

The Gen Z micro-influencer experience

by

Sandra Guzman

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Danielle LaGree

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Executive Summary

According to Meltwater (2022), micro-influencers allow brands to boost brand awareness, impression, and increase engagement and conversation among consumers. Micro-influencers are content creators who have a small platform on social media: between 10,000 and 100,000 followers (Meltwater, 2022). They're often experts on a specific industry, skill, or topic and have a highly engaged online community that they form. Micro-influencers enable brands to connect with individual users through their personal social media accounts. Micro-influencers are an important aspect to the public relations field due to their highly trusted social media content that shapes the way users view a brand or product. Information that is widely spread through micro-influencers' social platforms can have major effects on brand awareness and help facilitate a positive public perception (Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2017). The lack of research on Gen Z micro-influencers as a public relations strategy, and their experiences towards crafting their influencer brand from scratch, opens a unique window for understanding their journey.

While past research points to the power of micro-influencers over mega-influencers (Park et. al., 2021), little is known about how Gen Z micro-influencers gain their knowledge to perfect their online personas and how it affects their self-confidence. This study aims to unravel the processes by which these individuals cultivate and sustain their distinct online personas, while drawing insights from fellow influencers' experiences. Its primary goal is to comprehend the experiences of Gen Z micro-influencers as they navigate establishing and nurturing their personal brand in the digital sphere, all while examining the impact of this role on their self-confidence.

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Introduction

Understanding the unique experiences from the perspective of Gen Z micro-influencers will equip public relations teams who manage these relationships with the knowledge needed to better engage with and establish mutually beneficial partnerships with micro-influencers.

Researching these experiences will also leverage and improve the process on both ends of brand deals. These unique experiences were examined through the social learning theory along with the relationship management theory to expand on the public relations industry and research. Through this research, we can learn the experiences that Gen Z micro-influencers gain throughout their journey of learning how to manage their influencer brand and engage with their online communities.

Review of the Literature

Gen Z micro-influencers are known to have a great amount of influence on their audiences. This study will first define the experiences of micro-influencers and the various obstacles they must overcome. Next, it explores the relationship Gen Z has with social media along with their impact on the media. Lastly, the theories applicable to this topic, social learning theory and relationship management theory are explored to provide lenses through which to study, analyze and understand the experiences of Gen Z micro-influencers. Through these findings we will discover how Gen Z micro-influencers gain their knowledge and build self-confidence over time.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the unique experiences of Gen Z micro-influencers as they build and manage their roles as influencers and manage relationships with the brands they engage with. With this research, I hope to gain new knowledge about the experiences that Gen Z micro-influencers go through when working with brands to promote their products or services. Along with that, I will gain new knowledge on their unique experiences while learning what it means to be an “influencer”. My study will be a U.S. based study involving Gen Z micro-influencer females in the beauty and lifestyle niche on Instagram. Instagram is a unique platform where Gen Z micro-influencers can connect with their followers and tell their stories through photos, videos, reels, and Instagram stories. Gen Z micro-influencers engage with their followers on a daily basis which exerts significant influence over their audience.

Influencers as a Public Relations Strategy

According to Smith et al. (2023), social media influencers are individuals who shape attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media updates, and who engage large follower

bases through a “homophily connection of shared social demographics” (Davies & Hobbs, 2020, p. 2) with narration of their personal life and activities (Archer, 2019). Influencer marketing has greatly risen in popularity throughout the years. Targeting the correct audiences with strategic messaging strategies is a complex part of the success of influencer marketing. According to Sprout Social (2023), an influencer is someone in your niche industry with sway over your target audience. Influencers have specialized knowledge and insights into a specific subject or product (Sprout Social, 2023). According to Linqia (2018), 92% of marketers who used influencer marketing in 2017 found it to be effective. Influencers assist companies in “influencer marketing” which is a different form of advertising that aims to build brand authority using the influencers reputation (Sprout Social, 2023). This course of relationship building through influencers reputation is also known to directly correlate with the public relations field. With this knowledge, we can further understand why brands are choosing to collaborate with micro-influencers in order to connect with those niche areas on social media platforms.

