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Živković, Anamaria

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Influencing Travel Decisions: Impact of Micro- Influencers on Gen-Z in Croatia

Anamarija Živković

Rochester Institute of Technology Croatia

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Prof. Rebecca Charry

Prof. Kevin Walker

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Abstract

With the rise of social media impact, various types of influencers started to do their job. Micro-influencers as the most reliable ones influence Generation-Z the most. Since the social media impact is still in the state of growth in Croatia, Generation-Z was analyzed with the purpose of the effectiveness of micro-influencers on them. Because of that, the questionnaire was distributed among 103 students considered as a Generation Z. Students were from Croatia region, from 18 to 23 years old. The biggest result came from the research that the Gen-Z participated in this research did not have too much experience with micro-influencers but they are indeed ready to research in future about specific product and services. Their opinion on micro-influencers is various but they mostly agreed they tend to connect more with micro-influencers than with celebrities. Results stated in this study are helpful for the future implications of micro influencers. Since the Croatia is still in the state of growth when it comes to social media, businesses could learn from this study to see should they invest in this kind of marketing or should they continue with their strategies.

Keywords: social media, influencers, micro-influencers, Generation-Z, Croatia

Influencing Travel Decisions

Social media background

The usage of social networking is spreading enormously in past few decades. Originated as a way to connect with family and friends from all over the world, social media became much more than just sharing messages, photos, personal information etc. (Dollarhide, 2019). Through various platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, WhatsApp and many other popular platforms, users can engage with each other through computers, tablets or smartphones. Since stated platforms became indispensable part of everyday life, the power of social media encouraged businesses to use it as a part of communication channel through which they can reach new, potential customers (Dollarhide, 2019). The growth of social media in last few years almost doubled the number of users- in 2015, there were 2,078 million active users and in 2020, there are 3,960 million active users on social media (Dean, 2021). When it comes to the growth of social media by region, in 2020 Asia was on the first place with the growth of 16.98% while Europe had the slowest activation of new users at 4.9% (Dean, 2021). More precisely, Croatia as a European country had the rise from 32% to 54% of individuals that are participating in social networks from 2011 until 2018 (Statista, 2021).

Social Media Influencers

One of the biggest trends when it comes to businesses and social media is influencer marketing (Glucksman, 2017). This kind of marketing strategy became a huge trend in the social media world and many brands and companies are using influencers (Glucksman, 2017). The main aim is to make an impact on users of social media networks and to affect their buying decisions through promotions, advices and recommendations. Users of social media platforms can decide if they want to be influencers or if they want to be influenced by one of them. Before the

development of the influencer marketing, the term “influencer” used to describe any celebrity that has an impact on people, but the adoption and progression of social media resulted with everyday consumers making an influence on others (Gottbrecht, 2016). This actively demonstrates that today there are various types of influencers identified in three main groups. Mega-influencers are mostly famous celebrities that have more than 1 million followers, macro-influencers have 10 000 to 1 million followers and the smallest are micro-influencers which have 500 to 10 000 followers (Gottbrecht, 2016). When it comes to the mega- influencers, they are best suited for some bigger brands that can actually afford their prices while macro-influencers are more affordable and they can apply on large cross-section population (Amire, 2020). On the other side, smaller-scale influencers can encourage businesses to create partnerships because the audience of the influencers constantly continues to grow (Hayn, 2019). These micro- influencers have much smaller amount of followers but that is the reason why they can connect better with every of them. They are less expensive and it is easier to approach them and ask for more advices (J. S., 2018). That makes them more reliable since followers are more likely to know them.

Monitoring the Metrics

For businesses, it is important to choose right influencer so they can approach targeted audience. They can evaluate each influencer through various factors such as “quality of content”, number of followers, authenticity or page and posts views (Glucksman, 2017). Although, when they choose which one suits them the best, it is important to monitor the influencer’s posts in order to see if the campaigns are successful or not. The metrics to evaluate posts sponsored by influencers can be classified into four groups (Hayn, 2019):

1. Brand engagement – for a campaign’s development, engagement rate is the simplest way of calculating how successful campaign is. The observation of the likes, comments and like-to-follow ratio can help to see how efficient specific influencer is and is he “the one” who can reach specific target audience.
2. Brand awareness – shows how specific post actually help to increase awareness about the brand. To measure that, it is important to analyze what is the brand’s social media growth rate or growth in website’s traffic. This explains how effective sponsored posts are and do they attract target audience.
3. Brand conversions – ROI can be directly monitored since influencers are usually offering various discount codes and sharing affiliate links. By calculating the number of these assets, it will be easy to see how successful each post is.
4. Improved brand image – the focus is mostly on the qualitative data of the posts like mentions or sentiments within the comments on the sponsored posts.

