

Challenges of digital advertising from the study of the influencers' phenomenon in social networks

Elena Borau Boira
Universidad Antonio de Nebrija
eborau@nebrija.es

Ana Pérez Escoda
Universidad Antonio de Nebrija
aperezes@nebrija.es

Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera
U-TAD Centro Universitario de Tecnología y Arte Digital
cristina.ruiz@u-tad.com

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to study the challenges of digital advertising from the characterization of the influencer phenomenon based on the perceptions of two different and non-consecutive generations, explored from the perspective of parasocial relationships (PSR). **Design/methodology/approach:** Using a quantitative methodology design and a descriptive approach, a study is presented on a sample of 449 individuals belonging to two generational niches, generation Z (N=227) and generation X (N=222). For the study, characterization parameters have been defined based on existing literature, defining five-dimension conceptualization: strength, fairness, engagement, trustworthiness, and social role. **Findings:** The results point to a different perception of the phenomenon in some aspects that allow an intergenerational portrait of the figure of the influencer to be made. The findings of the study are innovative because they were not previously available and transcend academia to serve the companies that proliferate in the representation and management of *influencers*, as the characterization of this figure is important for the identification of key aspects in the adjustment of products and messages offered to a certain public of a specific population niche, both for advertising companies and for media and institutions. **Originality:** The study reveals interesting challenges for digital advertising from the audience's perceptions about influencers, highlighting the relevance of influencers which clearly contributes to a better understanding of more efficient strategies on digital advertising.

Keywords: social media, influencer, communication, engagement, gen Z, gen X, parasocial relationship, digital advertising

Paper Type: Research paper

1. Introduction

One of the most significant social transformations resulting from the popularization of the Internet is the democratization of participation. In 2008 Jenkins described the new communicative ecosystem as one of convergence and citizen participation, and that same

year Alex Burns coined the term “produser” to refer to the relationship between users and transmedia narratives online, merging the function of content producers and users-consumers. In turn, one of the defining features of the current media ecosystem is the empowerment of citizens through the possibilities of participation offered by the web 2.0. Blogs, entertainment platforms, and online shopping among others have gradually become spaces of massive and global participation and social empowerment. Digital communication technologies have transformed the role of the masses radically by allowing them to influence each other in more democratic conditions in online environments. As Kadushin (2013) points out, this transformation became more prevalent with the popularization of social media, which enticed even more massive interaction and participation. From a sociological standpoint, this transformation implies that society as a whole can take a more active role than ever before, behaving as produsers to the extent that the internet allows it, in a global, viral, and ecosystemic way (Pawle and Cooper, 2006). In addition to the new ways in which users can consume, contribute, criticize, create, and influence, this shift also involves the emergence of new social actors appeared on the web.

One of the most researched concepts of the last decade refers precisely to the new actors that can influence big amounts of followers through the profiles on social media: influencers. Though initially associated with brands and niches for younger audiences, these new agents have emerged in other environments, including politicians, public figures, and professions (chefs, healthcare professionals, educators, etc...). As a result, online influencing has become a social and multidimensional phenomenon due to its massive outreach and to the deep impact that it can achieve. As Meyers (2017) explains, these social agents have a renowned digital reputation, act as experts in a specific topic, and generate specific content consumed by thousands of followers, creating a virtual community with high levels of interaction and engagement that were not possible before. As the works of Alalwan *et al.* (2017), Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), Etter *et al.* (2018), and Castillo-Abdul *et al.* (2022) show, the phenomenon of influencers has transformed digital advertising significantly, as it facilitates highly efficient advertising actions. Combined with the use of social media, influencers can have great impact in digital advertising (Himmelboim and Golan, 2019). However, academic inquiry on this topic is still emerging and it behooves to make more studies about the subject.

With this in mind, this paper analyzes these social agents and contributes to the research on the topic by studying the perception that social media users have of influencers. More specifically, we establish a comparative intergenerational analysis including users from generations Z and X. By excluding one generation (Y or Millennials) we compare the perception that digital natives and digital immigrants have of influencers, which have transcended their initial novelty and their original target generations, becoming a more widespread phenomenon, especially after the global lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital advertising and branded content are facing new challenges, and influencers can constitute an ally to establish more audience engagement and to optimize their efficiency.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social networks: intergenerational phenomenon and changing paradigm

The development of social media has radically increased in the last decade, with level of impact and a speed that has no precedent in human history. After the global lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the numbers of active users of these platforms reached the 4,200 million worldwide, with an increase of 13.2% regarding the previous year (Hootsuite, 2021). Social media have enticed the digitalization of social interactions as well as the democratization of discourses online (Pedrero-Esteban and Pérez-Escoda, 2021). More specifically, younger generations socialize through these agoras greatly, a habit that has drastically modified their time use patterns and their social interactions on all realms (McCormick, 2016).

In addition to the new communication paradigm resulting from the integration of social media in all different realms, it must be noted that these platforms now constitute an intergenerational phenomenon, since they have existed for two decades. It is true they started as a novelty, only common to the most technically skilled users that followed the evolution of the Internet closely, but its current impact is global and intergenerational in spite of the existence of a digital divide (Sádaba-Chalezquer and Pérez Escoda, 2020; Vogels, 2019) to the extent that recent research regarding generational cohorts includes the use of social media among their defining factors, in addition to their socioeconomical and educational contexts. These are the Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y or Millennials, and Generation Z (Gardner and Davis, 2014; Morduchowicz, 2008; Tapscott, 1998). With these cohorts in mind, multiple large-scale studies suggest that social media use tends to be similar among the older groups (Baby boomers and Generation X) and the younger ones (Generations Y and Z) (see Pew Research Center, Reuters Institute, Digital News Reports). In turn, audience segmentation on social media can be easier, which potentially results in more efficient and controlled audience reach.

