

# Cultural Engagement in the Digital Age: The Role of Social Media Influencers Among Generation Z

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# **Cultural Engagement in the Digital Age: The Role of Social Media Influencers Among Generation Z**

## **Abstract:**

The widespread use of social media among Generation Z necessitates an examination of its impact, encompassing both advantages and drawbacks. While social media platforms have contributed to a disconnect from cultural enrichment, certain influencers are leveraging them to promote cultural awareness. This study explores how influencers can shape the cultural interests of Generation Z by disseminating culturally themed content. Using a quantitative approach, data was collected from 224 respondents via an online questionnaire. Analysis revealed the significance of para-social relationships in influencing users' intention to follow influencers, impacting their interest in culture and attitudes towards recommendations. This research is significant for understanding the connections between social media, influencers, Generation Z, and culture. It offers insights for cultural industries adapting to modern technology, aiding in effectively engaging with the Generation Z demographic.

*Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Influencers, Generation Z, Word of Mouth, Culture*

## 1. Introduction

With social media's widespread misuse and resulting information overload, Generation Z faces challenges in absorbing cultural content (Galli, 2011), exacerbated by their shorter attention spans (Wise, 2023). As they spend significant time on social platforms engaging in less educational content (Duffett, 2017), concerns arise among older generations, educational institutions, and cultural industries. Despite this, social media offers avenues for accessing current events and cultural content, potentially bridging the gap between Generation Z and culture. However, little is known about how influencers and social media can cultivate Generation Z's cultural interest. This study aims to address this gap by exploring: (1) the role of social media and influencers in promoting culture to Generation Z, (2) the influence of influencer qualities on Gen Z's interest in culture, and (3) the content qualities that capture Gen Z's attention and drive their intention to follow influencers.

Vargo and Lusch's (2004) service-dominant logic (SDL) suggests that value is not solely embedded in products and services but is instead derived from the overall experience and benefits users derive from their interactions. This concept can elucidate how influencers and followers co-create value through their interactions (Wu et al., 2022). Additionally, SDL underscores the significance of continuous interaction and engagement (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), which are pivotal aspects in the relationships between influencers and Generation Z, particularly in the context of social media and cultural engagement. Hence, SDL serves as the background theory for this study, providing a framework to understand the dynamics of value co-creation between influencers and Generation Z on social media platforms.

Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2010, represents the first cohort to grow up in a digitally connected world, earning them the moniker of digital natives (Priporas et al., 2017). Accustomed to technology, they effortlessly navigate various digital platforms, including the Internet, mobile devices, and social networks, which have been integral parts of their lives since childhood (Francis et al., 2018; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). As noted by Scholz and Vyugina (2019), digital natives exhibit a global communication and information consumption pattern, displaying a distinct preference for modern digital media, such as social networking sites, over traditional channels, a characteristic that sets them apart from previous generations. Due to their unique characteristics and significant presence on digital platforms, this study will focus specifically on Generation Z.

## **2. Understanding social media influencers' impact on Generation Z**

Social media influencers, often referred to as content creators, leverage their attributes to produce captivating content that garners the attention of users seeking advice and ideas (Barta et al., 2023a; Ki & Kim, 2019). Their goal is to cultivate long-term relationships with followers by maintaining interest through engaging content (Farivar et al., 2021). Despite the illusion of connection, interactions remain content-driven, yet consumers tend to trust influencers with whom they've developed para-social relationships (Audrezet et al., 2020; Horton & Whol, 1956). This study examines influencers' credibility, expertise, and homophily, positing that these qualities positively impact para-social relationships (H1a-c). Additionally, inspiration, characterized by perceived influence and attention-capturing abilities, is proposed to positively influence para-social relationships (H1d). Recognizing the potential impact, it is hypothesized that para-social relationships drive users' intention to follow influencers, particularly those sharing culturally relevant content (H2).

## **3. Examining engagement and content characteristics**

Regular engagement with influencer content can heighten followers' attentiveness, fostering positive attitudes towards endorsed content and potentially leading to recommendations. This study explores how specific content characteristics influence Generation Z followers' decisions to follow influencers and spark Word of Mouth (WOM). Key qualities under scrutiny include creativity, informativeness, design quality, and perceived enjoyment.

