

## Factors Influencing Generation Z Emirati Females' Following of Social Media Influencers in the UAE

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### Abstract

*Over the last few years, more and more companies have embraced using social media influencers to promote and boost their products and services. This study aims to understand the factors influencing Emirati females' following of specific social media influencer (SMI) accounts. This study was based on a mixed method qualitative research of 27 interviews and quantitative research of 409 valid questionnaires. Firstly, the data was analyzed and grouped to find the main themes behind participant's choice of SMIs, thematic analysis revealed four main factors influencing participants' selection of SMIs: Envy, Enjoyment, Entrust, and Empathy. Together, these four factors represent the proposed Four E's Model of SMI Following Behavior which was verified using quantitative analysis. The survey results indicated that there is a positive influence between these variables and Generation Z choice of SMI they follow. The data highlights important information for companies when targeting Generation Z consumers using SMIs. Moreover, it highlights characteristics of participants' behavior and the current state of social media following in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) region.*

**Keywords:** Social Media Influencers; Empathy; Entrust; Enjoyment; Envy; Generation Z; Following

### Introduction

During Covid-19, social media platforms have seen an increase in the number of accounts created and social media followers per individual (Statista, 27 September 2021). Consequently, the role of social media influencers has grown as an essential element to an organization's promotional strategy. The popularity of social media among young adults, particularly Generation Z, continues to rise, and social media has given origin to “microcelebrities,” who have gained fame through self-branding (Khamis *et al.*, 2017). These microcelebrities, known as social influencers, use social media to attract a large following by self-presentation (Chae, 2018).

Social media influencers have the platform and audience to endorse and promote brands' products and services while generating successful and positive campaign outcomes for companies (Taillon *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, brands continuously seek to increase their participation in the social media sphere and continue to increase their budgets in online social media influencer-related campaigns (Statista, 27 September 2021). However, while SMI following increases, brands have a wider pool of candidates available and a more challenging strategy to implement in their target selection and relationship brand-influencer match. Brands need to understand what leads consumers to choose a particular SMI.

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Rai (2020) believes consumer behavior is characterized by how individuals select, secure, and use information about ideas, products, and services to satisfy their needs. Understanding consumers' motives behind following specific social media influencers' accounts have gained profound importance. Some studies have attempted to explore the main characteristic traits leading to consumers' relations and selection with SMI (Mete, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2021).

## **Purpose of the study**

The paper aims to fill the gap in social media research, and it intends to identify the factors influencing Emirati females who are part of Generation Z to follow SMI. The research contribution is threefold; it uncovers the motives for following specific SMI accounts, it analyses the characteristics of the social media platforms Emirati females use, and finally it proposes a model based on the benefits and implications for users to follow SMIs in the UAE.

## **Literature Review**

### *Influencer Marketing*

In today's social-media-dominated world, traditional forms of advertising are becoming less effective, and more consumer brands are turning to influencers. Social media influencers represent “a new type of independent third party endorser who shapes audiences' attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg, *et al.* 2011, p. 91). Social content creators can offer more value to brands, and these people have a dedicated group of followers on social media platforms. Influencer marketing is a social media strategy where brands collaborate with people who have a significant social media presence, including bloggers, celebrities, and individuals with a social following who are viewed as experts in their field to endorse products. An influencer is someone who posts to social media in exchange for compensation (Campbell and Grim, 2019). The main appeal of influencers is that they are more alike to their audience than traditional celebrities are, and they are more accessible. Brands and celebrity endorsements have been companions to firms for a long while, but with digital connectivity, the concept of endorsement has shifted to individuals who deploy social media platforms to exert influence.

Influencer marketing is, therefore the process of identifying high-impact conversations between brands and customers or potential customers (Libert, 2019). Influencer marketing is proven to be a profitable business. The data shows “the entire industry is worth almost \$14 billion. This equates to a 42% year-on-year increase from \$9.7 billion in 2020” and “women aged 16 to 24 are 31% more likely to follow social media influencers than men” (Dopson, 18 August 2021).

Presently, women continue striving for work-life balance and pay equity across multiple industries, and influencer marketing is one industry dominated by women. Women enjoy fashion and beauty, and “fashion and beauty are industries that rely heavily on influencer marketing, as organic growth for brands has become more challenging without advertising and amplification. In this sector, 57% of companies now use influencers as part of their marketing mix, while 21% are planning to add this to their strategy in the coming year” (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). The women who perceive influencer marketing as authentic and genuine seem to engage with the influencer's sponsored content.



Consumers are interested in product influencer “fitment” for certain types of product categories. It can be determined that influencer marketing involves identifying the right type of influencer who will offer stories, curated recommendations to create engagement with the audience. It appears that consumers are impacted with an increase in brand awareness, subject matter knowledge and brand preference (Chopra *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, consumer motives for following influencers were explored by an online study conducted by Lee *et al.*, (2022). The researchers intended to understand the socio psychological motives that drive consumers to follow influencers on Instagram. Four primary motives were determined and they included consumerism, authenticity, creative inspiration, and envy – that exerted varying effects on purchase frequency (Lee *et al.*, 2022).

Likewise, followers consider a sponsored post as a genuine recommendation of an influencer, increasing the credibility of the message and positively affecting followers’ attitudes towards the brand endorsed in the post (Schouten, *et al.*, 2022). The tactic relies on influencers who have built a significant and engaged follower base by frequently posting a variety of content, particularly, texts, pictures, and videos to promote products and brands. New marketing tactics such as online video saw a rise in the past few years, with prediction that online video and influencer marketing will outperform other tactics and better connect with their audiences (Clapp, 2021).

