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Šanje, Martina

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The Effect of SMI in Decision-Making Process in Hospitality: Generation Z

Martina Šanje

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT Croatia)

HSPT-490 Senior Capstone Project

Course instructor: Rebecca Charry

Mentor: Professor Milena Kužnin

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Abstract

Social media influencers became a crucial tool when it comes to travelling decisions and a strong influence effect in the decision-making process, especially among Generation Z. This research paper explored the power of social media influencers and the relationship with digital natives regarding purchasing decisions. A survey questionnaire was distributed to 139 students at RIT Croatia, Dubrovnik campus. This method investigated the level of trust in the hospitality industry among Gen Z and social media influencers. Results have shown that certain geographical areas still do not have engagement with influencers while taking into consideration their family and friends first. On the other hand, results showed as well that students follow them primarily because of inspiration, the discovery of new products and information seeking. As for further research, digital natives from those certain areas should be questioned more for influencers to gain better insight but as well for hotels and companies.

Keywords: generation Z, social media influencers, hospitality, purchase power, hotels, decision-making

Social media (SM)

Social media is an interactive technology platform used for engaging, communicating with each other as well as sharing information and ideas within the community. Consumers use it for generating the content and creating their own stories (Hajli, M.N., 2014, p.1). Extensive social media usages become an important tool in the hospitality industry for tourists regarding their travelling decisions and in some way an influence on the purchase-making behaviour (Javed et al, 2020, p.2). More precisely consumers are relying on the recommendations and suggestions of social media influencers, people who have an extensive audience ready to connect and follow their opinions (Hawley, 2020, p.2).

Social media(SM) influencers

An influencer is a person who possesses the knowledge, relationship, position, authority and power over the targeted audience when it comes to purchasing decisions. Each influencer has a specific niche depending on the topic and the size of the following. It is important to understand that they can be anyone and anywhere. Being an expert in a distinct field builds their reputation. The explosion of media categorized them by size, type of content and level of influence. From mega, macro, micro, nano, to bloggers, You Tubers, podcasters, social posts only, along with celebrities the *original influencers* (Influencer marketing hub, 2020).

Job description they hold consists of raising brand awareness, driving brand engagement and brand loyalty. People with large social media environment over hundreds of thousands of loyal followers, like Kylie Jenner, can either ruin or raise the brand with only one tweet (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019, p.1). According to CBS Los Angeles (2018), Kylie Jenner's tweet about her not using Snapchat anymore, read by more than 24 million followers, cause the damage to the company in \$1.3B in market value (CBS Los Angeles,2018). Tweeting,

posting or snapping product or pieces of daily life is not always compensated by brands but collaboration is.

Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is brand collaboration with an online influencer (celebrities, social media “stars” or industry experts) for promoting service or products of a certain brand (Influencer marketing hub, 2020). Marketing through social media channels like Instagram and other platforms, influencers are compensated by the company in exchange for brand promotion through content creation. Marketers provide influencers with clear vision, purpose, hash tags, content, budget and free products as a component of additional advertisement (Zietek, 2016, p. 10-11). Moreover, behind every strategy, there is a side of human nature people cannot control and it consists of a psychological effect.

The psychology of influencer marketing

According to Bradley (2019) there is a psychology behind influencer marketing. Cultural conformity explains human beings as social creatures who tend to keep up with trends and connect with similar “*pack of people*”. Consumers feel an obligation to certain influencer and their daily activities. Besides, power and control are what an individual craves, by subscribing to influencers interested in. As influencers can be categorized as experts within their niche it creates informational social influence that changes behaviors’ and opinions.

Accurate information from people we believe in can cause a psychological conformity effect based upon their authority and level of trust. Creating a meaningful and personalized connection is the main focus of influencer by reaching the level of real friends. Last but not least is the desire to help others and provoke an emotional response in order to relieve burden and help. Everything that has been stated so far sums up emotions, desires and natural tendencies paired with effective storytelling in building engagement (Hoos, 2019). Therefore,

the biggest trigger is the effect on social media among the generations, where so-called Gen Z relies the most on users that already experienced or used a product or service (Reinikainen H. et al, 2020, p.1).

