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Influencers as a Segment of Digital Marketing Communication – Generation Y Attitudes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has affected all segments of society and economy, fundamentally changing the way in which businesses deliver value (Domazet et al., 2019). Marketing communication has become, to a large extent, integrated in digital environment, which has motivated marketing practicioners to employ social media for creating digital bond with their customers (Gardašević et al., 2018). In realizing their marketing campaigns, marketers increasingly engage social media influencers to endorse and promote their products or services (Schouten, et al., 2019). Those individuals can be „Instafamous personalities", bloggers or vloggers, who have become celebrities themselves and therefore suitable mediums for drawing attention to specific causes, products, events etc. Companies are engaging social media influencers in order to generate publicity and ensure the spillover effect of the individual's positive image to the image of a company or a brand. Authors state that social media influencers are individuals who have gained recognition due to their expertise regarding social media use. Furthermore, by covering specific topics, mostly beauty, fashion, fitness or lifestyle in general, social media influencers became prominent opinion leaders in their fields. Their popularity might be a result of the fact that people can easily relate to them, or because they are perceived as honest and competent information providers.

Considering the fact that social media influencers have become an important factor in realization of promotional campaigns, the aim of this paper is to investigate emerging trends within this phenomenon. Observing studies realized worldwide, a research on the attitudes of Generation Y (hereafter Gen Y) in Serbia towards influencer marketing was conducted. Gen Y was placed in the center of attention of this research as it is the first digitally literate generation. Moreover, this generation is believed to be the trigger of youth economic boom (morganstanley.com). This research was also meant to provide answers on customers' motivation to trust the opinion of influencers. Bearing in mind the stated issues, this paper is organized as follows: First, authors provided literature review on social media influencers phenomenon. Second, methodology of an empirical research conducted for the purposes of this paper was elaborated. Third,

Abstract: The aim of the research presented in this paper is to provide insights into marketing communication changes induced by digital transformation and social media use. Contemporary marketing communication strategies are observed in the context of dominant information sources shift, as well as demographic trends that have placed Generation Y in marketing theorists' and practitioners' focus of interest. This paper examines the role and significance of prominent social media users – influencers in creating contemporary marketing communication. Considering the fact that modern customers are characterized by a high degree of digital sophistication, the research in this paper focused on the prominence of social media as main sources of information sharing. This paper presents the results of an empirical research which aim was to examine the attitudes of Generation Y members in Serbia regarding influencer marketing. The contribution of this paper is reflected in the critical analysis of obtained results, thus increasing the corpus of relevant knowledge.

Keywords: *influencer marketing, success factor, digital marketing communication, digital sophistication, generation Y.*

research results and discussion are presented. Finally, research conclusions are presented and recommendations for further research are provided.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Exposed to variety of electronic gadgets, members of Generation Y have grown up during a period of time characterized by instant global communication and media saturation (Barbagallo, 2003). Popular culture, emergence of social media and reality television programs had a strong influence on them (Parment, 2013). Gen Y members were born in the period of time between 1980 and 1996 (Tanyel et al., 2013). It is argued that such as Internet-mediated communication, smartphones and other digital technology devices have become focal point of Gen Y life segments such as education, social interactions and work activities (Gibson, Sodeman 2014). D'alessandro (2018) adds that technology and digital communication have a significant impact on how this generational cohort seeks for employment and search for news and events. Of note is a research of Pempek et al. (2009), reporting that 85% of college students use social media for "facilitating social relationships".

Gen Y expresses interest in wide variety of media, they use blogs, reviews, and social networks on a regular basis to express their interests and feelings and state opinions (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010). They consume several media simultaneously, which is a characteristic that might overwhelm senior generations (Luck, Mathews, 2010). Media meshing represents global behavioral trend which implicates that Gen Y share their attention span on several media at once. For instance, they can browse the Internet while listening to music and texting. Therefore, Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) conclude that one of distinctive qualities of this generational cohort is the facileness they demonstrate in navigating digital technologies. Gen Y is observed as a "driving force of online communications" based on their comfortableness in using digital media (Mangold, Taken Smith, 2011).

