility (Newman 2019; Nunes et al. 2021), and connectedness (Demetry 2019; Newman 2019; Nunes et al. 2021). However, how SMI authenticity is perceived by different generations has not been thoroughly examined. This study aims to examine how Gen Z and Millennials perceive SMI authenticity, specifically in the factors each generation believes are most important in developing their opinion of an influencer’s authenticity.

2 Literature review

2.1 Word-of-mouth advertising

WOM advertising has been a successful persuasive tool used for decades, focusing on the messengers used to promote a product, service, brand, or company, giving an experiential or personal recommendation that can be more persuasive than more traditional marketing methods like print ads or emails (Brooks 1957; Cheung et al. 2009; Huang et al. 2009). However, the success of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) relies heavily on the audience’s perception of the messenger’s authenticity to establish trust. In marketing, authenticity captures “what is genuine, real, and/or true” (Beverland and Farrelly 2010, p. 839) to fulfill a consumer’s goal of establishing legitimacy of the recommender and/or products before spending valuable resources on goods and services (Beverland and Farrelly 2010). In the digital age, instead of face-to-face persuasion, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) utilizes similar principles within online platforms, including social media. Influencer marketing, one form of WOM advertising, utilizes the credibility of the messenger to spread information and persuade their audience (Duffy 2020). Many consumers rely on social media to seek out eWOM recommendations before making a purchase (Gopinath et al. 2014; Keller and Fay 2009; Meta 2022; TikTok for Business 2023), to share their opinions, increase brand awareness (Kang et al. 2020), and increase risk tolerance (Woodside and Delozier 1976).
2.2 Gen Z and Millennials

Based on the current digital landscape, the two generational cohorts that spend the most time on digital platforms and social media are Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1995/6) (Dimock 2019; Pew Research Center 2023). Both generational groups are not only the highest consumers of digital media worldwide, but they are also widely responsible for the vast majority of digital content creation (Zippia 2022). Members of Gen Z in the US and many other Western countries have never known life without smartphone and social media (Morning Consult 2022; Yaqub 2023), and their use of these channels is expected to continue to increase by 4% from 2023 to 2027 with no indication the trend will change after 2027 (Feger 2023; Flores-Marquez 2023). With an estimated $20 billion globally invested in SMI marketing in 2023 (Geyser 2023).

While sharing many similarities, there are intrinsic differences that set these groups apart. Gen Z, as a generation, are digital natives who are tech savvy having grown up in a digitally oriented world. As a generation now entering the work force, traits include navigating a work-life balance (Janssen and Carradini 2021), utilizing the web especially to procure information (Dimock 2019), individualism, entrepreneurship, economic priorities, and multitasking efficiently (Bulut and Maraba 2021). Gen Z is more active on social media platforms than any other generation; they depend heavily on social media as a source of information, especially from influencing content creators (Chiu and Ho 2023). Interestingly, 50% of Gen Z report they do not believe they could live without social media as compared to 35% of the global population (Kantar 2021). Because of their continual use of digital media, marketers specifically use social media platforms to target Gen Z (Goldring and Azab 2021). Unlike other generations, Gen Z is highly engaged with the brands they favor, often using social media to evaluate their connectedness to the brand and the value it represents to their identity (Ismail et al. 2021). One important aspect that Gen Z looks for in social media is “authentic expression” (Blanch-Bennett et al. 2022).

As a cohort, Millennials consist of both digital natives (having been born into a world with the internet) and digital immigrants (those older and having had to adapt to the introduction of digital technologies) (Prensky 2012). Some of their conventional traits include being team-oriented, optimistic, civic minded, and valuing work-life balance (DeVaney 2015). As social media users, Millennials focus on seeking out self-inspirational content (Blanch-Bennett et al. 2022; Janicke et al. 2018). This generation was among the first to utilize social media to learn and connect with others in order to gain social information, friendship, and earn social capital (Hund 2019; Manago and Vaughn 2015).
For both Gen Z and Millennials, social media is the bulk of their digital media consumption. The combined generations also account for the largest number of users on popular platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Atske 2022). However, the differences between the generations necessitate that they be understood separately as consumers as the differences could likely lead to variances in social media use, views of influencers, and perceptions of authenticity.

### 2.3 Generational perceptions of SMIs

The two-step flow of communication (Katz 1957) is evident in the digital world of social media through influential others, often in the form of a person or a persona. Influencers are persuasive digital personalities with their own brand who, using current technology, can create seamless connections between products and consumers (De Veirman et al. 2017; Hund 2019). These audiences can be followers, subscribers, or visitors who think of content creators as influencers and opinion leaders (Li and Peng 2021). Opinion leaders often take on the role of persuader, influencing their followers in what to think, believe, or how to behave, which could take on the form of spreading information about health campaigns (e.g., Covid) to performing a behavior such as the ALS Ice Bucket challenge (Pressgrove et al. 2018).