Similarly, brands are developing more sustainable relations with influencers to serve customers looking for authentic connections. Since people are spending an increasing amount of time on social media, the role of influencer-led conversations is essential. A solid social media presence and partnerships with influencers are one where a brand can grow.

### **Generation Z**

Gen Z is unfamiliar with a world without the Internet and they are looking for authentic relationships and visually stimulating content. Francis and Hoefel (2018) believe the search for the truth is at the root of their behavior, which is best defined as “expressing individual truth, connecting through different truths understanding different truths and unveiling the truth behind all things”. Organizations must understand that the new generation seeks truth and Generation Z is most influenced by social media influencers (Dopson, 18 August 2021). Influencers play a significant role in the customer decision-making process and brands can leverage the power of influencers to drive sustainability and acquire new customers. Unfortunately, influencer marketing is more challenging when targeting older consumers and as age increases, social media usage decreases. Studies show that “23% of Millennials, 16% of Gen X, and 9% of Boomers follow influencers on social media” (Dopson, 18 August 2021).

Research shows that young adults visit social platforms like Instagram and YouTube for product reviews before making a purchase and often purchase items because influencers recommend them (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). According to a SlickText’s (5 December 2021) survey, “Gen Z respondents (ages 16 to 24) ranked Instagram as the most trustworthy platform, followed by TikTok. Facebook, which ranked first in all other age groups, was fourth for Gen Z” and a drawback for all age groups is “universal distrust for sponsored posts”. There is a consensus amongst the literature that Instagram is an important marketing channel because of the visual appeal, which is also desirable for influencers. Out of all the generations, Gen Z is the most likely to shop via social media. However, they switch between

channels frequently, so implementing an omnichannel strategy is a good way to target them (Bewicke, 2021).

### **Factors influencing SMI following**

The Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) explains that there is misinformation and widespread mistrust of institutions worldwide. Digital natives respond positively to the brand they can trust and brands should be trustworthy. Gen Z is interested in authenticity and transparency, as they can easily recognize “fake news” because they have grown up with it. When the target market identifies with an influencer brand awareness and profits increase. “The value of influencer marketing lies in the fact that 61% of consumers trust influencers’ recommendations—more than the 38% who trust branded social media content” (Dopson, 18 August 2021). Gen Z is interested in brands that they can trust and deliver their promises.

The consumer's identification with a brand is a strong predictor of brand trust, brand loyalty (He and Li, 2011, Stokburger-Sauer, *et. al.*, 2012)), and brand consumption in online environments (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). While brands may not be the solution for the stress suffered by Gen-Z during Covid 19, they certainly can allow their voices to be heard while providing brands the opportunity to win their loyalty. Given the crisis and Gen Z's desire for change, organizations have a chance to give stability and gain brand trust and loyalty, retaining their social media influencers.

### **Social Media, Social structures, and Well-Being**

Participating on a social media site is a positive experience; however, remaining on social media has mainly to do with social capital and the tangible benefits people receive from being members of a group. Users tend to seek enjoyment and scholars tend to agree that enjoyment is a pleasurable and emotional response to media (Vorderer, *et al.*, 2004) or classified as a positive response to media content (Tamborin, 2003). Ryan *et al.* (2000) suggest a link between psychological well-being and the enjoyment of entertainment media. Vorderer *et al.* (2004) defined enjoyment as a pleasant experiential state that combines cognitive, physiological, and affective components.

Moreover, social media has played an important role in disrupting social structures, and concerning envy, disruption occurs in three ways: increasing proximity, rejecting concealment, and eliminating encapsulation (Samuel, 6 February 2018). Ben-Ze'ev's (1990) work talks about proximity “those who are close to us, but still above us, emphasize our own inferiority more than those who are distant from us” (p. 489). Social media breaks the proximity principle and puts experiences within reach of users where they can imagine what their lives could look like if they had the life of the Kardashians or the talent of Rihanna (Samuel, 6 February 2018). Social media usage, along with envy by proximity, is breaking the long tradition of encapsulation, which is referred to as social units that are marked off from each other by various barriers such as psychological, physical, and cultural (Foster, cited in Samuel, 6 February 2018).

Social media allows users to see what they are missing. The acceleration of opening up the boundaries has implications for envy and social stability (Samuel, 6 February 2018). Ben-Ze'ev (1990) also notes that with social media usage, “people become more engaged with each other, they have less tolerance for a given level of inequality” (p. 490), and that is because “social



media culture is quickly dispensing with what has long been the prevailing strategy for warding off envy: concealment” (Samuel, 6 February 2018).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Grounded Theory was developed by Sociologist Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) because they found qualitative studies to be limited. Qualitative research during this period followed traditional methods that involved coming up with a hypothesis and conducting research to validate it. Glaser and Strauss established a new methodology for discovering theoretical insight by taking an inductive approach to qualitative research. Whereas traditional hypothesis-deductive approaches come up with a hypothesis, which tries to prove or disapprove something, Grounded Theory is an inductive approach where new theories stem from data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

This theory focuses on the interplay with data in order to identify, develop and relate main concepts. According to the main precursors theory should be derived from data and not vice versa, the data should be systematically gathered, interpreted and analyzed through the research process, concluding that derives from data is more likely to resemble reality and provide meaningful guide to action.