Observing media consumption among Gen Y members, authors reported that more than 90% of research participants claimed using some type of social media on a daily basis, most often for collecting and disseminating information (Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013). It was also reported that young adults perceived social media as valuable news source (Wohn & Bowe, 2016), while others use it to obtain information in decision-making processes (Wang et al., 2012). There-

fore, this demographic group is prone to benefit from social media in sense of finding best purchase deals, gaining knowledge on products utilization, problem solving and achieving interaction with other consumers and brands. As a result of this propensity, it can be concluded that Gen Y members show considerable tendency for becoming market mavens (Mangold, Taken Smith, 2011). Market mavens are consumers who provide others with useful information and advices on products, services, purchasing points and other market aspects and are eager to start discussions on these topics (Goodey, East, 2008).

Social media influencers are „individuals who mastered self-presentation strategies on social media, by which they established a unique identity and gathered a substantial number of followers who are attracted to their personal brand image" (Khamis et al., 2016). They are observed as a new form of third party intermediary who shapes the attitudes of target audience members via blogs, tweets and social media posts (Peković et al., 2019). Abidin (2016) argues on the impact of influencers on members of social media communities, stating that Instagram users shape their behavior according to the content that these microcelebrities post online (Chae, 2018)this study examined the psychological process through which social media use and personality traits affect females' envy toward influencers through social comparison. Specifically, this study tested whether social media use variables (exposure to influencers' social media, interest in specific content on influencers' social media. Microcelebrities are a product of social media age, as interactive multimedia platforms have enabled individuals to create amusing content about their lifestyle and daily activities and invite other users of the platform to act accordingly (Khamis et al., 2016). According to the Association of National Advertisers (2018), social media influencers have rising significance in creating companies' digital media marketing campaigns due to the fact that increasing number of customers is creating opinion and making purchase decision based on word-of-mouth communication (Hughes, et al., 2019). Literature indicates that social media influencers became prominent opinion leaders because they are technically approachable and easy to identify with (Jin, Muqaddam, 2019), unlike celebrities such as athletes or artists who were, almost exclusively, engaged in promotional campaigns.

Arguing on the significance of social media influencers' engagement in realization of marketing strategies, Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) stated that they help in brand engagement improvement, unlike celeb-

rities who help with raising brand awareness. Social media influencers incorporate brands and products into their daily lives, which therefore become main topic of their online stories and discussions. By featuring specific products in their videos, blog or social media posts, influencers provide them with significant media attention. The specificity of influencers' contribution is related to the environment in which promoted products are displayed. By showing how products can be used for resolving everyday issues, influencers can showcase them in an environment which customers are familiar with and can easily relate to, which is not the case with traditional TV commercials or print media advertisements. It can be concluded that the credibility of user generated content, which is a result of a personal experience, has much bigger impact on customers' perception than traditional advertisements and promotional activities.

Researchers (Ki, Kim, 2019) emphasize the role and significance of social media influencers within marketing and promotion strategies. These authors argue that customers perceive brands as more relevant when endorsed by influencers rather than celebrities. Customers observe influencers as „one of them" and consequently have more trust in their opinion or the message they share, rather than the message created by companies and communicated by a celebrity who doesn't have to believe in it or personally support it. Furthermore, authors state the results of a research conducted by Influencer Marketing Hub (2019), which indicated that „businesses are receiving $5.20 on average for each $1 spent on influencer marketing", 92% of marketing specialists perceive influencer marketing as an effective tool for reaching the aims stated in a marketing strategy, while 63% of marketing specialists has an intention to increase the budget for influencer marketing activities in the following year.

