

MDDM

**The effect of characteristics of social media influencers on their
opinion leadership related to product choices among
Generation Z**

Wu Hongshan

Master Thesis

presented as partial requirement for obtaining a Master's Degree in Data-Driven Marketing

NOVA Information Management School
Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação
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to product choices among Generation Z**

by

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Master Thesis presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialization in Market Research & CRM

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July, 2024

STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism, any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

[Lisbon, July 2024]

ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on the product choices of Generation Z (Gen Z) from an opinion leadership perspective. Given the exponential growth of influencer marketing and the unique characteristics of Gen Z as digital natives, it is critical to understand the interplay between these influencers and Gen Z. This study uses a quantitative approach to collect data from a sample of Gen Z through a structured questionnaire. Findings suggest that these traits greatly enhance the ability of influencers to shape Gen Z consumer perspectives and product choices. This study highlights the importance of authenticity, credibility, and relatability in fostering trust and Gen Z attitudes toward SMIs, mediating parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. By examining these dynamics, the study provides insights into effective marketing strategies for brands that engage influential Gen Zers through social media platforms.

KEYWORDS

Social Media Influencers; Generation Z; Opinion Leadership; Parasocial Relationships; Credibility; Authenticity; Relatability

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, social media influencers (SMIs) have become highly popular, making influencer marketing widespread in firm strategies (Vrontis, Makrides, & Christofi, 2021). Generation Z (Gen Z), born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has grown up with digital communication and is a significant economic force (Alves, 2023). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers gain prominence through authentic content, creating strong connections with audiences (Croes & Bartels., 2021). As independent third-party endorsers, SMIs influence audience attitudes via blogs, tweets, and social media (Freberg et al., 2011). These influencers, interacting with many followers, are considered opinion leaders (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). In modern culture, varying social opinions arise and fade rapidly (Lee, Yang, & Kim, 2022). Opinion leaders significantly impact online opinions and are key information sources (Parau, 2017; Casaló et al., 2018). Consequently, media content heavily influences our opinions. With social media's rise, the research emphasizes the importance of SMIs and opinion leadership—where influencers provide valuable information (Casaló et al., 2018). Businesses recognize social media's cost-effectiveness for reaching target markets, investing in influencers worthwhile (Obeidat et al., 2022).

The quantitative method is used to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem. A survey-based approach involves collecting data from a sample of Gen Z people using structured questionnaires. This approach can provide a richer context for quantitative data and help explain quantitative findings.

This dissertation aims to explore the extent to which social media influencers shape the opinions and attitudes of Gen Z and how the characteristics of SMIs influence their opinion leadership on Gen Z product choices. Understanding these characteristics is critical to understanding Gen Zers' product preferences on social media. By examining the characteristics of SMIs, it is possible to reveal what factors make them more influential among Gen Z and how they influence young people's product choices through social media platforms. Meanwhile, understanding these factors will help us better understand how Gen Z, as a huge force in the global consumer marketplace, perceives influencers to help brands gain deeper insights into the minds of Gen Z young people and make better use of influencers to promote products and services.

Delving into the impact of social media influencers on opinion leadership among Gen Z, it is essential to recognize the potential consequences of this influence. Due to the advancement of internet technology and the rise of SMIs, more studies are being conducted on consumer behavior in Gen Z or influencer marketing. There is research focused on influencers in certain geographic locations, platforms, or specific areas (Tafesse&Wood, 2021; Byrne et al., 2017; Magno&Cassia, 2018), and much research also focuses on influencer marketing and the association of influencers with brands (Pinto&Paramita, 2021; Pradhan et al., 2022; Tamara et al., 2021; Uzunoğlu&Kip, 2014). However, there is a gap regarding the influence of specific

characteristics of influencers on opinion leadership among Gen Z. Gen Z is becoming a new generation of consumers and digital natives. Hence, it is important to have a deeper study on the relationship between Gen Z and SMIs and how the characteristics of SMIs affect Gen Z's opinion leadership. The previous research potentially neglects the diverse preferences and behaviors within Generation Z, especially in opinion leadership, and this study will dig into the area, more specifically, related to product choices. Furthermore, through the study, we can further explore whether Gen Z responds to influencers differently than older generations.

A more targeted investigation into the dynamics of opinion leadership within this demographic could provide a nuanced understanding. As we know from the previous literature, leadership is a phenomenon of great impact (Hogan&Kaiser, 2005), and in influencer marketing, influencers are seen as experts who influence others' attitudes toward products and brands (Fakhreddin&Foroudi, 2021); meanwhile, Gen Z shoppers prefer to get their information from influencers than traditional ads such as television commercials (Salukov, 2023). With this in mind, deeper research between influencers and Gen Z, particularly the impact of the information that Gen Z receives from influencers on forming their opinions regarding product choice, can better understand the relationship between influencers and Gen Z people. Accordingly, this study has the following research question:

How do social media influencers' authenticity, credibility, and relatability factors impact Gen Z on opinion leadership in terms of product choice?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THEIR RISE

Social media's significance has increased tremendously during the past ten years. Based on the latest data, 4.89 billion people are expected to use social media globally in 2023—a 6.5% increase over the previous year (Statista, 2023). Under the influence of the Internet environment, these Internet users will inevitably look up to social media influencers and ask them to guide their decisions (Geyser, 2023).

Through social media platforms, social media influencers (SMIs) are a new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape the opinions of their audience (Freberg et al., 2011). They have established credibility and a substantial following on one or more social media platforms. Sharing personal experiences, opinions, and aspects of their lives helps build a genuine connection with their audience. Unlike traditional celebrities and opinion leaders, many influencers are considered experts or enthusiasts in a specific niche, whether it is fashion, beauty, fitness, technology, or other areas. Their expertise lends credibility to their recommendations and content (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022). It is essential to note that the influencer landscape is diverse, and individual influencers may emphasize different aspects depending on their personal brand and niche.