Generation Z

According to Forbes (2020) generation Z or so-called digital natives are individuals born between 1995 and 2010. Constantly exposed to the internet and social networks, interaction is primarily based on internet platforms as a source of communication. Representatives of the Net Gen, compared to other generations, are more demanding. In addition, they expect quick transactions and interactivity. Build upon case internet content bite-sized is the most important, preference leans more on video calls, emojis are the core of the message and diversity is prized.

Researchers found out that they put more trust in generated information by users rather than on companies (Reinikainen H. et al, 2020, p.1). When it comes to opinions, they take into consideration family first (65%) followed by friends and internet users (64 %) (Werenowska & Rzepka,2020,p.10). In addition, 44%, which is almost a half, of generation Z, made a purchase decision process based upon the recommendation of social media influencer where almost 87 % of them follow at least one influencer on social media platforms (Williams R., 2020).

Influencers and generation Z

According to Alexandra (2020) Generation Z is the largest generation of consumers along with their values that changed the way they shop. Perceiving social media influencers by Gen Z can be divided into three categories of expectations: authenticity, purchasing intentions, personable& lifestyle. For them, posts shouldn't be over-edited rather realistic and relatable to the audience. Besides, telling the truth and not exaggerating in their posts is more appealing.

Finding influencers who fit into a similar lifestyle as theirs and engage in the same behavior is a fundamental component.

Research and surveys shown that micro-influencers (1,000- 100,000 followers) are the magnet for generation Z based upon purchase intentions, trust, authenticity, lifestyle and personalization. Digital natives find authenticity as the most important aspect when it comes to choosing whom to follow and engage (Wolf A., 2020, p. 11).

Hotel usage of social media influencers

In the new modern era hospitality industry is keeping pace with trends and includes a map of the future in the social media aspect. Head of marketing and hotel GM's are implementing social media platforms to gain competitive advantage (Nafi & Ahmed, 2019, p.8). Using influencers helps in reaching a targeted audience in the hospitality industry through someone that already has established and powerful connection with the audience. Besides, it contributes to brand recognition and performance of marketing campaigns.

According to Murphey (2020) when it comes to deciding where to go, a consumer is more likely to trust personal recommendation compared to traditional marketing platform. In addition, it is essential to pick influencer with authority, strong community and lifestyle compatible with hotel based service (Murphey D., 2020). Studies have proven that collaboration with influencers drives customers directly to the hotel website, reduces lost revenue up to 20% to the online agencies, and maximizes the up-selling and profitability to 18% (Nafi & Ahmed, 2019, p.10).

The ethical standpoint of SM influencers and hotel

According to Nafi & Ahmed (2019) influencers have a vital role in creating personalized experiences and ability to establish brand awareness. Some hotels offer free benefits in

exchange for promotion while others do not approve it. The issue that has always been raised is the ethical position of influencers, their credibility of the authenticity of motive to create content. Is promoting the destination in the form of personal experience deceiving others in exchange for money? A lot of hotels suffered a bad reputation for choosing wrong influencers or not dealing with them properly. When it comes to the selection of influencers by the hotel there is a procedure that should be followed.

According to Roko Palmić (Luxury Hospitality Sales and Marketing, 2020) entrepreneur and hotel GM at Ikador Hotel, the choice of collaboration with social media influencers considers a plan and it can be described as a very tricky job. First of all, there is a discussion of who is coming and whom the hotel is going to host. Based upon that hotel creates a questionnaire for SM influencers where the basic question should be answered. Following this they are composed of marketing kit, who are their followers, how old are they, from which market they come from, what is their interest, to give five samples of other corporations, how many likes they have per post and what is the percentage of interaction rate.

After the analysis hotels pick an SM influencer with the request they want from them. Apart from all of this, the hotel is the one that decides what hashtags, location and tags are included in the post. For an example of how effective this strategy is, Roko Palmić shares a story with Porto Montenegro opening their Middle Eastern Market. After calling five influencers from Dubai for opening in one day they increased their account by 20,000 followers (Roko Palmić on Luxury Hospitality, Sales and Marketing, 2020).

