

1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a tremendous surge in information technology and communications development, greatly influencing global human communication. Starting from the early 2000s, the first social networking platforms such as Friendster, MySpace, and LinkedIn were introduced. The advent of Facebook in 2004 marked a significant milestone in the popularity of social media, quickly becoming one of the most widely used platforms worldwide, captivating billions of users across the globe. Subsequently, other social networking platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok emerged and became integral to our daily lives. These social media platforms have provided businesses and managers with powerful tools to enhance interaction and customer outreach. Notably, social media influencers play a pivotal role in advertising. According to Katharina Buchholz (2020), a survey conducted among marketing managers worldwide indicated that 40% have utilized influencer marketing to promote their products and services.

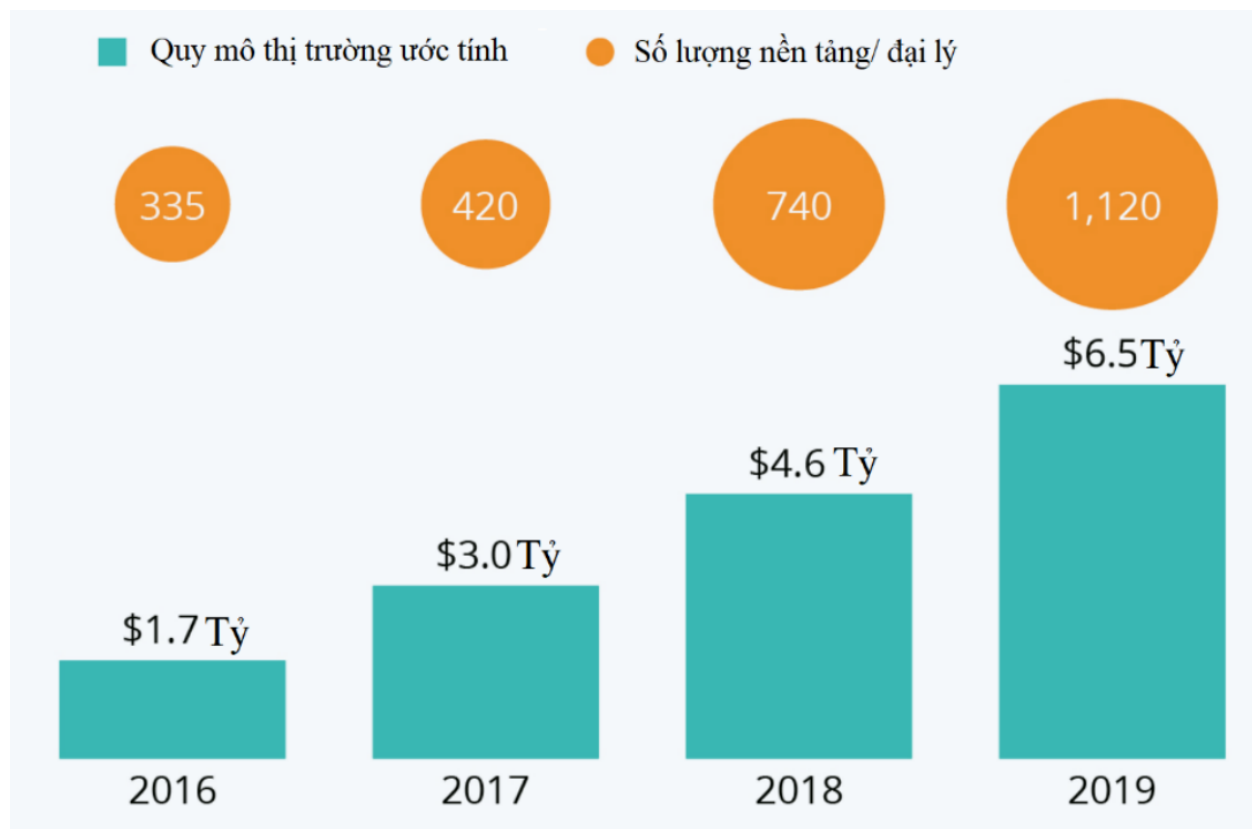


Figure 1. The market's scale of the Influencers in the world

(Source: Katharina Buchholz, 2020)

Besides, there are also many risks that exist alongside the bright spots in terms of effectiveness from influencers on social media, such as incidents related to speech, privacy, personality, etc., which have caused significant damage to businesses. Currently, virtual influencers have become a new trend in the field of communications, accepted by many managers in their promotional campaigns because virtual influencers seem to eliminate the potential risks that real influencers may bring. With the development of advanced technologies, creating virtual characters has become easier than ever. This has led to their increased presence on social media worldwide and in many countries, where virtual influencers are supported and accepted by the user community. Dewez and other authors (2019) also share a similar viewpoint in their research.

