

Designing a Sustainable Brand by Engaging Brand-Consumers' Collaboration Generation Z Co-Creators and Influencers in Serbia

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to identify the scope of Generation Z's participation in the process of collaboration with brands in Serbia and to study the potentials in the future. Collaboration between Generation Z (GenZ) and brands in the digital world and intensive era of social media marketing has two roles: GenZ as co-creators and influencers. The aim of the research is to measure statistically significant differences in the answers of the respondents in relation to the examined opinions, needs, attitudes and intentions of the members of GenZ regarding the process of collaboration (co-creators and influencers). In January & February 2021 the research was conducted with 303 respondents of GenZ in the online survey. The results show that almost 70% of members of GenZ believe that organizations should more often organize activities in which consumers participate. By involving GenZ in the process of collaboration with brand, product and service development, receiving regular feedback from them and engaging influencers, marketing and brand managers could work on creating unique solutions, added values and personalized experience. Serbian marketing and brand managers, working to strengthen the customer centricity approach, could apply research results, insights and recommendations to design more effective and efficient collaboration for their brands together with GenZ.

Keywords: *collaboration, co-creators, influencers, sustainable brand, Generation Z*

JEL classification: M31, M37

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the acceptance of innovation by users in Serbia, including digital brands such as Wolt, Glovo, CarGo, Yandex and others, which significantly increased their business in 2020 and 2021. Most of the company's business values come from intangible assets, such as a brand that has an impact on the choices of consumers, clients and employees, as well as investors and the community (Mamula, 2012). According to Interbrand (2021), digital brands have the highest value in 2020. With digital brands like Apple, Amazon, Google as a pioneers, but also Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, consumer technology has become far more adjusted to Generation Z (GenZ) compared to previous generations.

The rapid development of the Internet first, and then of social media, was a key driver of the adoption and application of collaboration and co-creation. In today's highly competitive market, consumers are seen as the intangible assets a firm and brand should wisely acquire, maintain and maximize just like other financial assets (Blattberg et al., 2001). When consumers themselves play the key role in creating value the advanced collaboration between brands and consumers take place. Value co-creation with consumers is already widely accepted approach as one of the most efficient strategy for companies to stay competitive. Added value comes from the consumers' needs and companies core strategies and competencies. Therefore, collaboration is not only an alternative but is the reality at the heart of green brands and sustainable production in the eco-system. As a result of benefits of collaboration, marketers interacting with consumers more intensively than previous (Moghadamzadeh et al., 2016). Ford et al. (2017, p. 27) postulates that "value creation requires the involvement of others, motivating them by developing relationships and creating value." Co-creation implies an economic strategy that involves several stakeholders who join forces to produce some value (Ind

& Coates, 2012; Ind et al., 2013). To make collaboration between consumers and brands more productive, both sides must learn to listen to each other and establish relationships based on transparency and trust. As they become more informed and involved, members of GenZ increasingly contribute to the continuous development of the brand by improving key indicators of brand success in the field of reputation, image, personality, feelings and attitudes that strengthen the brand as an intangible asset (Zwass, 2010; Kamboj et al., 2018; Mamula, 2012).

GenZ became the largest generation, constituting 32% of the global population (Spitznagel, 2020), while they make up 16% of the total population in the Republic of Serbia (SORS, 2020). Consumers that belong to GenZ are largely considered to be more internet savvy, heavily using media content and consequently they are the main target for brands to be effective on social media (Rohm et al., 2013). The first digital-native generation considers itself to be highly creative and research results show that over half (51%) agreed that their generation is more creative than other generations. As such, the report suggests brands should include that creative impulse through collaboration, as opposed to simply targeting GenZ without their input (Business Insider, 2019). GenZ is not only highly creative, but they view that creativity as being utilitarian, meaning it can serve a real-world purpose (Business Instagram, 2021). If a brand has found a way to create some value together with its consumers, it should certainly use it as a competitive advantage and communicate about that experience, among other channels, through social media accounts. Today in the digital age, if companies want GenZ to buy their brands, managers will have to make an effort to better understand its needs and immerse it to their brands in order to attract its attention, develop interest, and emotionally engage it for the purpose of making them loyal in the smarter process of decision making.

The paper is organized as follows: in the literature review section, authors included eminent scholars research' insights on GenZ and their roles as co-creators and influencers. In the third section, methodology of an empirical research conducted for the purposes of this paper is elaborated. In the fourth section research results and discussion are explained. Finally, research conclusions and limitations are presented. Recommendations for further research are given.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital platforms, and above all, social media, offer companies special opportunities to connect and interact with stakeholders, as well as the opportunity to co-create with a new generation of consumers in an innovative and interesting way (Mamula Nikolić, 2021). Younger people always seek information through social media platforms and consider it more acceptable and credible when information comes from their peers (Lenhart et al., 2010; Lenhart et al., 2015). The new consumer profile describes the consumer as active, oriented towards "peer-to-peer" collaboration, personal storytelling and partnership (Bhalla, 2011). This is a generation that knows how to look for and find exactly what it wants, so when expectations are not met, they do not give a second chance. Their limited range of attention means that brands should never stop being active and, because they do not like to be sold in the classic way, marketing experts must find ways to provide relevant, engaging and immediately useful experiences (Trifecta Research, 2015).

