

Generative AI Used by Social Influencers and Their Trust Among Generation Z

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Abstract:

Social influencers are people who emerge on social media platforms with considerable followers. In the era of artificial intelligence, there are social influencers tend to use generative AI to help them complete several tasks, for instance, data collection, data analysis, AI-generated music, images, text, videos etc. This paper will focus on the perspective of visual generative AI seen by audiences. The main purpose of the study is to investigate how generative AI used by social influencers would influence trust among Generation Z. In order to back up my research, the source credibility theory is applied. Questionnaires are handed out in the way of qualitative methods. This study explored the perception of different Generation Z for the trust for social influencers using generative AI.

Keywords: social influencers, generative AI, generation Z, source credibility theory, trust

1 Introduction

“Social media influencers (SMIs) represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.” (Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A., 2011) During the pandemic, people tended to be incarcerated at home, avoiding physical interactions with others, and, therefore, led to the rise of social media networks. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram then enabled businesses to use social influencers to target their audiences and carry out business activities. (Alves de Castro, C., O’Reilly Dr, I., & Carthy, A., 2021) Nowadays, there’s frequent emergence of social influencers on various social media platforms, with different numbers of followers from person to person. Generation Z, according to Dimock, M. (2019), is people who were born between the years 1997 to

2012, for different factors. Generation Z is a diverse group of people, been in touch with technology from the start of their lives, and they set a strong connection with the web through a number of devices. Just because of this, it’s worth finding out a certain relationship between Generation Z and the popular existence of social influencers on social media. “It is observed that individuals of Generation Z use social media to satisfy their different needs compared to individuals in other generation groups.” According to the study done by Yaman, D., & Çakın, Ö., “Generation Z individuals rely heavily on influencers’ feelings, thoughts and experiences about the product or service before they adopt a purchasing attitude towards a product or service, and they are affected by their discourse.” Moreover, “Generation Z individuals is that influencers help themselves to the acquisition of a new social environment.” (2021) It’s not

hard to conclude that the perception of Generation Z about social influencers is worth discovering, and this leads to the basis of this study.

Generative AI has developed quickly in recent years. “The term generative AI refers to computational techniques that are capable of generating seemingly new, meaningful content such as text, images, or audio from training data.” (Feuerriegel, S., Hartmann, J., Janiesch, C., & Zschech, P. 2024) And addition to this, generative AI has been applied in different areas because of its strong functionality and convenience, and what’s important, cost-effectiveness. For instance, social influencers currently use generative AI as content creators to achieve their marketing purposes on social media. This phenomenon has led to some uncertainty about the change in the relationship between social influencers and their audiences, focusing on the trust and reliability they have. Moreover, this study wants to discover the real perception of audiences about this new technology applied in familiar occasions, especially Generation Z.

2 Literature Review

2.1 People’s General Perception about Social Media Influencers

As vital figures on different social media platforms or acting as representatives for businesses, what are the differences between social influencers and traditional celebrities perceived by their audiences? Ouvrein, G., Pabian, S., Giles, D., Hudders, L., & De Backer, C. mentioned four key differences in their studies: Firstly, social media influencers are only instafamous, meaning that they don’t seek to be famous in real-world situations. Secondly, their most important job is to influence others. Thirdly, their contents updated should be authentic while doing the job. Lastly, social influencers have a unique relationship with their audiences, quite different from those of traditional celebrities. They keep their audiences alive by interactions. Overall, social media influencers are generally perceived as a trustworthy group of people and have similarities with their audiences. (2021) And what’s more, “in contrast to traditional celebrities, the perceived distance is less pronounced, increasing their potential effects on the young audience.” (Zimmermann, D., Noll, C., Gräber, L., Hugger, K. U., Braun, L. M., Nowak, T., & Kaspar, K., 2020) Basically, the establishment of relationship between social influencers and audiences is due to authenticity and trustworthiness no matter from a subjective and objective perspective.

2.2 Types of Different Social Influencers

There are different ways to categorize the types of social influencers. One common way is to divide them into micro, macro, and mega social influencers. According to the summary of this type of division done by Conde, R., & Casais, B., micro-influencers have followers between 1000 and 100000 people, with a high engagement rate, close relationships, and the highest perceived trust among audiences but a small number of audiences bring them low visibility and return on investment. Macro-influencers are those who have followers between 100000 and 1000000 people. They have better performances than micro-influencers except for the engagement rate and levels of trust. Lastly, mega-influencers have followed more than 1000000 people. They are globally recognized and make the best achievement than the other two groups of people from a commercial perspective, but this situation may lead to the audiences’ negative attitudes towards its characteristics. (2023) The first way of division is based on these elements below: number of followers, relationship, trust (authenticity or credibility) and other visual statistics. The second separation done by Ouvrein, G., Pabian, S., Giles, D., Hudders, L., & De Backer, C., however, contains measurements like passion, online admiration, social media entrepreneurship, celebrity status, authenticity, and revenue. In this way, social influencers are divided into five groups: Passionate Business Influencers, Passionate Influencers, Celebrity Influencers, Dreaming Business Dormants, and Passionate Topic Enthusiasts. (2021) In conclusion, the second division gives results of five different outcomes around 7 dimensions, but what’s similar to the first division is that trust (authenticity or credibility) is both studied, meaning that trust is a key element when studying social influencers.

