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Materialism and the De-Influencing Trend: Classroom Applications

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Abstract

A new trend on social media, coined "de-influencing," is reshaping the way Generation Z (Gen Z) views mass consumerism. Gen Z's Shifting position on consumerism, moral values, and relationships with rising influencers is the dominant explanation for the trend's popularity. Like the Hollywood celebrities of the past, micro-influencers are becoming recognizable icons whose endorsement and influence are valued by this generation. Using a meta-analysis of current publications, the article considers the magnitude of Gen Z's shifting interests and the economic impact this may have on consumer goods. The article extends its findings to the academic world by providing concrete suggestions for teaching the subject in the classroom.

Keywords

TikTok, Social Media, Micro-Influencers, Consumerism, Marketing

A case study using Instagram to create an online learning environment

In the past few years, TikTok has emerged as a powerful platform for social and cultural trends. One such trend, known as the "de-influencing trend," has been reshaping the way Generation Z (Gen Z) views mass consumerism, influencer culture, and the values they hold dear. This article delves into the rise of micro-influencers on TikTok, explores the changing values of Gen Z, and discusses how educators can incorporate this movement into communication disciplines such as marketing and public relations to foster critical thinking among students.

In the age of social media and digital connectivity, the role of influencers in shaping consumer behavior has never been more significant. However, as Gen Z emerges as a dominant force in the market, their values and preferences are reshaping the influencer landscape. The changing values of Gen Z and the emergence of the de-influencer movement are interconnected phenomena that reflect evolving attitudes and priorities in the digital age. Gen Z, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, has grown up in a world dominated by social media and digital technology. As they have come of age, their values and expectations have diverged from those of previous generations. One notable reflection of this shift is the rise of the de-influencer movement. This term stems from influencers being increasingly candid about not endorsing certain viral products. Their rationale is to avoid encouraging excessive consumption. To this end, many influencers are now advocating for alternative products that are more budget-friendly than popularly shared products. Their messages convey a clear and direct message: These products are excessively hyped and unnecessary. Additionally, they engage in discussions regarding sustainability and the economic toll of waste within specific sectors, such as the beauty and fashion industries. To begin our conversation on the trend, we must understand the overall shift to influencers and why it attracts Gen Z.

Rise of Micro-Influencers

Influencer marketing has evolved since its inception, initially taking the form of celebrity endorsements. Before social media, a select group of famous individuals with vast followings monopolized advertising campaigns, yet the sheer size of their audiences sometimes translated into substantial sales. Today, the landscape of influencer marketing has diversified, encompassing influencers with audiences of varying scales. It is not solely the mega-influencers reaping substantial profits; micro-influencers, with smaller yet deeply engaged followings, are also securing a piece of the pie. Micro-influencers, with smaller but highly engaged audiences, have emerged as trusted voices in social media. Unlike mega-influencers with millions of followers, audiences of micro-influencers perceive them as credible and relatable. Their credibility stems from their authentic and relatable content, which often centers around niche interests or firsthand experiences.

The impact of Influencers comes as social media has become crucial for marketing products and services – especially to younger consumers. A 2019 study showed that 87% of people surveyed followed a brand, visited its website, or purchased online after they saw a product advertised on social media, making visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok lucrative for promotions (Meta, 2019). However, one issue with influencer marketing is oversaturation; exponential user growth has led to a surge in influencers, overwhelming audiences with choices. Therefore, today's social media users are much savvier in influencer marketing due to an overabundance of product promotions and brand partnerships from creators. Therefore, the overabundance of product promotion and partnerships has made social media users keenly aware of influencer marketing.

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As a result, Gen Z loses interest in products if the partnered advertisement seems inauthentic. HubSpot (2022) conducted a study that found that 33% of Gen Z have purchased based on an influencer's recommendation in the past three months to establish trust in that brand. The diverse differences of influencers are applicable as a form of horizontal product differentiation, aka its distinctive factor making it stand out among the competition (Cong & Li, 2023). Throughout 2022, global companies and brands allocated a generous portion of their marketing budgets, paying over $16.4 billion to various influencers (Sanora, 2023). The 2022 numbers are up from $13.8 billion in 2021 and $1.7 billion in 2016 (Enberg 2022). In 2021, Gen Z, quickly gained the most purchasing power of any generation, holding over $360 billion in disposable income in 2021 and over 25 % of the global income by 2030 (Winck 2020), more than double the pre-COVID-19 estimates (Pollard 2021). The digital landscape suggests that the Gen Z and Millennial cohorts are the most significant consumers responsible for online purchases (Neilsen 2017). This number is estimated to increase to $33 trillion by 2030 as the generation ages and more join the workforce (Winck 2020).

