RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Investigation of how brands using influencer marketing affect the purchasing decisions of the Z generation in the context of Türkiye

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has significantly altered the way brands connect with their target audience, specifically Generation Z. The aim of this research is to explore how brands using influencer marketing impact the purchasing decisions of Generation Z individuals aged 15 to 25 in Istanbul, Türkiye. Data collection for this study is conducted through a qualitative study approach. A semi-structed questionnaire is used to assess how Generation Z's perception of an influencer affects how they engage with a brand and how that shapes their buying decision process. The results of this study showed that the attractiveness, integrity and level of fame that an influencer possesses affect the way Generation Z perceives them. If they have loyalty towards an influencer, they are more likely to have loyalty towards the brand associated with the influencer. The conclusions drawn from this study are particularly valuable for brands interested in optimizing their influencer marketing strategies to efficiently establish a connection with Generation Z in the Turkish market.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Generation Z, Purchasing Decision, Social Media Marketing

JEL codes: M10, M31, M37

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the past few years, the marketing world has undergone a substantial transformation due to the rise of influencer marketing. As social media has gotten more and more powerful, it has now become a tool used by brands to connect with their consumers, and Generation Z (Gen Z), often called "digital natives," has played a very critical role in this paradigm shift. Born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, this generation makes up almost 19% of the Turkish population (Deniz & Tutgun-Üna, 2019) and has grown up in the digital age. This is why it holds a significant amount of purchasing power and understanding how influencer marketing can be utilized to affect Gen Z's buying behavior becomes strategically important which is what this study aims to do.

Brands worldwide are utilizing the internet for both marketing and growth (Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023) and since Gen Z is also considered as the 'internet generation' (Akpinar, et al., 2022), brands have become more available to access and explore for this generation. Since they are so easily accessible and are being marketed even through the famous internet figures followed by a huge amount of Gen Z individuals, the affect they can have on Generation Z consuming their products can be massive. To understand this link effectively, a deeper insight on who exactly Generation Z is, how it thinks and functions as a whole, what relationship they hold with social media influencers and how these influencers are causing them to behave differently when engaging with a brand needs to be defined in detail.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Generation Z and Social Media

Gen Z is considered as the second-youngest generation, heavily influenced by their surroundings just like the generations before and after them. They come right after the millennial generation and are recognized as the first generation who grew up with constant access to the internet, making them "digital natives". Most of Gen Z lives in urban and metropolitan settings with constant access to social media, with only 13% of them living in rural areas. Controlling almost the entire global population with a staggering number of almost two billion people, this generation will be the largest consumer groups in the world (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Since Gen Z have a strong grasp of digital technology and display creative thinking, they greatly influence various aspects of society. From fashion to beauty to technology, Gen Z is causing some transformative developments to occur across various industries. The most noteworthy aspect that sets Gen Z is apart is how they prefer to conduct their work, shopping, dating, and socializing online. They have a great independence on the internet to get information regarding almost everything. Social media applications like YouTube, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram has made this incredibly easier for them (Nikos, et al., 2022). Out of these platforms, TikTok is considered the most dominant app due to its power over dictating trends, sentiments, and cultural shifts for Gen Z which constitutes a staggering 60 percent of the app's 1 billion plus user base. Based on a research in 2019, 73% of teenagers believed Instagram as the most effective application to connect with the new products and promotional offers that brands are putting out. With the way Instagram has worked towards integrating shopping into its platform, there is no surprise that it has become both a significant part of the user experience and the most preferred platform for engaging with the largest consumer generation of the current time (Gyan & Jyotsna, 2017).

A research conducted in 2017 showed that Gen Z inclined more towards influencer marketing when compared to other generations. For this generation, influencers serve as role models and educators. For Gen Z, authenticity is more about feeling a personal connection with the brand or the individual promoting the brand (FORBES, 2017). As times have changed, it has become important for marketers to know what kind of marketing strategy speaks to this generation since for most online brands, this generation is the biggest target audience. This is also why

influencer marketing has become increasingly popular.