There are two important elements to consider when studying the effect of influencers as a public relations strategy. Influencer marketing is a form of native or embedded advertising, seeking to display the authenticity of influencers for brand awareness and commercial gain (Campbell & Fareell, 2020; Delbaere et al., 2021; Hudders, et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2019). Influencer marketing works on the notion that an influencer-endorsed message will be perceived as more effective because the consumer may not recognize the content to be advertising (Hudders et al., 2021). Influencer marketing generally works based on pay-to-play arrangements that ensure positive endorsements (Howlett et al., 2021). This type of compensation separates influencers from popular social media users (Abidin, 2015).

On the other hand, influencer relations are also planted as a public relations tactic. Influencer relations position the public relations professional as “the liaison between a company and those considered to be influencers within the social media community” (Boone et al., 2016). The public relations function has been considered a tool for social media influencers to “perform activities with strategic significance to organizational goals” while practitioners “seek long-term effects through long-term collaboration” (Borchers & Enke, 2021, p. 2, 11). Studies have raised concerns about covert marketing practices, influencer relations may be differentiated by a focus on relationships (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). In public relations, relationships hinge on mutual benefit, commitment, trust satisfaction, and control mutuality (Gruing & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Brands and advertising companies have taken advantage of the need for targeting micro-influencers instead of major influencers for campaigns. The benefit of this is the small niche community that micro-influencers maintain as opposed to a large influencer who speaks to a variety of audiences. On the other hand, micro-influencers are much more affordable for companies to collaborate with in exchange for exposure with their target audiences (Rakoczy, M.E. et al., pg. 139). Micro-influencers also tend to have a high engagement from other entities through their number of reactions, likes, comments and post. This is due to their target audience being niche and vastly interested in their content. They have a limited audience size which leads to a reactive audience (Rakoczy, M.E. et al., pg. 143). Moreover, being a micro-influencer is more beneficial as they have more time for replying and engaging with their audiences making them more accessible (Rakoczy, M.E. et al., pg. 148). Micro-influencers, who typically have a smaller but highly engaging followers on Instagram, often excel at genuinely connecting with their audience by focusing on authenticity, relatability, and meaningful interactions. These

participants prioritize sharing genuine stories, experiences, and opinions that resonate with their audience. They often respond to comments, message and questions because they take the time to acknowledge and connect with their followers on a personal level, creating a sense of community and belonging.

Gen Z Micro-Influencers

According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2023), Gen Z represents the largest generation of consumers yet. This demographic has accounted for \$29 billion in direct spending with the number steadily increasing (Donovan, 2020). The Gen Z population itself is on board with influencers, nearly two-thirds report following them and 50% say they trust influencer recommendations (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). Knowing how important Gen Z is to the progress of social media is important to consider. Gen Z micro-influencers will continue to grow as brands turn to collaborate with more niche areas. Gen Z individuals place a high value on the opinions of their peers and are heavily influenced by social norms. Researching the value of Gen Z micro-influencers will help them leverage their knowledge to enhance communication with brands and their viewers.

Micro-influencers must self-brand themselves to a specific niche and carry knowledge on specific subjects. Personal branding, which is also referred to as self-branding, occurs when individuals develop a distinctive public image for commercial gain (Khamis et al., 2016). The process of personal branding is critical for micro-influencers to achieve in order to stand out in the market and create a memorable image. Micro-influencers benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is responsive to the needs and interests of their target audiences (Khedher, 2014). Through my research, I will further understand the process that Gen Z micro-influencers go through in order to develop and market their personal brand.

According to Fairchild (2007), self-branding has inspired new thinking about how to create evolving relationships with consumers and create lasting effects. By authorizing micro-influencers to assert strong identities, through research we can gain an understanding about the process and knowledge they must possess in order to effectively create bonds between the brand and their audiences.

Challenges Experienced by Micro-Influencers

Micro-influencers have the power to help brands possess strong, favorable, unique and relevant mental associations (Keller, 2007), which helps brands differentiate from the crowded market. Another aspect that micro-influencers support brands with is to imbue the product, service or firm with their personality (Aaker, 1997). Micro-influencers have the personal touch to give a product or service a human-like quality and thus makes the product more relatable to their audience (Aaker, 1997). Individuals then know what to expect from a brand or product before they commit to a reputable brand.