Authors argue on different impacts that influencers have on their followers, stating that they can motivate followers to embrace and cherish specific aesthetics, cultivate healthy lifestyle habits (Pilgrim, Bohnet-Joschko, 2019), support specific brands (Kolo et al., 2018) and promote online learning activities (Shen, et al., 2017). Since companies are constantly searching for a manner in which their messages could be communicated effectively, finding a suitable partner among social media influencers seems to be an appropriate solution. What companies are trying to achieve are lower rates of message resistance and avoidance. Nowadays, social media users often sign in to social media in order to search for product information, as well as to collect influencers' feedback on products or services, as they rely more on the content created by other users than companies (Peković et al., 2019). Authors (De Veirman, et al., 2017) explain this phenomenon by stating that brands are turning to influencers because they are perceived as "trusted tastemakers" by their followers and other social media users.

It is argued that digital business transformation and customer relationship management through digital communication channels can improve companies' micro-competitiveness (Domazet, 2018). Therefore, it is worth observing how rapid technological development and customer induced trends have shaped contemporary marketing communication. Due to the fact that communication created by social media influencers is gaining significant interest from both academia and businesses, a research to explore the attitudes of Serbian Gen Y towards this phenomenon was conducted. Although some studies have tackled the issue of social media use in travel decision making among Gen Y in Serbia (Suli, Martyin-Csamango, 2020), to the best of our knowledge no study examined their attitude towards influencer marketing. We aim to fill this gap by providing answers to the following research questions:

1) Do you perceive content created by social media influencers as reliable?
2) Do you consider reviews and recommendations on social media as genuine?
3) If an influencer was satisfied with a brand, product or service, what impact would it have on you?
4) If an influencer was dissatisfied with a brand, product or service, what impact would it have on you?

Research methodology and results are displayed in the following section of the paper.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An empirical research with the aim of examining the attitudes of Gen Y in Serbia towards the influencer marketing was conducted for the purposes of this paper. Gen Y was chosen to be the subject of this study as it is the first digitally literate generation and, at the same time, considered to be mature enough to evaluate the utility and truthfulness of the content distributed online. The survey, which involved 657 respondents, was conducted among students of the Faculty of Organizational Sciences at the University of Belgrade.

Surveyed students were of management and IT educational background. Being considered tech-savvy and knowledgeable in terms of both IT and marketing management, these students were considered as appropriate candidates for selected study. Students were motivated to take part in this research by being awarded points for teaching activity.

Filled questionnaires were collected in the period from January to August 2018. The respondents were sent a link to an online questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of demographic questions, multiple-choice questions related to respondents' use of social media and attitudes on influencer marketing. In the questionnaire, a five-point Likert scale was employed to measure the degree of respondents' approval or disapproval for a series of statements. The scale was created as a sum of questionnaire responses with answers ranging from 1 = „I completely disagree", to 5 = „I completely agree", when expressing intensity of attitudes and feelings, or 1 = „never" to 5 = „regular", when expressing the frequency of implementing specific activity in the online space. The constructs used for examination of research participants' attitudes were created on the basis of Wan-Hsiu and Linjuan (2014) and Enginkaya and Yılmaz (2014) researches. Research results were presented by using descriptive statistics. Apart from empirical research results, discussion in this paper included data gathered from secondary sources with the aim of testing validity of their conclusions.

Due to the incomplete or contradictory answers, 153 questionnaires were excluded from data analysis. Therefore, research results and discussion were based on data obtained from 504 questionnaires processed. In the structure of processed sample, 63.3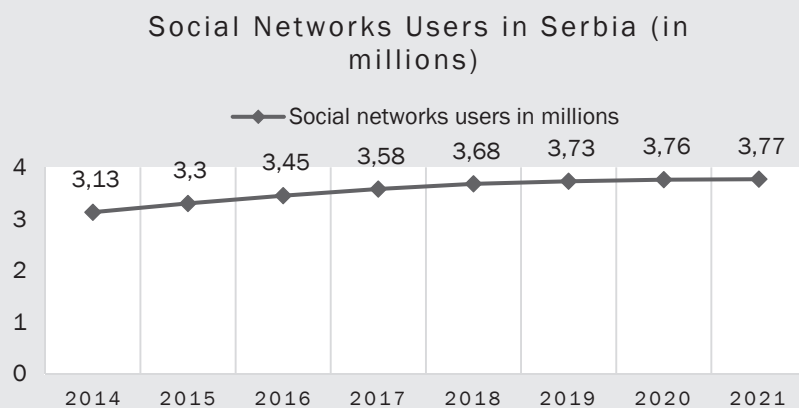% were female respondents and 36.7% male respondents. All respondents were undergraduate students, between 20 and 27 years of age, of which 68.7% were management and 31.3% were IT students. In the following section of the paper, research results were displayed.