2.2. The Growth of Influencers and Influencer Marketing

An individual who has gained a loyal following on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, are popularly known as social media influencers. Their relatability, proficiency, authenticity and accessibility is the reason they have earned so much admiration and trust from their followers. Social media influencers are now considered as extremely powerful figures who can shape consumer opinions, set new trends, and impact buying behavior (Daniel, et al., 2021). This is why using influencers to market a product has become such a widely used and effective strategy for brands to reach their consumer base. Influencer marketing refers to when brands partner with influencer to promote products and services to their followers. By using influencer's established integrity and connection with their audience as leverage, brands can connect with a highly receptive customer base (Sofie, 2017). Cooperating with a well-recognized influencer is one of the fastest way to reach young consumers through social media. Since these individuals have created a certain bond with their audience and are considered as 'digital wing leaders', their thoughts and ideas are given a lot of importance by the people who follow them and check their content on a daily basis (Elmi, 2022, p. 28).

Marketers use influencer marketing as a medium to connect with Gen Z consumers, broadcast information, and shape consumers' perceptions of products. Being computer oriented, Gen Z shows the highest interest in social media influencers, mainly in the fashion and lifestyle sector, with approximately 84.5% of them being drawn to this phenomenon (Khadar, 2020). Gen Z regards these influencers as role models or opinion leaders and tend to imitate their behavior, such as their fashion choices and dietary preferences which causes them to purchase any brand or product the influencer is endorsing.

Celebrity sponsorships and advertising are some traditional marketing tactics have been in the industry for a very long time and are regularly utilized by various companies. However, the accessibility of influencers as online personalities has brought a lot of attention to the phenomenon of influencer marketing. Celebrities usually have limited interaction with their fans, but influencers are known to actively engage with their followers and try their best to communicate with them through comments under posts and Instagram stories. This sets a more comfortable dynamic between a follower and an influencer, which sets them apart from other famous figures and contributes to their appeal (Schouten, et al., 2019). Influencers are also known to frequently talk about their beliefs and opinions in videos, a lot of times gaining more attraction due to their political and social comments and emerging as influential figures, particularly among young people. The more these influencers continue to stand up for what they believe is right, the more trust they garner from their followers who hold the same beliefs, which makes the followers relate to them more (Alkan & Ulaş, 2022).

The amount of Gen Z individuals joining and using social media platforms is constantly increasing as days pass. Newer, more innovative strategies are being applied to social media marketing every year, and without fail using social media and social media influencers has proved to be more beneficial for businesses. One of the biggest reasons why the influence marketing method is now being widely used and preferred by businesses is the high return on investment. Approximately, 89% of businesses have stated that they prefer influence marketing more than other marketing methods (Elmi, 2022, p. 32).

2.3. Impact of Influencer Credibility and Attractiveness on Gen Z

Gen Z are more inclined towards digital advertisements where the content is more transparent and original, instead of the traditional advertising approach carried out by companies (ShopLTK, 2021). This particular generation has outgrown conventional methods and now seeks an authentic voice that can share genuine experiences related to products, purchases, and life. Here is where influencers come in; having

emerged as individuals who have gained the trust of their followers, assuming a "friend" role, they have made sure Gen Z put great trust in them. They make sure they have in-depth knowledge about the product they are endorsing, and are being realistic in their reviews, so it instils a level of confidence and trust in Gen Z (Alkan & Ulaş, 2022).

In turn for their time and loyalty, Gen Z expects the influencers to provide them with original content, a sincere approach towards products, distinctiveness and authenticity. The basis of the bond between Gen Z and influencers is formed on sincerity and genuineness. Since influencer marketing functions on a personal level, these Gen Z consumers form parasocial relationships with the influencers. Having a peek into an influencer's life makes the Gen Z audience think they are a part of their lives, like they know the influencer and so their relationship with the influencer becomes personal to them. Gen Z consumers start to have more faith in them and believe that influencers as more sincere than companies (Närvänen, et al., 2020). In 2019, when influencer marketing was already on the rise, The Edelman Trust Barometer conducted a survey to find that 63% of respondents trusted what influencers had to say about a brand compared to what the brand said about itself in its own advertising campaigns (Edelman, 2019). It was also reported in the same report that young consumers are likely to keep following influencers as sources of knowledge and motivation as long as they feel that trust is part of the value proposition. The influence these social media personalities have over Gen Z is built on real relationships with them, and influencers are only as effective and trustworthy as the Gen Z make them out to be. If the Gen Z audience stops believing in an influencer or loses faith in their authenticity, the influencer has lost all standing (Yaman & Çakın, 2021).