In Vietnam, businesses are also embracing the trend of using influencers on social media in their marketing campaigns. However, the use of virtual influencers is still relatively new in the business's media market. It is predicted that the use of virtual influencers in promoting products and services is becoming more popular, and many businesses are realizing the potential of this field. However, using virtual influencers should be done carefully by understanding the reception trends of users, especially the Gen Z age group. Gen Z is considered to be a generation that tends to use advanced technology and spends a long time on social media. According to Thanh Thanh (2022), Gen Z accounts for 1/3 of the world's population and 14.4 million people in Vietnam - a significant number that cannot be ignored by brands. 71% of Gen Z spend more than an hour on social media every day. The acceptance or rejection of virtual influencers on social media by Gen Z in Vietnam should be researched to help businesses assess the effectiveness of using virtual influencers in their marketing strategies.

Many researchers around the world have captured the trend of virtual influencers' development; therefore, they have conducted numerous studies to explore various perspectives, aspects, trends, and related behaviors, such as Stein et al. (2022), Robinson (2020), Dewez et al. (2019). However, no study has evaluated the rejection of Gen Z users towards the presence of virtual influencers. In Vietnam, there are only a few rare studies on influencers, and currently, there is no research that explores the subject of virtual influencers.

Therefore, given the practical context of the booming trend of virtual influencers in the future and the lack of in-depth research on user rejection of this phenomenon, this study aims to answer the question: "Do Gen Z users reject the presence of virtual influencers on social media?"

2. Virtual influencers and the rejection

2.1. Virtual influencers

There are different definitions of influencers, but several researchers agree that they can create valuable and highly credible content in specific fields, which a large number of social media users seek and use to form judgments about the quality of related products or services (Kim et al., 2018; Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). Yên & Đạt (2023) also agree that influencers attract followers through interaction with users through content, images, and videos that demonstrate sincerity, expertise, and trustworthiness to authenticate products/services, thereby influencing users' buying and usage behavior. Therefore, influencers can be simply understood as individuals who have an impact on many others through various media outlets.

Along with the development of technology and continuous changes in the marketing industry related to influencers, a new phenomenon has emerged - virtual influencers. Virtual influencers exhibit characteristics, behaviors, and actions similar to humans but do not correspond to any actual individuals in the real world (Conti et al., 2022). According to Stein et al. (2022), virtual influencers are internet celebrities who appear partially or entirely, who are digitally created and presented as influencers similar to real people. Virtual influencers exist within a virtual environment (Dewez et al., 2019; Regia-Corte et al., 2013). Park et al. (2021) share the same opinion and additionally state that influencers are modern versions of fictional characters, digitally crafted to appear lifelike and gain a large following on media platforms. And of course, virtual influencers have visual appeal, elicit social reactions, and have the ability to change human behavior (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Khan & Sutcliffe, 2014).

Therefore, virtual influencers are individuals created by technology who can primarily influence users through social interactions or campaigns on technological platforms. They possess characteristics and behaviors similar to humans but do not correspond to any actual individuals in the real world.

2.2. The rejection

Most studies focus on user acceptance of technology or services, with very few investigating the phenomenon of rejection of technology or products. As a result, there are relatively few studies that address the concept of rejection. In a study by Portwood-Stacer (2013) on media refusal, the author argues that rejection can be seen as non-participation or non-use of a product or service, and it can also indicate social or

political significance for the individual. Stroud & Kenski (2007) suggest that rejection arises during the introduction or early stages of a product/service/technology.

Therefore, rejection is not only about not using a product, service, or technology, but it also reflects a social or political standpoint. Typically, the act of rejection emerges during the introduction or initial stage of the appearance of a product, service, or technology.

3. Research Methods

A research study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the phenomenon of Gen Z's rejection of online influencers on social media. The study employs a synthesis method to assess previous research on online influencers and rejection, utilizing a desk research approach to gather secondary data regarding the global market scale of online influencers. Additionally, a group discussion is conducted to formulate survey questions. The quantitative research method involves conducting surveys with a sample size of 174 Gen Z individuals and using SPSS for data analysis.

