

1 **Redefining Fame:** 2 **How Generation Z Defines Celebrity in the Digital Age**

3
4 *This study examines the shifting attitudes and beliefs of Generation Z*
5 *regarding celebrity influence, the evolving definition of a celebrity, and the*
6 *distinctions between micro-celebrities, A-listers, and internet phenomena.*
7 *Through a series of focus groups from 2015-2025, participants explored how*
8 *their views on celebrity influence are shaped by changing values, preferences,*
9 *and the digital landscape. The findings reveal that Gen Z evaluates celebrity*
10 *status not only through visibility and social media presence but also by*
11 *examining the projects, skills, and talents that underpin a celebrity's success.*
12 *Participants emphasized that micro-celebrities and internet personalities,*
13 *who often have smaller but highly engaged followings, are valued for their*
14 *relatable content and the authenticity of their creative or professional*
15 *pursuits. In contrast, traditional A-listers, often associated with major*
16 *achievements in film, music, or other established industries, were recognized*
17 *for their visibility and polished personas but were sometimes seen as less*
18 *accessible. Viral internet phenomena, while impactful, were noted for their*
19 *short-lived cultural relevance and lack of sustained creative output. This study*
20 *highlights how Gen Z's evolving opinions and criteria redefine celebrity*
21 *status, emphasizing the interplay between talent, projects, relatability, and*
22 *influence. These insights provide critical implications for brands, media, and*
23 *researchers aiming to engage with the dynamic landscape of celebrity*
24 *influence in the digital age.*

25
26 **Keywords:** *Gen Z, Celebrities, A-List, Micro-Celebrities*

27 28 29 30 **Introduction**

31
32 In the digital age, the definition of celebrity has undergone a significant
33 transformation. While traditional A-list celebrities—actors, musicians, and
34 athletes—once dominated public attention through mainstream media, the rise
35 of social media has democratized fame. Micro-celebrities, internet influencers,
36 and viral sensations now compete for cultural relevance, often engaging with
37 audiences in more personal and interactive ways. This shift is especially
38 pronounced among Generation Z, a cohort that has grown up in an era where
39 social media serves as both an entertainment platform and a space for identity
40 formation. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z does not solely rely on
41 Hollywood, the music industry, or professional sports to identify cultural icons.
42 Instead, they gravitate toward figures who align with their values, provide
43 relatable content, and offer a sense of authenticity.

44 This generational change has a significant impact on the traditional forms
45 of 'celebrity status.' The appeal of micro-celebrities and digital influencers lies
46 in their accessibility and perceived realness, while traditional celebrities are
47 often seen as distant and overly curated. This evolving perception of celebrity
48 has implications for media industries, marketing strategies, and the broader

1 cultural understanding of fame.

2 As the concept of what it means to be a celebrity shifts, brands and media
3 organizations must adjust accordingly. Older forms of celebrity endorsement
4 may be growing less effective with the younger audiences that increasingly trust
5 and relate to the forms of direct engagement pioneered by micro-celebrities and
6 influencers (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Companies trying to engage
7 with Gen Z are turning to partnerships with digital creators who embody
8 authenticity, relatability, and sustained engagement over simply relying on the
9 star power of a traditional celebrity. The changing perspectives of Generation Z
10 regarding celebrity culture underscore the growing relevance of authenticity,
11 engagement, and significant content in determining contemporary influencers.
12 Even though traditional A-list stars are still held in high esteem, micro-celebrities
13 and digital influencers are reshaping the understanding and value of fame. This
14 transformation, prompted by social media and evolving cultural norms, creates
15 fresh prospects and hurdles for brands, media, and researchers charting the
16 course of future celebrity influence. Grasping the essence of these changes is
17 going to be crucial for anyone who wants to interact with a generation that values
18 real connection.

19 This study seeks to explore how Generation Z defines and engages with
20 different types of celebrities in the digital landscape. Through a series of focus
21 groups, this research investigates the factors that influence Gen Z's perception
22 of celebrity status, including authenticity, engagement, and the nature of content
23 creation. By analyzing the distinctions between A-listers, micro-celebrities, and
24 viral internet figures, this study provides insights into the evolving criteria for
25 celebrity influence and its implications for brands, media, and researchers when
26 considering how to communicate and influence this important generational
27 segment.

