THE MYTH OF INFLUENCERS: DOES GENERATION Z REALLY TRUST THEM?

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ABSTRACT

For many, modern communication is unimaginable without social media, which created the foundations for the emergence and development of new opinion leaders. These so-called influencers seek to create connected and stable communities of followers by publishing content on their official profiles. The main goal of this article, based on the results of qualitative content analysis and quantitative survey research, is to conclude how Generation Z perceives influencers and their communication on social media and what the connection is between the attitudes of influencers and the selected public. To attain this goal, a qualitative analysis of the Instagram profiles of the three most popular influencers in Croatia was carried out to gain a deeper insight into the observed topic. Furthermore, an empirical study was conducted to investigate the perception of members of Generation Z about Instagram influencers. The research showed that respondents do not believe in the veracity of the content published by influencers on social media and do not share similar values with them. In conclusion, the results showed that Instagram influencers, with the content on their official profiles, do not contribute to shaping the attitudes and behaviour of members of Generation Z.

KEY WORDS

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Today's communication is unimaginable for many without social media, which offers countless features for easier connection with other users and includes these platforms in marketing strategies. Social media also enabled the development of new opinion leaders who dedicated themselves to the professional publication of content on their profiles and are known today as influencers to the public. The advantages of social media, as well as the impact of influencers on their audience, have been recognised by numerous brands that cooperate with them to achieve their marketing goals. Considering the topic presented in this article, various studies dealt with the influence and contribution of social media in different contexts and communication in general. For example, some authors emphasise that not only external communication is changing, but internal communication is as well. Namely, employee satisfaction stems not only from material incentives but also from a wide range of non-material incentives, such as efficient communication [1]. When communication is mentioned, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in digital advertising through influencers' active participation on many social media platforms. Budgets for influencer marketing rise yearly, and the return on investment from influencer marketing is higher than from other marketing channels [2].

Furthermore, the contribution of digital promotion is also visible in different areas, such as the presentation of heritage. Positive developments in implementing the digital promotion of cultural heritage during and after the pandemic are evident, but not fast enough considering the accelerated development of new smart technologies, according to the opinion of some authors [3]. Some researchers also emphasise the visibility of information and social media. To build efficient knowledge management, the most important thing is to have visibility of general information about clients, their behaviour, business activities, and intentions on social media [4]. Speaking specifically about Generation Z and influencers, the research most closely related to this topic shows that social media influencers can influence Generation Z brand loyalty, and purchase intentions are able to mediate social media influencers and Generation Z brand loyalty [5].

The main goal of the article, based on the results of qualitative content analysis and the results of quantitative survey research, is to conclude how the most followed Croatian influencers and their communication on social media are perceived by Generation Z (people born between 1995 and 2010) and what is the connection between the attitudes of influencers and the target public. In this regard, it is interesting to compare some other research on a similar topic. The results of a nationwide online survey of 227 Chinese Generation Z people show that social media influencers have a significant impact on Generation Z online consumer behaviour, especially on the Douyin social media platform [6]. The research conducted by Djafarova and Bowesapplies [7] applied the Stimulus-Organism-Response model to the context of Instagram. The findings of their qualitative study based on eight extensive focus groups conclude that there are significant gender differences in relation to impulse purchasing behaviour on Instagram. Instagram is vastly influential in encouraging impulse purchases amongst females. However, this was not the case for male participants. Also, in today's rapidly developing digital landscape, driven by the innovation of Industry 4.0, an increasingly powerful Generation Z consumer has emerged. The authors reveal five macro trends impacting brand affinity amongst Generation Z, who are global citizens, digital accelerators, future-proof, climate-aware consumers, and equality activists. These macro trends and values are shaping consumer culture and developing brand relationships [8]. Furthermore, social media advertising strategies, including using traditional celebrity endorsers and micro-celebrity influencers, are prevalent marketing tools. However, the trend of using virtual influencers to endorse products is a novel potential way to attract young consumers. An interesting fact is that some findings highlight the effectiveness of attachment theory in social media endorsement advertisements [9]. To conclude, the importance of consumerism for business survival and growth, albeit in a more

authentic, meaningful, and sustainable way, along with the increasing use of digital media such as social media, has led to the proliferation of social media influencer marketing and its burgeoning interest among academics and professionals [10].

In accordance with the aforementioned, the article is focused on three specific goals. The first is to investigate the perception of Generation Z about influencers, then to analyse the content of the posts of the three most popular Instagram influencers in Croatia, and, finally, to investigate the contribution of the content published on the influencers' Instagram profiles to the attitudes and opinions of respondents, i.e., Generation Z. The purpose of this article is to clarify how Generation Z perceives the content created by the most popular influencers and whether this contributes to the creation of their opinion on the topics they are exposed to. For research purposes, two methods were used – content analysis and survey. The goal of the content analysis is to conduct preliminary research in order to gain a better insight into the observed topic and the type of content that the most popular Croatian influencers post on their official Instagram profiles, and thus try to understand what attracts an extremely large number of audiences to their profiles Furthermore; a survey was conducted to analyse the habits of using Instagram and the perception of influencers among members of Generation Z (people born from 1995 to 2010) and the connection between the attitudes of influencers and the generation above.

The mentioned research papers, from a different perspective, deal with understanding the role of influencers in marketing. In addition, some research also deals with the importance of the connection between influencers and followers for establishing trust. For example, some authors say that brand control elicits strong reactions in terms of avoidance behaviour in the absence of a relationship. However, it has a less severe influence on avoidance behaviour when followers enjoy a strong relationship with the influencer. They thus argue that, in the case of strong relationship ties, that is, a strong relationship between an influencer and their followers, the followers value the relationship more, which protects the influencer against perceived brand control [11]. On the other hand, some new studies deal with the impact of influencer content on followers. For example, these findings lend strong support to the effect of verbal cues on users' responses. Specifically, the authors found that when the advertising post presents weak argument quality, the enhanced attention to the photo of the micro-influencer leads to an increase in the behavioural activation system, with possible implications on advertising effectiveness and online message design [12]. Following up on these and similar research, this article offers a better understanding of the relationship between the most followed Croatian influencers and their followers; that is, it brings results that explain how Croatian followers create their attitudes based on the influencers' posts on their social networks. Whether these posts contribute to the formation of the follower's thinking or not.