Influencers on social media have evolved throughout the generations. Hundreds of years ago, pioneers starred in early advertisements and lent their names and faces to reinforce brand values (Ahmad, 2017). Then, the fictional characters emerged to attract their target audience's attention. After the fictional characters phase came the celebrity endorsements. Compared to fictional characters, celebrities have mass followings due to their fame; they can convince consumers to buy the products they endorse. Nowadays, after the rise of social media influencers, celebrity endorsements have become relatively less effective as people cannot always relate to their over-the-top lifestyles; people tend to prefer influencers over celebrity endorsements (Ahmad, 2023). Social influencers play an important role in many aspects, such as new trends, styles, products, and brands, which makes them the most important factor influencing consumer buying behavior (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021). In this situation, influencers represent one of the most important types of social media product placement (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Based on the literature review above pertaining to influencers, it becomes evident that in the contemporary digital era, influencers are inclined to leverage the internet to connect with online users. By cultivating their channels and demonstrating expertise in specific domains, influencers endeavor to attract followers. In contrast to traditional celebrities, influencers are perceived as more relatable and individualized, enhancing their credibility among their audience. This differentiation is attributed to their down-to-earth demeanor and personalized approach, which fosters more profound credibility, authenticity, and relatability among their followers.

2.2. GENERATION Z AS DIGITAL NATIVES

As the people born between 1995 and 2010, Gen Z is the newest generation to enter the workforce. They are the generation most used to technology and have strong connections to social media (Mahapatra, Bhullar, & Gupta, 2022). Social media plays a significant role in the lives of Generation Z, who communicate informally, directly, and individually. They are the generation of Do-It-Yourself generation (Skees & Yusuf, 2021). Gen Zers are known as digital natives and are famous for their reliance on social networks (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). So, we can see that social media is an entertainment and communication tool for GenZers and an essential platform for building social relationships and expressing opinions. Members of Gen Z are prospective customers and the future workforce, and they will gradually influence society through digital platforms (Chang & Chang, 2023).

Gen Z is more active on social media platforms than any other generation; they rely heavily on social media as a source of information, especially from influential content creators (Chiu & Ho, 2023). As digital natives, Gen Z's daily lives are ingrained in social media. Morning Consult reported that 54% of Gen Zers spent at least four hours on social media, and 38% exceeded that duration (Briggs, 2022). Meanwhile, Insider Intelligence reported that over half of Gen Zers spend four or more hours daily on social media. In addition, according to the survey, about half of U.S. Gen Z and Millennial social users shop directly on social media. From these data, we found that GenZers are adept at utilizing social media to address various needs and also value personalization and self-expression, creating and sharing content on the Internet to show their interests, values, and identity. These characteristics also make it easier for GenZers to connect with social media influencers, so they may find resonance in a particular influencer, identifying with their views, lifestyle, or values and consequently strengthening their emotional connection with the influencers.

Regarding the marketplace, Gen Zers are the potential customers with a high purchase level (C. Chang&S.Chang, 2023). They affect household purchases to \$200 billion annually (Autotrader&Book, 2016). From this aspect, businesses will likely focus more attention and resources on appealing to Gen Z consumers due to their significant purchasing power.

2.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

From the above literature review, we can see that Gen Z is a group that values personalization, and due to the development of the Internet, they are interested in a variety of areas of interest, as well as expressing their true feelings. According to a survey, 92% of Gen Zers express that authenticity is the most essential value (Merriman & Oktem, 2022). Therefore, among the many influencers' characteristics, these variables will be considered dependent variables in the research model: authenticity, diversity, credibility, and relatability.

2.3.1. AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity refers to being sincere, truthful, and true to one's character (Lehman et al., 2019). Social influencers generally benefit from the highly perceived authenticity of the content they publish (Audrezet et al., 2020), and they gain a follower based on their established credibility and authenticity (Kapitan et al., 2021). A significant majority, comprising 61% of shoppers, indicate a higher propensity to purchase a product when it receives a recommendation from a trusted social media influencer (IMPACT 2024), which shows that followers usually value the opinions of online opinion leaders. Gen Z often forms their social identity through influencers in a complex and multifaceted process. Influencers play a significant role in shaping how Gen Z perceives themselves and their values in the world. They value authenticity and transparency and use digital media to access information about the world and form new ideas about themselves (Dearmer, 2023).

However, as the influence of influencers increases and various brands partner with them, followers also begin to doubt the authenticity of influencers (Zniva, Weitzl, & Lindmoser, 2023). In past research, we have learned that authenticity is an integral part of human identity. It helps build relationships with others, often from similarities, interests, and, most importantly, trust (Ebben & Bull, 2023). According to a survey, 82% of Gen Z consumers surveyed are more likely to trust a company that uses authentic images in its advertisements (Selig, 2024), and authentic influencers are good at building stronger trust with their followers. Meanwhile, research by Stackla (2019) found that 88% of consumers say authenticity is important when deciding what brands they like and support. This number is also significant for Gen Z, with 86% indicating that authenticity is crucial in purchasing. So, authenticity is essential in Gen Zers' purchase decisions.

Therefore, we have the following hypothesis.

H1. SMIs' authenticity positively influences their opinion leadership among Gen Zers regarding product choices.

2.3.2. CREDIBILITY

In the context of SMIs, they are highly sought after by brands because of the credibility they have built with their followers (Joshi et al., 2023). Belanche et al., (2021) point out that the credibility of influencers is critical to creating positive attitudes toward them. Furthermore, through the content of the previous literature, Gen Zers are known for being digital natives who heavily rely on online sources, including social media, for information (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Gen Zers support and follow people they believe have credibility, real skills, proven talent, interesting ideas, or people who directly act on the products or services offered (Singer et al., 2023). Gen Z emphasizes quality, authenticity, and uniqueness (Nugroho, Rahayu, & Hapsari, 2022). A survey by marketing firm Olapic reported that about half of respondents in the U.S. and the U.K. said they had considered buying a product after seeing information about it posted by an influencer (Vykus, 2023).