Marketing activities that are carried out through social media and use influencers are considered as good marketing strategies when it comes to targeting Gen Z, but they may not always have an effect on Gen Z's buying decisions. Gen Z will only support the people who they think

are credible, have authentic skills and talent, and those who are demonstrating the use and qualities of the product or service being offered clearly and honestly. Gen Z has a strong interest in the quality, authenticity, and uniqueness of the product or service that they want to buy, so they are more inclined to watch someone they believe in reviewing the product first. Since there is an easier associative relationship between products and influecers, Gen Z consumers are expected more to perceive the influencer as a truly reliable source when assessing the characteristics of the product (Nugroho, et al., 2022).

Customers tend to accept information from influencers if their moral qualities are confirmed, leading to more trust and acceptance. Once customers start to fully trust an influencer, they are more likely to trust and accept future information, many times without question. Also, once trust between an influencer and consumer is established, Gen Z customers readily extend it to the associated object or recommendation. This is why, when an influencer builds an honest and trustworthy image, it becomes easier to attract more individuals of the Gen Z community (Pham, 2021).

Another aspect that strenghtens the link between a Gen Z consumer and an influencer is attractiveness. Attractiveness is based on an influencer's acquaintance, fondness and familiarity to their followers (Till & Busler, 2013). An audience is more likely to adopt what an influencer believes or promotes when it believes that they have common intentions, values and characteristics with the influencer. The more the audience identifies with an influencer, the more likely they are to follow them. The desire to become like their favourite influencer because they are attracted to the way the influencer behaves, lives and thinks, makes Gen Z more reliant on what the influencer is saying or promoting (Nugroho, et al., 2022).

The attractiveness of influencers plays an essential role in catching public attention. The more attractive influencers are, the higher their popularity and the greater their chance will be to impact consumer behavior. In 2014, Sertoglu discovered that social groups often hold high

expectations of influencers who are more attractive. Additionally, in 1986, Chaiken found out that attractiveness directly correlates with social influence and the level of trust people place in individuals within their community. Based on these points, it becomes evident that the attractiveness of influencers plays a significant role in shaping the behavior of their followers (Pham, 2021). In the world of online platforms, the attraction in the virtual world clings to the minds of customers more than the words used. An attractive influencer has the advantage of presenting their message with greater persuasiveness compared to others (Chaiken, 1979). Hence, when influencers deliver messages that are attractive and captivating to users, the customers are most likely to make sense of the product's usefulness and can be convinced to actually purchase the product (Pham, 2021).

When Gen Z individuals watch an influencer's review, it makes them curious and instils in them a strong desire to purchase the featured product or brand. Research shows that if the individual likes the influencer, the product review might stay in their minds for a long time increasing the chance of purchase. A positive purchasing experience goes on to foster customer loyalty. Through a pleasant buying experience, Gen Z consumers develop trust in the product, which encourages them to buy from the same brand again and confidently share their positive experiences with others (Pinto & Paramita, 2021).

Influencers are defined as individuals who create authority and trust over their supporters. In this situation, it has been revealed that 60% of Gen Z are more involved in buying products and brands endorsed by influencers. In addition to that, influencers offer active access through social media platforms. Their posts are open for comments to which they try to regularly reply and their inboxes open for messages. All of these factors combined don't only increase reliability, but also increases brand awareness, causing Gen Z to be attracted towards the brand, many times leading them to make a purchase (Larrea, et al., 2021). Research carried out by Kantar revealed that 44% of Generation Z individuals form their purchasing decisions based on the

recommendations of influencers. Another research conducted by Survey Monkey showed that 58% of Generation Z's shopping habits are shaped by the ideas and suggestions put forth by influencers. According to another research by McKinsey and Company, Gen Z was found to be more willing to buy from personalized product promotions and products that emphasize their individuality. Similarly, Morning Consult's Influencer Report in 2019 brought forth that 52% of Generation Z trust influencers on social media platforms to get honest guidance about products, services or brands (Alkan & Ulaş, 2022).