In the world of eWOM, the level of influence is often broken down into four tiers based on the number of followers that the influencer has (Santora 2022; Social Studies 2022). Nano-influencers have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers; micro-influencers typically 10,000–100,000 followers; macro influencers have between 100,000 and 1,000,000; mega-influencers or celebrity influencers typically have over 1,000,000 followers (Santora 2022; Social Studies 2022). The number of followers typically reflects the ability of the influencer to reach audiences online, although marketers often work with nano or micro-influencers because they have either a niche market, a highly dedicated following, or a perception of greater authenticity (Forbes Communications Council 2020; Sullivan 2022; Vicuña 2021). This influence is often earned through the audience’s belief the content creator is a trusted and authentic resource for information (Scholz 2021). Influencers are valuable to marketers and companies because they often have a deep understanding of their audience and create content that resonates with them, which has led to the trend of influencer marketing where brands collaborate with content creators to promote branded content (Ki et al. 2020). This affects the decision-making process of the audience by creating a strong awareness of the product or service influencers promote.

In the world of influencers, certain dichotomies are present between both the Millennials and Gen Z cohorts. Gen Z perceives both in-person and digital
connections as having equivalent significance, seeking relationships in any realm where a mutual sense of interest and values exist, believing “digital-only friends are “just as good” as real-life friends” (Kantar 2021, p. 4).

On the other hand, Millennials believe that SMIs are most effective when deemed attractive and when there is an obvious connection between SMI and the promoted brand or company (Lim et al. 2017). Unlike Gen Z, Millennials have helped shape the influencer world by being the forerunners of the concept of influencer marketing.

2.4 Perceived authenticity

Social media users interact with influencers through mediated channels like TikTok and Instagram. As such, the audience must determine if that content creator is being honest and credible based on the influencer’s statements and actions and the limited amount of contact able to be generated using the various platforms. This trust and credibility developed by an audience’s perceived level of influencer authenticity is essential to the success of the marketing techniques and, ultimately, the consumer’s purchase intention (Li and Peng 2021; Ohanian 1990; Shareef et al. 2019). Previous studies have used different terms to describe how an audience views the honesty and transparency of influencers; for the purpose of this research, we will use the term “perceived authenticity” for this concept.

For Gen Z and Millennials who have been raised on a digital diet of social media, the concept of SMIs is almost mythological in that the idea of a persuasive content creator feels natural and goes unquestioned. In November 2022, a popular influencer made headlines when two others accused the first of wearing fake eyelashes when promoting a name-brand mascara. The event quickly took on the name #mascaragate and became a watershed moment for SMI and their audiences to question what are the rules and boundaries that influencers should have in their communication with their followers. Why would fake eyelashes be seen as inauthentic? What are the ground rules that govern the dos and don’ts of an influencer?

The question of SMI authenticity quickly devolved in the months that followed #mascaragate which led to a movement known as de-influencing. As a foil to what was considered inauthentic, de-influencing became a technique where lifestyle influencers who had been professionally promoting hair products to shoes to vacations quickly shifted to advising their audiences what not to buy.

Although many social media users and researchers alike can agree that perceived authenticity is an important factor for social media users (Moore et al. 2018), the concept of authenticity can be difficult to define (Moulard et al. 2021; Shomoossi and Saeed 2007). The essential components to create authenticity include
contextual interpretation, topic relevance, and the potential to communicate meaning either orally or visually (Shomoossi and Saeed 2007). In social media analysis, researchers often hear that users prefer, trust, or relate to content because it is “authentic”, but the user often cannot clarify what makes content “authentic”. The concept of authenticity has been synonymous with several other ideas including: truthful (Becker et al. 2019; Beverland and Farrelly 2010), genuine (Becker et al. 2019; Beverland 2006), relatable, factual (Beverland and Farrelly 2010), real (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Stern 1994), intrinsically motivated (Audrezet et al. 2020; Holt 2002), transparent (Moulard et al. 2021), credible (Nunes et al. 2021; Shomoossi and Saeed 2007; Stern 1994), and multidimensional (Beverland 2006; Joo et al. 2019; Nunes et al. 2021).

Nunes et al. (2021) believe that the concept of authenticity is “a formative rather than a reflective construct” because consumers’ evaluations are a result of the judgement of multiple, non-interchangeable constructs that combine to form an overall perception of authenticity rather than simply basing the estimation on a single judgement of a stand-alone concept (p. 2). The six-factor model created by Nunes et al. (2021) proposes users form their conclusions of authenticity based on a blend of six conceptual judgements, including originality (the degree to which a person or product stands out from others within the same market), accuracy (the extent to which someone is seen as ‘transparent’ in their representation of themselves and any products or services they promote), legitimacy (the extent to which a person, group, or product adheres to standards and norms of a particular group), connectedness (the degree to which an audience feels familiar and engaged with a person, brand, or product), integrity (the extent to which a person, brand, or product is believed to be intrinsically motivated and acting independently rather than for profit), and proficiency (as craftsmanship, skill, passion, and expertise) (each factor is further explained within the Theoretical Framework section below) (see Figure 1). Additionally, the concepts must be considered together to reach a level of perceived authenticity. As a result, Nunes et al. (2021) state authenticity is a “composite construct rather than causal” (p. 2), which means that consumers can place more emphasis upon a particular construct, like accuracy over originality, depending upon the context in which the concept is being evaluated. Additionally, this interpretation can also help to understand how there can be a varying degrees or levels to perceived authenticity.