30 Literature Review

31
32 The concept of celebrity has evolved significantly in the fast evolution of
33 the digital era, with traditional A-list celebrities now sharing cultural influence
34 with micro-celebrities and internet personalities. Historically, fame was largely
35 dictated by mainstream media, but social media has decentralized the process,
36 allowing individuals to cultivate celebrity status through digital platforms
37 (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This shift is particularly noticeable among Generation
38 Z, a demographic that has grown up in an era where fame is more accessible,
39 interactive, and fluid. Understanding how Gen Z perceives and evaluates
40 celebrity status is critical for media professionals, brands, and researchers
41 seeking to navigate this evolving landscape.

42 Generation Z, typically identified as the group born from the late 1990s to
43 the early 2010s, has been raised in a media environment that is predominantly
44 digital. This is an age cohort that uses in its everyday life a largely digital world
45 that is seeming omnipresent and provides information at their fingertips. It is an
46 atmosphere which fosters a type of information literacy, and an ease with

1 consuming and producing content (Panagiotou, Lazou, & Baliou, 2022). Unlike
2 prior generations, Generation Z doesn't look exclusively to Hollywood or the
3 traditional entertainment industry for cultural icons. They look to people who
4 align with their values and provide relatable, unfiltered content (Cotter,
5 2019). This generation have a stronger desire than previous generations for
6 public figures to be "real"—at least a perception that these people represent the
7 natural state of the person and the not the highly cultivated artificial image
8 associated with being famous (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Social media has
9 introduced new personalities to this generation, creating or reinforcing attitudes
10 towards the idea of authenticity. Gen Z views authenticity as figures who share
11 parts of their lives, including their hard times and their triumphs, with their
12 public. Most often through the controlled media of social media platforms.
13 Social media is a controlled media whereas messaging, placement, and design
14 of the media are determined by the user. New controlled media platforms have
15 provided new ways of building fame and attention and has directly impacted the
16 concept of "celebrity status". According to Rojek (2001) the idea of celebrity
17 relates either to ascribed status (such as royalty or lineage), achieved status
18 (based on personal success) or attributed status (such as media attention or self-
19 branding). With this understanding, it becomes important to create a categorical
20 approach to the celebrity phenomenon (Turner, 2014). The common ground
21 between these categories is media.

22 According to Povedák (2014), A celebrity is, above all, an individual whose
23 fame is manufactured and maintained by the media; without media exposure,
24 their visibility would likely fade. In contrast, he defines a second category as the
25 "Hero." heroes are deeply rooted in the collective cultural imagination, sustained
26 through narratives, songs, and popular folklore—they are figures of the people.
27 A third category is defined as the "star." Stars are constantly illuminated by
28 public attention, and their fame typically carries a more positive and enduring
29 aura. Stars often attract a more loyal and enthusiastic following than
30 conventional celebrities. When viewed on a symbolic scale, celebrities occupy
31 the base level, heroes sit at the top, and stars fall somewhere in between. Stars
32 have surpassed the fleeting fame of celebrities as they remain products of mass
33 media, and only when their recognition persists independently of media
34 influence can they truly be regarded as heroes (Both & Péter, 2014 140).

35 Richey (2016) conceptualizes celebrity status as the result of accumulated
36 profit generation; however, her analysis extends beyond traditional film stars to
37 include individuals whose prominence and popularity are primarily sustained by
38 the evolving dynamics of media systems. Traditionally, celebrity culture was
39 centered on the personalities that were pushed forward by radio, television, and
40 magazines. Fame, in those days, was something that only a few people had
41 access to. (Rojek, 2001). Thus, the traditional view of traditional celebrities, or
42 A-listers, is that they have achieved fame through large-scale industries such as
43 film, music, and sports. Their visibility is reinforced by mainstream media,
44 industry awards, and high-profile endorsements (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher,
45 2010). However, as Spálová, Mikuláš, and Púchovská (2021) demonstrate, it has
46 become common practice that traditional celebrities extend their fame into the

1 area of digital media, thereby broadening their public fame and attention. This
2 expansion, in some cases, introduces these traditionally aligned celebrities to the
3 younger demographics. “Therefore, it cannot be generally concluded that there
4 is a single indication pointing to the fact that these (originally) non-Internet
5 celebrities would be currently less connected to the Internet than those who
6 gained their fame exclusively through digital media” (Spálová, Mikuláš, &
7 Púchovsk 2021, p. 46).

