

INFLUENCER MARKETING AS A MODERN PHENOMENON CREATING A NEW FRONTIER OF VIRTUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Zdenka KÁDEKOVÁ – Mária HOLIENČINOVÁ



Ing. Zdenka Kádeková, PhD.
Faculty of Economics and Management
Slovak University of Agriculture
Trieda A. Hlinku 2
949 76 Nitra
Slovak Republic
zdenka_kadekova@yahoo.com

Zdenka Kádeková is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Marketing and Trade, Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. Her lecturing activities are focused on marketing, marketing communication, managerial communication, commercial business, social networks and consumer behaviour and consumer personality. She is also a lecturer of MBA study at the FEM SUA in Nitra. Her scholarly works are aimed at the marketing communication field, especially at the relations between PR and CSR in food industry. She publishes in foreign and domestic conference proceedings, scientific journals and monographs.



Ing. Mária Holienčinová, PhD.
Faculty of Economics and Management
Slovak University of Agriculture
Trieda A. Hlinku 2
949 76 Nitra
Slovak Republic
maria.holiencinova@gmail.com

Mária Holienčinová is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Marketing and Trade at the Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. She gives lectures related to marketing, marketing communication, managerial communication, consumer behaviour and consumer personality, sustainability in food industry and CSR. She has been cooperating with the Slovak Agricultural and Food Chamber, evaluating and participating in several projects. Her scientific and research activities, as well as the works she has published in foreign and domestic conference proceedings, scholarly journals and monographs, reflect on the above-mentioned issues and topics she is interested in.

ABSTRACT:

Social media influencers are winning over the Internet with their outstanding work and presence. Their opinions have a powerful impact on people, especially on young generation. We can mark them as a modern phenomenon that has seen a huge increase in cooperation with marketing agencies over recent years. More and more people are following such influencers so that they do not miss out on their content. Brands flock to such influencers for mentions, reviews and recommendations. Even though influencer marketing is a relatively new strategy, it continues to be a viable solution for marketers who are willing to think outside the box while building relationships with their target market. The aim of the study is to offer a comprehensive reflection on influencer marketing opportunities and determine the impact of influencers on consumer behaviour of Generations Y and Z. We wanted to find out whether influencers, who promote products, can attract potential customers and encourage them for purchase, as well as find differences between the given consumer generations. In order to meet the objectives of the study, own research was conducted (459 respondents from the Slovak Republic belonging to Generations Y and Z were involved in the inquiry). The research findings confirm that there are significant differences between the above-mentioned consumer generations in the area of impact of influencers on consumer behaviour, which leads to different marketing opportunities. For statistical processing of the results, we used the Kruskal-Wallis Test, Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, Fisher's Exact Test and Dunn's Test of Contrasts.

KEY WORDS:

brand, consumer behaviour, influencer marketing, marketing communication, WOM marketing

Introduction

Influencer marketing involves marketing products and services to those who have a sway over the things other people buy. This market influence typically stems from an individual's expertise, popularity or reputation. Marketing to an audience of influencers is similar to word-of-mouth marketing, but it does not rely strictly on explicit recommendations.¹ Social media have been crucial in revitalising this instrument, creating

¹ *Influencer Marketing*. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<http://www.marketing-schools.org/types-of-marketing/influencer-marketing.html/>>.

greater and better opportunities for its use. While in the past, branding has been focused exclusively on well-known personalities, it has later moved to well-known bloggers and today it is about everyday consumers who have a huge impact.² More and more brands and companies are focusing on their marketing activities to find new opportunities for presenting themselves. They are looking for someone to 'tell' their story.³ Influencer marketing is one of the fastest growing tools in terms of getting new customers online. Proper use of influencer marketing is a cost-effective way of promoting goods, people or ideas, bringing creative content to the company and offering the ability to reach target groups in a natural way.⁴

"Influencer" is an individual with a significant following on social media who is paid by brands to promote their products to said followers, via free products and trips and/or cash payment per promotional post.⁵ The purpose is to persuade followers to purchase such products.⁶ Popular social media of choice for influencing are *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Snapchat* and *YouTube*. An influencer has the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship with their audience. It is important to note that these individuals are not simple marketing tools, but rather social relationship assets with which brands can collaborate to achieve their marketing objectives.⁷

Influencers are a late modern phenomenon; there has been a huge increase in their collaboration with marketing agencies over the past year.⁸ The majority of influencers fit into the following categories: celebrities, industry experts and thought leaders, bloggers or content creators and micro-influencers. Today, the bulk of social influencer marketing occurs on social media, predominantly with micro-influencers and blogging. Industry experts and thought leaders (such as journalists) can also be considered influencers and hold an important position for brands. Then there are celebrities. They were the original influencers, and they still have a role to play, although their importance as influencers has been waning. Bloggers and influencers active on social media (predominantly micro-bloggers) have the most authentic and active relationships with their fans. Brands are now recognising and encouraging this.⁹

New types of agencies have been established, providing services to look for the right influencers and influencing tools that help them get to know their followers better and to create more interesting contents. This is a new way of reaching the target group, especially the younger generation. Content Agency divides influencers into four groups, as follows:

