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Playful communicative strategies of Korean Instagram influencers: Enhancing Gen-Z followers' socialisation

Ji Hye Jaime Chung [a], Joshua Youngbin Min[b]

[a]Mahidol University International College, Thailand, [b]Singapore American School, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This study explores the playful communicative strategies employed by Korean Instagram influencers to engage Gen-Z followers, with a focus on how such strategies foster digital socialisation. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the research investigates the linguistic and visual techniques that resonate with young Korean audiences. The findings reveal that influencers who incorporate humour, playful language, trending memes, and interactive storytelling are more effective in capturing attention and encouraging follower participation. These elements not only make the content more relatable and memorable but also strengthen emotional connections between influencers and their young audiences. Moreover, influencers who adopt personalised communication styles enhance relatability, fostering a sense of community and shared identity among Gen-Z users. The study highlights how creativity, authenticity, and interactivity amplify influencers' social influence and their capacity to shape online trends. These insights have significant implications for content creators and digital marketers aiming to build sustainable engagement with Gen-Z audiences in Korea's fast-evolving social media landscape.

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-digital era, the rapid advancement of technology has revolutionized the way people connect and communicate, particularly through social media platforms. These platforms transcend geographical and temporal boundaries, emerging as essential tools for businesses to strategically market their products, raise brand awareness, and engage with consumers (Arya et al., 2022; Farzin et al., 2022; Lestari, 2019; Ninan et al., 2019). Among these platforms, Instagram has become a prominent space for both independent brands and established companies to promote their products, particularly among Generation Z (Gen-Z, hereafter)—a tech-savvy cohort born since the mid-1990s, known for its active role in shaping online trends and culture (Entina et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2022).

Instagram's appeal stems from its dynamic content features—stories, reels, memes, and interactive posts—that offer avenues for creative self-expression and real-time brand engagement (Arora et al., 2019). For South Korean (Korean, hereafter) youth, who are

among the most digitally connected populations globally, Instagram is more than a visual platform; it serves as a powerful communicative space where identity, community, and commerce intersect (Hwang & Cho, 2018; Mun & Kim, 2021). As brands compete in this saturated digital landscape, leveraging influencers who can craft communication strategies that resonate with young users has become crucial (Leung et al., 2022).

While much of the existing research explores the general impact of influencers on consumer behaviour, there is limited focus on how specific communicative strategies—such as language use, memes, and cultural resonance—shape the behaviour and identity formation of Gen-Z followers, particularly in non-Western contexts. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a more in-depth understanding of how influencer communication impacts Gen-Z consumers in specific cultural and regional settings, such as South Korea (Korea, hereafter).

This study thus aims to address this gap by examining the communication strategies employed by Instagram influencers to engage Korean Gen-Z followers. Specifically, it seeks to explore how these strategies influence Gen-Z's online behaviour, social interactions, and perceptions. The research addresses the following questions:

1. What attracts Korean Gen-Z's attention when it comes to Instagram influencer communication?
2. How do Instagram influencers' communicative strategies affect Gen-Z followers?

By focusing on this niche yet significant demographic, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of influencer marketing dynamics within the Korean context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer engagement with Gen-Z

In today's hyperconnected landscape, businesses increasingly rely on diverse communication channels not only to promote products but also to foster connection, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging (Voorveld, 2019). This shift is particularly important when engaging Gen-Z—a cohort that values brand uniqueness, entertainment, and emotional resonance. As digital natives, Gen-Z consumers respond well to personalised, viral advertisements that reflect their values, personality, and lifestyle, allowing them to actively insert themselves into brand narratives (Croes & Bartels, 2021). They also expect to voice their opinions instantly and engage interactively with content and brands (Bhattacharya et al., 2019).