Social media provide an extraordinary chance for marketers to increase brand awareness, make brand image stronger and strengthen consumers' knowledge of the brand. The growth in the use of social media and emergence of social search are playing a central role in consumer-brand interactions, engagement and introduction of new channels of brand communication (Kim & Ko, 2012; Laroche et al., 2013; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Globally active consumers (Foux, 2006; Bruhn et al., 2014) and social media have made consumer-brand interactions more complex and transformed it into a multi-party conversation rather than a brand-dictated monologue (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). As a result, scholars have underlined the necessity of research that would analyze the complexity of consumer interactions with brands (Bowden, 2009; Rohm et al., 2013; Hsu & Tsou, 2011) and examine the nature of brand-consumer engagement within interactive, online and social settings (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Brodie et al., 2011; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Hutter et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2013; Yazdanparast et al., 2016; Mamula Nikolić, 2021). As an implication of such close and frequent interactions for brands is the increased exposure and improved customer relationships. Co-creation of products, services, business models, values is the outcome of such two-way direct collaboration and interactions between consumers and brands (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Kim & Ko, 2012; Christodoulides et al., 2012). As the results show socializing, expressing opinions, playing games and

sharing experiences or information about products and services significantly impact consumer attitudes toward brands' social media activities. (Yazdanparast et al., 2016; Bruhn et al., 2012).

In the age of digital transformation when GenZ uses digital platforms, brands are in communication with the target group testing solutions by using co-creation. The techniques that they use are not just focus groups and interviews, but permanent collaboration on web forums of loyal consumers, pilot prototype testing and other methods that enable quick feedback from the target group. If we take the example of creating a new product or service, the involved stakeholders can be the company, its suppliers, its current consumers, but mostly the followers of the account that the company has on social networks. In this way, the general population as well as the relevant group of brand ambassadors are introduced into the co-creation process. This interactive approach integrates their ideas into the core of business activities and creates a new business model. All this is possible thanks to the available digital technologies, which network people and enable them to work on the same task simultaneously, regardless of their location. For years, companies have been encouraging consumers to a sense of belonging, monetary rewards, in developing an image of themselves, increasing interest and the need for a solution (Kanchan, 2017), by creating a networked economy even stronger and more sustainable. Roser et al. (2013) state that co-creation of brand and consumer erases the boundaries of the companies by developing innovation and creating added value for consumers.

The Internet has changed the dynamics and frequency of exchange by increasing the scope and speed of interaction and the possibility for stakeholders to become part of mutual networks (Ind, 2012). One of the effective tactics is to present potential consumers with testimonials, impressions of previous satisfied consumers, because GenZ members follow the comments of their generation, their „tribe“. This situation has created space for the employment of influencers by brands. Simultaneously with the emergence of influencers, personalized marketing is becoming increasingly important, which includes tracking searches and personalized consumer interactions with brands in the digital world.

Authenticity and meaningful interaction are important for GenZ. Therefore, companies that focus on communicating with this generation on a personal level (Business to People, B2P), look at them as individuals with unique desires, expectations and tastes.

Since GenZ members spend most of their time online watching videos on their mobile devices, it is of utmost importance for brands to be present on social networks. According to research by Morning Consult (2019), as many as 72% of young people in America, GenY and GenZ, follow influencers and trust them more than celebrities or company spokespersons. What makes influencers so attractive, besides the brands they use (YouTube, TikTok), and which are close to these young people, is their authenticity. Influencers, often members of the same generations, GenY and GenZ, hold on to their authenticity by not making concessions for the sake of more clicks (Morning Consult, n.d.). More and more brands have recently realized the importance of the role of influencers and used them for promotional purposes (Taher, 2019). The same research found out what is attractive to young people with influencers, and the basic items are inspiration and aspiration, proximity, learning about new trends and interesting and fun content. In addition, for some brands a partnership with micro-influencers is more effective on GenZ.

In Serbia, young people aged 18 to 30 use smartphones, which makes it easier for them to access brands (Perčić & Vukadinović, 2019a; Perčić & Vukadinović, 2019b). GenZ from 15 to 24 years often uses Facebook and Instagram to monitor the activities of companies published on their profiles on social networks and digital platforms (Perčić et al., 2019; Perčić and Perić, 2021) which are the main prerequisite for involvement in the process of brands co-creation. Research results conducted in Serbia in 2019 (Peković et al., 2019) have shown that influencers have a significant effect on consumers' purchasing intentions. How to get someone to share company or brand content with his online community? Certainly, this happens when the brands that the company offers are of good quality and authentic. In most cases, they spend much more time communicating with their followers or tribe members than official accounts of companies or brands. Considering this, as well as the fact that influencers often share information from private life, members of the new generation communicate with them more directly and more often. In a way, they see them as their online friends and role models (Mamula Nikolic, 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer on the question how strong is collaboration between GenZ and brands, authors prepared research

hypotheses related to Generation Z and co-creation and influencers. The aim of the research was to measure statistically significant differences in the answers of the respondents in relation to the examined opinions, needs, attitudes and intentions of the members of Serbian GenZ regarding the co-creation process. Taking into account insights from previous research (Brodie et al., 2011; Schultz and Peltier, 2013; Hutter et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2013; Yazdanparast et al., 2016; Bhalla, 2011; Zwass, 2010; Kamboj et al., 2018; Ind et al., 2012; Ind & Coates, 2013; Kanchan, 2017; Mamula Nikolić, 2021; Perčić et al., 2019; Perić et al., 2021; Vukmirović et al., 2020; Peković et al., 2019) the following hypotheses were set.

