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Social Media Influencers and Consumer Purchasing Decisions among Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria

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Abstract
The proliferation of social media in Nigeria has given rise to influencers who significantly shape consumers among Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria. This study explores how these influencers impact consumer behaviour and brand preferences, identifying the mechanisms behind their influence. Guided by the Social Identity Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory and using thematic analysis, data was collected from 25 participants through online focus group discussions, uncovering key themes such as authenticity, cultural resonance, and socio-economic alignment. The findings reveal that factors such as authenticity, expertise, consistency, transparency, and relatability are crucial in establishing an influencer's credibility and trustworthiness. Psychological and social motivations for following influencers include aspiration, social validation, relatability, entertainment, and a desire for information on trends. Cultural and socio-economic factors, like cultural resonance and socio-economic status, also play significant roles in shaping how influencers affect purchasing decisions. The study concludes that while influencers do shape consumer behaviour, their effectiveness varies by type, perceived authenticity, and alignment with followers' socio-economic realities. This study contributes to the understanding of influencer marketing by dissecting the factors that shape consumer trust and engagement in the Nigerian context. It highlights that authenticity, cultural resonance, and economic sensitivity are critical to influencer effectiveness, challenging broader trends that prioritise reach and visibility over genuine connection. The study recommends prioritising micro-influencers for targeted campaigns, as their perceived authenticity can drive meaningful engagement despite their limited reach.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Purchasing Behaviour, Millennials, Generation Z,

Introduction

The widespread adoption of social media has profoundly influenced consumer behaviour across the globe, with individuals increasingly turning to online platforms for information, entertainment, and purchasing guidance (Michael, 2024). On these platforms, certain individuals - commonly referred to as influencers - have emerged as powerful opinion leaders, shaping perceptions and behaviours within their audiences (Gómez, 2019; Vrontis *et al*., 2021). These influencers extend their impact beyond mere content creation, leveraging their credibility and relatability to establish trust with followers and influence decisions (Edim *et al*., 2024). Their reach and influence have become particularly significant in societies with growing digital populations, such as Nigeria, where social media has seen rapid expansion in recent years (Kemp, 2024). The Social Media Influencers, by reason of the magnitude of influence they wield, seem to be replacing or relegating to the background the role of primary agents of socialization in shaping buying decisions among the youth population.

The youthful composition of Nigeria's population, with a median age of 17.3 years, underscores the growing importance of social media as a space for marketing and engagement (Michael, 2024). Millennials and Gen Zs represent a substantial proportion of social media users, exhibiting distinct consumer behaviours shaped by their values and priorities. Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, gravitate toward brands that align with their ethical standards and provide convenience (Howard, 2018; Falke *et al*., 2022). Conversely, Gen Zs, born between 1997 and 2012, are drawn to products and brands that resonate with their sense of identity and quality expectations, often seeking inspiration and validation from influencers (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Zatwarnicka-Madura *et al*., 2022). In Nigeria, influencers connect with these generational groups by fostering authenticity and relatability, which strengthens brand loyalty (Edim *et al*., 2024).

Furthermore, the process of consumer purchasing decisions - where individuals evaluate, select, and purchase products or services to meet their needs or desires (Hanaysha *et al*., 2021) - serves as a foundational concept within the broader discussion of consumer behaviour. These decisions, influenced by personal preferences (Kuncoro & Kusumawati, 2021), cultural values (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020), marketing strategies (Al-Azzam & Al-Mizeed, 2021), and social influences (Zhang & Dong, 2020), are also shaped by both rational and emotional considerations.

While existing research highlights the roles of social media influencers in promoting brands and facilitating customer engagement (Fakeye & Ayoola, 2022; Oraedu *et al*., 2021), there is a tendency to generalise findings without accounting for generational differences. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the psychological mechanisms that underpin consumer trust in influencers, such as perceived authenticity, social identity, and parasocial relationships (Jin *et al*., 2019; Kanwar & Huang, 2022). The impact of different influencer types—micro, macro, celebrity, or niche—on purchasing behaviour also remains underexplored, particularly in the Nigerian context (Abidin, 2018; Conde & Casais, 2023).

This study therefore seeks to address these gaps by examining the attributes of influencers that resonate with Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria. It explored how generational traits, local cultural dynamics, and influencer credibility converge to shape consumer behaviour, offering a nuanced understanding of how these cohorts engage with influencer marketing in a rapidly evolving digital

environment. Hence, the study sought to explore how social media influencers affect purchasing behaviour and brand preferences among Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria, identifying the mechanisms and factors that drive their influence. This study sought to;

i. explore the types of social media influencers that most significantly impact purchasing decisions among Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria;
ii. investigate the key factors that contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of social media influencers as perceived by Nigerian Millennials and Gen Zs;
iii. examine the psychological and social motivations behind following and engaging with social media influencers in Nigeria's Millennial and Gen Z demographic..