8 Digital media created a new entry to conceptual and categorization-based
9 approaches to the subject of celebrity. The Micro-celebrity was first introduced
10 in relations to in the context of adult webcam performers who earned income by
11 cultivating a digital persona (Usher, 2020, p. 171). Sthe concept has since
12 broadened, with Chan & Gray (2020), describing micro-celebrity as “the state of
13 achieving fame that is rooted in digital environments” (p. 356). In contrast to
14 traditional forms of celebrity, micro-celebrity is intricately tied to the economic
15 and structural logics of the digital platforms of social media, where it becomes
16 less about visibility, but about turning the self into a marketable product. As more
17 people were able to create content that attracted large numbers or an audience
18 the ability to sway public opinion from a controlled media platform grew. Thus,
19 the term “influencer” was coined referring to an individual who leverages their
20 expertise or persona for promotional purposes. Influencers largely embody a
21 modern adaptation of traditional opinion leadership within the context of digital
22 communication. “influencer” refers to an individual who leverages their
23 expertise or persona for promotional purposes. Influencers largely embody a
24 modern adaptation of traditional opinion leadership within the context of digital
25 communication.

26 Understanding the term “influencer” requires emphasizing its roots in the
27 concept of the “opinion leader”—an individual whose perceived authority and
28 expertise enable them to shape public attitudes and behaviors. The traditional
29 definition of an opinion leader is a person who can deliver messages from mass
30 media to local personal networks. The paradigm encompasses traits such as
31 personal involvement, product familiarity, subject-matter knowledge, and a
32 distinct public presence (Chan, 1990). Opinion leaders traditionally engaged in
33 the two-step flow of communication, whereas opinion leaders share information
34 gained from primarily news media. However, Hunt & Gruszczynski (2023)
35 explain influencer in the new media ecology by the term *horizontal* two-step
36 flow, wherein non-media actors are the opinion leaders, this accounting for the
37 social media phenomena.

38 Based on this research, a categorical division regarding influencers or
39 opinion leaders is based on the size of the community, the platform used by the
40 influencers, or the role the influencer takes. Backaler (2018) suggests a rather
41 pragmatic approach to understanding levels of influence, dividing influencers
42 into three categories: (1) celebrity influencers, (2) influencers within a specific
43 category, and (3) micro- influencers.

44 Categorized further, the term “microcelebrity” denotes a certain level of
45 public fame and visibility. Micro-celebrity is “a state of being famous to a niche
46 group of people” (Marwick, 2013, p. 117), whereas a micro-influencer has a

1 social media presence larger than a normal person’s but smaller than a
 2 celebrity’s, landing between 1,000 and 100,000 followers. As the phenomenon
 3 of micro-celebrity continues to develop, scholars have increasingly aimed to
 4 expand its conceptual boundaries and enhance its representational inclusivity.
 5 The notion of subcultural micro-celebrity offered by Raun (2018) provides a
 6 more nuanced framework that accounts for marginalized digital identities.
 7 Marwick (2015) furthering the specificity of the lexicon.

8 In contrast to A-listers, who depend on uncontrolled media such as
 9 mainstream channels for recognition, micro-celebrities cultivate fame via more
 10 personal platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram. For them, consistent
 11 and often interactive performance is key to staying on top (Abidin, 2018). These
 12 individuals might not be widely known, but they hold very strong parasocial ties
 13 with their audiences, resulting in a following that is engaged and loyal
 14 (Labrecque, 2014).