3.1. Research results and discussion

According to the research on youth information and activism, conducted by the Serbian Ministry of Youth and Sports, 91% of young people aged 15 to 30 years uses the internet on a daily basis, most often for the purpose of browsing social networks (mos.gov.rs). Furthermore, Thompson Foundation assesment report on digital economy and media development in Serbia (2018), provided a forecast of social networks users which points to their constant growth (thomsonfoundation.org).
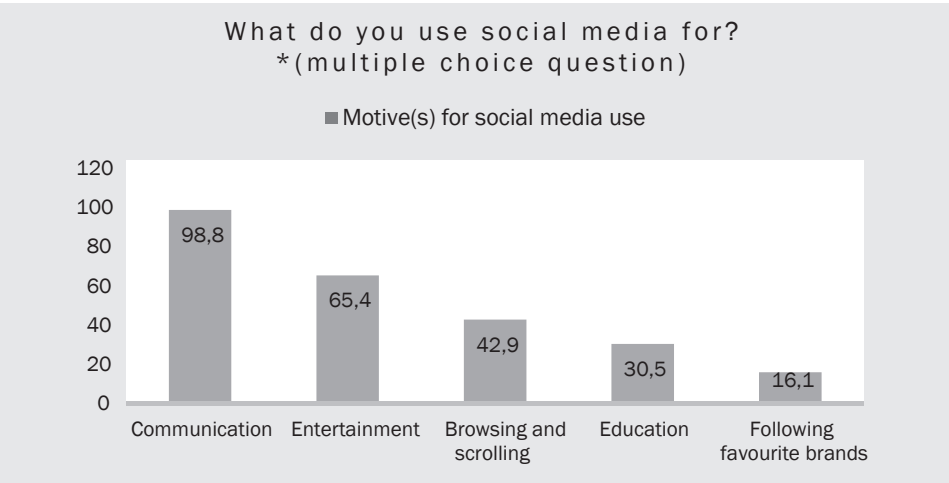
Observing the results of a research conducted for the purposes of this paper, it can be concluded that Gen Y in Serbia is almost entirely present on social media, as all research participants owned at least one social media profile. Facebook was the most used social media, as 98.6% of research participants declared having personal profile on this platform. Second most used social media was Instagram, with 81% of research participants being present on this platform, while 78.3% of research participants claimed using YouTube. Twitter was used by 31.2% and LinkedIn by 30.2% of research participants, while SnapChat was used by 5.1% of students who took part in this research. Pinterest and Tinder were used by 2.9%, while other social media platforms such as Google+ or Reddit were used by less than 1% of research participants. In order to verify the validity of these results, data collected by other institutions was also examined.

FIGURE 1. Forecast of social networks users in Serbia (millions)

Social Networks Users in Serbia (in millions)

→ Social networks users in millions

3,13 3,3 3,45 3,58 3,68 3,73 3,76 3,77

2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021

SOURCE: thomsonfoundation.org

FIGURE 2. Distribution of answers on motives for social media use

What do you use social media for?
*(multiple choice question)

■ Motive(s) for social media use

Communication: 98,8
Entertainment: 65,4
Browsing and scrolling: 42,9
Education: 30,5
Following favourite brands: 16,1

SOURCE: Authors' research

Accordingly, research conducted by the Umbrella organization of youth in Serbia (2019), indicated that most popular social media network among Serbian youth was Instagram, as 91.3% of research participants claimed owning a profile. Facebook was second most popular network with 89.9% of participants claiming to have a profile on this social media newtork. Instagram and Facebook were followed by YouTube, Twitter and Linkedin. Interpersonal and group communication was moslty performed via Instagram direct messages, Facebook messenger, Viber and Whatsapp. According to global trends on the consumption of traditional media among youth, traditional media such as press and TV are declining.

