

Book Chapter 5: Influencers (Human vs Virtual)

Introduction

Influencers on social media have a significant impact on consumer behaviour, exerting substantial power to shape trends, sway opinions, and dictate market dynamics. Influencers are highly prevalent in the fashion industry, often setting trends and influencing consumer purchasing decisions through their social media presence. An “influencer” is an individual engaged in marketing communication practices (M. Thomson, 2006) serving as both trendsetters and trusted advisors, helping to guide their followers through the ever-changing fashion landscape. Generation Z, the first truly digital-native cohort, have been observed to exhibit a unique relationship with influencers, regardless of whether they are human or virtual.

Over nearly twenty years, human influencers have been able to master the art of digital connection. This has allowed them to convert their initially small, personal brands into global empires through a pattern of strategic engagements and a curated authenticity. Their influence is rooted in the perception of a shared experience with their audience, building up a sense of trust and community. However, the rise of virtual avatars is having a significant impact on the social media landscape and its potential to disrupt the industry cannot be ignored. These pixel-perfect personas are designed to connect with audiences on a personal level, yet their existence is a curated fiction, programmed and polished by creative teams (Jhawar et al., 2023).

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of how Generation Z interacts with both human and virtual influencers in the fashion industry, focusing on their authenticity and influence on consumer behaviour. The analysis draws from a range of perspectives, including industry reports, press articles, and regional case studies. The findings show that human influencers, with their perceived authenticity and relatability, continue to foster strong personal connections with Gen Z. However, virtual influencers are gaining significant momentum due to their curated consistency and the novelty they offer. The chapter concludes that while both types of influencers exert considerable influence, they engage their audiences in distinct ways, shaping trends, values, and consumer loyalty in the fashion sector. It also highlights the growing ethical challenges, such as authenticity in commercial content and the transparency of virtual influencers, which will shape the future of influencer marketing.

1. Gen Z and the Authenticity Paradox

For Generation Z, authenticity is not just a buzzword; it is treated as if it were a currency (Tirocchi, 2024). As digital natives, their distinction between their online and offline worlds are becoming increasingly blurred, with life online often taking precedence. This generation has grown up in an era with never-before-seen access to information, which has ultimately led them to develop a sophisticated filter for authenticity, beyond that of previous generations (Liguori, 2022). Gen Z do not just buy products; they will often “buy into” the story and

personality of the people behind them often seeking out brands and influencers who best align with their values, ethics, and aesthetics. This in itself is becoming a significant challenge in a time where there is an increasing amount of curated feeds and sponsored content.

For Gen Z authenticity is a complex concept that extends beyond simply being transparent with their audience. Authenticity for them means truly genuine expression, having consistent values, and a strong connection to realism (Audrezet et al., 2020). Influencers who are talented enough to be able to strike a balance between aspirational content and relatable material are often able to secure a loyal following within this cohort. However, content sharing is not just about finding the connection between creators and their followers; it is a business aimed at generating profit. Seeking attention and selling products become the ultimate goals for these individuals. According to van Dijck (2013), social media, as a commercialized entity, heavily incorporates enterprise logic, emphasising connectivity, popularity, and attention as its three core principles, transforming platforms into arenas driven by metrics and engagement. During the process, one challenge a creator has to face is how to make 'authentic life' interesting enough in exchange for clickbait. Authenticity can be considered as something that could be socially constructed through content creation, opinion expression, events participation and many more actions. This has led to the development of the concept of performed authenticity, which explores how authenticity could be assigned, orchestrated and enacted (van Dijck, 2013). Therefore, if we treat the content creator as an entrepreneurial self, the process of discovering true self is also the way to use the self as a marketable commodity (Pooley, 2020). Therefore, when assessing social media content creation authenticity online is part of the parasocial strategy which fit into the performative ecology (Abidin, 2018). It highlights the strategic nature of social media engagement where authenticity is both genuine and performed. Influencers must carefully balance being real with being interesting enough to attract and maintain their audience's attention. This creates an ecosystem where personal expression is constantly managed to meet both personal and commercial goals.