Gen Z places a high premium on authenticity and relatability when assessing celebrity credibility. Individuals who share their real-life experiences, struggles, and passions are most enticing to Gen Z. These qualities often make digital celebrities more relatable and trustworthy in their eyes. The 2019 The Influencer Report survey highlights that 69% of Gen Z respondents believe authenticity is the most essential quality for influencers. This emphasis on authenticity underscores the changing dynamics of celebrity credibility. Furthermore, trust in influencers is growing, as the number of Gen Z and millennials who said they trust social media influencers increased from 51% in 2019 to 61% in 2023 (Morning Consult Pro, 2023).

One of the critical reasons micro-influencers hold greater credibility and trust among Gen Z is their authenticity. These influencers often create content that displays their real lives, struggles, and passions, making them more relatable. In contrast with more prominent celebrity influencers, these influencers are not promoting these products or services purely for financial gain. Gen Z appreciates influencers who prioritize genuine connections with their audience and are willing to share their firsthand experiences, even if they are imperfect. Furthermore, micro-influencers often focus on niche interests or industries, positioning themselves as experts. Gen Z, a generation known for valuing individuality and niche hobbies, is likelier to trust influencers who share their passions. When micro-influencers engage within these niches authentically, Gen Z perceives their recommendations as valuable and trustworthy. This trend challenges mass consumerism by encouraging more selective and thoughtful purchasing decisions, leading to more informed consumer choices.

Microcelebrities heavily influence Gen Z's media consumption patterns. They watch their YouTube videos, follow their Instagram stories, and participate in challenges or trends started by these influencers. As a result, microcelebrities significantly impact the content Gen Z consumes and creates. Micro-influencers often build close-knit communities with their followers, fostering a sense of belonging and shared values. Gen Z, driven by a desire for genuine connections and a sense of purpose, is drawn to these communities. As a result, they are more likely to trust product recommendations from influencers within their chosen communities. Additionally, microcelebrities often collaborate with brands and companies. Gen Z is receptive to these partnerships if they see them as authentic and aligned with the influencer's values. However, they can quickly detect insincerity and are more likely to disengage if they feel an influencer is solely motivated by financial gain. Gen Z also relies heavily on peer recommendations and word-of-mouth marketing. Microcelebrities can act as trusted friends or peers, offering product recommendations, lifestyle advice, and entertainment that aligns with Gen Z's interests and values.

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#De-Influencing Movement

Gen Z is characterized by values that differ from previous generations. They prioritize community, authenticity, and conscious consumerism over materialism. The de-influencing trend on TikTok has further accentuated these values. De-influencing videos began surfacing in early 2023, as a sincere attempt to join the dots between trend cycles, unethical labor practices, and excess waste. As of this writing, de-influencers are growing in popularity. On TikTok, the total views for the #deinfluencing hashtag from January to March 2023 were 300 million (Digital Day, March 10, 2023). Using Talkwalker.com, a free media monitoring webpage and app, we found that in the last seven days of this writing- between September 27th and October 3, 2023- over 517.3 million have been reached with the #deinfluencing tag. Talkwalker analytics show that the total number of people who have viewed the tag since Jan 2023 is 897.9 million.

This movement occurs when consumers are displaying growing skepticism toward influencer-generated content. Marketers are observing a shift away from the prevailing culture of mass consumerism and the pursuit of perfection. Instead, there is a burgeoning interest in adopting a more mindful lifestyle that values community and authenticity and aligning with businesses that embody meaningful values. Therefore, de-influencing is exactly what it sounds like-- the opposite of a social media star promoting a product.

Gen Z, known for their skepticism toward traditional advertising and marketing tactics, gravitates toward micro-influencers who appear more genuine and less commercialized (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez 2019). While prominent influencers endorse fast-fashion giants like Shein or Old Navy, clothing production contributes to 8% to 10% of the world's carbon emissions and 20% of global water pollution (Andreadakis & Owusu-Wiredu, 2023). Furthermore, shipping activities contribute around 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Reuters, July 7, 2023). These statistics lend credibility to the idea that the influencer culture fosters an unhealthy pattern of excessive consumption as individuals strive to stay current with the latest trends. De-influencers, in contrast, champion sustainability by curbing their consumption at the consumer level. Those involved in this movement are active participants in online activism and believe in using social media as a tool for advocacy and change.

De-influencing actively counters the desire for material possessions, including clothing, cosmetics, and gadgets, perpetuated by internet influencers and prevailing trends. It represents a rejection of the materialistic culture and the societal pressure to crave and accumulate more possessions constantly. If influencer marketing uses personal endorsements to sell products, de-influencing urges consumers to think critically about their purchases and evaluate their necessity. More importantly, consumers gain information and learn about important topics related to social justice, environmentalism, and other issues through watching de-influencing content (Ekvall & Mellberg, 2023).
Other key aspects of the de-influence movement include:

1. ***Critique of Materialism:*** This movement challenges consumerism and encourages a more minimalistic and sustainable approach to living. De-influencers may reject materialism and emphasize experiences and relationships over possessions.