From a socio-cognitive standpoint, there are great differences between Generation X and Generation Z: the parents being digital migrants and their children being digital natives (Piscitelli, 2006). Many authors point out that members of Generation Z are able to respond rapidly and have a strong desire for immediacy and permanent interaction. They consider themselves competent in their use of digital technology and give limited credibility to social media even though they are their main source of information (Pérez-Escoda and Pedrero-Esteban, 2021). Conversely, what motivates Generation X in their use of social media is different. Unlike their parents, both men and women of this generation were able to work beyond the domestic space, so professional development drives them to stay up to date with technological developments in spite of the challenges of being digital migrants. They were the protagonists of the rise of consumerism of the 1980s and grew up with a materialistic mindset, but they also became great professionals that value the recognition and the impact of their work (Zemke *et al.*, 2013). In sum, their perception of social media differs from that of younger generations (Etter *et al.*, 2018; Pérez-Escoda and Pedrero-Esteban, 2021; De Miguel *et al.*, 2022), yet the intensity of their use is as strong as that of Generation Z, which makes both groups ideal for our comparative sample.

2.2. The influencer phenomenon: new challenges for digital advertising

Digital advertising has evolved greatly in the last few years due to the proliferation of social media, its intensive use by intergenerational groups, and the audience segmentation they facilitate. The first pandemic of the digital age has contributed to consolidate social media as a medium for interaction, information, and communication, demonstrating the power of users in digital environments (Waqas *et al.*, 2022). In this context, the

advertising industry needs to adapt rapidly to find ways to empathize with customers. Recently, the most decisive formulas to execute an effective communication strategy to cultivate the relationship between brand and customer have been the use of branded content (Castillo-Abdul *et al.*, 2022; Asmussen *et al.*, 2016) and of storytelling (Woodcock *et al.*, 2019; Llorente *et al.*, 2022). However, the increasing marketing power of influencers is turning these agents into more effective outreach tools, as the studies by Masuda *et al.* (2022) and Abraham *et al.* (2022) illustrate.

Brands face the challenge of articulating and communicating a relevant, coherent narrative, one that connects with the stakeholders so that they can behave as prescribers of the company's values. This is because online brand communities are more active than ever: they demand to interact with the brand, they need to identify with its values, and they prioritize emotion over logic as well as experiences over products (Bleier and Eisenbeiss, 2015; Chen Lou *et al.*, 2019). In this context, influencers emerge as the most effective marketing formula. They operate as models for their communities, and they generate emotional bonds with their followers to the point that they sometimes transcend their community and become public social figures (Djafarova y Rushworth, 2017), offering great differential value for digital advertising. In fact, many studies focus on how the development of parasocial relationships (PSR) between influencers and their followers can serve brand positioning and engagement. This paper emerges in response to the need of deeper inquiry about these relationships. As Yuan and Lou (2022) argue, digital advertising cannot face its challenges without understanding the parameters that determine the foundations of the parasocial relationships (PSR) between influencers and their followers.

First, the trust of this relationship is strengthened when influencers show part of their intimate and private life in their posts, establishing a quasi-personal bond with their audience (Meyers, 2017). In addition, there are three significant aspects in the development of the parasocial relationship, according to Yuan and Lou (2022): 1) the influencer's features, 2) the audience's features and 3) the process of interaction between them. Being a relatively new topic of academic research, there are still few studies exploring how the audience perceives the figure of the influencer, which is crucial to design marketing strategies.

Some studies about influencers examine their defining features as social agents that contribute to the audience's parasocial experience with them. First, they refer to their performative characteristics influences their strength and credibility, such as being attractive, having good leadership skills, or being good communicators. Second, they mention the way they interact, such as their verbal and body language, their honesty, and their credibility (Tilo and Goldhoorn, 2011). More recent work relevant components such as the influencer's level of engagement and trustworthiness (Bond, 2016) or social mediation (Yuan and Lou, 2020). Our study takes these features into consideration and hypothesizes that they will appear in our subjects' description of influencers as media persona establishing innovative relations with their followers.

With this state of affairs in mind, we established the following research objectives:

RO1: Analyzing the intergenerational differences of social media use and influencers' following.

RO2: Comparing intergenerational perceptions of influencers and their strengths and fairness as a phenomenon.

RO3: Exploring the factors that, according to users, generate engagement and trustworthiness with the audience.

RO4: Examining the intergenerational perception of influencers in their social role as generators of stereotypes and social commitment.

2. Research design and methodology

This study relies on a descriptive correlational research design with a quantitative methodology to approach the influencer phenomenon with an innovative perspective, through the perception of users and through an intergenerational comparative analysis.

To comply the data, we developed an *ad hoc* questionnaire in which the variables and constructs were determined by sociological and communicative theoretical approaches as well as by the previous works developed by Munnukka *et al.* (2016) and Lou and Yuan (2019). Thus, this exploration adopts the five-dimension conceptualization of source characterization: (1) Strength, (2) Fairness, (3) Engagement, (4) Trustworthiness and (5) Influencer's mediating role.

After the validation of experts in Communication Studies and Social Studies (N=5), who handled the first design of 50 variables, the result was an instrument with 40 variables. Out of those, there were 5 independent variables, 3 of them socio-demographical ones to determine gender, age, and level of studies, and 2 of them referring to their use of social media and the type of influencer they follow; the remaining 36 were dependent study variables distributed among the 5 analysis constructs, as shown on Table 1.