Grounded theory is also based on a more critical thinking approach and on the premise of building rather than testing. It should develop a conceptual order of the data, a method of organize it, codify, categorize, ranked and then theorize.

Similarly, this article methodology was anchored on grounded theory at first, during qualitative - interview stage. The goal was to extract information and knowledge using large collections of data (Hand, Mannila, & Smyth, 2011) rather than considering factors affecting social media used in previous studies. The research focused on the creation of analytic codes and categories derived from data and not by previous conceptualizations, theories or hypothesis, as a result and in coherence, no research hypothesis were advanced previously to data analyses. The hypotheses and model were only proposed at the quantitative stage, after the themes and factors were revealed by the analysis of the data itself.

As per the interview stage the information collected was recorded and then analyzed.

The factors influencing Generation Z social media influencers following, were categorized taken into account the words, frequency of the terms, semantic analysis showcase in the memo of the interviews, that allowed for several factors to be revealed and then grouped using thematic analysis.

The outcomes from Grounded Theory are directly informed by real world participants in real world environments that stem from interviews and observations. Therefore, the data is heavily connected to the outcomes, which contrasts other research theories. Grounded theory is an open ended methodology but the strategies are structured in the discovery process. The process is iterative where data collection and analysis develops a theory. What is more, Grounded Theory can be combined with existing theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In that respect, the study stems from Grounded Theory and two additional theories are further outlined: Social Comparison Theory and Uses and Gratification theory.

### **Social Comparison Theory**

People compare themselves to others when they acquire information about others (Mussweiler *et al.*, 2006). Presently, social comparison behavior is more frequent due to the Internet. The Internet provides diverse information sources and, therefore, more social comparison behavior. Similarly, people frequently compare themselves with others on social network sites, making them an important venue where people can evaluate themselves and develop their identities. However, comparison can lead to either happiness and satisfaction or unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

Social comparison theory (Festiner, 1954) states that people evaluate their abilities and opinions through comparison with others. Thornton and Arrowood (1966) refer to personality trait comparison, and Gibbons and Buunk, (1999) discuss how people try to enhance their self-concept and self-esteem by comparing with others. Mussweiler *et al.* (2006) states, “whenever people are confronted with information about how others are, what others can and can- not do, or what others have achieved and have failed to achieve, people relate this information to themselves”. It is a natural phenomenon to compare oneself to another, and people can easily be influenced in many ways. Also, how a person feels about themselves varies depending on personal traits and who they are comparing themselves with (Buunk and Gibbons, 2006).

Morse and Gergen (1970) examined how the presence of desirable or undesirable people can influence a person's self-esteem. They state when a person is present with socially desirable people, their self-esteem decreases, and when people are present with undesirable people, their self-esteem increases. Moreover, Campbell (1990) found that people with low self-esteem seem to engage in social comparison more regularly and are more sensitive to social comparison content and information. There is also some concern between a person's social comparison frequency and self-uncertainty (Butzer and Kuiper 2006). In short, social comparison theory highlights the influence of self-esteem on an individual's tendency to compare themselves with others. Such comparisons can take place by means of the virtual world.

### **The Uses and Gratifications Theory**

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), with roots in communication literature, was originally developed to understand why people use mass media and could explain why people use social media and follow social influencers. The theory was based on the premise that people interact with media to satisfy their personal needs and gratification (Wu, Wang and Tsai, 2010). The audience has power over their media consumption and plays an active role in integrating social media into their own lives. The UGT theory has been applied to social media channels such as Facebook (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008), Instagram (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016), Snapshcat (Phua, Jin and Kim, 2017) and YouTube (Khan, 2017); however, in terms of gratification, many other factors can come into play such as gender, age, and education. To narrow in on the variables, this article specifically studied Emirati women between the ages of 18 and 24, who attend Higher Education (HE) in the United Arab Emirates.

A plethora of studies have applied the Uses and Gratification Theory to identify the motivations for using multiple types of media; however, they have not focused on the





motivations of Emirati women for following social media influencers. Uses and Gratification Theory is relevant to social media and is considered a relevant factor in online behavior.

In this study, we seek to understand what social media platforms and gratifications Emirati women seek and what they expect from their social media influencers that influence their following acceptance behavior. Precisely, this article is interested in learning the factors that draw Emirati women to social media influencers.

## Method

Assisted by Grounded theory at first in which the logic of inference is an interplay between induction and abduction. The aim was to construct a grounded theory of the phenomenon under study, i.e., concepts and hypothetical relationships between concepts that make sense of or explain the phenomenon. Based on theory or framework from an initial grounded theory qualitative phase, the instrument, identify variables and stated propositions or hypotheses to test within a large sample and with statistical methods was then used in the quantitative stage.

In sum, the current study utilized a mixed method qualitative (first stage) and quantitative research method to collect data (second stage). The interview stage comprised of twenty-seven higher education female students enrolled in a Digital Marketing Bachelor's Program. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 24 years. Using a purposive sampling approach, the researchers carefully chose 27 participants with active social media accounts and an active following of SMIs. Prior to being selected for an interview, two control questions were used to verify the suitability of the studied candidates: 1) Do you have any social media accounts? and 2) Do you actively follow any SMI?