3.1. Research hypotheses related to generation Z and co-creation and influencers

Hypothesis H₁: There is a statistically significant difference in the responses of GenZ members according to age categories (10-14 years, 15-19 years, 20-26 years) in relation to the examined opinions, needs, attitudes and intentions regarding co-creation.

Hypothesis H₂: There is a statistically significant difference in the responses of GenZ members by gender in relation to the surveyed opinions, needs, attitudes and intentions regarding co-creation.

Hypothesis H₃: Members of Generation Z are influenced by the recommendations of influencers, whose content they follow through social media, and take them into account when choosing (buying) products/services.

3.2. Research method

SPSS was used for data processing and analysis, as well as for interpreting the obtained research results. The following quantitative statistical methods were used: descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, arithmetic mean) and comparative statistics: Chi-squared test, t-test and ANOVA test. Some questions in the questionnaire were formulated in the form of a five-point Likert scale. The t-test and the ANOVA test were used to examine statistically significant differences in the answers of respondents formulated in the questionnaire in the form of numerical variables (Likert scale 1-5) in relation to categorical variables (t-test for analysis by gender, and ANOVA test for analysis by age categories). The Chi-square test was used to examine statistically significant differences in the responses of the respondents which were formulated in the form of categorical variables in relation to categorical variables (age groups).

3.3. Sample structure

The sample is intentional and it is consisted of 303 respondents (primary and secondary school pupils and university students). The fieldwork was conducted in January and February 2021 during COVID 19 pandemic. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to primary and secondary school teachers who further distributed it to their pupils. The student-respondents were sent a link to an online questionnaire. The online questionnaire was tested with all three groups prior to final launching. The statistical error of the sample is 5.6%.

1. Male respondents make up 40% of the sample, and female respondents 60%;
2. Respondents aged 10 to 14 make up 20% of the sample, respondents aged 15 to 19 25%, and respondents aged 20 to 26, 55% of the sample;
3. Over 50% are unemployed and does not search for a job, which automatically means that a large part of this generation is provided for by parents who ultimately make the final decision on their purchase.

Table 1. shows the mean value of the respondents' answers related to the total, as well as by age and sex.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. What is the impact of co-creation on my opinion about the brand?

One third of GenZ members (33%) pointed out that their opinion about the company/brand improved after learning that they cooperate with their consumers in creating products, marketing campaigns, while half of GenZ members (51%) said that their opinion about the brand remained unchanged after that knowledge. According to the ANOVA test ($p = 0.003 < 0.05$) there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents of different age categories according to the degree of agreement with the stated statements about opinion about brand, i.e. the number of respondents who pointed out that their opinion about the company, i.e. brand has greatly improved and it improved after learning that it involves consumers in the process of creating its campaigns is the highest in the age group 20-26 (51% of respondents this age category), and the most numerous are respondents aged 10 to 14 (72%) among those whose opinion about the company remained the same after that knowledge.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics total, by age and sex (mean)

Survey questions	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	age 10-14	age 15-19	age 20-26	Male	Female
The impact of co-creation on my opinion about the brand.	261	1	5	3.27	2.83	3.36	3.37	3.23	3.31
As a consumer, you would like to work with a company or brand to improve their brand, product or marketing.	294	1	5	3.76	3.38	3.87	3.84	3.48	3.96
In your opinion, this approach to brands sounds close to you.	277	1	5	3.19	2.61	3.25	3.35	3.13	3.25
In your opinion, this approach of brands sounds different from others (authentic).	281	1	5	3.53	2.88	3.61	3.66	3.34	3.65
Companies should more often organize such activities (campaigns) in which consumers participate.	295	1	5	3.81	3.30	3.89	3.94	3.63	3.94
Brands overwhelm me with useless information every day. They need to be more interactive and different.	296	1	5	3.67	3.43	3.60	3.78	3.58	3.72
How much is your choice of product/service affected by influencers?	294	1	5	2.41	2.04	2.49	2.50	2.19	2.54

* Data for questions formulated in the form of a five-point Likert scale are presented.

SOURCE: Research results, authors

TABLE 2. Examination of the existence of a statistically significant difference in the answers of members of GenZ of different age categories in relation to the questions (ANOVA test)

Questions from questionnaire	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
The impact of co-creation on my opinion about the brand.	11.119	2	5.560	5.913	0.003*
In your opinion, this approach to brands sounds close to you.	20.731	2	10.366	8.239	0.000*
In your opinion, this approach to brands sounds different from others - authentic.	20.758	2	10.379	7.774	0.001*
Companies should more often organize such activities or campaigns in which consumers participate.	17.036	2	8.518	6.953	0.001*
As a consumer, you would like to work with a company or brand to improve their brand, product or marketing.	9.605	2	4.803	3.330	0.037*
Brands overwhelm me with useless information every day. They need to be more interactive and different.	5.548	2	2.774	1.908	0.150
How much is your choice of product/service affected by influencers?	9.358	2	4.679	2.949	0.054

SOURCE: Research results, authors

NOTE: * An asterisk indicates the existence of a statistically significant difference in the answers of the respondents (where $p < 0.05$).