1. *Blogger* – the owner of a blog (website) aimed to share their thoughts and passions. A blogger creates authentic and unique content – photos, texts and comments – and displays them in chronological or alphabetical order by posting on the blogs. Such posts are often shared via social media.
2. *YouTuber (vlogger)* – interacts with audiences through their videos on *YouTube*, expressing own feelings and experiences and dealing with the most diverse topics one can imagine.
3. *Celebrity* – most often an actor, singer, presenter, athlete, but also a person who gets watched due to some extraordinary action or show. In other words, it is a person who has become widely known thanks to media. On *Facebook*, *Instagram* or *YouTube*, these celebrities have a number of followers to share their everyday professional accomplishments and private 'secrets' with.
4. *Instagrammer* – a person who, thanks to high-quality photo content, has been able to attract the audience to *Instagram* while gaining a large number of followers. This person is not a typical celebrity.

2 SCOTT, D. M.: *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 2015, p. 123.

3 ODELL, P.: *Influencer Marketing Benefits, Challenges, Facts: Infographic*. Released on 7th July 2016. [online]. [2018-07-20]. Available at: <<http://www.chiefmarketer.com/influencer-marketing-benefits-challenges-facts-infographic/>>.

4 PENG, S. et al.: Influence Analysis in Social Networks: A Survey. In *Journal of Network and Computer Applications*, 2018, Vol. 106, No. 1, p. 19.

5 LANDSVERK, K. H.: *The Instagram Handbook: 2014 Edition*. London : Prime Head, 2014, p. 105.

6 KUBELAKOVÁ, A., ŠUGROVÁ, M.: Habit or Choice? The Decision-Making Process of Young Generation in Purchasing Dairy Products in the Slovak Republic. In *International Day of Science 2017 – Economics, Management, Innovation*. Olomouc : Moravian University College, 2017, p. 114.

7 OLENSKI, S.: *The Impact of Live Streaming on Influencer Marketing*. Released on 25th September 2017. [online]. [2018-09-22]. Available at: <<https://bit.ly/2HY8ev2>>.

8 VIKTOR, K.: *10 najsledovanejších slovenských profilov na Instagrame: Ako využívajú vplyvní Slováci svoje sociálne siete?*. Released on 23rd April 2017. [online]. [2018-07-23]. Available at: <<https://refresher.sk/42817-10-najsledovanejsich-slovenskych-profilov-na-instagrame-ako-vyuzivaju-vplyvni-slovaci-svoje-socialne-siete>>.

9 *What Is an Influencer?*. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>>.

Instagrammers' followers (thanks to the still unaffected algorithm of *Instagram*) can share new and new posts that followers respond to with masses of hearts, emojis and comments. In Slovakia, very little has been said and known about them, and the brands rather approach the above-mentioned groups of influencers for cooperation.¹⁰ In addition to the given facts, *YouTube* has emerged as a new type of digital journalism environment, offering users an opportunity to participate in the content for free. *YouTube* is the place for creating many online celebrities (so-called YouTubers) whose videos have been watched by a huge number of people (for example Jenna Marbles, Ray William Johnson and others).¹¹

Studies on the topic show that people actually conduct surveys and search for products, which clearly points out that the importance of companies is based on the fact that their ideas or stories will be disseminated online, so that they are available at a time when potential buyers surf the Internet and ask for answers.¹² The definition and aiming at the target group is the first step that accompanies the process of creating a marketing strategy. Every communication activity should begin by defining a target customer or audience. A strategy will be chosen to address potential customers and what they are going to talk about. The more we find out about the target group, the better we understand how they live, what they think, what they enjoy, what discourages them, and then it leads to the creation of an effective advertising campaign.¹³

Over the last decade, we have seen social media grow rapidly in importance. According to the August 2017 *Global Digital Statshot* from We Are Social and Hootsuite, 3.028 billion people actively use social media – that is 40% of the world's population. These people inevitably look up to influencers on social media to guide them with their decision-making.¹⁴

A type group of consumers represents a certain set of common consumer traits shared by these people; we need to know about their particular interest in an organization or a product or about their problems that can be solved by the product or service offered by the company. Online marketing would not fulfil its purpose without the correct identification of one or more types of consumer groups. Thus, achieving success is conditioned by working with these groups efficiently. Creating or rather identifying such groups is the most important step to take when compiling a marketing plan.¹⁵

Today's young people can be divided into two groups: Generation Y, which comprises people born in 1981-1991, and Generation Z including people born in 1992-2001. We can call these two generations by a common name – the Millennials. Research shows that 25% of Slovak citizens are Millennials. This group has already been formed and it is assumed that in the coming years, it will also possess a very strong purchasing power. Marketers are very well aware of this fact and therefore are making big efforts to understand who the people of these generations really are.¹⁶

The Millennials openly claim that traditional media (such as TV, newspapers, magazines) are not the key ones for them anymore. They prefer social networks instead; social media are becoming their area of interest and tracking on a daily basis. They prefer visual content such as videos, photos or music and tend to ignore long written texts. They travel a lot, dress well and care for their health and healthy lifestyle. And this is to encourage the emergence of a new group of 'heroes' – influencers. No influencer has to be a celebrity. Influencer is anyone who has added value to their social network, whether it is *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, *Pinterest*, *YouTube* or others, by reaching a large number of subscribers, friends or fans, bringing some of this added value to their followers and also expressing the ability to influence their behaviour.¹⁷ These are people who have built up the reputation based on their knowledge and expertise in a specific field. They

10 *Content Agency*. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://contentagency.sk/>>.