Micro-influencers have the overwhelming experience to manage what brands they partner with and the communication process that leads to confirmative brand deals. Self-branding through social media relies on the freedom and agency of micro-influencers. The challenge of self-branding constitutes a form of neoliberal governance by compelling individuals to be entrepreneurial subjects (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013). Micro-influencers are subsequently responsible for their own success or failure in the marketplace. By conducting additional research, I will gain data on the knowledge acquisition steps that Gen Z micro-influencers go through in order to properly communicate with brands and their audiences.

Understanding Gen Z Micro-influencers through Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory and social media experiences are intertwined, yet current literature does not offer connections between the two. By exploring existing literature on both social learning theory and Gen Z micro-influencers, this study draws connections between the two concepts to better understand how Gen Z micro-influencers gain knowledge and expertise about how to manage their influencer brand through observations made of other influencers' behaviors. Bandura's social learning theory (1986) is a combination of behavioral and cognitive theories. It posits that Gen Z micro-influencers learn how to effectively manage their influencer brand through their observed knowledge of other influencers.

A social learning perspective on Gen Z micro-influencers proposes that other influencers have the ability to influence the ethical, relational and business conduct of followers via modeling. The term modeling covers a range of psychological matching processes, including observational learning, imitation, and identification. According to Bandura (1986) ideally anything can be learned by vicarious experience, by observing others' behavior and its consequences. Micro-influencers can learn from macro influencers behavior and rewards that come with their actions. Their status and success in the industry serve as a framing lens for micro-influencers to imitate as they learn what it means to become an influencer (Brown, M. E., et. al., 2005).

Bandura suggests that both external and internal factors are correspondingly important to the model of the social learning theory (O'Roke, 2006). Personal factors, such as beliefs, expectations, attitudes and knowledge are all considered cognitive variables. Other environmental factors, such as resources, consequences of actions, physical setting, individual actions, choices, and verbal statements are measured as behavioral variables (O'Roke, 2006).

Cognitive and behavioral variables are a part of the learning and motivation process of the social learning theory according to Bandura (O’Roke, 2006).

By conducting research, knowledge on the development of Gen Z micro-influencers’ expertise will expand. Social learning theory is useful in this study because it examines how Gen Z micro-influencers gain knowledge through the actions and behaviors of their influencer peers. Observational learning is one of the most important concepts with social learning theory (O’Roke, 2006). When new behavior is acquired through observation alone, this learning is known to be cognitive. Thus, Bandura believes that learning must include internal cognitive variables such as personal factors, beliefs, expectations, and attitudes (Crain, 1992). Gen Z micro-influencers observe celebrity influencers and other major influencers to notice what happens when others partner with brands. Bandura calls this process vicarious reinforcement. This reinforcement is also a cognitive process (Crain, 1992). In this case, Gen Z micro-influencers formulate expectations about the outcome of their own behavior without any direct action on their part. Gen Z micro-influencers have grown up in a highly digital and interconnected world, where social media continues to play a significant role in their lives. As a result, they are more likely to learn through online social interactions, making the social learning theory highly relevant for the research of Gen Z micro-influencers.

Relationship Management as an Influencer Strategy

Not only is it important for influencers to acquire knowledge about how to manage their influencer brands, but they must also engage in relationship management behaviors when attracting new brands to partner with and negotiating brand contracts and expectations. Influencers are individuals who communicate to organizations key publics to create a positive outlook for brands. Relationship management is an inherent function of public relations. “Public

relations is seen as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends” (Broom et al., 1994). From an influencer relations perspective, Gen Z micro-influencers should be knowledgeable about how to strategically manage their relationships with current and prospective brand partners as well as their followers.

Relationship management theory shifts the focus of public relations from transactional communication to relational communication and relationship-building: communication acts as the tool in the nurturing, initiation, and maintenance of organization-public relationships (Ledingham, 2003). Micro-influencers often rely on building relationships with their followers and brands they collaborate with. The relationship management theory provides a framework for how Gen Z micro-influencers effectively build and maintain these relationships, which can lead to greater success as a micro-influencer based on their knowledge and approach.

Scholars have also explored the composition of organization-public relationships and the linkage of those relationships to public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Ledingham, 2003). Dozier (1995) reasoned that, “the purpose and direction of an organization (its mission) is affected by *relationships* with key constituents (publics) in the organization’s environment” (p.85). Dozier also suggested that communication is “a strategic management function (that helps) manage relationships with key publics that affect organizational mission, goals and objectives” (p. 85). Broom and Dozier (1990) also argued that the relational perspective shifts the validation of public relations initiative from measures of communication output to that of behavioral outcomes. This is important when we think about Gen Z micro-influencers being the voice for various brands when they are communicating with their publics online. Their role and

their functions often structure the conversations surrounding brands. Their success is measured by the achievement of relationship objectives (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000b).