In the meantime, product placement is another significant part of entrepreneurial practice and presents a challenge to authenticity construction. As mentioned above, followers trust influencers because, compared to other marketer-initiated communications, influencers' natural and non-commercial content appears more trustworthy (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Among all consumers, Generation Z seems to particularly dislike explicitly commercialized information. Brand collaborations will challenge influencers' authenticity, as they must balance promotional content with the genuine engagement that defines their appeal. How will influencers react to these challenges? With the development of technology, how will content commercialisation and brand collaboration be embraced by this generation? Which potential ethical issues might emerge from these practices? We will discuss these issues in the following content.

2. Human Influencers and Their Enduring Impact

2.1 The Human Touch: Participatory Culture and Success Stories

As previously mentioned, human influencers have crafted their personal narratives into the fabric of digital media, endearing themselves to Gen Z with a dynamic blend of charisma and honesty. Their success stories are not just accounts of personal triumph but also drive to the hearts of an engagement-hungry audience.

By continuing to build on the connection between human influencers and their followers, it can often be seen that it is the personal touch that truly bridges the gap. Human influencers are able to adopt authentic rapport by including their followers in their journey, where they act not just as spectators, but are included as part of their narrative (Orencia, 2023). By sharing every aspect of their lives with a strong candidness that surpasses curated, synthetic content, they present a multidimensional image that effectively communicates the complex realities of Gen Z's own experiences.

In the modern era of social media, it can often be observed that vulnerability can be turned into a strength. By sharing not only their successes but also how they may struggle in their lives, human influencers are able to resonate with their followers on a much deeper level (Duffy et al., 2023). For young people, the topics mainly focus on mental health and identity issues around gender, race, and class. One prominent example is the body positivity movement within the fashion industry. Gen Z influencers are proactively sharing their stories related to body image online, addressing ideas such as 'normalizing diverse body images,' 'body inclusivity,' and 'body neutrality.' In 2023, Gen Z influencers on TikTok and Instagram have been trying to change the social symbolic meaning of the word 'fat' by starting an online video post series titled 'POV: you are hot and fat.' In the videos, influencers showcase their bodies in bikinis and miniskirts. This movement has been largely embraced by many young audiences, which to some extent lessens the appearance anxiety affected by beauty standards established by the traditional beauty industry. However, Jolie (2021) pointed out that the majority of posts representing the overweight population feature either non-fat or smaller fat women who still conform to traditional femininity. Also, when discussing body positivity, the primary focus of social media influencers tends to be on deconstructing the idea of 'fat,' while a broader spectrum of body types, particularly those with disabilities or from the LGBTQ+ community, lack representation. Additionally, considering the commodification of content creation, promoting clothing brands often becomes the primary purpose for these fashion influencers, leaving limited space for thoroughly discussing body diversity. (Jolie, 2021)

Engagement with their audience is a deliberate choice by Gen Z influencers. Burgess and Joshua (2018) pointed out that compared with traditional media such as TV and newspapers, social media platforms highly encourage the idea of 'interaction' and exemplify the power of participation in the design of interfaces and algorithms. In order to achieve success, human influencers are frequently proactive and will often initiate conversations with their followers.

This in turn will lead to deep discussions on subjects which truly matter to their followers. Fashion influencers such as Emma Hill, frequently initiates conversations about sustainable fashion by sharing her journey of transitioning to an eco-friendlier wardrobe. Emma often starts her posts with questions like, "What are your thoughts on sustainable fashion?" or "How do you incorporate eco-friendly choices in your daily outfits?" This invites her followers to share their experiences and opinions, fostering a sense of community and dialogue. Through these conversations, Emma dives deep into subjects that matter to her followers, such as the impact of fast fashion on the environment, tips for thrifting, and the importance of investing in quality over quantity. By regularly responding to comments, hosting live Q&A sessions, and featuring follower stories, Emma creates a space where her followers feel seen, heard, and valued. This inclusive approach makes her followers feel like they are part of a meaningful conversation.

