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The Impact of Macro Influencers in Travel Decision Making Process for Generation Z

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Abstract

Social media has been considered by many as one of the most powerful tools when it comes to making travel decisions among Generation Z. Macro influencers have the most influence on this generation. This research paper investigates the credibility of influencers and the importance of their reviews and comments related to the travel decision making process. The method used to collect data was a questionnaire which was distributed to RIT Croatia students belonging to Generation Z from two campuses, Dubrovnik, and Zagreb. The most significant result of this research shows that even though the concept of social media influencer is still not familiar to all participants, Generation Z follows influencers because of their knowledge, honesty and experience, and this generation travels most often to gain new experiences and get to know new cultures. Further research is recommended to understand better the concept of social media influencers and why Instagram is considered to be the most powerful platform and a possible marketing tool to influence travel decisions of Generation Z.

Key words: social media platforms, social media influencers, Generation Z, travel influencer marketing

About Social Media in General

In the past decades, the number of users of social networks has increased drastically. One author thus claims that “more than 4.5 billion people use social media, as of October 2021” (Dollahride, 2021). The same author also believes that social media are convenient because they facilitate communication and share various information and ideas through virtual means, and one of the main advantages is that users have a quick insight into their personal data, photos, or any other personal documents. The drastic increase in the use of social media has enabled tourists to make decisions about travel using services based on the content provided by social networks. In addition, tourists use social media to publish interesting contents of their trip through pictures or videos and thus attract new tourists (Javed et al., 2022).

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencer is a person who has gained a sufficient number of followers on his profile and a sufficiently high credibility to be able to influence the decisions of his audience (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). The research shows that influencers have a significant impact on customers decision making based on their knowledge, power, relationship with their audience, reputation, and status in society. Posting regular pictures, videos, reels, comments, and stories are just a few of their responsibilities that their job required. By publishing such content, they gather an increasing number of followers who are highly engaged and ready to follow their steps or learn from them, based on their content (Geysler, 2023).

Division by number of followers

There are two divisions of social media influencers. The first division is by the number of followers these influencers attract, and, according to this division, social media influencers can be mega, macro, micro and nano influencers.

Mega and macro influencers are highly influential people. Their social media profiles contain celebrity status (Sanders, 2023). While mega influencers have over 10 million followers and are often in demand, macro-influencers with a smaller audience in the range of 500,000 to 1 million also have a very good influence on the market. In terms of effectiveness, micro influencers with a number of followers less than 50,000 can do much better job because they are not that busy and overwhelmed with work, and usually the audience has more trust in such people (Sanders 2023.). The newest type of influencer is known as nano influencers. In a way, these are ordinary people who are experts in their narrow areas and with a very narrow audience (Geyser, 2023.).

Division by typology

When it comes to the second type of division, influencers can also be divided by typology. According to this division, snoopers are influencers that share content on social networks as a hobby. They are very curious, eager to make new acquaintances, and very eager to communicate with people and share their knowledge and experience (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018, p. 3).

The second type of influencer, called informers, have similar intentions. They differ from the first type in that their information is completely credible and their influence and their need to inform the audience is often based on the educational level.

Entertainers, as the word itself suggests, are social media influencers whose content is mostly related to relaxation and enjoyment. They are very creative and team-oriented, so this helps them achieve and realize their goals (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018, p. 4).

Infotainers, also known as hybrid mode of operation, are well-read people who most often associate their content with some form of entertainment and enjoyment (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018, p. 5).

Social media platforms

According to Lyons (2022), “social media platforms help you increase brand awareness and reach, engage with your audience, and gather valuable customer and competitor insights”. Young people are the most frequent users of social media platforms, and they singled out Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube as the most famous social media platforms. Furthermore, all those platforms can help in improving the whole business including customer service, public relations, or the whole marketing (Hruska & Maresova, 2020).

Facebook

The largest and most famous social media platform with monthly users’ number of 2.9 billion is Facebook (Lyons, 2022.). According to Conlin (2023), "Facebook’s business tools help you build your online brand, create meaningful connections with customers and potential employees, and increase overall productivity". Hruska and Maresova claim in their research (2020) that Facebook is a significant platform, and a great marketing support for promoting any brand virtually.