Businesses are increasing the usage of social media because they want to improve the engagement with their potential customer; that is one of the reasons why they are using influencer marketing (Rios Marques, Casais, Camilleri, M.A., 2020). Very often, consumers are not searching just products and services on social media. Hence, as micro-influencers are attracting followers who are searching for a more detailed content where they can find a good recommendation or advice, many businesses are partnering with them so they can increase the awareness about the brand or to improve mentioned customer-brand engagement (Marques, 2020). Talking about brand engagement, an average engagement rate on Instagram and Twitter in 2020 was higher for micro-influencers than for celebrities. More than 100 000 followers on Instagram has an engagement rate of 1.7% while for micro-influencers, less than 1000 followers

has an engagement rate of 8% on average (Influencer Mark. Hub, 2020). That means that people are more likely to engage with micro-influencers than with celebrities.

Social Media Platforms

According to Dean B. (2021), in 2020 there was 3.96 billion users of social media, which is almost a double from 2015. This number leads to a 50.64% of the world's population. Majority of these social media users are using more than one account, on average it is 8.8 accounts per person. The most used platforms are Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Pinterest, and Tumblr. Considering that people have more than one account on some platforms and they use some less popular platforms, mentioned number can rise more.

Knowing that hospitality industry grew in one of the most dynamic industries in the world influencer marketing became an important tool for promoting various types of products but also for destinations. Giving that in consideration, influencers created a “trend” with which they could promote travel – hashtags (De Veirman, Cauberghe, Hudders, 2017). With hashtags, people can simplify their searching by putting different types of words or sentences in searching engine. Taking in consideration one of the platforms that are using hashtags – Instagram, as per 2021, there are 553 million posts that are using hashtag #travel. Furthermore, when it comes to the different regions, according to Instagram (April 2021), hashtag #visiteurope has 694 000 posts on Instagram.

Generation-Z

The largest generation of consumers of social media platforms is the generation that have been using technology and social media since young age – Generation Z, also known as Zoomers (in further text Gen-Z). Population of this young generation in 2020 is 2.56 billion (Georgiev,

2021). Gen-Z is youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2010 (Parker, Igielnik 2020) and raised with technology – starting from mainly keeping in touch with close people, all the way to nowadays when having the mobile phone and various social media have become a “generational norm” (Twenge, 2017). Because they are raised with technology, it is important to understand that some of them are already people who are working and who will be potential future employees, by 2030 it is estimated that 30% of global workforce will be Gen-Z (Georgiev, 2021).

In terms of Gen-Z, 98% of people born in post-millennials own a smartphone. On given number, 85% will learn about the products and services they want to purchase on social media (Georgiev, 2021). Given that in consideration, young generations are most likely to encounter influencers on a daily basis. Furthermore, taking into account creativity of young generations, they created and still are creating many platforms and trends. As an example, a TikTok app that is created for personalized short videos, all trends are starting mostly by young people. While using hashtags, or tagging other users on their posts, influencers can easily get new followers which will most likely continue to use new trends. Therefore, Gen- Z is generation that would certainly accept new challenges and adventures; they are ready for new experiences. According to that, Francis T. and Hoefel F. (2018) agreed that new generations are much different from past generations (a.k.a. millennials). Gen- Z is ready to solve conflicts with conversation, while previous generations do not accept other’s opinions very well. This difference shows that new generations are more willing to embrace other’s recommendations. In addition, Gen- Z is looking for authenticity in every post they see on social media platforms; they want to recognize themselves in influencers’ posts and descriptions (Hunt, 2019).