According to Ledingham (2003), “the building and sustaining of organization-public relationships requires not only communication, but organizational and public behaviors, a concept central to the relationship management perspective” (p. 194). Communication is used as a strategic tool within the relational perspective; thus, influencer practices help build and maintain organization-public relationships (Ledingham, 2003). The development of the relationship management theory provides individuals to effectively manage organizational-public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, resulting in mutual understanding and benefits from interacting organizations and key publics (Ledingham, 2003). Gen Z micro-influencers are seen as a key component to supporting brand initiatives in order to build relationships with key publics.

Gen Z micro-influencers often have smaller followings, which requires them to build trust and credibility in order to be successful. When applying the principles of relationship management theory, micro-influencers establish themselves as trustworthy and credible sources of information, this then helps them attract and retain followers in return. Ledingham and Bruning (1998b) operationalized five relevant dimensions: trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment. Trust is operationalized as an organization “doing what it says it will do” and openness is seen as “sharing the organization’s plans for the future with public members.” Involvement is described as “the organization being involved in the welfare of the community,” investment as “the organization investing in the welfare of the community,” and commitment as “the organization being committed to the welfare of the community” (p. 62). Through this research, I gained knowledge on how Gen Z micro-influencers communicate

effectively, build trust, manage expectations, collaborate with brands and other influencers to expand their reach and build their audiences while actively engaging in the relationship management theory. Gen Z micro-influencer participants serve as the key relationship builders for an organization's key publics in order to effectively sustain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its significant publics.

Micro-influencers are taking a new approach to building relationships online and connecting with niche audiences. Micro-influencers leverage the relationship management theory by focusing on managing organization public relationships to generate benefits for organizations, and publics alike (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000b). This study further analyzes how micro-influencers build and maintain strong relationships with followers, brands, and other influencers to increase their chances of long-term success. Overall, the relationship management theory guides research to build knowledge on how Gen Z micro-influencers establish themselves as trusted sources of information and cultivate lasting relationships that lead to their success. Understanding the way that Gen Z micro-influencers navigate their partnerships is important for both the influencer and the brand to maintain and improve the communication process.

The review of current literature on Gen Z micro-influencers and how social learning theory and relationship management theory informed the development of the following research questions:

RQ 1a: How do Gen Z micro-influencers describe their experiences with obtaining knowledge and expertise about developing and managing their personal influencer brand?

RQ 1b: How have these experiences contributed to their self-confidence related to building their brand?

RQ 2: How do Gen Z micro-influencers describe their perception of relationship management as a key strategy for engaging in brand deal discussions?

RQ 3: What challenges do they face when engaging in relationship management with brands and/or their followers?

RQ 4: How do they describe successful relationship management with brands and/or their followers?

Methodology

To best understand the perspective of Gen Z micro-influencers and their knowledge acquisition, in-depth interviews were chosen as the research method. Qualitative methodology is the most relevant approach for researching the personal experiences of Gen Z micro-influencers because it helps the researcher explore a person's actions and understanding in detail (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Semi-structured in-depth interviews allow for guided conversation with room for exploration and emergent knowledge. The interviews were guided by a 17-question discussion that involved follow-up questions to deepen the thought process of the interviewees.

Participants

Gen Z micro-influencers are the main focus of this study. The demographic characteristics for this study were limited to Gen Z (born 1997- 2012) ages 12 to 27, individuals who have a following on Instagram and reside in the United States (Dimock, 2019). These individuals are focused on lifestyle and the beauty industry. The participants don't have agencies representing them; therefore, they must evaluate and negotiate with brands on their own without any outside instructions or knowledge. Participants were recruited through an Instagram search of accounts that exhibit strong engagement in terms of likes, comments, shares and saves on their posts. As well as individuals who collaborate with brands at least once every month. The search also included individuals who authentically resonate with their followers' values and niche interests. Drawing from my network, I selected individuals committed to engaging with brands and their followers on a daily basis, who also met the criteria listed above. All participants were Gen Z micro-influencers who actively facilitate brand deals.

