Influence of the Influencer: Decoding the Credibility of Influencers Among College Students.

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BACKGROUND

The consumer market is shifting due to changing demographics and technological advancements (Fortin & Uncles, 2011). Gen Z, the new generation coming of purchasing age, exhibits unique buying habits shaped by their digital literacy and reliance on technology (Lai & Hong, 2014).

Gen Z uses the internet at the highest rate of all current generations at 99%, with 45% reporting that their internet use is "near constant" (Pew Research Center, 2024) (Anderson, 2018). Additionally, 28% of Gen Zs report being "smartphone dependent" (Sidoti, 2024).

More and more social media platforms have integrated commercial interfaces, paving the way for social commerce, where influencers have started to play a pivotal role in contemporary marketing strategies.

Influencers are social media content creators who often leverage their online credibility to endorse products and services, bridging the gap between brands and consumers (Alves de Castro et al., 2021).

METHOD

Participants, drawn from Pacific University's College of Arts and Sciences and completed a survey administered via Qualtrics™. Demographic information was collected alongside questions related to social media usage and influencer following.

The survey included established psychological measures such as the Self-Determination Scale, Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and NEO-Five Factor Inventory, to assess motivational factors, social comparison tendencies, self-esteem levels, and personality traits, and consumer behaviour.

Data was analyzed using SPSS® Software to examine correlations and patterns between influencer engagement, psychological factors, and consumer behavior.

Empirical Questions

This project seeks to contextualize the evolving consumer landscape within the broader generational and technological shifts, with a specific focus on understanding the role of influencers in shaping Gen Z's purchasing decisions.

RESULTS

Correlations → Pearson's R Correlation:

Prediction 1: Social Comparison (INCOM) would be correlated with **Informed Consumer Behavior** (ICBS);

→ The INCOM (M= 24.99; SD= 4.80) and ICBS (M= 102.41; SD= 15.51) were significantly positively correlated, $r(70)=0.23$, $p=.05$

→ ICBS Influencer Subscale (M= 20.46; SD= 4.21) and INCOM (M=24.99; SD= 4.80) were significantly positively correlated, $r(70)=0.28$, $p=0.02$

→ ICBS Urgency Subscale (M= 13.29; SD= 3.83) and INCOM (M= 24.99; SD= 4.80) were significantly positively correlated, $r(70)= 0.31$, $p=0.009$

Prediction 2: Self-determination (SDS) will be correlated with Informed Consumer Behavior.

→ Failed to reject the null hypothesis that SDS (M=40.20; SD=6.61) and the ICBS (M=102.41; SD =15.51), would be correlated $r(70)=0.38$, $p=0.75$

Prediction 3: Informed Consumer Behaviour would be negatively correlated with **Self-Esteem**

→ ICBS Influencer Subscale (M= 20.46; SD= 4.21) and RSES were significantly negatively correlated, $r(71)= -0.28$; $p= 0.02$

Prediction 4: Self-Esteem would be negatively correlated with **Social Comparison**

→ INCOM (M= 24.99; SD= 4.80) and RSES (M= 20.68; SD= 5.77) were significantly negatively correlated, $r(71)= -0.31$; $p= 0.009$

Exploratiory 1: Informed Consumer Behavior (M=102.41; SD=15.51) would be negatively correlated with **Neuroticism** (M=39.31; SD=8.06) and **Openness to Experience** (M=42.64; SD=7.05)

Exploratory 2: Informed Consumer Behavior (M=102.41; SD=15.51) would be positively correlated with **Extraversion** (M=43.10; SD=5.93), **Agreeableness** (M=42.64; SD=5.36), and **Conscientiousness** (M=43.17; SD=5.63).