Effectiveness of influencers on Gen- Z is rising simultaneously with the awareness of social media. Therefore, identifying the effectiveness of influencers on purchase intention through customers' attitude could potentially offer valuable insights to marketing practitioners, whereby

they can develop promotional strategies to shape impactful customers' decision-making towards their product and services (Lim, Radzol, Cheah and Wong, 2017). Since the influencer marketing is a new trend, and Gen- Z is “growing up” with it, understanding of this concept matters for many industries, so they can know on which type of influencers they can focus to reach proper audience and consumers.

Influencer Marketing in Croatia

New developments like influencer marketing are mostly known in high-developed countries. Countries like Croatia accepted this kind of marketing a few years later and that is why it is still in process of growing (Pale, 2019). Encouragingly, in past few years, businesses in Croatia are willing to accept influencers and they started to use them to promote their products or services. Some of the most knowing influencers in the Croatia are Ella Dvornik who has 511 000 followers on Instagram, Davor Gerbus who has 288 000 followers on Instagram and Andrea Andrassy who has 211 000 followers on Instagram. These influencers are most likely to promote lifestyle or health and fitness recommendations (Pale, 2019).

Considering that Croatia has attractive locations for tourists, seasons in this country are highly profitable and positive. When it comes to the hashtags used on social media that are related to hospitality, as per Instagram (April 2021) hashtag #visitcroatia has more than 643 000 posts on Instagram and #travelcroatia has 121 000 posts.

The aim of current research is to examine effectiveness of micro- influencers on Gen- Z in Croatia since Croatia is small country, still in state of growth when it comes to social media and influencer marketing. It is important to examine whether local people trust micro- influencers or purchase their promotions and recommendations. The focus is on hospitality and tourist

destinations since there are some micro-influencers in this region who are promoting Dalmatian coast. For the purpose of the study, questionnaire will be devoted to younger generation (Gen-Z) from 18 to 24 years old, focused on their opinions about the content of the micro-influencers and effectiveness in their willing to purchase decisions when it comes to travelling.

Methods

The aim of this quantitative research was to investigate how micro-influencers effect on Gen Z in Croatia when it comes to tourism and hospitality services. The instrument applied for this study was written in English and was composed of various types of questions related to opinions, experience and expected future behaviors toward micro-influencers. The instrument has been prepared based on research at Merrimack College; questions from that research served as the basis of this research's instrument.

The questionnaire contained 11 main questions, divided into two sections. First section involved five questions that referred to usage of social networks and personal opinion about micro-influencers. Opinion about micro-influencers contained 11 sub-questions; respondents rated whether they disagree or agree with the statements on seven-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Second section contained six questions; one of them was examining previous experience with micro- influencers who promoted hospitality products and services. Second question was related to expected future behavior toward micro-influencers and was rated on seven-point Likert-scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Two questions asked demographic characteristics of the participants. Moreover, there were two optional, open-ended questions where participants could write additional thoughts about micro-influencers and identify some of them, if they follow any.

Survey was conducted in online form, via Google forms. Target audience for the research were hospitality students at RIT Croatia, based in Dubrovnik, Croatia. All of the study's participants are fluent in English. Before releasing the survey, the convenience sample was used on small group of Gen-Z who gave their immediate or very fast responses. The collected data includes 103 responses in total; they were collected from April 05th until April 12th 2021. All responses were valid, answered properly and all were included in results examination.