Consequently, businesses have shifted their marketing focus toward social media platforms, which offer direct and dynamic channels to reach younger audiences (Putter, 2017). These platforms enable greater consumer engagement and have been shown to significantly strengthen purchase intentions (Alalwan, 2018; Almohaimmeed, 2019), offering brands a competitive edge through meaningful digital interactions. Within this context, Gen-Z's digital fluency and desire for individuality have made them central to the rapid growth of influencer marketing (Katz et al., 2022).

As expressive, fun-seeking individuals, Gen-Z consumers are particularly drawn to influencers who demonstrate uniqueness, entertainment value, and a close connection with their followers. Influencer credibility shaped by alignment with brand values, content authenticity, and perceived peer recommendations plays a significant role in shaping Gen-

Z's responses to influencer content (Nguyen et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2019). From word choice and behavioural cues to visual presentation, every element of influencer communication can influence Gen-Z's purchasing decisions (Charuvila & Jnaneswar, 2021).

Unlike traditional celebrities who often maintain distance, influencers are perceived as trusted peers or collaborators, offering a more personal and approachable presence (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Smith et al., 2018; Entina et al., 2021). This relational closeness allows influencers to deliver brand messages with high engagement and resonance, particularly when targeting Gen-Z audiences (Taylor, 2020). Importantly, Gen-Z expects more than just product promotion—they seek content that is entertaining, relatable, and interactive (Nguyen et al., 2022). Influencers excel in crafting such experiences, often using playful content and communication styles tailored to Gen-Z's cultural vernacular.

Influencer credibility is derived less from institutional authority and more from perceived authenticity. Influencers differentiate themselves by presenting as 'real friends', with a consistent online presence that fosters intimacy and relatability (Belanche et al., 2021). Their openness resonates with Gen-Z, who primarily consume and communicate through social media platforms (Watson, 2023). A clear example is Twitch streamer Richard Blevins, known as Ninja, who builds audience trust by streaming over twelve hours a day. His friendly, hardworking persona aligns seamlessly with Red Bull's brand values, making him a powerful brand ambassador (Kozinets et al., 2023). Influencers like Ninja highlight how effective communication and shared values contribute to successful marketing among Gen-Z audiences.

Tech-driven socialisation: The role of influencers in Gen-Z's cultural context

Gen-Z's communication practices are deeply shaped by technological immersion, making influencer interaction far more than a commercial tactic; it is a form of authentic social exchange. Influencers are often perceived as trusted, knowledgeable peers, with whom Gen-Z users engage as they would with close friends and this dynamic grants influencers significant social power, enabling them to shape followers' beliefs, values, and consumer behaviours (Entina et al., 2021).

As digital natives, Gen-Z has grown up in an ecosystem dominated by mobile technologies, social media, and on-demand communication. These platforms serve as integral spaces for socialisation, enabling global connections, diverse interactions, and ongoing relational engagement (Katz, 2021; Mahapatra et al., 2022). Gen-Z routinely uses digital tools for not only entertainment but also learning, social activism, and identity expression. Often aligned with diversity, inclusivity, and social justice, their values are actively promoted in digital spaces.

Online communities offer space for collaboration, self-expression, and anonymous experimentation—key aspects of identity development (Fan et al., 2023). Within these communities, influencers act as central figures in shaping preferences, norms, and behaviours (Erwin et al., 2023). Their narratives contribute to Gen-Z's worldview, as meaning is constructed through digitally mediated peer networks (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2021). These networks also serve as sources of validation, shaping how Gen-Z perceives themselves and their social roles (Baillie, 2017; Hermanda et al., 2019).

Platforms like Instagram have radically transformed communication strategies, enabling influencers to shape narratives through visual storytelling, aesthetic presentation, and personalised engagement (Arora et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022). While current research has emphasised the importance of visual aesthetics, credibility, and authenticity in driving

engagement, fewer studies have analysed the specific communicative strategies influencers use particularly those tailored to generational identities such as Gen-Z in the East-Asian context.