2. ***Empowerment:*** De-influencers often build communities around shared values and interests. They use their platforms to empower their followers, encouraging them to embrace their individuality and make more conscious choices.

3. ***Social Commentary:*** De-influencers engage in social commentary and critique influencer culture itself. They highlight the negative aspects of the traditional influencer lifestyle and its impact on mental health and self-esteem.

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As you browse the #deinfluencing hashtag today, you will notice two prominent content streams. One stream shows that the trend has evolved from discouraging excessive consumption to promoting one product over another, emphasizing the need to encourage people to make more conscious and thoughtful purchasing choices. The second stream of content has individuals reflecting on how social media has distorted our perception of everyday consumption habits. This serves as a refreshing reminder in a digital landscape often dominated by excessive consumption, as evidenced by phenomena like clothing hauls from fast fashion brands such as Shein, which has garnered an astonishing 8.1 billion views on the platform to date under the #SheinHaul hashtag (British Vogue, March 3, 2023).

Changing Values of Gen Z

Gen Z has redefined the values associated with mass consumerism, challenging long-held beliefs about conspicuous consumption and materialism. Several fundamental shifts in Gen Z's values contribute to this change, but four are essential: Sustainability and Ethical Consumption, Quality over Quantity, Social Activism, and Personal Branding.

Generation Z is more concerned about the environmental and social impact of their purchases. Gen Z places a high emphasis on sustainability and ethical consumption. They are more concerned about the environmental and social impact of their purchases. As a result, micro-influencers who advocate for sustainable and ethical products gain credibility among Gen Z, promoting conscious consumerism over mindless mass consumption.

When it comes to their possessions, Gen Z values quality over quantity. They prefer investing in durable, functional products that align with their values. Micro-influencers focusing on product quality and longevity resonate with Gen Z, encouraging them to make thoughtful purchases rather than chasing fleeting trends.

Gen Z consumers are more likely to engage with celebrities who use their platforms to advocate for critical issues and raise awareness, as they are known for their commitment to social and environmental causes. Digital celebrities actively contributing to positive change often gain credibility among Gen Z, as this generation is highly socially conscious and is committed to causes such as climate change, racial and gender equality, and social justice. Their expectation is for influencers to use their platforms to promote positive change. Underscoring this are the results from a 2021 study of the role of social media influencers in promoting pro-environmental behavior among Gen Z. The study found that exposure to sustainability content on social media affects sustainable habits and consumption behavior. These three factors influence social media's propensity to promote sustainability-related issues (Confetto, Convucci, Addeo, & Normando, 2021).

Gen Z prioritizes products that align with their values and image, rejecting the one-size-fits-all approach of mass consumerism. As such, Gen Z is keen on personal branding and self-expression through consumer choices. Micro-influencers who align with their values and help them curate their brands gain credibility in this context. Micro-influencers' credibility among Gen Z reflects the changing values regarding mass consumerism. This generation values authenticity, niche expertise, and community building, all challenging the traditional notion of mass consumption.

In this evolving landscape, micro-influencers are trusted guides, helping Gen Z make more thoughtful and meaningful purchasing decisions. The #deinfluencing tag is a prime example of Gen Z leveraging the platform to discuss conscious consumer choices, from sustainable fashion to ethical beauty brands. Users actively engage in discussions, forming a sense of shared purpose and accountability. Gen Z prefers businesses that align with their values. Brands with a solid commitment to sustainability, diversity, and social responsibility are celebrated on TikTok.

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As a result, the de-influencing trend has driven a surge in awareness and support for ethical companies. As Gen Z continues to influence the market, businesses and marketers must adapt their strategies to align with these changing values, promoting conscious consumerism and ethical choices over mindless mass consumption.

Other characteristics of Gen Z that correlate with the de-influencing movement should be noted as characteristics that may play a role for brands in future influencing attempts. Of specific concern is the idea that this generation prefers experiences over possessions. Gen Z prioritizes experiences, such as travel, adventures, and events, over material possessions. They are more inclined to spend money on experiences that enrich their lives rather than accumulating things (Hubspot, 2022). Furthermore, with vast amounts of information through the internet, Gen Z is more informed about consumer choices' environmental and social impacts. They make conscious decisions to support ethical and socially responsible brands. Along this line, Gen Z is receptive to anti-consumerism movements that challenge the culture of overconsumption. They engage in campaigns like "Buy Nothing Day" and support initiatives promoting conscious consumer choices (Ergun & Erdigmus, 2017).