The concept of authenticity is extremely important to brands and marketers (Euromonitor International 2019; Moulard et al. 2021), even being referred to as “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown et al. 2003, p. 21) and “the benchmark against which all brands are now judged” (Breen 2007). Likewise, Euromonitor International (2019) identified authenticity as one of the top 20 factors to shape consumer markets; the concept of authenticity can be attributed to objects
(including social media content or products), business entities, as well as people (Pöyry et al. 2019). As a result, companies looking to integrate social media influencers into their marketing mix need to be concerned with the perceived authenticity of their own brand or products as well as that of their chosen influencer, all of whom are trying to gain the trust of their followers and customers to generate and maintain market value and profits (Breen 2007; Brown et al. 2003; Hartman 2002; Tran and Strutton 2014). Perceived influencer authenticity is important because perceptions of authenticity strengthen message reception and credibility (Brown et al. 2003; Mollleda and Roberts 2008).

2.5 De-influencer movement

As stated, previous data has shown that perceived authenticity is critical to SMI success. Recently, many SMI have begun to alter their presentation techniques to highlight products they do not believe their followers should spend resources on, a method referred to as de-influencing. De-influencing can have multiple meanings, from a simple “do not buy this product” recommendation to suggestions for cheaper alternatives or ideas concerning more minimalistic lifestyle practices. According to the LTK (formerly LikeToKnow.it) 2022 review, the site has over 27 million monthly shoppers with more than $4.1 billion in annual sales by simply connecting influencer-featured products with consumers (LTK 2023). In 2022, SMIs helped sell $16 billion in products in 2022 (Bramley 2023; Santora 2022), lead in 2022 by the $600 Dyson Airwrap and the $150 Our Place Always Pan, even though many reviews have
stated these expensive products are not worth their price tags (Dellatto 2023). Influencers tout their “must haves” that help them maintain their often-desired lifestyle. While influencers do their best to convince consumers to purchase items like the $600 Dyson Airwrap, the de-influencer movement aims to convince their audience not to overconsume or fall victim to the gamification of influencer marketing (Bramley 2023; Johnson 2023). This technique, as with traditional advertising, can attack brands or companies, but that may not always be the case, as in situations when they are promoting minimalist lifestyles. After the movement reportedly began on TikTok in early 2023, the hashtags #antihaul and #deinfluencer quickly gathered hundreds of millions of views, helping audiences to discover creator content touting products they would not purchase or repurchase (Bramley 2023; Johnson 2023).

While content creators who use de-influencing techniques seem to promote non-purchasing behavior, they have more similarities than differences with traditional SMIs who endorse products. Additionally, content creators can use both traditional promotion techniques in addition to de-influencing tactics, and there is no evidence to suggest audiences feel there are any ethical issues with SMIs using either or both techniques. Both types of marketing methods are designed to help creators generate good will and followers through being perceived as authentic. Creators who use traditional influencing techniques and de-influencer tactics generate profit from using their audience to garner advertising dollars from brands and companies. There are more similarities than difference between the two types of influencers with the biggest variance being the technique used to generate that perceived authenticity, with de-influencers specifically using modern minimalism values to connect with their audiences as compared to traditional SMIs who promote purchasing sponsored or preferred products. In doing so, they potentially strengthen their perceived authenticity and maintain loyal followers. These creators will still attract advertisers as lifestyle de-influencers can “influence” their audience just by using a product in one of the many styles of content they create. Further, a de-influencer can still advertise products and brands. Although many content creators use the de-influencing technique to persuade followers not to purchase goods, they also use the same method to improve traditional influencing techniques used to garner credibility and perceived authenticity, which ultimately leads to more brands and companies looking to them to persuade customers. No matter the underlying intent, de-influencing is still suggesting how someone should spend their time and money, which is the essence of influencing. If these SMIs now change tactics and begin to tell their followers not to purchase products for whatever reason, they take a chance the audience could perceive the SMI as being inauthentic and use any tactic they can to secure corporate sponsorships.
2.6 Theoretical framework

Nunes et al. (2021) established a model that utilizes six factors for authenticity, with each factor critical to the results in developing an accurate meaning for the construct. Just as we understand that personality is a cumulative product, and each is unique based on the different amounts of each ingredient, Nunes et al. (2021) believe that perceptions of authenticity can vary in how they are constructed based on which constructs are emphasized by the consumer or audience.

