# Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing on Gen Z Consumers in China

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#### **Abstract:**

Influencer marketing has taken over the global market especially in China. Social media platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Douyin have significantly changed market trends. This study investigated the extent to which influencer marketing impacts the Gen Z consumers in China because this generation is more tech-savvy and has substantial buying power. This dissertation focused reviewing consumer behavior to understand the effects of influencer marketing on Gen Z's buying behavior and their brand loyalty. The results demonstrate that influencer marketing is ideal for targeting the Gen Z consumers in China, but only if certain parameters like authenticity, relatability, platforms, and cultural sensitivity are taken into consideration. These are critical aspects for any brand that want to use influencer marketing effectively to target Gen Z consumers in China.

**Keywords**: Influencer marketing, Gen Z, China, social media, consumer behavior, digital marketing, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), authenticity, cultural relevance

#### 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background and Rationale

Influencer marketing has become one of the most popular marketing trends in the contemporary society. It is particularly useful in modern times with the emergence and evolution of social media platforms. In China, influencer marketing is particularly used to target Generation Z consumers. These are individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Rue, 2018; Dolot, 2018). They are considered the most suitable for this marketing strategies because they have grown

up in the dispensation of modern technology and are therefore well conversant with contemporary technological changes. According to Pradhan et al., (2023) Gen Z's are not only tech-savvy but are also the driving force of the markets. In China, nearly 250 million consumers in China fall under this category (Comendulli,2020), making Gen Z segment in China, a vital and vibrant target market. Platforms including Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Douyin are some of the platforms where Gen Zs frequent. These platforms have made Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) the rulers of consumer's actions. Because of its opportunity to create content that relates to everyday life of the gen-

eration, influencer marketing remains powerful tactical approaches for brands in the market (Salam et al., 2024). However, there are some challenges that are associated with influencer marketing on Gen Z consumers in China. Some of the concerns that may affect such campaigns include influencer realness, the algorithms of the platforms, the consumers' skepticism, reliability and culture. This study thus investigated how and to what extent influencer marketing affects the members of the Gen Z in China taking into consideration the above mentioned concerns as key elements that shape influencer marketing to the Gen Z consumers in China.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 The Evolution of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is one of the biggest trends across the world. A wide range of brands use social media influencers to market their products or services. In the view of Joshi et al., (2023), influencer marketing works perfectly well because of the trust that followers place on influencers. Today, the influencer marketing has become a developed industry in China, with Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin as some of the leading platforms that have a high influence on consumers, particularly Gen Zs. Influencer marketing is not an entirely new concept. It has been in existence before as a celebrity endorsement, a practice that involves getting celebrities to endorse specific brands (Wang & Liu, 2022). However, with the coming of social media, it is possible to categorize influencers as micro-influencers and nano-influencers, despite the fact that they may have a lesser number of followers as compared to the others. In China, the influencer marketing is more developed, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) are crucial factors that influence consumers' decisions.

The roots of influencer marketing can be dated back to the year 2000s when companies first realized that celebrities' endorsements could be useful. Michael Jordan and Britney Spears are some of the early stars who adopted the culture of using their fame as a marketing strategy to control the purchasing patterns of the audience (Jones, 2023). But when such social platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and

TikTok appeared, the meaning of influencers broadened to include ordinary people who have a huge following on the Internet. In the last ten years, the industry of influencer marketing in China has developed rapidly. Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and others have engendered a niche market in which KOLs have a great deal of control over consumers. As it is stated by (Thomala,2024), the influencer marketing in China is growing rapidly with brands spending over 10 billion dollars on collaborations with influencers in 2020 (Thomala, 2024; Thomala, 2024b).

The second reason for influencer marketing's increased popularity in China is the specifics of social media in this country. This situation differs from the well-known social media sites like Instagram or YouTube available in the west. China has its own social media platforms which are more preferable by Chinese consumers. Weibo is a microblogging site widely used by the influencers to post short messages and interact with the audience. Xiaohongshu or 'Little Red Book,' is a lifestyle application platform in which people post product reviews and thus, it is one of the influential marketing tools. Douyin is the Chinese version of TikTok. It is a social media application where people share viral videos, and numerous collaborations are made with influencers.