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to find out whether the utilisation of influencer marketing by brands has had a positive effect on Generation Z's buying behaviour, particularly in Türkiye.

3.2. Research Questions

This study will provide answers to:

RQ1 Does the attraction of influencers have any affect on Gen Z's purchasing decision?

RQ2 Does the perceived honesty of influencers have any affect on Gen Z's buying decision?

RQ3 Can influencers make Gen Z loyal to a brand through their promotions?

3.3. Hypothesis

The hypothesis this study is going to be testing is as follows:

H1 Influencer marketing has a positive effect on Gen Z's purchasing decision

H0 Influencer marketing has a negative effect on Gen Z's purchasing decision

3.4. Population and Sample

The population for this research comprises of individuals ranging from ages 15 to 25, and are students at English Time which is one of the most famous English language learning schools of Istanbul. The sample for this study will consist of exactly 20 participants, male and female, who

will fall into the following criteria: they must be within the required age range, must be Turkish citizens and must be active on social media platforms.

The sample size was chosen to be 20 participants based on practical considerations, including limitations of time and resource. A larger sample size would have allowed the findings to be generalized to a larger group, but due to the limited scope of the study the focus remained on a smaller sample. To increase the significance however, it was made sure that there was some level of diversity between the participants since they all came from different areas of Istanbul. Since I am a teacher at English Time, it was very convenient to have access to the individuals there and choose participants, because knowing the exact ages of the students and having an idea of their social media usage helped in choosing the right group of people. All inidividuals present at the institute also speak and understand English, so as an English speaker it became easier to interview them. Moreover, students constitute of a significant portion of Generation Z, and their reliance on social media made them an ideal group for this research.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	8	40
Female	12	60
Age		
15 – 20	6	30
21 – 25	14	70

3.5. Instrument and Method for Data Collection

For this research, questionnaires and interviews were used as the research instrument. The questionnaire included both open and closed-ended questions. Questions of quantitative nature were included in the interviews because some precise information was also required. On the most part, however, the study conducted was of qualitative nature. Using the qualitative research method, interviews were chosen as the most appropriate tool for data collection. Data was collected through semi-structured

questionnaires which allow the opportunity of going in-depth in the context (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018). As the researcher, I undertook the role of guidance and made sure the questions were determined before the interview in the context of the subject. 20 students were made to sit in 1 classroom at English time, after they showed their IDs to confirm that they lied between the ages of 15 – 25. They were made to sign a consent form, and were told to participate voluntarily. The questionnaires were distributed among them, and they were given an hour to fill them out and submit them. The study was conducted in just 1 day, for not more than 2 hours.

3.6. Method of Data Analysis

After the qualitative data was collected, the data was closely inspected and studied. Segments of the data which represented similar concepts and themes were identified and coded. These coded segments were then further put under themes, after similar patterns were identified in between them. This helped categorize data in a meaningful way to get to the key findings which were then reported. To analyze the quantitative data, IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used to run descriptive and correlation tests. SPSS is widely acknowledged as one of the most effective tools for quantitative data analysis. (Rahman & Muktadir, 2021, p. 300)

3.7. Limitations of the Research

Due to the limited time and resources availabie, there are some limitations to this research design, for example the small sample size and the limited geographical scope restricts the generalizabily of the study. Researcher bias and subjectivity may have been introduced to the research due to its qualitative nature.

4. FINDINGS

All of the respondents chosen used social media daily. 15% of the participants engaged with influencer content on a social media site other than Instagram. The average time these individuals spent on social media ranges from 2 – 5 hours per day. Patterns and themes in the data collected were formed keeping the research questions in mind. The data collected and

analyzed was categorized and inspected under the following themes, in order to see whether the research questions were answered positively or negatively.