4. Results

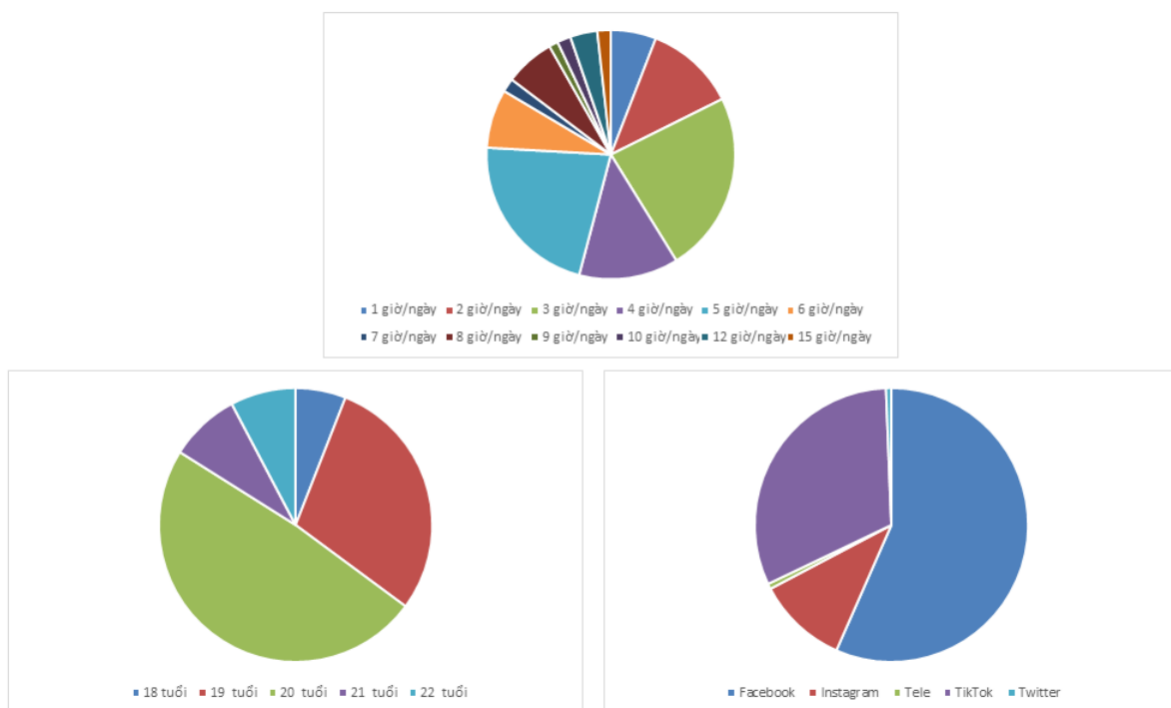


Figure 2. Descriptive statistics on age, social media platforms, and duration of social media usage.

(Source: Statistical analysis results)

The research findings have indicated that Gen Z is virtually unconcerned about the presence of online influencers on social media platforms. When receiving questions about their views on the statement "I would not like the presence of online influencers on social media," the responses primarily focused on indifference. Additionally, Gen Z does not pass judgment on whether social media platforms utilize online influencers in their communications. Evidence suggests that when asked about their disappointment in online influencers, the survey responses tended towards a non-judgmental trend. This indicates that Gen Z's perspective on the actions of online influencers and the behavior of social media platforms tends to be lenient. They can easily accept the actions of online influencers and their behavior, whether positively or negatively impacting them through the social media platforms they commonly use. This effect may stem from the dependence on social media and the current phone usage habits of Gen Z. Despite being aware of the negative consequences and impacts of online influencers, they still continue to use them. The role of habits and lifestyle significantly influences this issue.

Question category	Average scores
1. I would not appreciate the presence of virtual influences on social media.	3.06
2. I dislike virtual influencers exerting impacts on my personal life.	3.37
3. I would skim through content from virtual influences on social media.	3.19
4. I would disregard images from virtual influences.	3.15
5. I find it uninteresting when virtual influences appearances on social media.	3.05
6. I would feel annoyed by the voices of virtual influencers.	2.90
7. I distance myself from sources that feature content from virtual influences.	3.11
8. I would refrain from purchasing products endorsed by virtual influences.	3.17

9. I feel bored when virtual influencers appear on social media.	3.08
10. I am not inclined to create a virtual influencer that closely resembles a real person.	3.16
11. I am not concerned about the personality of online influencers	3.24
12. My friends also do not have a preference for virtual influencers.	2.90
13. My family also does not have a preference for virtual influencers.	3.24
14. I believe virtual influencers may have a negative impact on my behavior.	2.81
15. I believe virtual influencers may have a negative impact on my emotions.	2.76
16. I experience a sense of unease when confronted with virtual influencers.	2.59
17. I dislike sensitive images from virtual influencers.	3.42
18. I would be disappointed with social media platforms that use virtual influencers.	2.91

Regarding the perspective on virtual influencers on social media, Gen Z has shown an open-minded and non-negative attitude. This is evidenced by their disagreement with the statement "I would feel annoyed by the voices of virtual influencers." Clearly, they do not dislike virtual influencers. Additional evidence is their neutral stance towards the statement "I feel bored when virtual influencers appear on social media." Therefore, in this aspect, similar to their attitude towards social media platforms they frequently use, young people do not express animosity towards online influencers. However, a significant portion of the surveyed individuals agreed with the statement "I dislike sensitive images from online influencers." This also reflects Gen Z's attitude towards online influencers in cases where individuals abuse the images of influencers beyond conventional ethical standards and boundaries. It affirms that Gen Z still tends to care

about ethical standards and criticize aspects of virtual influencers' behavior that violate those standards on social media in general, or specifically, from virtual influencers.