After the introduction, the section on social media as a modern way of communication follows, which thematises the role of social networks in modern communication. After that comes the section How have influencers changed marketing communication? Which is aimed at understanding new marketing phenomena that continue to be influenced by influencers and their actions. The section titled Importance of Influencers in Shaping Public Attitudes explains the influence of influencers on followers and their attitudes, and the section Characteristics of Generation Z as a Target Audience describes the characteristics of Generation Z with the aim of better understanding that target group. The Methodology section describes the research objective, problem and research tool. The Results section follows, in which the results of the content analysis are first presented, followed by the results of the survey questionnaire. The Discussion presents a summary of the research results and links them to the set research objective. The Conclusion, which includes the main highlights of the work and a list of literature, follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MODERN WAY OF COMMUNICATION

We live in a society shaped by the presence of information and communication technologies, and their historical development reveals the significant influence of new media on the transformation of communication [13]. Thanks to technological progress, people have moved on to social communication, and "in this communication, new media play an increasingly important role today, which is recording an unstoppable development" [14; p.14]. First, new media refers to the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, computer games, 3D animation and virtual reality, as well as video-on-demand services and social media [15]. Their essential characteristic is that they abolish face-to-face communication, i.e., they are based on impersonal communication and technical virtuality [13]. Communication becomes two-way, which is significantly different from the communication model of Shannon and Weaver, who understand communication as "exclusively technical and linear and one-way" [16; p.20]. Digital media and communication on the Internet have become an inseparable part of the everyday life of the majority of the population [17]. Technology has enabled the "quick transfer of information from one end of the world to another, business at the speed of thought, and construction of different types of virtual realities" [13; p.16]. With the enormous amount of content provided by digital media, the ease of obtaining and accessing information has never been more accessible in human history [17]. The presence of various forms of digital media, such as social media, websites and games, has created social connectivity [17], and today, more than ever before, one can notice the persistence of the "global village", which communication theorist Marshall McLuhan talked about back in the 1960s. McLuhan believes that "humanity lives in a 'global village' created by electronic interdependence because electronic media have brought all social institutions into a state of mutual dependence" [16; pp.45-46]. In the book *Global Village*, Croatian political scientist Anđelko Milardović reflects on the information society in the context of the globalisation process and presents an overview of the basic ideas essential for understanding the transformation of contemporary societies and the world in which we live. He states that the information and communication dimension of globalisation enables the understanding of the "global village" metaphor [13].

With the development of the Internet, McLuhan's metaphor "global village" became a reality. As a result, "21st-century man literally became a technology addict connected to a machine (computer) with a permanent connection online from zero to twenty-four hours a day" [13; p.23]. In addition, the Internet and social networks have changed the human understanding of communication, and the urges for which people go to the Internet have also changed, i.e., "it used to be because they wanted to be informed, they wanted to see and experience, read and learn. The reason people go online today is that they want to be part of communication, they want to participate in it, they want to be present, they want people to read about them, and they want to read about others" [18; p.168].

Furthermore, social media and communication apps have brought about the biggest change in the way people communicate in recent history, such as well-known tech giants like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and LinkedIn. Social media have gained enormous popularity, gaining millions and even hundreds of millions of users. This can be attributed to the amazing concept of Web 2.0 technology, which places users at the centre of interaction, empowering them to generate and share content with other users [19]. This is confirmed by the statistical data published in the Global Digital Reports report, one of the most read reports on digital trends and behaviour on the Internet. According to the report, in April 2023, there were 4,8 billion active social media users in the world. For context, the world's population reached 8,03

billion at the beginning of April 2023, which would mean that more than half of the Earth's population uses social media [20].

IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS ON MARKETING COMMUNICATION

As already stated earlier, social media have redefined the way of communication, both among users of social media and among companies that have "moved" their business to the digital environment in order to keep up with the times and reach their target audience. The emergence of social media in the last two decades has significantly influenced the way in which marketing communication is carried out through traditional media channels, such as newspapers or television, which today have been replaced by digital platforms [21]. The advancement of technology has led to changes in marketing trends, making traditional media less attractive to younger generations. However, they emphasise that each medium still has its unique audience. As a result, advertisers tailor strategies to effectively communicate with their target market, using the appropriate medium where their audience is. The emergence of social media was especially beneficial to numerous brands that recognised them as an ideal platform for branding [22]. The above is supported by research that shows that social media are more effective in promoting products and services and that users have greater trust in the opinions of other users compared to traditional marketing methods [21]. Social media offer several advantages, including cost-effectiveness and the ability to reach a specific target audience more precisely, which makes them crucial to companies' marketing strategies because these platforms empower consumers to share information actively and quickly about products and services, improving the exchange of experiences and ultimately increasing the effectiveness of marketing communications for the company [23]. However, social media have not only contributed to the development of trends and changes in traditional marketing. The emergence and popularity of social platforms contributed to the creation of "new creators of public opinion, i.e., influential persons, who gained their popularity and influence primarily thanks to the development of new technologies" [24; p.5]. It was the influential people who attracted the attention of business entities, who, in recent years, have shown significant interest in these people, who are recognised for their influence on the market [22]. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is an increase in interest in the study of various influential factors on consumer behaviour, including the characteristics of public opinion leaders – influencers, the effect of communication messages on brand trust and the tendency to share information by word of mouth, especially in the context of social media in the digital era [22].

Although today the term influencer is most often mentioned in the context of social media, they are not a new phenomenon that is the result of their development and popularity; on the contrary, they have always existed – "in the past, they were members of royal families, politically powerful and influential people, athletes and other public and famous individuals" [24; p.5]. The popularity and use of social media around the world have contributed to experts and those who are not able to reach many more individuals than ever before, which has encouraged many to dedicate themselves professionally to publishing their content and opinions on social platforms [24; p.5]. There is no doubt that these influential individuals attract exceptional attention from business entities. Still, they also become the subject of research by numerous authors, so it is necessary to list their characteristics and answer the question – who are influencers?

IMPORTANCE OF INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING PUBLIC ATTITUDES

As already stated, the importance of influencers on social media is increasing because they can shape consumer attitudes, which is especially valuable for marketers. In the context of influencer marketing, due to the added value influencers bring to a brand, product, or service,

influencer credibility is generally considered a key determinant of advertising effectiveness [25, 26]. However, to understand their role in shaping audience attitudes, it is necessary to explain what attitudes are and how they can be changed.

Aronson, Wilson, and Akert state that most social psychologists define attitude as an "evaluation of people, objects or ideas" [27; p.217]. According to the Croatian Encyclopaedia, an attitude is "an acquired, relatively permanent and stable structure of positive or negative emotions, evaluations and behaviour towards an object (person, group, phenomenon, idea)" [28]. Attitudes consist of three components: an emotional aspect that includes emotional reactions toward the object of the attitude (such as another person or a social problem), a cognitive aspect that includes thoughts and beliefs about the object of the attitude, and a behavioural aspect that includes actions or visible behaviour toward the object of the attitude [27]. Furthermore, they are equated with evaluations. They include positive or negative reactions to something because people tend to evaluate and not remain impartial observers of the world [27, 28]. Although attitudes can generally be considered a relatively permanent tendency to respond positively or negatively, it is important to note that a change in attitude is possible. The authors state that this can be influenced by two basic mechanisms: persuasion or behaviour modification, whereby persuasion refers to the conscious and intentional sending of a verbal or non-verbal message to shape, change or strengthen the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, values and behaviour of the individual we are addressing [29].