#### 2.2 Social Media and Consumer Behavior

Social networks occupy a special place in the lives of the Chinese Gen Z consumers. This is evidenced by the significant majority of Gen Z consumers in China who use social media to find out about the products they need where nearly seventy percent report having bought a product based on what they found on the social media platforms (Oakes, 2025). This demonstrates how social media has a great influence the behavior and decision making process of young generation customers. Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Douyin are some of the platforms where brands interested in reaching out for the Gen Z consumer audience in China can market their products. Weibo, as a real-time and hotspot social media, is more suitable for those brands who would like to build up the awareness of a new product. Xiaohongshu allows brands to engage with users and share their experience in the form of product reviews, which makes it a perfect platform for the brands to

establish themselves among the audience. Given that Douyin features short-form videos and challenges, it would be ideal for brands that want to generate content that is easily shareable. Young generation consumers active on social media and influencers with their huge followership act as opinion leaders in influencing the buying decisions of the consumers. Therefore, social media platforms play a major role in influencing online purchases. Together these platforms provide unique features that shape consumers' preferences and decision making differently thus helping channel consumers purchase behaviors in a particular manner depending on the platform that one is using.

#### 2.3 Social Media Platforms in China

The social media industry is quite different in China. Among the most used platforms include Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. Each of them has its own specific features that make it useful for influencer marketing. These platforms play a vital role in providing avenues for influencer marketing. However, the success of influencers marketing to the target Gen Z consumers depend on the characteristics of each of these platforms since they are developed with different algorithms designs.

#### 2.3.1 Weibo

Weibo is one of the leading platforms well targeted by influencers marketers in order to reach the target consumers – the Gen Zs. This platform has adopted new features such as live streaming, e-commerce, and analytical tools to make the it suitable for influencer marketing. Gen Zs preference for Weibo can thus be said to be due to its effectiveness in creating current affairs and trends. The 'Hot Search' section that displays trending topics, topics of the day, is especially embraced by users particularly the young people who seek to know more about the latest happening in the society. For influencers, this feature is also a way to increase the popularity of their accounts by engaging in the trending topics or generating the content connected with active discussions and also just keep user active on the platform. The desire to keep up with new occurrences makes it easier for influencer marketers to target active participants with tailored goods based on users' frequent searches or preferences.

The nature of Weibo suits influencer marketing campaigns

especially those that are targeted at creating awareness and engagement. Most of the messages on Weibo are short and to the point with prompts that may range from product reviews to personal updates and promotional campaigns (Kim et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). This is specifically true concerning trending topics as it means that the influencers may create content that is in sync with the general opinion of the society. Weibo is beneficial as it allows the brands to work with key opinion leaders who are already active on Weibo. These are referred to as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) given the fact that they command the conversations and can influence consumers (Li et al., 2024). For instance, in a major product release or occasion, the brands liaise with Weibo influencers to draw attention of the targeted customers. Zhou et al. (2024) describes Weibo as one of the best platforms for targeting Gen Z consumer.

However, there are some challenges associated with Weibo when it comes to influencer marketing. The first of them is the high velocity of the platform, which means that brands and influencers need to constantly post new and popular content (Zou et al., 2021). However, the platform has an algorithm that favors trending discussions, meaning that it could take time for influencers or a brand to be seen even when they have quality content without boosting it. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that Weibo is still one of the most effective platforms to use for influencer marketing, especially for those campaigns which goal is to create a hype (Yang & Peng, 2022). Through the application of the platform and participating the right influencers, the brands are capable of reaching the Gen Z consumers and achieve the goal.