Playful communication in influencer – Gen-Z interaction

Playful communication is a central strategy used by influencers to maintain engagement with Gen-Z audiences. It refers to a communicative style characterized by light-heartedness, informality, humour, and creativity that prioritizes enjoyment and emotional connection over purely informational content (Vardeman, 2024). In digital spaces, this form of communication often manifests through the use of memes, emojis, slang, inside jokes, and exaggerated expressions, all of which signal intimacy, social closeness, and shared understanding.

From a theoretical standpoint, playful communication is deeply rooted in sociocultural communication theory, as conceptualized by Craig (1999, 2007). This tradition views communication not merely as a means of transmitting messages but as a social practice that constructs and maintains shared meanings, identities, and norms within specific cultural contexts. Communication, in this sense, is performative and constitutive; it actively shapes social reality rather than simply reflecting it. For Gen-Z, who have grown up in highly digital, interactive, and visually expressive environments, communication is both a tool and a playground for social bonding, identity performance, and cultural participation.

Craig's (1999, 2007) sociocultural lens is especially relevant when analysing the influencer–follower dynamic, where meaning is co-created through participatory, often humorous, digital exchanges. Influencers who adopt a playful tone align themselves with the communication norms of Gen-Z subcultures, using culturally coded language, visuals, and behaviours to signify belonging. Through this approach, influencers do not simply disseminate brand messages; they enact and reinforce shared cultural scripts, allowing followers to see themselves reflected in the content. This helps cultivate a peer-like relationship rather than a top-down, persuasive one strengthening parasocial bonds and enhancing emotional investment.

Craig (2007) also emphasised that theories of communication should be practical and context-sensitive, meaning they must account for how real people use communication to achieve social goals. In influencer–Gen-Z interactions, playful communication serves as a strategic cultural practice: it entertains, fosters intimacy, and facilitates identity negotiation. It reflects the values Gen-Z holds such as authenticity, humour, creativity, and interactivity while also shaping how Gen-Z perceives brand personalities and their own digital selves.

Supporting this theoretical framing, Apter's (1984) Reversal Theory suggests that individuals toggle between serious and playful states of mind. In this light, influencers' playful content offers Gen-Z audiences an outlet for emotional relief, self-expression, and experimentation, making branded content feel less intrusive and more socially relevant. Similarly, Shifman (2013) highlights that memetic communication has become a key cultural language among younger users, reinforcing shared humour and digital fluency.

In the context of influencer marketing, playful communication allows influencers to act as 'cultural intermediaries' (Caliandro et al., 2024), translating brand values into emotionally resonant and culturally meaningful messages. This approach is particularly effective for Gen-Z, who not only expect entertainment and personality from digital content but also favour material that appears spontaneous, participatory, and community-driven (Taylor, 2020; Entina et al., 2021).

In this study, playful communication is operationalized as the influencers' use of: 1) humorous tone and jokes relevant to youth culture; 2) informal language, including internet slang and abbreviated speech; 3) multimodal elements like emojis, GIFs, and memes; 4) playful visual or video editing techniques; and 5) insider references that evoke a sense of belonging and shared identity. These communicative elements, embedded in influencer content, reflect not just a marketing tactic but also a social tool, helping Gen-Z audiences navigate their identities and relationships in digital spaces.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and participants

A mixed methods approach was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram influencers communicate with Korean Gen-Z followers, and how these followers perceive and respond to such interactions. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study aimed to triangulate findings and produce a more nuanced and reliable analysis.

The study was conducted in two phases. Phase One involved a quantitative questionnaire designed to gather general data on the attitudes, preferences, and behavioural tendencies of Korean Gen-Z Instagram users. This preliminary phase provided a broad overview of the target population and informed the development of the qualitative interview protocol used in Phase Two. The primary data for this research comprises in-depth interview data, capturing participants' experiences, reflections, and intuitive responses to influencer communication strategies and their effects on follower behaviour and engagement.

This mixed methods design allowed for both descriptive generalization through the survey and contextualized understanding through interviews, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of the research questions.