Creativity, denoting originality, and innovation is hypothesized to positively impact users' intention to follow influencers (H3a). Informativeness, defined by the practical value of shared information, is expected to similarly influence users' intention to follow (H3b). Moreover, the design quality of content, incorporating visual elements, is anticipated to positively impact users' intention to follow (H3c). Finally, perceived enjoyment, reflecting the degree of enjoyment derived from content consumption, is posited to positively influence users' intention to follow (H3d).

## **4. The role of attention, intention, and Word of Mouth in influencer marketing**

According to So et al. (2014), attention is a favorable and possible antecedent to engagement, especially because when individuals are attentive toward a topic, they often desire

to keep hearing about that, thus, they will positively start to feel engaged. Before investigating how the gap between Generation Z and culture can be bridged by the efforts of those who use social media networks to spread interest in culture, it is relevant to understand if an initial degree of attention, involvement, and focus (So et al., 2014) combined with the influencer's positive message about culture will be more effective or not. Thus, the following hypothesis is stated: Attention to culture has a positive impact on users' future interest in culture (H4).

Sokolova and Perez (2021) stated that, when users express a strong intention to be exposed to influencers' posts, they not only show interest in the content itself, but also in what is promoted in it, and they provide an example of the impact of YouTube fitness influencers on those who watch their videos in developing their interest in fitness activities and in practicing these activities. In the same way, this reasoning can also be applied to culture, influencers, and Generation Z. Furthermore, intentions represent reliable predictions of how customers will behave in the future (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017b; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Moreover, para-social relationships lead to a desire to interact more with the influencer from users, and therefore to continue engaging with his/her content and finally emulating his or her consumption behavior (Audrezet et al., 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023). Consequentially, this frequent interaction will have an impact on users' intention to follow, consider, and ultimately carry out the suggestions (Casaló et al., 2020), since the influencer developed a persuasiveness power (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). In accordance with past research, this research assumes that Gen Zers would develop a positive approach to culture thanks to their trust in those influencers that share posts about culture, and as the following hypotheses are stated: Para-social relationships developed by the users have a positive impact on their future interest in culture (H5), and: Intention to follow the SMI positively influences followers' future interest in culture (H6).

In the online realm, the number of views and visitors to an influencer's profile impacts his/her ranking (Cosenza et al., 2015), and it can be enhanced by the word of mouth (WOM), which represents the exchange of opinions and thoughts (Bone, 1992). Para-social relationships between an influencer and young users would bring them to follow his/her profile, to engage with the content related to culture, and lastly to discuss it with others. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are stated: Para-social relationships developed by the users have a positive impact on their intention to recommend the influencer's suggestions to other people (H7), and: Intention to follow the social media influencer positively influences followers' intention to recommend the influencer's suggestions to other people (H8).

## 5. Methods

The empirical study used an online questionnaire published online on the social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook), and also distributed through WhatsApp. The questionnaire included filter questions to ensure that respondents were following social media influencer who produces art-related content. To access study dimensions, the measurement scales were adapted from previous (Table 1).

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Autors of reference</b>
Credibility	Sokolova et al. (2021)
Expertise	Ki et al. (2020)
Inspiration	Ki et al. (2020)
Homophily	Lee et al. (2016)
Para-social relationships	Lee et al. (2016)
Creativity	Cheung et al (2022)
Design Quality	Cheung et al (2022)
Informative Value	Cheung et al (2022); Ki et al. (2020)
Perceived Enjoyment	Barta et al (2023)
Intention to follow the SMI	Barta et al (2023)
Attention	So et al. (2014)
Future Interest in culture	Reychav and Wu (2015)
WOM	Belanche et al (2021)