Selected students were later interviewed and asked a series of open-ended questions including follow-up questions as needed. Overall, the interview process focused on four main questions with related sub questions. Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes, depending on the level of detail provided by respondents. The questions used were as follows:

Q1-Which social media platforms do you currently engage with daily?

Q1b- Why are you active in that particular platform?

Q2- On average, how many SMIs do you actively follow?

Q3-Where are the SMIs you follow from? Provide 2-3 account examples.

Q3b- What industries do the SMIs you mentioned represent?

Q4- Based on the Social Media influencers you follow, what are the reasons behind following their specific accounts?

Q4b- What are the expected benefits from actively following these SMIs accounts?

In the second stage, based on the insights gathered by the thematic analysis, a questionnaire was developed comprising of demographic, behavioral questions and Likert scales statements (ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree), of the main four categories highlighted during the interviews. The affirmations that represent the four dimensions and the Following Behavior variable were mixed throughout the questionnaire, so the respondents do not assume directly that affirmations correspond to the same dimension or do not evaluate the affirmations equally according to their proximity.

The reliability analysis given by Cronbach Alpha was of 0.855 for the 18 statements showcasing a good level of internal consistency among the statements used for each scale. The independent variables of the study were combined using their mean for the statements in question.

Envy variable statements were allocated as number 2, 4, 12, 14; Empathy- 1, 5, 8, 10; Entrust- 3, 6, 9, 11; Enjoyment-7, 13, 16; and the dependent variable of the study Following acceptance by statements-15, 17, 18 respectively in the questionnaire. Factor analysis provided evidence if the scales in question were unidimensional. Factor analysis helped to verify sampling adequacy and correlation between the statements.

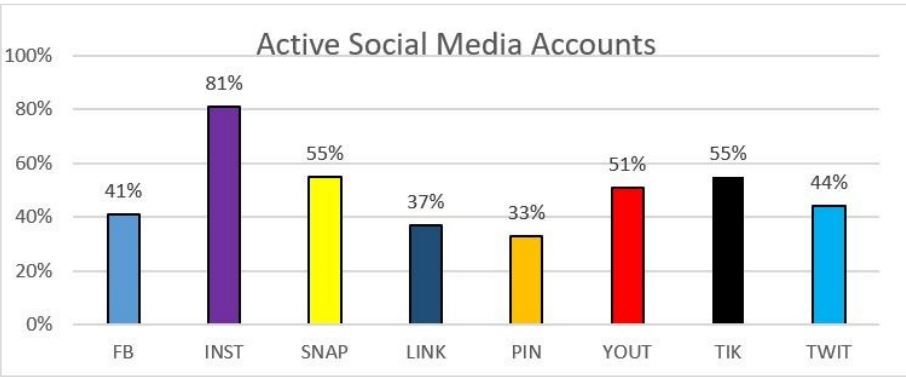
Envy scale showcased (KMO=0.711, Df=6, Sig. 0.000), Empathy (KMO=0.605, Df=6, Sig. 0.000), Entrust (0.629, Df=6, Sig. 0.000), Enjoyment (KMO=0.585, Df=3, Sig. 0.000) and Following Behavior (KMO=0.656, Df=3, Sig. 0.000).

Analysis and Results of the qualitative study

Following data collection, the interviews were reviewed and examined using thematic analysis techniques to fins the main themes and amalgamate ideas. Insights gathered were analyzed based on the answers provided, frequency, and key considerations that were converted to quantitative data tables for easy illustration and measurement of the findings.

According to question one, participants were asked what type of social media platform they have an active account. Figure I depicts the usage of social media platforms in which the participants have active accounts. The participants' most popular social media platform was Instagram (81%), followed by Snapchat and Tiktok (55%). Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook appear next, ranging from 41% to 51%. Pinterest (21%) is the least favorite, followed by LinkedIn (31%). Figure I also illustrates that Emirati females are active in many different platforms at once. The participants received a follow-up question asking, “Why are you active in that platform?” to provide reasons for previously stated platforms.

Figure I. Gen z Social Media Accounts Actively Used



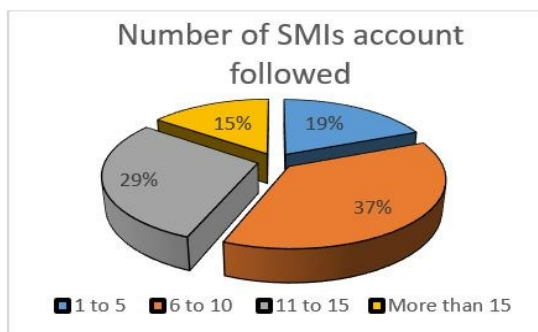
The answers provided were recorded as shown in Table I. Primarily, analysis of the transcripts showed that SMIs are followed mainly in three platforms Instagram, TikTok, and Youtube. Other media platforms are mainly used by participants to connect with family and friends as well as find information or updates. Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram are also favorite platforms for communication with friends and relatives.