#### 2.3.2 Xiaohongshu

Xiaohongshu, which is translated as "Little Red Book," acts as a search for new products and services, Xiaohongshu follows the user-generated content approach and is highly suitable for brands to leverage influencer marketing approaches that seek to establish credibility (Li, 2023). It provides Chinese customers with information on overseas products and has grown to be a lifestyle blog that deals with virtually everything starting from beauty and fashion to traveling and food. Currently, Xiaohongshu has 300 million plus user registrations, a good number of which

are made up of Gen Z. Another interesting aspect that is important to mention is that the main content of Xiaohongshu is user-generated content (Zhe & Srijinda, 2024). This implies that the users can share detailed reviews, give product recommendations, or even create lifestyles that can be of interest to their followers. This has made Xiaohengshu to become a reliable platform for the Gen Z consumers who are always looking for brands that are honest and real.

Because Xiaohongshu follows the user-generated content approach, it is highly suitable for brands to leverage influencer marketing approaches that seek to establish credibility. Key Opinion Consumers, or Influencers on Xiaohongshu, are regarded for their professional and rather truthful comments and recommendations that their followers trust (Si & Leou, 2023). These individuals usually post their own experiences with products and this can be very useful to the buyers.

For brands, Xiaohongshu is an excellent platform to cooperate with influencers with whom they share a close-knit bond with the audience. These influencers can be trusted to come up with content that can help in promoting the brand and the products it deals in in a natural way. For instance, beauty brands work closely with Xiaohongshu influencers to post videos on how to use the products, opening new products, and showcasing the usefulness of the products. Available data from the year 2021 shows that the engagement rate of the influencer marketing campaigns on Xiaohongshu is 15% something that makes this platform among the most effective to reach Generation Z consumers in this market (Tan, 2024).

Xiaohongshu has both opportunities and challenges. One primary challenge with this platform is its emphasis on the authenticity of the posts which means that the influencers and brands should create the content that will be relevant and close to people. The platform's algorithm also tends to recommend content of high quality, which means that new or less popular influencers or brands will not become popular overnight without investing in content creation. Nevertheless, Xiaohengshu is still a strong tool for influencer marketing, especially for the campaigns that can work on the principle of trust (Zhang, 2024). Through the application of the platform and participating the right

influencers, the brands are capable of reaching the Gen Z consumers and achieve the goal.

#### **2.3.3 Douyin**

Douyin has reached six hundred million daily active users, making it a favorite among Gen Z in China. The shortform video format of the platform is suitable for the influencer marketing campaigns targeting the Gen Z consumer audience. Douyin was established in 2016 and within a short period, it gained a significant popularity in China as a social media application. It specializes in short-form videos as it lets the users create and publish videos that do not exceed 15 seconds (He & Tian, 2023). It has made significant changes over the years and introduces functions such as live streaming, e-commerce integration, and more insightful analytics that make it favorable for influencer marketing. It provides a high-quality and entertaining content to meet the needs of the target Gen Z consumers. The platform algorithm computes the content with a performance rate of high-quality posts, which makes it suitable for influencers and brands.

Due to the nature of short-form video content, Douyin is an effective platform and has significantly promoted influencer marketing efforts that target the young generation consumers. The influencers on Douyin normally post interesting and interactive videos that capture the use of a product in a unique manner (Hung, 2024). These videos may be product reviews and tutorials or dances and challenges and therefore, are easily shareable as well as captivating.

For brands, Douyin is a rather effective platform to cooperate with influencers who are active on the site. These are what are commonly known as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and can orchestrate content that goes viral among the targeted audience. For instance, during product launch or any event, brands collaborate with Douyin influencers to develop short, memorable clips that evoke the consumers' interests. As noted by Hung, (2024), average engagement rate for the influencer marketing campaigns on Douyin stands at ten percent, and thus it is one of the most effective means of reaching the Gen Z consumers in China.

Douyin is replete with opportunities for influencer marketing despite having some drawbacks. The first of them is the high velocity of the platform, which means that brands and influencers need to constantly post new and popular content. Furthermore, the algorithm of the platform gives precedence to the content that has a high rate of interaction, which remains challenging for small influencers or brands to compete with without having to invest in content production.

However, it is still possible to consider Douyin as a highly effective tool for influencer marketing targeting the audience of the Generation Z. Through the application of the platform and participating the right influencers, the brands are capable of reaching the Gen Z consumers and achieve the goal.