Aronson, Wilson, and Akert further argue that attitudes sometimes change and explain that the reason is often a reaction to social influence [27]. Even something as intimate and individual as attitude is greatly influenced by the behaviour of those around us. The authors state that the concept of advertising is precisely because our opinion about consumer goods can change, such as when we hear someone claim that a new and improved detergent provides superior cleaning or observe a famous person wearing a certain brand of jeans. Aronson, Wilson, and Akert report that Hovland et al., drawing on their experiences during World War II when they worked for the US military to boost the morale of American soldiers, conducted extensive research on the conditions most likely to influence people through persuasive messages. Specifically, they explored the "Who says? What? To whom?" factors, focusing on the source of the message (how knowledgeable or attractive the speaker is), the message itself (the quality of the arguments), and the audience (what types of appeals work with reluctant or receptive audiences). This approach, better known as the Yale approach to attitude change, has led to many valuable insights into how individuals change their attitudes in response to persuasive messages. Concerning the source of information, it was found that a credible speaker has a greater power of persuasion than one with less credibility. Additionally, an attractive speaker, whether due to physical appearance or personality traits, is usually more persuasive than an unattractive speaker. By looking at the nature of communication, Hovland et al. found that people are more likely to be influenced by messages that do not have the overt goal of changing their attitudes. Finally, the nature of the message is significant. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 are particularly sensitive to attitude change, while the attitudes of people after that age become more stable and resistant to change [27].

However, it is the credibility of the source that has been proposed as the dominant antecedent of the attitude towards the ad and, ultimately, the effectiveness of advertising [26]. Belanche et al. [25] state that cooperation with influencers would be useless if they cannot influence. From a relational perspective, influencers seek to cultivate stronger psychological bonds with their followers to foster lasting relationships. Therefore, it is not surprising that influencers face challenges when it comes to attracting and retaining followers, as this is essential for cultivating a successful community that serves as the foundation of their influence. Alignment between influencers and the products they promote is key to increasing the effectiveness of marketing

campaigns that rely on influential individuals. Conversely, when influencers deviate from their usual content and promote unrelated products, their followers may be surprised by such content, which could potentially cause a sense of confusion and make them wonder if the influencer is driven by commercial motives for posting such content and not by a real personal interest [25].

Mesarić and Gregurec [30] emphasise that the most successful influencers are not necessarily those with the largest number of followers. Brands must prioritise influencers who stay true to their style and provide their followers with carefully selected high-quality and relevant content. The authors also state that they should be honest but also enthusiastic and authentic and should focus on promoting products they use and have knowledge about. This is why true influencers do not endorse every product that comes their way but instead carefully select the brands they represent. Depending on their previous recommendations, the audience evaluates them as a credible source of information and decides whether to trust them or not. Belanche et al. [25] surveyed a sample of 341 respondents, and the results revealed that followers consider influencer-product unity as an important cue to evaluate influencers. The perception that the post is paid communication significantly damages the perceived credibility of the influencer, but its effect on the attitude towards the influencer is insignificant. Furthermore, the authors concluded that the influencer's credibility plays a central role in the success of influencer marketing and that this characteristic had a positive effect on the attitude towards the influencer.

Although a change in attitude is possible, it is important to remember that not all attitudes are created equal. Aronson, Wilson, and Akert [27] explain how some are based more on beliefs about the object of the attitude (cognitively based attitudes), while others are more influenced by emotions (emotionally based attitudes). Various studies have shown that the most effective approach to changing attitudes is to "fight fire with fire". If the attitude is cognitively based, it is best to try to change it with rational arguments, but if it is emotionally based, appealing to emotions is more effective. The authors conclude that advertising is very effective in influencing attitudes, as evidenced by split-market testing research. It is most successful when advertising is tailored to the type of attitude and when the product is presented as personally meaningful to the individual.

By associating positive emotions with the product, the advertiser can transform a product that may seem impersonal into one that evokes feelings of nostalgia, love, warmth, and affection in general [27]. Therefore, even in the context of influencer marketing, it is crucial to understand the prevailing attitude of people towards the product and adapt the ad accordingly. The primary goal of influencers is to establish strong and lasting relationships with their followers in order to create successful communities. Belanche et al. [25] state that it is important to recognise the significance of each post, especially when it comes to commercial communication that may deviate from the influencer's typical content. Consequently, each post has the potential to influence attitudes, perceptions and behavioural reactions towards the influencer in their constant connection [25].

CHARACTERISTICS OF GENERATION Z

Social media gathers and attracts a huge number of users of different age groups and preferences, which marketing experts are aware of. Influencers, who have to adapt their communication to the age of the audience following them, are also aware of this. Although every person in this world is an individual for himself or herself, until now, there have been many attempts to generalise and define different groups of people, and one of the results of the generalisation is the creation of the term "generation" [31].

A generation can be defined as "a group of people determined by age, i.e., persons who were born during a certain period, who grew up similarly and had similar experiences, and therefore, their values and attitudes are similar" [32; p.20]. Living in similar conditions, such as the same economic and historical circumstances, exposure to the same events (e.g., cultural or environmental), and under the influence of similar technology can significantly shape the thinking, decision-making and behaviour of individuals [31].

Each generation has unique characteristics and perspectives, which are often completely unknown to other generations, so it is not surprising that "the almost proportional growth between digitisation and the generation gap is most evident precisely in the example of age groups" [33; p.123].

Many authors disagree about the exact age limits of different generations. Still, they agree that there are veterans, the baby boom generation, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z, and the latest, Generation Alpha [32].

Most previous research on generational differences has been conducted in the United States, Canada and Great Britain; however, due to significant implications for the economy, labour market and marketing strategies of organisations, this issue has become the interest of authors and numerous considerations around the world [31]. Generational research is significant because the results provide valuable insights into understanding the dynamics, values and attitudes of different groups.

Table 1 presents an overview of generational differences according to technology usage and cultural differences.

The influence of digitalisation on generational divides has become increasingly evident, particularly in the context of Generation Z, who have grown up in a world saturated with technology and social media. Fistrić [33] highlights the widening generational gap due to rapid digital advancements, with Generation Z's digital fluency contrasting sharply with older generations' experiences [34]. This fluency shapes their social interactions and expectations since Generation Z's social interests are deeply intertwined with their technological environment, influencing how they connect with others and perceive content online [35]. In educational settings, adapting to Generation Z's expectations, particularly their preference for interactive and technology-driven experiences is crucial for engaging and retaining their attention [36]. These technological influences extend into the workplace challenges and opportunities of managing a multigenerational workforce. Generation Z's tech-savviness can be both an asset and a source of tension [37].