From the above, we have formulated the following hypothesis.

H2. SMIs' credibility positively influences their opinion leadership among Gen Zers regarding product choices.

2.3.3. RELATABILITY

In the previous literature review, we mentioned that influencers often post their personal experience and interests to attract followers on the same wavelength. Relatable influencers can shape the opinions and attitudes of Gen Z individuals. When Gen Z individuals perceive an influencer as relatable, they are more likely to identify with the influencer's values, beliefs, and perspectives (Tirocchi, 2023). So, we assume this relatability fosters a sense of connection and engagement, leading Gen Zers to trust and be influenced by the opinions and messages conveyed. Therefore, we have the following hypothesis.

H3. SMIs' characteristic relatability positively influences their opinion leadership among Gen Zers regarding product choices.

2.4. OPINION LEADERSHIP

Opinion leadership plays a significant role in marketing communications (Farivar et al., 2021). Opinion leaders can be seen as people who have an important influence on the attitudes of others (Godey et al., 2016), and with today's highly popular online social media, the role of opinion leaders is likely to be even greater (Turcotte et al., 2015).

When faced with peers' opinions on a particular issue, people tend to filter and integrate the information they receive and adjust their beliefs accordingly (Yaniv, 2004). SMIs often show different perspectives, backgrounds, and identities, promoting inclusiveness and challenging traditional norms, which helps to shape a more diverse and inclusive cultural landscape for Gen Z (Team, 2024). The authenticity of SMIs can affect follower behaviors such as purchases and beliefs. Influencers build trust and reliability with their followers by demonstrating their expertise on specific topics, and through social media interactions, influencers can be seen as reliable sources of information and trusted experts (Ebben & Bull, 2023).

Opinion leadership is related to individuals being mainly perceived as role models for others, and the information they provide is perceived as interesting and persuasive (Casaló et al., 2020). Gen Z, as digital nomads in the internet age, are susceptible to influences from social media. People process the information received to form judgments and generate attitudes, influencing opinions (Andrés et al., 2015).

According to previous research, attitudes and values are essential in developing public opinion (Rokeach, 1968). Therefore, due to the strong link between attitude and opinion, when we discuss the influencing factors of opinion leadership, we also consider whether those factors that we assume may have an impact on opinion leadership will have an impact on people's

attitudes, in this case, we will study whether the characteristics that influence opinion might influence the opinion leadership of SMIs by influencing Gen Z's attitudes toward SMIs.

2.5. ATTITUDES TOWARD SMIs

Attitudes toward influencers encompass followers' overall evaluations and affective responses towards SMIs. These attitudes are shaped by various attributes of the influencer, including perceived credibility, attractiveness, and relatability (Ohanian, 1990; De Veirman et al., 2017). Positive attitudes toward influencers can enhance their persuasive power and reinforce their opinion leadership (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

2.6. PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

Parasocial relationships are unilateral relationships that media users form with media personas. It refers to one-sided, emotionally charged interactions that audiences develop with media personalities, including SMIs. Horton and Wohl (1956) first introduced the concept, describing how viewers perceive media figures as intimate friends despite the unidirectional nature of the relationship. Subsequent studies have expanded on this, highlighting the depth of emotional investment and perceived reciprocity involved in PSRs (Giles, 2002; Dibble et al., 2016). Relationships with media personalities can affect individuals in many ways, such as political views, voting decisions, purchasing behavior, attitudes about gender stereotypes, and trust in various groups of people (Vinney, 2022). Research indicates that increased reliance on social media and extended time spent on it are associated with a higher likelihood of forming more parasocial relationships (Su et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Gen Z's trust in influencers can create parasocial relationships (Barber, 2023), so Gen Zers may see influencers as role models or sources of inspiration.

Unlike celebrity endorsers, SMI produces entertaining and informative content that blends with their personalities and preferences to create solid parasocial relationships with their followers (Ong, Sun, & Ito, 2022). Marwick (2015) also identifies two significant changes. First, traditional celebrities use social media to build direct relationships with their fans without an intermediary. Second, the rise of social media has also enabled non-celebrities, known as "social media influencers," to create large amounts of personal media, manipulate and widely disseminate this content, and reach (real or imagined) audiences. We assume that when influencers cultivate authenticity in their interactions with their audience, Gen Zers may be more inclined to trust their opinions and recommendations. When influencers express opinions or endorse products, Gen Zers may be more receptive to these messages due to the sense of connection and trust fostered by parasocial relationships. In this study, the relationship between PSRs' and SMIs' opinion leadership is hypothesized to be mediated by followers' attitudes toward influencers. This hypothesis is grounded in the idea that PSRs create a foundation of trust and emotional connection, which fosters positive attitudes toward the influencer. These attitudes then enhance the influencer's capacity to lead opinions.

Social penetration theory posits that relationships develop through gradual self-disclosure, leading to increased intimacy and influence (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In the context of SMIs, consistent and personal content can deepen PSRs, fostering positive attitudes and enhancing opinion leadership.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggests that persuasion occurs via central or peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). PSRs can lead followers to process an influencer's messages more centrally, resulting in stronger attitudes and greater influence.

Research has provided empirical support for the proposed mediation model. For instance, Kim and Song (2016) found that PSRs positively influence attitudes toward YouTube personalities, which subsequently enhances the persuasive impact of these personalities.

Comparative studies highlight similarities and differences in the impact of PSRs across various media and contexts. For example, Brown (2015) found that PSRs with traditional celebrities also enhance attitudes and influence, but the effect is stronger with SMIs due to the interactive nature of social media. This interaction allows for more frequent and personalized communication, reinforcing PSRs and positive attitudes (Chung & Cho, 2017).