TABLE 3. Examination of the existence of a statistically significant difference in the answers of GenZ members by gender in relation to the questions (t-test)

Questions	T	df	p
The impact of such cooperation on my opinion of the brand.	-0.630	258	0.529
In your opinion, this approach to brands sounds close to you.	-0.835	273	0.405
In your opinion, this approach to brands sounds different from others - authentic.	-2.188	278	0.029*
Companies should more often organize such activities or campaigns in which consumers participate.	-2.311	291	0.022*
As a consumer, you would like to work with a company or brand to improve their brand, product or marketing.	-3.377	290	0.001*
Brands overwhelm me with useless information every day. They need to be more interactive and different.	-0.985	292	0.325
How much is your choice of product/service affected by influencers?	-2.319	290	0.021*

SOURCE: Research results, authors

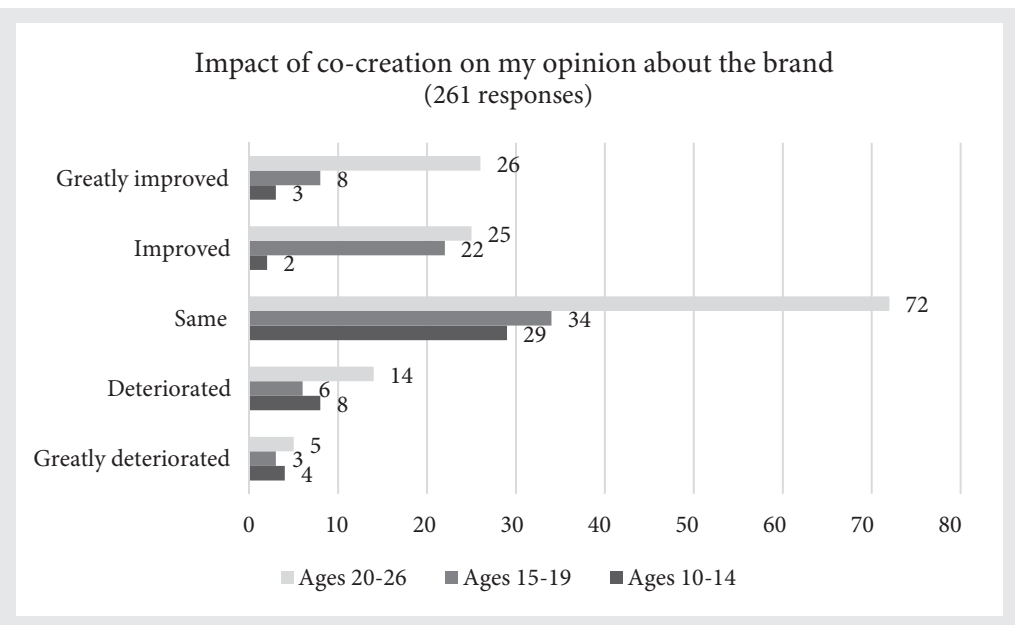
Friedrich, Peterson and Koster describe the fast-growing GenZ (born after 1990) as connected, communicative, content-focused, computerized, oriented to community that always clicks. This group makes up 40% of the population in the United States, Europe and the BRIC countries in 2020. Consumers in the VUCA world also play the game by changing rules and demanding for more discounts, sharing opinions on product or service, asking for participation in co-creation of new product or service. Consumers do not fully understand their needs until they try out prototypes to explore exactly what does and does not work as a “learning by doing” process. (Thomke,

2001; von Hippel, 2001). With a customer-as-innovators approach, capitalizing the Internet as a platform and tool, the business result is increasing in speed and effectiveness.

4.2. To what extent have you been buying a product/service from a company after learning that it practices co-creation?

After learning that certain organization practices this type of campaign in cooperation with its consumers, the largest number of respondents (70%) has been buying a product/used the service of that company/brand to the same extent, while only 12% of surveyed

CHART 1. Distribution of respondents by age categories in relation to the opinion about the brand that practices co-creation



SOURCE: Research results, authors

GenZ members has been buying a product/service to a greater extent. Learning about co-creation led to buying to a lesser extent with 6% of respondents.

The driving force behind Marketing 3.0, according to Kotler et al. (2010) includes human spirit, or new marketing that enables consumer journey from transactions to values delivering experience to consumer development process. Consumers are not only looking for brands that will meet their needs, but they are also looking for experiences and business models that will include their heart, brain, body and soul. Offering “meaning” is the future of marketing is “conditio sine qua non” in marketing management today. Although co-creation is one of the important elements for assessing brand value perception, research conducted by Emily Boyle (2007) concludes that “a well-established brand is more dependent on the activities of brand managers than brand co-creation”, just as our research has also shown that co-creation has a weak effect on increasing GenZ’s purchase habits.