Therefore, various ways are present these days to deal with influencers and if they are done in accordance that is beneficial for a hotel. A lot of successful hotel chains are using influencers suitably and ethically. An example would be Marriott with creative Snapchat content. The chain uses influencers to share with their followers' stories for promotion of the Marriott

Rewards program. Another example would be Ritz Carlton which invites influencers to the property so they can share content and perspectives with their audience (Nafi & Ahmed, 2019, p.11). Creating content is the key factor combined with the right influencer for engagement as the final result.

Consumer engagement and decision-making process

Engagement is manifested through behavioural and cognitive component ranging from simple ones (like double-tapping for like) to complex ones (like sharing and commenting on the post). Moreover, influencer face attracts attention when it comes to posts. Unique characteristics of each face can influence followers' intentions, attitudes and emotions. For example, a left cheek poses result in a higher number of likes (Torbarina M. et al, 2020, p.4-5).

Decision-making process is composed of top, mid and bottom-funnel. The top is building brand awareness by familiarizing the audience with a brand and persuading them about product or service with personal experience shared on platforms. The mid-funnel combines various types of engagements, activities such as comments, likes and shares. Studies have shown that 74% of people choose companies based on experiences shared online (Hawley D., 2020). Last but not least is the bottom where influencer create an action like „Swipe up" feature (follower is sent directly to purchase page). However, behind all of this is as well psychological effect and different tactics like algorithm updates (Hawley D., 2020). It is important to take into consideration statistics, habits and generation of a certain country.

When it comes to statistics and numbers, Croatia had 2, 10 million SM users in January 2020 and penetration stood at 51 % (Digital-in-Croatia, 2020). According to research based on usage of social media among Croatian Generation Z, 87% use it on daily bases by putting the Instagram platform as number one. Furthermore, 97% follow an influencer and decision-

making process based on their recommendation is at 59% (Media Marketing, 2017). Travelling decisions have slightly different percentage where 28 % of Gen Z trusts influencers when it comes to travel recommendations (Turistički news portal, 2019).

This section covered the literature overview, starting with general information about influencers, target generation Z, connections between them, hotel industry and usage of social media influencers. Next one will explain the methodology used for the project and final results of the hypotheses.

Method

As already mentioned in the introduction, generation Z are digital natives who are hooked up to social media usage and interaction based on internet platforms. Besides, the emphasis is on the user-generated pieces of information with taking the opinions of internet users as second consideration after family and friends. Looking back at the characteristics mentioned earlier, they are demanding, along with expecting fast interactivity and transactions.

When it comes to relationship with social media influencers the main element is the similarity of lifestyle combined with authenticity and reality. This research aims to explore generations Z evaluation about social media influencers, the most important aspect that builds trust and usage of connections in decision- making process in the hospitality industry.

The procedure began with contacting the professors depending on the college year of the students and informing Senior Academic Advisor, Mrs. Draženka Franić. After the emails were provided by Mrs. Franić, a short in-person presentation was made in each of the classes where the method and topic were presented. Students were notified in advance by the professors and they received an invitation via G-mail to complete the survey. The questionnaire was opened from March 31st till April 8th, 2020.

For this research, a survey in a form of a questionnaire method was used in order to collect the data. It is a technique of gathering information through a structured set of questions which in the end provide both qualitative and quantitative data. Prior to the actual distribution, a questionnaire was pilot-tested on 6 RIT students that confirmed at the end that the method was effective.

A survey was composed out of 16 questions divided into categories of Likert scale, open-ended and yes/no questions. They were focused on how much is generation Z familiar with social media influencers, what field of influencers they look most up to, what characterizes a good influencer and how much they trust them when it comes to the hospitality industry. Multiple choice questions allowed participants to select more preferences while open-ended ones asked for the opinions of their own.