Moreover, the integration of artificial intelligence in communication, such as in the music industry, exemplifies how technology is reshaping fan engagement, further illustrating the unique ways Generation Z interacts with digital content [38]. Generation Z is an ambitious generation of individuals that is becoming more significant in the research of the entire communication industry. The actions of this generation are reflected in the shaping of the media, and the most important means of communication with them is influence marketing.

The author believes that the peculiarity of this generation is the fact that they live in the digital world as if it were real and do not see the boundary between global and local. Musicians, athletes, YouTubers and influencers are equally important to them [38]. In addition, some authors state that versatility and self-centeredness are the most expressive characteristics of Generation Z that determine their behaviour in the communication environment and their unique approach to the environment [39; p.27], and other authors call them "digital natives" because they believe that its members are able to receive information very quickly in parallel with other tasks and provide significant preference to the visual [40; p.2].

Table 1. Generational differences according to technology usage and cultural differences (compiled by the authors according to McCrindle, Mark. 2014. The ABC of XYZ).

	Traditionalists 1925 – 1964	Baby boomer 1946 – 1964	Generation X 1965 – 1979	Generation Y 1980 – 1994	Generation Z 1995 – 2010
CULTURAL TECHNOLOGY	Radio (wireless) Motor vehicle Airplane	TV Audiocassette Transistors	VCR Walkman IBM PC	Internet, Email, SMS DVD PlayStation, Xbox, iPod	MacBook, iPad Google, Facebook, Twitter Wii, PS3
MUSIC	Jazz Swing Frank Sinatra	Elvis, Beatles, Rolling Stones	INXS Nirvana Madonna	Eminem Britney Spears Jennifer Lopez	Rihanna Justin Bieber Taylor Swift
TV AND MOVIES	The appearance of TV *Gone with the Wind*	Colour TV *Easy Rider*	MTV *ET*	Pay TV *Titanic*	Smart TV *Avatar*
POP CULTURE	Fluffy jeans Roller skates	Short skirts Rolls	Ripped jeans Piercing	Baseball caps Men's cosmetics	Skinny jeans V-neckline
KEY EVENTS	Great depression Word War II	Neil Armstrong The Vietnam War	Stock Market Crash Berlin Wall fall	Landslide Thredbo 9/11	Iraq/Afghanistan War Arab Spring
INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE	Government	Experts	Practitioners	Colleagues	User-generated forums
SALES AND MARKETING	Press and radio Persuasive	Mass media ATL marketing	Direct/Targeted Media BTL marketing	Electronic media Through a friend	Interactive campaigns Positive brand association
PURCHASE AND INFLUENCES ON PURCHASE	The origin of the brand Storytelling	Brand loyalty Authorities	Rebranding Experts	They are not brand-loyal Friends	Brand evangelism Trends
FINANCIAL VALUES	Long-term savings	Long-term needs	Medium-term goals	Short-term wishes	Impulsive buying

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH GOAL AND HYPOTHESIS

The main goal of the article is to determine the contribution of influencer communication on their official profiles in forming the attitudes of Generation Z members based on the results of a qualitative analysis of the content and the results of the survey. Furthermore, the purpose is to clarify how Generation Z perceives the content created by the most popular influencers and whether this contributes to the creation of their opinion on the topics they are exposed to. The results of this type of research will offer a deeper insight into understanding the perspective of Generation Z, as well as their views on the digital content on the social media they consume. The two hypotheses of this article are as follows:

H_1: Instagram influencers, with the content on their official profiles, contribute to shaping the attitudes and behaviour of members of Generation Z (change of opinion, purchasing behaviour, etc.)

H_2: Generation Z mainly trusts the content that influencers publish on their Instagram profiles.

Two research approaches have been used. The first is a content analysis of Croatia's most popular influences. The second is survey research on a sample of Generation Z social media users.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The posts on the official Instagram profiles of the three most popular influencers in Croatia were investigated through qualitative content analysis. The goal of the content analysis is to conduct preliminary research to gain a better insight into the observed topic and the type of content that the most popular Croatian influencers post on their official Instagram profiles and thus try to understand what attracts an extremely large number of audiences to their profiles. In addition, the goal of the content analysis was to determine the type of content that the selected influencers publish but also to discover the most popular posts in the given time frame (the most likes, shares and comments) to offer these posts for evaluation to respondents in the survey questionnaire.

For that purpose, the content analysis is used to determine the advertising announcements in the selected period, which were also offered to the respondents in the survey questionnaire with the aim of checking whether such an announcement would encourage the respondents to buy. As stated previously, many brands often collaborate with well-known influencers in order to achieve marketing goals, whereby the visually oriented application Instagram is recognised as a leading platform for influencer marketing. Furthermore, the characteristics of influencers and their classification regarding the number of followers and the type of content they publish are listed, and each category has unique characteristics that differentiate it from the others. What kind of content is published by the most famous Croatian influencers, what messages are conveyed by their posts, and to what extent collaboration with brands is represented on their profiles are just some of the topics covered by the content analysis.

According to the list of top influencers, which was created on March 22, 2023, as part of Manjgura's education "Media image", the most popular influencers on Instagram are Jelena Perić (994 000 followers), Mirta Miler (991 000 followers) and Amadea Muša (935 000 followers) [41]. It is important to emphasise that the list excludes media celebrities, such as athletes or musicians, who, although they are considered influencers, primarily gain their influence from traditional media. From the date of publication of the list of the most popular Instagram influencers to the start of the content analysis, the number of followers of the mentioned influencers changed, which also affected the order in the list itself. Mirta Miler is currently in first place with 1052 519 followers, followed by Amadea Muša with 923 237 followers, while Jelena Perić took third place with 990 207 followers. The period from May 1 to 31, 2023, was selected for content analysis. The posts were analysed according to the following parameters: date of publication, type of publication (informative/educational, promotional, entertainment, beauty or other), publication format (photo, video, infographic or GIF), the number of "likes", the number of comments, and it was studied whether the content is closely related to the type of influencer and whether the post calls for user engagement (marking the post with a "like", commenting, sharing, etc.).

SURVEY RESEARCH

A survey was conducted from June 7 to 29, 2023, to analyse Instagram users' habits, influencers' perceptions among Generation Z (people born from 1995 to 2010), and the connection between influencers' attitudes and the generation above. The questionnaire was designed in four parts. The first part investigated the demographic characteristics of the research participants. The second part contained questions about the Instagram usage habits of members of Generation Z and following influencers on the said social platform. In the third part of the survey, questions were used to investigate Generation Z members' perceptions of the Instagram influencers that respondents follow and their influence on their decisions. In the last part of the survey, the respondents evaluated the posts of the three most followed Instagram influencers in Croatia. They expressed their degree of agreement with the offered statement

related to the given photo. The research used content available to the public that was collected on the profiles of the mentioned Instagram influencers from May 2023 for the respondent's evaluation of the mentioned posts. Considering that content that was voluntarily placed on social media was used in the creation of this research, there were no ethical challenges in the implementation of this research.