Arguing on motives for social media usage, it can be noticed that research participants mostly use social media for communication (98.8%) and entertainment (65.4%). Furthermore, spontaneous search or scrolling/browsing was very strong motivation for social media presence for 42.9% of research participants. Another important reason for social media usage was education, as 30.5% of research participants claimed it to be a strong motivation for creating social media profiles. On the other hand, following favorite brands or companies was main motivation for social media presence for 16.1% of research participants.

Media experts in Serbia state that beneficial usage of social media among youth in Serbia is not promoted enough. Namely, it is believed that educative components of social media are not promoted enough, as young people use YouTube to search for entertainment, rather than browsing educational or informative content (Mladi u medijskom ogledalu, 2019).
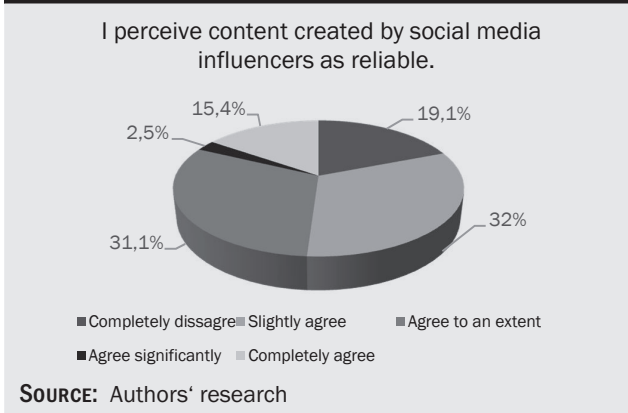
Observing the distribution of responses in relation to gender, it can be concluded that female participants were more interested in using social media while searching for online offers. Even though most participants had more than one social media account, female participants were also more active in posting content on their social media profiles. Consequently, female participants appreciated more the quality of content created by brands and companies on their official social media profiles.
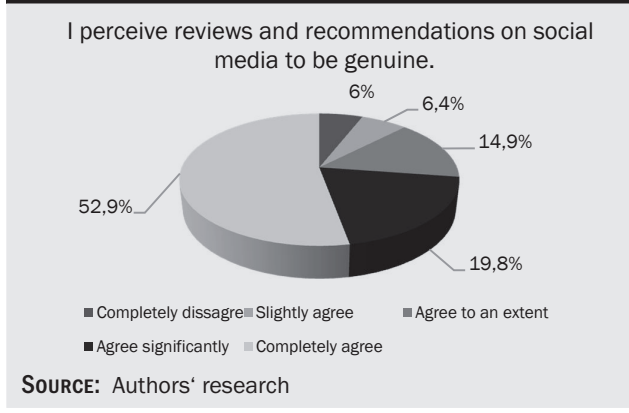
More than 50% of research participants did not consider content created by prominent social media users as reliable. More precisely, 51.1% of research participants stated that they have very little or little trust in this content, whereas 31.1% of research participants expressed an average trust towards user generated content. Only 2.5% of research participants stated that they trust user generated content to a large extent, while 15.4% of research participants expressed significant trust in this content. Global survey on Influencer marketing conducted by Rakuten Marketing (2019) indicated that only 3% of customers felt that they did not get any benefit from the influencers they follow. On the contrary, 36% of research participants perceive influencers' reliability as their main asset due to the fact that their opinion reassures them in correctness of their choice. Their perception of influencers' reliability is based on the good taste of their recommendations, combined with providing content which is genuinely useful rather than commercial. Distribution of answers on perceived reliability of social media content created by influencers is presented in figure 3.

Low levels of trust in content created by social media influencers can be connected with the overall lack of trust in Serbian media. Researches about the attitudes of young people in Serbia indicate that they

I perceive content created by social media influencers as reliable.