11 RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L.: YouTube, YouTuber. PRAVDOVÁ, H., RADOŠINSKÁ, J., VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J. (eds.): *Slovník vybraných pojmov z mediálnych štádií. Kľúčové termíny v súčasnej mediálnej komunikácii*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2016, p. 230.

12 GODIN, S.: *All Marketers Are Liars*. New York : Portfolio, 2005, p. 104.

13 TRIAD ADVERTISING BLOG: *Čo je cieľová skupina?*. Released on 30th October 2011. [online]. [2018-08-24]. Available at: <<https://blog.triad.sk/marketingovy-slovník/co-je-cielova-skupina/>>.

14 *What Is an Influencer?*. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>>.

15 REVELLA, A.: *Buyer Personas*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 2015, p. 154.

16 TULGAN, B.: *Not Everyone Gets A Trophy: How to Manage the Millennials*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 2016, p. 198.

17 STRÍŽ, E.: *Influenceri: Internetové celebrity a ich vplyv na marketing znáčiek*. Released on 7th September 2016. [online]. [2018-07-21]. Available at: <<http://www.unitedlife.sk/influenceri-internetove-celebrity-a-ich-vplyv-na-marketing-znaciek/>>.

publish regular contributions on different topics on their preferred social networks, creating a relationship with people (fans, followers, subscribers) who pay close attention to them. Brands, whether bigger or smaller, love influencers, because they can be closer to their customers; they can create new fashion trends. The main reason why people watch influencers is the presumed authenticity of such communication activities.

And here comes the question of celebrities in the position of influencers. Celebrities may have many fans and gigantic social media followings. However, it is debatable exactly how much real influence they hold over those who follow them.¹⁸

Research Methodology

The aim of the study is to offer a comprehensive empirical reflection on influencer marketing opportunities and determine the impact of influencers on consumer behaviour of Generations Y and Z. We wanted to find out whether influencers, who promote products, can attract potential customers and encourage them to buy specific goods, and also identify differences between these two customer generations.

In order to achieve the stated objective, primary and secondary sources of information were collected and used. We present the findings related to researches conducted by various agencies to describe the current marketing reality in the subchapter titled Research Outlines. Secondary data was obtained from available scholarly sources, i.e. from studies and articles published by domestic and foreign authors and professional organisations. In order to process individual underlying data and formulate conclusions of the study, methods of analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction and the comparative method were applied. Our own marketing research was conducted in the period from September 2017 to May 2018.

The questionnaire was evaluated by contingency tables prepared in MS Excel; graphic representations of the obtained data were created subsequently. As we were interested in a deeper analysis of the results, the following assumptions were tested:

- *Assumption 1:* There are certain preferences for a specific social network, and these preferences vary by age groups.
- *Assumption 2:* There are differences in the reasons for following influencers between different age groups.
- *Assumption 3:* There is a dependency between the ability to influence the purchasing behaviour and the consumers' different age.

The questionnaire was processed in Google Forms and the respondents were asked to participate in the research on social networks and via e-mails. Some questionnaires were filled in printed form during personal meetings. Finally, 459 respondents from the Slovak Republic were involved, of which 48.6% represented Generation Y (people born in years 1981-1991) and 51.4% Generation Z (people born in years 1992-2001), as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

	Category	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Gender	Female	249	54.2%
	Male	210	45.8%
Age group	Generation Y	223	48.6%
	Generation Z	236	51.4%
Residence	City	210	45.8%
	Countryside	249	54.2%

¹⁸ *What Is an Influencer?*. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>>.

Economic activity of respondents	Employed	199	43.4%
	Unemployed	15	3.3%
	Student	225	49.0%
	Maternity leave	20	4.4%
Education	Primary education	82	17.9%
	Secondary education without A level	14	3.1%
	Secondary education	132	28.8%
	Bachelor's degree	74	16.1%
	Master's degree	151	32.9%
	PhD.	6	1.3%

Source: own processing

Research Outlines

Influencer marketing is becoming more and more popular every year, and many businesses see customer interest increasing along with sales growth that companies have achieved by using influencers in their campaigns. Influencers have built their credibility and authority over a large group of fans. Telling a brand's 'story' through influencers can help manage and connect with the target audience.