As previously noted, this framework is based on the idea that authenticity is formative and composite, created through the combination of originality, accuracy, legitimacy, connectedness, integrity, and proficiency (Nunes et al. 2021). Each of the concepts is needed to yield authenticity, but individuals and even groups may place more emphasis on specific components within that recipe. For example, both Millennials and Gen Z may place great weight on the concept of connectedness in their perceptions of SMI authenticity, but the two generations could differ in the importance of proficiency and integrity, resulting in different evaluations of an influencer’s perceived authenticity.

The construct of accuracy refers to the extent to which someone is seen as ‘transparent’ in their representation of themselves and any products or services they promote (Nunes et al. 2021). Accuracy includes the idea of reliability as well as telling the truth as it is known to the entity. In terms of SMIs, accuracy could be described with terms like “transparency” and “truth”, as well as letting the audience see sides of a brand or product they promote, including both the good and the bad. In previous research, the concept of general accuracy in relation to authenticity is thought of as being “not to be a copy” (Grayson and Martinec 2004, p. 297), “genuine, real, and/or true.” (Beverland and Farrelly 2010, p. 839), and “how it actually is” (Beverland 2006, p. 257).

Originality refers to the degree to which a person or product stands out from others within the same market (Nunes et al. 2021). For SMIs, this sense of uniqueness can be seen as different perspectives offered by influencers, as well as standing apart from the crowd in views, appearance, or behaviors. Previous research described originality concerning authenticity as “It is a brand which positions itself from the inside out versus one that panders to the latest trend” (Schallehn et al. 2014, p. 194), and “creative ideas” (Wang et al. 2019, p. 40).

Legitimacy concerns the extent to which a person, group, or product adheres to standards and norms of a particular group (Nunes et al. 2021). Legitimacy is very much a construct of a particular culture, group, and even generation. For social media influencers, a lack of legitimacy can turn up as a perception of a controversy
where they have broken a norm or rule (spoken or unspoken). Within previous literature, authors describe legitimacy in terms of authenticity as it “adherence to local cultural genres” (Delmestri et al. 2005, p. 976) and materials that “correspond with a socially determined standard” (Moulard et al. 2021, p. 99), “communal commitment” and “ideal standard” (Leigh et al. 2006, p. 481).

Proficiency can be exhibited as craftsmanship, skill, passion, and expertise. One of the most common types of lifestyle influencers concerns make-up artists, most of whom have garnered large number of followers based on their passion for and excellence in make-up application, sharing tips and tricks with millions of followers and visitors. Authenticity literature describes proficiency as having a “passion for craft and production excellence” (Beverland 2005, p. 1008), as well as displaying authenticity in “role performance” (Leigh et al. 2006, p. 481).

Connectedness refers to the degree to which an audience feels familiar and engaged with a person, brand, or product (Nunes et al. 2021). When concerned with SMIs, connectedness could be described in terms like parasocial relationships, such as “they are like a friend” and “I feel like I am hanging out with a friend”. Previous literature describes connectedness in terms of “similarity and relevance” one might feel in relation to a SMI (Spiggle et al. 2012, p. 967).

Integrity concerns the extent to which a person, brand, or product is believed to be intrinsically motivated and acting independently rather than for profit. SMIs can often be viewed as not having integrity if audiences feel the person is a ‘puppet’, acting in a manner because they are being paid to do so. Within previous literature, authors noted authenticity as having integrity using descriptions like “intrinsic motivations” (Moulard et al. 2021, p. 103) and “without an instrumental economic agenda” (Holt 2002, p. 83).

The composite of these six factors culminates in an overall perception of authenticity. Additionally, the context in which the content is being appraised as well as the culture of the evaluator all help to determine the significance of each factor in creating the construct of authenticity. The complexity and different dimensions of authenticity raise questions about their more primal form: how do both generations regard authenticity of influencers. Thus, we ask:

**RQ1:** How do Gen Z and Millennials view their relationship with social media influencers?

**RQ2:** Of the six conceptual characteristics based on the Nunes et al. (2021) model, which components are most valued by Gen Z and Millennials independently?
3 Methods

This research project builds off the six factors of authenticity (Nunes et al. 2021) to better understand how Gen Z and Millennials differ in their perceptions of influencers, as well as which of the six concepts each generation uses to moderate their perceptions of authenticity. As we were interested in how social media users perceive authenticity as opposed to testing these six factors, we opted for a qualitative approach. To answer the research questions, we conducted four qualitative, online focus groups, split by generation with two focus groups consisting of Gen Z participants and the remaining two consisting of Millennial participants. The audio portion of the focus groups was recorded and used in conjunction with the transcripts to thematically analyze how each generation perceived influencer authenticity.