The relationship between influencers and their followers is very often reciprocal. As much as Gen Z shapes the influencer's content through feedback and engagement, influencers will shape the attitudes and even the self-perception of their followers (Erwin et al., 2023). In traditional media producers control content and delivery (Burgess & Joshua, 2018). On social media platforms, audiences have the opportunity to express their preferences positive or negative and hype up the content. Through this powerful dynamic, influencers have the opportunity to lead by example, promoting issues and inspiring action within their communities. One of the leading examples is the widespread attention on issues sparked by the 'Me Too' movement, which resulted in heated discussion between social media users across platforms in 2017. Many fashion influencers have been involved in this online activism by sharing personal stories and highlighting the importance of supporting survivors of sexual harassment and assault (Thomson, 2018). This relationship is the cornerstone of the trust and relatability that is so crucial to the success of human influencers within the Gen Z demographic (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

However, can trust and relatability continue when influencers collaborate with brands? Studies show that when product placement is carefully managed, it will not harm the relationship between influencers and their followers. In her Instagram post, Nyane Lebajoa (@nyane) initiated a series of posts #GetReadyWithMe. These types of videos are typical content that fashion influencers create, but Nyane added an extra twist. She mimicked the non-playable character (NPC) style from digital games. The video also displays the outfit change through mouse click animations. In the description section of this post, Nyane initiated the conversation with the text, 'Let's dress me up for an evening out... Which dress and shoes did you prefer?' The interaction is embedded in every element of this post, giving her audience the power to communicate on an 'equal level'. Additionally, Marwick (2013) pointed out that unlike traditional perspectives that view authenticity and commercial interests as opposing forces, many fashion influencers believe that authenticity can coexist with commercial activities. They

manage this by integrating honest reviews and personal opinions even when engaging with brands.

The close relationships cultivated online have led to numerous success stories where influencers have not only built massive followings but have also moved markets, driven trends, and shaped cultural dialogues.

Dixie D'Amelio started as a TikTok influencer and now has front row seats at international fashion weeks. Her journey from obscurity to prominence is punctuated by true moments of authentic engagement: a candid story of a fashion faux pas, a live Q&A session about personal style, or an honest review of a much-hyped product. It is these moments which resonate the most strongly with Gen Z, a demographic that sees influencers as peers rather than distant celebrities.

2.2 From Concept to Culture: The Birth of Virtual Influencers

The modern digital age has given rise to a new breed of influencer: one that is not bound by the physical limitations of reality. Virtual influencers, once a concept rooted in science fiction, are now a new significant cultural phenomenon. Their origin can be traced back to the computer gaming industry and also to virtual pop stars. These provided the foundation for non-human personas to grow large real-world followings. This development from concept to culture signifies a paradigm shift in the influencer marketplace (Jhawar et al., 2023). Brands have begun to see the significant potential of these perfectly curated characters and that they have the potential to embody the ideal ambassador—being forever on-trend, always available, and without the risk of human error or scandal (Hwang, et al., 2024) .

The design and appearance of virtual influencers is deliberately crafted and often extremely detailed. This provides them with a level of precision in their narrative that human influencers find impossible to achieve. Their stories are unblemished by the unpredictability of human life, enabling a tailored experience which can be adjusted and refined over time (Jhawar et al., 2023). The appeal of virtual influencers lies in their ability to be both omnipresent and unreachable at the same time. Noonouri, created by designer Joerg Zuber, is a virtual influencer who has gained global attention. She has collaborated with major fashion brands like Dior, Versace, and Marc Jacobs, participating in international campaigns and fashion shows (Marr, 2023). Noonouri's digital presence allows her to transcend cultural and physical boundaries, engaging a diverse global audience, especially Gen Z, through crafted content.

For Gen Z, a cohort that have grown up in age of avatars and customizable characters, the phenomenon of virtual influencers directly aligns with their experiences. The digital artifice is not a deception but an expected aspect of their online engagement (Angmo & Mahajan, 2024). Gen Z notice the consistency and control of virtual influencers not as a detractor but as a feature that enhances the reliability of their endorsements and their interactions.