**Table I.** Reasons for Being active in Social Media Platforms.

<b>Facebook</b>	“Connect with friends/ Follow brand pages’ updates/ Close Groups”
<b>Instagram</b>	“Follow different accounts/ SMIs and accounts that match interest/ Pictures/videos//Entertainment”
<b>Snapchat</b>	“Active chat with close friends & family/ Sharing pictures and information”
<b>Linkedin</b>	“Connect with possible employers, looking for types of jobs available, self-promotion/accomplishments”
<b>Pinterest</b>	“To get ideas for travels/baby showers/ weddings /arts and crafts”
<b>Youtube</b>	“Music/videos, entertainment, streaming, gaming, information/ SMIs content”
<b>Tiktok</b>	“Fun, music, entertainment video, new trends, music, SMIs content”
<b>Twitter</b>	“Information, opinions, news updates, Interaction”

Figure II highlights responses to Question Two of the interview, where participants were asked to provide a range of how many social media influencers they actively follow. Researchers provided participants with an operational definition of “actively following an SMI”: engagement in likes, comments, shares, retweet, views, etc. at least once a week. The majority of participants follow between 6-10 Social Media influencers actively comprising 37%, followed by 29% of participants who follow between 11 to 15 SMI. Around 19% of participants actively follow more than 15 accounts, and only 15% follow between 1 and 5 SMI accounts.

**Figure II.** Average SMIs accounts followed.

It can be inferred that despite females following many social media influencers on different platforms, 66% following more than ten accounts. While mentioning examples of accounts they follow, participants provided a total of 98 accounts which served as a basis for Question Three shown in Table II, which focuses on SMI characteristics which were categorized using nationality, gender, and account type/ industry the SMI represents.

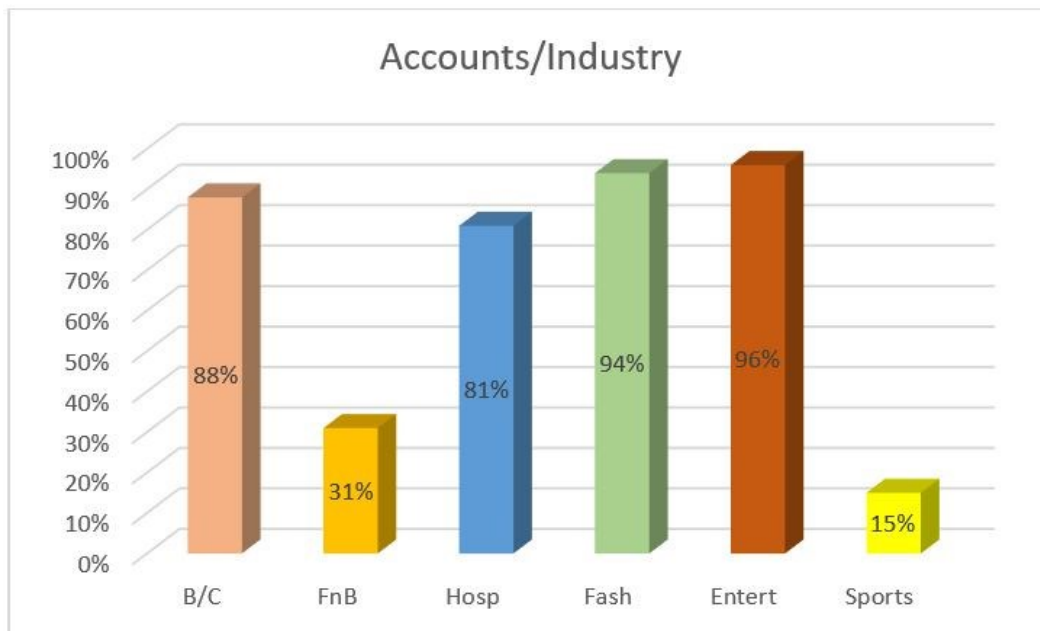
As shown in Table II, Emirati females follow mainly international SMIs (66%); however, 34% of the accounts mentioned are SMIs from their area/region. Furthermore, they follow mainly other female accounts (68%), and males SMIs account for 32 %. Figure III displays the SMIs accounts participants follow. The leading type of account is Entertainment with 96%,

followed by Fashion 94% and Beauty/cosmetics (88%). Hospitality-related accounts (travels, hotels, etc.) account for 81% while Food-related and sports are the least social media accounts followed by Emirati females, respectively 31% and 15%. Beauty/Care, Fashion and Entertainment are the preferred industries that Emirati females follow. The responses serve as a good indicator for brands/companies in those industries to invest in SMIs.

**Table II.** Demographic characteristics of SMIs followed.

	Arab	International
<b>Nationality of SMI</b>	34%	66%
	Female	Male
<b>Gender</b>	68%	32%

**Figure III.** Type of industry represented by the SMIs



In Question Four of the interview, the participants were asked to explain and elaborate on the SMI accounts they follow by providing reasons for actively engaging with that specific SMI. Participants were told to base their explanation on two or three real account examples of the SMIs followed. The accounts provided were recorded, transcribed and examined for thematic analysis. A list of 54 motives was gathered from the answers of the participants, which at a later stage (after screening to avoid semantic errors and redundancies) were grouped into similar themes, creating four main categories.

As highlighted in Figure IV, keywords from the transcripts based on semantics, word affiliation, meaning allowed the identification of four main categories: Entrust, Envy, Empathy, and Enjoyment. The list of motives affiliated to each category were then added as part of the statements included in the survey.



**Figure IV.** Categorization of Factors Impacting Social Media Influencers'

Table III provides a sample of direct quotes from participants for each of the identified categories. Additionally, the essential benefits highlighted by the participants when following SMI accounts are:

- Information about Trends/lifestyle: Participants mentioned that majorly, they follow specific influencers because their accounts allowed them access to new information and awareness of new products and services they use (trending products, lifestyle, quality of living).
- Valuable tips and how to: participants highlighted benefits regarding usefulness (beauty tips, best locations, what to do, where to...).
- Enjoyment/amusement: participants refer to a sense of fun/relaxation and laugh (pranks, comedy, funny videos, etc.) as the main benefits of following SMIs.