2.3 People’s General Perception of Generative AI

Generative AI has been a double-edged sword since it came to use. It has shown opportunities and threats among users, and here’s the summary of people’s perception about Generative AI based on existing literature. Most positive perceptions about Generative AI are based on its functionality: content creation, data analysis, natural language interfaces, image synthesis, space synthesis, product design and object synthesis, etc. However, the negative perception arises from different aspects: “(i) no regulation of the AI market and urgent need for regulation, (ii) poor quality, lack of quality control, disinformation, deep fake content, algorithmic bias, (iii) automation-spurred job losses, (iv) personal data violation, social surveillance, and privacy violation, (v) social manipulation,

weakening ethics and goodwill, (vi) widening socio-economic inequalities, and (vii) AI technostress.” (Wach, K., Duong, C. D., Ejdys, J., Kazlauskaitė, R., Korzynski, P., Mazurek, G., ... & Ziemba, E., 2023) The current studies focus more on the opportunities and threats of generative AI itself, but lack in-depth analysis of different people’s perception. Generative AI can be further explored from all human beings’ perspectives.

2.4 Types of Generative AI Used by Social Influencers on Social Media

There are four Generative AI output modalities mentioned in the literature: text generation, image/video generation, speech/music generation, and code generation. (Feuerriegel, S., et, al., 2024) Social influencers may use the functions above while using generative AI for several reasons: refine or create texts to make high-quality outputs, make influencing more cost-effective, and make comparisons of the human and AI effort. The wider application of the use of generative AI by social influencers does mean that the development of generative AI has come to the next level, but whether it will change the essence of social media and social influencers is questioned. Therefore, it’s necessary to switch to the audience’s angle to further explore.

2.5 Source Credibility Theory (SC)

Social media are defined as “internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.” (Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A., 2015) The establishment of the relationship between social influencers and audiences are based on these channels, therefore leads to the consideration of the credibility of source (the social media). Source credibility (SC) is a term often used to refer to the positive characteristics of an influencer that influence the recipient’s acceptance of a message (Ohanian, 1990). The theory has three main constructs: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. (Ohanian, 1991). Munukka, J., Uusitalo, O., & Toivonen, H. added a new construct, which is “similarity” in the theory. (2016) Source credibility theory can also explain the trust of audiences in social influencers. Balaban, D., & Mustăţea, M. (2019) mentioned in their literature: “Three of the credibility elements: trustworthiness, similarity, and attractiveness, proved to have positive effects on perceived trust, brand awareness, and purchase intention.” This study will apply source credibility theory to discover the trust for social influencers using generative AI among Generation Z from the aspects of trustworthiness, similarity and attractive-

ness.

3 Methodology

The main research objective was to analyze the trust of Generation Z for social influencers using generative AI. This study explored the implication of the three constructs of the source credibility theory on Generation Z’s trust. The aim of the study is to contribute to the further exploration of the role of social influencers on social media affected by generative AI. Hund, E. D. emphasizes the importance and promoting qualitative research in the influencer industry. (2019) This study also wants to use qualitative methods to gather in-depth perceptions of audiences in order to reduce the gap between quantitative research and qualitative research.

The main focus is presented in the three research questions below.

RQ1: How does Generation Z perceive social influencers using generative AI?

RQ2: What kind of trust does Generation Z have for social influencers using generative AI?

RQ3: How different types of generative AI affect the trust?

Through the insight of audiences, this helps to gain key phases that relates to or reflect trust. Without gathering and analyzing visual data from a subjective perspective, this study wants to focus on the ideas that may vary from person to person from a relative objective perspective, that’s what most current studies neglect. (Ouvrein et al., 2021)

As mentioned above, source credibility has a direct impact on perceived trust. Based on the present situation on social media platforms, the way how social influencers use generative AI becomes more diverse. We want to categorize the types of generative AI that being touched by Generation Z and analyze the level of trust on either of them. The two research questions partially rely on the findings of RQ1.

4 Design of the Research

Qualitative research is used by assigning a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions. Qualitative research methods are essential for this study, for “aims which are directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories; data which are very detailed, information-rich and extensive...” (Moriarty, J., 2011) Snowball sampling was used. The participants are mostly from 16 to 24, and are

gender-mixed. The scenarios they provided are social media platforms like Douyin, little Redbook, and Bilibili.