2.3 Analysing the Appeal: Why Virtual Influencers Resonate with Gen Z

Virtual influencers represent the current epitome of a refined, polished online presence. They resonate with Gen Z consumers who, having grown up in the age of the internet, are well-versed in the language of digital identities. Their appeal is based on a combination of novelty, the allure of perfection, and the entertainment of witnessing something new unfold in the influencer space.

For the generation that grew up with avatars and digital representations of the self, virtual influencers are a natural progression in the evolution of online interaction. They are not only accepted but are now expected as part of the social media landscape. This demographic appreciates the artistry behind these creations and the control they offer over brand messaging.

The most successful virtual influence nowadays is Lil Miquela - this digital character is introduced by Brud, a technology company based in Los Angeles, in 2016. She is depicted as a 19-year-old Brazilian American female with distinctive blue hair and a pair of oversized sunglasses. She is presented with a sleek, fashionable image that has attracted many young followers aspiring to have a similar lifestyle. By 2018, Lil Miquela earned recognition as one of the 25 most influential internet personalities by (Jhawar et al., 2023) magazine. Her content engagement significantly surpasses that of typical human influencers, being three times more engaging (Bradley,2020).

Brands quickly become aware of Lil Miquela's impact, leading to significant collaborations with a series of fashion brands such as Prada, Chanel, and Supreme. In a 2019 Calvin Klein promotion, she appeared in a video kissing real supermodel Bella Hadid, blending real and virtual traits in ways that both confused and fascinated viewers. Similarly, in 2020, Miquela posted on Instagram claimed that “I was at the Prada show!... They let me fly the drone, which was amazing, I had to figure out how to manoeuvre that thing really quickly, though. I kept thinking I was gonna fly it into Fondazione by accident! But all went smoothly.” While Miquela shares personal experiences like many influencers, her emotional expressions and interactions are programmed, which has surprised many fans with how relatable a virtual entity can be.

Miquela seems to interact with real issues, challenge online negativity, and partake in activities with real individuals fostering a sense of authenticity. Drenten and Brooks (2020) commented on how Miquela's projected authenticity serves to enhance her realness and focused public attention by engaging with current issues such as 'Black Lives Matter' as well as addressing social media trolls.

Although getting attention and seeking out the most current and widely discussed issues can be a double-edge sword for many human influencers, virtual influencers are free from the controversies that can plague human content creators. Their persona and content are carefully constructed to avoid missteps. This level of control and predictability is appealing to both brands and a segment of the Gen Z cohort that values consistency and reliability in the influencer personas which they follow.

The engagement with virtual influencers by Gen Z can also be viewed from the perspective of aspirational lifestyles. To enhance her realism, Brud has created a complete virtual community on Instagram, where Miquela and characters like her virtual boyfriend, Nick Killan, engage in modern storylines akin to an ongoing television drama. This narrative depth keeps followers engaged and interacting with their content.

These digital characters are designed to portray an unrealistic level of style and living, yet they do so without provoking the same level of envy or disbelief that might accompany a human influencer's luxurious lifestyle. They allow followers to indulge in a fantasy which results in a break from reality that is accepted as such. According to Sands et al., (2022) narratives around brand collaborations with virtual influencers like Lil Miquela are often more readily accepted than those with human influencers, who are likely to face backlash for inconsistent product usage. Lil Miquela's inherent commercial nature means that her brand partnerships are expected and don't detract from her authenticity.

The appeal of virtual influencers is further heightened by their interactivity. Despite being non-human, many virtual influencers can interact with their followers through comments and messages, thanks to advanced generative AI technology, such as ChatGPT powering them. This interaction, although artificial, creates a semblance of an actual relationship and loyalty.

Virtual influencers are not however, universally acclaimed. According to Angmo and Mahajan (2024), the major concern consumers have relate to ethical issues, which will be discussed in paragraph 5.

2.4 The Power of Influence: Human vs. Virtual

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, it seems that human influencers are facing an emerging challenge from virtual influencers. Human influencers have responded by leveraging their irreplicable qualities—their spontaneity, their unpredictability, and their intrinsic human flaws. These are aspects that cannot, at least currently, be programmed into virtual entities and thus remain unique selling points for human influencers. Human influencers will typically double down on their personal stories, live interactions, and community-building, emphasizing the human experiences that a virtual entity cannot replicate.