This information can be helpful for brands to incorporate their promotions in those specific types of content used by SMIs.

**Table III.** Description and Coding behind the reasons for Social Media Following

Category	Participants' Expressions
<b>Empathy</b>	e.g. similar view on "marriage, religion, society, gender, discrimination, hot topics"; "I follow accounts that usually the person expresses similar beliefs to mine". "We have the same culture and he see things the same way...". "She is such a nice girl", "He looks so sweet". "...is very relatable".
<b>Entrust</b>	"I follow her because she has been doing this for years and she gives the best advice when it comes to make-up"; "Everyone knows her and she has been around and know a lot about ..."; "Her opinion matters" "People trust her opinion". "I go there (SMI account) when I need to...". "She is my go to account for...".
<b>Envy</b>	"I follow her to see what she is doing", "... I follow her because she always has the best clothes. "She is too much, I don't personally like it but she is famous". "I have the same make up as she"; "I usually buy her products", "I wish I had her ....".
<b>Enjoyment Gratification</b>	"I Love him, he makes me laugh"; She is hilarious, and so weird, I love it"; "Her dances lighten my mood", "He always put a smile on my face"; I enjoy seeing what he is up to"; They are so creative". "They are really awesome... they make me happy".

## Development of the 4E Model and Discussion

Based on the data that emerged from this study, a conceptual model is proposed (Figure V). This model, referred to as the 4E Model of SMI Following, highlights four critical factors that positively influence Generation Z Emirati females' choice of SMI accounts to follow: empathy, entrust, envy, and enjoyment gratification. Each element of the model is discussed in further detail.

### Independent variables

**Empathy** describes the connection that followers believe exists with their chosen SMIs based on the latter's expressions of the same or similar viewpoints or experiences as that of followers. Empathy in general is the ability of an individual to identify with another person's feelings. In the world of social media, the more followers feel they can relate to a SMI, the more motivated they are to follow them. Lou and Yein (2019) refer to this concept as "similarities" in their efforts to identify drivers of influencer marketing, and other studies explore this theme as "identify".

**Entrust** factor describes participants' willingness to follow a chosen SMI based on their ability to provide desirable content/outcomes. Entrust also encompasses credibility, proven knowledge, accounts that are verified or SMIs that participants seem to trust and commit to. Such accounts are considered as go to accounts for specific purposes. Previous studies have investigated the impact of trust in influencers as an important source of influencer marketing (Lee *et al.* 2021)

**Enjoyment** denotes the sense of pleasure experienced by participants and the fun associated with following a specific SMI. Entertainment and fun are characteristics associated with this dimension, as well as, hedonistic enjoyment Kim *et al.* (2021). This factor may also be described as entertainment value in prior studies.

**Envy** refers to participants' selection of social media influencers that they wish to resemble, copy/imitate or be more alike in some way. Interesting some participants intimated they don't necessarily like the selected SMI, but there remains a strong desire to follow such SMIs in order to see what they are doing or what they currently have (lifestyle, jewelry, etc.), especially if they are famous/trending. Envy is addressed in other studies. For example, Lee *et al.* (2021) recognized envy as one of four motivations for following influencers on Instagram. Such envy revolves around feelings of admiration and the desire to be like the influencer.

### Dependent Variable

**Following Behavior** is characterized by the likelihood of engaging and interacting with SMI. Other studies namely, Han & Chen (2021); and Lee *et al.* (2021) have also used Following Behavior as to measure intentions of users to act in a specific way towards influencers.

It must be acknowledged that several of these dimensions –using the same or similar terminology - appear independently in some marketing influencer related studies, but the current researchers suggest that together these dimensions form an appropriate framework to determine followers' motives in following specific SMI. Based on previous studies the following hypothesis were created:

H1- Empathy has a positive influence on consumers' following behavior of SMI

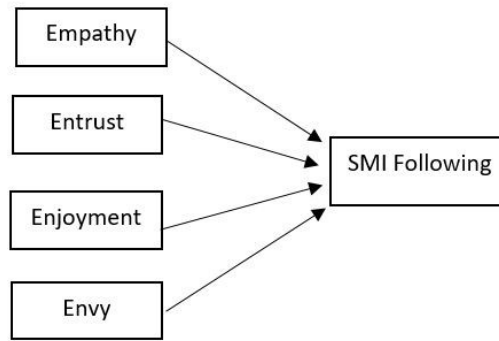


H2- Entrust has a positive influence on consumers' following behavior SMI

H3- Enjoyment has a positive influence on consumers' following behavior of SMI

H4- Envy has a positive influence on consumers' following behavior of SMI

**Figure V.** Proposed 4E Model for Social Media Following



The EFA presented in Table IV, illustrates the five components and their cumulative loadings. All cumulative loading below 0.6\* were eliminated. Statements that showcase values lower than the required were then eliminated from the final analysis.