The instrument that was used as a base is Rakuten Marketing, *Influencer Marketing Global Survey Consumers*, which conducted a survey in 2019 about influencer marketing. 3600 consumers across the US, Australia, Germany, France and UK participated and provided their insight on online shopping behaviour as well as the type of influencers they follow. The report showed what consumers expect from an influencer, what can change a consumer's relationship with an influencer, what kind of influencers' consumers engage with most often and how consumer shopping behavior is influenced by different types of influencers. (Rakuten Marketing, 2019)

The data samples for this survey were hospitality students at the RIT Croatia, Dubrovnik campus since they all fall into the Gen Z category (born between 1995-2010). Out of 139 students, there were 27 freshmen, 29 sophomores, 39 juniors and 47 seniors. Female students were the majority, while the male population was a little lesser. As for their ethnicity and religion, there is a variety from all over the world. Furthermore, the selection method was the

age, based on the research project. The response rate was 77.7% (108 students) which represented the number of people who answered the survey. A high percentage indicated the quality of the survey and assured more accurate results.

Results

The results of this research are firstly showing the social media presence among hospitality students at RIT Croatia. With 98% of them using it, only two people are not active on social media platforms. When it comes to following social media influencers it seems that only ten respondents don't while the rest is engaged with their field of work ($M=2.75$, $SD=1.24$). Moreover, the majority of students follows at least one social media influencer where only females follow the category of more than twenty of them ($M=1.81$, $SD=1.07$).

As for the familiarity of the role of social media influencers respondents opinions were divided where the majority agreed with the words very familiar ($M=2.23$, $SD=1.03$). Over 87.9% said that they are either extremely, very and somewhat familiar while the rest of 12.1% is not so or not at all familiar. Every group had the most answers by female population and in an extremely familiar category; senior students were the majority with 13 of them.

In addition, when asked to provide the name of a social media influencer a student follows there were few names repeated. Influencers with the most answers were Croatian bloggers Dora Predojević(9), Jelena Marinović(6), Pamela Smoljanić(6), Serbian blogger Tamara Kalinić(10) and famous American family Kardashian(11). Also, male students only mentioned various sports players in the field of football and tennis.

Regarding the categories of their social media influencers, the top three answers were lifestyle (64.8%), fashion (56.5%), and travel (42.6%). As well there were combinations of these, but as well as single answers like hospitality, memes, makeup, weddings etc. On the other hand statement of why they follow social media influencers in general three answers with most

responses were inspiration (68.5%), the discovery of new products (56.5%) and information (48,1%). There was no significant difference when it comes to genders, but a mix of all three categories was the majority of freshman and senior students.

The next set of questions were the ones where hypotheses were proven wrong based on the recommendation, seeking for reviews and travelling decisions as sources of trust from social media influencers. It turns out that Generation Z doesn't trust and give power to SMI as much as people think. Purchasing a product after the recommendation was responded to mostly by never and rarely while there few of them who do it regularly or sometimes ($M= 3.69$, $SD= 0.98$). Female seniors from Dubrovnik are the only ones who purchase products sometimes.

As for actively seeking reviews before making a purchase decision majority said no with 59.3% ($M= 1.59$, $SD=0.49\%$). Again the majority of the groups were females and the yes answers mostly junior and senior females. Travelling decisions and believing a recommendation of SMI had half of the respondents disagreed (64.8%) that SMI are not the ones to trust when it comes to these decisions ($M= 1.64$, $SD=0.48$).

Following a question of booking a 4/5 star hotel after the promotion or recommendation of SMI indicates that Gen Z still indicates no as an answer ($M= 1.88$, $SD= 0.32$). Only twelve females, mostly seniors, out of 108 respondents said that they booked a hotel. The reliability question proved that even though research said that digital natives have a connection with SMI, here most of the students said no ($M= 1.62$, $SD=0.49$). As in the previous results, females are the ones who said yes, more precisely seniors and sophomores.

The open-ended question at the end provided the opportunity for students to express their opinion on what makes a good social media influencer. The Top three words that were repeated were honesty, authenticity and transparency. Besides, there were other answers like consistency, engagement, credibility, originality, sincerity etc. Last but not least was the

demographic result containing 78 females and 30 males. All year levels of hospitality students filled the survey which is 23 freshmen, 21 sophomores, 31 juniors and 33 seniors. City of origin was diverse from Croatia, US, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Spain, Bulgaria and Ukraine.