Human influencers are also expanding their reach beyond traditional social media, exploring platforms like podcasts, where long-form conversation underscores their real humanity. They are diversifying content across different mediums, thus trying hard to stay ahead in the attention economy.

To illustrate, consider the fashion influencer who hosts a podcast discussing mental health challenges in the fashion industry. By diversifying the conversation to include topics of substance and societal import, they solidify their place as thought leaders and confidantes in the eyes of their followers. This expansion into areas of personal and public interest not only strengthens the influencer's connection with their audience but also confirms their relevance in an ever-changing digital landscape.

Instead of treating virtual influencers as a threat, some human influencers decide to use the technology to further expand their reach. In China, it is reported that many human influencers are using AI-powered tools to increase the efficiency of their content production, aiming to maximize their value on social media. These influencers have decided to create AI clones to host their livestreams, and very few followers can distinguish between the real humans and the replicated AI clones (Gastel, 2024). In the US, Caryn Marjorie, a 23-year-old influencer with 2 million followers on Snapchat, launched an AI chatbot, CarynAI, powered by GPT-4, which replicates her voice and personality. It claims that CarynAI will provide an 'immersive AI experience' and act as a 'virtual girlfriend' for people who subscribe to this service (this service is charged at \$1 a minute as of the time this article was written). This technology will make people feel as if they were talking to Marjorie herself when they interact with the chatbot (Lorenz, 2023). According to *Fortune* (2023), Meta also launched AI chatbots for many celebrities like Snoop Dogg, Kendall Jenner, Charlie D'Amelio, and many others. The practices of Marjorie and Meta signify a new strategy in this ever-changing era, aiming to exemplify the commodification of influencers' impact by providing participatory experiences for their followers, especially Gen Z—a generation that highly values the power of interactive communication.

3: Influencer Marketing to Gen Z

3.1 The Strategies and Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing on Gen Z's Fashion Choices

Influencer marketing, when tailored to the generation of digital natives, employs a narrative that resonates deeply with their individualistic and community-oriented ethos (Ietto & Pascucci, 2023). Also, the influencer market size will reach 24 billion US dollars in 2024 (Statista, 2024). The visual nature of fashion and the highly visual platforms used by influencers combine to create strong opportunities to influence Gen Z's fashion choices.

The art of storytelling has always been a crucial element for those who want to be seen on social media, with content that both entertains and informs (Atiq et al., 2022). Gen Z consumers are looking for stories that weave a brand's message into daily life in a way that feels genuine and relevant. According to Ron (2010), influencers achieve this by aligning brand partnerships with their personal brand and values. A key to this effectiveness is in relatability (Atiq et al., 2022). Gen Z consumers prefer influencers who mirror their own realities and aspirations. When influencers wear a brand or promote a fashion trend, their endorsement carries weight because it comes across as a peer recommendation rather than a corporate advertisement. This peer effect has been a driving force behind the success of influencer-led fashion campaigns which target Gen Z.

Interactive content is also key. Gen Z values a genuine two-way conversation, not a one-sided broadcast (Leung et al., 2022). Polls, quizzes, and question-answer sessions are just a few interactive strategies influencers employ to engage with their audience. Metrics also show that Gen Z's engagement with influencer content can lead to direct action, such as visiting a brand's website or actually making a purchase (Deyo, 2023). The effectiveness of influencer marketing is thus measurable, with conversion rates, engagement rates, and other data points illustrating its impact on fashion choices.

Influencers who encourage their followers to participate in the fashion discussion, whether simply through comments, sharing their own styles, or participating in challenges, create a significantly more immersive experience. This interaction not only heightens engagement but also fosters a sense of community and belonging, which can translate into loyalty to the brands which influencers are endorsing and working alongside (Leung et al., 2022).