It should be emphasised that minors did not participate in the research. However, according to the age range, they belong to Generation Z, considering the necessary parental consent to participate in the survey.

Furthermore, regardless of whether the respondents follow the selected influencers, the intention is to determine how the posts of the most popular influencers affect different publics, that is, different members of the Z generation that the selected influencers are targeting with their posts. So, the goal is to show whether the influencers would succeed in getting the target public (Generation Z) to change their attitude or possibly buy the product regardless of whether or not they follow them on social networks.

The survey questionnaire was distributed by e-mail and social media using the snowball method. The research sample is random and non-probabilistic. Members of Generation Z, i.e., people born from 1995 to 2005 in Croatia, could access and fill out the anonymous questionnaire.

RESULTS

CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

The First Influencer

The first influencer, Mirta Miler, is a make-up influencer better known under the username mime makeup. According to the above list of top influencers, Mirta Miler is in first place with more than a million followers on Instagram; therefore, according to the influencer classification, she belongs to the mega-influencer category. She has been involved in social media for several years; more precisely, she started publishing her make-up content on Instagram in 2018. In 2019, she opened an account on TikTok, which has 17 million followers. She became famous for posting short videos demonstrating her makeup skills while narrating a short story.

As can be seen in Table 2, in the mentioned analysed period, Mirta Miler published a total of ten posts on her official Instagram profile, of which five were photos and five were videos. The post that achieved the highest audience engagement was a video of an influencer filming the tattooing process, and this post garnered 181 458 likes and 546 audience comments. Although Mirta Miler is a make-up influencer, in the mentioned analysed period, only three posts were closely related to the type of influencer. Most of the posts are entertaining, 60% of them, to be exact. There is only one promotional post, and in the description of the post, the influencer has tagged the company, but there is no paid partnership or sponsored hashtag. In the description of all posts, the said influencer uses up to one sentence, and sometimes the description contains only emojis. Furthermore, it was observed that the influencer speaks in English in all the videos made, as she uses English in the descriptions of the posts. None of the posts on Mirta Miler's Instagram profile invites the audience to engage, i.e., to like the photo, comment, share, etc.

Table 2. Content analysis of Mirta Miler's Instagram profile.

DATE	PURPOSE	TYPE	# OF LIKES	# OF COMMENTS	RELATION OF CONTENT TO THE TYPE OF INFLUENCER	INVITATION TO USER ENGAGEMENT
7.5.	Promo	Video	181 458	546	No	No
12.5.	Fun	Video	113 178	647	No	No
18.5.	Fun	Photo	54 895	179	No	No
18.5.	Promo	Video	22 371	56	Yes	No
21.5.	Rest	Photo	94 210	190	Yes	No
24.5.	Rest	Photo	89 481	164	No	Ne
27.5.	Fun	Photo	80 958	105	No	No
30.5.	Fun	Video	12 631	45	Yes	No
30.5.	Fun	Photo	40 704	44	No	No
31.5.	Fun	Video	8 128	21	No	No
Total # posts from May 1 to May 31: 10						

The Second Influencer

Amadea Muše is a beauty and fashion influencer from Split who, according to the aforementioned list, is in second place with 923 237 followers, which means she belongs to the macro-influencer category. Better known to the general public under the username amadea_dashurie, she opened her Instagram profile in 2013, and today, she is one of the most followed Croatian influencers who collaborates with numerous renowned global brands.

Table 3 shows that, in the period from May 1 to May 31, 2023, Amadea Muše published 17 posts. Amadea Muša's post about the device for abs that she recommends to her followers achieved the highest number of audience comments, 69 to be exact. Unlike Mirta Miler, Amadea Muše published ten posts related to fashion or make-up; that is, 58.8% of the posts are closely related to the type of influencer. Although Amadea Muše initially based her posts on beauty content, in the analysed period, more fashion-related posts were noticed (eight of them). In contrast, beauty content was published to a much lesser extent (two posts). 41.2% are

Table 3. Content analysis of Amadea Muše's Instagram profile.

DATE	PURPOSE	TYPE	# OF LIKES	# OF COMMENTS	RELATION OF CONTENT TO THE TYPE OF INFLUENCER	INVITATION TO USER ENGAGEMENT
1.5.	Fashion	Photo	Not visible	54	Yes	Yes
4.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	56	Yes	Yes
6.5.	Fashion	Photo	Not visible	44	Yes	Yes
7.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	53	No	No
8.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	26	Yes	No
10.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	20	No	No
12.5.	Beauty	Video	Not visible	45	Yes	No
13.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	31	Yes	No
15.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	69	No	No
17.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	51	Yes	No
17.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	47	No	Yes
19.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	38	Yes	No
22.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	68	No	Yes
25.5.	Beauty	Video	Not visible	18	Yes	No
28.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	35	No	No
30.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	50	Yes	Yes
31.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	21	No	Yes
Total number of posts from May 1 to May 31: 17						

promotional posts, and it is important to note that covert advertising was also observed with this influencer in two posts. In contrast, the other promotional posts indicated a paid partnership, and the advertised brand was indicated. Like the previous influencer, Amadea Muše uses English in the description of her posts. In the description of the analysed posts, 76.78% of the posts contained a question intended for followers, i.e., the posts invited users to engage. In comparison, a significantly smaller percentage of posts (23.53%) contained a description of up to one sentence and emojis.

The Third Influencer

Beauty influencer Jelena Perić is third on the list of the most followed Instagram influencers in Croatia; she currently has 990 207 followers. Although she posts content on her YouTube she became famous when she started posting make-up tutorials on Instagram in 2016. Her videos went viral, and that year, the influencer job was still an unknown and under-researched field in Croatia. By publishing make-up content, she gained popularity. She was at the top of the list in terms of the number of followers, which can also be attributed to the fact that they declared her the Croatian Kim Kardashian due to her resemblance to the American star, who is also one of the most followed celebrities on Instagram. According to the number of followers, Jelena Perić belongs to the category of macro-influencers.

During the analysed period, Jelena Perić published a total of 26 posts, of which 18 were photos and 8 were videos (Table 4). The post that achieved the highest audience engagement, at least as far as comments are concerned, given that the number of "likes" is not visible, is the prize contest, i.e., the photo in which Jelena Perić, in cooperation with the Good Food restaurant, is giving away a valuable mobile phone. The mentioned post collected 35,211 comments. Most of the posts are promotional, 73.1% to be exact. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that although, according to Instagram's guidelines, it is necessary to emphasise paid cooperation, none of the posts of the said influencer has such a label. Jelena Perić also does not publish content that invites the audience to engage, and only 19.2% of posts encourage user interaction. The descriptions of the posts are mostly written in Croatian, and considering the percentage of sponsored posts, the descriptions in the analysed period mostly refer to the brand that the influencer promotes.