Table 1. Study constructs based on the forenamed theoretical approaches and number of variables studied on each construct

Research construct	Definition	N variables
Strength (RO2)	Their persuasive ability depends to a great extent on the community they generate and on the level of expertise associated with them. The qualitative aspect serves as a differentiating element though dynamism, leadership, communicative ability, etc.	7
Fairness (RO2)	The generation of attitude through their content defines influencers because of their transparency, credibility, honesty, charisma, etc. but also because of negative aspects such as manipulation, deceit, self-interest, etc.	9
Engagement (RO3)	The ability to remain permanently up to date, the use of friendly and familiar language, one-on-one, makes them reach their audience through familiarity, enthusiasm, a sense of experience, etc.	9
Trustworthiness (RO3)	Influencers are not only able to influence regarding specific products or messages, they themselves become role models for their followers building trust.	7
Social role (RO4)	Intense visual narratives that can be constantly consumed, such as leisure and entertainment, which generate engagement and invite a mediation and interdependence flow with a specific social role.	3

We obtained a convenience, non-probabilistic sample made up of 449 total individuals of which almost half and half belonged to each of the studied generations: Generation Z consisted of 50.6% (N=227) and Generation X consisted of 49.4% (N= 222). In terms of gender, 22.9% of the sample were men (N= 103) and 77.06% of the sample were women (N= 346). Regarding the level of studies, on Generation Z the average age was M=20,5, and 16.2% of them has a high school diploma, 55.3% of them are college students, and 28.3% hold a bachelor's degree. Regarding Generation X, the description indicates that the average age was M=44 and 14% have a high school diploma, 5.8% are college students, 60.3% hold a bachelor's degree, and 19.36% have a PhD.

To collect the data, the study relied on an online survey as an optimal methodological procedure, as Vilches (2012) argues. In fact, the online approach was particularly appropriate given the fact that the data collection took place in the midst of the second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain, during the first semester of the academic year (October 2020-January 2021).

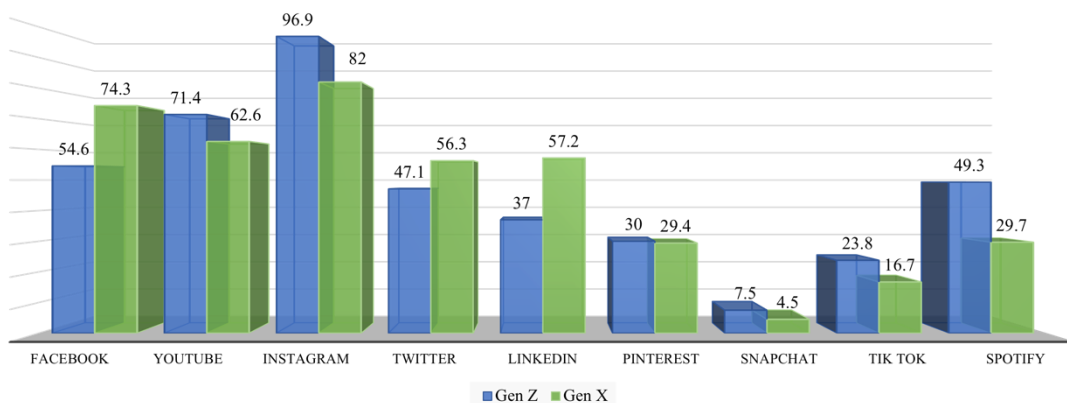
The survey was distributed through the application Google Forms, using emails and social media, and each participant gave their consent before responding. According to George and Mallery (2003), when the Alpha coefficient is >0.90, the reliability of the instrument is excellent, and if it is >0.80 it is good. Thus, the internal consistency of our data collection instrument proved to be very reliable, with a level of Cronbach's Alpha over 0.80 on the five study constructs.

3. Results

The results are presented in a comparison between the two generations taking into consideration the five study constructs and the outlined objectives. The comparative analysis regarding the perception of the influencer figure relied on basic descriptors (means, medians, typical deviations, contingency tables, and correlation with Chi-square).

To study the first objective (RO1), we first present how both generations in our sample use social media, since it would not make sense to continue the study if the sample does not prove to be active in their use of social media. The data show differences between both generations coinciding with bigger studies such as IAB 2021 (2021) that can be seen on Figure 1, which illustrates the percentage of individuals using social media by generation.

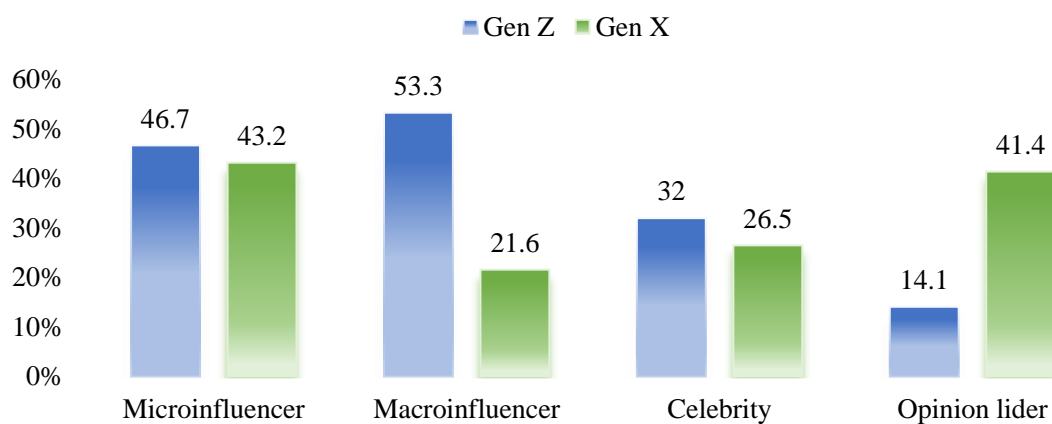
Figure 1. Percentages of social media use by generation. Own elaboration.