Social Media Influencers, Generational Cohorts and Influencer Marketing in the Nigerian Context

Gómez (2019) and Vrontis *et al*., (2021) describe social media influencers as individuals who have built a dedicated online following and possess the ability to shape the opinions and behaviours of their audience. They are not merely content creators but act as opinion leaders, leveraging their perceived authority, trustworthiness, and authenticity to affect purchasing decisions (Luoma-Aho *et al*., 2021; Mabkhot *et al*. 2022). Hence, the landscape of influencers is diverse, encompassing various categories based on the size of their following, engagement rates, and the nature of their content. Thus, there are micro-influencers who have a smaller follower count, often between 1,000 and 100,000, but they boast high engagement rates due to their close-knit communities (Ebulueme & Vijayakumar, 2024); macro-influencers have a follower base ranging from 100,000 to one million (Oliveira *et al*., 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023); Celebrity influencers, encompassing well-known public figures such as actors and athletes, have followers in the millions (Cox & Paoli, 2023; Matiza & Slabbert, 2024); and Niche content creators focus on highly specific content areas and can belong to any follower category (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023; Ietto & Pascucci, 2023). What distinguishes them is the specialised knowledge and content they produce, which attracts a highly engaged and targeted audience (Ouvrein *et al*., 2021). Their influence is strong within their domain, making them valuable for brands seeking to engage with a particular demographic (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023).

Millennials, typically born between 1981 and 1996, represent the first generation to come of age alongside the rapid development of digital technology (Dimock, 2019). They have witnessed the transition from analogue to digital, shaping their behaviour as digital pioneers who value convenience, personalisation, and social experiences (Howard, 2018). Millennials' consumer behaviour is often influenced by their preference for experiences over material goods, with a strong inclination towards brands that embody social values, sustainability, and authenticity (Falke *et al*., 2022). Their buying habits tend to favour companies that offer seamless digital experiences and align with their ethical standards, highlighting a shift towards conscious consumption (Cairns *et al*., 2022).

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, grew up in an entirely digital world, with the internet and social media being central to their lives from an early age (Dimock, 2019). This

upbringing has made them adept at navigating online spaces, leading to shorter attention spans and an increased preference for visual and video content (Podara *et al*., 2022). Gen Zs are characterised by a pragmatic approach to purchasing, prioritising quality and value over brand loyalty, and showing a strong preference for brands that resonate with their personal identity and social causes (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). They are more skeptical of traditional advertising and are heavily influenced by peer reviews, influencers, and social media trends when making purchasing decisions (Childers & Boatwright, 2021; Zatwarnicka-Madura *et al*., 2022).

Social media use in Nigeria has seen significant growth, driven by a youthful demographic and increasing internet penetration. In January 2024, 36.75 million Nigerians were active on social media, a 16% increase from the previous year (Michael, 2024). This growth is influenced by a rising internet penetration rate of 45.5%, reflecting increased connectivity in both urban and rural areas. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram dominate the landscape, with Facebook alone boasting 36.75 million users, highlighting the central role of social media in everyday interactions (Kemp, 2024).

In Nigeria's digital marketing landscape, influencers play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour and brand perceptions. Brands like Jumia heavily rely on influencers to reach younger audiences, such as Gen Z, by leveraging influencer marketing for up to 70% of their promotional strategies (Fakeye & Ayoola, 2022). Influencers help bridge the gap between brands and consumers by fostering trust and relatability through personal endorsements. This personalised approach, especially when influencers share values with the brands they promote, enhances brand credibility and visibility (Edim *et al*., 2024). However, the impact of influencer marketing is not always consistent; while some campaigns drive significant engagement, studies suggest that traditional sponsored adverts may perform better in driving specific consumer actions, like saving or sharing content (Jarrar *et al*., 2020).

Nigeria's unique cultural and socio-economic factors significantly influence the appeal of social media influencers. The country's median age is just 17.3, reflecting a youthful population that is more receptive to digital trends and peer influence (Michael, 2024). Social influence and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) are particularly potent in Nigeria, where community and social connections often dictate consumer preferences (Ishola, 2022). Influencers, seen as relatable figures rather than distant celebrities, can easily sway public opinion, especially in a society where peer recommendations hold substantial weight. This aligns with the broader African context, where collectivist cultural norms elevate the importance of social endorsements (Oraedu *et al*., 2021).