15 It is apparent that the concept of fame has been redefined by the emergence
 16 of these “micro-celebrities.” Although A-list stars are still acknowledged for
 17 their achievements, Generation Z sees them as increasingly unrelatable because
 18 of all the money they have, the high status they're in, and their overmanaged
 19 external public personas (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Micro-celebrities, on the other hand,
 20 are viewed as much more approachable and engaging, producing an aspect of
 21 familiarity that is often negated in the relationship between the public and
 22 traditional heavyweights of Hollywood. These microcelebrities, as well as
 23 traditional celebrities, are a priori dependent on the ability of branding (Spálová,
 24 Mikuláš, & Púchovsk, 2021). Our research seeks to answer the following
 25 research questions:

- 26
- 27 • How does Generation Z perceive and define “celebrity”
- 28 • How social engagement impacts Gen z’s understanding of celebrity
- 29 • How celebrity status is achieved and maintained according to Gen Z.
- 30 • What factors lead to fame according to Generation Z
- 31
- 32

33 **Methodology**

34

35 This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate how
 36 Generation Z perceives and defines the paradigm of celebrity. This study adopted
 37 a qualitative research design, utilizing focus group discussions as the primary
 38 method for data collection. Focus groups were chosen for their ability to generate
 39 rich, interactive dialogue and to uncover collective meanings, shared
 40 experiences, and differing perspectives within a group context. This approach
 41 was particularly suited to exploring complex and evolving perceptions of
 42 celebrity among members of Generation Z.

43 Participants were prompted to reflect on the media figures they regularly
 44 engage with and to articulate the reasons for their attention. Each session
 45 included open-ended questions designed to elicit spontaneous, participant-led
 46 conversation about the individuals they frequently encounter across media

1 platforms. Participants were invited to reflect on why they pay attention to
2 certain figures and to describe what attributes or conditions they believe qualify
3 someone as a “celebrity.”

4 Participants were university students aged between 18 and 24, recruited
5 through convenience sampling via course lists from a midsized liberal arts
6 university on the East Coast of the USA. A total of 100 students participants took
7 part, divided across ten focus groups, ranging from 2015-2025. Each focus group
8 consisted of 6-12 individuals. This age group was selected as Gen Z. As digital
9 natives, Gen Z participants have grown up immersed in an online environment
10 shaped by social media, streaming platforms, and constant connectivity. This
11 unique cultural and technological context informs their perspectives on celebrity,
12 fame, and influence in ways that differ markedly from previous generations.
13 Their firsthand familiarity with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube,
14 and Twitter enabled them to speak with authority about the nuances of digital
15 visibility and the shifting boundaries between celebrities, influencers, and micro-
16 celebrities.

17 Each focus group lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted
18 in a quiet, neutral setting in person or via video conferencing platforms (e.g.,
19 Zoom). A semi-structured discussion guide was used to facilitate conversation,
20 allowing for flexibility and participant-led dialogue. The sessions began with
21 general questions about participants’ media habits and gradually progressed to
22 more specific prompts about the individuals they encounter in media, their
23 reasons for following these figures, and their personal definitions of what
24 constitutes a celebrity.

25 Participants were encouraged to reflect on the characteristics they associate
26 with celebrity status, including media visibility, attractiveness, relatability, and
27 perceived authenticity. The format allowed for interaction among participants,
28 enabling the emergence of collective insights as well as points of contrast in how
29 celebrity is interpreted and assigned.

30 All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic
31 analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and key themes across the
32 transcripts. This iterative process involved coding the data, grouping codes into
33 broader themes, and refining these themes to reflect the depth and variation of
34 participant responses. Particular attention was given to how participants
35 negotiated the boundaries between traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities,
36 and how factors such as appearance, media presence, and platform-specific
37 norms influenced these perceptions.