YouTube

Followed by Facebook, YouTube is the second largest social media platform. According to Lyons (2022), there are 2.56 billion monthly active users who have an option of sharing longer videos on this platform and have thus gained a significant potential for promotion and connecting with other users of this platform (Nizami, 2022).

Instagram

Instagram is “an app where users curate visual content, including photos, Stories, Reels, Instagram TV, and live videos” (Lyons, 2022). Instagram has become one of the excellent platforms to promote a certain brand, create one’s own business page or design an influencer marketing campaign which can further encourage awareness of a specific brand (Nizami, 2022). According to Chadha (2018), Instagram holds a high 80 percent of the current market of social media platforms as the best platform for product promotion and cooperation with brands.

Twitter

The main purpose of Twitter is microblogging. User activity is significant, since this platform is quick and easy access to news and promotions, as well as increased communication (Nizami, 2022). Users most often post messages, express their feelings related to complaints or frustrations and get in touch with particular events and trending stuff (Lyons, 2022).

Snapchat

According to Lyons (2022), Snapchat is “an instant messaging app where users can share pictures and messages that disappear after a short period of time”. The main purpose of this application is for companies is to share promotions to connect with a larger audience. Even though compared with other platforms, the use of Snapchat has decreased, this social media platform still has a significant number of users (Nizami, 2022).

TikTok

TikTok is a social platform that appeared in 2016 and has become one of the most famous social media platforms. Users are able to create, share and watch short videos that are mostly related to entertainment. TikTok also provide thousands of music and sound effects that make a certain video better (D'Souza, 2023).

Generation Z

Generation Z is a demographic group born between 1996 and 2010. According to Georgiev (2023), the use of social networks and mobile phone devices has increased drastically throughout this generation. The research shows that Generation Z has a major impact on the creation of new travel trends. Some of the main purposes that this generation seeks for are related to new experiences, getting to know new cultures, education, learning new languages and participating in events (Schiopu et al., 2016). According to the research, Generation Z is also known for its social and global connection. Compared to their ancestors, this generation has a higher level of education, which leads to an increased number of trips, increased spending, and increased work (Madden, 2017).

Gen Z and mobile phone devices

Members of generation Z are digitally native because they have been using mobile phone devices since their early years. They are exposed to the communication via social media and that is where they spend the most time (Meola, 2023). Influencer marketing is very important for Generation Z since they have grown up with the Internet. With this type of upbringing, the manners, attitudes, and lifestyle of this generation are very different from those of the older generations (Dimock, 2019). Members of Generation Z are capable and educated enough to create their own content using internet tools and thus build their abilities (Dunkley, 2017).

Gen Z and brand engagement

The engagement with brands for young people who belong to Generation Z occurs chiefly on social media. For announcing about new products, Generation Z most often chooses Instagram as a platform for notification (Georgiev, 2023.). Regardless of knowing that a certain post is sponsored, Generation Z still trusts the influencers they follow (Dunkley, 2017). Generation Z uses social media platforms because they provide communication with other people and sharing opinions about services and products of a certain brand (Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2017).

Gen Z and social media influencers

For this generation, social media influencers are the main tool that helps promote the products of a certain brand (Newman, 2014). Generation Z creates a certain connection with influencers who are credible and whom they consider reliable. Social media influencers, on the other hand, are usually and mostly recognizable by their celebrity status (Dunkley, 2017). Fear of missing out (FOMO) is one of the most important characteristics of Generation Z, so therefore it is quite safe to conclude that social media users belonging to this generation must always be in touch with influencers and people they follow on social networks (Dunkley, 2017).

Gen Z and Travel

The desire to travel among members of this generation is significant: Generation Z decides to take trips that are filled with adventure, activities, and unique experience. They often decide to travel first, and only then do they attempt to choose a destination, deciding on the destination based on the influencers they follow (Expedia Group, 2018). The intention to travel is also

related to posting photos about the destination on social networks (Simmons, 2022). Online travel agencies are mostly their choice for booking a trip. The main prerequisite for buying a product or using a service is related to lower prices (Georgiev, 2023).

Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is the cooperation between companies and influencers on social media with the goal of promoting goods and services (Chen, 2022). In exchange for using social media and publishing content about the brand on it, influencers receive a certain compensation from the company or even a free product as a gift. Marketing experts provide influencers with clear instructions on the number of necessary posts and types of hashtags (Zietek, 2016, p. 10-11). Influential marketing, in addition to helping to increase people's awareness of a brand, also affects sales. While the initial social media platforms were Facebook and Twitter on which users would post blogs about their daily routines, today, Instagram as a social media platform has a greater influence that can help influencers improve their careers or earn additional income from sponsorship (Corbitt, n.d.).

Visual appeal is one of the reasons why consumers make a certain decision. By following an influencer's content, people experience visual appeal. Influencers use a multitude of effects and other variants of image or video processing in order to portray a certain destination as best as possible (Nagar, n.d.).

Opinion leaders is a concept that is known in literature which appeared before the 1950s. They had an influence on their audience because they represented certain values, their level of expertise was very high, and they influenced many people (Katz, 1957). The raise in technology, especially web 2.0 enabled influencers to gain more importance and visibility. With the advancement of technology, online bookings became especially important as people could

exchange their opinions. With the introduction of online reviews, people also started using vlogs and social media platforms for advertising (Ristova and Angelkova Petkova 2019). Unlike vloggers before, who were considered the first influencers, today's influencers are expected to be active on at least one social network (Barbe, D. & Neuburger, L., 2021).

Tourism and Travel

Technology is very important because it affects the behavior of Generation Z in a certain destination. A high level of technology is associated with easy access to information, and in this way its development has a great impact on them (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019). In tourism, the planning process is very demanding. Influencers have taken on this task, which includes an overview of the destination, accommodation, various activities to be done on the spot and mode of transportation. Social media influencers know about the trends through their social networks and in this way provide information about their choices. According to Finch, Generation Z is one of those who often follows their guidelines.

The research shows that hotels have been increasingly using influencers for the promotion of their services. Influencers help to spread brand awareness and influence the change of accommodation decision. Guests often therefore make decisions based on influencer content. Hotels have a great advantage over influencers, regardless of their number of followers, because they build a relationship with guests and thus achieve loyalty (Ristova and Angelkova Petkova 2019).

Method

The main goal of this research was to investigate how influencers influence generation Z when it comes to choosing a tourist destination. The chosen method was survey, and an instrument (a questionnaire) was created in English. It consists of questions related to the experiences and opinions of Generation Z towards influencers. The questionnaire was distributed online to RIT Croatia students in Zagreb and Dubrovnik.

The questionnaire contains 16 questions that are divided into three groups. The first part of the questions is related to social media platforms and their use. The second part of the questions is related to social media influencers, their credibility and awareness of their influence. The third part is related to the travel destinations and the main purpose of traveling. The survey is composed of questions and/or statements with Likert scale categories and several yes/no questions. The focus of the survey was to find different things related to the main topic of the research, such as: how much Generation Z is connected to social media platforms, how much they trust social media influencers, what are the main characteristics an influencer must have and what are the main prerequisites to choose travel destination.

The questionnaire had 4 questions related to social media platforms. Respondents are asked to identify if they use social networks or not and evaluate how important social networks are to them using a 7-point Likert scale, from "not at all important" to "extremely important". Of the several social media platforms offered, they are invited to rate the one they use most often, and also indicate the amount of time they spend using social media platforms from "I do not use them at all" to "I use them more than 4 hours a day".

As for the second and third part of the questions, the Likert scale was most often used. Respondents had 3 questions consisting of seven degrees, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". They had two questions that also consisted of seven degrees, from "never" to "always". Two questions were related to the number and type of influencers that respondents follow the most. There were also two more questions that depended on the context that is the most

memorable of them, and the reason why they follow a certain influencer. Other questions were demographic characteristics. Moreover, there were three open questions in which participants could write additional thoughts about the reasons why they follow certain influencers.

The survey was conducted in online form, via Google forms. The audience of the research was RIT Croatia students from Zagreb and Dubrovnik. The collected data includes 70 responses in total. The responses were collected from March 31 until April 12th, 2023. All responses were valid, and all were included in the results.

Results

Respondents were young people, all belonging to Generation Z, and all students of RIT Croatia from both campuses, Zagreb and Dubrovnik. According to the year level, out of 70 participants, 38.6% or 27 were Seniors, 10% or 7 were Juniors, 8.6% or 6 were Sophomores and 42.9% or 30 of them were Freshmen.