A total of five individuals participated in the study. Out of the participants, three were African American, one Caucasian, and one Asian American. The individuals were all a part of

Gen Z ranging in age from 20 to 24 years old. Participants resided and worked in locations across the United States including the East and South coast and the Midwest. All participants have majors that are not related to public relations or the communications field. One participant is a nurse, another studied STEM, one was an accountant and now works in marketing, and another studies financial planning. They are all new college graduates or are still in college studying. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half.

Table 1. Gen Z micro-influencer profiles

Profiles by Code Names	College Major	Age	Race	Demographic	Past Brand Collaborations	Industry
Micro-influencer #1	Science and Human Development	22	Asian American	Houston, TX	Bumble, Glamnetic, Samsung, Kenkou, Bumble, Playboy, HelloFresh,	Lifestyle
Micro-influencer #2	Tech Management	21	African American	College Station, TX	Thatssofetch, Lulus, Lounge Bumble,	Lifestyle & Beauty
Micro-influencer #3	Accounting & Finance	23	Caucasian	Seattle, WA	Budlight, Beatbox Bumble, LaRochePosay, Studs, Chiikis	Lifestyle
Micro-influencer #4	Nursing	24	African American	San Diego, CA	Activewear, Thirdlove Bumble, Parade,	Lifestyle & Beauty
Micro-influencer #5	Fashion Merchandising	22	African American	Dallas, TX	Princess Polly, Bread	Lifestyle & Beauty

Analysis Procedures

Interviews focused on how Gen Z micro-influencers communicate effectively, build trust, and manage expectations when working with brands. I actively took notes during these interviews, transcribed them, and then proceeded to analyze and categorize the findings into themes aligned with the research questions. Subsequently, these themes were thoroughly evaluated and synthesized in relation to the research objectives.

Findings

RQ 1a: How do Gen Z micro-influencers describe their experiences with obtaining knowledge and expertise about developing and managing their personal influencer brand?

Two themes emerged on how Gen Z micro-influencers obtain their knowledge for learning from others on things to do and what to not do.

Theme 1: Study participants learn from other influencers

The most prominent theme is that the participants are self-taught or learn from other influencers. They are actively learning from other influencers in ways that align with social learning theory. It's also important to point out that all the individuals who were interviewed come from different backgrounds where they studied other topics in college not related to influencer marketing. Their development of their influencer brand is true to themselves and their niche audience. Their geographic location also affects how they tailor their brand due to trending topics in their area. As one study participant has said "I see a pattern with other influencers and try to find my own way to grab the attention of my audience" (micro-influencer #1). While these participants are learning from others, they are still trying to be authentic to themselves by throwing in their own twist when imitating things that other influencers do. In alignment with social learning theory, they were able to learn from other influencers in a way that they are still making their content relevant to their niche audiences online. These study participants are successful because they tailor their content to what their followers are interested in while still being their authentic self. Unlike macro influencers who talk to a large range of different audiences, Gen Z micro-influencers also have an advantage when it comes to social media because they grew up watching the ways that social media has evolved.

Another micro-influencer expressed her desire to be herself while also observing in ways supported by social learning theory. “I want to be authentic and genuine” (micro-influencer #3). These participants are actively prioritizing being their authentic self while also applying the social learning theory. These individuals have no prior learning experiences from social media or marketing so they must rely on their resources and learn from others on the internet. One participant expressed “these are the people that I look up to for inspiration. Looking at when they post and their consistency helped me” (micro-influencer #3). Study participants also pay close attention to what day and time these successful influencers are posting their content. When it comes to creating their own influencer brand, it’s important that they stay consistent and keep their audience engaged. Most study participants who find huge success are consistent and post anywhere from two to four times a day on each social media platform. They also engage with their audience online by direct messaging, liking posts and replying to comments. It’s important for these individuals to stay engaged with their audience to form a sense of belonging.

