

Public opinion and influencers on social media: the valuation of their effects by generation Y and Z in Hungary Public opinion and influencers on social media

Bendegúz Richárd Nyikos¹

ABSTRACT: Internet technologies made it possible for organisations to reach masses of people. It has also become essential to get to know the right audience in order to achieve a better return on their investments in marketing campaigns. However, with the ever-changing world and fast-paced evolution of digital technologies the consumer preferences have also altered.

Digital communication is mostly used by the younger generations. Even though in terms of their age there are also a slight difference between generation Y and generation Z, there are significant differences between them based on their consumption habits.

The internet and the available forums allow people to express their feelings. With the introduction of social media virtually anybody can let their peers and the public know how they value different things, goods, services or, as in fact, also companies. Additionally, the various digital platforms and social media has brought the term “influencer” into life: a form of opinion leaders have born whose power can also be leveraged by the companies. However, it must also be taken into account that there might be differences in the reaction of the different cohort: this research aims to discover how the generation Y and generation Z in Hungary values the effects of the opinion of both consumers or the well-known public figures.

KEYWORDS: public opinion, opinion leader, influencer, social media, decision-making

JEL Codes: D91, E71, M31, O33

¹ Nyikos, Bendegúz Richárd PhD-student, University of Sopron István Széchenyi Economics and Management Doctoral School

Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become widely introduced due to the acceptance and the increasing number of users of the different social networking platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. As these platforms are becoming increasingly vital part in the everyday life of many people, besides connection with peers and entertainment they also must be recognised as powerful psychological tools for business users. In the process of information search and opinion formation, users are now active participants of the mechanism which greatly affects the decision making process of other consumers. (Höllig–Hasebrink, 2016; Frees–Koch, 2018).

Due to the fact that the data and information on the Internet have become virtually endless and in some cases contradicting, the development of the networks lead to the recommendation system applied in order to allow people to have access to those contents which are more likely to be important on a personal level. (Adomavicius–Tuzhilin, 2005) However, this might also mean that based on a specific criteria created by the system some people might only see filtered information without their consent. (Burke, 2002).

The effect of public voice and the recommendation of public figures and opinion leaders have become increasingly important and can effectively manipulate public opinion in either a positive or negative way (Shang, 2019).

The effects of public opinion and ratings available on social media must also be considered as powerful tools in the decision making process. Users are able to share messages not only through private channels but also on public domains making it available to others to disseminate (Lottridge–Bentley, 2018).

Companies have realized that not only the traditional celebrities can be used in their campaigns. Self-proclaimed opinion leaders such as bloggers, vloggers, YouTubers or Tik-Tokers are able to influence a large audience in the online space. With their increasing, more and more companies see the business potential of working with influencers (Alghizzawi, 2019).

Literature review

In order to discover the effect of opinion leaders, the process of influence and persuasion, as well as stages of reaction must be described. According to McGuire (1985), influence and persuasion are actually recognized as the result of a multi-step process.

The first condition for changing attitudes is the emergence of new information in the system. Within the stage of inclusion, two sub-sections can be distinguished: observation and understanding. In case of observation, the attention of the consumers should be brought to the recently presented and received information, while understanding means that the affected individuals must be able to understand the message and in case of misunderstanding, the desired change in attitude will not occur.

It is important to emphasize that acceptance is not the same as the understanding phase due to the fact that an individual might not necessarily agree with the message, even though his or her attention has been successfully brought to it. In case of such situations, there will be no change in attitude. Therefore, it can be deduced, that acceptance of the message is vital.

Due to the fact that the modern consumer can be exposed to a significant amount of external stimuli and messages, the success of the influencer lies in the fact that despite consumers can receive conflicting messages, they are still able to focus on those they find the most interesting and outstanding.

The influencer might be successful throughout the previous stages, however, if the influenced person does not make behavioural changes or does not change his or her pattern of behaviour, overall, the persuasion cannot be considered successful. The process of influence and persuasion must be followed by an appropriate response by the consumer. It has a great importance to understand how individuals can react to the influencer. According to researchers in behavioural sciences, there are four different stages of reaction consumers can have towards to affecting message.

The individual refuses to the change his or her attitude. Occasionally, a conflicting message can result in an "open rebellion" (Atkinson et al., 1999). When individuals are able to resist influential aspirations, the attempt must be considered as unsuccessful, therefore the initial attitude of

the target audience can also become even more prominent and resistant to any future attempts to influence (Tormala–Petty, 2004).