4.3. Have you ever been a participant or heard/seen campaigns where consumers participate in the process of creating products/packaging/marketing campaigns?

Despite the fact that involvement in the co-creation of the campaign is attractive for GenZ consumers, only 9% of respondents participated in the campaign where, as consumers, they participated in the process of creating products/packaging/marketing

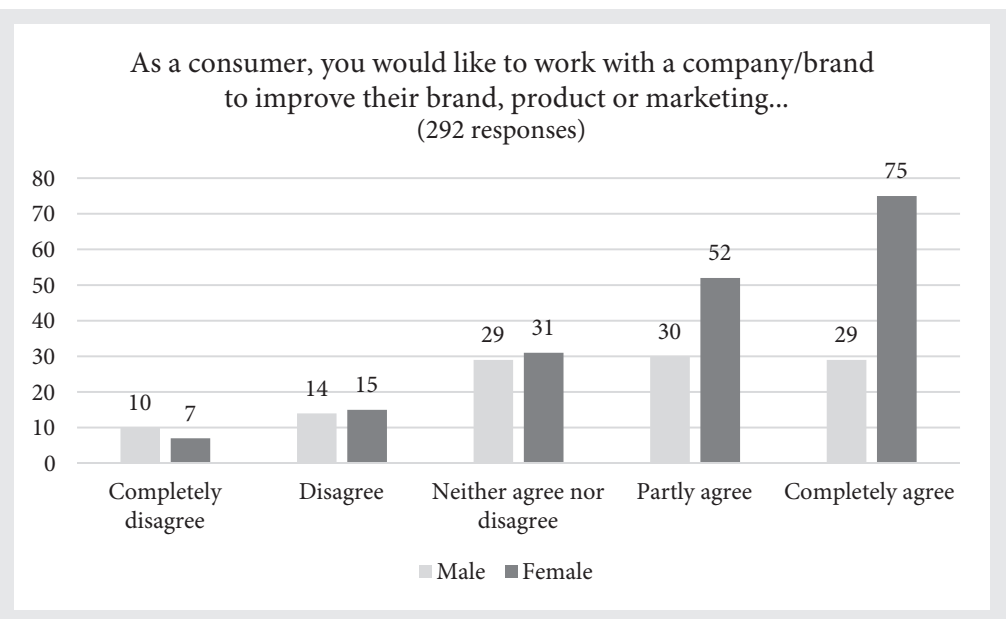
campaigns; 35% of respondents had heard of such campaigns but had not participated, while 53% have neither heard of nor participated in this type of campaign. According to the Chi-squared test ($p = 0.022 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents by age categories, i.e. the percentage of those who participated in campaigns where consumers participate in the process of creating products/packaging/ marketing campaigns is the highest among respondents aged 15-19 mostly (13% of respondents in this age category).

Unlike previous generations, GenZ members have always had and will have instant access to a large amount of information on a variety of topics. GenZ quickly shares its opinion with all its virtual friends not only about the experience with brands but also with companies. Although 91% of young people between the ages of 15 and 30 in Serbia are present on the Internet and social networks, marketing experts in Serbia have concluded that social media is not used enough when it comes to content aimed at young people (Vukmirović, Kostić-Stanković, Domazet, 2020).

4.4. As a consumer, would you like to work with a company or brand to improve their brand, product or marketing?

As many as 64% of GenZ members would like to contribute to this type of campaign, i.e. to participate in the process of co-creation with a brand, in order to work on improving that brand. According to the t-test

CHART 2. Distribution of GenZ members by gender in relation to the degree of agreement with the indicated statement.



SOURCE: Research results, authors

($p = 0.001 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of male and female respondents according to how much respondents, as consumers, they are willing to participate in campaigns and improve brand, product or marketing campaign (female respondents are more willing compared to male respondents).

It was found that there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents according to age groups in relation to the willingness to participate in the co-creation process (ANOVA test, $p = 0.037 < 0.05$). Members of the older categories (15-19 and 20-26 years) compared to the youngest category (10-14 years) are more willing to participate in cooperation with an organization to contribute to the improvement of the brand and campaign.

4.5. Co-creation as a brand approach seems authentic or close to you.

For 55% of respondents, co-creation as an approach in building brands acts differently from others - authentically, and 41% of GenZ members feel that this approach to brands seems close to them. An indifferent attitude towards co-creation as a brand approach that is authentic has 25% of GenZ members, while 28% is "neutral" towards the feeling of closeness gained through co-creation. The approach of brands through co-creation has no impact on the authenticity (20%) and the sense of closeness (31%) of GenZ members. According to the ANOVA test ($p = 0.00 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents according to the age groups of GenZ members in relation to the degree of agreement with the statement, i.e. among those who pointed out that they agree with the statement that the mentioned approach of brands sounds close to them there are the most respondents aged 20-26 (48% of respondents in this age category), then, 39% of respondents aged 15-19 agree with this statement, while on the other hand, as many as 55% of respondents aged 10-14 do not consider this approach of brands close to them. According to the ANOVA test ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of respondents by age categories and according to the degree of agreement with the statement that this approach of brands works authentically, i.e. among those who pointed out that they agree with the statement that the mentioned approach of brands sounds authentic there are the most respondents aged 20-26 (62% respondents of this age category), then, 51% of respondents of category 15-19 years, while on the

other hand, as many as 44% of respondents aged 10-14 do not consider this approach of brands authentic. According to the t-test ($p = 0.029 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents by gender in relation to the degree of agreement with the statement that the approach of brands in the form of co-creation sounds authentic. There are more female respondents who think so (60%) compared to male respondents (48%).