3.1 Sample selection

Prior to sample selection, IRB approval was obtained, ensuring confidentiality and privacy for all participants. Participants for the Gen Z and Millennial cohorts were recruited from a Rocky Mountain regional university. Those that participated were awarded extra course credit for their participation. Students were recruited through the SONA research participation and management system in addition to in-person presentations in both undergraduate and graduate level classes. Those that opted to participate were screened to ensure they were between the ages of 18–42 years, followed at least three social media influencers on social media, and had made at least one purchase based on SMI recommendations. Participants were directed to a pre-test survey and asked which generation they identified in addition to their birth year so that those who were born in 1995–1996, considered “cuspers” who were born on the cusp of Gen Z and Millennials, could be placed in the focus group that aligned with their values and like-minded participants (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al. 2017) (only one participant was born on the cusp year that had to choose the generation), as well as the number and types of SMIs they followed. Based on the information provided, 40 students were selected (24 Gen Z and 16 Millennials) to participate in one of four online focus groups (two Millennials and two Gen Z). Of those selected, there were a total of 12 participants (nine Gen Z and three Millennials) who did not show up to take part in the focus groups, leaving 15 Gen Z participants, eight were women and seven men (all were undergraduate students from a variety of majors), and 13 Millennial participants, 11 women and two men (all graduate students from a variety of majors) who took part in the focus groups. Participants joined 60-min focus groups via Microsoft Teams and Zoom in
sets of 6–8 participants along with a moderator, to discuss the concepts of authenticity concerning their favorite influencers and how influencing and de-influencing could potentially affect their perceptions of authenticity. The focus groups were analyzed thematically for patterns to identify how each generation discussed authenticity in relation to social media influencers.

### 3.2 Online focus groups

Online focus groups create an environment where participants can build off each other’s ideological views regarding authenticity in SMIs. Not only would the idea generation found within focus groups be important in understanding what makes an influencer authentic as well as why these factors lead to authenticity, but they also have a tendency towards normative discourse, revealing not just what they believe is authentic, but what they believe is expected to be authentic with their peers (Kitzinger 1995; Smithson 2000). Online focus groups have been shown to be highly effective in multiple fields of research, including marketing (Jiles 2019; Sweet 2001). Additionally, online focus groups offer other benefits, including increased ability to contribute and stay on task (Stewart and Shamdasani 2017).

First, two researchers conducted a pilot focus group with three participants to ensure that the moderator’s guide was robust. No significant changes were made to the script and questions between the pilot and participant focus groups. Then two researchers were assigned to each focus group, one as a moderator, the other as a note taker/technology specialist. Each moderator facilitated one Gen Z and one Millennial focus group.

The structure of each online focus group was broken up into three segments that were led by the moderators who explained the process and began each segment by asking a prompting question. First, an introductory section where participants introduced themselves and discussed their favorite influencers. Next, participants were asked about what characteristics of the mentioned influencers the participants found trustworthy and/or authentic. Finally, the idea of the de-influencer movement was introduced using a short de-influencer video, which was then discussed, and participants were asked how they felt about it the authenticity of the influencer and what factors they believed added to their credibility and authenticity.

All focus groups audio was recorded for data analysis. Transcripts were created using the Microsoft Teams transcribing functionality and were thematically analyzed in conjunction with the audio recordings. All participants were anonymized within the transcripts and data analysis to ensure privacy.
3.3 Data collection and analysis

The four focus group's discussions were recorded for audio only and transcribed using Teams and manually checked for accuracy. The transcripts were then used to conduct a thematic analysis as it has been shown to be a great way to allow for emergent patterns to emerge from texts (Braun and Clarke 2012). Two coders worked together to analyze each of the four transcripts using the six factors of authenticity, using the statements of all participants to identify what factors were most important for each generation when it came to perceived authenticity. Further, to understand how each generation used each theme to construct their perceptions of authenticity, each of the six factors was thematically analyzed by generation to allow for the revelation emergent themes. These themes, seen through the six factors from Nunes et al. (2021), helped reveal how each generation understood authenticity. The data was coded twice to further develop any prospective themes and ensure all participant statements were analyzed.

4 Findings

4.1 Friends versus comrades

The most impactful difference between the two generations was the personal connection each group had with their favorite influencers. Gen Z saw influencers as people with whom they had a close personal connection, akin to friends or even family. Millennials, on the other hand, saw influencers not as friends but as comrades: peers who have gone through similar struggles or may be experiencing things that the Millennial cannot but would like to experience.

4.2 Gen Z’s friends

When discussing why they believed an influencer was authentic, Gen Z consistently referenced explicit personal connections between the influencer and audience, many of which showcased influencer vulnerability or allowed the follower to be vulnerable themself. The eighth participant from the Gen Z groups (GZ8) explicitly referred to influencers as friends, saying, “[an influencer] is like a friend from afar, even though you don’t really get to talk to them”. Many others in the Gen Z groups also referenced this level of friendship, with participants claiming that knowing an influencer on a “personal level makes [the connection] more authentic, or that they have an idea of [influencer]’s character”, which lead to more trust.
When the Gen Z groups discussed friendship, it usually included explicit descriptions of vulnerability; either the influencers being vulnerable or descriptions of how the influencers helped the participant deal with their own vulnerability. Participant GZ12 described their connection to influencers, stating “I really like watching channels where it feels like I’m just hanging out with that group of friends while they’re talking about just whatever it may be”, showcasing their connection to these people as friends. However, they quickly followed up by talking about the importance of that shared vulnerability by saying, “Showing authenticity can sometimes be done by talking about things that are challenging or things that are not as commonly talked about. Just talking about those things that can be quite difficult, but that people need to hear”.