The conducted qualitative content analysis provided useful information about the type of content of the most followed Croatian influencers, the compatibility of posts with the type of influencer, and the engagement of their large audience. According to the literature, mega-influencers are considered more passive compared to macro-influencers and micro-influencers [42], and the characteristics above can be observed in the results of the content analysis. Mega-influencer Mirta Miler published 10 posts in the period from May 1 to 31, while macro-influencers Amadea Muše and Jelena Perić created more content on their Instagram profiles in the same period. Thus, Amadea Muše published 17 posts, most of which encouraged the audience to interact in the form of liking, commenting, or sharing content. In comparison, Jelena Perić published 26 posts in the same period. In addition, although the advantage of macro-influencers is that they have an exceptional ability to reach a large number of people, which makes them ideal for brand awareness campaigns, analysing the content of Mirta Miler's profile in the mentioned period, only two posts were noticed that reflect cooperation with brands. The influencer above mostly publishes content of an entertaining nature, while she published considerably less make-up content in the observed period. Unlike the other two colleagues, visible under Mirta Miler's every post is the number of "likes". At the same time, for Amadea Muše and Jelena Perić, no information is available on how many people "liked" the photo, but only the number of comments is available. Although Mirta Miler's posts do not invite audience

Table 4. Content analysis of Jelena Perić's Instagram profile.

DATE	PURPOSE	TYPE	# OF LIKES	# OF COMMENTS	RELATION OF CONTENT TO THE TYPE OF INFLUENCER	INVITATION TO USER ENGAGEMENT
1.5.	Lifestyle	Photo	20 313	83	No	No
2.5.	Beauty	Photo	Not visible	65	Yes	Yes
4.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	25	No	No
5.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	31	No	No
6.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	136	No	No
8.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	80	No	No
9.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	42	No	Yes
11.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	13	No	No
12.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	28	No	Yes
13.5	Promo	Video	Not visible	31	Yes	No
14.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	29	No	No
18.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	17	Yes	No
19.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	20	No	No
20.5.	Beauty	Photo	Not visible	34	No	No
22.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	18	No	No
23.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	35	No	No
24.5.	Promo (giveaway)	Photo	Not visible	47	No	Yes
24.5	Promo	Photo	Not visible	55	Yes	No
25.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	18	Yes	No
26.5.	Promo (giveaway)	Photo	Not visible	35 211	No	Yes
29.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	13	No	No
29.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	44	No	No
30.5.	Rest	Photo	Not visible	48	No	No
30.5.	Promo	Video	Not visible	34	No	No
31.5.	Promo	Photo	Not visible	33	No	No
31.5.	Rest	Video	Not visible	15	No	No
Total number of posts from May 1 to May 31: 26						

engagement, her posts achieve an extremely high number of comments and likes. For the sake of comparison, Mirta Miler's post that received the most comments received 647 comments, and Amadea Muša's post with the most comments received 69. In contrast, 136 people commented on Jelena Perić's most popular post (if we leave out the prize contest, of which a condition is to comment on the photo in order for the audience to participate).

In addition, macro-influencers can be of great value to advertisers whose products and services are related to the topic that this type of influencer publishes on their profile [22], which was noticed by analysing the posts on Amadea Muša's profile. This beauty and fashion influencer collaborates with brands that are related to the topics she normally deals with, so such promoted posts do not stand out from the rest of the content. In contrast, the analysis of the content revealed a discrepancy between the sponsored posts on Jelena Perić's profile and the type of influencer who sponsors a certain car brand, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, clothing brands, and the like, while 19.2% of the posts cover beauty topics that should be the primary content of her profile. As already stated, all three influencers have posts that represent covert advertising, and such posts especially dominate the profile of Jelena Perić. In contrast, on the profiles of Amadea Muše and Mirta Miler, there are only two posts without the paid partnership label. Covert advertising is a tool used by the media and individuals who want to promote products in a way that is both illegal and unethical. The Media Act and the Electronic Media Act expressly prohibit covert advertising, as stated in the Code of Honor of Croatian

journalists [23]. "Covert advertising and promotional journalist contributions are not allowed. Interweaving and connecting journalistic articles and advertisements is also prohibited. Whether paid or free, advertisements, like all paid information, must be clearly and unequivocally distinguished from journalistic contributions." [23]. Although this provision of the Code of Honor of Croatian journalists does not directly apply to influencers, it would be desirable for all those who participate in the media and Internet space to familiarise themselves with the media laws and regulations in the Republic of Croatia and to comply with them [24]. It should be noted that social media such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are not classified as media and are, therefore, not subject to the same legal obligations in Croatia or the European Union, which leaves room for influencers on social media to manipulate the audience by publishing content that is a reflection of paid cooperation and failure to mark it with a promotional post label, which leads the audience to consider such posts as honest recommendations of products and services. Despite the above, female influencers have an extremely large number of followers, which may mean that covert advertising and, generally, a lot of sponsored content do not change the attitude of their audience towards the influencer. Furthermore, one of the reasons for changing the order on the list of top influencers and the exceptional popularity of Mirta Miler and Amadea Muše can be the use of the English language. If the content is in English, there is a greater chance of reaching a larger audience; nevertheless, at the same time, it can prove to be a greater challenge to stand out in the midst of increased competition.

SURVEY RESEARCH RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

In the end, 176 Generation Z members filled out the questionnaire, of whom 139 were women (79%) and 37 were men (21%). The largest percentage of respondents, 42.6% to be exact, is between 21 and 23 years old. More than half of the members of Generation Z who participated in the survey are full-time students (67.6%), while 26.1% are employed, 5.1% are part-time students and 1.1% are unemployed.

It is important to point out that, by analysing the answers, it was observed that some participants are employed but still studying. Therefore, the percentage of students who filled out the questionnaire is significantly higher (85.2%).

According to higher education institution representation, students of the Catholic University of Croatia (62%), Faculty of Economics, University of Zagreb (13.3%), Edward Bernays University of Applied Sciences (6%), VERN' University (4%), Libertas (2%), Faculty of Law of the University of Zagreb (1.3 %), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb (1.3 %), University of Applied Health Sciences (1.3 %), Faculty of Medicine Osijek (1.3 %), Faculty of Croatian Studies (1.3 %), Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Computing and Information Technologies Osijek (0.67 %), Business Academy Aarhus (0.67 %), Faculty of Medicine Zagreb (0.67 %), Technical Polytechnic in Zagreb (0.67 %), Teacher Faculty of the University of Zagreb (0.67%), Faculty of Educational Sciences (0.67%), Faculty of Transport Sciences (0.67%) and Faculty of Agriculture (0.67%).