Table 1. Measurement scales

## 6. Analysis and results

### 6.1 Sample characterization

The questionnaire counted with 224 responses, but only 182 responses were used for the analysis as 42 responses were excluded due to their incompleteness, or the respondents were not Gen Zers (between 18 and 26 years old). As for the sample characterization, 68.1% of respondents were women and 31.9% were men. Regarding the highest level of education obtained, 44% of participants had a bachelor's degree, 37.4% had a master's degree, while 18.1% completed a secondary degree. When questioned about their residence, 76.4% of respondents answered that they lived in a city and 20.9% in a small town. As it concerns the country of residence, six countries were indicated: 89% of the participants were from Italy, 7.1% from Portugal, 1.6% from France, 1.1% from Australia, 0.5% came from Germany and 0.5% from Switzerland. The respondents indicated Instagram as their favorite social media (62.9%), following TikTok (26.9%), YouTube (7.7%), and lastly Facebook (1.1%). Regarding the average number of hours spent online on these platforms, 70.3% of respondents stated that they spend daily between two and three hours on social media.

## 6.2 Model assessment

Partial least squares structural equation modelling was used with the assistance of SmartPLS 4.0.9.9 to conduct the quantitative analysis of the data gathered from the online survey. The measurement model was assessed confirming construct reliability and validity, discriminant validity, and no collinearity issues were detected. After confirming the adequacy of the measures, we have proceeded with the structural model assessment (table 2, figure 1).

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Para-Social Relationships	0.527	0.517
Intention to Follow	0.672	0.663
Interest in Culture	0.589	0.582
WOM	0.690	0.686
	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.093	0.109
d_ULS	13.205	18.211
d_G	3.648	3.923
Chi-square	3485.223	3567.602
NFI	0.683	0.675

Table 2. Model fit

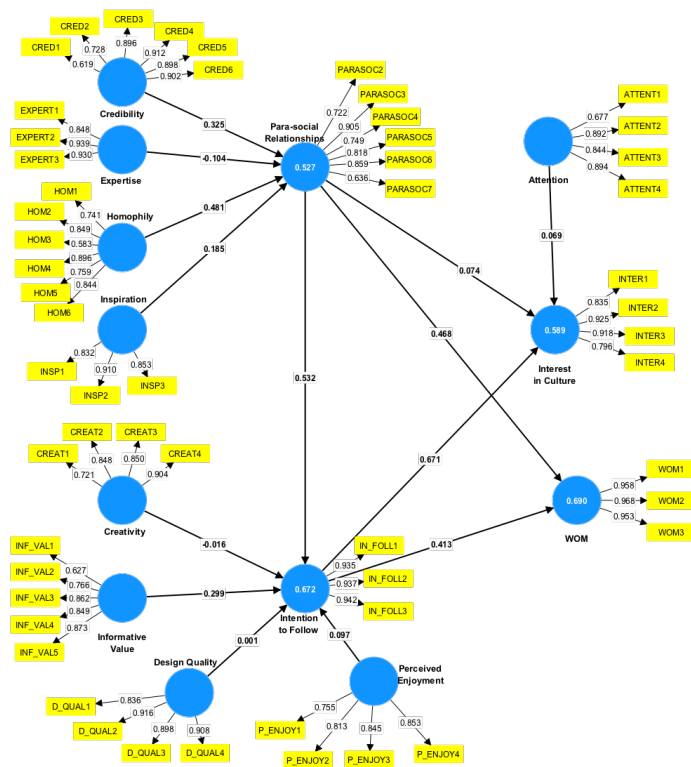


Figure 1. Structural model

### 6.3. Hypotheses testing

As it comes to the hypotheses testing, SmartPLS relies on the nonparametric bootstrapping technique to test the level of significance and relevance of the path coefficients estimated by the structural model (Henseler et al., 2009). As it is shown in table 3, eight hypotheses out of fourteen have been validated.