Another participant, GZ3, discussed how influencer vulnerability fosters connection by saying, “Sometimes they’ll need help, and it makes it feel like you have more of a connection … that you’re friends with them but you’re not. They don’t know you”. For these Gen Z members, influencers showcasing vulnerability decreased the social distance, thus increasing their perceived authenticity.

This feeling of vulnerability can be a two-way street, with participants relying on influencers during vulnerable times such as experienced during Covid or when feeling lonely. Participant GZ10 revealed “There are certain times where people will share stories of their own experiences that I feel like I can actually relate to. So, it kind of makes me feel like I’m not alone”. For this participant, the personal connection not only increases authenticity, but it is also used to increase their wellbeing.

Even when discussing how an influencer can regain trust, the solution seems to come back to that personal connection, with participant GZ9 saying:

And if he (an influencer) were to try and regain my trust … at some point, maybe come out and be open about the whole situation and be honest, be detailed and be authentic. Don’t have a PR person do it for you. Just be open with what you are and get to … the people that support you. Or if you’re not going to do that, then maybe it’s just time to … either get off the platform or just accept that people are going to probably stop watching your content.

To this Gen Z participant, a personal connection is important for authenticity, and if that bond is lacking, then there is the assumption that the influencer is no longer convincing, and people will no longer follow the influencer. For the Gen Z groups, personal connection was more than an important aspect of being an influencer, it was a requirement.

In addition to this prerequisite, there is also a requirement that influencers not blatantly advertise. Participants had viscerally negative responses when talking about influencers who did, as if they had betrayed a friend. Participant GZ8 said “When (influencers) start to … sponsor things … gain followers, or … tell us to try
this product right away, I’m like, I don’t know how to say this respectfully, but, you’re a sellout … I unfollow … I’m done, and it doesn’t feel authentic. It’s for a purpose. There’s an ulterior motive now. It’s not you just sharing with us”. Here, the assumption that the connection should be a personal relationship, but it is sullied by business which leads to the complete rejection of the influencer. Participant GZ1 gave another example, saying, “If I can tell that you’re kind of just doing it for the ads and getting money … I’m not going to trust your opinion. But if I think you’re a fraud, and you’re just a sellout, I’m not going to trust what you’re saying”. For these participants, it was the influencer’s motivation that was important. Specifically, when assessing authenticity, these participants evaluated if the influencer was motivated by making a personal connection with the audience or in creating posts that were specifically designed to get more followers.

4.3 Edutainment

While Gen Z saw influencers as personal friends, the content they consumed was primarily educational or informative in nature. Even when participants spoke about entertainment, they usually brought their purpose back to something they could learn. For instance, participant GZ10 said, “I like watching some of the content that I do because some of it is entertaining and the other part of it is helpful, and there’s tricks and tips on how to do things that I can apply to my life”. Another participant, GZ15, said “It’s mostly just entertainment, though. I started watching a lot of like tech review channels when I’m … looking to buy something. I look at people’s opinions on what they have and what they think is good”. As the Gen Z participants discussed why they enjoyed consuming the content from their favorite influencers, the discussions continually returned to what they could learn from influencers.

The Gen Z participants saw influencers as personal connections, friends, or even potentially family that could be relied on in vulnerable moments as well as informative. Millennials, on the other hand, had requirements rooted in shared experiences of working professionals rather than friendly connections.

4.4 Millennial professionals

While the Gen Z groups spoke about personal connections with influencers, the Millennial groups saw influencing as a job and were much more skeptical of influencers’ opinions. Millennials described their relationship with influencers as more utilitarian than personal, often putting the emphasis on the content rather than the person themselves, even when they had favorite influencers.
The Millennial groups consistently contextualized their discussion of influencers with the assumption they were paid to influence their audience. This assumption fundamentally changed how the Millennial groups discussed influencers compared to the Gen Z groups, adding skepticism to what an influencer says but also flexibility in what made an influencer authentic. For instance, the second participant in the Millennial group (M2) said, “Authenticity is the ability to be wrong, being able to adjust your sale. If you’re doing how-tos or life advice and you mess up, like a [#mascaragate] situation, and it’s like ‘Umm yep, I was wrong’, or those influencers who are like this is what works for me; do what’s best for you … everybody’s different; everybody has their own stuff”. This was just one of many participants who discussed influencers as professionals rather than as friends. Instead of denouncing #mascaragate influencer Mikaela as a dishonest person, the participant talked about how influencer selling can be done in a way that is still trustworthy. Another participant, M6, even added, “I would almost wonder if [#mascaragate] was a marketing strategy by a company, because even after that ‘mascaragate’ issue, it was like that mascara was still wiped off the shelves”.