In Phase One, an online questionnaire was distributed to Korean university students aged 18–25, a demographic representative of Gen-Z Instagram users in Korea. A total of 461 participants were recruited using purposive snowball sampling, starting with an initial group of 25 university contacts known to one of the researchers through her previous work at a Korean educational institution. These contacts helped recruit peers via social media platforms and messaging apps such as KakaoTalk. This approach helped access a relatively hard-to-reach, digitally native population. In addition, convenience sampling was used to expedite the process and ensure sufficient sample size within the given timeframe. Out of the 461 students contacted, 355 participants completed the questionnaire over a three-week period. The online survey comprised 17 researcher-developed items, combining closed- and open-ended questions. These were designed to explore patterns of Instagram usage, perceptions of influencer communication styles, and digital behaviour.

Sample questions included:
o How often do you interact with Instagram influencers through likes, comments, or messages?
o Which aspects of an influencer's content do you find most engaging (e.g., humour, visuals, relatability)?
o Have influencers ever influenced your purchasing decisions or online discussions?

At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Of the 355 respondents, 21 agreed and provided their contact information.

In Phase Two, 13 of the 21 volunteers took part in semi-structured interviews designed to explore, in greater depth, the communicative strategies used by Instagram influencers and their perceived impact on follower behaviour. A 15-item interview protocol was developed based on insights from the questionnaire and piloted beforehand for clarity and coherence.

Interview questions included:
- o   Can you describe a time when an influencer's post really caught your attention? What about it stood out?
- o   How do you feel when an influencer responds to your comment or story?
- o   What kinds of humour or memes do you find most effective in influencer content?

Table 1. Summary of Study Phases and Participant Demographics

Phase	Method	Number of Participants	Gender	Age Range
Phase 1	Online Questionnaire	355	203 females, 152 males	18-25
Phase 2	Semi-structured Interviews	13	9 females, 4 males	18-25

Interviews were conducted in Korean via Zoom, phone, or voice messages, depending on participant preference, and lasted 30–40 minutes each. With consent, all sessions were audio-recorded, and detailed field notes were taken to capture tone and context.

The interviews were conducted in Korean using three different methods based on the interviewees' preferences: online Zoom meetings, direct phone calls, and social media voice messaging. This flexibility helped in obtaining a higher participation rate. Each interview took 30 to 40 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, and detailed notes were taken to capture nuances.

Data analysis

An inductive content analysis approach was employed to examine the qualitative interview data, enabling themes to naturally emerge from participant narratives without being constrained by pre-existing categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kracauer, 2022; Neuendorf, 2017). Inductive content analysis was chosen for this study because it allows themes and patterns to emerge directly from the data, making it especially suitable for exploratory research where existing theories or frameworks may not fully capture the lived experiences or communicative behaviours of participants. The researchers began by immersing themselves in the data, reading the transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity and to identify initial impressions. This close engagement with the data helped in highlighting recurring keywords, expressions, and significant patterns within participants' accounts. These elements were then coded, and similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories.

As the analysis progressed, emerging categories were refined through iterative reading and comparison, ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the underlying meanings

conveyed by participants (Neuendorf, 2017). The analysis ultimately centred around three main thematic categories: Korean Gen-Z followers' online identity and self-expression; Instagram as a platform for socialisation; and influencers as agents of social power.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, certain validation procedures were incorporated. Credibility was enhanced by triangulating data from both the questionnaire and interview phases. In addition, member checking was conducted by inviting interview participants to review and comment on the interpretations of their responses. Dependability and inter-coder reliability were established by having both researchers independently code a subset of the interviews. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus, leading to a high level of agreement. This approach contributed to the rigour and reliability of the analysis, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' authentic experiences and perspectives.

RESULTS

This small-scale study advocates that Korean Instagram influencers play a significant role in shaping the purchasing behaviours and social interactions of Gen-Z consumers. Across the interviews, participants consistently highlighted Instagram's appeal, citing its entertaining and engaging communicative strategies particularly through influencers who resonate with Gen-Z cultural sensibilities (Entina et al., 2021). Influencers were widely described as effective communicators, adept at using playful Gen-Z language, memes, and informal tones to maintain engagement and build a sense of connection.