■ Completely dissagre ■ Slightly agree ■ Agree to an extent
■ Agree significantly ■ Completely agree

SOURCE: Authors' research

I perceive reviews and recommendations on social media to be genuine.

■ Completely dissagre ■ Slightly agree ■ Agree to an extent
■ Agree significantly ■ Completely agree

SOURCE: Authors' research

perceive domestic media scene as biased, corrupted and lacking integrity, while dissemination of information is believed to be in favor of specific stakeholder (Stojanović, 2019). According to the data presented in Thompson Foundation report (2018), Serbia is ranked among countries with the lowest level of media trust in Europe. Namely, only 11% of citizens stated high level of trust in media, compared with 21% which is the European average (thomponfoundation.org). Anyhow, same research indicated that Serbia is above EU-average in trusting online sources, even though this percentage is still small, as 28% of citizens trust the internet.

In order to realize whether users of online interactive platforms have a desire to mimic social media influencers (Ki, Kim, 2019) research participants were asked the following question: If a celebrity/influencer/blogger expressed satisfaction with a brand or recommended specific product or service, what kind of impact would it have on you? In accordance with the results obtained on the question about the level of trust in user generated content, 53.5% of research participants stated that they would not create positive attitude towards a brand, product or service just because someone else recommended it. Furthermore, 69.8% of research participants stated that they would not become brand supporters or purchase a product/service just because somebody else recommended it on social media.

As influencer-based marketing has become a prominent mean of sales improvement, companies invest in their collaboration with prominent social media users (Peković et al., 2019). Therefore, customers often doubt that influencer content is sponsored, which

makes them think about how reliable one recommendation really is. The following statement: „I suspect that positive reviews and recommendations provided by influencers are sponsored by companies or brands", was true for 52.9% of research participants. Furthermore, 19.8% of research participants agreed with this claim significantly. Furthermore, 14.9% of research participants agreed with this claim to an extent, 6.4% of them did not agree mostly, while 6% of research participants did not agree with this statement at all. Customers doubts might have been resolved with recent changes in advertising policy which expect from influencers to make a statement regarding sponsored content on their profiles. It would be interesting to examine whether sponsored ad statementes affect customers' perception about influencers' genuineness and objectivity. Distribution of answers on perceived truthfulness of reviews and recommendations distributed on social media is presented in figure 4.

Similar results were obtained while observing responses collected to the question: If a celebrity/influencer/blogger expressed dissatisfaction with a specific brand, product or service, what kind of impact would it have on you? More than half of research participants (56.3%) stated that someone else's dissatisfaction would not have an impact on them while forming an attitude about a brand, product or service. Almost one third of research participants agreed with this claim to an extent (29.5%), stating that extremely negative comments would make them revise or change their purchase decision, while 13.6% of participants stated that it is rather likely that they would be influenced by influencer's negative review which would make them search for additional opinions. Only 0.6% of re-

search participants stated that they would most likely be influenced by a negative impression of a prominent social media user when creating an opinion about a brand, product or service and would not search for additional information.

Bearing in mind the results of a research conducted for the purpose of this paper, it can be concluded that members of Gen Y in Serbia, do not express much trust in content created by prominent social media users. More precisely, research participants claimed that other people experiences do not help them in collecting information or creating an opinion about a brand, company or products more easily. The reason for such attitude could be explained by the results of the following question: Do you doubt that influencers' favorable opinion about a brand or product is sponsored by businesses? Research participants stated that they are absolutely sure about this claim in 21.9% of cases, while 37.5% agreed with this statement significantly.