**Table IV.** EFA Loadings Exploratory Factor Analysis

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Empathy</b>	0.77				
I follow SMI Because they are Likeable	0.77				
I follow SMI Because they Share similar viewpoints to me	0.711				
I follow SMI Because they are relatable	0.699				
I follow SMI Because they look nice/sweet	0.57*				
<b>Envy</b>					
I follow SMI because I desire to have what they have (e.g lifestyle)		0.843			
I follow SMI when I desire to be more like they are.		0.793			
I follow SMI when I like to know what they have.		0.77			
I follow SMI because I aspire to be more like them.		0.696			
<b>Entrust</b>					
I follow SMI because I trust their opinion			0.741		
I follow SMI because their opinion matters			0.71		
I follow SMI because their credibility			0.703		
I follow SMI accounts which are the best go to accounts for ... (specific purposes, e.g. make up tutorials)			0.629		
<b>Enjoyment</b>					
I follow SMI because their accounts are fun or make me laugh				0.733	
I follow SMI because they put me in a good mood				0.686	
I follow SMI because their accounts makes me happy				0.644	
<b>Following behavior</b>					
I enjoy following SMI					0.830
I daily engage with SMI (like, shares, comments)					0.784
I constantly check on the SMI I follow					0.752

Notes: Loadings below 0.6 are deleted

### Analysis of the quantitative study

A total of 420 respondents took part of the survey, however only 409 of the total answer positively to the control question, which was created to validate the participants for the study. Regarding the respondents' answers for the question "The Majority of SMI you follow are", 222 participants mentioned they follow more international SMI corresponding to 54.3%.

Similarly, to the interview a good level of accounts followed are already spotted at national (Arab influencers) level with 45.7 %. The majority of participants (304) follow less than 10 SMI accounts actively (74.4%), where 104 already follow more than 10 SMI accounts representing 25.6 %. It is also important to note that the majority of participants own between 2-3 social media accounts (45%) and 70.7 % are already active in more than one social media platform.

Based on buying behavior characteristics of the respondents 299 respondents mention that they have already used/purchased products that were advertised/promoted by the SMI influencer they follow (73.1%) and only 26.9% stated they never engaged in purchases/usage of products and services promoted by SMI, this also leads to assume that SMI are important and an increasing vehicle for companies to promote their products and services.

The social media accounts owned by the participants illustrated that the preferred Social media platforms are Instagram (87%), Youtube (79%) and Tik Tok (75%). The least used platform was seen on Twitter (35%) and Facebook (37%).

**Table V.** Questionnaire descriptive analysis

		Count	Column N %
Do you actively follow SMI ?	Yes	409	
	No	11	
The majority of social media influencers accounts you follow are:	National	187	45,7%
	International	222	54,3%
Your approximately number of SMI accounts you actively follow. (Comments, likes, share, retweet, etc)	>less than 5	119	29,1%
	6-10	185	45,2%
	11-15	84	20,5%
	15-20	16	3,9%
	>more than 20	5	1,2%
How many social media platforms do you have an account and are active (Post, engage, etc)?	1	120	29,3%
	2-3	185	45,2%
	4-5	74	18,1%
	6-7	26	6,4%
	> more than 7	4	1,0%
Have you ever bought a product/service which was advertised/promoted/mentioned by a SMI you follow?	Yes	299	73,1%
	No	110	26,9%
Owned accounts (Select all that apply) I have:			
Facebook		153	37,4%
Instagram		357	87,2%
Snapchat		289	70,6%
Twitter		143	34,9%
TikTok		309	75,5%
Youtube		322	78,7%

According to the descriptive statistics table it can be seen the mean of the scales, concluding that Entrust (4.04) and Enjoyment (3.91) are deemed the variables generation z consumers





rank the highest. It can be assumed that the majority of respondents showcases a good level of agreement with all variables. The lowest mean were verified in Envy (3.68) and Empathy (3.76) but also showcasing reasonable level of agreement with the statements.

**Table VI.** Descriptive statistics of the variables

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Envy	3,6846	,60317	409
Empathy	3,7616	,44109	409
Entrust	4,0452	,46748	409
Enjoyment	3,9095	,42616	409
Acceptance	4,0236	,53089	409

Since, one of the main focus of the study was to identify factors influence SMI following, Pearson correlation was used to verify the association amongst the variables. The table below shows the correlation between the variables and Following Behavior. According to the Pearson correlation it demonstrates a positive relationship between Envy (0.639), Empathy (0.626), Entrust (0.297) and Enjoyment (0.597). It can be said that (e.g) the more empathy is shown by social media influencers the more the likelihood of Emirati females to accept to follow a particular SMI. The sig=0.000 demonstrate the statistical significance between the variables.

**Table VII.** Pearson correlation association between variables and following acceptance

Following Acceptance		
<b>Following Acceptance</b>	1	<b>Envy</b>
Pearson correlation		0,639**
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
Pearson correlation	1	<b>Empathy</b>
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.626**
		0.000
Pearson correlation	1	<b>Entrust</b>
Sig. (2-tailed)		0,297**
		0.000
Pearson correlation	1	<b>Enjoyment</b>
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.597**
		0.000

As regression table showcases the consumers' acceptance of a SMI can be predicted by the four main dimensions, the R<sup>2</sup>, also called the coefficient of determination, which measures the proportion of the total variation in Y about its mean explained by the regression of Y on X. In this case, the regression model explains 58.3 % of the acceptance to follow a specific Social Media Influencer and its characterized by Enjoyment (B=0.299; Sig. 0,000), Entrust (B=0.140; Sig. 0.000), Empathy (B=0.236; Sig. 0,000) and Envy (B=0.337, Sig. 0.000).