Generation Z appear to make a more intensive use of Instagram (96%) followed by YouTube (71.4%) and Spotify (49.3%). In contrast, Generation X makes a more intensive use of Facebook (74.3%), Twitter (56.3%), and LinkedIn (57.2%). There are significant differences between the two studied generations on the statistic Chi-square on four social media platforms: Facebook ($\chi^2(1) = 18.98, p < 0.005$), Instagram ($\chi^2(1) = 26.71, p < 0.005$), LinkedIn ($\chi^2(1) = 18.39, p < 0.005$) y Spotify ($\chi^2(1) = 18.03, p < 0.005$).

For the exploratory analysis of the first objective (RO1), it is also important to consider the type of influencer users follow. The established typology responds to the criteria of number of followers the influencer has (Casaló *et al.*, 2018; Lou and Yuan, 2019), resulting in microinfluencer (5K-100K), macroinfluencer (100K-500K), celebrity (50K-1M) and opinion leader (over 1M).

Figure 2. Percentages of following by type of influencer. Own elaboration.



In this sense, the results show interesting differences between both generations, particularly regarding the following of macroinfluencers: Generation Z shows a percentage of 53.3% while Generation X only shows a percentage of 21.6%, thus illustrating statistically significant differences ($\chi^2(2) = 49.54, p = .000$); ($p < 0.005$). In addition, both generations differ in their following of opinion leaders conversely: Generation X follows this type of influencers more (41.4%) while Generation Z shows a significantly smaller percentage (14.1%), ($\chi^2(1) = 41.98, p = .000$).

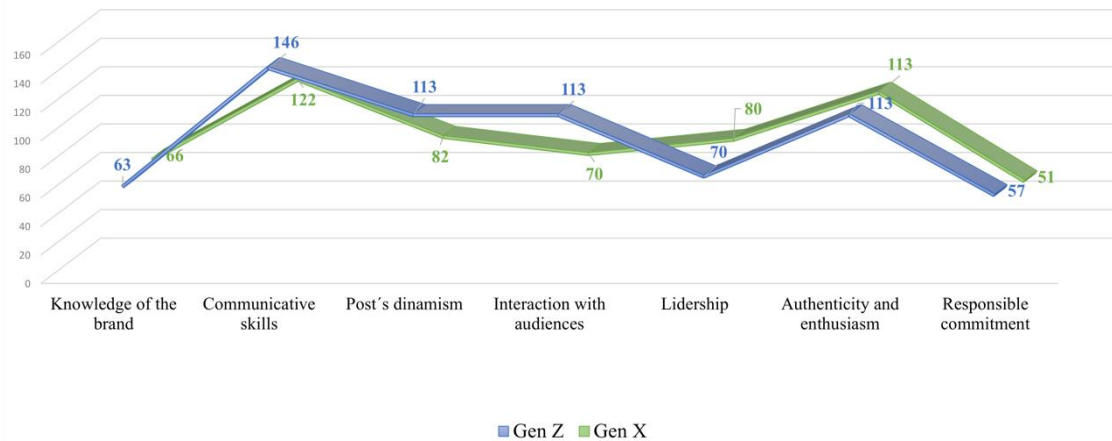
3.1. Strength and fairness

To study the second objective (RO2), comparing intergenerational perceptions of the figure of the influencer through its strengths and conceptualization, we present the results of 2 study variables with a total of 16 variables. First, our study analyzes the defining elements of an influencer's strength through 7 dimensions established in previous studies (Lou and Yuan, 2019). The data show that both generations differ in their perception, as seen on Figure 3 which illustrates the frequency of the positive responses for each of the studied dimensions.

The main defining factors of an influencer's strength for Generation Z are the "communicative skills (54.5%), the "posts' dynamism" (57.9%), and the "interaction with audiences" (61.7%). This last dimension is the only one showing statistically significant differences with Generation X ($\chi^2(1) = 15.47, p = .000$). Generation X values these factors much less, with a percentage of 45.5% regarding the influencer's "communicative skills", of 42.1% regarding the "posts' dynamism", and of 38.3%

regarding their “interaction with audiences.” The only dimension that Generation X values over Generation Z is “charismatic leadership” (Generation Z, 46.7% vis-à-vis Generation X, 54.3%). Interestingly, both generations share similar perceptions regarding “knowledge of the brand,” slightly more valued by the older group (Generation Z, 48.8% vis-a-vis Generation X, 51.2%), and regarding “responsible commitment”, which is slightly more valued by the younger niche (Generation Z, 52.8% vis-a-vis Generation X, 47.2%).

Figure 3. Representation of the positive frequencies for the influencer’s seven strengths in both studied generations. Own elaboration.



To complete the study of objective two (RO2) we analyze the way in which both generations define the influencer figure. Table 2 illustrates the results of the responses' frequencies as well as the existing correlation between variables (*p*).

Table 2. Basic descriptors and correlation between studied variables and the dependent generational variable.