Pentina et al., (2013) investigated the trust transfer phenomenon between social media platform and brands within Eastern European and USA Twitter users. The results of this research indicated that level of trust towards Twitter as a social media network influences level of trust towards businesses presented on this network, but only in case of Eastern European users. Therefore, authors made an assumption that members of high-context cultures, such as Ukrainian which was observed in this paper, are more likely to make connections between social media and businesses they host. Since South Slavic culture belongs to the group of high-context cultures as well, the same assumption could be made for social media users in Serbia. The reason why influencers' opinion is not perceived as reliable might be the consequence of the fact that social media themselves are not considered as trustworthy source of information, rather as an entertaining environment which is also used for product placement. On the other hand, results of a research conducted by Peković et al. (2019), indicated that the influence of these individuals on customers' purchase intention has statistical significance. The influence is a result of perceived trust and sense of utility regarding influencers' suggestions. Due to contradictory results, further investigation should be conducted regarding these issues.

4. CONCLUSION

Due to the influence of new technology, customers have changed their attitudes and behavior, both in the use of goods and services, as well as in manners of communication. Since main aim of every company is profitable business, it is important to understand customers' needs and create marketing communication accordingly (Domazet, Cvetkov Čikošev, 2019). Bearing this in mind, this paper provides insights into preferences and attitudes of Gen Y in Serbia regarding communication on social media. Based on the results of a research conducted in this paper, it can be concluded that among Gen Y in Serbia, digital media has rising significance and value in collecting information and acquiring knowledge. Anyhow, significant percentage of observed target audience expressed their doubts regarding reliability of online content created by other users, for example influencers, bloggers or YouTube-ers. Namely, even though they use social media for entertainment and education, Gen Y members in Serbia do not find the content that they consume to be genuine or trustworthy.

Limitations of the empirical research conducted for the purposes of this paper have to be taken into consideration when interpreting presented results. These limitations refer to the homogeneity of research sample, as research participants are of similar demographic characteristics and educational background. Furthermore, since half of research participants were information technology students, it can be assumed that they express significant propensity towards social media usage due to their education orientation. Therefore, authors advise further investigation of the issue presented in this paper in sense of taking into consideration opinion of Gen Y members of heterogeneous educational background and including other age groups within the cohort. As communication on social media is undergoing constant change, researchers should pay attention to the latest trends in this field. Namely, researchers' focus should be directed towards examining the influence of user-generated content, strategic role of video, potential of business podcasts as well as the role and significance of micro-bloggers in shaping contemporary marketing communication.

Proposed extension of a research presented in this paper may contribute to gaining more thorough insight into the communication specifics of Gen Y in Serbia, which is caused by extensive use of social media. Research results presented in this paper, as well as proposed research extension should contribute to achieving a greater degree of message personalization and customization regarding target audience specifics and preferences, as well as communication platforms they use. This could be of great importance for those who create media communication as it is believed, and to a certain point proved, that they find it challenging to create effective communication for young people in Serbia.

Acknowledgement

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Apstrakt:

**Influenseri kao segment digitalne
marketinške komunikacije
– stavovi generacije Y**

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Cilj istraživanja u ovom radu podrazumeva sticanje uvida u način na koji se marketinška komunikacija izmenila pod uticajem digitalne transformacije i upotrebe društvenih medija. Savremene strategije marketinške komunikacije posmatrane su u kontekstu pojave tehnološih inovacija kao i demografskih trendova koji su postavili generaciju Y u centar interesa marketinških teoretičara i praktičara. U tom smislu, ovaj rad istražuje ulogu i značaj dominant-nih korisnika društvenih medija, influensera, u kreiranju savremene marketinške komunikacije. Uzimajući u obzir činjenicu da današnje potrošače karakteriše visok ste-pen digitalne sofisticiranosti, istraživanje u ovom radu usmereno je ka rastu značaja društvenih medija kao glavnih izvora sticanja i deljenja informacija. U ovom radu prezentovani su rezultati empirijskog istraživanja koje je za cilj imalo sticanje uvida u stavove generacije Y u Srbiji u pogledu influenser marketinga. Doprinos ovog rada ogleda se u kritičkoj analizi prikupljenih podataka, čime se povećava korpus znanja iz ove oblasti.

Ključne reči: *influenser marketing, faktor uspeha, digi-talna marketinška komunikacija, digitalna sofisticiranost, generacija Y.*

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