This contextualization of influencing as a profession altered the perception of intentionality behind influencers. Because of this, the Millennial groups expressed skepticism when discussing both following and unfollowing an influencer. However, the distinction of professional versus friend is important as many participants conveyed beliefs of good intentions from influencers.

For instance, as participant M5 was discussing the lifestyle influencers they follow, they noted, “I know instinctually that they’ve tested it before, and they could lie, but, through visual cues as well as time, I’m pretty sure they’re telling the truth and they’re showing that they test this on their own”. This participant had a belief that an authentic influencer would have good intentions as they reviewed products. This sentiment was echoed by participant M3 who said, “that motivation and how that comes through from … the audience’s perspective is kind of one of the biggest determinants of authenticity for me. It’s like, what do I think that they mean to be doing?” For these Millennials, authenticity could be found in influencers whom they believed to have good intentions in their job. If there was a perception of good intentions, then the sales pitch could be overlooked. However, another key way in which Millennials described their connection to influencers was through a content-first mentality.

As opposed to a personal connection desired by Gen Z, Millennials made explicit declarations of content being their primary reason for following a specific influencer. Participant M1 said, “If they’re not showing me the content I want to see, which is humor, and they start advertising … I’m done with that one. That’ll lose my trust real quick.” Participant M1 later added “I’ll just kind of scroll past [advertisements]. No big deal. But then if it continues and it tends to be like a primary part of their feed
that I see, then I’ll just stop following. So, I think it takes a little time for me to officially cut it off, but then I’ll just cut it off. Stop following it … and tell Instagram like, no, don’t recommend that anymore.” The Millennial groups contextualized influencers as working professionals and accepted advertisements as part of that experience so long as the content suited their needs. Additionally, for the Millennial groups, the needs are usually equated to escapism or catharsis.

4.5 Vicarious living for stress relief

Specific interests aside (paranormal investigation, humor, etc.), the Millennial groups discussed using social media and influencers to live vicariously through others. Through their interaction with influencers, these participants could experience things they enjoy and, in doing so, feel a sense of catharsis.

When discussing the type of influencers they follow, participant M11 said, “most of the social media influencers that I follow have mostly been more towards my hobbies and … lifestyle. So, a lot of baking, a lot of like home décor or renovating stuff, even though I don’t own a house … I would love to”. For this participant, watching someone renovate a home, not for potential use but simply to experience it, is the primary reason for interacting with this influencer. Participant M2 shared in the sentiment of living vicariously through influencers, saying they liked “… paranormal investigating where they break into abandoned buildings and try and videotape it while they're going through there, so I get to live vicariously through them 'cause I wouldn’t have the guts to do that stuff myself”.

While this was a clear example of vicarious experience, many other participants mirrored this sentiment, often adding they seek a sense of catharsis of stress mitigation. For instance, participant M6 said, “I do tend to follow influencers that basically call out misogyny and men that basically make fun of women's bodies and things … There’s just something about the way that she, like, shuts it down that is so cathartic for me”. This seeking of catharsis through influencers has become routine in this participant, a sentiment that was mirrored by many other Millennial participants.

Finally, Millennials stated they use influencers for stress relief, like participant M10 who said, “Some of the main [influencers] that I follow have a lot of like stress management stuff, like stoicism [techniques]”. This participant, like many others, referenced the daily stress of life and how integral influencers were to help manage it.

Where Gen Z saw influencers as friends, Millennials saw them as comrades: working adults who are beholden to their employer but have good intentions and can help with stress management by delivering catharsis.
4.6 Generational similarities and differences

In considering RQ2 (which of the six factors each generation felt were more important in perceiving SMI authenticity), the analysis found both generations prioritized accuracy and connectedness as keys in which they perceive influencer authenticity, the way these themes were discussed demonstrated that the two generations have different expectations of what constitutes SMI authenticity. While there were many similarities between the two generations, the Gen Z groups talked about influencers as knowledgeable friends, personal connections from which followers could count on gaining education and entertainment. Millennials, on the other hand, saw influencers as desirable comrades and working professionals with whom Millennials could live vicariously through. This perception of an influencer’s role was the most visible difference in how Gen Z and Millennials connected with and viewed influencers.

5 Discussion

As with previous research, our findings indicate that perceived authenticity is important to social media users of different generations (Moore et al. 2018). However, the differing expectations of influencers by Gen Z and Millennials contextualized how each generation conceptualized authenticity, how authenticity could be demonstrated by influencers, and how each of the Nunes et al. (2021) factors for authenticity were prioritized. Both generations placed great emphasis on perceived authenticity, as shown in the focus groups. However, in viewing influencers differently (friend vs. comrade), the techniques successful influencers used to target their specific audience varied just as much. Further, while both generations placed somewhat similar weight on each of the six factors of authenticity (with accuracy and connectedness being more important than the others), there were great differences in how each criterion exhibited itself between the two cohorts. For instance, Gen Z participants used connectedness to express personal connection with the influencer. On the other hand, Millennial participants used connectedness to express affinity for an influencer’s content and acknowledgment of their career. As such, understanding influencer authenticity requires attention to what the individual or group expects from an influencer. This is particularly important when looking to understand how to market brands and products efficiently to develop connection between a brand and consumers.