Results show that all Generation Z participants use social media platforms. In the following question, using a 7-point Likert scale, respondents had to choose how important social media platforms are to them. Answers varied from "not at all important" to "extremely important". Results show that Sophomores perceive social media platforms as important ($M=4.5$, $SD=1.64$), as well as Seniors ($M=4$, $SD=1.48$). Juniors ($M=3.71$, $SD=1.38$) and Freshmen ($M=3.77$, $SD=1.43$) do not attach so much importance to social media platforms.

The participants were then also required to select a social media platform they use the most. The most famous platforms chosen were Instagram (64.3%) and YouTube (20%). The rest of offered answers were TikTok (8.6%) and Facebook (1.4%). Since Snapchat and Twitter are the oldest platforms, no one mentioned these platforms, and they do not seem to be relevant or interesting to the participants.

In addition, when asked to provide the category and number of a social media influencers a student follows, most of them state that they follow either 3 to 5 or more than 5 influencers (55.7%), which makes them belong to the group of Macro influencers (42.4%).

Regarding the types of social media influencers, respondents' top three answers were fashion and beauty (26.1%), entertainment and fun (27.5%), and travel (17.4%). The rest of the answers were related to sport, food, work, and education with some lower percentages. When it comes to the reasons why generation Z follows a certain social media influencer, knowledge (29.9%) and honesty (22.4%) had the highest percentage.

The next question was related to the prices and budget determination. Respondents were required to answer if the price and budget determination are the most important factor when choosing a travel destination. Answers varied from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Participants showed that price and budget determination are very important for them when choosing travel destination, since they either strongly agree, agree or somewhat agree (80%). Freshmen show the highest importance ($M=5.43$, $SD=1.14$), as well as Seniors ($M=5.37$, $SD=1.45$) and Sophomores ($M=5.17$, $SD=0.41$). For Juniors, price and budget determination is a little less important ($M=4.71$, $SD=1.60$).

Participants rated that the main purpose of traveling for them is to have new, unusual, and unique experiences (70%) as well as the importance of recognition and integration of different cultures (18.6%).

The next set of questions were those where hypotheses were proven incorrect based on influencers credibility when choosing travel destination and seeking for their reviews. The results show that Generation Z does not have so much trust in social media influencers, that they do not give them power and that their credibility seems to be much lower than expected from what stated in the research and literature.

Trusting social media influencers when choosing travel destination was responded from “never” to “always”. Results showed that Generation Z does not have that much trust in them when choosing travel destination. Even 67,1% of participants stated that they have either never, rarely, or occasionally trusted social media influencers when choosing travel destination. Freshmen’s results showed that they are the group that trusts social media influencers more than other groups (M=3.13, SD=1.22). Furthermore, Seniors (M=2.7, SD=1.86) and Sophomores (M=2.5, SD=1.22) also have some trust in them when it comes to choosing travel destination, while Juniors do not perceive them as a credible source of information (M=2.14, SD=0.9).

When it comes to seeking for influencers’ reviews before choosing a travel destination, participants were required to give answers from "never" to "always". Generation Z either never, rarely, occasionally, or sometimes seeks for influencers’ reviews before choosing travel destination (69,9%). Freshmen are the group that sometimes seek for those information (M=3.1, SD=1.91). Unlike the Freshmen, Juniors (M=2.29, SD=1.38), Seniors (M=2.37, SD=1.82) and Sophomores (M=1.83, SD=1.17) do not have tendency to seek for those reviews.

The answers to the last question in the questionnaire showed a contradiction. Participants were required to answer whether they believe that influencers’ reviews are a strong marketing tool for choosing a travel destination or not. Even 67,2% of participants said that they either agree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree that influencers’ reviews could be a strong marketing tool. Group of Freshmen (M=4.87, SD=1.63), Seniors (M=4.81, SD=1.98), and Sophomores (M=4.83, SD=1.33) show a slightly higher percentage than Juniors (M=4.71, SD=1.98).