A strong preference emerged for influencers who employ casual, relatable language and culturally relevant humour. Ten out of thirteen interview participants (77%) reported that they gravitate toward influencers who 'speak their language', a style marked by informality, insider expressions, and playful tone. As Participant 1 explained:

Yes, I think it's all about the way the influencer presents herself. The language she uses, of course, is the language we like using! My mom does not understand when I use specific terms, but the influencer I follow, she's like my friend; speaking our language. So, yeah, it's very engaging…so I guess that's why I'm hooked.

Similarly, the use of memes, especially humorous and trend-based ones, was identified as a key strategy for maintaining attention and enhancing relatability. Nine participants (69%) specifically mentioned that memes made content more memorable and enjoyable, supporting previous research that positions memes as culturally resonant communicative tools for Gen-Z audiences (Denisova, 2019; Iloh, 2021; Malodia et al., 2022).

Participant 7 noted:

I particularly like the influencers who use popular memes in their own way. The uniqueness! It stays with me for long, and I keep thinking about it whenever I see or hear something related to the product those influencers endorsed.

Participant 12 also highlighted the habitual nature of influencer engagement:

Sometimes I feel like, ummm, this is a bit too much to handle. But still, I can't stop from viewing influencers' clips, attending their live streaming, and buying items they use. It's become a habit, it's like just a part of my everyday life. But all my friends do it, too.

The findings further reveal that for most participants, Instagram is not just a platform for entertainment but also a key site for product discovery and peer connection. Eleven out of thirteen interview participants (86%) identified Instagram as their preferred platform for finding new products and engaging with like-minded users. Influencers were not perceived merely as marketers but as trendsetters and social figures who help shape personal identities and community belonging, an observation that aligns with Delbaere et al.'s (2021) assertion that influencers significantly shape Gen-Z followers' social identities. This short, unique yet eclectic experience provided them with opportunities to bond and build relationships online; those who understand the feeling of sharing and relishing the moment of excitement and amusement kept on consuming memes (Voorveld, 2019).

For instance, Participant 9 shared:

I just want to feel like I belong. I want to be a part of this world where my friends acknowledge me as someone 'hip' (trendy/cool).

Participant 2 emphasized the importance of staying up to date through influencer content:

If I want to show my presence online, on my social media account, and gain more followers, I need to know and stay up to date with the current trend and influencers are the trend especially when it comes to fashion and beauty!

Echoing this sentiment, Participant 13 added:

I feel like following influencers is natural because this is how we live. I learn new terms, new trends, and make new online friends via influencer sites. And, I think this is how I become myself…a person who knows the current trends and styles. Above all, it's fun.

These findings suggest that playful communicative strategies that involve informal language, memes, and cultural fluency, enable Korean Instagram influencers to foster deeper connections with Gen-Z followers. This, in turn, supports socialisation processes by reinforcing shared cultural references, promoting trend adoption, and encouraging digital community-building. The participants' narratives positively point that communication indeed plays a vital role in building relationships grounded in trust (Craig, 2007). Understanding users', followers', and consumers' preferred language styles, as well as the verbal and nonverbal cues they feel comfortable with, helps build this trust. Influencers effectively use these elements to connect with their followers, who are aware of these strategies. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of syncing language, as they actively communicate on the platform not only with the influencer but also with other followers. Gen-Z enjoys having a say in improving products and services they consume (Croes & Bartels, 2021) by enthusiastically interacting with the influencer, other like-minded followers, and the brand the influencer endorses.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate that Instagram influencers effectively leverage communication strategies, such as the use of playful Gen-Z language and memes, to foster strong connections with young followers. These strategies are not merely marketing tactics; they reflect deeper social interactions that allow followers to express their identities and connect with like-minded peers. The study supports the idea that language and communication styles used by influencers can significantly shape the online behaviour of Gen-Z consumers (Wallace et al., 2021). The informal, friendly tone of influencer communication fosters a sense of closeness, which encourages deeper engagement and loyalty among followers.