The influencer has the power to both reward and punish. In this case, there is no actual change in attitude, the individual aims to conform to the influencer in order to either gain advantage or to avoid punishment. Even if the influencer believes that the alteration of attitude was successful, it must be carefully monitored or evaluated in order to reveal if the change will prevail for a longer period (Kelman, 1961).

The influencer is often viewed as an either an attractive, trustworthy or experienced individual by the person who is affected with the message (Ohanian, 1990). In this case, the focus is on the attraction or connection, which can actually result in a change in attitude. However, this newly acquired attitude is highly vulnerable, therefore, if the influencer changes his or her attitude, the influenced individual might also change it. It must be noted that if the influenced person explicitly dislikes the influencing person, he or she simply and instantly rejects the views and patterns of behaviour of the influencer (O'Reilly–Chatman, 1986).

The individual finds the influencing person entirely reliable and convincing, as a result of which a long-term and profound change of attitude will take place. Additionally, the influenced person also acquires the behaviour patterns represented by the influencer. According to Kelman (1961), influencing can be successful because the behaviour induced is consistent with the value system of the individual. In order to increase the likelihood of success on internalization, influencers who have experience with the displayed product or service and those with expertise in the topic should be used in connection with the sponsored content (Pomerantz, 2014).

Besides the description of the phenomenon and process of influencing it is necessary to also examine the individuals who are able to influence the different attitudes, feelings and behaviours of others in a given group. These individuals are referred to in the literatures as reference groups and opinion leaders. Reference groups can be seen as groups that people admire or respect, thereby tending to embrace the attitudes and behaviours of that group, that is, to identify with it, thereby significantly changing the behaviour of an individual (Atkinson et al., 1999). Not only do general groups influence general behaviour, but they also play a significant role in purchasing decisions of the customers: the desire of consumers to resemble or imitate the group they admire can strongly influence their product or service or brand choice (Hofmeister–Tóth, 2014).

Based on the type of influencing power an individual or a reference group has, there are four categories that aims to differentiate the influencers and opinion leaders: the power of reference, the power of information, the power of expertise, the power of rewarding and the power of coercion (Solomon–Bamosy, 2006).

Power of reference refers to the case when an individual looks up to the characteristics of a person or a group or tries to imitate the attributes, resulting in the group becoming a guide to shaping consumer preferences. It means that the consumers voluntarily change their behaviour patterns in order to identify or meet the reference person or group.

In case of power of information, a person or a group has knowledge that others wish to also acquire. People with such power have the potential to influence consumer perceptions, since these consumers see the said individuals or groups with the relevant information as bearers of truth who can be entirely trusted, therefore their recommendations should be applied.

There are some occasional overlaps between the power of information and power of expertise. However, influencers with expertise are viewed as experts in a given topic, which means that they have specific knowledge in a specific field. In some cases, an individual or group can have the means to provide positive reinforcement. Therefore, it can be stated, that the person or group has this specific power over individual or group of customers, only if the reward has a certain value. In general, this power of coercion refers to the act when a person or groups is influenced through social or physical intimidation. There are several tools which are only effective in the short term and will not result in changes in behaviour or attitudes on a long-term basis.

The psychological effect of brand ambassadors can also be leveraged by reference groups or influencers. The concept of cognitive dissonance has been defined by Festinger (1970) has been widely used in connection with decision theories, as well as examined by Pankotay and Nyikos (2021) through its effect on consumer behaviour. In addition to the general effect on the behavioural patterns it has already been established than, in some cases, a well-known character does not necessary have to fit a brand or product – which also supports the theory that there are different dimensions of ambassadors and opinion leaders that might have an even more powerful influence on consumers (Nyikos, 2020).

The concepts of influencers and opinion leaders are very similar to the reference group, as influencers can be considered as the opinion leaders of the 21st century who are highly active on social platforms. These individuals are members of the group who can be seen as a kind of mediator in the sense of communication, giving advice or information through informal communication, thereby influencing other group members (Szcurski, 2017).

In addition, users of the various platforms can be classified as influencers in case of having an extremely high number of followers and a significantly dedicated follower base, therefore they own a certain level of influencing power (Lou et al., 2019). According to Varga et al. (2018), from the users point of view, influencers are primarily considered as individuals who undertake sponsorships and product recommendations.