Currently, many influencer norms seem tailored to a Millennial’s view of influencer expectations; influencers actively pushing products on their followers,
seemingly acting like live reviews, which is fitting for a Millennial audience who are looking to gain information rather than ‘hang out’ with friends. However, as Gen Z is concerned primarily with personal relationships, product reviews would seem to impede the perception of authenticity (Hund 2019). As Gen Z slowly becomes the largest consumer group, influencers will need to adapt to represent this shift in perception, phasing out of product reviews and relying on other ways to market a product to those who want to connect before being influenced.

De-influencing may be part of this cultural shift. Interestingly, most of the participants in both generational groups felt that de-influencing was positive. The Gen Z groups saw de-influencing as a friend looking out for other friends, offering tips and knowledge to save money, hitting both the personal connection and educational components that Gen Z looks for from influencers. Millennials, on the other hand, appreciated de-influencing but saw it as another form of an online review, though one that could additionally save money. Where actively selling was accepted by Millennials and rejected by Gen Z, de-influencing hit a sweet spot that created a perception of authenticity for both generations most likely because of the negative connotation surrounding influencers as salespeople. Active selling was brought up by both generations as a problem with influencers. The Gen Z groups, seeing influencers as friends, seemed adamantly against being the target of advertisements. However, even the Millennials, who seemingly acknowledged sales as part of an influencer’s job, considered it refreshing when they were not told to purchase something. All groups were unhappy when explicitly told to purchase something. Still, no participants referred to influencers using a product as a problem, which is a very common method influencers use in advertising. For instance, many gaming influencers simply play video games on Twitch, more passively encouraging sales even when they do not obviously ‘advertise’ the games (Socially 2023; Woodcock and Johnson 2019).

For many participants, sales pitches were at best expected, and, at worst, a reason to stop following an influencer. However, advertising, when done in a generation-specific manner, such as sharing passions or allowing audiences to live vicariously through the influencer’s experiences, were welcomed and even a reason for some to subscribed or follow an influencer. As research continues to grow surrounding influencers and authenticity, it is important not just to analyze them as a whole but to do so in conjunction with their audience. Additionally, any generational changes in an influencer’s audience can lead to important distinctions in how an influencer is expected to connect with their followers to maintain a sense of authenticity and the ability to effectively persuade.
5.1 Global implications

It is essential that global marketers understand their target markets to effectively reach their audience and understand how their messages are being perceived, including understanding how the different generation's view SMI authenticity, to ensure the ideal SMIs are employed. As such, this research aids brands and companies target members of Gen Z and Millennials utilizing influencers. For example, based on the research findings, brands wanting to connect with Gen Z consumers should consider SMIs who are perceived as friends and can teach their followers. On the other hand, if a brand or company is looking to promote to Millennials, they would want to consider content creators who connect through vicarious experiences and who are thought of as more utilitarian rather than friendly.

It is expected that as Gen Z grows older and begins to enter the workforce and outspend other generations (Flores-Marquez 2023), their use of digital device evolves from primarily social and entertainment purposes to include product research and discovery (Petrock 2021; Yaqub 2023). This use would suggest they will continue to turn to their devices to help make consumer decisions, very often looking to SMIs to help them make purchase decisions (Meta 2022; TikTok For Business 2023; Yaqub 2023). Business predictions indicate global influencer marketing spending will increase from $16.4 billion in 2022 to $84.89 billion by 2028 (Santora 2022). With surveys and research revealing global consumers prefer a more “empathic” and personal level of marketing with brands and companies through SMIs (Deloitte Insights 2020; Hund 2019; Rahilly 2020), selecting the right SMI is critical to the overall success of any campaign and company’s bottom line (Walsh 2018).

6 Limitations and future research

We note that although clear differences were documented between the generational focus groups and saturation was met, the sample was taken from college students at a single university. Future research should expand the participant sample to incorporate both students from different educational institutions and non-students to include the opinion of consumers already in the full-time workforce. Additionally, future research could expand the generational participants to explore differences in perceived SMI authenticity with other generations, including Gen X, Boomers, Silents, and Polars. Potential research should include a larger quantitative examination of the six-factor model (Nunes et al. 2021) to determine if this study's findings can be generalized to a broader sample. Although the gender of the participants did
not show differences in perceived authenticity, most participants were women (68%). Future research would benefit from including more male participants and investigating whether the gender of the SMI is a factor perceived authenticity. The generational themes that emerged in this research along with experimental conditions could be used to guide future research to further examine generational perceptions of SMI authenticity. Additionally, this study focused primarily on lifestyle influencers after the de-influencing movement that took place in fall 2022. It would be worth investigating different types of influencers (i.e., gaming, financial, etc.) to determine if similar trends consist throughout multiple genres of social media influencing.

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