Moreover, economic factors, such as the desire for upward social mobility, make aspirational content from influencers highly appealing. Young Nigerians often emulate the lifestyles portrayed by influencers, using them as models for achieving social status (Ishola, 2022). However, there is a growing concern about the authenticity of influencer endorsements, as increased commercialisation can erode trust if followers perceive content as merely transactional rather than genuine recommendations (Sodeinde *et al*., 2022). Hence, while influencers are effective in engaging Nigerian audiences, maintaining authenticity remains a challenge in this dynamic landscape.

The impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer behaviour is shaped by multiple factors, which collectively determine the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies. Trust in the influencer and the content they produce is fundamental. Consumers are more likely to be influenced if they perceive the influencer as credible and authentic (Pop *et al*., 2022). When influencers present themselves as relatable and share genuine experiences, they can establish stronger parasocial relationships, where followers feel a personal connection to them (Kanwar & Huang, 2022). This sense of intimacy enhances trust and encourages followers to adopt the influencer's lifestyle or recommendations as social norms, driving consumer decisions (Chan, 2022).

Motivations for following Influencers, Brand Loyalty and Purchasing Decisions

The motivations behind following social media influencers are deeply rooted in both psychological and social factors, reflecting a blend of individual needs and societal dynamics. Psychologically, one significant motivation is the desire for social comparison. People often follow influencers to evaluate themselves against others, using influencers as benchmarks for ideal lifestyles, beauty standards, or behaviours. This process helps individuals define their own identities and aspirations (Chan, 2022). The influencers' curated lives provide a mirror through which followers can assess their own achievements and shortcomings, fuelling a cycle of comparison that can be both motivating and detrimental, depending on the perceived attainability of the influencer's lifestyle.

Another key psychological motivation is the fulfilment of parasocial relationships, where followers develop a one-sided emotional connection with influencers.

Social motivations are equally influential, particularly the need for social validation and status. By aligning themselves with popular influencers, followers can signal their taste, preferences, and social standing to others (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). The act of following certain influencers or engaging with their content can serve as a form of social capital, where being associated with well-known figures enhances one's perceived status among peers.

Social media influencers (SMIs) have a significant impact on brand loyalty and purchasing decisions, often driven by their perceived authenticity, credibility, and the parasocial relationships they build with followers. The persuasive power of influencers goes beyond traditional advertising, as they often embody lifestyles and values that resonate with consumers, thereby shaping their attitudes and behaviours towards brands (Chan, 2022). For instance, Jin *et al*. (2019) found that influencers on Instagram are seen as more trustworthy than traditional celebrities, thus leading to stronger positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This perceived trustworthiness is a crucial factor, as highlighted by Pop *et al*. (2022), where SMI trust significantly influenced purchasing decisions for travel products ($\beta=0.301$, $p<0.05$), with 44.9% of respondents visiting destinations based on influencer recommendations.

However, the influence of SMIs is not without limitations. The authenticity of influencer marketing is often questioned, especially with the rise of influencer fraud and undisclosed sponsored content, which can erode consumer trust (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). This skepticism is especially prevalent in the beauty and fashion sectors, where audiences may perceive influencer reviews as biased, affecting their purchase decisions negatively (Sodeinde *et al*., 2022). While the

source credibility theory posits that a trusted influencer can positively impact brand perception and purchasing decisions, instances of over-commercialisation can lead to diminished returns on influencer marketing efforts (Nafees *et al*., 2020).

Moreover, consumer response to influencers varies across demographics and income levels. High-income consumers, for instance, are more critical of the information shared by influencers, scrutinising content for quality and reliability before making purchasing decisions (Chan, 2022). This indicates that the effectiveness of influencer marketing is contingent upon aligning influencer traits - such as interactivity and authenticity - with the target audience's expectations (De Veirman *et al*., 2017).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is anchored using two theories; Social Identity Theory Uses and Gratifications Theory. Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships, leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Trepte & Loy, 2017). SIT suggests that people categorise themselves and others based on shared social identities such as age, culture, or lifestyle, which subsequently influences their behaviours and attitudes (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Although SIT effectively explains group-based behaviour, it has been critiqued for oversimplifying identity as static and ignoring individual agency (Abrams *et al*., 2021). In the context of influencer marketing, SIT helps explain why followers identify more strongly with influencers who share similar social identities. For instance, Gen Z followers may connect with influencers who exhibit similar cultural values or lifestyle habits, such as sustainable fashion or veganism, because these shared traits affirm their social identity (Chan, 2022). This identification strengthens the influencer's impact, making their recommendations more persuasive, as followers perceive them as authentic representatives of their in-group.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), first articulated by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), focuses on why and how individuals actively choose specific media to fulfil various personal needs, such as entertainment, information, or social connection (Kim *et al*., 2019). Unlike passive audience models, UGT views individuals as active participants in media consumption. However, it has been critiqued for its reliance on self-reported motivations, which may not always accurately reflect actual behaviours (Ruggiero, 2000). Applied to influencer marketing, UGT suggests that individuals follow influencers to satisfy different needs. For instance, someone might follow a travel influencer for escapism and entertainment, while another might seek out a tech influencer for reliable product reviews, fulfilling an informational need (Pop *et al*., 2022). Additionally, followers may connect with lifestyle influencers to feel part of a community, thereby satisfying social needs. These gratifications make influencer content appealing, potentially increasing the influencer’s impact on followers’ attitudes and behaviours.