Results

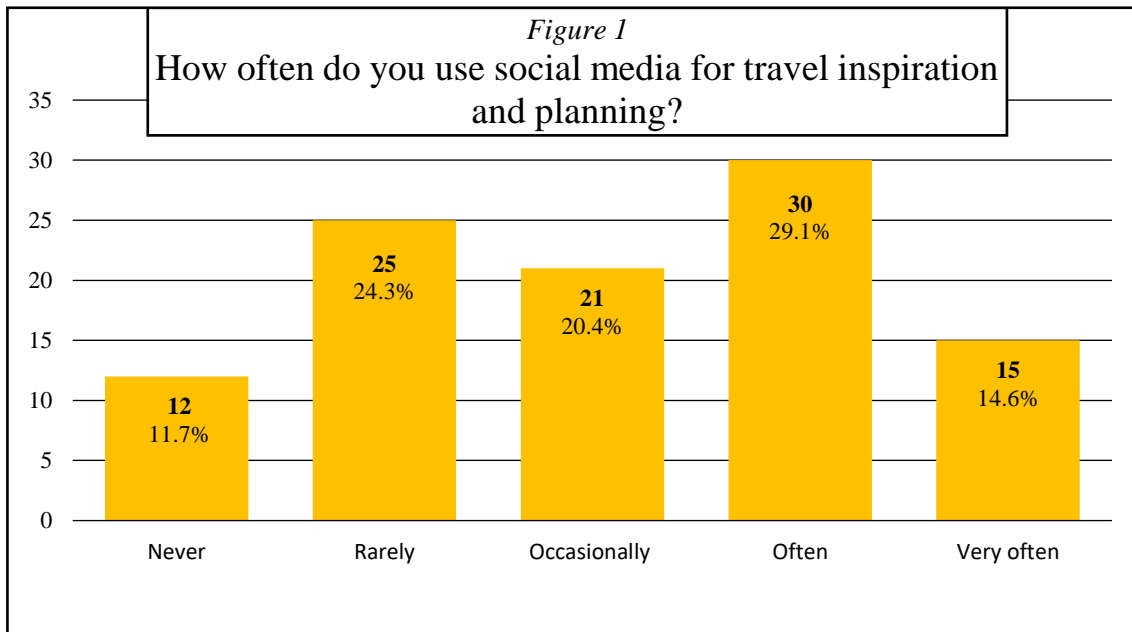
The purpose of this research was to examine the effectiveness of micro-influencers on Gen-Z in Croatia, especially when it comes to hospitality industry. Respondents of the instrument were younger population age, from 18 to 23 years. Age range was divided in four groups; from 103 participants, 14.6% or 15 participants were 18 years or younger, 15.5% or 15 of them were 23 years or older. The largest number of participants were 21-22 years old, which is 47.6% or 49 of all participants. The rest of respondents were 19-20 years– 23 participants in total. Majority of respondents were female; 62.1% or in total 64, while males were 34% or 35 altogether. Minority preferred not to say the gender.

When it comes to the social media, participants were required to select all social media platforms they are using. The most famous platforms were YouTube (89.3%), Instagram (86.4%) and Facebook (77.7%). The rest of offered platforms that are less are Snapchat (25.2%), TikTok (25.2%) and Twitter (18.4%). Participants also had chance to add additional platforms; 1.9% added Tumblr, Pinterest and Reddit. Compared with the Gen-Z in US, according to Statista (November 2019), results are nearly the same. Equal to this research, YouTube was on the first place with more than 90% users. Facebook was on second place together with Instagram and more than 75% users. The only difference is that back in 2019 TikTok was not popular app as it is today; it was on the last place with less than 25%. Comparing it with the Gen-Z participated in this research, only 25.2% uses TikTok regardless its popularity increase from 2019 until today.

On the mentioned social media platforms, participants spend mostly 1-3 or 4-6 hours per day. 44 participants or 42.7% agreed they spend 1-3 hours, while 37 of them or 35.9% spend 4-6 hours. 11.7% or 12 respondents use social media platforms 7-9 hours per day while 8.7% or 9

participants use it less than 1 hour. Only one participant spends 10 or more hours on social media per day.