38 Finally, thematic coding was employed as the primary method for analyzing
39 the focus group data. This approach allowed for the identification and
40 organization of recurring patterns and ideas that emerged across participant
41 discussions. After transcribing the sessions, the data were read multiple times to
42 ensure familiarity before generating initial codes. These codes were then
43 grouped into broader themes that captured key aspects of how Generation Z
44 participants perceive and differentiate concepts such as celebrity, fame,
45 influencer culture, and authenticity. Particular attention was given to the
46 language participants used to describe the various celebrity dimensions, the

1 values they associated with influence, and the emotional or relational dimensions
2 of their engagement. Thematic coding provided a structured yet flexible
3 framework for interpreting the nuanced and evolving attitudes expressed within
4 the group discussions.

5 6 7 **Findings**

8
9 The focus group discussions across all years provided rich insight into
10 Generation Z’s evolving and multifaceted understanding of celebrity in the
11 digital age. Participants consistently demonstrated a departure from traditional,
12 mainstream notions of fame—characterized by wealth, exclusivity, and curated
13 appearances in legacy media—toward a more accessible and dynamic
14 conceptualization shaped by social media and digital culture. For this
15 demographic, celebrity is no longer a distant ideal mediated solely by industry
16 gatekeepers, but a fluid and, at times, ephemeral status that can be achieved and
17 lost through digital presence and public perception.

18 Participants drew a clear distinction between “celebrity,” “influencer,” and
19 “micro-celebrity,” suggesting that the boundaries between these categories are
20 increasingly porous. However, participants reflected a growing and evolving
21 understanding of the micro-celebrity concept from 2015 to today. Participants
22 from 2024 and 2025 noted that, compared to just a few years ago, there has been
23 a noticeable shift in how micro-celebrities are recognized and valued. We found
24 that earlier perceptions may have regarded them as minor or niche internet
25 figures, recent participants now see micro-celebrities as influential cultural
26 actors within their own right, often commanding loyal followings within specific
27 digital communities. The focus groups participants post COVID-19 highlighted
28 that they believed there was a shift tied to the rise of platforms like TikTok and
29 the increasing commercialization of personal branding. For these most recent
30 participants, micro-celebrities are no longer seen as “lesser” celebrities but as
31 central figures in shaping trends, opinions, and online culture.

32 Participants from 2015 through 2025 described the traditional celebrity as
33 someone who has reached a level of media notoriety—often appearing in film,
34 television, or high-profile events. However, more recent participants also
35 emphasized that celebrity status is not necessarily permanent. Rather, it is subject
36 to change, depending on media cycles, audience sentiment, and broader cultural
37 conversations. In contrast to fame in the past, which was perceived as stable and
38 exclusive, today’s celebrity is seen as contingent and transient.

39 Another difference found between the earlier focus group participants
40 (2015-17) and the more recent (2022-25) regarded the definition of influencers.
41 Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers were increasingly expected to be
42 relatable, genuine, and transparent. This perceived authenticity was cited by
43 more recent participants as a key reason audiences follow and engage with
44 influencers. Specifically, participants from 2025 agreed that influencers sharing
45 intimate aspects of their lives fosters a sense of connection and trust among their
46 followers. One participant aptly summarized this dynamic, stating, “Influencers

1 are famous for being themselves. That’s kind of the point.” This expectation for
2 openness underscores the growing interpersonal and participatory nature of
3 influencer culture.

4 Moreover, the focus groups recognized an intermediary category: the micro-
5 celebrity—someone who might not be widely acknowledged but wields
6 considerable influence and allegiance within a narrow community or platform
7 more often in recent years. In 2015, the phrase “Micro-celebrity” was not
8 mentioned organically in conversations from participants. However, after 2022,
9 this terminology was commonly used in the discussions. Participants revealed
10 people who fit into this category often straddle the line between influencers and
11 celebrities and occupy an unusual cultural position. Participants also emphasized
12 that authenticity is a defining characteristic of successful influencers. The groups
13 consistently highlighted the importance of perceived genuineness, noting that it
14 plays a central role in why audiences choose to follow individuals. Authenticity
15 fosters a sense of trust and relatability, enabling followers to construct a more
16 complete and more personal mental image of the influencer.