Analyzed parameters	Gen Z (N=227)		Gen X (N= 222)		<i>p</i>
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	
Credible	71.4	28.6	40.5	59.5	.000*
Transparent	22.9	77.1	18	82	.199
Honest	19.4	80.6	24.3	75.7	.205
Inspiring	58.1	41.9	55	45	.495
Charismatic	51.1	48.9	50.9	48.6	.599
Self-interested	77.7	27.3	79.7	20.3	.080
Deceitful	76.2	23.8	90.1	9.9	.000*
Controversial	74.9	25.1	91.9	8.1	.000*
Manipulative	84.6	15.4	85.3	14.7	.663

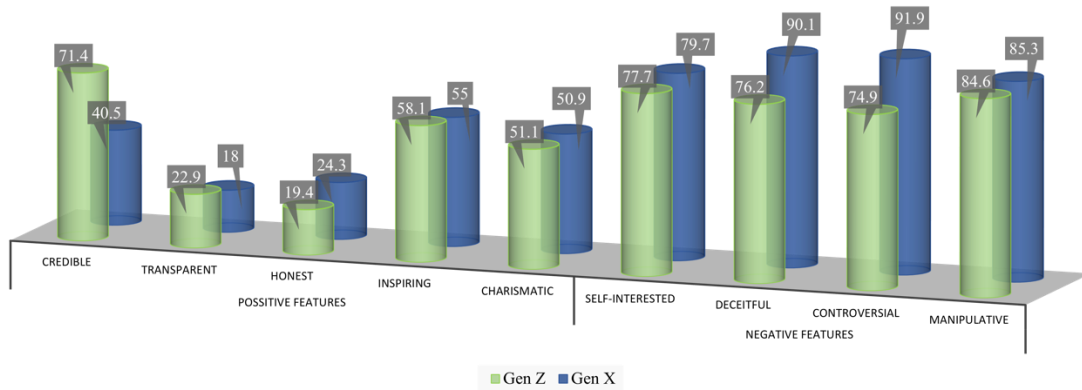
**p* < 0.005

To characterize influencers, the study defined five positive features (credible, transparent, honest, inspiring, and charismatic) and four negative features (self-interested, deceitful, controversial, and manipulative). The differences between both generations stand out, especially regarding negative features. We found statistically significant differences on the definition of “deceitful” ($\chi^2 (1) = 15.37, p = .000$), a feature that Generation X associates with influencers more (Generation Z=76.2% vis-a-vis Generation X=90.1%),

as well as on the definition of “controversial” ($\chi^2 (1) = 23.31, p = .000$), which 74.9% of Generation Z respondents found as a defining feature, while 91.9% of Generation X respondents did. There is also a significant difference regarding the feature “credible,” which Generation Z associates with influencers on 71.4% of the responses while Generation X only associates it on 40.5% of the responses.

A portrait of the influencer figure considering only the positive responses to conceptualize the perceptions of both generations results on the data shown on Figure 4.

Figure 4. Representation of the positive responses used to define the influencer figure in both studied generations. Own elaboration.



3.2. Engagement and trustworthiness

The third study construct refers to engagement to respond to objective 3 (RO3). Engagement is defined as the influencers’ strategy to reach their audience. The following elements illustrate the features that our sample considers ideal for the audience reach to be wider. In this sense, our study relied on two approaches to analyze engagement: (A₁) personal parameters including authenticity and familiarity, feelings conveyed, enthusiasm, and persuasion; and (A₂) professional parameters including experience, professionalism, reputation, unsponsored posts, and lifestyle. The results can be seen on Table 3.

Table 3. Basic descriptors of the personal and professional parameters that configure the influencer’s engagement according to the sample’s positive perception.















Approach	Parameters	Gen Z (N=227)		Gen X (N= 222)		p
		n	%	n	%	
A ₁	Authenticity and familiarity	120	52.9	105	47.3	.238
	Feeling conveyed	125	55.1	108	48.6	.174
	Enthusiasm	55	24.2	51	23	.754
	Persuasion	58	25.6	49	22.1	.387
A ₂	Experience	32	14.1	40	18	.258
	Professionalism	35	15.4	53	23.9	.024
	Reputation	71	31.3	58	26.1	.228
	Unsponsored posts	20	8.8	32	14.4	.064
	Lifestyle	87	38.3	73	32.9	.229

*p < 0.005

From the personal approach (A₁) the sample does not indicate significant differences between generations ($p > 0.005$). The results about the defining elements of an influencer's engagement were similar: regarding "authenticity and familiarity" the percentages were 52.9% for Generation Z and 47.3%, for Generation X, and regarding "feeling conveyed" the percentages were 55.1% for Generation X and 48.6% for Generation Z. Conversely, "enthusiasm" and "persuasion" do not appear as relevant values, since in both groups 8 out of 10 individuals does not consider them. Regarding the professional approach (E₂), there are no statistically significant differences between the two generations either ($p > 0.005$). Yet certain aspects are worth noting: "experience" and "professionalism" are hardly considered by the sample, with only 1 out of 10 of Generation Z users (14.1% and 15.4% respectively) and only 2 out of 10 of Generation X users (18% and 23.9% respectively). According to the obtained results, the professional approach to influencers has little relevance for their impact: in the case of "reputation," only 31.3% of Generation Z users and 26.1% of Generation X users consider it, and in the case of "lifestyle" the responses are slightly higher but still moderate, with 38.3% of consideration by Generation Z users and 32.9% by Generation X users.

Secondly, trustworthiness generated on social media is one of the crucial aspects of the relationship between an influencer and their audience, as Bleier and Eisenbeiss (2015) explain. Consequently, to study our third objective (RO3) we analyzed how influencers build trust according to each of the analyzed generations, as seen on Table 4.