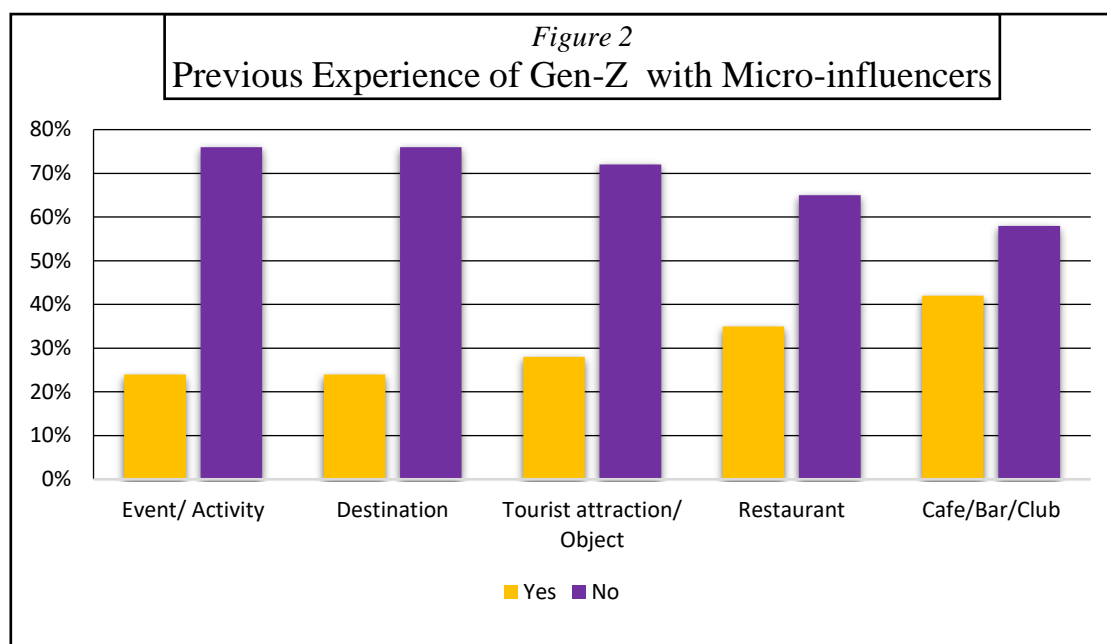
As for the usage of social media for travel inspiration and planning, more than 40% or in total 45 participants agreed they use it often or always while 37 respondents use it rarely or never. 21 respondents or 20.4% use it for travel inspiration occasionally (*Figure 1*).



Given the definition of the micro-influencers, Gen-Z introduced how many micro-influencers they follow on social media. Some of the participants was not sure if they follow any; 18 of them while the same number of participants stated they follow none. From 103 participants, 24 stated they follow 1-3 micro-influencers. Majority of these participants use three or less social media platforms. Those who use social media platforms more often, they follow 3 – 5 micro-influencers or even more. Overall, 43 participants agreed they follow more than 3 micro-influencers. Those participants added names of the micro-influencers they follow. Some of the examples are Jelena Marković, Ines and Tea Kristić.

Participants of this research did not have much experience with micro-influencers so far, as shown in *Figure 2*. When it comes to the events and activities recommended by micro-

influencers, 76% of the participants did not experience this kind of activities and 24% of them agreed they did. Same or similar numbers can apply on destinations and tourist attractions or