However, discrepancies exist in the magnitude of these effects. Some studies suggest that the impact of PSRs on attitudes and opinion leadership might vary based on cultural contexts and platform-specific dynamics (Jin & Phua, 2014). For instance, PSRs might be more pronounced on visual platforms like Instagram than on text-based platforms like Twitter due to the richer media and perceived intimacy (Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Therefore, based on the literature above, we conclude the following hypothesis:

H4. The attitudes toward influencers mediates parasocial relationships and SMIs' opinion leadership.

2.7. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

A conceptual model has also been proposed based on the above literature review and the hypotheses introduced. The conceptual model visually represents the study's conceptual framework, illustrating the relationships between variables and concepts. In the context of studying the impact of SMIs on opinion leadership regarding product choices among Gen Z, a conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

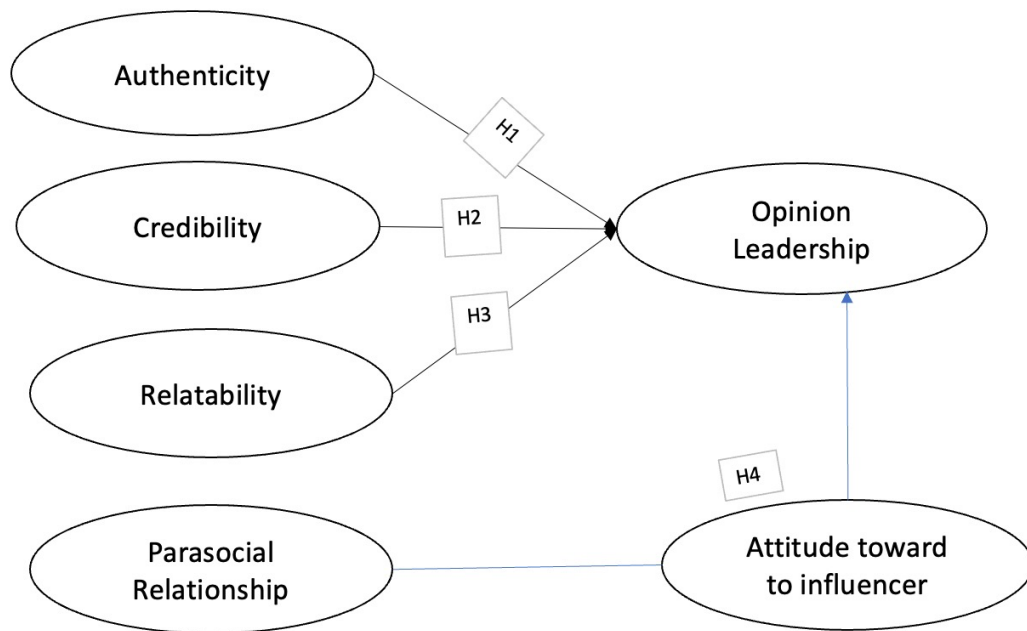


Figure 1 – Conceptual Model

3. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research design, sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures. By outlining these steps, the methodology section provides a comprehensive overview of how the study is conducted and how the research questions are addressed.

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the impact of social media influencers on opinion leadership among Gen Z regarding product choices. Quantitative methods allow collecting and analyzing numerical data to identify patterns, correlations, and trends (Kotronoulas et al., 2023). To analyze the mechanisms and factors by which social media influencers affect the opinions of Gen Z, the survey method used in this study is a questionnaire distributed online. The questionnaire will focus on how social media influencers influence opinions among Gen Z and then test whether the proposed hypotheses are valid.

3.2. SAMPLING

In this survey, the target group of the questionnaire will be the Gen Z group, so there will be an age limit. Moreover, the sampling frame would likely consist of Gen Zers who are active users of social media platforms. Convenience sampling is used as a sampling technique to select participants who are readily available and accessible. As the author is a member of Gen Z, the questionnaire was first distributed to the author's peer friends for pilot testing to ensure that the questions were reasonable and feasible. The questionnaire was then re-distributed after ensuring that the questions did not need to be modified.

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

After determining the objectives of the survey and the questions of the questionnaire, data collection methods should be chosen based on the research objectives, available resources, and the preferences and characteristics of the target population. The method of data collection used for this research topic was a questionnaire survey. Online surveys were distributed to a sample of Gen Zers to gather quantitative data on their exposure to social media influencers, opinions formed, and behaviors influenced by influencers. The questionnaire was created at Qualtrics; data collection started on May 2, and 346 questionnaires were collected by May 25. Excluding the responses that did not fit into this study, a total of 300 data items were included in the analysis.

Designing valid survey questions and using validated scales to measure the relevant constructs is vital. The survey questions for this study were clear, concise, and relevant to the study's objectives. The first section deals with the demographic information of the respondents. The second section deals with respondents' social media usage and basic perceptions of social media influencers. The last part conceptually measures variables and tests hypotheses. The

survey mainly uses a 5-point Likert scale, and the respondents will choose one of the answers to express their opinions.

3.4. ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The data collected will be used to draw meaningful conclusions. In this study, the tool used for data analysis is SPSS. First, descriptive analysis was used to calculate descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode, standard deviation) for quantitative variables (age, frequency of social media usage, Education level). Then, correlation coefficients are used to examine relationships between variables, such as the correlation between the frequency of following influencers and opinions formed. Also, regression analysis was conducted to explore the predictive relationship between independent and dependent variables based on the hypotheses.

3.5. MEASUREMENT ITEMS

Table 1-Measurement items

Construct	Reference	Adapted item
Authenticity	Ramírez et al. (2022)	A1: I perceive influencers's opinions as authentic. A2: Influencers' online posts seem genuine to me. A3: Influencers' opinions are reliable.
Credibility	Youssef and Lebdaoui (2020)	B1: I do believe that the influencers I follow are convincing. B2: I do believe that the influencers I follow are credible. B3: I do believe that influencer advertising is a good reference for purchasing products
Reliability	Hassan et al. (2021)	C1: I would like to follow what influencers do C2: I think I have similar interests with the influencer I follow C3: I believe it is valuable when the influencer interacts with their followers
Parasocial Relationship	Kim et al. (2015)	D1: In the past, I pitied influencer when he(she) made a mistake on his(her) social media D2: I feel comfortable about influencers on (social media. D3: I can rely on the information I get from influencers. D4: I think that influencer's post on social media is helpful for my interests. D5: I feel influencers are fascinating on their (her) social media.