It is important for the brand to be perceived as authentic and close to the consumer, it is one of the elements that not only creates loyalty but also attracts new workforce and talent. Brand authenticity is what must be not only presented to the public but also an integral part of an organization's sustainability (Stuart, 2011). Co-creation can and does have some impact on the experience of brand authenticity, especially in the process of experiencing the brand after consumption (Boyle, 2007). Here, the influence of influencers, whose value is precisely in the experience of their authenticity, comes to the fore (Peković, 2019).

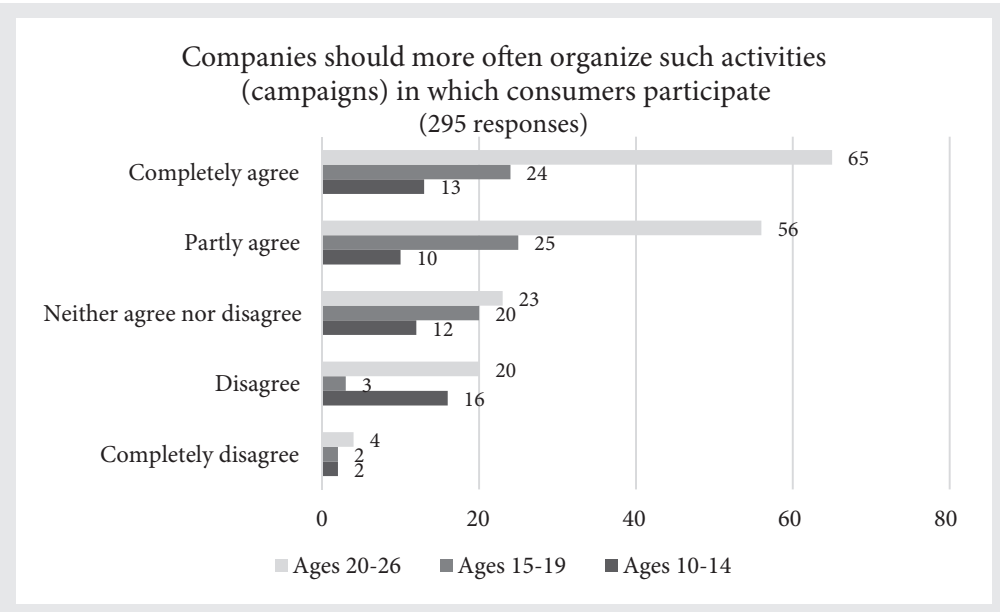
4.6. Companies should more often organize such activities (campaigns) in which consumers participate.

Almost 70% of GenZ members believe that companies/brands should organize activities in which consumers participate more often. According to the ANOVA test ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents by age categories, i.e. among those who pointed out that they completely agree with the statement that companies should more often to organize such activities there are the most respondents aged 20-26 (65%), while on the other hand 18% of respondents aged 10-14 do not consider this approach of brands significant. It was found that there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents by gender in relation to their opinion that companies should more often organize activities involving consumers in co-creation (t-test, $p = 0.022 < 0.05$), where such thinking is more present among female respondents.

4.7. Brands overwhelm me with useless information every day. They need to be more interactive and different.

The results of the research show that as many as 58% of GenZ respondents believe that brands overwhelm them with useless information every day and that they should be more interactive and different. 23%

CHART 3. Distribution of respondents by age categories in relation to the degree of agreement with the statement



SOURCE: Research results, authors

of GenZ members are indifferent to the amount and quality of information they receive from brands/services on a daily basis, while 19% of them do not think that brands overwhelm them with useless information. Using the t-test ($p = 0.325 > 0.05$) it was found that there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of male and female respondents in relation to the degree of agreement with the statement that brands should be more interactive and different. Also, using the ANOVA test ($p = 0.150 > 0.05$) it was found that there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents of different age groups in relation to the degree of agreement with the statement. It can be concluded that GenZ, regardless of age and gender, „requires“ brands to be more interactive, different and not to provide them with information that is not important to them.

Based on the results of the research we can conclude that unlike previous generations, GenZ members have always had and will have instant access to a large amount of information on a variety of topics. Marketing experts should keep in mind that when advertising for the needs of the GenZ target group, they should communicate visually and with short content of the size of a „bite“, nano or micro content (Perić et al., 2021).