Theme 2: Unveiling authenticity: participants gained insights from observing others' content

One participant explains “the influencers who are actually showing the before and after effects of products makes you want to buy the product” (micro-influencer #2). This is important to take into consideration because they expressed the need of being genuine when marketing products to their audiences. Gen Z can spot fake advertisements and individuals who are not genuine when working with products that they truly don’t use outside of the brand collaborations. One participant described, “I care about the actual product and take their opinion to heart” (micro-influencer #4). Study participants will market products that they love outside of the brand collaboration. They are more willing to work with brands that they have used before the collaboration or products that they genuinely use themselves. Being genuine with their

followers involves being in a state of authenticity and sincerity in their thoughts, actions, and interactions. These individuals stay true to oneself, without façade and express their beliefs honestly and openly. Being genuine with their followers entails honesty in all aspects of their online persona. This is an advantage when working with Gen Z micro-influencers, they are more willing to be genuine and honest when it comes to collaborating with brands. Another advantage is being tech savvy when it comes to different social media platforms. One participant says: “We grew up with technology and we’re more open minded to learning new things.”

RQ 1b: How have these experiences contributed to their self-confidence related to building their brand?

Theme 1: Confidence grows over time

One of the common themes of these participants is that none of them had prior experiences of being an influencer. One micro-influencer explains, “At the beginning I had no idea what I was doing. Trial and error were the best ways to figure out what worked for me and what didn’t” (micro-influencer #5). Participants are more comfortable with trying new things because their audiences are generally smaller than other influencers. This is a massive advantage that they have because most success comes from trial and error. Participants are willing to try new things and see what methods work best for them and their personal brand.

Over time, individuals in your social circle will start to recognize the work you are producing online, one micro-influencer explains that “if a lot of your followers are from people around you, they’ll recognize you outside of social media” (micro-influencer #1). The ability to be recognized by others for your online work has boosted their self-confidence. Their confidence continues to grow over time when they collaborate with bigger brands and influence their audience.

Another participant says, “it helps with my public speaking, it’s helped my self-esteem because I know what I’m talking about most of the time” (micro-influencer #4). When individuals have a platform that they are comfortable on, they are more willing to speak about the things they are passionate about. Being a Gen Z micro-influencer can be empowering when you have an audience who listens and interacts with you online. Having that positive reinforcement online also contributes to their confidence when their content performs well.

Theme 2: Being confident also means turning down collaborations that don’t fit participants’ niche audience

It’s important to understand that these participants were willing to turn down collaborations with brands that don’t fit their personal brand. “If the brand doesn’t fit your niche, you shouldn’t create content with the brand. It won’t gravitate to your audience.” Micro-influencer #1 explained that working with brands who don’t fit your brand won’t perform well with their followers. She expanded on this by saying, “The impact numbers won’t be there. It’s okay to reject brands that don’t fit your personal brands.” Knowing when to say no to brands is something that participants are careful about. It’s obvious when influencers collaborate with a brand solely for the compensation and not because they love the brand or actually use their products. The advantage of Gen Z micro-influencers is that they are relevant, genuine, and connect with their followers. They aren’t willing to sacrifice their personal brand just to collaborate with a brand that doesn’t fit their niche. Most of the participants explained that they align their goals and values with the brands they want to work with. These individuals seek out brands that have goals and values relevant to them. In return, their followers for the most part have the same goals and values, making it easier to be relevant and influential. At the end of the

day, brands are collaborating with Gen Z micro-influencers to showcase their brand and micro-influencers are learning their worth.

RQ 2: How do Gen Z micro-influencers describe their perception of relationship management as a key strategy for engaging in brand deal discussions?

Theme 1: Participants practice relationship management authentically

Most of the participants fell into being a Gen Z micro-influencer by accident. Their natural relationship management skills played a role in their ability to authentically collaborate with brands. Their abilities for managing relationships naturally helped them thrive in collaborations with brands. Participants in the study exhibited a natural interest for expanding their networks even before diving into the world of influencer marketing. They recognized the potential of leveraging these existing connections in their new role as Gen Z micro-influencers. Many of them had already cultivated diverse social circles, whether through school, extracurricular activities, or online communities. Their innate ability to forge connections and maintain relationships served as a solid foundation for their journey as Gen Z micro-influencers.