Table 4. Basic statistics for the study of the necessary elements that make an influencer generate trust with their audience

Variables de estudio	Gen Z (N=227)		Gen X (N= 222)		p
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes(%)	No (%)	
Transparency	 63,9	36,1	 33,3	66,7	.000*
Credibility	 68,3	31,7	 72,5	27,5	.325
Originality	 51,5	48,5	 32,9	67,1	.000*
Representing values	 46,7	53,3	 46,4	53,6	.949
Healthy habits	 12,8	87,2	 11,3	88,7	.715
Life style	 67,8	32,2	 21,2	78,8	.009
Impact of the posts	 21,1	78,9	 76,6	23,4	.000*

* $p < 0.005$

To facilitate the data interpretation, the percentages have been marked with 3 icons responding to 3 ranges of meaning: the green icon encompasses between 66-100% to illustrate that most of the sample recognizes this feature as important to build trust with the audience; the yellow icon encompasses between 33-66% to show that the feature is considered by less than two thirds of the sample; and the red icon encompasses 0-33% and shows those features that are not considered relevant to build trust with the audience. Regarding the intergenerational differences it must be noted that there were statistically significant differences regarding "transparency" ($\chi^2 (1) = 41.9, p = .000$), which is a crucial feature to build trust for 63% of the respondents from Generation Z, while for and for 66.7% of respondents from Generation X it is not an important feature. Regarding "originality" there is a 1-point difference ($\chi^2 (1) = 16, p = .000$), with 51.5% of respondents from Generation Z who consider it important and only 32.9% of respondents from Generation X who do. Lastly, there are differences regarding the "impact of the posts" ($\chi^2 (1) = 46.3, p = .000$), as 8 out of 10 individuals from Generation Z consider that it does

not build trust, while 76.6% of the respondents from Generation X consider it as a crucial feature for an influencer to build trust.

3.3. Influencers' social role

The last study construct, which responds to objective 4 (RO4) of this work, analyzes the influencer's commitment to gender equality as well as their creation of stereotypes through 3 variables with Likert scale responses in which 1= Strongly disagree; 2= Somewhat disagree; 3= Indifferent; 4= Somewhat agree; 5= Strongly agree. As Table 5 illustrates, there are only statistically significant differences on the first item, "influencers are committed to gender equality" ($\chi^2(4) = 15.28, p=.004$). In both generations, almost half of the respondents considers that influencers are committed to gender equality. If we combine responses 4= Somewhat agree and responses 5= Strongly agree the percentages for Generation Z are 55% and for Generation X are 50.4%.

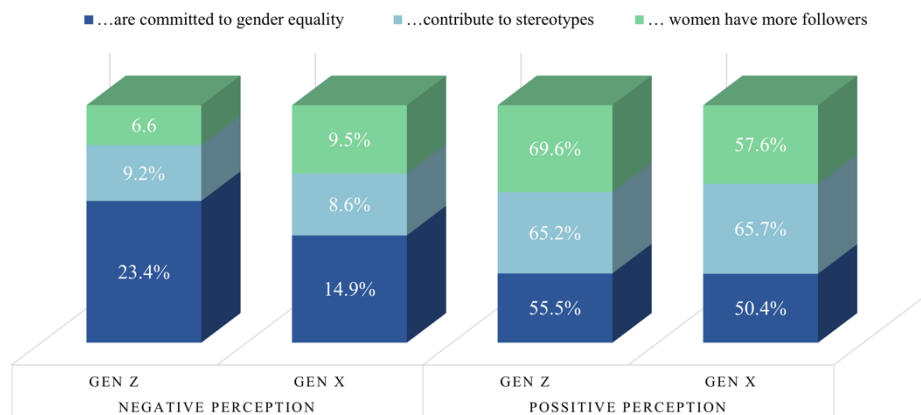
Table 5. Basic statistics and frequencies for study construct Social Role.

Influencers...	p	1		2		3		4		5		N
		Gen Z	Gen X	Gen Z	Gen X	Gen Z	Gen X	Gen Z	Gen X	Gen Z	Gen X	
...are committed to gender equality.	.004*	22	18	31	15	48	77	74	56	52	56	449
...contribute to the formation of stereotypes.	.643	5	7	16	12	58	57	82	70	66	76	449
... women influencers have more followers.	.037	4	10	11	11	54	73	79	74	79	54	449

$p < 0.005$

According to the results, there are no statistically significant differences between the two age groups with regard to the other two variables. Regarding the statement "influencers contribute to the construction of stereotypes" no differences are found, ($\chi^2(4) = 2.510, p=.643$). If we combine the answers "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree" the percentages are 65.2% for Generation Z and 65.7% for Generation X, as seen on Figure 5.

Figure 5. Positive and negative perception of the variables of the construct "mediating role" on both generations. Own elaboration.



Regarding the last variable, "women influencers have more followers" there are no statistically significant differences, ($\chi^2(4) = 10.22, p=.037$), however, the percentage is

higher on Generation Z (69.6%) than on Generation X (57.6%) in the perception that women's profiles generate more engagement and thus more followers.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Influencing the audience through traditional media was gradually becoming more challenging vis-a-vis digital environments, as Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009) note. Yet, the permanent transformation of the advertising landscape described by previous literature (Bleier and Eisenbeiss, 2015; Himelboim and Golan, 2019; McCormick, 2016) is not the only conclusion of our study. The underlying evidence suggests that these agents have transcended the advertising realm and consolidated as social prescribers in very diverse areas and with a high degree of intergenerational relevance that requires more inquiry.