Research confirms that 92% of consumers say that they trust word-of-mouth recommendations of their acquaintances, relatives, friends or influencers more than any other type of advertising; 70% of teenage *YouTube* subscribers trust influencer opinions more than traditional celebrities and 40% of Millennials say that their favourite *YouTube* personality "understands them better than their friends". 81% of marketers who have already used influencer marketing judged it to be effective.¹⁹ Tomoson surveys have found out that influencer marketing has a strong ROI (on average, businesses generate \$6.50 for every \$1 invested in influencer marketing).²⁰

This affirms that influencer marketing is the fastest growing channel in online marketing and the fastest growing tool for acquiring customers.²¹ Influencer Orchestration Network compiled a cross-section of the most compelling stats together in one place, as follows:

- 51% of marketers say that video content produces the best ROI;
- 86% of women turn to social networks before making a purchase;
- 32% of US influencers who currently work with brands cite *Facebook* as the best platform, followed by *Instagram* at 24%;
- 71% of consumers are more likely to make a purchase based on a social media reference;
- 86% of the most viewed beauty videos on *YouTube* were made by influencers, compared to 14% made by beauty brands themselves. Beauty videos' views have been increasing by 65% year over year;
- 57% of beauty and fashion companies use influencers as part of their marketing strategies, while an additional 21% are also planning to add this strategy to their campaigns in 2018.²²

¹⁹ HARAN, R.: *How to Grow Your Business with Influencer Marketing*. [online]. [2018-09-10]. Available at: <<https://www.singlegrain.com/content-marketing-strategy-2/what-is-influencer-marketing-chris/>>.

²⁰ Tomoson. [online]. [2018-07-15]. Available at: <<https://www.tomoson.com/tour>>.

²¹ ĎURAČKOVÁ, L.: *Význam influencerov v online marketingu*. Released on 28th September 2016. [online]. [2018-07-28]. Available at: <<https://blog.mindshare.sk/2016/09/28/digital/uputajte-svojich-zakaznikov-vyznam-influencerov-online-marketingu/>>.

²² *Influencer Orchestration Network*. [online]. [2018-07-19]. Available at: <<https://www.ion.co/essential-stats-for-influencer-marketing-in-2017>>.

Consumers expect brands to establish conversations, make contacts. This trend allows influencers to possess more power than ever before. Through a partnership with the right influencers, brands are able to create a conversation with the desired audience segments. Linking brands with a suitable influencer represents the perfect link and is the most important prerequisite for success in Slovakia, too. If a brand is working with an influential person who is consistent in what they are promoting, success is guaranteed. The power of marketing influence lies in the fact that 3% of people can generate 90% of the effect.²³ When looking for brand influencers, it is important to look at the number of their followers on social networks. However, the number of followers does not define the impact. An important aspect is also the expertise and credibility that we call “affinity marketing”.

The relationship between influencers and their followers is a necessary variable. Marketing using influencers is the fastest growing communications platform that can change the stereotypes in advertising (see Figure 1). This is based on the results that are in favour of influencers and say that the target group is better penetrated in and its access to advertising is more positive. This leads to an increase of the advertising cost of large brands, as the effect is positive.

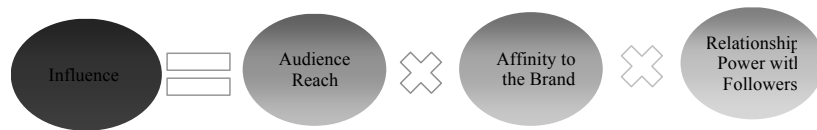


Figure 1: Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation
Source: ĎURAČKOVÁ, L.: Význam influencerov v online marketingu. Released on 28th September 2016. [online]. [2018-07-28]. Available at: <<https://blog.mindshare.sk/2016/09/28/digital/uputajte-svojich-zakaznikov-vyznam-influencerov-online-marketingu/>>.

There are also Slovak influencers who have become famous and successful thanks to the Internet. The use of influencers in Slovakia is still much cheaper than abroad. They are more affordable and inexpensive, and they are also an opportunity for medium-sized businesses to enrich their marketing by means of communication that are well-known across the world, but may still appear to be innovative in Slovakia. However, it is important to make sure that the promotion is not violent and the promoted products and services are of good quality.

Influencer Marketing: Brands Create Virtual Influencers

Nowadays, everything is really possible. While influencers have helped form brands in the past, the brands are creating their own influencers at present. Shudu Gram is a digital supermodel and Lil Miquela is a virtual influencer (see Figure 2). Both promote selected brands, are successful and appeal to millions of fans on *Instagram*. However, they do not really exist. Is that all right?²⁴



Figure 2: Shudu Gram is a digital model who rocks Fenty Beauty lipstick. Miquela Sousa is a computer-generated influencer who supports Black Lives Matter and advertises for Prada
Source: Shudu.gram. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/Be0ldl7F-Pu/?hl=en&taken-by=shudu.gram>>.
Lilmiquela. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/BhK8RQZltQr/?hl=en&taken-by=lilmiquela>>.