The participants intuitively understood the value of networking and recognized that their existing social networks could be transformed into valuable assets in their influencer endeavors. As they transitioned into the role of influencers, participants strategically leveraged their extensive networks to amplify their reach. They utilized social media platforms not only to connect with their existing contacts but also to actively seek out like-minded individuals and potential collaborators within their niche. For the most part brands reach out to them first. Micro-influencer #2 said, “some of the brands will reach out and ask questions about your content.” Brands are actively seeking out individuals that fit their brand and target audience. The relationship management aspect comes into hand when they are discussing their partnerships

with brands. Relationship management happens when brands reach out to individual influencers that fit their brand. Micro-influencer #1 said, “These brands know who they want to collaborate with. They know which influencers they have an eye on.” She further explains that she doesn’t reach out to brands because, “What if they never reach back out to me? I would get sad.”

Another common relationship management opportunity included leveraging their network of other influencers. Some Gen Z micro-influencers find out about opportunities through their friends who are also influencers. For example, one participant said, “companies have programs for college students because everyone is looking to work with micro-influencers more.” It’s important to connect with other micro-influencers as a key strategy to engage in brand deal partnerships. Relationship management is important when dealing with brands, other micro-influencers, and engaging with followers.

It’s also important as a Gen Z micro-influencer to include their audience when managing their relationships. Micro-influencer #5 said, “make your content catered to you and your audience.” At the end of the day, these individuals are looking to influence and connect with their followers. Therefore, their relationship with their followers must be a key strategy for being successful in brand deals. Gen Z micro-influencers are constantly engaging in positive relationship management skills to be successful and influential.

RQ 3: What challenges do they face when engaging in relationship management with brands and/or their followers?

Theme 1: Managing an influencer persona is a full-time job

A Gen Z micro-influencer explains, “It’s a full-time job. The earnings are the amount of time you put into your work” (micro-influencer #1). Micro-influencers are paid per brand deal, so the more brand deals they participate in the more money they will earn in return. Trial and

error is the best approach when working with brands. Brands have different expectations for micro-influencers and those expectations are usually discussed before deciding to partner with an influencer. Brands have different expectations, so you must come up with different options to approach the brand deals. She expands on this by saying, “the more work and effort that I put in, the more money I seem to get.”

While most of these participants are micro-influencers as a side gig, several of them also have full-time jobs or part time jobs along with school to juggle. “It’s basically my fun money,” said micro-influencer #4. While these Gen Z micro-influencers may not be officially employed in the traditional sense of dedicating their entire career to being an influencer, they view their involvement and status within the realm of influencing as consuming a significant portion of their time and energy. Even though their brand collaborations don’t strictly adhere to the conventional definition of a full-time employment, they are still working on content at any hours of the day and constantly thinking of ways to create content outside of their “contracted hours”.

Most of the participants have expressed that working with brands is a full-time job due to creating content, editing, and publishing the content. On top of editing and creating content, these individuals are their own boss and have to negotiate deals on their own. If they are doing more work than the brand is willing to compensate, most micro-influencers will negotiate their prices. This is a great method for micro-influencers to participate in once they build their self confidence in their work. If they know they are going to generate the attention that the brands want, they are more than likely going to ask for more compensation. Being a Gen Z micro-influencer is a full-time job, micro-influencer #3 said, “you are representing brands, but you are also representing yourself and your brand.”

If influencers create content while working at another job, several legal issues may arise. If content is created using resources provided by another employer besides the brand they are working with, there may be disputes regarding who owns the intellectual property rights to the content. Some employers may claim ownership if the content creation is within the scope of the employment agreement. Most employers also have policies in place regarding conflicts of interest. This could lead to termination of employment if an employer does not agree with how they are managing their work hours. Micro-influencers should be cautious when they are creating content while they are working for another employer; if the content created by them reveals confidential information about their employer or colleagues, it could lead to breaches of confidentiality agreements and legal consequences.

RQ 4: How do they describe successful relationship management with brands and/or their followers?

Theme 1: Building relationships with brands is key to successfully collaborate

Most participants work with a brand over a period of time, or they collaborate with them more than once if they are successful. One micro-influencer says, “your first impression is important to keeping that relationship with the brand” (micro-influencer #3) As a Gen Z micro-influencer, it’s important to build successful relationship management skills when working with brands. Micro-influencers rely on brand deals to generate content for their audiences as well as earning money as extra income. When relationships are positive, there’s better opportunities that will come with working with brands. One participant explains, “when you work with brands again it says a lot about the product, and it speaks louder than your social media profile.” It’s beneficial for these micro-influencers to work with brands more than once because it shows that

they're loyal to the brand and products. In return, their followers will recognize this and trust the product more.