Influencers resemble to ordinary consumers, which makes users much more likely to identify with them, making them appear more authentic in their eyes than celebrities or other brand ambassadors (Glucksmann, 2017). However, it must also be noted that influencers can have experience with certain products and services or expertise in certain areas (Lou–Yuan, 2019).

The personality of a typical opinion leader or influencer have been defined by a range of professionals. The opinion leaders or influencers can be considered as public individuals who consciously distinguish themselves from the crowd. They promote individualization and consider themselves unique (Chan–Misra, 1990). Based on the finding of Töröcsik (2009) it must also be added that in certain cases they have expert knowledge in specific topics, therefore their followers expect guidance and advice from them. Additionally, a younger individual with a higher education, income and/or status compared to the average of his or her age group.

In addition, influencers can be also considered as the ambassadors of certain places such as towns or cities. This phenomenon made it possible for the word “urban influencer” to be born which perfectly defines how well-known a particular person can help towns and other places to become known on a much wider scale (Papp-Váry, 2021).

Information published by opinion leaders can be classified as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) due to its economic connection to a product, a service or a brand. It can also be seen as a type of interpersonal

communication tool, where the channel facilitates the flow of information between consumers (Nyiró et al., 2012).

According to Alghizzawi (2019), social media allows a wide spectrum of types of e-WOM. Due to the fact that social networking platforms are always evolving and new alternatives are being developed, the list is constantly growing. The most commonly used practices and forms of communication regarding viral e-WOM are blogs, news, friends, chats, tweets, likes, shares and photos.

Involving influencers and treating them as part of a communication and marketing strategy has therefore become an increasingly common and necessary element in promoting businesses. This was generated by the previously discussed factors, which leads to the realization: in most cases, consumers trust more likely what influencers on social media recommends (Yetimoğlu-Uğurlu, 2020).

There is a wide variety of tools to be used throughout marketing campaigns on social media involving influencers: according to Papp-Váry (2019), product placements, giveaways, hashtag-campaigns and other, creative content creation are considered as highly successful methods.

Methodology

The different behavioural patterns of two generations have been examined in this study. The aim of this article is to uncover the feelings of the participants towards public opinions and opinion leaders. In addition, participants were also asked different questions regarding the channels they are using for their orders. Due to the lack of information about the comparison of the view of different generations of Hungarian consumers about public opinions and opinion leaders, the following questions have been asked in a questionnaire:

- Public opinions on social media are able to affect the way how people view a company in general. Do you agree with this?
- The influencers are able to affect the way how people view a company in general. Do you agree with this?
- How important is the opinion of an influencer to you in general in case of a brand of product in general?
- Have you ever purchased or would you purchase anything solely due to the recommendation of an influencer?

In order to gather more responses, an online questionnaire was used. While the majority of the participants are from the Western-Hungarian towns of Sopron and Győr, there are also answers collected from respondents who live in different parts in the country. Based on the sizes of the different age groups, generation Y and generation Z were chosen for this specific analysis.

Respondents were divided into two categories based on the year of their birth (Törőcsik, 2017):

- Participants born between the years of 1980 and 1995 are classified into the group of Generation Y.
- Participants born between the years of 1996 and 2010 are classified into the group of Generation Z.

Out of the total number of responses, 812 answers came from participants of generation Y and 1228 originated from respondents of generation Z.

The answers collected through the questionnaire were transformed in Microsoft Excel and the statistical data was examined and analysed in SPSS version 22.

Results of the questionnaire

Even though there are literatures and researches dealing with the behavioural patterns and the decision-making mechanism of the different generation based on the implications of social media channels, there are no data on the topics that compare generation Y and generation Z on a quantitative, numerical basis. Due to the lack of information we assume that there is no difference between the two generations, therefore we aim to accept the H_0 , according to which there should be no significant difference between generation Y and generation Z.

The first question on this matter aimed to discover how the participants of generation Y and generation Z feel about the public opinion available online and whether they believe in the effect they have on the decision-making. Participants were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, 1 meaning their complete disagreement, while 5 meaning that they completely agree.