#### 3. Discussion

# **3.2** Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing on Gen Z Consumers

#### 3.2.1 Authenticity

The success of influencer marketing dependents on a wide range of factors besides the choice of social media platform. One primary aspect is trust and authenticity (Pradhan et al., 2023; Van den Bergh et al., 2024). This makes influencer marketing effective for influencers who have developed trust with their followers. Li & Peng (2021) observed that people tend to believe recommendations of influencers that they consider to be genuine and similar to them. This is especially the case with the Gen Z consumers who expect brands to be truthful and open with them (Anjum et al., 2020). Authenticity is an important concept that determines the effectiveness of the influencer marketing strategy. This is because the audience is more likely to trust an influencer who they feel is similar to them and can relate with them hence increasing the chances of conversion. Thus, in China where the public has become very skeptical with the conventional forms of advertising, this is even more so. According to Hasan et al. (2024), Gen Z consumers in China have at least bought something based on an influencer's endorsement. This shows that influencer authenticity is critical. This way, influencers perform one of the activities that are crucial to building a believable life around the product. For instance, bloggers on Xiaohongshu share the results of using the skincare products with their followers by providing the 'before and after' pictures alongside describing their experiences on the product. Brand communication of this kind go well with the Gen Z consumers, who are known to appreciate the truth in advertising (Anjum et al., 2020).

Gen Z is a generation that values authenticity, and expects customized content and messages. Whereas they are active on social media they are only persuaded by the recommendations made by an influencer than an advertisement. They tend to be impatient hence the need for brands to ensure that they present authentic appealing content. Being individuals born after the year 1995, they are more digital savvy consumers - digital natives brought up with the digital influence. They are therefore present in nearly all social media applications such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu that appeals more to the young generation. Because these young consumers are capable of handling technology, they are also well conversant with different types of digital platforms. Therefore, mobile optimization is an essential factor to observe for brands targeting this audience. The Gen Z consumers in China have a tendency of spent more than 3hours on social media platforms using their phones (Weiwei & Yongyue, 2021). Due to the high level of digital literacy of the Gen Z consumers, new forms of content consumption have emerged, including short videos and live broadcasts. Such platforms as Douyin and Kuaishou benefit from the increased popularity of short-form videos that are vibrant and engaging. The emergence of video streaming is another critical factors that is making it easier to target Gen Z consumers. Therefore, companies need to provide entertaining live shows that also promote sales (Zhou et al., 2021). Gen Zs have a high affinity to live stream since this tends to be authentic. Gen Z expect influencers to be sincere and would rather follow those perceived to be real.

According to Raza et al., (2022) Gen Z consumers are inclined towards authenticity due to the fact that they value the truth when it comes to brands and their products. Having been brought up in an environment where they are surrounded by advertisements and marketing messages. Gen Zs have learned how to tell the difference between the original content and the fake one and will only engage with the brands that are real. Therefore, to gain trust with

Gen Z companies can bring onboard influencers with whom Gen Zs are aligned with their ideals and interests. For instance, beauty brands in China tend to work with influencers who are not considered conventionally beautiful and who do not wear much makeup. It is also noted that audiences prefer such influencers as they are natural and do not post fully edited or filtered pictures.

#### 3.2.2 Engaging Content

Gen Zs have an impulsive characteristic. Therefore, incorporating the use of engaging content is necessary because of their short attention span. Zhou et al. (2021) reiterates that the attention span of the generation is very low, and with such a short attention span, brands need to come up with interesting and appealing content that would be able to grab the attention of the Gen Z consumers at first sight. This is important because the competition on social media platforms is also rather high in China and so brands have to pay extra efforts to make the content distinctive. This is necessary and can result in the production of more creative and innovative content types, which include; short videos, polls and game like experiences (Hung, 2024). Brands on Douyin can make short funny clips which are meant to trend whilst brands on Xiaohongshu can use polls or quiz to capture the attention of the audience.