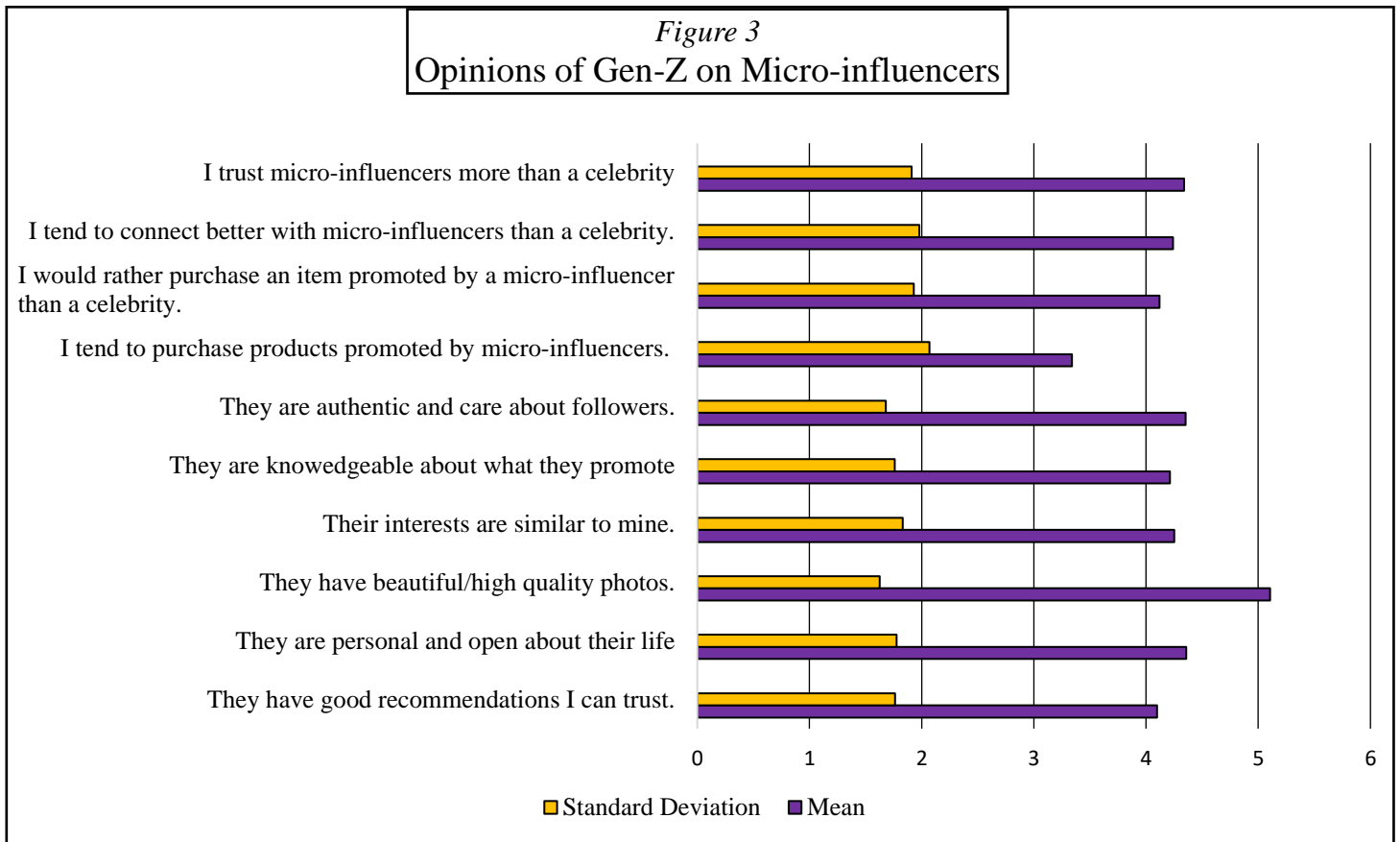


objects promoted by micro-influencers. On the other hand, this number is somewhat lower when it comes to the cafés, bars and clubs promoted by micro-influencers. Altogether, 58% of participants did not visited any of them, while 42% listened to recommendations and explored some café, bar or club.

However, previous experience did not affect the opinion of Gen-Z on micro-influencers (*Figure 3*). In the matter of quality of pictures posted on social media networks, participants in general agreed that pictures are beautiful and high quality ($m=5.17$, $SD= 1.63$). In total, it shows that 67% respondents strongly or mostly agreed with this idea, while only 18% strongly or mostly disagreed and 15% were neutral. In addition, participants who agreed with this statement are spending 4-6 or more hours on their social media per day and are currently using four and more social media platforms.

Concerning trust between micro-influencers and celebrities, Gen-Z participated in this research in general trust micro-influencers slightly more than celebrities ($m=4.34$, $SD= 1.91$). More than

45% agreed that they trust micro-influencers more and approximately 29% disagreed. More than 21% respondents were neutral; most of them were females older than 22 years.