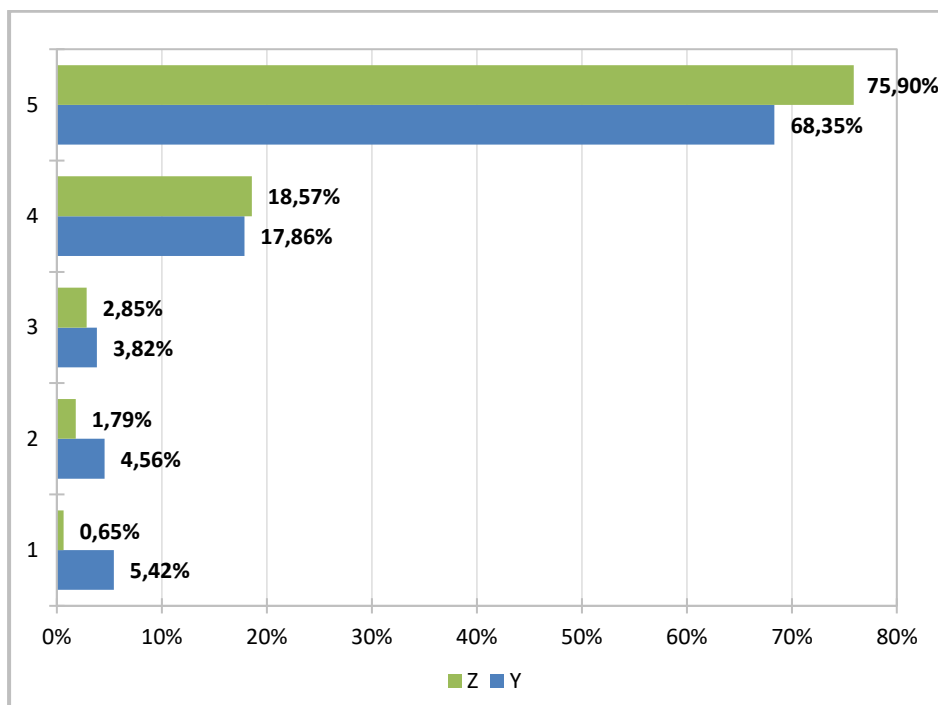


Figure 1: The way how generation Y and Z values the effect of public opinion on the view of others on a company in general

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

According to *Figure 1* presented above, in case of both generations the majority of the respondents (75.90% and 68.35%) completely believe that public opinion on social media has an effect on decision-making. The ranking of the alternative answers based on the respective percentages are the same in the case of both age groups.

By taking a look at the average values of the total number of answers for the two generations it can be seen that there is a difference of 0.285 between the two values. Based on the differences between the standard deviation of the 2 groups we assume that they are significantly different, however, we additionally also do a t-test.

Figure 2 of the Independent Samples Test tells us that based on the significance value of 0,000 with Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and 0,000 value for the 2-tailed significance test the null hypotheses must be rejected, meaning that the variances of the two groups are not even close to equal, hence there is a significant difference between them.

Group Statistics										
		Generation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
PublicOpinion	Y		812	4,39	1,113	,039				
	Z		1228	4,68	,690	,019				

Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
PublicOpinion	Equal variances assumed	161,263	,000	-7,176	2038	,000	-,285	,040	-,363	-,207	
	Equal variances not assumed			-6,535	1211,154	,000	-,285	,044	-,371	-,200	

Figure 2: Independent samples t-test to compare the values of question 1

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

The second question was used to uncover how participants feel about the connection between influencers and their effect on the view of certain companies. Similarly, participants were asked to pinpoint their feelings on a Likert-scale of 5, from complete disagreement to complete agreement.