17 A key conceptual distinction emerged in discussions of “fame” versus
18 “celebrity.” Participants argued that while celebrity status may be fleeting and
19 dependent on external factors, fame is perceived as more enduring and earned
20 through long-term achievement or exceptional talent. Participants suggested that
21 fame is earned, not given, and that once someone becomes truly famous, their
22 name and legacy tend to outlive short-term trends. Once achieved, participants
23 suggested, fame tends to withstand the ebb and flow of media attention, making
24 it more permanent than the label of celebrity

25 Therefore, fame, in this context, is tied to legacy—achieved through notable
26 contributions in fields such as entertainment, sports, or activism. Fame, in Gen
27 Z’s view, is rooted in tangible accomplishments, long-term influence, and
28 exceptional talent, whether that be in acting, music, sports, activism, or other
29 professional disciplines. Interestingly, while authenticity was seen as essential
30 for influencers and micro-celebrities, it was not considered a prerequisite for
31 fame. Famous individuals, particularly those considered part of the
32 entertainment elite, were described as operating at a level of visibility where
33 personal transparency was optional. Participants acknowledged that such figures
34 could maintain their status based on talent or public image alone, without the
35 kind of daily disclosure expected of influencers.

36 Finally, the focus groups explored the distinction between being famous and
37 being infamous. Participants highlighted that widespread recognition does not
38 always equate to celebrity status or fame. In 2015 and 2016, participants used
39 the examples of Monica Lewinsky and O.J. Simpson, asserting that infamy is
40 defined by negative public attention and is often associated with scandal,
41 controversy, or failure. While such individuals may be well-known, the nature
42 of their notoriety excludes them from being perceived as “truly famous” in the
43 conventional or aspirational sense. In 2024 and 2025, Gen Z participants
44 emphasized that infamy is rooted in negative public attention, often tied to
45 moments of public failure, legal troubles, or media sensationalism.

46

1 *Authenticity*

2

3 All focus groups emphasized the centrality of authenticity in defining
4 successful influencers. Participants from 2020 forward consistently viewed
5 influencers and internet personalities as more relatable and trustworthy than
6 traditional celebrities. This perception stemmed from the tendency of influencers
7 to share unfiltered, behind-the-scenes aspects of their lives, offering direct and
8 non-mediated interactions with their audiences through various social media
9 platforms. Such openness was highly valued by Gen z more recently, with
10 participants praising influencers for “remaining genuine” and presenting lives
11 that appeared attainable and grounded. This level of openness, according to
12 participants, creates a sense of relatability and trust, making followers feel as
13 though they know the influencer on a personal level—even if they’ve never met.
14 As one participant noted, “Influencers are famous for being themselves. That’s
15 kind of the point.” In contrast, the group discussed how fame, largely traditional
16 fame, is often objective of authenticity. Famous individuals, especially A-list
17 celebrities, can achieve and maintain their rank through talent, reputation, or
18 public image—without necessarily exposing their personal lives. In 2015-2017,
19 the conversation concerning a-list celebrities more focused on what celebrity
20 was on the A list and who was on the B List. For example, they argued in 2015
21 that Robert Downey JR. was an A-List, (one of the most famous people) and
22 Adam Sandler was a B-List actor. However, in 2024-2025, instead of discussing
23 who was in the A-list, celebrities were characterized as “unreachable” or
24 “inauthentic.” Participants argued that the polished, curated images of traditional
25 celebrities often hindered the development of a meaningful connection with their
26 audience, making these figures seem distant and disconnected from the everyday
27 experiences of their followers. This in part, respondents argued, stems from the
28 fact that respondents noted that many A-List celebrities do not have a social
29 media profile, and if they did was updated rarely.

30 The idea of social media profiles led, almost invariably in all focus groups,
31 to a discussion of social media visibility- most often discussed in the form of
32 followers. Participants considered the number of followers to be paramount
33 regarding visibility. A difference of opinion in visibility was apparent between
34 participants in the early and later years of the decade. Those Gen Z participants
35 in the early years of this study were more likely to mention visibility regarding
36 media coverage and magazine spreads, albeit online (not in Print). Those more
37 recent participants determined that visibility was related to high follower counts
38 and social media. However, these more recent participants acknowledged
39 follower counts as a factor that contributes to someone being seen as a celebrity,
40 they were not considered decisive on their own. Participants repeatedly
41 emphasized that talent, creativity, and the quality of a person’s content carried
42 more weight than popularity alone. As one student put it, “Just because someone
43 goes viral doesn’t mean they’re a real celebrity—it has to last.” This reflects Gen
44 Z’s ability to differentiate between temporary online fame and lasting cultural
45 influence.