Appendix

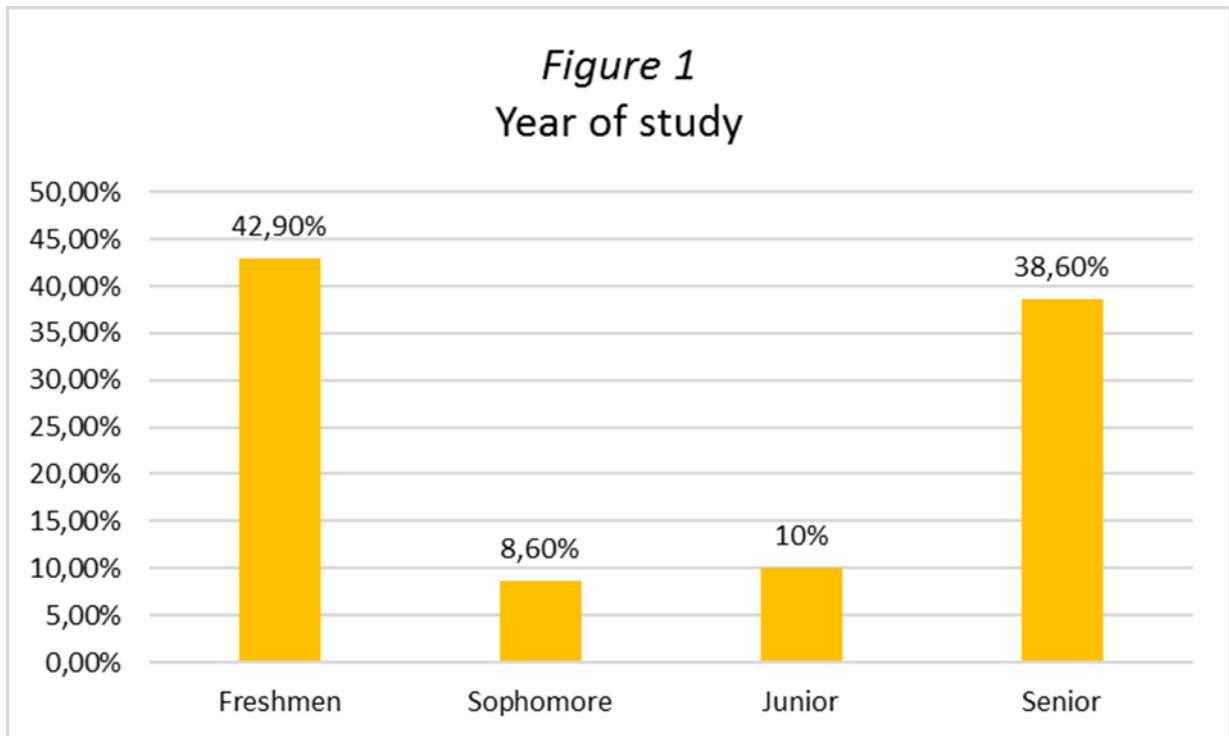


Figure 1. Year of study.