#### 3.2.3 Relatability

Another aspect that defines the effectiveness of the influencer marketing campaigns is relatability. Gen Z consumers are willing to engage with influencers that they have something in common with in terms of values, lifestyle and interest. As the channels such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu in China are highly individualistic, this is critical factor when engaging Gen Z if it takes into account aspects of relatability (Zhang et al., 2022). For instance, micro and nano influencers who possess comparatively smaller number of followers are more effective because they are considered more genuine compared to mega influencers or celebrities. Such influencers share content related to their normal life experiences hence, Gen Z consumers can easily relate to them. Brands should thus approach the right people who can help them to create campaigns that look more like a genuine promotion rather than a commercial break, which is ignored by Gen Z.

#### 3.2.4 Platform Choice

Platform selection is another significant determinant that influence the effectiveness of the influencer marketing strategies. Every site has specific content and audience. Therefore, brands need to find which site they can use to reach the target audience. Among the social media platforms in China, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin are most widely used by Gen Z consumers in different capacities. For creating awareness in real-time Weibo is the best suited, while for detailed reviews and lifestyle sharing Xiaohongshu is the best suited and for attracting attention in a short span with creativity, Douyin is the best suited (He & Tian, 2023). For instance, a brand in the beauty product category can use Xiaohongshu for detailed information and demonstration of their products while a fashion brand can use Douyin for challenges and dance trends. Brands should therefore take advantage of the above-listed platforms depending on the following strengths of each of the social media platforms.

#### 3.2.5 Content Quality

Content quality is important to Gen Zs. The content put out must be highly creative and visually appealing as Gen Zs are known to be easily distracted and will not spend time going through any boring content. In China, social media is highly visual and therefore the quality of content is critical in an influencer marketing campaign. Amusing Apps like Douyin and Xiaohongshu focus on the high clarity of images, beautiful videos, and attractive stories. For instance, to be noticed on Douyin, it is common to have well-edited videos with popular music and bright pictures and graphics in between. High quality content is what should be produced by brands to engage the Gen Z consumers and achieve their attention.

#### 3.2.6 Cultural Relevance

Cultural significance is another component that is very important in enhancing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaign for Gen Z consumers in China. This generation is very conscious of their culture and what they stand for; therefore, they will interact with the content that is culturally relevant (Zhang et al., 2022). For instance, campaigns with Chinese traditions, Chinese festivals or cultural symbols will likely appeal to the Chinese Gen Z

consumers. Also, when the influencers are culturally sensitive to their followers, they are likely to be trusted and believed. Culturally authentic brands are closer to achieving the goal of reaching the consumers of Gen Z in a more effective manner.

#### 3.2.6 Brand Loyalty

Another important factor is that influencer marketing that make use of well-known brands is likely to effective in engaging Gen Z consumers and convert viewers to buyers. Li & Peng, (2021) observed that Gen Z consumers tend to stick with brands they know well and who work with influencers whom they know. This is especially the case when companies are involved in influencer marketing and use relatable and realistic content. In China, because of the focus on values and emotions in brand choice, influencer marketing is a good way for building a long-term brand relationship with Gen Z. Brand loyalty and association are thus common techniques for winning over more Gen Zs. It is common to find the influencers to recommend products from the brand and post pictures and videos of them using the products that are well known to tareget audience. This elicits a feeling of community among the Gen Z consumers since they feel that they are part of the society. For instance, sportswear brands like Li-Ning being common in the eyes of Gen Zs are cable to establish a fan base among the Gen Z consumers through influencer marketing. Through partnering with such influencers who have similar values and interests as the brand, Li-Ning it is possible for them to establish an emotional appeal with the target consumers hence improving on the brand loyalty level.

In another sense, influencer marketing fosters brand loyalty because of the presence of a coherent and sincere trademark image. It is also important to point out that Gen Z consumers are not keen on inauthentic or commercially-oriented content, rather and are more likely to remain loyal to a brand that posts content that they find relatable.

# 3.3 Challenges and Limitations of Influencer Marketing

However, influencer marketing is not without some challenges as it is discussed in this paper. The first one is the matter of influencer credibility (Li & Peng, 2021). With

the current rising trend of influencer marketing, some influencers have been deemed to misrepresent their affiliations with brands and products, and this has affected the reliability of the end consumer. Also, algorithms within platform can hinder brands to reach the target consumers as content might not be easily visible to the users.