Compared to previous generations, Gen Z is less loyal to traditional brands. They are likelier to switch brands or opt for smaller, independent businesses that align with their values and offer unique, personalized products (Hootsuite, 2019). In part due to the digital sharing, they have grown up with, Gen Z has embraced the sharing economy and collaborative consumption. They are more willing to share or rent items like clothing, transportation, and housing, reducing the need to own and consume excessively. To this generation, the value of their dollars and their personal beliefs is their top priority when purchasing goods and services.

Incorporating the De-Influencing Trend in the Classroom

Understanding and analyzing the de-influencing trend on TikTok is an essential topic, especially in fields such as communication, media studies, sociology, or marketing. Assignments that delve into this trend can help students critically examine social media's and influencer culture's impact. When structured thoughtfully and infused with specific values and perspectives, college courses can be powerful catalysts for positive societal change. College-level learning has the potential to make the world a better place by fostering advocacy, promoting sustainability, and reducing consumerism.

One of the fundamental pillars of a functioning democracy (reword) is an informed and engaged citizenry. College classes can play a pivotal role in nurturing this essential aspect of democracy by teaching students about various social and political issues, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting active participation in advocacy. By introducing the de-influencing trend, students can better understand the challenges facing their communities and the world through a medium they already use. By encouraging students to question assumptions, analyze evidence, and engage in respectful dialogue, these classes help shape future advocates who can effectively address complex problems.

For example, the global community faces profound environmental challenges, including climate change, deforestation, and resource depletion. College-level learning can be crucial in promoting sustainability by educating students on the importance of responsible stewardship of the planet. Furthermore, consumerism, driven by excessive consumption and materialism, has profound environmental and social consequences. University-level learning can equip students to become agents of positive change in society through a holistic educational approach that combines knowledge, critical thinking, ethical values, and practical skills.

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Here are some assignments and activities that can help students understand the de-influencing trend on TikTok:

Literature Review:	Have students conduct a literature review to explore academic articles, news reports, and scholarly research related to the de-influencing trend on TikTok. They should summarize key findings, identify patterns, and assess the reasons behind this trend.
Deconstruct Influencer Culture:	Analyze the evolution of influencer culture, from its origins to the rise of micro-influencers on TikTok. Encourage students to critically examine the implications of this shift for traditional PR practices.
Content Analysis:	Ask students to select TikTok videos that reflect the de-influencing trend. They should analyze these videos for common themes, messages, and strategies to criticize or challenge influencer culture. This assignment can help them understand the content driving the trend.
Interview Influencers:	Encourage students to contact TikTok influencers, both those participating in the de-influencing trend and those critical of it, for interviews. This primary research can provide valuable insights into the motivations and experiences of influencers in this context.
Case Studies:	Assign students to research and present case studies of specific TikTok influencers who have experienced a decline in popularity or faced backlash. They should analyze the factors contributing to this decline and explore the role of authenticity, relatability, and social issues in the context of TikTok.
Social Media Analytics:	Have students use social media analytics tools to track and analyze engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments, followers) of influencers participating in the de-influencing trend. They can identify trends in engagement and assess the effectiveness of such campaigns.
Ethical Implications:	Ask students to author essays or engage in class discussions about the ethical implications of the de-influencing trend on TikTok. They should consider issues like cancel culture, online harassment, and the responsibility of platforms in moderating content.
Creative Content:	Encourage students to create their own TikTok videos or social media content that reflect their opinions on the de-influencing trend. This hands-on activity allows them to experiment with the platform and gain firsthand experience.
Debate:	Organize a class debate where students take on distinct roles, such as influencers defending their work or critics advocating for the de-influencing trend. This activity promotes critical thinking and helps students understand multiple perspectives.
Guest Speakers:	Invite guest speakers who are experts in social media, influencer marketing, or online trends to provide insights and real-world experiences related to de-influencing.
Final Research Project:	Students work on a semester-long research project investigating various aspects of the de-influencing trend on TikTok. They should incorporate their findings, analysis, and recommendations into a comprehensive research paper or presentation.

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By incorporating these assignments and activities into a college class, students can better understand the de-influencing trend on TikTok, its societal implications, and the broader context of influencer culture in the digital age.

Conclusion

Conversations on TikTok and Instagram, like on any other public platform, can be meaningful, but lasting change will come from a significant economic overhaul needed to tackle overconsumption. The de-influencing trend on TikTok reflects the changing values of Gen Z, emphasizing community, authenticity, and conscious consumerism. As micro-influencers gain prominence and reshape the influencer landscape, educators in public relations can leverage this movement to engage students in critical thinking exercises. By analyzing real-world examples and discussing the impact of these trends, educators can empower the next generation of PR professionals to navigate the evolving media landscape with authenticity and purpose.

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