Additionally, video content, especially short-form videos, has proven to be highly effective in capturing the attention of this young audience. Social media platforms, such as TikTok, have been instrumental in this trend, with influencers leveraging them to create viral challenges, tutorials, and other engaging formats that Gen Z can participate in and share. The prevalence

of "haul" videos and "outfit of the day" posts on social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, provides continuous exposure to new trends and products. This never-ending stream of content can subtly shift the fashion sensibilities of young consumers, making certain styles or brands more desirable (Huang & Copeland, 2020). This persuasive power lies not in just a single post, but in the compound effect of seeing trusted influencers consistently embrace a fashion label or trend.

The use of exclusivity and early access is another powerful strategy. In 2019, Amazon launched a limited fashion collection "The drop". It claimed that the collections are designed by influencers around the globe and consumers only have 30 hours to shop the collection after it is released (Draper, 2019). By providing Gen Z with the feeling of being insiders or that they are ahead of the curve, influencers can foster a sense of special privilege that can increase engagement and loyalty. This approach also capitalises the exclusivity and enhances the perception of the influencer as a gatekeeper to desirable content and products.

Finally, influencers engaging with Gen Z are often expected to stand for more than just a brand. Social responsibility and activism are intrinsic to Gen Z's identity, and influencers who advocate for causes or promote causes such as sustainability can resonate more strongly with this audience (EY - US, 2021).

In short, influencer marketing harnesses the trust and admiration that Gen Z has for its favourite personalities, translating it into a powerful driver of fashion trends and purchasing decisions. The personal touch of influencer recommendations is invaluable in an industry where authenticity and personal identity are critical.

3.2 Analysing Consumer Behaviour: A Dive into Gen Z's Psyche

Understanding Gen Z requires looking deeper into their collective psyche, where values, technology, and cultural shifts converge to shape their consumer behaviour. This generation's purchasing patterns are intricately linked to their identity and the social ethos they uphold.

Gen Z are active participants in market dynamics, often advocating for authenticity and increased social responsibility (Burgess & Joshua, 2018). Their choices of fashion reflect a broader commitment to issues such as sustainability, diversity, and ethical production, which leads them to gravitate toward brands whom also champion these causes (Williams & Hodges, 2022).

Gen Z is also characterized by a desire for uniqueness and personalization (Cho et al., 2022). Influencer marketing resonates with them when it looks to offer ways to express individuality. Influencers who curate distinctive styles and showcase a variety of fashion choices provide inspiration for Gen Z consumers to personalize and diversify their own wardrobes. Consequently, influencers have the power to set trends among their followers by being champions to niche brands or innovative styles.

Moreover, Gen Z is motivated by experiences rather than simply the possession of goods. They are more likely to invest in a brand that promises a lifestyle or an experience, not just a product. Influencers who can create a narrative around a fashion brand—transforming clothes and accessories into elements of a desirable lifestyle—can tap into Gen Z's consumer psyche effectively. Fashion brands such as Gucci, and Louis Vuitton started to reach out to this generation by working with influencers and K-pop idols to host exclusive, experiential events blending high fashion with music and culture, creating immersive environments where attendees not only see the products but experience the ethos of the brand firsthand (Langer, 2021). This strategy effectively merges entertainment with consumerism, turning product launches into cultural happenings that are highly shareable and resonate deeply on social media platforms. In 2023, Gucci launched the Ancora campaign, which featured a series of TikTok videos showcasing models and influencers wearing Gucci's latest collection, blending traditional fashion aesthetics with contemporary cultural references. The short-form video content TikTok is ideal for capturing quick, engaging snippets of events and brand experiences. Influencers use TikTok to share trendy, viral content that often includes fashion challenges, behind-the-scenes looks, and collaborations with music and culture icons. Influencers like Francis Bourgeois were brought into the spotlight. Known for his unique and charming love of trains, Bourgeois' involvement exemplified how Gucci taps into the authenticity and relatability sought by Gen Z. His videos garnered significant attention, showing how high fashion can intersect with everyday passions and hobbies (Ho,2024.) Followers do not just see a new handbag or dress; they see a desirable lifestyle that includes attending exclusive parties, meeting celebrities, and experiencing high fashion up close.