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Theme 1: Perception for Social Influencers Using Generative AI

Predictably, different people's ideas vary from person to person. But in general, the ideas can be divided into 3 types, which are positively supportive, being neutral, and negatively supportive. For those being positively supportive, "It helps to solve the situation when influencers are running out of innovation, as well as giving different experience to audiences.", "we should accept since sometimes it can bring unexpected creations.", and "AI can generate things that won't happen in reality." Moreover, one respondent said, "I use generative AI to create texts." We can see that the reasons for them to be positively supportive are due to AI's functionality that may benefit both social influencers and audiences. For those being neutral, they find the combination of human effort and AI effort reasonable, "I think they can use generative AI to complete repetitive work, for instance, data collection and AI dubbing, but I do not accept AI of current levels to completely finish selecting topics and other stuff like subjective operations." But one condition is not to infringe others' rights: "Do not infringe." and "I'm fine with anything that doesn't involve AI crime or infringement." People who are negatively supportive prefer to keep the essence of creation, and using generative AI seems to lose the meaning of creation. "Real art cannot be created by AI", "Social influencers lose the meaning of being themselves.", "It lacks of innovation.", "It doesn't convey personal characteristics.", "The value of human effort will diminish". These opinions also show that they see the relationship between social influencers and audiences as important, and AI as a mechanism will break the relationship.

5.2 Theme 2: Kinds of Trust for Social Influencers Using Generative AI

Three constructs of source credibility theory were used as guidelines for this theme. Respondents were asked about how they thought of the attractiveness, trustworthiness, and similarity of social influencers using generative AI. According to the data, most of the people had no sense about the attractiveness and trustworthiness of social influencers using generative AI. However, most of the participants feel a decreased similarity about social influencers using generative AI, that is, no more emotional interac-

tions. According to the answers to the first open-ended question, the other aspect of trust was found: the maturity of generative AI. The participants responded that high maturity of generative AI won their higher level of trust. The maturity of generative AI can be further explained by the authenticity of the content created. Overall, higher source credibility brings a higher level of trust; higher maturity of generative AI brings a higher level of trust.

5.3 Theme 3: Types of Different Generative AI

The main types of generation AI that emerge on social media platforms are AI-generated text, images, video, and music. According to the data collected, the liking and acceptance of AI-generated text are the highest among participants. Images come the next, and then it's music and video. The main reason for the ranking is also due to the maturity of generative AI; AI-generated text is perceived as "meticulous, and better continuous.", "it won't like AI-generated images and videos, showing some basic problems of human bodies." However, the evaluation of four types of forms isn't complete enough. These forms don't show comprehensive functionality on social media platforms in China; when it comes to AI-generated videos, they are often funny programs on the platform, therefore leading to perceptions like "Some videos are disgusting." "I only appreciate influencers using AI-generated videos for entertainment." Similar to AI-generated music, the current example on Chinese social media platforms is to use AI to replace the original singer of the song. Other functions of AI-produced music, for instance, background music, aren't studied. But overall we still make a conclusion: AI-generated text has the highest level of trust.

*The phrases and sentences in the quotations are from respondents' answers to the questionnaire.

6 Conclusion

The main conclusion is that generative AI used by social influencers reduces the level of trust among Generation Z. According to terms like source credibility and maturity of generative AI, it's concluded that higher the source credibility and maturity of generative AI, the higher the level of trust of Generation Z. Our participants are all familiar with social media influencers and their emergence on social media platforms, most of them have seen generative AI used by social influencers. They not only gave a detailed perception of the current generative AI but also gave their expectation for the further development of it in the future from a relatively critical and objective perspective.

The similarity is seen as a key element that influences Generation Z's trust in source credibility. In terms of the

frequency of generative AI used by Chinese social influencers, attractiveness and trustworthiness cannot be fully evaluated. Therefore, most of the participants have no sense of them. The original and pure relationship between social influencers and audiences should be carefully taken into consideration, meaning that the reason of following them should not be neglected. Therefore, this study makes a prediction: If generative AI used by social influencers no longer generates emotional resonance, generation Z will perceive the least level of trust.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how generative AI used by social influencers would influence trust among Generation Z. We applied source credibility theory into the research, and had discovered the factors that influenced trust other than attractiveness, trustworthiness and similarity. Qualitative research helped us deepen the question we had raised, especially when most of the current studies focus on quantitative methods and give a general conclusion. But that's also our limitation: the perception of social influencers using generative AI varies from person to person. Under different education, cultures, and access to social media platforms, the familiarity and acceptance of AI would be different from the very start.

"Social media influencers attempt to impact all areas of their target audience's lives."(Alves de Castro C., et al., 2021) And in the era of artificial intelligence, problems and conflicts appear. This paper contributes to the development of social influencers and generative AI through deep insights into people's perceptions. Social influencers can use this result to help them build better relationships with audiences to maximize trust and achievements with the use of generative AI. Also it also provides other scholars with future directions, for instance, how education, cultures, and access to social media platforms influence the trust of social influencers using generative AI.

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