Discussion

The research purpose was to explore the triangle relationship (see Appendix 1) of social media influencers, generation Z and the hospitality industry. More precisely, to gain a better insight into the engagement and trust generation offers and shows when it comes to influences in decision-making processes. Results received proved that both hypotheses were wrong, where the first one states that Generation Z trusts the recommendations of social media influencers and the second one that Generation Z actively seeks reviews from SMI before making a purchase decision. The main question is, despite the readings that said that generation Z is influenced by SMI, why is that wrong in this paper.

In comparison with the literature review, the magnet for generation Z are micro-influencers as a survey showed as well. Participants expressed that relationship with influencers is developed by being authentic, unique, similar and honest. Furthermore, that content produced should be a real one, without any exaggeration in the posts. At the same time, as mentioned in the introduction digital natives are more connected with people who have a similar lifestyle. In a survey, a lot of participants mentioned our local influencers from Dubrovnik and Zagreb.

However, researchers said that gen Z puts more trust in generated information by users and take into consideration the opinions of internet users. In this case, the situation is inverted. It seems that the secondary research was only approved by the American side, but not in the Balkan area. The real question is, why there is a difference and what are the reasons behind this unexpected result. Cultural context would be one of the explanations. Each country and

state is different and there are various types of mindsets. Since the participants mostly came from the Balkan area, precisely Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, I would say that they are more traditional. It means that they trust more to their friend and family, rather than in social media influencers. When comparing it with the Americans who put their power and trust in social media influencers more than to family and friends.

We are still not that developed when it comes to influencers in general. The field of their community is pretty small and there are only a few macro and micro-influencers. Even though we follow them, look for inspiration, products, discovery and codes, still, we don't have connections and relationships big enough in order to engage with them even more. The most important thing is to create a bond of trust in order for us to rely on them.

The most interesting findings were the domination of females and a small percentage of male influencers. Females were always the ones to purchase things online, to promote and to share their opinions on platforms. In this case, the majority of social media influencers are actually females. When students were asked to provide the name of the influencer they follow, there were only a few male names. Mostly sports players from a field of football and tennis. Each female named female while each male named male.

As for further research, a survey should be conducted where generation Z from Balkan would be asked why exactly they don't trust social media influencers and to whom they give power and trust. Only to their friends and family or are there new sources. Furthermore, when it comes to the additional value, this kind of research can help hotel chains and companies in marketing campaigns. Real life example for hotels would be collaboration with micro-influencers. Hotels can target those influencers who will attract Gen Z with the type of content. As for the companies to attract Gen Z they can produce videos that last short so the attention can be gained. More precise make a change in the marketing department. Hire

individuals who will narrow guidelines on how to make digital natives look for their videos and make them purchase products and services.

There are few limitations in this research that disabled the results to be useable for others. Covid 19 and its restrictions disrupted the number of participants and the way to reach out to them. Last but not least is the duration of the survey questionnaire that was opened only for a week. Despite these two limitations, research showed the importance of the work of social media influencers and the power they have in some states and that is some they are still not that effective. The future of influencer work will grow even more and be the tool number one to attract certain generations.