Methods

The research strategy for this study was grounded in qualitative methodology, a choice justified by the need to deeply explore the subjective experiences and social dynamics surrounding social media influencer impact on consumer behaviour. Specifically, focus group discussions (FGDs) were chosen for data collection because they foster rich interactions among participants, allowing the researcher to observe the dynamics of how opinions are formed and challenged in a social context. By discussing their experiences with peers, participants were able to explore and articulate their attitudes towards social media influencers more thoroughly than would be possible in individual interviews.

The sampling strategy employed was purposive, aiming to ensure that the selected participants were highly relevant to the research focus - namely, active social media users within the Millennial and Gen Z age brackets. Participants were divided into five groups: Younger Gen Z (18-21 years), Older Gen Z (22-27 years), Younger Millennials (28-33 years), Older Millennials (34-43 years), and a Mixed Demographics group (18-43 years). Each group consisted of five participants, making a total of 25 participants. The segmentation allowed for an exploration of intra-generational differences, recognising that Gen Zs and Millennials may have varying levels of exposure to and experiences with social media. By structuring the sample in this way, the research acknowledged the critique that generational labels often obscure the diversity within groups (Costanza *et al*., 2012). The deliberate inclusion of a Mixed Demographics group further added depth by enabling cross-generational comparison within a single discussion, thus shedding light on both differences and shared experiences.

Regarding participant characteristics, the distribution between Millennials and Gen Zs was evenly balanced, with 10 participants from each generational group and five participants in the Mixed Demographics category. The diversity extended to gender representation, with each group designed to include a mix of male and female participants, though slight imbalances existed. For example, Younger Gen Z comprised 60% females and 40% males, reflecting research suggesting that gender may influence social media engagement and the impact of influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This gender-conscious sampling aimed to uncover any gender-specific patterns in how social media influencers are perceived. Additionally, social media usage frequency was varied across participants, with most Gen Zs being daily users (80-90%), while Millennials showed slightly lower daily engagement (60-75%). This detail allowed the research to explore whether higher social media engagement correlates with a stronger influence from social media influencers, aligning with findings from studies that associate increased screen time with greater susceptibility to social media effects (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

The data collection process through online FGDs was a pragmatic choice given Nigeria's vast geographic diversity and the logistical challenges of convening participants in person. Online FGDs facilitated the inclusion of participants from multiple cities—Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Kano, among others - ensuring that regional cultural influences were considered, which is crucial in understanding consumer behaviour in a country as culturally diverse as Nigeria. The online format was also in line with the digital focus of the study, making participants more comfortable discussing social media topics in an environment that mirrors the digital nature of their everyday

experiences. This methodological choice addressed the limitation often cited in face-to-face FGDs, where geographical and logistical constraints can lead to sample homogeneity.

The study's data analysis utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis, a method recognised for its systematic yet flexible framework in handling qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The steps include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach was particularly appropriate given the study's focus on exploring complex, multi-layered phenomena related to social media influence. It allowed for both descriptive analysis—identifying explicit themes such as "trust and credibility of influencers"—and interpretive analysis, which uncovered deeper, more implicit themes like "aspirational identity formation." The latter reflects participants' desires to emulate the lifestyles of influencers, indicating underlying motivations for following certain personalities.