Most respondents who took part in the research studied psychology, 17.3% to be exact, while 16.7% studied communication, 14% studied nursing, 8% studied sociology, 5.3% studied business economics, and 3.3% studied medicine. Slightly over half of the respondents, 50.6% to be exact, are studying at the graduate level, 47.4% at the undergraduate level, 1.3% at the postgraduate specialist and 0.6% at the doctoral study program level. The vast majority of respondents, i.e., 83.8% of them, attend university studies, while 16.2% of them are enrolled in professional study programs. The largest percentage of members of Generation Z, 29.4%, is

in the fifth year of study, 20.3% in the second year, 19.6% in the first year, 15.7% in the third year, and 15% of respondents are in the fourth year of study.

Social Media Usage Habits

More than half of Generation Z members (64.2%) answered that they use social media extremely often. Most respondents (92.6%) have their own Instagram profile; 86.9% have a private account on this popular social network, while 13.1% have a public profile.

The largest percentage of respondents (31.3%) spend from 30 minutes to 1 hour a day on Instagram, while 29% spend from 1 to 2 hours a day, 19.3% spend from 2 to 3 hours a day, 15.3% spend less than 30 minutes, and 5.1% spend more than 3 hours a day using Instagram.

When asked how many influencers they follow on Instagram, 39.2% answered that they follow from 1 to 5 influencers, 25.6% follow from 6 to 10, and 17.6% of members of Generation Z do not follow any influencer on Instagram. In comparison, 11.4% follow more than 15 influencers on Instagram.

The most common answers were fashion influencers (40.9% of respondents chose this type of influencer as one of the three answers). The same percentage of answers was recorded for lifestyle and fitness influencers (34.9%), and 34.2% followed well-known public persons.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (53.4%) also follow Croatian influencers on Instagram, after which they were asked to name up to three Croatian Instagram influencers they follow.

Although the vast majority of Generation Z members surveyed declared that they follow at least one influencer, 63.6% stated that they do not check the content that their favourite influencers publish on their profiles every day.

Motivation for Following Influencers

As a reason for following influencers on Instagram, the most common answers chosen by respondents were: "for distraction" (46.6%), "they share useful tips" (40.3%), "they publish quality content" (39.2%), "they publish visually appealing photos" (39.2 %), "I like to follow which products they use so that I could buy them myself" (23.9 %).

Slightly more than half of the respondents, i.e., 51.7% of them, bought at least once a product that they learned about through an influencer. In comparison, 48.3% never bought a product that they learned about through an influencer, i.e., 29% of them bought a product 1-2 times, 15.9% bought the product 3-5 times, 5.7% of them bought a product 6-10 times, while 1.1% of respondents bought a recommended product more than 10 times.

Regarding influencer recommendations for cafes, restaurants, and the like, 56.8% of respondents visited a place at least once because of their recommendation. In comparison, 43.2% never visited a place because of an influencer's recommendation.

Furthermore, 91.5% of respondents stated that they never changed their opinion on a topic due to the impact of an influencer. In comparison, 7.4% of respondents who initially had an opinion that differed from the opinion of the influencer stated that they changed it on the following topics: (1) cosmetics, (2) beauty tips, (3) religion, abortion, LGBT, coaching, mental health, (4) in general, what is the meaning of influencers, (5) religious topics, (6) religion, (7) war, environmental and food topics, (8) fast fashion, (9) fitness influencer regarding healthy recipes, (10) some trends.

However, despite the following, the largest percentage of covered participants (72%) do not consider the influencers they follow on Instagram as role models. More than half of the

respondents (68.7%) mostly disagree with the statement, "I consider the advice of influencers with a large number of followers to be credible".

The number of followers is not a reflection of the influencer's credibility, which is shown by the percentage of disagreement of Generation Z (78.5%) with the statement, "I consider the advice of influencers with a small number of followers less credible than those with more followers". Furthermore, the respondents mostly disagree with the statement that they have applied the advice of the influencers they follow at least once in their lives (45.5%). In comparison, 30.7% mostly agree with the stated statement, and 23.9% neither agree nor disagree.

In addition, 28.5% of Generation Z members surveyed mostly agree that they share similar values with the Instagram influencers they follow, 34.7% neither agree nor disagree, and 36.9% disagree.

More than half of the respondents (51.1%) agree with the statement that influencers provide them with new ideas on where to travel. In comparison, 32.3% of the respondents disagree with this statement, and 16.5% neither agree nor disagree. 58.8% of the respondents do not agree that they often go to places (cafes, restaurants, festivals, concerts, etc.) recommended by influencers, while a much smaller percentage of respondents (18.8%) agree. A significant majority of respondents, more precisely 83.6%, do not even agree with the statement that they often use services recommended by influencers (hairdressers, beauticians, barbers, pedicurists, manicurists, etc.). Also, 69.3% of the respondents do not agree that they would be happy to buy a product from an influencer they follow. However, more than half of the respondents (67.6%) believe that influencers have a significant influence on consumers when making a purchase decision.

The largest percentage of respondents, i.e., 44.4% of them, do not believe in the truth of the content that influencers publish on their Instagram profiles, and 42% partially believe it. In comparison, only 13.6% of respondents believe in the truth of what influencers publish. Respondents were then asked what type of content published by influencers inspires trust in them, and the most common answers were travel, fitness, honesty, use of products they advertise, unfiltered depictions of life, family, authenticity, and advice. Generation Z was then asked what type of content causes distrust towards influencers, and 41.6% answered sponsored posts.

Experimental Evaluation of Influencer Posts

Members of Generation Z were offered three posts each from the most followed Croatian Instagram influencers – Mirta Miler, Amadea Muše and Jelena Perić. The criterion for selecting the post was the highest number of "likes", but considering that the overview of the number of "likes" is only available on Mirta Miler's profile, the criterion for selecting the posts of Amadea Muše and Jelena Perić was the largest number of comments under the post. Respondents had to rate on a scale of 1-5 how much they liked the displayed post and the degree of agreement with the statement below each post.

Furthermore, 44.3% of respondents did not like Mirta Miler's post with the highest number of "likes". 85.8% of respondents do not agree with the statement, "The post made me want a certain product (e.g., buying a dress, jewellery) or using certain services (e.g., tattooing)", and it is interesting to note that no respondent fully agreed with the said statement. The second post by mega-influencer Mirta Miler did not achieve better results either, so 42.1% of the respondents rated that they did not like the photo. Furthermore, most participants generally disagree with the statement that the photo shown makes them want to travel (67.6%). Mirta Miler's third photo did not achieve a positive reaction from Generation Z, as more than half of

the respondents (50.3%) rated that they did not like it, and mostly they disagreed with the statement that they liked the post because it was entertaining (65.3%).