Playful memes and Gen-Z language

Memes—socially constructed ideas, images, or behaviour that spread by people mimicking or imitating the forms through writing, speech, gestures, or certain actions—are perceived as an entertaining form of sharing concepts and cultural experiences (Denisova, 2019). Regarded as a new genre of online communication, these images, GIFs, or short video clips are commonly shared through the Internet which then are copied and reproduced and spread again (Iloh2021; Wiggins, 2019). The study participants understood memes as valuable cultural units and symbols that form unique connections online which have become a part of everyday communication. They were often captivated by this approach and even tried to mimic these memes in their own communication. Participants agreed that memes excel in simplicity by avoiding overwhelming communication (Mitra, 2023) and are trendy and fun. They efficiently and effectively convey a specific message. For Gen-Z, who values simplicity and uniqueness, memes are a perfect fit.

Thus, the use of memes in influencer communication functions as a form of cultural shorthand that enhances relatability and shared understanding aligning with Wibowo and Zainudin's (2024) study that cultural relevance is a key element in engaging Gen-Z audiences. Participants highlighted the importance of humour and uniqueness in meme use, indicating that these elements create a strong emotional connection with followers. The findings also highlight the role of memes in influencer marketing. Memes, which have become an integral part of Gen-Z communication, act as a bridge for influencers to communicate in a way that is both engaging and culturally relevant. By integrating memes into their promotional content, influencers create a sense of shared culture and experience, making their content more accessible and attractive to Gen-Z followers (Fernandez et al., 2024; Vardeman, 2024).

Participants strongly preferred influencers' playful communication styles since they come across as friendly and approachable, making it easy for followers to talk to them and share opinions. Influencers who use informal and fun language are perceived as more inviting and trendier, as this linguistic behaviour fosters a sense of closeness with their audience. This phenomenon is in line with the study by Wallace et al. (2021), which highlights the importance of positive psychological proximity in co-creating value between communicators and one of the most effective ways to build this close relationship is by employing the right communication strategies. Fun, short words, and trendy slang, accompanied by the use of emojis, images, and stickers, immediately appeal to Gen-Z.

Social influence, identity, and belonging

The findings also reveal that influencers act as cultural agents who not only influence consumer preferences but also shape identity and peer dynamics. Many participants described influencers in relational terms— 'like a friend'—highlighting the importance of social closeness and shared values in building trust and engagement. These dynamics reflect the concept of para-social relationships, where followers perceive influencers as part of their social circle, which is central to how Gen-Z navigates online spaces (Craig, 2007). Moreover, the findings reiterate that influencers are more than just marketing tools; they are cultural agents who shape the values, tastes, and behaviours of their followers. The data suggests that the social power of influencers is not merely about promoting products but also about influencing the way followers perceive themselves and interact with others. Gen-Z consumers often view their relationship with influencers as akin to a friendship, where shared interests and mutual understanding of trends play a central role in shaping their identities (Craig, 2007; Wallace et al., 2021).