Braun and Clarke's method is valued for its capacity to capture meanings within qualitative data, making it suitable for studies involving subjective experiences and social interactions (Nowell *et al*., 2017). Its flexibility enabled the researcher to adapt coding processes based on emerging insights while remaining systematic in theme development. This adaptability was crucial in unpacking the multiple factors influencing consumer behaviour, as it facilitated a detailed examination of both surface-level trends and underlying psychological drivers, providing a comprehensive understanding of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

To establish trustworthiness, the study employed strategies based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was prioritized through member checking, allowing participants to review preliminary findings to ensure they accurately reflected their experiences, reducing researcher bias and enhancing data authenticity (Birt *et al*., 2016). This approach validated the alignment of data analysis with participants' realities. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context, including participant demographics like age, gender, and social media usage, allowing others to assess the applicability of findings to different contexts (Shenton, 2004). Dependability was supported by an audit trail, which detailed each research step, from data collection to analysis, enabling replication and ensuring consistency over time (Nowell et al., 2017). Lastly, confirmability was upheld through reflexivity, as researchers documented biases in a reflexive journal to focus on participants' perspectives rather than personal assumptions (Finlay, 2002).

Results

Details of Participants

The groups are segmented by age to capture different perspectives across sub-cohorts of Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria. Each FGD will explore how social media influencers impact purchasing behaviour, with discussions focusing on trust, motivations, and brand loyalty. The mixed demographic group aims to identify generational contrasts and shared experiences.

Table 1: Groupings of Participants

Group	Description
Group 1: Younger Gen Z (18-21 years)	Participants aged 18-21 who are active on social media. This group aims to explore the influence of influencers on younger Gen Z's brand choices and purchasing behaviour.
Group 2: Older Gen Z (22-27 years)	Participants aged 22-27 who regularly follow social media influencers. The discussion will focus on their motivations for engagement and perceived influencer credibility.
Group 3: Younger Millennials (28-33 years)	Participants aged 28-33 who follow influencers across different platforms. The goal is to examine the impact of endorsements on brand loyalty and purchasing decisions.
Group 4: Older Millennials (34-43 years)	Participants aged 34-43 who are frequent social media users. This group will discuss factors that drive trust in influencers and their purchasing motivations.
Group 5: Mixed Demographics (18-43 years)	A mix of participants from Gen Z and Millennials to explore generational differences and similarities in influencer engagement and purchasing behaviour.

In Table 2, participants are further categorised based on age range, gender distribution, social media usage frequency, and influencer-following behaviour. Each group includes a mix of daily and weekly social media users to ensure diverse perspectives. The gender distribution aims for a balanced representation, while the influencer following behaviour categorisation ensures insights from participants with varying levels of influencer engagement. This segmentation helps explore how demographic factors influence perceptions of influencer impact on purchasing decisions.

Table 2: Participant Breakdown

Group	Age Range	Number of Participants	Gender Distribution	Social Media Usage Frequency	Influencer Following Behaviour
Group 1: Younger Gen Z (18-21 years)	18-21	5	60% female, 40% male	80% daily users, 20% weekly users	70% follow more than 5 influencers, 30% follow 1-4 influencers
Group 2: Older Gen Z (22-27 years)	22-27	5	50% female, 50% male	90% daily users, 10% weekly users	60% follow more than 5 influencers, 40% follow 1-4 influencers
Group 3: Younger Millennials (26-30 years)	28-33	5	55% female, 45% male	70% daily users, 30% weekly users	50% follow more than 5 influencers, 50% follow 1-4 influencers
Group 4: Older Millennials (31-35 years)	34-43	5	45% female, 55% male	60% daily users, 40% weekly users	40% follow more than 5 influencers, 60% follow 1-4 influencers
Group 5: Mixed Demographics (18-35 years)	18-43	5	50% female, 50% male	75% daily users, 25% weekly users	55% follow more than 5 influencers, 45% follow 1-4 influencers

Themes

Types of Influencers and Their Impact on Consumer Decisions

The focus group discussion (FGD) highlighted several influencer categories and their varying levels of impact on consumer purchasing behaviour among Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria. The main influencer types discussed were celebrity influencers, micro-influencers, niche

experts, and social media personalities. Participants offered different views on how these categories influence brand loyalty and purchasing decisions, with a few respondents sharing skepticism towards their impact.

Celebrity influencers emerged as a divisive topic. Participants such as P6, P12, and P18 emphasised the substantial influence of celebrities in shaping consumer trends, with P6 noting, "*When someone like Davido or Tiwa Savage endorses a brand, it automatically becomes more desirable... it's like an instant validation."* This sentiment was echoed by P18, who remarked that the large following of celebrities gives them the ability to reach audiences far beyond what regular individuals could achieve. P9, a social media manager, pointed out that even if the celebrity doesn't have expertise in the product, their "*status alone can make people want to try the brand*."