The problem of virtual brand ambassadors brings along new questions, either related to the principles of intellectual property, authenticity and credibility or to the moral principles. A lot of interesting information about this phenomenon of digital marketing has been introduced in an article published in *ADWEEK*. Although swapping the Kardashians for virtual influencers might sound like a dream that have come true, the reality is that virtual influencers and their creators bring their own set of PR and legal challenges. In the course of months, they have collectively amassed more than a million followers on *Instagram*. Shudu is being positioned more as a piece of art, like a mannequin, but Miquela is put forward as an ordinary girl. ‘She’ (through her creators) posts pictures of herself with purported friends on *Instagram*, claims to support Black Lives Matter and participates in media interviews.

Virtual or rather artificial influencers operate online, much like the real ones. Brands want to team up with them to tap into their fan base. Even if they are not originally designed to be brand ambassadors, with enough popularity, they will almost surely attract companies seeking endorsement deals. Shudu recently promoted Rihanna’s Fenty Beauty lipstick in an *Instagram* post that went viral, and Miquela pushes Prada and Chanel, among other brands.²⁵

There arises a question: If virtual influencers are so lifelike and intriguing that they are able to go viral, do we really need to hire human influencers to market our products?

Whether this trend will continue or whether virtual influencers will prove boring in the long run is just one issue of many to address here. After all, it is the unattainable assets mixed with the fatal flaws associated with real human beings that sustain the public’s interest. Celebrity has a cycle. Consumers may lift them up, then tear them down and later celebrate their comeback. It is the imperfection that ultimately creates connection. However, setting aside longevity issues, there are also many business-related and legal issues that need to be considered before we can declare that virtual influencers will put the humans out of business.²⁶

23 HOLOTA, T. et al.: Teória obmedzení – moderný nástroj riadenia kvality. In *Kvalita, technológia, diagnostika v technických systémoch*, 2014, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 47.

24 HAPÁK, P.: *Influencer marketing: Značky tvoria virtuálnych influencerov*. Released on 2nd July 2018. [online]. [2018-07-19]. Available at: <<https://marketeris.sk/clanok/influencer-marketing-znacky-tvorja-virtualnych-influencerov>>.

25 NOLAN, H.: *Brands Are Creating Virtual Influencers, Which Could Make the Kardashians a Thing of the Past: But Brands Could Face Legal Troubles Along the Way*. Released on 11th May 2018. [online]. [2018-07-19]. Available at: <<https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/brands-are-creating-virtual-influencers-which-could-make-the-kardashians-a-thing-of-the-past/>>.

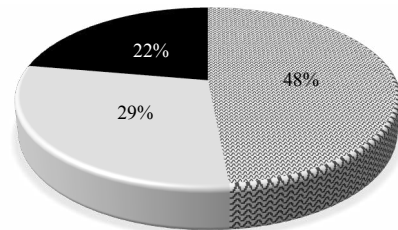
26 NOLAN, H.: *Brands Are Creating Virtual Influencers, Which Could Make the Kardashians a Thing of the Past: But Brands Could Face Legal Troubles Along the Way*. Released on 11th May 2018. [online]. [2018-07-19]. Available at: <<https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/brands-are-creating-virtual-influencers-which-could-make-the-kardashians-a-thing-of-the-past/>>.

Results of the Authors' Own Research

Our marketing research was conducted in order to determine the impact of influencers on consumer behaviour of Generations Y and Z. We wanted to find out whether influencers, who promote products, can attract potential customers and encourage them to buy products, also aiming to identify potential differences between these two consumer generations.

In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked whether they knew the term "influencer" or whether they had ever heard of this concept. We found that almost half of the respondents (48%) knew what this term meant, and 22% of the respondents said that they had already known about the concept of "influencer", but they did not know exactly what or who they were. Approximately one third of the respondents (30%) claimed they had never heard of this concept (see Figure 3).

In order to allow the respondents to continue filling in the questionnaire, it was necessary to explain the concept of influencer in the next step and offer examples of well-known influencers active on Slovak media market that our respondents could have met or heard about on social media. We released photos of three well-known influencers, including the most famous Slovak YouTuber and vlogger Gogo, the oldest YouTuber (as he calls himself) Matej 'Sajfa' Cifra and the popular blogger Sweet Lady Lollipop.

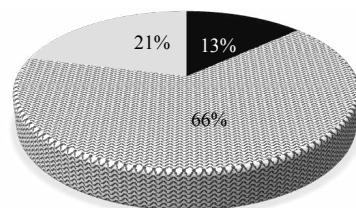


■ Yes ■ No ■ I have heard about it, but I do not know what it means

Figure 3: Knowledge of the "influencer" concept

Source: own processing

Since vloggers and bloggers are currently able to reach out to their target audience in a natural way and through creative content affecting many different groups of people, we wanted to find out more about the ways our respondents follow influencers on social networks (Figure 4). Based on the obtained data, we can see that up to 66% of the respondents regularly follow their influencers. The respondents (more precisely, 21% of them) say they sometimes encounter them or their contents on social networks, but do not follow their contributions regularly. Only 13% of the respondents do not track or look for any influencers on social networks.



■ No
 ■ Yes, I follow some of them
 ■ Sometimes I find them or their contents on social media, but I do not follow them

Figure 4: Following influencers on social networks

Source: own processing

In the following question, the respondents had the option of choosing one social network they followed most often (Figure 5), thus the most popular social networking platform. The most attractive social networks to monitor influencers are *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *YouTube*. It is quite complicated to unambiguously determine their rank in popularity. If we evaluate social networks from the point of view of individual consumer generations, it is possible to identify a clear preference and see differences between generations.