46 The subjects made a distinction between internet sensations and long-term

1 influencers. Content that goes viral is appreciated for what it is—entertainment.
 2 But the figures that make up the viral landscape are rarely considered even close
 3 to true celebrity unless they do one of two things: either follow up with
 4 entertaining, viral-yielding content or use their newfound visibility to launch
 5 themselves onto a meaningful online platform. A TikTok creator who is viral, for
 6 instance, is only thought of as a celebrity if the creator keeps adapting or keeps
 7 making interesting content over time.

8 9 *Talent and Project-Based Recognition*

10
11 Study participants from 2022-2025 more clearly differentiated between
 12 internet figures who gain fame from a single viral event and those who
 13 consistently generate quality and/or amusing content. Content creators who
 14 create and maintain strong connections with their audience—through music,
 15 acting, activism, or niche expertise—are much more likely to be regarded as
 16 celebrities. Participants from all years acknowledged A-list celebrities for their
 17 achievements, but participants from 2024 and 2025 measured their worth
 18 through recent projects or visible contributions rather than legacy or status
 19 alone.

20 21 *Parasocial Relationships and Emotional Investment*

22
23 The information also emphasized how vital parasocial relationships are in
 24 influencing views of a celebrity. Respondents frequently addressed influencers
 25 or creators as though they had an intimate knowledge of them, demonstrating
 26 and even reveling in the emotional stakes that—they claim—make up the core
 27 of the reality television experience. The key differentiating factor for internet
 28 celebrities versus A-listers was the emotional closeness they had with their fans.
 29 This made them appear way more approachable and interactive than A-listers.
 30 When it came to referencing the internet's micro-celebs, fans often used their
 31 first names or usernames, showing the closeness and parasocial aspect people
 32 associate with the micro-celebs in question. Furthermore, Gen Z had a hard time
 33 placing older A-List celebrities such as Meryl Streep or Clint Eastwood into a
 34 context beyond the fact they were award winner for acting (they did not know
 35 what projects). Interestingly, every participant considered Jennifer Aniston a A-list
 36 celebrity, because of the TV show Friends, but acknowledged this may be due to
 37 the fact that she was previously married to Brad Pitt (they divorced in 2005), and
 38 the more recent Pitt Jolie divorce (2019). Many of the women in focus groups
 39 spanning all years claimed that Aniston was someone they could relate to,
 40 despite not following her on any social media.

41 42 *Blending of Categories: Celebrity as a Spectrum*

43
44 Lastly, the discussions indicated that Gen Z does not see celebrity as a binary
 45 condition (you are either a celebrity or you are not) but rather as a spectrum of
 46 influence. This generation frequently blurred the lines between micro-

1 celebrities, A-listers, and social media influencers, indicating that micro-
2 celebrity is now more of a context-dependent, community-driven phenomenon
3 than a product of the industry. A makeup artist on TikTok with 500K followers
4 could be more influential to a niche group than a mainstream pop star.
5 Participants remarked that one could be an "A-lister" in their own niche of the
6 internet—be it gaming, beauty, activism, or meme culture. This decentralization
7 of fame hints at a transition toward fragmented celebrity, where influence is no
8 longer monolithic but rather individualized.

11 Discussion

13 This research investigates the ways in which Generation Z is transforming
14 the idea of celebrity in our contemporary, digital society. Emphasizing
15 authenticity, emotional connection, and sustained engagement over traditional
16 fame. Most participants concurred that the phenomenon of being a celebrity in
17 contemporary society is not exclusively the result of traditional hallmarks such
18 as widespread public knowledge, access to various forms of media, or the receipt
19 of commendations from acknowledged authorities. Instead, Gen Z defines
20 celebrity through a spectrum of influence, where perceived relatability and
21 consistent interaction within niche online communities are key indicators of
22 status and cultural relevance.