However, not all participants were convinced. P1, P11, and P20 raised concerns about the authenticity of celebrity endorsements, with P1 saying, "*Celebrities often promote products just for the money... they don't necessarily use them.*" P11 added that some endorsements felt "*forced and disconnected*," making it harder for consumers to trust their recommendations.

There was a significant consensus on the growing importance of micro-influencers. Participants such as P7, P21, and P24 highlighted how micro-influencers often have a more personal connection with their followers, which makes their recommendations seem more genuine. P7 noted, "*They feel more relatable because they are closer to the everyday person... they also tend to engage more with followers*." P21 explained that micro-influencers' authenticity stems from their "*real-life experiences*" with the products they endorse, which resonates more with consumers.

Conversely, P5 and P25 questioned the impact of micro-influencers, arguing that their limited reach reduces their influence compared to larger celebrities. P5 expressed doubt, stating, "*Even though micro-influencers are more relatable, they just don't have the same pull*."

However, P17 and P25 expressed skepticism, noting that some social media personalities may lack credibility as their endorsements often seem driven by popularity rather than genuine belief in the product. P17 remarked, "*It's hard to trust someone who promotes one thing today and something completely different tomorrow*."

Factors Influencing Credibility and Trustworthiness of Influencers

The discussion among participants highlighted various factors that determine the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of social media influencers. These factors included authenticity, expertise, consistency, transparency, and relatability, each playing a crucial role in shaping how Nigerian Millennials and Gen Zs assess influencer reliability.

Several participants, including P7, P10, and P12, emphasised authenticity as a key factor in an influencer's credibility. P7 noted, "*If an influencer genuinely uses the product and shares their real experiences, it's easier to trust them*." P12 agreed, adding, "*People can tell when influencers are just doing it for the money… it's obvious when it doesn't feel real*." P2 supported this view by pointing out that "*authentic influencers share both positive and negative aspects of products,*" which makes them more believable.

Conversely, P5 and P25 expressed doubts about how common authenticity really is. P5 mentioned, "*These days, it's hard to know if they truly like the product or if they're just being paid...*

authenticity can be faked too." This sentiment was shared by P25, who argued that some influencers are skilled at "*appearing genuine even when they are not.*"

Expertise was also highlighted as a significant factor, especially by P3, P16, and P18, who argued that influencers with specialised knowledge in a particular field are more credible. P3 stated, "*I trust a tech influencer more when they review gadgets because they know what they're talking about.*" Similarly, P16 remarked, "*When a fitness influencer recommends a diet, it's because they have the background to understand its effects*." P18 added that expertise creates a perception of "*authority*," which enhances trust.

However, P1 and P20 questioned whether influencers always stay within their areas of expertise. P1 pointed out, "*Some influencers promote things outside their niche, which makes it hard to take their recommendations seriously.*" P20 agreed, adding that "*just because they know about one thing doesn't mean they should endorse everything.*"

The consistency of an influencer's message was another recurring theme. P6, P9, and P14 suggested that when influencers consistently advocate for similar products or maintain a steady tone across their content, it boosts their trustworthiness. P6 observed, "*It shows that they stand by their word and are not just switching brands every week.*"

Finally, relatability was deemed essential by many, including P13, P22, and P19. They argued that influencers who share everyday experiences or have a lifestyle similar to their audience are seen as more credible. P13 said, "*It's easier to connect with someone who seems like they could be your friend*."

Yet, P25 pointed out that not all influencers remain relatable as they gain fame, stating, "*The more popular they become, the more distant they feel… they start to live in a different world.*"

Psychological and Social Motivations for Following and Engaging with Influencers

The focus group discussion revealed several psychological and social motivations that drive Millennials and Gen Zs in Nigeria to follow and engage with social media influencers. Key subthemes that emerged include aspiration, social validation, relatability, entertainment, and the desire for information and trends.

Many participants, such as P2, P7, and P10, indicated that aspiration plays a significant role in why they follow influencers. P2 noted, "*Influencers often have the kind of lifestyle that people aspire to... they seem to live the life that we all want.*" P10 elaborated, saying, "*It's not just about the products they promote; it's about the idea that you can achieve a certain level of success or beauty if you follow their advice.*" This aspirational appeal was a common thread, with several participants seeing influencers as role models who "*set a standard for what success looks like*" (P12).