According to the results of our survey, for Generation Z, the most attractive social network to monitor influencers is *Instagram*, which was chosen by 115 respondents (49%). The reason may be that influencers or celebrities have the ability to establish a business account that has many benefits on this network, providing different statistics, the ability to promote products and a better feedback from fans. These profiles, to be of such a nature, have to be public, so that their tracking is accessible to anyone. The second most popular platform is *YouTube* preferred by 54 respondents (24% of the research sample). The reason is that YouTubers and vloggers who work there are nowadays the most powerful influencers, especially amongst young people. The third place belongs to *Snapchat* with a 17% share. *Facebook* was reported only by 20 respondents (8%).

For Generation Y, however, *Facebook* is the most popular social network (in case of 68% of the research participants belonging to this consumer generation). *YouTube* is the second most popular social network (14%) and *Instagram* (10%) is ranked third. For both generations, *Blog* and *Pinterest* were chosen by very few of the respondents. This may be due to the fact that most bloggers or other influencers work on all platforms where they have the opportunity to present their posts, and then fewer people visit their blogs.

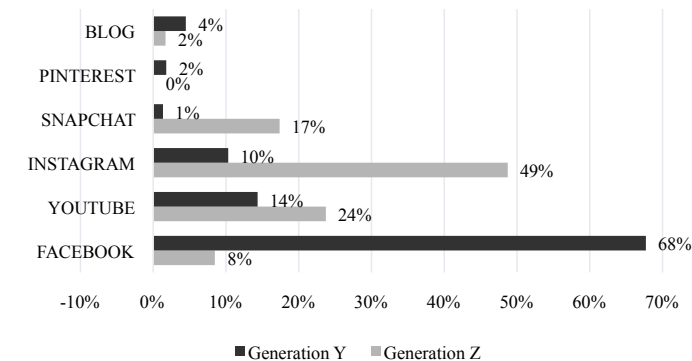


Figure 5: The most popular social networks

Source: own processing

In relation to the data obtained via this question and answers provided by the respondents, *Assumption 1*, where we assume that there are preferences for a specific social network and these preferences vary by age generation, was statistically tested.

H0: Preferences for a specific social network by age generation do not exist.

H1: There are preferences for a specific social network by age generation.

For evaluation, we used the non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. This test is used in situations where a comparison has to be made between an observed sample distribution and theoretical distribution. The results are shown in Table 2. Since the calculated value is greater than the critical value, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there exist preferences for a specific social network by age generation.

Table 2: Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test	
D-stat	0.231
D-crit	0.185
D-stat > D-crit The result is significant at $p < 0.05$.	

Source: own processing

In the following question, we aimed to find out what are the most common reasons for following influencers. As of the respondents who did not follow any influencers, they should have (hypothetically) state which reasons would have been most relevant to them if they had been interested in such contributions. Respondents had the option to select up to three responses. On basis of evaluating Generation Y, we can state that the most common reasons are *inspiration* (68%) and *reviews* (54%), as more than half of the respondents selected these reasons particularly. In the third position, with 43%, is the option *it is a part of my job*, followed by *relax* (39%) and *fun* (34%).

What is especially interesting, *fun* is the least important factor for Generation Y (34%); for Generation Z (78%), it is, however, the most important reason why to follow influencers. Even for Generation Z, *inspiration* is an important factor, as it was indicated by up to 44% of the respondents. The opportunity to *relax* also gained a great percentage (43%). Different percentages in comparison with Generation Y were gained by *reviews* (23%) and *it is a part of my job* (9%). We can say that for the younger generation, reviews are not as important as for people belonging to Generation Y (see Figure 6 below).

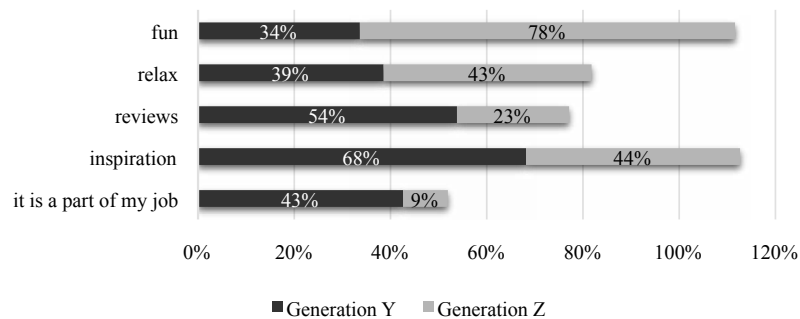


Figure 6: Reasons for following influencers

Source: own processing

The analysis of the most common reasons for following influencers was carried out by the Kruskal-Wallis Test, the results of which are given in Table 3. In connection with the evaluation of this question, we wanted to find out whether the choice of the particular option (the main reason) is different for Generation Y and Generation Z (*Assumption 2*). The following hypotheses were tested:

H0: There are no differences in the answers given by two different age generations.