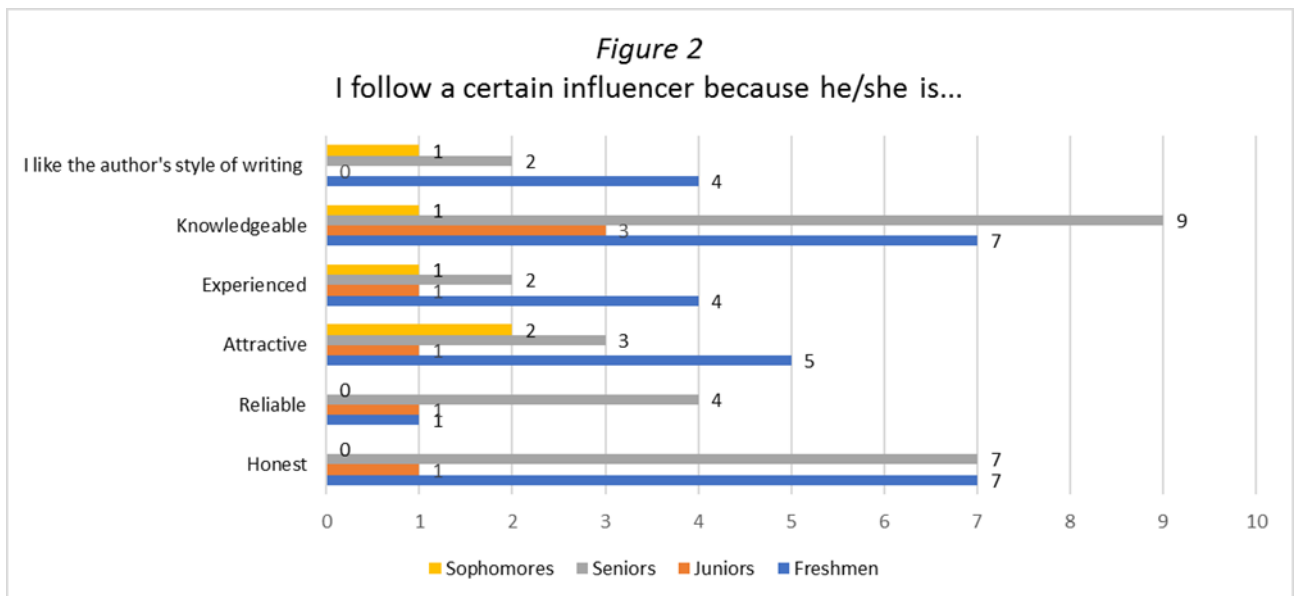


Figure 2. Reasons to follow a certain influencer.

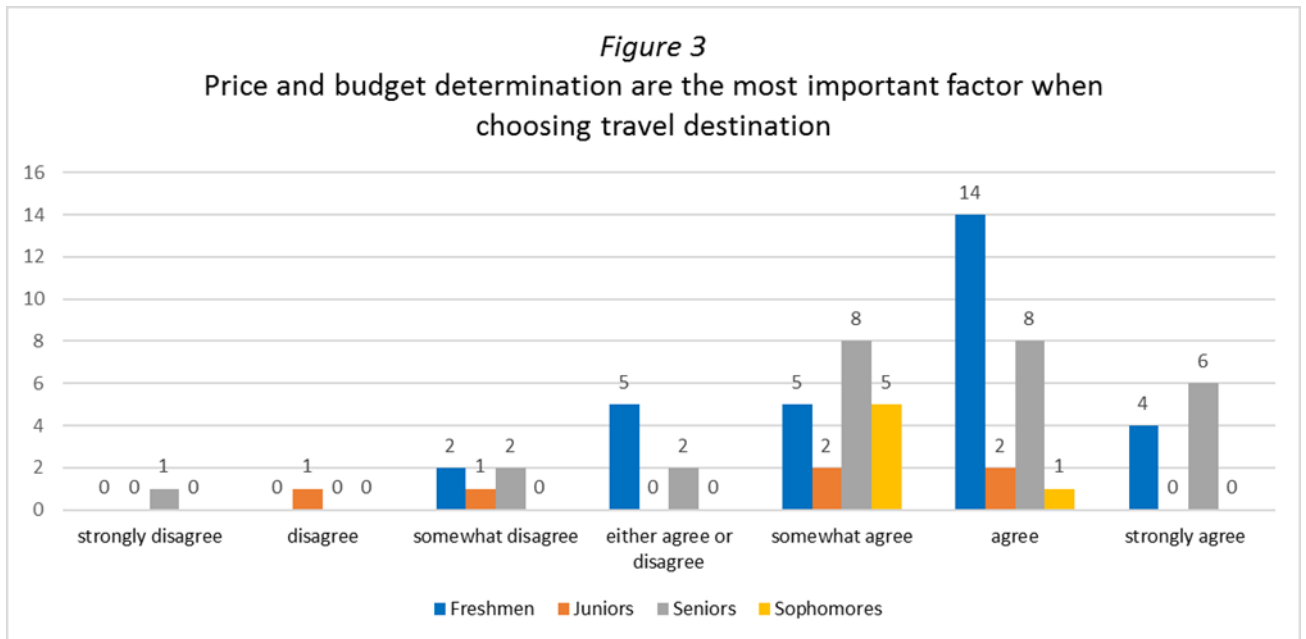


Figure 3. Price and budget determination when choosing travel destination.