→ Failed to reject the null for all five personality traits and the total score for the Informed Consumer Behavior Scale (ICBS)

→ Subscales on the ICBS were significantly correlated with N, O, & C
ICBS Urgency & Neuroticism, $r(66)= -0.34$, $p=0.006$
ICBS Awareness & Openness-to-Experience, $r(66)= -0.29$, $p=0.02$
ICBS Social Responsibility & Openness, $r(67)=-0.29$, $p=0.02$
ICBS Research and Conscientiousness, $r(66)= -0.39$, $p=0.001$

Results Continued

Independent Samples t-tests for Following Influencers → Effect Size Estimate

Prediction 5: Significant differences between **Influencer Followers** and **Non-Followers** on scores of: **ICBS, INCOM, RSES,** and **SDS**

→ Support for differences in Influencer Followers (M= 40.80; SD= 6.70) vs. Non-followers (M= 40.67; SD= 3.93) in Self-Determination, $t(19)= -0.05$, $p=0.04$, $\delta^2= 0.01$, small effect

→ Support for differences in Influencer Followers (M=40.80; SD= 8.45) and Non-followers (M= 45.00; SD= 3.91) on Conscientiousness trait, $t(18)= 1.07$, $p<0.05$, $\delta^2= 0.06$, small effect
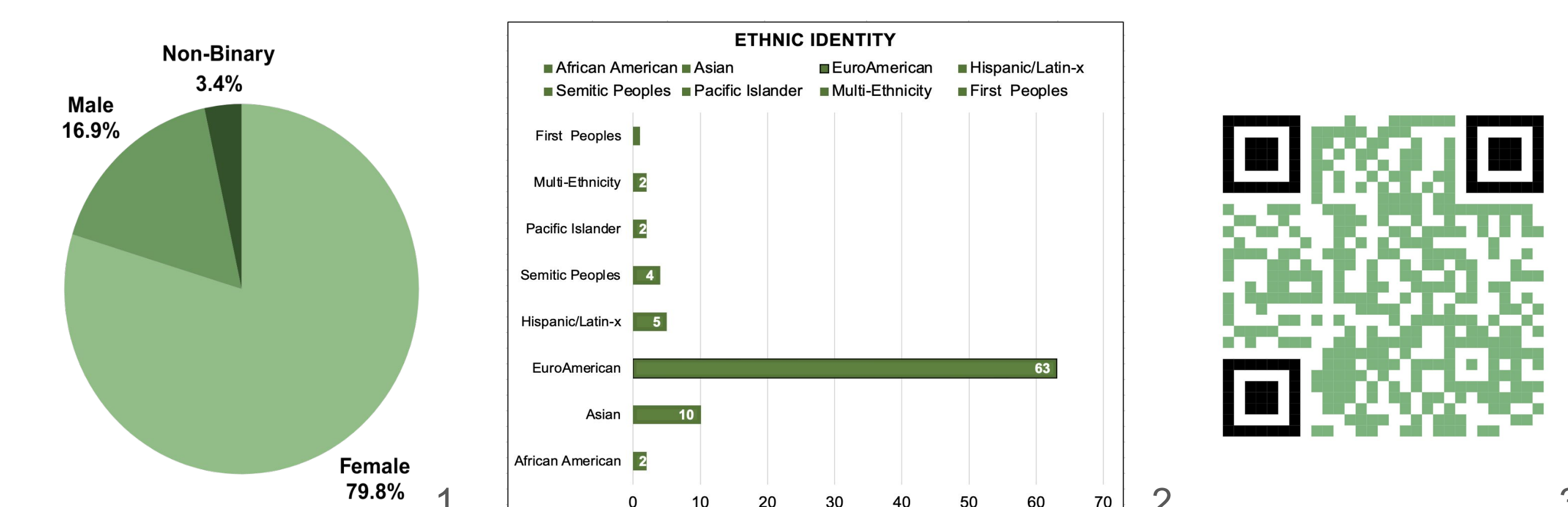

Figure 1 & 2: participant demographics;
Figure 3: Exploratory Correlation Matrix

CONCLUSIONS

As Gen Z's continue to take up more space in retail markets, understanding their evolving consumer behavior will open doorways that facilitate more targeted, impactful, and effective marketing strategies. Additionally, investigating the impact and qualities of contemporary marketing strategies, such as influencer marketing allows for better understanding of the characteristics of gen z as a cohort.

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