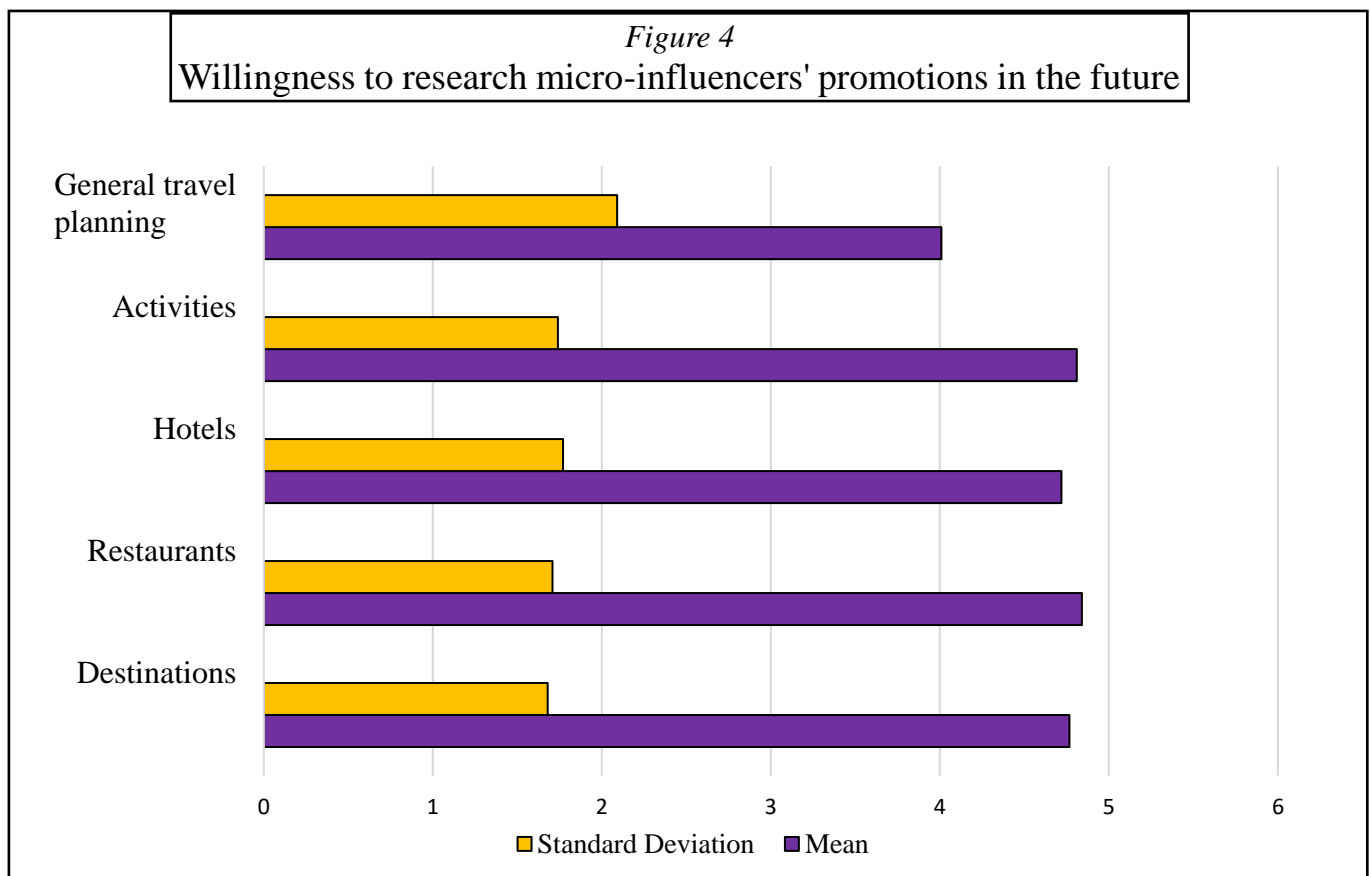


On the contrary, when talking about purchasing a product or service recommended by micro-influencers, mostly people disagreed with the statement ($m=3.34$, $SD=2.07$). The most popular answer was “strongly disagree” on seven-point Likert scale where 32% of participants strongly disagreed. Other 26% mostly or somewhat disagreed while only 32% respondents somehow agreed with the statement. Most of disagreed participants were male who usually use three or less social media platforms. On the other hand, talking about female who disagreed, they were mostly 21 years and older. Younger female respondents rather agreed or remained neutral.

Despite the fact that the participants of this research did not have a lot of experience with micro-influencers and most of them have different opinions about them, their expected future behavior

towards micro-influencers leads in a positive way. For instance, when it comes to a future research about the promoted restaurants, more than 65% of Gen-Z agreed that they would research about it ($m=4.85$, $SD=1.70$). The most of agreed participants were female who spend more than 4 hours per day on their social media. Moreover, Gen-Z agreed that they would research more about hotels promoted by micro-influencers if they find it desirable as well ($m=4.72$, $SD=1.77$). Responses were almost the same when it comes to promoted cafés, destinations and the hotels.