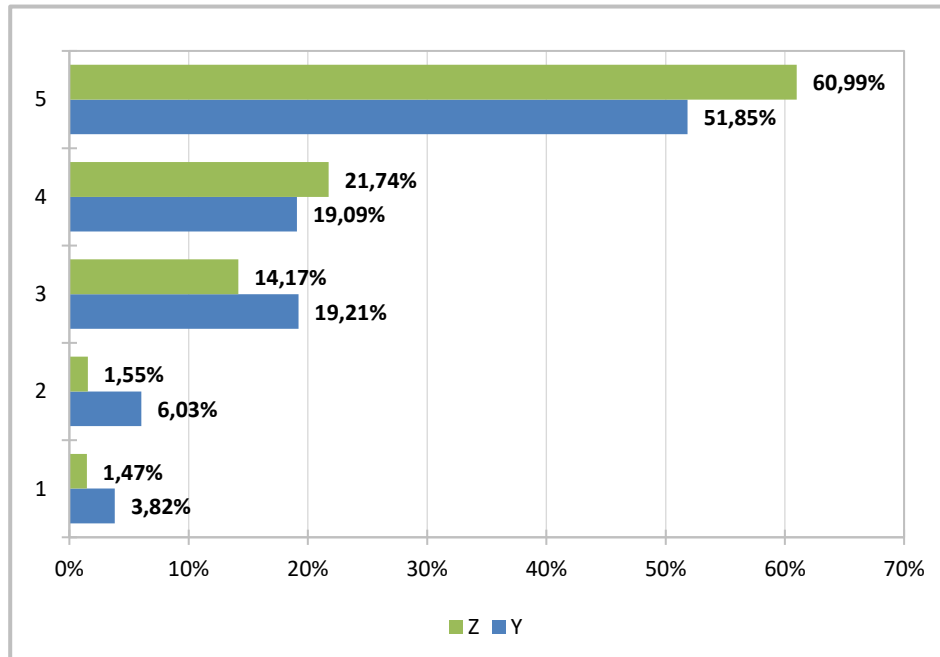


Figure 3: The way how generation Y and Z values the effect of influencers on the view of others on a company in general

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

The results presented in *Figure 3* are similar to the previously experiences values in the case of this comparison, the majority of the respondents with 51.85 (generation Y) and 60.99% (generation Z) completely agree with the statement. However, it must be noted that in case of generation Y, the values of 4 and 3 achieved only slightly different numbers: 19.09% and 19.21%, respectively, therefore the ranking of answers based on the number of respondents were different in the two cases.

When it comes to the comparison of the average values of the two groups, there is a 0.314 difference between the two means (*Figure 4*). Based on the results of the Independent Samples Test, the null hypothesis was rejected meaning that the two values of the two groups are significantly different.

Group Statistics										
		Generation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
InfluencerOpinion	Y		812	4,09	1,135	,040				
	Z		1228	4,41	,882	,025				

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-Test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
InfluencerOpinion	Equal variances assumed	70,265	,000	-7,018	2038	,000	-,314	,045	-,402	-,227
	Equal variances not assumed			-6,672	1436,050	,000	-,314	,047	-,407	-,222

Figure 4: Independent samples t-test to compare the values of question 2

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

The third element of the questionnaire aimed to explore how the two generations value the importance of the opinion of influencers on a personal level by using the 1-5 Likert-scale ranging from completely unimportant to completely important.

By taking a look at *Figure 5* based on the answers given to the 3rd question, there are highly notable differences between the two examined generations.

In the case of generation Y, most of the respondents valued the overall, personal importance of influencers as a 2 (62.32%). The number values of 4 and 3 achieved a highly similar number with 18.97% and 16.01%, respectively. The options of “completely important (0,99%) and “completely unimportant” (1.72%) were the two least frequently picked answers.