H1: There are differences in the answers given by two different age generations.

Based on the theoretical level of significance, the zero hypothesis related to the same choice of answer by both age generations is rejected. In other words, we can assert that there are statistically significant differences in the choices associated with age-based reasons at the level of alpha significance.

Table 3: Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test

Kruskal-Wallis test:	
K (Observed value)	27.3982
K (Critical value)	4.7264
DF	2
p-value (Two-tailed)	< 0.0001
alpha	0.05

Source: own processing

Based on the results of Dunn's Test of Contrasts, we can confirm there are statistically significant differences between the two generational groups. Table 4 lists the P-Values of the paired comparison of each category.

Table 4: Results of Dunn's Test of Contrasts

	Reason-Generation Y	Reason-Generation Z
Reason-Generation Y	1	0,0099
Reason-Generation Z	0,0099	1

Source: own processing

The next question was aimed at the dependency between influencing the purchasing behaviour and the age generation (*Assumption 3*). We believe that young people aged 17-26 (Generation Z), for whom social networks have become an area of interest and tracking on a daily basis, are more influenced by their favourite influencers. A much smaller impact on purchasing behaviour is assumed in case of people aged 27-37 (Generation Y). To evaluate this question, we used the Fisher's Exact Test (see Table 5), testing the following hypotheses:

H0: There is no dependency between influencing the purchasing behaviour and the age generation.

H1: There is a dependency between influencing the purchasing behaviour and the age generation.

The dependence is expressed in Table 5 using the Phi Coefficient, the Contingency Coefficient and the Cramer Coefficient. The values of these coefficients indicate moderate to strong dependence.

Table 5: Results of Fisher's Exact Test

Statistic	DF	Value	Prob
Chi-Square	4	71.238	<.0001
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	4	43.1237	<.0001
Mantel-Haenszel Chi-Square	1	25.2437	<.0001
Phi Coefficient		0.782	
Contingency Coefficient		0.6132	
Cramer's V		0.5517	

Fisher's Exact Test	
Table Probability (P)	2.38E-11
Pr<= P	8.15E-09

Source: own processing

Based on Fisher's Exact Test results, we reject the zero hypothesis at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$. In other words, we can assert that there is a statistically proven dependency between influencing the purchasing behaviour and the age generation.

To provide a better explanation, we offer a visualisation of the obtained research data (Figure 7). Comparing the answers provided by each generation's representatives, we can identify several differences. According to the data, up to 41% of the Generation Z respondents regularly purchase goods on basis of influencers' recommendations, whereas only 19% of the respondents belonging to Generation Y purchase products or services based on influencers' recommendations. Another significant difference in responses is obvious in the options where the respondents claimed they did not believe influencers' recommendations; only 11% of the respondents of Generation Z, but twice as many respondents of Generation Y (24%) decided to mark this option.

Given the above-mentioned options, the opposite tendencies of the two generations were clearly confirmed. Approximately the same percentage of both generations stated they sometimes bought and tested what influencers had recommended. Both generations hesitate whether their recommendations are true, although Generation Y (26%) to a greater extent than Generation Z (17%). For more information, see Figure 7 below.

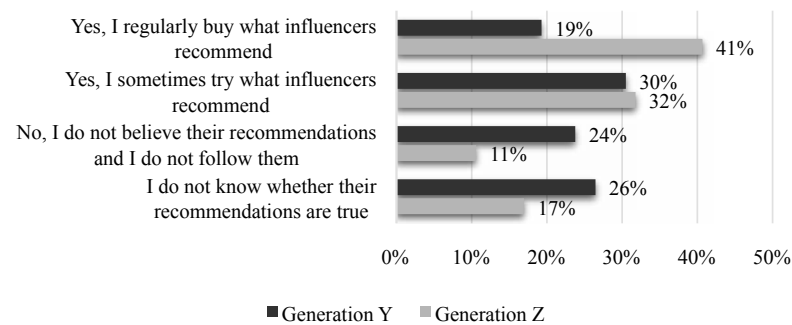


Figure 7: Influencing the purchasing behaviour by influencers
Source: own processing

Figure 8 presents how a contemporary consumer perceives influencers' posts promoting products of certain brands. Many posts, especially on *YouTube* channels, are focused on the fact that *YouTube* personalities have corporate sponsors who pay for product placement in their clips or production of online ads. The advantage of such promotion is authenticity, and people get first-hand reviews provided by a person they trust. By offering the individual options, we wanted to obtain an answer to the question whether people feel bothered or ignore such posts or perceive them as a part of their work. Seeing the data in Figure 8, it is clear that users of social networks currently accept brand-influencer cooperation, as indicated by the largest percentage of the respondents. The research also confirms that this type of product promotion is perceived positively and people like to watch or read influencers' posts. Up to half of the Generation Z respondents (50%) like to watch/read this kind of product placement, while only 35% of the Generation Y respondents marked this option. The smallest percentages are associated with the two remaining choices, so it can be said that such posts bother people just a little bit and almost none of the respondents ignore them. It is possible to summarise that the surveyed people consider influencers as an integral part of the online environment with a certain economic background.