#### 3.3.1 Consumer Skepticism

Consumer skepticism is another major problem that affects the success of influencer marketing in China. According to Dolot, (2018), Chinese Gen Z consumers are less trusting of influencers whose marketing trend seam not to be genuine or are out rightly foreign. Such marketing are hard to sell particularly when they do not appear authentic. Where Gen Zs think that influencers are insincere or entirely compromising their content for monetary gains Gen Zs often opt not to buy the products being promoted. This is a major challenge that is hampering influencer marketing. According to Zhang et al., (2022) nearly sixty percent of the Gen Z consumers in China have at one time unfollowed an influencer due to the issues of fake reality. This is due to the current increased cases of fake influencers who post fake sponsored content or influencers who endorse products they do not personally use. Therefore, the consumption of content by the Gen Z has changed and they are more likely to unlike the accounts of influencers that they feel are fake.

To this effect, there is the need for brands to ensure that they are authentic in their influencer marketing. This also entails working with influencers who are regular users of the products and also those who have faith in them, while the influencers should declare paid partnerships. However, brands must ensure they develop content that the Gen Z can identify with and that is why it is good to be as transparent as possible with them.

#### 3.3.2 Platform Algorithms

Another potential issue regarding influencer marketing that can potential harm their success is the algorithms of the social media platform. For instance, Douyin has an algorithm that targets contents that garners a lot of engagement thus making it hard for brands to post their target audience if the content does not go viral. In the same way, Xiaohongshu's algorithm filters the best quality content

which can be disadvantageous to new or small influencers or brands with less capital on content production (Li & Peng, 2021) Thus, the brands need to create high-quality content with the help of well informed and market sensitive influncers for them to be able to work with the platform's algorithm in a way that does not disorient the trust of Gen Zs. This will encompass development of quality and engaging content in form of images and videos that are most likely to attract traffic. Also, paid promotions of the content should be considered especially in Douyin and Xiaohongshu platforms.

#### 4. Conclusion

Influencer marketing is an efficient way of targeting Gen Z consumers in China. However, its effectiveness is dependent of vital factors including authenticity, platform choice, reliability and cultural sensitivity. These are specific circumstances that influencer marketers must take into consideration and even guarantee if they are to succeed in marketing products to Gen Z target audience. This calls for brands to work with the proper influencer and produce good and genuine content to increase sales among Gen Z consumers. But brands should also remember that there are also some issues and drawbacks of the influencer marketing, for example, low trust from the audience or problems with the algorithms. This can affect influencer marketers' success. Thus, brands can enhance the effectiveness of their influencer marketing in the long run and within the Chinese market by performing frequent checks and readjustments to ensure that they keep up with the changes and that they do not present falsity at any given point in time.

#### Review

In the process of doing this study, I have gained significant insights on the impact of influencer marketing in the Chinese Gen Z consumers. Throughout the process of conducting research, I identified key factors that determine the effectiveness of the influencer marketing strategies. One of the problems, which I faced while doing this study was the limited peer reviewed journals on my area of focus. The limited number of up-to-date information

about the influencer marketing industry in China, was a major challenge. To overcome this, I reviewed as much information as I could find.

I like this project because I have learned a lot while doing this project. I can say that it has helped me improve the research and analysis skills and the ability to provide a synthesis of the information obtained from different sources. I have also learned the value of authenticity and relatability in the influencers' marketing strategies since these factors influence the behavior of consumers. In future, it will be possible to use the findings of this project and the skills developed in the course of the work in further research and practice.

One of the main limitations in this study was the lack of use of primary data and instead, using secondary sources to obtain information on the ever-evolving field of influencer marketing in China. The study was limited to Gen Z consumers in the Chinese market. Therefore, the conclusions derived from this study may not be generalizable to other particularly western countries. Future research could extend the research on the influence of influencer marketing to other consumer segments or even in other cultures.

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### **Appendix-Time management**