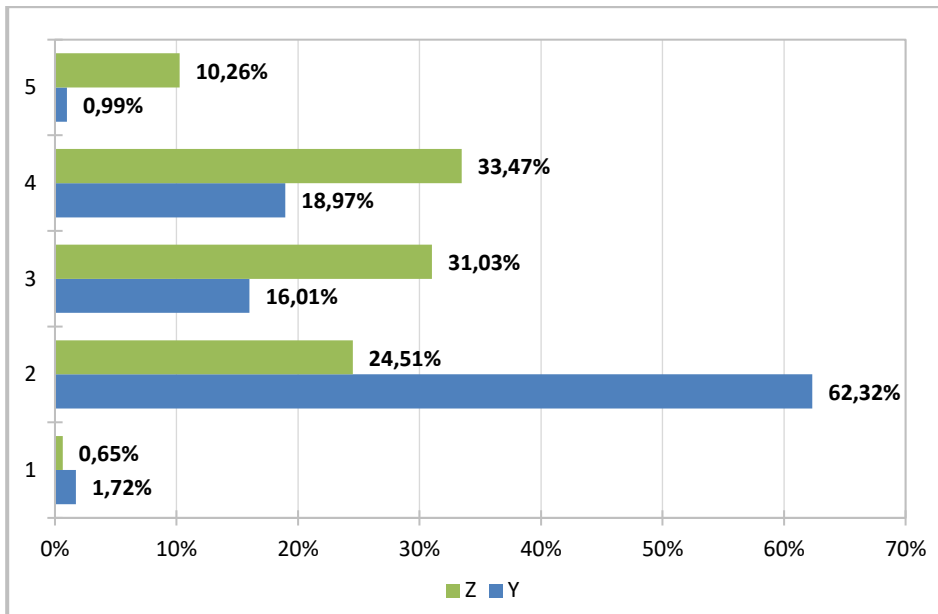


Figure 5: The importance of the opinion of influencers on brands or products for generation Y and Z in general

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

When it comes to generation Z, the values of 4 and 3 were only a couple percentages apart from each other (33.47% and 31.03%, respectively). Similarly to the results of the previous age group, “completely important (10.26%) and “completely unimportant” (0,65%) were the two least favourable options. The average values of the answers by the two groups were only slightly different with a value of 0.003.

Group Statistics										
		Generation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Influencer Importance	Y		812	2,55	,849	,030				
	Z		1228	2,55	,864	,025				

Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Influencer Importance	Equal variances assumed	,017	,896	,074	2038	,941	,003	,039	-.073	,079	
	Equal variances not assumed			,074	1757,179	,941	,003	,039	-.073	,079	

Figure 6: Independent samples t-test to compare the values of question 2

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

Figure 6 contains the results of the Independent Samples Test which prove that the difference is in fact not significant due to the fact that the significance value of 0,0896 from Levene's Test and the 2-tailed significance value of 0,941. Therefore, we accept the null hypothesis.

The last questions focused on the purchase decision made based on the recommendations of the influencers. Participants had three separate options to choose from to justify their behaviour. This question also aimed to discover if expertise is necessary when it comes to making a choice or any person they like or follow can have an effect on the decision-making process – even though they might not have a certain degree of knowledge in a given topic.

Table 1: Influence of opinion leaders on decision making

	Only if I like or follow the person on social media	Only if the person has expertise (burger & gastro blogger)	Not interested in such recommendations
<i>Generation Y</i>	150	184	478
<i>Generation Z</i>	504	622	102

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

As presented in *Table 1*, in case of generation Y, it can be clearly seen that the most popular alternative was the answer of “not interested in such recommendations”, while this option was the least favourable for the younger generation. According to the table it can be stated that generation Z relies more heavily on the recommendations of influencers in general.

It must also be noted that expertise is more important than personal likeability or sympathy in case of both generations.

Based on the frequency of answers relative to the total samples (812 for generation Y and 1228 for generation Z), *Figure 7* was generated in order to have a more visually appealing presentation of the results which also allows us to analyse the compared results more effectively.

According to the chart below it can be said that the majority of generation Y (58,87%) is clearly not interested in the recommendation of influencers. In case of generation Z, the results show that a relatively small group (102 people accounting for 8,31%) shared this opinion.