Attitudes towards SMIs	Youssef and Lebdaoui, (2020)	E1: I do believe that SMIs serve as models for me. E2: I do believe that SMIs present interesting content. E3: I believe that SMIs provide new ideas about different products and services.
Opinion Leadership	Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2022)	F1: The influencers I follow are one step forward compared to others. F2: I take the opinion of influencers as a source of product information. F3: The SMIs influence my opinion

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4. RESULTS

4.1. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

A total of 346 questionnaire responses were collected in this study. Of these, 35 were excluded due to age restrictions that did not meet the study's target population, and another 11 were excluded due to incomplete responses. Ultimately, demographic information was collected and analyzed for 300 respondents aged between 12 and 27.

Regarding gender distribution, females accounted for 54.33% and males for 45.67%, indicating a relatively balanced gender ratio. Regarding educational attainment, most respondents (57.33%) have a bachelor's degree, while those with a high school education or less accounted for 12.67%, indicating a relatively high level of education.

Regarding employment status, 51.00% of respondents are employed full-time, while 24.67% are students, reflecting that this age group is in a critical period of career development.

Regarding social media usage, most respondents spend more than two hours daily on social media. The most common usage is 2-3 hours per day, accounting for 34.00%, with 25.00% of respondents spending more than four hours daily. Additionally, most respondents (92.00%) reported that they do not follow any influencers on any social media platforms, which may indicate that today's young people tend to use social media in more diverse and spontaneous ways.

Table 2-Basic information of respondents

Demographics of Respondents				
Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Age	12-27 years	300	100.00	100.00
Gender	Female	163	54.33	54.33
	Male	137	45.67	100.00
Educational Level	Below high school	38	12.67	12.67
	High school	71	23.67	36.33
	Bachelor's degree	172	57.33	93.67
	Master's degree	19	6.33	100.00

Demographics of Respondents

Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Occupation	Student	74	24.67	24.67
	Full-time employment	153	51.00	75.67
	Part-time employment	34	11.33	87.00
	Self-employed	33	11.00	98.00
	Others	6	2.00	100.00
	Less than 1 hour	2	0.67	0.67
Daily Time Spent on Social Media	1-2 hours	26	8.67	9.33
	2-3 hours	102	34.00	43.33
	3-4 hours	95	31.67	75.00
	More than 4 hours	75	25.00	100.00
Follow Any Influencers on Social Media Platforms	Yes	24	8.00	8.00
	No	276	92.00	100.00
Total		300	100.0	100.0

This study analyzed influencers' perceptions of social media across six dimensions: authenticity, credibility, relatability, parasocial relationship, attitudes towards SMIs, and opinion leadership. Each dimension was rated on a scale from 1 to 5. The results of the data analysis are as follows:

The average score for authenticity is 2.413 (with a standard deviation of 1.029), indicating that the perceived level of authenticity displayed by influencers is moderately low. Additionally, the skewness of 0.717 suggests that the data distribution is slightly skewed towards higher scores. The average score for credibility is 1.993 (with a standard deviation of 0.846), the lowest among all dimensions, indicating that the overall credibility of influencers is perceived to be quite low. The skewness of 0.747 similarly indicates that the data distribution is skewed towards higher scores. The average score for relatability is 1.89 (with a standard deviation of 0.872), the lowest average score among all dimensions. The skewness of 0.916 indicates that more respondents tend to give lower ratings for relatability. The average score for parasocial relationships is 2.063 (with a standard deviation of 0.838), and the kurtosis value of 1.154

indicates that the score distribution is sharper than a normal distribution. The skewness value of 0.451 shows a slight skew towards higher scores. The average score for attitudes towards SMIs is 2.353 (with a standard deviation of 0.996), and the skewness value of 0.492 indicates a relatively even distribution of scores. The average score for opinion leadership is 2.193 (with a standard deviation of 0.799), and the kurtosis value of 0.23 and the skewness value of 0.391 indicate a relatively balanced distribution of scores, with a slight skew towards lower scores.

Overall, the analysis results show that the perceptions of the surveyed young people towards social media influencers in terms of authenticity, credibility, relatability, parasocial relationship, attitudes towards SMIs, and opinion leadership are generally low. This may reflect a critical attitudes among young audiences towards influencer content and a demand for higher levels of authenticity and interactivity.

Table 3-Basic Metrics of Variables

Name	Sample Size	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard Deviation	Kurtosis	Skewness
Authenticity	300	1	5	2.413	1.029	0.104	0.717
Credibility	300	1	5	1.993	0.846	0.817	0.747
Relatability	300	1	5	1.89	0.872	0.615	0.916
Parasocial Relationship	300	1	5	2.063	0.838	1.154	0.774
Attitudes Towards Influencers	300	1	5	2.353	0.996	-0.161	0.492
Opinion Leadership	300	1	5	2.193	0.799	0.23	0.391

4.2. RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

The CITC values for each item on the scale are all greater than 0.4, indicating a good correlation between the analyzed items. Regarding the “Cronbach’s α if Item Deleted,” removing any item does not significantly increase the reliability coefficient.

Therefore, it suggests that items should not be deleted. The overall scale and Cronbach's α values for each dimension are all above 0.7, indicating a high level of internal consistency in the scale.