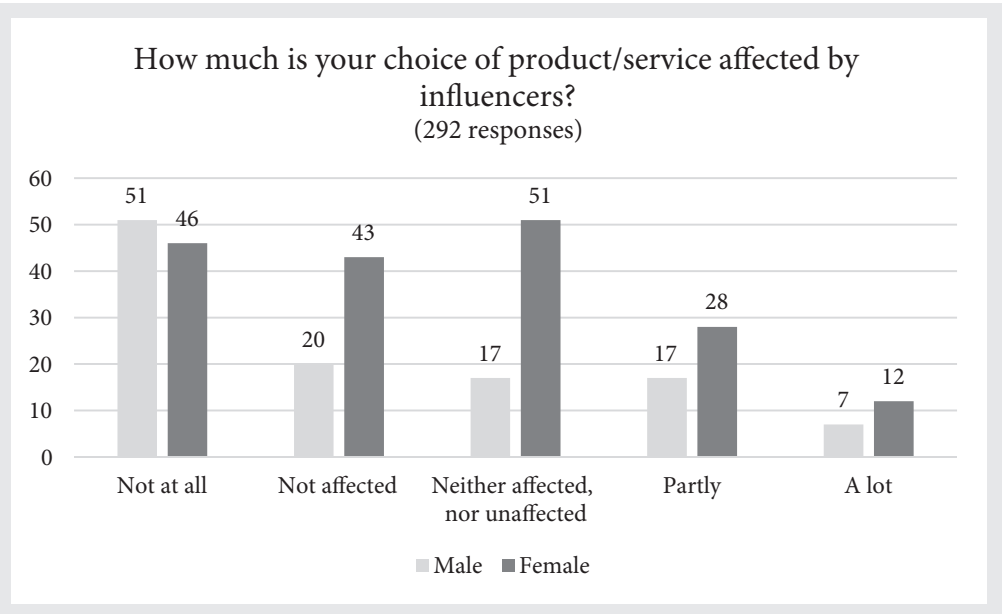
4.8. How much is your choice of product/service affected by influencers?

22% of respondents are influenced by influencers when it comes to choosing a product or service of a

company, while 55% of Generation Z members said that their choice of products/services is not influenced by influencers, and 23% of respondents are „neutral“.

According to the t-test ($p = 0.021 < 0.05$), there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of male and female respondents according to the degree of effect of influencers on the process of making decision on purchase, i.e. female respondents are on average more affected by influencers in choosing products. Out of all GenZ respondents, who want to become influencers, one third of the respondents want to become beauty (33%) and travel (29%) influencers, and a quarter of those want to become lifestyle influencers (27%), point out that their choice of products and services is affected by influencers, while other GenZ respondents do not make purchasing choices based on suggestions from other influencers. According to the results, this generation is most interested in the categories of influencers in the fields of fashion, beauty, games, technology and sports. As all of this falls under certain entertainment activities, we can understand why Generation Z responds precisely to the content that influencers from these industries place online. The data and the result we got in this survey tell the brands from these areas that cooperation of such promotional character is obligatory in their marketing strategy, otherwise they will be invisible to the GenZ. The task of brands is to research, select and evaluate the necessary brand ambassadors, and then devise an efficient way to engage a wider audience through the influence of the chosen influencer.

CHART 4. Distribution of members of Generation Z by gender in relation to the degree of influence of influencers on their choice of products/services to be purchased



SOURCE: Research results, authors

4.9. Testing research hypotheses

In relation to the hypotheses we set at the beginning of this research, we can conclude the following:

1. Since it was found that there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents who are members of GenZ according to age categories in relation to the examined opinions, attitudes, needs and intentions of the same regarding co-creation, the hypothesis H_1 is confirmed. For the oldest group of examined GenZ members (aged 20-26), the co-creation process is of the greatest importance. They emphasize to the greatest extent (51% of them) the importance of this process for forming their opinion about the company/brand which includes their consumers in the joint process of creating a brand, marketing campaigns. The largest number of members of the same age group (aged 20-26) point out that the mentioned approach of brands sounds close to them (48% of respondents in this age category), and authentic (62% of respondents in this age category). Also, they pointed out that companies should more often organize such activities (65%). When considering the participation of GenZ members in the co-creation process, most of those who participated in such a process are from the age group 15-19 (13% of respondents in this age category). Members of the older categories (15-19 and 20-26 years) compared to the youngest category (10-14 years) are more willing to participate

2. in cooperation with an organization to contribute to the improvement of the brand and campaign. Since it was found that there are some statistically significant differences in the responses of GenZ members by gender, and in relation to the examined opinions, attitudes, needs and intentions regarding co-creation, the hypothesis H_2 is confirmed. Female respondents are more willing to participate in the co-creation process compared to male respondents. More female than male respondents stated that companies should more often implement a co-creation process and that approach of brands in the form of co-creation sounds authentic.
3. The results of the research show that most GenZ influencers have no influence or are „indifferent“. Only a small part (22%) of GenZ sees influencers as a recommendation, and more by female members, as well as by GenZ members who are focused on certain occupations: fashion, beauty, games, technology and sports. It can be concluded that the influencers' recommendations have a weak influence on decision-making in the process of GenZ's purchase and that hypothesis H_3 has been refuted.