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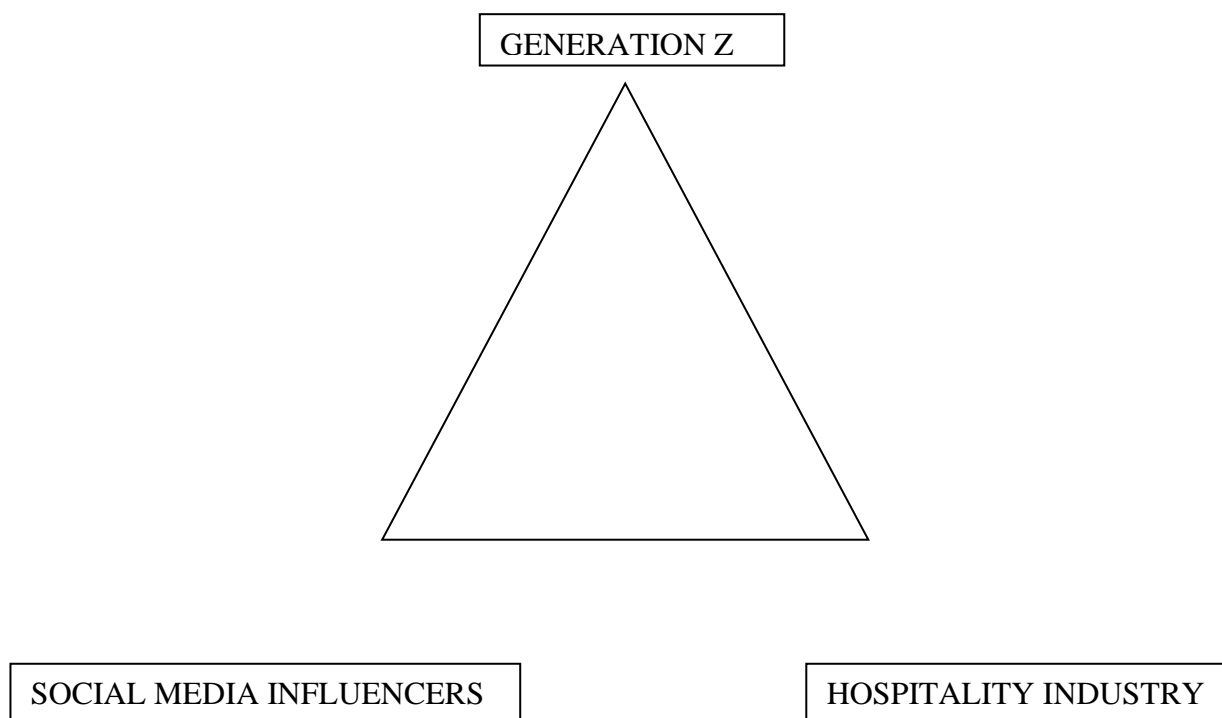
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Appendix 1

Source: The author of the paper



Appendix 2

Dear Survey Participants,

My name is Martina Šanje and I am a senior student at RIT Croatia Dubrovnik.

For my final research project in International Hospitality and Service Management, along with Professor Milena Kužnin, I am investigating "The impact of social media influencer's on decision-making processes in the hospitality industry among generation Z in Dubrovnik".

The procedure involves completing an online survey that will require approximately 5 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary. Confidentiality will be provided to the

fullest extent possible and the information will be kept anonymous. The survey will not contain information that will personally identify you or your name. There are no risks associated with participating in this research.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me!

1. I use social media (SM)? Yes - No
2. I am familiar with the role of social media influencers (SMI) in tourism?
 - 1 Not at all familiar
 - 2 Slightly familiar
 - 3 Somewhat familiar
 - 4 Moderately familiar
 - 5 Extremely familiar
3. I follow SMI?
 - 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Always
4. Can you indicate how many SMI you follow?
 - ☐ 1-5
 - ☐ 6-10
 - ☐ 11-15
 - ☐ 20+
5. Can you please provide a name of SMI you follow?

6. What categories are your SMI in (multiple choice)?

- Travel
 - Lifestyle
 - Food
 - Fashion
 - Sport
 - Others (please indicate)
-

7. You follow SMI in general because (multiple choice):

- Discovery of new products
 - Inspiration
 - Loyalty
 - Promotional codes
 - Information
 - Other (please indicate)
-

8. I purchased a product or service after the recommendation of SMI

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Often

5 Always

9. I actively seek for reviews from SMI before making a purchase decision Yes – No

10. When it comes to travelling I look for recommendations of SMI Yes – No

11. I booked a hotel (4/5 star) after the recommendation or promotion of SMI Yes – No

12. I feel that SMI are reliable source of information when it comes to hotel decisions Yes

– No

13. In your opinion, what makes a good SMI?

14. Please indicate your gender

☐ Female

☐ Male

15. Year level at college

☐ Freshman

☐ Sophomore

☐ Junior

☐ Senior

16. City of origin