Table 4 – Construct Reliability

Variable	Item	CITC	Cronbach's α if Item Deleted	Cronbach's α
Authenticity	A1	0.700	0.777	0.838
	A2	0.713	0.764	
	A3	0.691	0.785	
Credibility	B1	0.602	0.694	
	B2	0.617	0.679	0.770
	B3	0.596	0.701	
Relatability	C1	0.554	0.690	0.746
	C2	0.583	0.654	
	C3	0.588	0.643	
	C4	0.554	0.690	
Parasocial Relationships	D1	0.602	0.809	0.833
	D2	0.636	0.799	0.847
	D3	0.640	0.798	
	D4	0.664	0.790	
	D5	0.628	0.801	
Attitudes towards influencer	E1	0.621	0.746	0.795
	E2	0.645	0.719	
	E3	0.658	0.699	
Opinion Leadership	F1	0.552	0.609	0.717
	F2	0.514	0.656	
	F3	0.544	0.619	

4.3. VALIDITY ANALYSIS

From the table below, it can be observed that the communalities of each item are all above 0.4, and the KMO value is 0.816, which is greater than 0.6. Additionally, the six factors explain the variance: 15.174%, 11.540%, 11.149%, 10.630%, 10.479%, and 9.420%, respectively. After rotation, the cumulative variance explained is 68.392%, greater than 50%. This indicates that the information in the research items can be effectively extracted.

Based on the loading coefficients of each item on the factors, it is evident that Factor 1 corresponds to Para-Social Relationships, Factor 2 corresponds to Authenticity, Factor 3 corresponds to Attitudes Towards SMIs, Factor 4 corresponds to Credibility, Factor 5 corresponds to Relatability, and Factor 6 corresponds to Opinion Leadership. This alignment between factors and items corresponds well with expectations, demonstrating good structural validity of the questionnaire.

Table 5 - Construct Validity

Items	Factor Loading Coefficients						Communalities (Common Factor Variances)
	Factor 1	Factor2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	
A1	0.040	0.840	0.148	0.088	0.060	0.118	0.755
A2	0.141	0.854	0.024	0.114	0.066	0.114	0.780
A3	0.116	0.834	0.107	0.030	0.134	0.082	0.746
B1	0.177	0.002	0.060	0.802	-0.010	0.110	0.690
B2	0.128	0.113	0.121	0.784	-0.031	0.129	0.676
B3	0.132	0.116	0.073	0.794	0.101	0.132	0.695
C1	0.054	0.064	0.188	0.083	0.779	0.126	0.672
C2	0.122	0.049	0.038	-0.067	0.780	0.157	0.656
C3	-0.020	0.125	-0.012	0.037	0.821	0.051	0.694
D1	0.769	0.076	-0.098	0.039	0.029	0.044	0.611
D2	0.722	0.147	0.129	0.058	0.047	0.245	0.626
D3	0.749	0.097	0.088	0.113	-0.096	0.162	0.627

D4	0.736	0.060	0.160	0.239	0.110	0.120	0.654
D5	0.787	-0.011	0.025	0.118	0.115	-0.089	0.656
E1	0.024	0.130	0.797	0.103	0.174	0.080	0.700
E2	0.078	0.073	0.835	-0.015	0.008	0.132	0.726
E3	0.096	0.071	0.824	0.180	0.039	0.088	0.735
F1	0.230	0.080	0.018	0.103	0.091	0.785	0.694
F2	0.009	0.213	0.194	0.190	0.289	0.623	0.591
F3	0.112	0.094	0.164	0.154	0.092	0.118	0.696
Eigenvalue (Unrotated)	5.244	2.360	1.796	1.664	1.500	1.114	-
% of Variance (Unrotated)	26.222%	11.802%	8.979%	8.319%	7.500%	5.570%	-
Cumulative % of Variance (Unrotated)	26.222%	38.025%	47.004%	55.323%	62.823%	68.392%	-
Eigenvalue(Rotated)	3.035	2.308	2.230	2.126	2.096	1.884	-
% of Variance (Rotated)	15.174%	11.540%	11.149%	10.630%	10.479%	9.420%	-
Cumulative % of Variance (Rotated)	15.174%	26.714%	37.863%	48.493%	58.972%	68.392%	-
KMO				0.816			
Bartlett's 18esto f Sphericity				2212.447			
Df				190			
P value				0.000			

4.4. CORRELATION ANALYSIS

The six variables, Opinion Leadership, Authenticity, Credibility, Relatability, Parasocial Relationships, and Attitudes Towards SMIs, exhibit significant positive correlations pairwise. Specifically, the correlations between Opinion Leadership and Authenticity, Credibility, Relatability, Parasocial Relationships, and Attitudes Toward SMIs are as follows:

The correlation coefficients between Opinion Leadership and various constructs indicate significant positive correlations. Specifically, the correlation between Opinion Leadership and Authenticity is 0.313 ($p < 0.01$), with Credibility is 0.358 ($p < 0.01$), Relatability is 0.328 ($p < 0.01$), Parasocial Relationships is 0.257 ($p < 0.01$), and with Attitudes Towards Social Media Influencers (SMIs) is 0.275 ($p < 0.01$).

Table 6-Pearson correlation

	Opinion Leadership	Authenticity	Credibility	Relatability	Parasocial Relationship	Attitudes Towards SMIs
Opinion Leadership	1					
Authenticity	0.313**	1				
Credibility	0.358**	0.195**	1			
Relatability	0.328**	0.263**	0.094	1		
Parasocial Relationship	0.257**	0.195**	0.279**	0.156**	1	
Attitudes Towards Influencer	0.275**	0.249**	0.241**	0.153**	0.149**	1

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

4.5. LINEAR REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Authenticity, credibility, and relatability are independent variables, while opinion leadership is the dependent variable in the linear regression analysis. The model equation is: opinion leadership = $0.845 + 0.147 * \text{authenticity} + 0.281 * \text{credibility} + 0.229 * \text{relatability}$.

The R-squared value of the model is 0.248, indicating that authenticity, credibility, and relatability can explain 24.8% of the variation in opinion leadership. The model passes the F-test ($F = 32.572$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that at least one of authenticity, credibility, and relatability impacts opinion leadership. All VIF values in the model are less than 5, indicating

the absence of collinearity issues. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson statistic is close to 2, indicating the absence of autocorrelation in the model.