Gucci Ancora also involved real-world events that were highly shareable on TikTok. These events were designed to be not just fashion shows but cultural experiences, where attendees could interact with the brand in immersive environments. This strategy effectively merges entertainment with consumerism. Influencers' posts and stories from these events are highly shareable, creating buzz and making the brand's narrative resonate deeply with the audience. By leveraging these platforms, fashion brands can turn product launches into immersive, experiential events that deeply engage Gen Z.

Gen Z's consumer behaviour is complex and is interwoven with their digital fluency and their idealistic worldviews. Influencers who understand and mirror these characteristics in their marketing approach can significantly influence the fashion choices of this discerning demographic.

4. Ethical Considerations

4.1 The Ethics of Influence: Transparency and Disclosure

The ethical concerns of transparency and disclosure have moved to the forefront of consumer consciousness in the age of influencer marketing, especially for Gen Z, who are a demographic that highly values authenticity. Ethical influencer marketing hinges on the clear communication of sponsored content to maintain trust between the influencer, their audience, and the brand they are endorsing.

Ethics in digital creation involves more than just truthfulness in one's representations; it encompasses ethical practices that respect the audience's trust and maintain integrity. Influencers face the challenge of how to best balance their online personas with their inherent responsibilities that they have to their followers. This includes making clear distinctions between sponsored content and personal endorsements, ensuring that all promotional activities are fully transparent and clearly marked. The ethical handling of such disclosures not only has to adhere to legal standards but also reinforces the influencer's authenticity in the eyes of their followers. Many countries' governments now have clear brand partnership rules for social media influencers. For example, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (2019) has guidelines which require influencers to disclose any financial or material connection to the brands they promote. This is not just a legal requirement but also a building block of ethical practice, reinforcing the authenticity that Gen Z consumers demand. Influencers who fail to disclose such relationships risk eroding the trust they've built with their followers, which can lead to a loss of influence and credibility.

Moreover, with the rise of virtual influencers, ethical implications take on new dimensions. While virtual influencers can be programmed to avoid making unethical decisions, their lack of transparency about being non-human can be problematic. Audiences, particularly Gen Z, expect clarity on whether they are engaging with a real person or a brand-created character. Take the virtual influencer Lil Miquela as an example- critics argue that labelling Miquela as Brazilian-American is cultural appropriation since she, being non-human, lacks any genuine cultural experience or background—a point echoed by Clein (2019) who criticised her as being used as a vehicle for 'commercialized fake justice' during the Black Lives Matter movement. As the realm of virtual influencers grows, it's crucial for creators and brands to thoughtfully consider the messages which they are endorsing.

Conversely, the rise of virtual influencers has sparked numerous debates over intellectual property rights. Miquela, for example, has endorsed products like Prada and released music on Spotify, highlighting the need for the definition of a clear legal frameworks to address IP ownership—whether it belongs to the brand being promoted or the creators of the virtual persona. As this industry continues to expand, establishing robust legal guidelines to protect the intellectual property rights of all parties involved will become increasingly important.

Influencers hold the power to sway public opinion and consumer behaviour significantly. This power comes with the responsibility to be transparent about advertisements and honest in their reviews. For Gen Z, this transparency is not negotiable; it is the essence of a trust-based relationship. Influencers cultivate significant influence over norms and behaviours, especially regarding sensitive issues like body image and mental health (Södergren & Vallström, 2023; Pretorius et al., 2022). Ethical influencers are aware of this impact and strive to promote positive messages, inclusivity, and realistic standards, all while respecting the diversity of their audiences. In 2024, the #NoFilter campaign on Instagram, led by influencers like Jameela Jamil and her "I Weigh" movement, encourages followers to post unedited photos and share their true selves. These initiatives aim to challenge the unrealistic standards set by heavily edited images, promoting body positivity and mental well-being. By highlighting the reality behind the perfect photos, these influencers help nurture a healthier social media environment, reducing the pressure on followers to conform to unattainable ideals (I Weigh Community, n.d.). This transparency about the artificial measures involved in creating seemingly perfect images or lifestyles can avoid unrealistic expectations among followers, nurturing a healthier social media environment. According to Pradhan et al.(2023), one of the major concerns from Gen Z regarding influencer marketing is that they are concerned about brands over-controlling influencers to create irresponsible content, leading them to avoid both. Brands and influencers who prioritise ethical standards in their marketing strategies are likely to win the loyalty of this principled generation.