This paper allows for a detailed understanding of how influencers are perceived as a social agent exploring the development of parasocial relationships between them and their followers through an intergenerational comparative analysis, covering users from Generations Z and X. While drawing from previous studies about the phenomenon of influencers (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Waqas *et al.*, 2022), the novelty of our contribution lies on our intergenerational methodological approach, in spite of the limited size of our sample. We reached the following conclusions regarding digital advertising:

1. For Generation Z, the strength of an influencer lies on their communicative skills, on their interaction with their audience, and on their enthusiasm. For them, the main defining features of an influencer must include being credible and inspiring. But Generation Z users are also aware that influencers have an agenda, that they can be opportunistic, deceitful, controversial, and manipulative. Generation Z users consider that the engagement influencers generate is based on the familiarity they show, on the feeling they convey, on their digital reputation, and on their depicted lifestyle. This group of users believe that in order to build trust with their audience, influencers must cultivate their transparency and credibility as well as their lifestyle. The majority of the sample (7 out of 10) considers that influencers contribute to the construction of stereotypes, claiming that women influencers reach wider audiences and have higher engagement than men influencers.
2. Regarding Generation X, they also attribute the influencer's strength to their communicative abilities, but they place more emphasis on the dynamism of their posts and on their leadership skills. This group also values credibility and charisma as features that should define influencers, and even more of them compared to Generation Z users (9 out of 10) consider that influencers are opportunistic, deceitful, controversial, and manipulative. This generation, conversely, considers that professionalism is an element that generates more engagement, although they agree with their younger counterparts in their perception that credibility and transparency are key. But in spite of agreeing with Generation Z that the influencer's credibility is crucial, they differ in that consider that influencer's trust with the audiences is based on the impact of their posts.

Ultimately, this study offers an innovative segmented perspective that complements existing works on the subject. It allows us to conclude with a different portrayal of the figure of the influencer based on each demographic niche. Some of our results agree with the negative perception of influencers, coinciding with the works of authors such as Childers and Boatwright (2021), who approach this figure as key in digital communication but also as deceitful. Regarding the creation of stereotypes, our results

coincide with the existing literature in that it seems to be a problem that depends on the influencer's gender, as argued by Martínez-Sanz y González (2018). Lastly, our results make it apparent that influencers are no longer a matter of youth, as previous studies concluded (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Fromm and Read, 2018).

The implications of this study transcend academia to serve emerging companies that manage and represent influencers, since the characterization of an influencer is crucial to identify key aspects to adjust products and messages offered to a specific audience and to a specific demographic niche, as argued by Zhang *et al.* (2017) and Yuan and Lou (2020). More work needs to be done on this line of study to track the development of this social phenomenon that, far from being a model due to its negative features, has a relevant presence that requires attention within the field of social and communication studies.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

CITED WORKS

- Abraham, J. S. E., Floreto, S. J. L., Pagkalinawan, M. I. B., and Etrata, A. E. (2022), "Consumer Perception on Influencer Marketing Efforts of Brands in the Beauty and Cosmetics Industry". *International Journal of Social and Management Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 105-118. <https://doi.org/10.5555/ijosmas.v3i2.122>
- Alalwan, A. A., Rana, N. P.; Dwivedi, Y. K. and Algharabat, R. (2017), "Social media in marketing: A review and analysis of the existing literature", *Telematics and Informatics*, Vol. 34, No. 7, pp. 1177-1190. <http://doi.org/gcgn49>
- Asmussen, B., Wider, S., Williams, R., Stevenson, N., and Whitehead, E. (2016), "Defining Branded Content for the Digital Age: The Industry Experts' Views on Branded Content as a New Marketing Communications Concept", available at: Branded Content Marketing Association. http://www.thebcma.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/BCMA-Research-Report_FINAL.pdf (accesses 10 January 2022).
- Bleier, A. and Eisenbeiss, M. (2015), "The importance of trust for personalized online advertising" *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 91, No. 3, pp. 390-409. <http://doi.org/drdb>
- Bond, B. J. (2016), "Following Your 'Friend': Social Media and the Strength of Adolescents' Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae", *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 19, No. 11, pp. 656-60. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0355>
- Burns, A. (2008), *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producersage*. Peter Lang. Bristol.
- Casaló, L., Flavián, C. and Ibañez-Sánchez, S. (2018), "Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 117, pp. 510-519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.005>
- Castillo-Abdul, B.; Pérez-Escoda, A. and Núñez-Barriopedro, E. (2022), "Promoting Social Media Engagement Via Branded Content Communication: A Fashion Brands Study on Instagram", *Media and Communication*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4728>
- Chatzigeorgiou, C. (2017), "Modelling the impact of social media influencers on behavioural intentions of millennials: The case of tourism in rural areas in Greece", *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 25-29. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1209125>