The regression coefficient for authenticity is 0.147 ($t = 3.566$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that authenticity significantly positively affects opinion leadership.

The regression coefficient for credibility is 0.281 ($t = 5.788$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that credibility significantly positively affects opinion leadership.

Relatability has a regression coefficient of 0.229 ($t = 4.789$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that relatability significantly affects opinion leadership.

Table 7- Linear Regression Analysis Results (n = 300)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p	Collinearity Diagnosis	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
Constant	0.845	0.143	-	5.923	0.000**	-	-
Authenticity	0.147	0.041	0.189	3.566	0.000**	1.109	0.901
Credibility	0.281	0.049	0.298	5.788	0.000**	1.042	0.960
Relatability	0.229	0.048	0.250	4.789	0.000**	1.077	0.929
R ²	0.248						
Adjusted R ²	0.241						
F	F (3,296)=32.572,p=0.000						
D-W value	1.998						

Dependent variable: opinion leadership

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

4.6. MEDIATION ANALYSIS

The mediation analysis involves three models, as follows: Opinion Leadership = $1.689 + 0.245$ * Para-Social Relationships Attitudes Towards SMIs = $1.987 + 0.178$ * Para-Social Relationships Opinion Leadership = $1.302 + 0.210$ * Para-Social Relationships + 0.194 * Attitudes Towards Influencer.

Table 8-Mediation Model Test Results

	Opinion Leadership (M1)	Attitudes Towards Influencer (M2)	Opinion Leadership (M3)
Constant	1.689** (14.205)	1.987** (13.104)	1.302** (8.992)
Parasocial Relationship	0.245** (4.582)	0.178** (2.610)	0.210** (4.009)
Attitudes Towards Influencer			0.194** (4.413)
Items	300	300	300
R ²	0.066	0.022	0.123
Adjusted R ²	0.063	0.019	0.117
F value	F (1,298)=20.995,p=0.000	F (1,298)=6.812,p=0.010	F (2,297)=20.884,p=0.000

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 (t-values in parentheses)

Table 9-Mediation Effect Test Results**

Item	Meaning	Effect Value	Standard Error (SE)	95% CI	
				(Lower)	(Upper)
Para-Social Relationships => Attitudes Towards SMI => Opinion Leadership	Indirect Effect	0.035	0.018	0.006	0.076
Para-Social Relationships => Opinion Leadership	Direct Effect	0.21	0.052	0.107	0.313
Para-Social Relationships => Opinion Leadership	Total Effect	0.245	0.053	0.14	0.349

The results indicate that for the mediation pathway “Para-Social Relationships => Attitudes Towards SMIs => Opinion Leadership,” the 95% confidence interval does not include zero (95% CI: 0.006~0.076), suggesting the existence of this mediation effect pathway.

The data analysis results show that Model 3 explains 12.3% of the variance in Opinion Leadership ($F = 20.884$, $p < 0.01$), a significant improvement compared to Model 1.

This indicates that para-social relationships and attitudes towards SMIs have good explanatory power in opinion leadership. When Attitudes Towards SMIs is included in the model, the positive effect of Para-Social Relationships on Opinion Leadership decreases but remains significant (β before = 0.245, β after = 0.210, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the positive effect of Attitudes Towards SMIs is significant ($\beta = 0.194$, $p < 0.01$, $t = 4.413$), indicating that Attitudes Towards SMIs partially mediates the positive effect of Para-Social Relationships on Opinion Leadership.

5. DISCUSSION

In contemporary research on social media and influencer dynamics, several key constructs, such as authenticity, credibility, relatability, and parasocial relationships, have emerged as critical factors influencing opinion leadership and the mediating role of attitude towards SMIs in the relationship between parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. This study aims to investigate these constructs and their interplay, providing empirical evidence to support or refute existing theories and literature. The following discussion delves into how the results of this study align with or diverge from established theories, compares the findings with other research, and explores possible reasons for observed differences.

5.1. AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity has been widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective influence, particularly in digital contexts. The results of this study, which show a significant positive relationship between authenticity and opinion leadership (regression coefficient = 0.147, $p < 0.01$), support the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory posits that authentic behaviors foster intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being, essential for building trust and influence.

Additionally, the findings align with the Authentic Leadership Theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), which emphasizes that leaders who are true to themselves and their values are likelier to inspire and engage their followers. This theory has been extended to the digital influencer context by researchers like Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard (2020), who argue that authenticity in social media communications enhances followers' engagement and trust.

5.2. CREDIBILITY

Credibility, marked by the regression coefficient of 0.281, emerges as a stronger predictor of opinion leadership than authenticity. This aligns with the well-documented notion that credibility, which encompasses expertise and trustworthiness, is fundamental to opinion leadership (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Credibility not only lends weight to the leader's opinions but also reinforces the audience's confidence in the information provided, amplifying the leader's influence.

Credibility, encompassing trustworthiness and expertise, is a well-established determinant of influence. The significant positive relationship between credibility and opinion leadership (regression coefficient = 0.281, $p < 0.01$) found in this study supports the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Our study extends the work of Hovland and Weiss (1951) by demonstrating that credibility remains a robust predictor of opinion leadership in the digital age. The significant impact of credibility on opinion leadership aligns with the source credibility theory, which posits that credible sources are more persuasive.

The results also align with the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits that source credibility enhances the likelihood that messages will be elaborated upon and accepted. The importance of credibility in digital contexts has been highlighted by Metzger et al. (2003), who found that credibility is crucial for online information evaluation.

Our findings corroborate those of Pornpitakpan (2004), who demonstrated that expertise and trustworthiness significantly enhance persuasive impact. Similarly, Metzger et al. (2003) found that credibility is critical to online influence. However, our study presents a slightly higher effect size for credibility, which could be due to the context of social media, where credibility might be more visible and scrutinized.