However, P1 and P5 questioned the attainability of these aspirational lifestyles, with P1 remarking, "*Sometimes it feels unrealistic... not everyone can live that kind of life.*" P5 added, "*It can be discouraging because some of these influencers portray a perfect life that doesn't exist.*"

For some respondents, social validation was a key motivator. P6, P14, and P21 described how following influencers and engaging with their content helps them feel connected to a larger community. P6 mentioned, "*When you like or comment on a popular influencer's post, it feels like you're part of something bigger.*" P14 explained, "*Engaging with influencers can boost your own*

social status... especially if they respond to your comment." P21 added that there is "a sense of belonging" when many people are engaging with the same content. Conversely, some respondents expressed skepticism towards this notion

Relatability emerged as another crucial factor, with P3, P13, and P19 highlighting that influencers who share similar experiences or challenges are easier to connect with. P3 stated, "*When influencers talk about everyday struggles, it feels like they're one of us*." P13 agreed, saying, "*It's refreshing to see influencers who don't just show the glamorous side but also share the struggles*." However, P17 pointed out that relatability diminishes as influencers grow more popular, stating, "*They start off relatable, but once they become big, they seem distant... they no longer seem like normal people*."

Several participants, including P8, P9, and P24, cited entertainment as a primary reason for following influencers. P8 noted, "*Sometimes, it's not about the products or advice... it's just about having a good laugh or enjoying their content.*" P24 remarked that influencers often provide a "*break from reality*," making their content an appealing escape.

Lastly, the desire for up-to-date information and trends was a motivation noted by P4, P18, and P22. P4 explained, "*Influencers often know what's trendy before anyone else... they set the pace.*" P18 added, "*They are a go-to for the latest in fashion, tech, or even lifestyle tips.*" P22 echoed this, mentioning that "*following influencers helps keep you informed on what's hot and what's not."*

Discussion

The qualitative data aligns with broader literature in many areas but also reveals some distinct perspectives, especially concerning the impact of different types of social media influencers on Nigerian Millennials and Gen Zs.

The varying effectiveness of influencer types, as observed in the focus group discussions, aligns with the literature's categorisation of influencer tiers based on their follower count and engagement levels (Vrontis *et al*., 2021; Gómez, 2019). For instance, the data supports findings by Abidin (2018) and Teixeira *et al*. (2023), which highlight that micro-influencers often wield greater influence due to their closer, more authentic connections with followers. Respondents such as P7 and P21 noted that micro-influencers' perceived authenticity and relatability made them more effective at driving genuine engagement. However, P5's critique regarding their limited reach echoes Ebulueme & Vijayakumar's (2024) argument that while micro-influencers can foster deep connections, their impact may not scale effectively for larger campaigns. This highlights a divergence in expectations about the scope of influence between smaller, more relatable influencers and celebrity or macro-influencers with wider reach but potentially lower engagement quality (Oliveira *et al*., 2020).

Celebrity influencers, while generally considered influential due to their vast follower base, were viewed with skepticism by some participants (P1, P11), who felt that endorsements often lacked authenticity. This aligns with the findings of Cox & Paoli (2023) and Hearn & Schoenhoff (2016), which suggest that celebrity endorsements can seem superficial and disconnected from real user experiences. The data showed that while some respondents like P6 recognised celebrities' capacity to quickly validate a brand, others doubted the sincerity of such endorsements, indicating a view of trust that goes beyond simple reach. This divergence can be attributed to the increasing

awareness among young Nigerians regarding influencer marketing tactics, where endorsements are often perceived as purely transactional rather than genuine recommendations (Sodeinde *et al*., 2022).

The perceived authenticity of niche experts was another area of alignment with existing literature, where specialised knowledge enhances credibility (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023; Ietto & Pascucci, 2023). Participants like P3 and P16 valued endorsements from niche influencers within their areas of expertise, confirming literature that posits that targeted knowledge fosters trust and authority (Ouvrein *et al*., 2021). However, the data also brought to light concerns about potential commercialisation, as noted by P17, who mentioned that some niche influencers might promote products merely to capitalise on their reputation. This suggests a broader issue in influencer marketing where even those who are considered credible can lose trust if their endorsements appear opportunistic, challenging the general assumption that niche expertise alone is a safeguard against skepticism.

On the topic of trustworthiness factors, the data echoed Luoma-Aho *et al*. (2021) in identifying authenticity, expertise, consistency, transparency, and relatability as key determinants. Yet, there was a more skeptical view towards the feasibility of achieving true authenticity, as highlighted by P5 and P25, who argued that authenticity could be faked. This contrasts with the often idealised notion in literature that authenticity directly translates to trust (Pop *et al*., 2022). The skepticism towards influencers' authenticity in the Nigerian context could stem from cultural and socio-economic factors, where followers are increasingly critical due to the prevalence of overtly commercial content. This skepticism reflects a broader global trend where consumers are becoming more discerning about influencer motivations (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023).