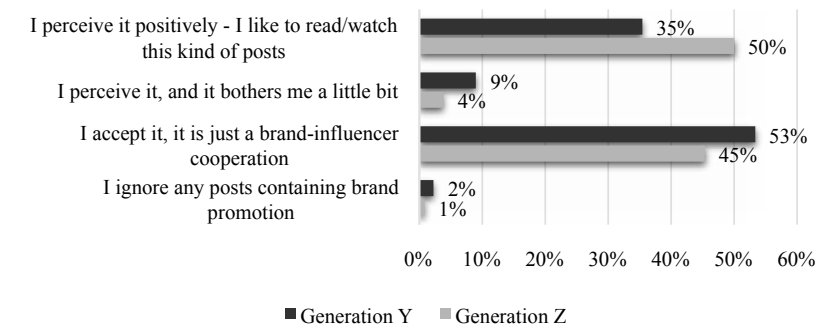


Figure 8: The ways consumers perceive the influencer-brand cooperation
Source: own processing

Discussion and Conclusions

Brand marketers are eager to partner with influencers, particularly to attract the Millennials. Moreover, it looks like this trend will continue. Influencer marketing appeals to marketers for a number of reasons; among other things, it allows them to do an end run around ad blocking. eMarketer forecasts that in 2018, more than one in four Internet users will employ software to block ads.²⁷ At this point it is adequate to say that online marketing has been just a new and different way of promoting goods, services or people. It has created a new form of media on which to peddle goods and services. In 2018, the average Internet user has at least 7 social media accounts. The current trend is that an average person spends over 2 hours a day on social media, average teenagers 9 hours. Social media are integrated into everything they do – from school, through work, to entertainment and hanging out with friends. Social media are anywhere where people are. They have become an integral part of what a business is to its customers.²⁸

As influencer-backed promotion continues to grow in popularity for marketers, various tactics have proven more effective than others. We see future in ambassadorships as one of the most effective uses of influencers, ahead of product reviews and brand mentions. Influencers, especially YouTubers, have a great impact on Internet economy by influencing purchasing behaviour and representing a source of information and entertainment for the young generation known as Millennials. This is part of an overall shift in how we prioritise word-of-mouth information over paid television, magazine and newspaper ads; it is hard to ignore the power of these unofficial brand ambassadors. Influencer marketing provides an opportunity for companies to leverage the power of social proof, while relying on those who already have a large following.²⁹

In our study, we have outlined the current issue of virtual brand ambassadors which brings along new questions. We believe that replacing real people by digital constructs brings many new challenges and problems to address. What does this mean for influencer marketing? A major advantage identified in relation to using virtual influencers is the power they can give to a brand. As the designer team behind the artificial influencer has total control over the content created for the campaign, using virtual influencers can be, in fact, less risky. The content is, quite naturally, designed to perfectly match the given promotional request. Moreover, this strategy can allow brands to reach a younger audience, and accounts such as Lil Maquela are very attractive to Millennials, especially to Generation Z. In addition, the publicity gained by these virtual accounts going viral can also be beneficial to brands, as it further enhances their audience.

²⁷ eMarketer. Released on 13th December 2016. [online]. [2018-08-21]. Available at: <<https://www.emarketer.com/Article/Marketers-Boost-Influencer-Budgets-2017/1014845>>.

²⁸ Lyfemarketing. Released on 15th June 2018. [online]. [2018-09-24]. Available at: <<https://www.lyfemarketing.com/blog/importance-of-digital-marketing/>>.

²⁹ HARAN, R.: *How to Grow Your Business with Influencer Marketing*. [online]. [2018-09-10]. Available at: <<https://www.singlegrain.com/content-marketing-strategy-2/what-is-influencer-marketing-chris/>>.

On the other hand, the use of virtual influencers is also subject to criticism. A key flaw identified is the lack of authenticity: how can an influencer genuinely promote a product if they cannot see, touch or use it? Their reviews and recommendations are entirely artificial and based upon mimicking trends alone, which does not sit well against a backdrop of increasing importance and awareness of fake news and a growing number of legal regulations ensuring honest advertisements. Both brands and influencers must find a way to remedy the issue of inauthentic product endorsements in order to pursue a successful virtual influencer campaign.³⁰

It is also a great opportunity for medium-sized brands to enrich their marketing with such forms of communication that are trendy in the world and show the best returns. According to website *Convince and Convert*, each dollar invested in the campaign with an influencer is estimated up to 6.5 times.³¹ That suggests the space is likely a multibillion-dollar industry – and growing. Most marketers consider doubling their investment in 2018. This is no surprise, since audiences turn to social media influencers more often than ever to be entertained and well-informed.³² Without any doubts, we can conclude that influencer marketing is one of the fastest growing communication platforms, which in addition weakens or even negates several stereotypes related to advertising. This statement is based on the results of the mentioned surveys, which are in favour of this new type of marketing communication – the target group is much better penetrated in and its approach to advertising is more positive.

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