The higher effect size for credibility in our study could be due to the interactive nature of social media platforms, where followers have more opportunities to assess the credibility of influencers through their content, interactions, and engagement with followers.

Additionally, the focus on university students, who are often more critical and discerning about online information, might have amplified the importance of credibility in this context.

5.3. RELATABILITY

Relatability refers to the extent to which audiences identify with and feel connected to an influencer. The positive relationship between relatability and opinion leadership (regression coefficient = 0.229, $p < 0.01$) supports the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This model suggests that messages that resonate with audiences are more likely to be elaborated upon and internalized.

The concept of relatability has been further explored in influencer marketing by researchers like Labrecque (2014), who argued that relatable influencers are more effective in engaging audiences and driving behavioral change. Our findings align with this perspective, highlighting the importance of emotional and personal connections in opinion leadership.

Atiq et al. (2022) found that relatability significantly enhances the effectiveness of influencer marketing, a finding that parallels our results. Both studies emphasize the importance of emotional engagement and personal connections in influencing audiences. However, our study reports a slightly higher effect size for relatability, which might be due to the specific context of social media influencers who often share personal and relatable content.

The higher effect size for relatability in our study could be attributed to the nature of social media platforms, where influencers often share personal stories and experiences that resonate deeply with their followers. The younger demographic of our sample, which might place a higher value on personal connections and relatability, could also explain this difference.

5.4. MEDIATION ANALYSIS

The mediation analysis results provide further depth to our understanding of the dynamics at play. The indirect effect of para-social relationships on opinion leadership through attitudes towards SMIs (0.035, SE = 0.018, 95% CI: 0.006 to 0.076) is significant, indicating that attitudes towards SMIs mediate in this relationship. This pathway highlights the complex interplay between personal connections with celebrities and their perceived influence, suggesting that para-social relationships foster positive attitudes towards SMIs, enhancing their opinion leadership.

The mediation findings also have practical implications for influencer marketing. By recognizing the mediating role of attitudes towards SMIs, brands can better understand the pathways through which influence is exerted. This understanding can inform the selection of influencers and the design of marketing campaigns. For instance, brands might build para-social relationships through consistent, engaging content that fosters familiarity and positive attitudes towards the influencer.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for marketers, brand managers, and influencers. Understanding that authenticity, credibility, and relatability are key drivers of opinion leadership can inform brands and influencers' strategies to enhance their influence.

5.5. RESULTS-BASE STRATEGY

For marketers and brand managers, these findings suggest that efforts should be focused on fostering authenticity and credibility in their communications. Authenticity can be enhanced by ensuring that brand messages are genuine, transparent, and aligned with the brand's core values. Credibility can be bolstered by partnering with influencers who possess expertise and are perceived as trustworthy by their audience. Relatability can be achieved by creating content that emotionally engages the audience. This involves understanding the audience's values, interests, and experiences and crafting messages that resonate with these aspects. By leveraging these strategies, brands can enhance their opinion leadership and foster stronger connections with their audience.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the effects of Authenticity, Credibility, and Relatability of SMIs on SMIs' opinion leadership and investigate the mediating effects of the Quantitative methods used in this study to test the research hypotheses. Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire with valid samples completed by 300 Gen Z population.

The findings indicate that there are strong positive correlations between opinion leadership and key factors such as authenticity (0.313), credibility (0.358), and relatability (0.328), all significant at $p < 0.01$. Additionally, parasocial relationships and attitudes towards SMIs also show significant positive correlations with opinion leadership, with coefficients of 0.257 and 0.275, respectively, at $p < 0.01$.

These results validate the importance of personalized and relatable content shared by influencers that resonate deeply with followers and increases their perceived authenticity and credibility. These results validate all the hypotheses that we have put forward.

6.1. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The theoretical contributions of this study are multifaceted. This study contributes to the existing literature on social media influencers (SMIs) by empirically validating the importance of authenticity, trustworthiness, and affinity in enhancing Gen Z opinion leadership. Our findings also demonstrate that relatability has a higher effect size in the social media context. This may be due to the personal content shared by social media influencers, which can resonate deeply with followers. Furthermore, by applying social penetration theory and the elaboration likelihood model, this study elucidates how the persistence of parasocial relationships and personalized content deepens parasocial relationships, leading to positive attitudes and greater influence. These insights expand the theoretical framework of opinion leadership and provide a solid foundation for future research.

6.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In terms of management implications, the findings suggest that marketers should focus on authenticity, credibility, and affinity in their communications. Authenticity can be strengthened by ensuring transparency and alignment with brand values, while credibility can be increased by working with knowledgeable and trusted influencers. Relatability can be achieved by creating content that creates emotional engagement with the audience, reflecting their values, interests, and experiences. Additionally, understanding the mediating role of audience attitudes towards SMIs can inform the choice of influencers and the design of marketing campaigns, as well as strategies that can help brands enhance their opinion leadership and build stronger connections with their audiences.

6.3. LIMITATION

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider more diverse samples, including different age groups, professions, and cultural backgrounds.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data could introduce social desirability bias. Participants might have provided responses they deemed socially acceptable rather than true opinions. Future studies could mitigate this by incorporating objective measures or using experimental designs to validate self-reported data.

Third, the study's cross-sectional nature limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While the findings suggest significant relationships between the variables, longitudinal studies are needed to establish the direction of causality and examine how these relationships evolve.

Based on the limitations and findings of this study, several directions for future research are suggested. Future studies should explore the impact of authenticity, credibility, and Relatability on opinion leadership across different demographic groups and cultural contexts. This would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing opinion leadership.

6.4. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Concerning future research directions, future research should explore the impact of authenticity, credibility, and relatability on opinion leadership across different demographic groups and cultural contexts to enhance the generalisability of the findings. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that examine how these relationships evolve to gain insight into the temporal dynamics of opinion leadership. In addition, future research could investigate other potential mediators and moderators, such as personality traits, cultural influences, and social media platforms, to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of opinion leadership.

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