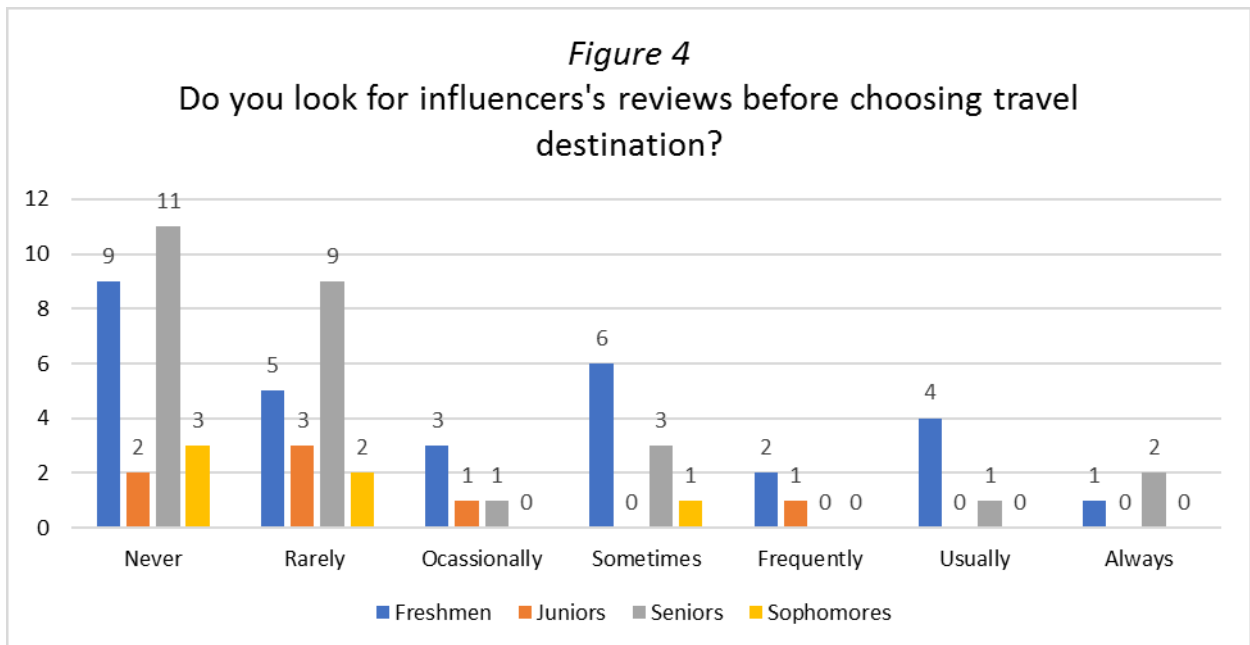


Figure 4. Seeking for influencers' reviews before choosing travel destination.