Respondents were also offered three posts by Amadea Muše, which were selected based on the highest number of comments, given that the number of "likes" is not visible. The first post, which received 69 comments on Amadea Muša's official Instagram profile, was evaluated extremely negatively, i.e., 58% of respondents said that they did not like the photo at all. For the same photo, 81.8% of them said that they would not buy the displayed product that the influencer is promoting. The second post by Amadea Muše achieved significantly more positive reactions from Generation Z, as more than half of respondents (56.9%) said they liked it. Nevertheless, 57.9% of respondents would not hire the company mentioned in the post's description if they needed it for future space decoration. Amadea Muša's last photo was rated by most respondents as neither like nor dislike (39.2%). Given that the influencer is promoting a clothing brand in the photo, respondents had to rate the degree of agreement with the statement, "I would not buy the clothes shown because paid collaborations reduce my trust in the influencer". The results show that the respondents' opinions are divided; 39.7% mostly disagree with the statement, 36.3% mostly agree with the statement, and 23.9% neither agree nor disagree.

At the end of the survey, respondents were offered the three most commented posts by Jelena Perić. The first post was liked by 38.1% of the respondents; however, half of the respondents did not start following the said influencer because of the prize contest (54%). More than half of the respondents, 57.9% to be exact, rated that they liked the second displayed post by Jelena Perić, but 73.9% of the respondents did not agree with the statement "I would like to use one of the services listed in the description of the post because the influencer used them". The last post offered was also liked by 61.4% of the respondents, but more than half of the respondents (55.7%) disagreed that they would visit Dubrovnik because of the influencer's post.

The data indicates that Generation Z respondents generally exhibit a critical or ambivalent attitude towards the posts of Croatian Instagram influencers Mirta Miler, Amadea Muše, and Jelena Perić. Despite being popular on Instagram, these influencers' posts did not resonate strongly with the surveyed audience. Mirta Miler's posts, although receiving the highest number of likes, were often disliked by respondents, and there was a significant lack of interest in purchasing or using the products and services promoted. Amadea Muše's posts elicited mixed reactions, with one post being somewhat favoured, but trust issues regarding paid collaborations were evident. Similarly, Jelena Perić's posts had some positive responses, but they were not sufficient to influence behaviour, such as following the influencer or acting on the recommendations. This suggests that high engagement metrics on Instagram do not necessarily translate to genuine influence or trust among Generation Z, who may be more sceptical of influencer marketing tactics.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis (**H₁**) of this research was that Instagram influencers, with the content on their official profiles, contribute to shaping the attitudes and behaviour of members of Generation Z (change of opinion, purchasing behaviour, etc.). Research results indicate that this hypothesis is partially confirmed.

Most respondents have never changed their opinion on a topic due to the impact of influencers, 91.5% to be exact. The survey showed that the majority of Muša's respondents visited a place or bought a product due to an influencer's recommendation, but the largest number of respondents did so only once, while 43% of the covered members of Generation Z never visited a place or bought a product due to their recommendation. Furthermore, most respondents do not agree with the statement about applying the advice at least once in their life (54,6%), about

frequently going to the recommended places (56.8%) or frequently using the recommended services (43.2%).

The respondents' answers about the most followed Croatian influencers prove the above. Almost the majority (67.6%) of the surveyed Generation Z believe that influencers have a significant influence on consumers when making a purchase decision. Still, it should be taken into account that the statement was made in such a way that respondents express their opinion that other consumers, unknown to them, are influenced by influencers, but not they, which is evident from the research mentioned above results. In accordance with the above, hypothesis **H₁** (Instagram influencers, with the content on their official profiles, contribute to shaping the attitudes and behaviour of members of Generation Z (change of opinion, purchasing behaviour, etc.)) is partially confirmed.

The second hypothesis (**H₂**) presumed that Generation Z mainly trusts the content that influencers publish on their Instagram profiles. Results indicate that the hypothesis was rejected.

Respondents mostly disagreed with the claims that the content of the mentioned influencers would encourage them to buy, travel, use services and the like (73.9%). While a promoted post without a paid collaboration tag was rated poorly, a post featuring the influencer with family received significantly better ratings. The above can relate to the most common responses of respondents to the question "What type of influencer content inspires trust in you?" when they answered that these are depictions of life and family. At the same time, sponsored posts instil distrust towards the influencer. It is interesting to point out that the respondents stated in their answers that they do not believe in the truth of the content published by influencers and that they have no influence on shaping their attitudes. However, they believe that influencers have a significant influence on other consumers when making a purchase decision.

More than two-fifths of respondents (44.4%) generally do not believe in the integrity of the content that influencers publish on their social media. As the most frequently stated answer to the question of what type of content causes them distrust, they stated that these are sponsored posts (41.6%). Furthermore, they do not consider influencers with many followers to be credible (68.7%), but they also do not consider those with fewer followers not to be credible (78.5%). Accordingly, hypothesis **H₂** was rejected.

CONCLUSION

This article provides a clear picture of social media's development and features in the context of influencers' role in marketing. The research places special emphasis on Instagram, which is particularly valuable for influencers and brands due to its features that allow the promoted message to reach the target market more easily and precisely. Although all generations are exposed to the content of social media, marketers are particularly interested in the so-called Generation Z, which refers to all people born between 1995 and 2010. These individuals do not know a world without technology; they are very familiar with all trends and form a significant part of the influencer audience precisely because of their exceptional presence on social platforms and exposure to the content of influencers.

The theoretical contributions of this research are as follows. Firstly, respondents do not believe in the truth of the content that influencers publish on their official Instagram profiles. Furthermore, Instagram influencers do not contribute to shaping the attitudes and behaviour of members of Generation Z with the content on their official profiles. Respondents confirmed this by evaluating the posts of the most followed Croatian influencers, thus confirming the previous research results [11]. Second, results show that Croatian followers generally do not harmonise

their attitudes, nor do they change their attitudes according to the influencers they follow. However, this result is in contrast with previous research in Indonesia, which showed that social media influencers can influence Generation Z brand loyalty and purchase intentions [5; p.105].

The practical implications of this research are mostly relevant for marketing professionals, as it brings a deeper understanding of Croatian social network users and their view of influencers. The research showed that followers of Croatian influencers are not inclined to change their personal opinions based on the influencer's views and are not very receptive to buying products or services promoted by influencers. This is certainly useful information for all practitioners in marketing and public relations, and it can be a guideline for choosing influencers and budgeting their campaigns.

The limitation of this research is that not all members of Generation Z, i.e., all people born after 2005, could participate in the survey. If minors were included, it would be necessary to obtain parental consent for their participation in the survey. By surveying the entire Generation Z, i.e., by including in the sample those under 18 years of age, it would be possible to gain new insights on the observed topic. The results of this survey cannot be generalised to the entire population, so it would be useful to conduct further research on a larger sample, as well as to examine younger generations. In addition, all three Croatian influencers belong to similar categories regarding the type of content they publish. Accordingly, it is necessary to include influencers from different fields in future research. Influencers are no longer a new phenomenon on social media, and numerous brands cooperate with them to achieve their goals, often using a non-transparent way of advertising. Since globalisation has taken off and once distant trends have reached Croatia, but also due to the lack of legal regulations that allow covert advertising on social media, it is necessary to study the mentioned topic in more detail, as well as to expand research in Croatia.

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