- Childers, C., and Boatwright, B. (2021), “Do digital natives recognize digital influence? Generational differences and understanding of social media influencers”, *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, Vol. 42, No. 4, pp. 425-442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2020.1830893>
- De Miguel-Zamora, M., Borau-Boira, E and Abellán-Hernández, M. (2022), “Brand Story. El caso Aprendemos juntos de BBVA como modelo de relato de marca”, *Revista Mediterránea de Comunicación*, Vol. 13, No 1, pp. 233-249, <https://doi.org/10.14198/MEDCOM.20765>.
- Djafarova, E. and Rushworth, C. (2017), “Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 68, pp. 1-7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>
- Etter, M.; Colleoni, E.; Illia, L., Meggiorin, K. and D'Eugenio, A. (2018), “Measuring Organizational Legitimacy in Social Media: Assessing Citizens' Judgments With Sentiment Analysis”, *Business and Society*, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 60-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650316683926>
- Fromm, J., and Read, A. (2018), *Marketing to Gen Z: The rules for reaching this vast--and very different--generation of influencers*. Amazon. New York, NY.
- Gardner, H. and Davis, K. (2014), *La generación APP. Cómo los jóvenes gestionan su identidad, su privacidad y su imaginación en el mundo digital*. Paidós. Bogotá.
- George, D. and Mallery, P. (2003), *SPSS for Windows step by step: A simple guide and reference*. (4th edition). Allyn & Bacon. Boston.
- Himelboim, I., and Golan, G. J. (2019), “A social networks approach to viral advertising: The role of primary, contextual, and low influencers”, *Social Media & Society*, Vol. 5, No. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119847516>
- Hootsuite (2021), “Digital 2021. We are social”, available at: <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2021/> (accessed 20 December 2021).
- Kadushin, C. (2013), *Comprender las redes sociales. Teorías, conceptos y hallazgos*. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. Oxford Press University. Madrid.
- Lou, C y Yuan, S. (2019), “Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media”, *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol 19, No. 1, pp. 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Martínez-Sanz, R and González, C. (2018), “Comunicación de Marca en Instagram, ¿Una Cuestión de Género? El Rol del Influencer de Moda”, *Masculinities and Social Change*, 7(3), Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 230- 254. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/mcs.2018.3693>
- Masuda, H., Han, S. H., and Lee, J. (2022), “Impacts of influencer attributes on purchase intentions in social media influencer marketing: Mediating roles of characterizations”, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Vol. 174, pp. 121-146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.121246>
- Meyers, C.B. (2017), “Social Media Influencers: A Lesson Plan for Teaching Digital Advertising Media Literacy”, *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2017.0018>
- McCormick, K. (2016), “Celebrity endorsements: Influence of a product- endorser match on Millennials attitudes and purchase intentions”, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 32, pp. 39-45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2016.05.012>
- Morduchowicz, R. (2008), *La Generación multimedia. Significados, consumos*. Paidós. Buenos Aires.

- Munnukka, J., Uusitalo, O. and Toivonen, H. (2016), “Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness”, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 182-192. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-11-2014-1221>
- Palmer, A. and Koenig-Lewis, N. (2009), “An experiential, social network-based approach to direct marketing”, *Direct Marketing: An International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 162-176. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17505930910985116>
- Pawle, J. and Cooper, P. (2006), “Measuring Emotions-Lovemarks, The Future Beyond Marks”, *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 38-48. <https://doi.org/10.2501/S0021849906060053>
- Pedrero-Esteban, L. M., and Pérez-Escoda, A. (2021), “Democracia y digitalización: implicaciones éticas de la IA en la personalización de contenidos a través de interfaces de voz” *RECERCA. Revista De Pensament I Anàlisi*, Vol. 26, No. 2, <https://doi.org/10.6035/recerca.4666>
- Pérez Escoda, A. and Pedrero Esteban, L.M. (2021), “Challenges for journalism facing social networks, fake news, and the distrust of Generation Z”, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, Vol. 79, pp. 67-85. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2021-1519>
- Piscitelli, A. (2006), “Nativos e inmigrantes digitales. ¿Brecha generacional, brecha cognitiva, o las dos juntas y más aún?”, *Revista mexicana de investigación educativa*, Vol. 11, No. 28, pp. 179-185. <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/140/14002809.pdf>
- Sádaba-Chalezquer, C. and Pérez-Escoda, A. (2020), “La generación “streaming” y el nuevo paradigma de la comunicación digital” L.M. Pedrero-Esteban y A. Pérez-Escoda (Eds.), *Cartografía de la Comunicación Postdigital: Medios y Audiencias en la Sociedad de la COVID-19*. Aranzadi Thomson Reuters, Madrid. pp. 37–56.
- Tapscott, D. (1998), *Growing up digital: The rise of the Net generation*. McGraw-Hill. New York.
- Tilo, H., and Goldhoorn, C. (2011), “Horton and Wohl Revisited: Exploring Viewers’ Experience of Parasocial Interaction”, *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 61, No. 6, pp. 1104–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01595.x>
- Vilches, L. (2012), *La investigación en comunicación. Métodos y técnicas en la era digital*. Gedisa. Barcelona.
- Vogels, E. (2019), Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life. Pew Research Center, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/> (accessed 01 February 2022).
- Waqas, M., Hamzah, Z. L., and Salleh, N. A. M. (2022), “Branded content experience in social media settings: a consumer culture theory perspective”, *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 56, pp. 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2021.07.001>
- Woodcock, J. and Johnson, M. (2019), “Live Streamers on Twitch.tv as Social Media Influencers: Chances and Challenges for Strategic Communication”, *International Journal of Strategic Communication* Vol. 13, pp. 321-335.
- Yuan, S., and Lou, C. (2020), “How social media influencers foster relationships with followers: the roles of source credibility and fairness in parasocial relationship and product interest”, *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 133-147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514>
- Zemke, R., Raines, C. and Filipczak, B. (2013), *Generations at work: Managing the clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the workplace*. Kindle Edition AMACOM Div American Mgmt Assn. Indiana.

Zhang, Y., Moe, W. W. and Schweidel, D. A. (2017), "Modeling the role of message content and influencers in social media rebroadcasting", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 100-119.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2016.07.003>