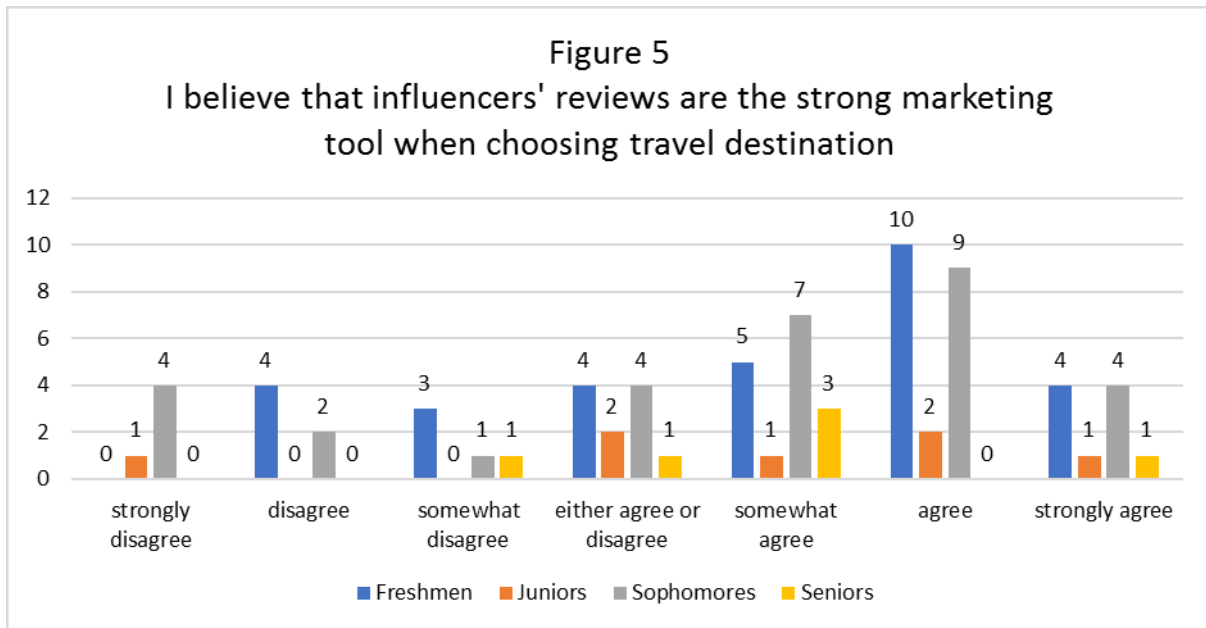


Figure 5. Influencers' reviews could be a strong marketing tool for a travel destination.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to gain better understanding on the opinion of Generation Z about social media influencers as a possible strong marketing tool when it comes to choosing a tourist destination and see how this can be used in hospitality industry. Another aim was to explore the relationship among users of social platforms from Generation Z and social media influencers, travel destinations and social media platforms. Even though the literary review claims that Generation Z are highly influenced by social media influencers and depend on their reviews when it comes to choosing a travel destination, the results have shown differently, and the main hypothesis has not been confirmed.

The results from the questionnaire show that even though participants believe that Instagram could be a strong marketing tool when choosing a travel destination, but they themselves do not rely on influencers so much while choosing a travel destination.

The results of the survey agree, on the other side, with the reason for which the participants follow certain influencers: they believe that they are knowledgeable, honest, attractive and experienced, which is also confirmed by the literary review. Furthermore, users from Generation Z usually follow fashion and beauty-based, entertainment and fun-based and travel-based influencers. The results also showed that generation Z most often follows more than 5 influencers who belong to the group of Macro influencers. Even though Generation Z uses social networks a lot and follows several influencers, but the results showed that when it comes to using the influencers' reviews when choosing a travel destination, the participants still do not trust the influencers so much. It could be concluded that Generation Z users of social media most probably like to hear the tips and ideas of influencers, but on the other hand, they want to be careful and take the advice of some more reliable people. It can be either their friends or family who have some experience on the matter.

Literary review has also shown that the main purpose of traveling for generation Z is seeking new experiences, getting to know new cultures, and learning languages, which has also been confirmed in the survey. Participants also stated that prices and budget determination are the most important factors when choosing a travel destination. In the same way, the finding that the main prerequisite for the generation Z are lower prices while buying or using a service, has also been identified by previous researchers.

Another important finding confirmed by the results of the survey showed that the Instagram platform is one of the most popular and important among generation Z, and this generation most often uses Instagram as a platform for notifications. Additionally, interestingly, a larger percentage of participants were women. In general, women are the ones who often engage in influencer marketing and promote products and services on Instagram, so it is quite clear why Instagram has the highest percentage of responses.

In terms of additional value, the author believes that this kind of research can help influencers to be more aware of the content of the materials they post on their platforms, having better understood the needs of their audience. The influencers should overall provide a more realistic image of reality, focus less on editing pictures and videos to make everything look perfect and engage more and adapt to their audience. Their activities then could become a valuable asset for larger marketing companies or some other businesses to join forces and cooperate with influencers, especially with Macro influencers since these influencers have a large enough following that would help businesses to promote their offer, and, at the same time, they have time to engage better and in a more qualitative way with their audience. Influencers can promote diverse products and services and help marketing companies to gain better results, to attract new people and increase the awareness of a certain product or service, especially if this is related to travel and tourism. Further research could be conducted among Generation Z to further explore the reasons why the influencers could be a powerful marketing tool or analyze what changes and benefits can be impacted by the influencer's engagements in certain areas of tourism and hospitality in general. Since student body at RIT Croatia is rather diverse, and students come from different countries, this could also be a potential field to explore and determine if that fact can determine some differences in the impact of social media influencers.

Finally, one of the main limitations of this study is a relatively small sample of participants. To make more conclusive opinions and state if Generation Z is prone to trust social media influencers related to making travel decision, more users should be surveyed regarding this topic.

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