The Gen Z micro-influencer participants are the notion that mutuality is a cornerstone on which long-term organization-public relationships are constructed by Ledingham and Bruining's (1998b). These participants are actively managing their mutual understanding and benefit under specified conditions (a focus on shared goals and common interests over time). In order to gain influence, they must remain consistent with their communicative efforts. Through the relationship management theory these individuals are exemplifying five relevant dimensions: trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment (Ledingham and Bruining, 1998b).

When Gen Z micro-influencer are looking for brands to work with, they often scout them out. One Gen Z micro-influencer says, "I go to brands or they come to me because we see that we're a good match for each other." She expands on this by saying "I want my relationships to remain very good and very steady even if it's not the product for me" (micro-influencer #5). Even if Gen Z micro-influencers don't end up working with a brand for any reason, it's still important to have a positive relationship for their personal brand. Mutual connections are important to expand micro-influencers' profile and influence.

Theme 2: Gen Z micro-influencers want to have fun while creating content for their followers

At the end of the day, micro-influencers are posting content because they enjoy it. One Gen Z micro-influencer expressed, "Being creative is so important to me." She further expands on this by saying "I don't want to take away the fun and make it my job" (micro-influencer #1). Most of the participants said they are a Gen Z micro-influencer because they enjoy being creative and connecting with their followers. These participants actively connect with their followers by liking, commenting and privately messaging their followers to deeper their

relationships online. They want their content to have a positive outlook because they actively enjoy doing it. Successful relationship management with their followers is important to enjoy what they're doing. Most participants explain that they want to be relatable to their followers. One Gen Z micro-influencer says, "Be approachable to your followers" (micro-influencer #2). Being approachable can result in many positive relationship management outcomes.

Discussion

This research was guided by social learning theory and relationship management theory. Through this research we can understand the experiences and learning outcomes that Gen Z micro-influencers have been exposed to throughout their journey as influencers. Understanding how they gain knowledge, build their personal brands, challenges, and their relationship management skills is important to understand how they achieve their greatest potential when working with brands. Therefore, this research contributes to social learning theory by gathering information that proves that Gen Z micro-influencers gain their skills and knowledge by learning from other influencers online. This research also contributes to the relationship management by observing the various ways that influencers must interact with their online audience and community to gain influence. While past research has focused on the uses and consequences of working with influences (Davies, C., & Hobbs, M., 2020), we now know that Gen Z micro-influencers are very relevant and can have the power to influence their online communities.

Results have shown that Gen Z micro-influencers often use social learning of other macro/micro-influencers online to imitate some of their strategies to engage with brands and their followers on Instagram. Effectively learning from other individuals through their actions online has helped Gen Z micro-influencers to develop their own personal brands. Through building their personal brands, they are able to market themselves better to work with brands that align with their values and interests as well as connect with individuals who are like minded online. There currently isn't a guide on how to become the most successful or trusted influencer, so these individuals are constantly using the social learning theory to learn from each other.

Recommendations

This study reveals the need for further exploration about Gen Z micro-influencers. Future research should address behavioral patterns of Gen Z micro-influencers across different social media platforms. This study offered insight on Instagram, only revealing the behavioral patterns for one platform and not comparing it to other social media platforms. We must understand what motivates them, their content strategies, and how they engage with their followers. Another important aspect to further explore is the psychological impact of being a Gen Z micro-influencer. Assessing the psychological impact of these individuals is important to understand their stress levels, factors that contribute to burnout, and mental health challenges that are associated when managing an online persona. It is evident that these individuals are working as social media influencers as another full-time job.

Research in the future will also have several limitations. For one, accessing detailed data about individuals is hard, especially due to privacy concerns or platform restrictions. Also, we must take into consideration that technology evolves at a rapid rate, which may alter influencer marketing dynamics and strategies. This would then alter the relevance of research findings. This partial study also has research limitations. The small sample size doesn't allow the data to be generalizable. The sample is largely African American, a more diverse sample might reveal how ethnicity can affect their online persona and their audiences. Interviews were also conducted remotely; in-person interviews would have allowed researchers to better analyze non-verbal cues and emotions. Finally, social learning theory is a very broad theoretical perspective and this study only applied to Gen Z micro-influencers. Future research should explore all micro-influencers no matter their generation.

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