The discussion on the psychological and social motivations for following influencers, such as aspiration, social validation, and relatability, supports existing literature by Chan (2022) and Kanwar & Huang (2022), who note that influencers serve as benchmarks for social comparison and sources of entertainment or escapism. However, some participants, like P1 and P5, challenged the attainability of the aspirational lifestyles portrayed by influencers, which aligns with Ishola (2022) regarding the potentially alienating effect of influencers who promote luxury or unattainable lifestyles. This divergence suggests a deeper underlying issue of socio-economic disparity in Nigeria, where a significant portion of the youth may find the lifestyles portrayed by influen

The data aligns with Social Identity Theory (SIT) in explaining how shared cultural and socio-economic factors strengthen the bond between followers and influencers. Participants like P6 and P12 indicated that influencers who incorporate local cultural elements or reflect their socio-economic realities resonate more strongly, reinforcing the idea of in-group favouritism (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). However, the skepticism towards some influencers' cultural references (P1, P5) suggests that shared identity alone does not guarantee trust or influence. This divergence from SIT's assumptions highlights the limitations of identity-based marketing when the authenticity of these shared traits is questioned. Here, the critique that SIT oversimplifies identity by neglecting individual agency (Abrams *et al*., 2021) becomes evident, as followers appear to evaluate authenticity beyond just shared social markers.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) also finds application, particularly regarding motivations like aspiration and social validation (Chan, 2022). Yet, the data presents contradictions; for instance, while escapism through aspirational content appeals to some, others, such as P1 and P5, find it unrealistic, challenging UGT's assumption that media use straightforwardly fulfils needs. This suggests that influencers may not always meet gratifications due to varying socio-economic contexts, revealing gaps in UGT's capacity to fully account for the discrepancies in followers' responses based on personal circumstances.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings highlight a complex understanding of influencer marketing among Nigerian Millennials and Gen Zs, challenging some assumptions in existing literature. While influencers do shape consumer behaviour, their effectiveness varies by type, perceived authenticity, and alignment with followers' socio-economic realities. Micro-influencers often foster deeper engagement due to perceived relatability, but their limited reach hinders their impact in larger campaigns. Conversely, celebrity endorsements, despite broad reach, often lack authenticity and trustworthiness. This reveals that socio-economic and cultural contexts play a crucial role in how endorsements are received, suggesting that local relevance alone may not guarantee influence. Additionally, the study's application of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) reveals that shared identity markers and aspirational content alone cannot universally predict consumer behaviour, especially when authenticity is doubted.

This study contributes significantly to the understanding of influencer marketing by dissecting the factors that shape consumer trust and engagement in the Nigerian context. It highlights that authenticity, cultural resonance, and economic sensitivity are critical to influencer effectiveness, challenging broader trends that prioritise reach and visibility over genuine connection. By exploring the reception of influencer types and endorsements, the research broadens the scope of influencer marketing studies to include cultural and socio-economic determinants. This offers additional understanding of influencer impact, especially in Nigerian context, where traditional theories like SIT and UGT may not fully apply due to unique consumer perceptions of authenticity and trust.

The implications for knowledge and practice are profound, particularly for brands aiming to penetrate culturally diverse and economically stratified markets like Nigeria. Practitioners should carefully consider the choice of influencer type, balancing reach with authenticity to avoid superficial connections that lack consumer trust. Further, marketers should be aware of socio-economic sensitivities, as endorsements for luxury products may alienate lower-income demographics, reducing brand appeal. This study suggests that influencer campaigns should incorporate local cultural elements authentically, without appearing forced, as performative localisation can undermine trust. For academia, it calls for a more critical view of theories like SIT and UGT, encouraging adaptations that account for economic and cultural realities.

The study recommends prioritising micro-influencers for targeted campaigns, as their perceived authenticity can drive meaningful engagement despite their limited reach. Findings indicate that micro-influencers foster trust through relatable, close connections, as observed with companies like Glossier, which effectively uses micro-influencers to cultivate brand loyalty.

Implementing this could enhance consumer trust, especially in niche markets. Another recommendation is for brands to ensure genuine cultural resonance in influencer content, avoiding superficial localisation, as genuine cultural references increase relatability and brand credibility. Finally, brands should be cautious about promoting high-end products, as luxury endorsements may alienate financially constrained audiences. This approach would ensure inclusivity, aligning brand messaging with the economic realities of the target audience.

Future studies could explore the long-term impact of influencer campaigns on brand loyalty in economically diverse markets. Additionally, research should examine the effectiveness of hybrid influencer strategies that combine micro and macro-influencers in campaigns.

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