5. CONCLUSION

On the one hand, collaboration is correlated with the characteristics of GenZ, which enables them to show

their values and characteristics, as well as to satisfy their needs and their purpose according to how much they contribute to society. On the other hand, collaboration is one of the innovative approaches in making the brand more effective and efficient in the competitive market. Co-creation allows consumers to demonstrate their values (creativity, flexibility, knowledge) and qualities (innovation). This strategy is also an effective way for GenZ to meet its needs (interactivity and engagement, collaboration and shared learning). Finally, through co-creation, they achieve their purpose (because they measure the success by how much they contribute to society). It should be added that co-creation touches on another important need of GenZ and that is adaptation (customization, personalization), through cooperation and creativity they create something that is exactly to their liking and bears their personal stamp even when intended for everyone. Through co-creation, as research has confirmed, organizations and brands present themselves to GenZ as someone who is outside the rigid corporate mold, authentic and flexible. The importance of the impression of authenticity and innovation is reflected in the fact that GenZ does not necessarily have to participate in the co-creation process itself, but just knowing about its existence is enough to create an opinion about the company and the product, which is important for designing sustainable brand.

Consumers are a vital resource for enterprises to grow and compete in the VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), so the business segment that deals with research on the needs, wishes, demands, preferences of consumers and includes them in the process of co-creation, as co-creators and influencers, important. Although designing a sustainable brand by engaging brand-consumer collaboration is of great importance for the sustainable development of the organization, according to the results of empirical research conducted in Serbia on members of Generation Z, it cannot be said that this type of cooperation is applied sufficiently. A small percentage of GenZ members participated in the co-creation process (9%) and valued it by increasing the purchase of products from the company that practices it (12%). On the other hand, the results show that co-creation is attractive to GenZ as consumers – almost 70% of GenZ members believe that companies / brands should organize activities in which consumers participate more often; and as many as 64% of GenZ members said they would participate in such a process. In addition, one third of GenZ respondents (33%) pointed out that their opinion about the company/brand improved af-

ter learning that they cooperate with their consumers in creating products, marketing campaigns. Co-creation as a strategy addresses the key points of GenZ identity, answers questions about who they are and what is important to them. For 55% of respondents, co-creation as an approach to building brands seems different from others – authentic, and 41% of GenZ members feel that this approach of brands seems close to them. Almost 60% of Generation Z respondents, regardless of age and gender, believe that brands overwhelm them with useless information every day and that they should be more interactive and different.

The results of empirical research have shown that the co-creation process is of the greatest importance for the oldest group of Generation Z (20-26 years), that it is more important for female respondents and that the influencers' recommendations have little influence on decision-making in the GenZ purchase process. Regardless of such a finding, it can be concluded that influencers are a very important link in building brand perception and that it is necessary to include them as brand ambassadors in marketing (digital) strategy.

So, the opportunities for today's marketing experts (social media manager, brand manager, digital manager) are huge. By involving consumers in the process of co-creation of brand, product and service and providing incentives in the form of unique solutions and customized experience, decision makers are constantly receiving feedback from them. According to the findings of the Serbian research, brand managers do not sufficiently recognize the possibilities of the co-creation with GenZ process. This fact gives brand managers/social media managers room for stronger cooperation with GenZ consumers in building stronger brands, and thus their sustainability.

In spite of the fact that the total number of respondents is sufficient for statistical representativeness the key limitation of the empirical research is reflected in the insufficient number of respondents per subtotal like age groups that are unevenly distributed. This should be kept in mind when interpreting research results. Also, the sample is intentional, while it would be more important if it was random, which is a recommendation for some future research on this topic. For future research, the goal is to analyze the results of works with a similar topic in other regions, in order to bring integrative findings and insights that are applicable in practice. It is evident that there are insufficient papers on the behavior of Generation Z in the neighbouring countries and wider as a source of comparison.

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Apstrakt:

Dizajniranje održivog brenda saradnjom angažovanog potrošača i brenda Kokreatori i influenseri Generacije Z Srbije

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Svrha ovog rada je da identifikuje obim učešća generacije Z u procesu saradnje sa brendovima u Srbiji i da prouči potencijale u budućnosti. Saradnja između generacije Z (GenZ) i brendova u digitalnom svetu i intenzivnoj eri marketinga na društvenim medijima ima dve uloge: GenZ kao kokreatori i influenseri. Cilj istraživanja je da se izmere statistički značajne razlike u odgovorima ispitanika u odnosu na ispitanika mišljenja, potrebe, stavove i namere članova GenZ u vezi sa procesom saradnje (kokreatori i influenseri). U januaru i februaru 2021. istraživanje je sprovedeno sa 303 ispitanika GenZ-a u onlajn anketi. Rezultati pokazuju da skoro 70% članova GenZ-a smatra da bi organizacije trebalo češće da organizuju aktivnosti

u kojima učestvuju potrošači. Uključivanjem GenZ-a u proces saradnje sa razvojem brenda, proizvoda i usluga, dobijanjem redovnih povratnih informacija od njih i angažovanjem influensera, marketing i brend menadžeri bi mogli da rade na kreiranju jedinstvenih rešenja, dodatnih vrednosti i personalizovanog iskustva. Srpski marketing i brend menadžeri, koji rade na jačanju pristupa usmerenosti na klijenta, mogli bi da primene rezultate istraživanja, uvide i preporuke kako bi zajedno sa GenZ osmislili efektivniju i efikasniju saradnju za svoje brendove.

Ključne reči: saradnja, kokreatori, influenseri, održivi brend, generacija Z

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