4.2 Some suggestions: Fostering Ethical Consumption and Marketing Practices

In the age of digital consumerism, adopting ethical consumption and marketing practices becomes crucial, especially when engaging with Gen Z—a demographic known for its commitment to ethics and sustainability. Influencers, given their substantial sway over consumer behaviours, play a pivotal role in promoting these practices.

Ethical consumption involves making purchasing decisions that are considerate of environmental and social impacts. Influencers can encourage this by highlighting brands that prioritize sustainable manufacturing processes, use eco-friendly materials, or support fair labour practices. By aligning themselves with such brands, influencers not only promote products but also advocate for the values behind them, resonating deeply with Gen Z consumers

who prefer spending their money on brands that demonstrate strong levels of social responsibility (Ge, 2024).

Furthermore, influencers have the opportunity to teach their followers about ethical consumption practices. This might involve discussing the significance of reducing one's carbon footprint, choosing products with minimal packaging, or supporting local businesses. Such educational content can help shape a more conscientious consumer culture among Gen Z. In the meantime, increasingly number of consumers aware the negative impact of 'green washed' products – item falsely marketed as environmentally friendly. This reorganisation has led consumers to question the sustainability claims made by brands and influencers (Sailer et al., 2022). Consequently, consumer's scepticism towards brands and influencers will cause long-term distrust. It is not easy to address the question: while influencers with larger followers have the power to negotiate with the brands, those without massive followings will face ethical challenges when partnering with brands. Therefore, although it is important for influencers to thoroughly investigate the brand's sustainability practice, developing a better and more practical guidelines and monitoring systems to avoid 'greenwashed' products is more significant for the entire industry.

By embracing and advocating for ethical consumption and marketing, influencers can profoundly influence Gen Z's purchasing habits. This not only helps build a more sustainable and equitable market but also strengthens the trust and loyalty of their audience, ensuring that their impact on social media is both positive and lasting.

Conclusion

This exploration into the dynamic between Gen Z consumers and influencers—both human and virtual—has revealed a complex landscape shaped by digital innovation and cultural shifts. As we've seen, influencers wield significant power in shaping the preferences and behaviours of this young demographic, making their role both influential and require them to be responsible.

Human influencers continue to resonate due to their authenticity and relatability. Their ability to connect on a personal level, sharing real-life experiences and engaging in meaningful interactions, builds trust and loyalty among followers. These influencers thrive on their human touch—flaws, emotions, and all—which endears them to a generation that values transparency and authenticity.

On the flip side, virtual influencers represent a new frontier in digital marketing. Their perfection and controlled narratives cater to the fantasies and aspirations of young consumers,

providing a glimpse into a curated world free from the chaos of human error. Despite their artificial nature, they attract a significant following by offering consistency and a unique form of escapism, appealing to Gen Z's appreciation for innovation and storytelling.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing in shaping Gen Z's fashion choices is undeniable. Whether through aspirational content or practical fashion tips, influencers impact what young consumers wear, how they shop, and the brands they favour. However, the true measure of this influence lies in its execution—where ethical considerations and genuine engagement determine success.

As digital platforms continue to evolve, so too does the nature of influence. The continued appeal of influencers will depend on their ability to adapt to changing technologies and maintain ethical standards in their practices. Transparency in collaborations, respect for diversity, and advocacy for sustainability are not just trendy buzzwords but critical elements that define the credibility and longevity of influencers in the eyes of Gen Z. Looking forward, influencers, brands, and marketers must navigate these challenges with care.

This chapter has only been able to scratch the surface of the complex interactions between Gen Z and the influencers they follow. Further research and observation will be essential as we seek to understand the evolving roles of influencers in our digital society. What remains clear, however, is the significant impact these personalities have on the market trends, consumer behaviour, and cultural norms of today and tomorrow.

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