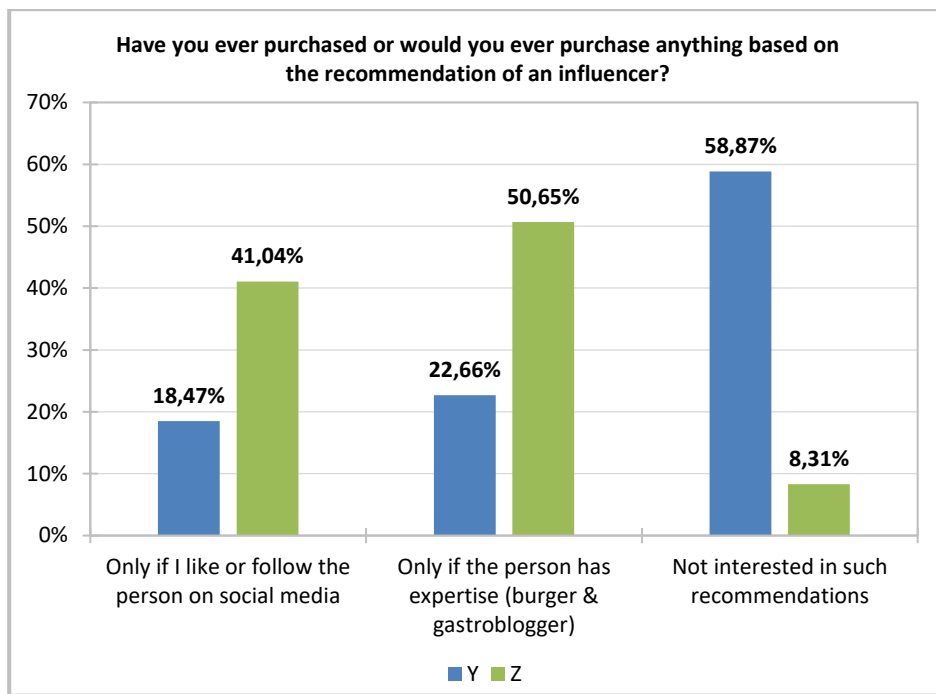


Figure 7: The willingness to make a purchase decision based on the recommendation of an influencer

Source: Own questionnaire (own editing)

Based on the results it can be concluded that generation Z is seemingly more open for the recommendations of influencers, however – similarly to generation Y –, they are more likely to trust a person who has an actual expertise or some degree of knowledge in a certain topic or about a product.

Conclusion

It has been proven multiple times that social media in general can have a significant effect on consumer behaviour. The various channels made it possible for individuals to gather followers and become opinion leaders. Their power heavily relies on the personality rather than their actual knowledge in any areas in general, however their expertise and experience can also positively affect the size of their following base.

The value and the degree of the effect of influencer originate from 3 sources, which can also be leveraged in social media marketing:

- **Social Reach:** Influencers can reach hundreds of thousands of consumers through their own social media and blogs.
- **Original content:** Influencers produce unique content that is typically effective marketing content for the brand.
- **Consumer trust:** Influencers maintain a strong relationship with their audience, who typically trust the influencer's opinion.

The influencers can play a significant role in the flow of information, in the formation of the opinion of a group. They have more prestige than the others within the community. Involving one or two opinion leaders in the preparation of the decision can be very useful, it can speed up the formation of the desired opinion. During informal communication, the opinion leader provides advice or information about a product or group of products, regarding which brand is the best among many, or how the given product can be used. An opinion leader is able to control the attitudes of others.

Researchers suggest that younger generations are more interested in following influencers across the different social media channels. Even though there are comparisons on an international level available, there is only a few quantitative, statistical data available about how the behavioural patterns of the different Hungarian generations can be affected by influencers.

This research aimed to discover how the different generations value public opinion and the personal opinion of influencers on social media. Based on the results of the questionnaire, there is a significant difference between their valuations and in addition, generation Z does in fact value the opinion of others more than the older consumers.

In general, it can be said that that both generations believe that the opinion of others on social media can influence the decision of other consumers - regardless whether this actual opinion originates from other consumers or influencers on social media. However, it must be stated that generation Z would rely more heavily on the opinion of an influencer.

In addition, the difference between the valuation of the importance of the opinion of such person is statistically significant. It must also be added, that based on the data both generations believe that the opinion of the public is more important than the recommendation of opinion social media influencers.

When it comes to making an actual purchase decision based on the recommendation of an influencer, the difference between the two generations is even more prominent: while the majority (58,87%) of generation Y is clearly not interested in such recommendations, generation Z, on the other hand, is far more likely (91,69% of the respondents) to buy something solely for this reason. Based on the results of the questionnaire it must also be added that having knowledge, expertise or experience in a certain topic would help an influencer to increase the power they have over the decision-making process of the Internet and social media users.

Future outlook

Based on the number of respondents the sample unfortunately cannot be considered representative for the category populations due to time limitations. There are constantly new responses registered to the questionnaire, therefore it might be interesting to have an additional analysis once the sample reached a higher number. Introducing additional questions to an even broader audience, including more participants from other regions in Hungary and also from other generation would result in a more valuable and representative research.

The effect of influencers and social media marketing in general could be further explored by introduction additional multiple choice and open-ended questions in order to have a more complex picture of the behavioural patterns of the different generations. Lastly, consumers might not be aware of the risks associated with their online behaviour and purchases associated with following influencers and making decisions based on recommendations: the connection between opinion leaders and data regulations and privacy could be also researched (Balogh–Mészáros, 2020).

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