On the issue of general travel planning including all aspects of travel (hotels, restaurants, cafés, and travel activities/objects), results are diverse ($m=4.00$, $SD=2.01$). More than 40%



participants disagreed that they would use micro-influencers for general travel planning. Those participants were mostly 20 years or younger. On the other hand, more than 45% agreed with this idea. Respondents who agreed with the statement are mostly female, 21 years or older and who are spending more than 4 hours on social media per day.

As a part of the survey, participants had an opportunity to write their opinions on micro-influencers. From 103 participants, there were 21 responses on this question. Some of the comments were useful, saying that micro-influencers are “great business opportunity” and mentioned they follow recommendations when it comes to the food, sport or music. At the same time, some of the respondents concluded that they do not follow micro-influencers on purpose, but they believe they are unconsciously affected by them.

Discussion

Based on data collected from this survey, Gen-Z who participated in this research did not have previous experience with micro-influencers. However, this number rises when it comes to cafés or clubs because they are more popular among young people and they are more likely to visit popular places that someone recommends. In any way, less experience with micro-influencers does not mean that they have low opinion about them. They just do not have enough information about micro-influencers since influencer marketing is still in the state of growth in Croatia. Some of the participants added names of the micro-influencers they follow and some of them are Ella Dvornik, Andrea Andrassy or Dharmann. However, these influencers have more than 10 000 followers on their social media platforms, which means they are not micro-influencers. That concludes that Gen-Z in Croatia is not familiar enough with micro-influencers.

On the other hand, those who follow micro-influencers commented that they use them just as a inspiration in music, food or sport. They are not interested in purchasing the products or services that are promoted. One of the participants stated that it is a great business opportunity but people do not know enough about micro-influencers. Furthermore, one of the respondents said that they are not following influencers on purpose but they are influenced unconsciously. Some participants agreed they are not interested in social media in general so they do not want to follow any influencers but as results are showing, they tend to purchase promoted products in the future. This concludes that Gen-Z do have positive thoughts about micro-influencers and they will use them, as influencer marketing will continue to grow in Croatia. As a matter of fact, majority of Gen-Z agreed that they trust micro-influencers more than celebrities. Besides that, participants agreed they would research more about promoted services and products in the future. In general, opinions of Gen-Z on micro-influencers is various when it comes to the age or gender. Number of social media platforms used and time spent on social media per day is

what affect Gen-Z's opinion. Those who spend more than 3 hours on social media platforms and have more than four active platforms are participants who have positive comments about micro-influencers while participants who are not fans of the social media and do not spend a lot of time on it, are not interested in further research about micro-influencers.

There are several implications that can be applied based on the results of this study. Currently, some participants of this research stated that they do not follow any micro-influencers that are based on hospitality but rather on music, sport or food. That means micro-influencers who promote travel services and products should more focus on authenticity and take care more about their followers so the percentage of purchasing products and services can rise. Additionally, since Gen-Z as a part from this research tend to connect more with micro-influencers than with celebrities, micro-influencers in this area should benefit from it and focus more on relationship with their followers. In that way, they could achieve higher engagement with the followers.

Some of the limitations of the current study is focusing on hospitality products and services in the time of pandemic. Croatia is area that had strict pandemic control measures, borders were closed and hospitality services were not working. That means participants of this research did not encounter with travel or hospitality products in previous period. It indicates that the results of this survey are not as reliable as possible and the research could be done once the pandemic is over and people will get chance to travel again. Furthermore, since the Dubrovnik area where research is completed is tourism-focused area, this research should be re-done in the wider geographical area of the country with the larger amount of the participants so the results are more trustworthy.

This study can help for potential future researches when it comes to the other countries in Europe. It would be desirable to examine the effectiveness of micro-influencers on Gen-Z in other countries. As already mentioned, Gen-Z is the largest generation and they are connected

with technology and social media since they are born and raised with it. Hence, the effectiveness of social-media influencers is exceptionally important for the future of many industries. Taking into consideration that awareness of social media and influencer marketing are growing, once pandemic is over, people and especially younger generations will search recommendations for traveling on social media. For that reason, it is important to investigate what is the perception of Gen-Z on micro-influencers so the micro-influencers can know the right way to engage with them. In fact, this research could be conducted again in few years, to analyze if Gen-Z perceive micro-influencers for travel inspiration more or less than they do now.

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