Hypothesis	Relationships	Path Coefficient	t-value	P-values	Decision
H1a	Credibility -> Para-Social Relationships	0.325	2.409	0.016	<i>Supported</i>
H1b	Expertise -> Para-Social Relationships	-0.104	0.815	0.415	<i>Not supported</i>
H1c	Homophily -> Para-Social Relationships	0.481	7.552	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H1d	Inspiration -> Para-Social Relationships	0.185	2.145	0.032	<i>Supported</i>
H2	Para-Social Relationships -> Intention to Follow	0.532	6.489	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H3a	Creativity -> Intention to Follow	-0.016	0.197	0.844	<i>Not supported</i>
H3b	Informative Value -> Intention to Follow	0.299	4.088	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H3c	Design Quality -> Intention to Follow	0.001	0.018	0.986	<i>Not supported</i>
H3d	Perceived Enjoyment -> Intention to Follow	0.097	1.326	0.185	<i>Not supported</i>
H4	Attention -> Interest in Culture	0.069	1.470	0.142	<i>Not supported</i>
H5	Para-Social Relationships -> Interest in Culture	0.074	0.696	0.486	<i>Not supported</i>
H6	Intention to Follow -> Interest in Culture	0.671	7.487	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H7	Para-Social Relationships -> WOM	0.468	5.101	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H8	Intention to Follow -> WOM	0.413	4.126	0.000	<i>Supported</i>

Table 3. Hypotheses testing

## 7. Discussion of results

In terms of the impact of social media and influencers on the promotion of culture, Table 3 presents the validated relationships explaining Generation Z's future interest in culture, alongside those that were not statistically significant. The quantitative analysis confirmed the relationship between influencer credibility and para-social relationships (H1a), aligning with Sokolova et al. (2021). Similarly, H1c, regarding the positive link between homophily and para-social relationships, was supported, consistent with Lee et al. (2016). Additionally, H1d, concerning the connection between inspiration and para-social relationships, found support, echoing Ki et al. (2020) and Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019).

Moreover, H2, indicating the relationship between para-social relationships and intention to follow, was confirmed, as posited by Belanche et al. (2021a) and Casalo et al. (2017). Likewise, H3b, linking informativeness of content to intention to follow, was supported, in line with Ki et al. (2020). The analysis also affirmed H6, demonstrating the link between intention to follow an influencer and Gen Z's interest in culture, as suggested by Sokolova and Perez (2021) and Cosenza et al. (2015). Additionally, H7 and H8, pertaining to intention to



recommend and word-of-mouth, were supported, consistent with Casaló et al. (2017) and Cosenza et al. (2015).

However, the study did not find support for certain hypotheses. Specifically, influencer expertise (H3a) and creativity (H3c) were not statistically significant, contrary to Ki et al. (2020) and Casaló et al. (2020), respectively. Similarly, the relationship between design quality of content and intention to follow (H3d) was not supported, contradicting Casaló et al. (2020) and Cheung et al. (2022). Furthermore, perceived enjoyment (H3d) did not significantly explain intention to follow, going against Barta et al. (2023).

Furthermore, the relationship between attention and interest in culture (H4) and para-social relationships and interest in culture (H5) were not supported, deviating from Sokolova and Perez (2021).

## **8. Final remarks**

This study set out to investigate the impact of social media and influencers on fostering cultural engagement, with a specific focus on their influence on Generation Z's cultural interests. Addressing a notable gap in existing research, this study made significant strides by conducting an empirical examination within a targeted population.

The findings of this study corroborate earlier research, particularly the work of Sokolova and Perez (2021), highlighting the substantial influence wielded by social media influencers in advocating for certain online behaviors among their followers. Notably, individuals displaying interest in influencers' online activities are inclined to develop positive attitudes towards the content they promote, including cultural themes.

Furthermore, this study shed light on the pivotal role played by influencers' personalities in cultivating deep connections with their audience. Factors such as perceived credibility, alignment of values and interests, and the influencer's ability to inspire followers were found to significantly contribute to the development of para-social relationships. However, intriguingly, the study revealed that these para-social relationships did not consistently translate into heightened engagement with the content promoted within the influencers' posts, including cultural content.

Lastly, the study unveiled that the receptivity of young Generation Z individuals to cultural promotion from influencers is contingent upon their perception of the content as informative, trustworthy, and reliable. This finding underscores the importance of informative content in capturing the interest of recipients and aligns with the insights put forth by Ki et al. (2020),

emphasizing the relevance of informative content in influencing engagement levels with influencers' content.

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