However, the perspective of rejecting information from virtual influencers is still the predominant viewpoint among the surveyed individuals. The high agreement is expressed with the statement "I dislike virtual influencers exerting impacts on my personal life." At the same time, there is also a high level of agreement with the statement "I would skim through content from virtual influences on social media." This demonstrates a strong rejection of virtual influencers from Gen Z. The clear action is that they tend to disregard the presence of this tool (35% agreement). Young people also tend to stay away from promotional and media content from this source (33.3% agreement).

The attitude of rejecting virtual influencers makes Gen Z believe that seeing and receiving information from them is a waste of time. Virtual influencers are not trusted, their information is not accepted, and the response is to ignore, avoid, and reject the images and information from these influencers, which leads them to feel that virtual influencers are worthless, not beneficial, and a waste of time. This will result in their negative attitude towards virtual influencers.

From the attitude of rejecting virtual influencers, the negative attitude of social media users towards virtual influencers becomes negative. This will also lead to a negative attitude toward the content, messages, and products associated with virtual influencers from users. Evidence shows that up to 35.6% of respondents affirm that they will not purchase products advertised by virtual influencers. This is a high rejection rate, clearly stating that advertising using virtual influencers for this target group will generate a backlash effect, not only failing to increase sales but also potentially leading to a decrease and impacting the brand image of businesses.

The attitude of rejection also leads to a consequence that the majority of respondents do not believe and are not afraid of being affected by anything from virtual influencers. They do not agree with the statement "I believe virtual influencers may have a negative impact on my behavior" because they have rejected virtual influencers and the information they bring. In terms of emotions, young people believe that they are not afraid of virtual influencers and do not worry about virtual influencers causing them negative emotions. This is the clearest evidence of the rejection of virtual influencers. In other words, due to the clear direction and determination to reject and not accept virtual influencers, the content, and information that virtual influencers bring cannot impact the awareness and emotions of Gen Z.

When asked what young people think about the views of their friends and family regarding virtual influencers, they believe that their families would also not like and accept virtual influencers. On the contrary, they believe that their friends may accept

virtual influencers. This reflects their perspective that older generations, especially parents and older relatives, tend to reject technology. On the other hand, it is also important to acknowledge that stereotypes and social views are not always accurate in every case. Typically, the majority of young people will adapt to and accept virtual influencers positively. However, research results have shown that young people themselves, through their use of social media, are creating barriers to protect themselves from the impact of virtual influencers, a digital transformation application of influencers.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The use of virtual influencers in communication activities and brand promotion may be receiving a lot of attention and investment. However, the effectiveness of virtual influencers in communication goals, increasing awareness, and creating positive impressions with Gen Z may still need clarification due to uncertainties and evident skepticism. The potential of virtual influencers in this field can be significant, but it should be implemented in a certain and cautious manner to avoid any negative effects that could damage the image, brand, and business operations of the company. Although there is no hostility towards virtual influencers, users are still evaluating them. They are ready to react if virtual influencers exceed social norms and standards. Virtual influencers have not yet gained acceptance from users, so messages, images, and brands promoted alongside virtual influencers may not be accepted and tend to face rejection. Therefore, the promotion of products and communication with virtual influencers should only be carried out when trust is established and the rejection of virtual influencers is overcome by the recipients of the information.

Table 1: The average time spent on social media per day

Average	4.68
Trung vị	4.00
Mode	3

(Source: Statistical analysis results)

Regarding the issue of social media usage, users are well aware of the harmful effects and time wastage caused by unnecessary content, messages, and images that social media platforms force them to consume. However, users still refuse to give up

using this platform. Additionally, the increasing amount of time spent by Gen Z on social media is a matter of concern (an average of 4.68 hours per day). Research shows that despite being aware of the negative impacts, social media remains inseparable from Gen Z. This is an issue that deserves further research to gain a clearer understanding of how individuals respond to virtual influence. The research also indicates that general societal assumptions about Gen Z may not always be accurate. Although Gen Z is highly dynamic, tech-savvy, and embraces new technologies, not all technologies and digital applications have the same influence. They are willing to reject virtual influencer platforms in advertising and communication activities on social media.

6. Future research directions

Research has some inherent limitations due to the methods of data collection and the formation of research samples. Convenience sampling methods make it easier to collect data, but they sacrifice the generalizability and representativeness of the sample to the population. The study focused on the age group of 19-20 years old, accounting for 75.3% of the sample. Subsequent research may need to be validated in different age groups. Future studies could increase the sample size, and stratify the sample to create diversity for comparing different study groups and different social media platforms to identify more differences and enhance the scientific and practical significance of the research.

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