Model Summary <sup>b</sup>									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,763 <sup>a</sup>	,583	,579	,34465	,583	141,026	4	404	,000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Envy, Empathy, Entrust, Enjoyment

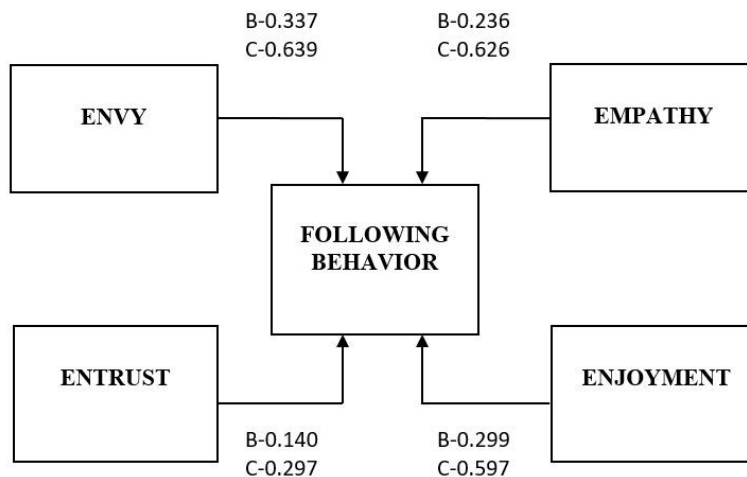
b. Dependent Variable: Following Behavior

**Table VIII.** Regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error				Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-,234	,207		-1,130	,259		
Envy	,296	,037	,337	7,984	,000	,581	1,720
Empathy	,284	,053	,236	5,403	,000	,542	1,844
Entrust	,159	,038	,140	4,134	,000	,899	1,112
Enjoyment	,372	,048	,299	7,821		,708	1,412

Dependent Variable: Following acceptance

Based on the Regression (B) beta results and Correlations (C) the following model was verified and the four main independent variables showcasing a positive impact on Following Behavior. The Figure VI illustrates the relationships amongst the independent and dependent variable. In sum, all the four Hypothesis (H1, H2, H3, H4) are accepted.

**Figure VI.** Model visual presentation

B- Beta predictor value C- Correlation value

## Findings and Practical Implications

Business owners and marketers can use the proposed 4E Model to improve their understanding of the reasons consumers – particularly those of Generation Z – follow specific SMIs. Armed with such knowledge, organizations can make better choices in their selection of SMIs to represent their products and brand. Better-informed choices translate to an improved SMI selection process which further translates to more effective marketing campaigns and ultimately costs savings.



Additional insights from the qualitative study that might benefit Gulf area companies include the following:

- Brands should invest in SMIs in Instagram (81%), Snapchat and TikTok (55%). They are the preferred social media platforms where female users have active accounts.
- Entertainment (96%), Fashion (94%), and Beauty/Care (88%) are the preferred types of industry accounts followed by Emirati females. This information serves as a good indicator for brands/companies in those industries to invest in SMI to promote their products and services.
- Companies using SMIs for the UAE market can avail of the use of International influencers to promote their brand products and services since 66% of the accounts followed; however, Arab influencers already constitute a big part of the accounts followed (34%).
- Females influencers are more widely followed than male counterparts by Generation Z, which can influence a company's choice of SMI to attract female consumers.

Additional insights from the quantitative study:

- The majority of Emirati females are already displaying a good level of usage of social media platforms, since around 71% is active in more than one platform. This allows companies to make use of different SMI to promote their products and services for this particular generation.
- Around 299 participants (73.1%) indicated that they have previously bought products that were recommended by SMI, this number presents a good representation of the value SMI add to organizations.
- Around 69.9 % of participants follow actively more than five SMI accounts. This accounts to a growing importance placed amongst SMI for Generation Z.
- The four E' model proposed was deemed significant, since Envy, Enjoyment, Empathy and Entrust variables were all positive related to following behavior of Generation Z. It can be said the more SMI present those characteristics the more the likelihood of generation Z following them. This also impacts brands ability to choose SMI with those particular characteristics when targeting or creating Generation Z Female campaigns.
- Similarly, to the interview stages the Generation Z most used social media account for Influencer following happens in Instagram (87%), followed by Youtube (78%) and Tik Tok (75%). These are perhaps the social media platforms brands should consider additional investment in SMI when targeting Generation Z females in the region.

The outcomes of this study also provide some meaningful insights for influencers in terms of the platforms potential Emirati female followers are most interested in and the types of accounts they prefer. Influencers can capitalize on their current status by embedding content

that would appeal to the interests of Generation Z Emirati females using the 4E Model as a guiding framework.

## Limitations and Future Research

The present study is not without limitations. The current study data were gathered using a qualitative and quantitative approach and was conducted in the UAE from a limited audience of Emirati Females attending higher education studies. These limitations may serve as directions for future studies. Researchers should replicate the study with a larger audience, across multiple countries, or with male participants. Future studies can also include cross-cultural/country comparisons.

Moreover, further research of the proposed 4E Model is needed. Longitudinal data might be useful to better assess the soundness of the proposed model. Additional research could examine what connections, if any, exist among the dimensions of the proposed model. For example, does empathy influence entrust? Is there a significant connection between envy and enjoyment? These and similar questions are open to the interest of future researchers.

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