While the desire for community, trend awareness, and digital visibility was evident, participants also expressed concerns about the negative effects of heavy influencer consumption, such as fatigue and overexposure. However, these concerns were often outweighed by the social benefits that influencers provide, such as a sense of connection and belonging. For many participants, belonging was not merely about fitting into a trend but about being part of a shared cultural space where they felt seen, understood, and included (Barsallo et al., 2024; Hillman et al., 2023). Influencers, through their use of familiar language, memes, and lifestyle cues, created digital environments that mirrored the participants' own social worlds. This resonance fostered a feeling of inclusion, especially for individuals navigating the complexities of identity and peer acceptance in a fast-paced digital culture. Here, belonging is closely tied to social validation and the need to be recognised within one's peer group (Barsallo et al., 2024; Hillman et al., 2023). Influencers, in this context, become cultural gatekeepers; their role extends beyond product promotion to identity shaping, particularly among Gen-Z users who are actively negotiating their self-image and group membership online. Belonging, in this sense, is not just emotional but performative. It involves active participation as a means of staying relevant and connected. Influencers provide both the scripts and the stage for this performance, allowing followers to participate in shared rituals (e.g., reposting memes, joining live streams, using specific hashtags) that reinforce group identity.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study has revealed how Instagram influencers use playful, engaging, and youth-oriented communication strategies to connect with Gen-Z followers in the Korean context. The findings emphasise the social and commercial power of influencers who skilfully integrate humour, memes, vernacular language, and storytelling to capture attention and foster emotional connections. These strategies go beyond entertainment, influencing how Gen-Z consumers interact, build communities, and derive meaning within the digital communication space. Through their interactions on social media platforms, they actively shape their self-identity, recognize their social roles, and experience a strong sense of connectedness with others (Missier, 2022; Vardeman, 2024). This underscores the

importance of influencers in facilitating not only commercial exchanges but also complex identity formation and social engagement processes among youth in the digital age.

Key findings suggest that Korean Gen-Z values communication that is interactive, creative, and generationally resonant. Influencers who employ short, playful language and integrate unique memes and visual narratives are more likely to drive engagement and stimulate behaviour. This co-creation dynamic, where influencers shape interactions and Gen-Z users actively participate in content creation, reinforces not only the influencer's but also the follower's social capital.

This study contributes to the broader academic discourse on digital media by illuminating the evolving role of Instagram influencers in shaping youth culture, communication practices, and identity construction. As Gen-Z navigates a media landscape saturated with curated content, understanding the motivations and strategies behind influencer messaging becomes essential for fostering critical media literacy. Beyond media literacy, the study also offers insights into the formation of youth identity in the digital age. As young people increasingly define themselves through online interactions, influencers play a key role in constructing spaces for self-expression, community, and belonging. Engaging with influencer content allows Gen-Z to not only follow emerging trends but also affirm their place within broader social and cultural movements, contributing to the development of a collective digital identity.

The study also has theoretical implications, particularly for understanding parasocial relationships and social influence in online environments. It expands existing frameworks of digital communication by showing how playful strategies such as humour, memes, and vernacular language facilitate engagement and community-building. The findings emphasise the dynamic and reciprocal nature of digital influence as a co-constructed process between influencers and followers, contributing to the advancement of communication theory in social media contexts.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small and demographically specific sample, which may restrict the generalisability of the results. The use of self-reported data through interviews carries the potential for response biases, such as social desirability or selective recall. Although data triangulation helped to mitigate this risk, some bias may still be present. Additionally, while interviews were conducted in Korean and later translated into English, linguistic and cultural nuances, particularly those related to humour and informal expressions, may have been lost or altered in translation, potentially affecting the interpretation of certain themes.

For future research, expanding the sample to include a more diverse population across age groups or cultural contexts would enhance the representativeness of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer a deeper understanding of how influencer communication shapes youth identity and behaviour over time. By further examining how playful digital communication fosters social connection and influences consumer behaviour, researchers can continue to explore the intersection of digital influence, identity formation, and intercultural communication in an increasingly interconnected media environment.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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BIODATA

Ji Hye Jaime Chung is an assistant professor at Mahidol University International College. Her research interests lie in the area of language and communication ranging from theories to applied pragmatics. She is particularly interested in researching communication styles, strategies and skills practiced in East and Southeast Asian contexts in relation to business and education. She can be reached at jihyejaime.chu@mahidol.ac.th.

Joshua Youngbin Min is an independent researcher interested in examining young entrepreneurs and their communication methods and approaches especially on online platforms. He focuses on various ways Generation Z uniquely express and communicate. He can be reached at min44473@sas.edu.sg.