23 Participants distinctly defined the ideas of celebrity, influencer, and fame.
24 Individuals with widespread recognition in the mainstream media, and those
25 with high skills in their field were described as celebrities. On the other hand,
26 influencers were seen as individuals who derive their influence from digital
27 platforms and who maintain a continuous, direct engagement with their
28 audience. In contrast, recognition gained through fame was viewed as more
29 permanent and tied to types of achievement that had the potential to yield long-
30 term, rather than short-term, effects. This layered perspective shows a clear
31 understanding of not only public figures but also the media systems they inhabit.
32 It corresponds to a burgeoning literature on the new kinds of digital visibility
33 that allow public personas to be molded in ever more elaborate ways.

34 Throughout the various discussion, it is made clear that the concept of a
35 celebrity has evolved significantly with the rise of digital media, moving beyond
36 its historical association with mass media visibility and institutional validation.
37 Participants in this study largely agreed that being a celebrity today is not
38 exclusively the result of traditional hallmarks such as widespread public
39 knowledge, access to various forms of media, or the receipt of commendations
40 from acknowledged authorities. Instead, Gen Z has changed the way we define
41 what a celebrity is with the introduction of influencers and micro-influencers,
42 allowing for a more diverse description than ever before.

43 To understand this shift, both conceptual and categorization-based
44 approaches to the subject of celebrity are essential. The participants drew very
45 clear lines between the concepts of celebrity, influencer, and fame. They stated
46 that celebrities are the people who are most recognized across all forms of mass

1 media. These are the individuals who are known not just by a specific
 2 demographic but by everyone. Influencers, by contrast, were viewed as
 3 individuals who draw their notoriety from online platforms and who interact on
 4 a regular, direct basis with their followers. On the contrary, acknowledgment
 5 earned through fame was perceived as more enduring and associated with
 6 accomplishments having the potential to deliver long-term outcomes, instead of
 7 effects that are short-lived. This stratified viewpoint reflects an even deeper
 8 comprehension of the icons involved, as well as of the systems of mass media
 9 and participatory cultures that shape them.

10 Participants categorization showed an increasingly relevant meaning for the
 11 term "microcelebrities." This word designates a new form of public visibility and
 12 apparent fame that people achieve within specific online niches. A
 13 microcelebrity is understood to be famous among a small group of people, rather
 14 than a famous person to the whole world. Our focus groups discussed the rise in
 15 micro-influencers due to the increase in various niche communities with the rise
 16 of social media platforms such as TikTok, stating that these niche topics couldn't
 17 be shared prior to these outlets being created.

18 Social media emerged as a central force in shaping these definitions.
 19 Although participants recognized that achieving a viral moment can thrust
 20 individuals into the public's attention, they repeatedly highlighted that going
 21 viral does not equal being able to maintain a consistent influence. Content
 22 creators who build trust and create a sense of authenticity by sharing unfiltered,
 23 emotionally transparent content are more impactful than those whose content is
 24 curated and promotional. This finding reaffirms the increasing significance of
 25 authenticity in the influencer community. Regarding the paradigm of opinion
 26 leaders, numerous participants viewed influencing and microcelebrity roles to
 27 be these so called "opinion leaders" in their communities, especially when their
 28 content connected with the community's lived experience and values. This
 29 underscores the importance of contextual, rather than universal, influence in the
 30 digital age.

31 This study ultimately shows that Generation Z has a fluid and decentralized
 32 understanding of a celebrity and that this understanding is rooted in cultural
 33 values that prioritize connection, credibility, and contextual influence. The rise
 34 of micro-celebrities and niche influencers disturbs the binary systems of fame
 35 and brings in a more democratized model of cultural influence. These findings
 36 may be built upon in future research that explores the evolving definitions of
 37 celebrity and their effects on branding strategies; audience trust; and new
 38 technologies, such as algorithmic content curation and AI-generated personas.

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