4.1. Attractiveness of Influencer

The results clearly showed that 80% of the individuals beiıeved that the influencers they followed were attractive.
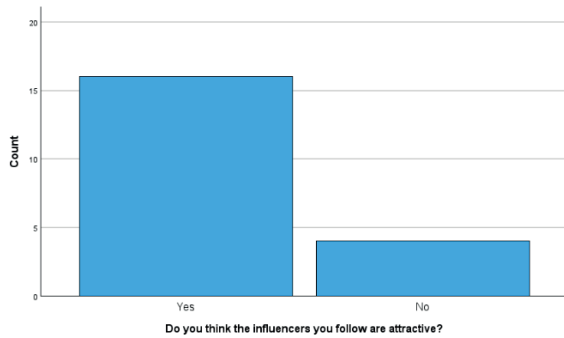

Figure 1. Individuals who find influencers attractive

When further asked about what they perceived as attraction, the most common responses included the infuencers using good makeup, wearing pretty clothes and having lavish lifestyles.The participants were clear about why they deemed these influencers attractive and why they were influenced by them. Below, 12 responses are listed which fell under the same category and shows why Generation Z is in fact affected by how attractive the celebrity is.

Most individuals believed that the way the influencers they are following lived was an attractive lifestyle and they want to relate to it, or at least feel like they are living that lifestyle. Moroever, they saw how attractive these influencers are which seems to make them believe that they have become attractive by usimg the products they are using, which in turn makes me want to buy those products. Most of the participants just admire the attractive exterior the influencers are putting on social media, and in the race to become more like them, these individuals subconsciously let these infleuncers make their buying decisions for them. RQ1 is answered as follows: the attraction of an influencer does have a positive affect on the purchasing decision of Gen Z.

Table 2. Responses on Attractiveness

Question: *When you see an attractive influencer endorsing a product, what makes you want to buy it?*	
"I want to relate to them."	"I feel like I am closer to them."
"If for example Tati used a mascara and looked that pretty, I want to look the same."	"Makes me feel like I am living like them."
"Maybe by using that product they got so pretty, I can too."	"I feel like if I am using what they are using, I will be like them."
"They look pretty amazing using it sometimes, so I want to look like that too."	"I want to achieve their lifestyle."

4.2. Honesty of Influencers

The results show that most of the participants are unsure of what they feel about the honesty level of the influencers they follow. Compared to how 80% of the respondents were sure that the influencers were attractive, only 38% are sure that the influencers they follow are honest on social media, whereas more than 60% are not really sure. Out of all 20 individuals, nobody completely believed that the influencer they follow are dishonest.
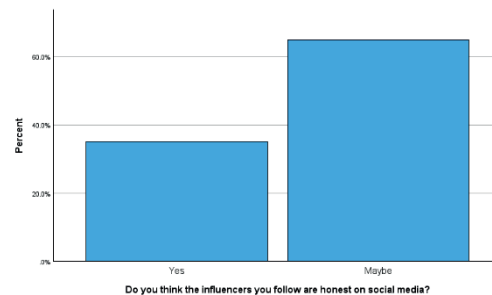

Figure 2. Individuals who find influencers honest on social media

When asked about why they responded the way that they did, the two most common responses suggested that if an influencer has never been

in a scandal or controversy, they are perceived as honest by their fans which increases the fan's loyalty towards them. The respondents who weren't sure about their favourite influencer's honesty, were confident in suggesting that nobody can be completely hoenst on social media all the time, but even if they are hiding things or not speaking the whole truth, it is never that serious so calling them dishonest would be unfair. Once it was understood that the participants were more inclined to believe that the influencers they followed were honest, they were inquired about if they would buy any product that is being endorsed by them even if the product did not have good reviews by the general public.

When it came to honesty, the participants seemed to believe that if the influencer has always been honest before, they were less likely to be dishonest now. Due to the attachment they had established with the influencer, they were ready to trust them with their buying decision. Just 12 responses out of 20 are stated above, but the rest were also among the same lines with 2 of the respondents saying they would listen to the general public instead. These two participants also answered as 'maybe' to the previous question about honesty too.

After analysing the responses collected from the participants, it was certain that RQ2 has also been answered positively; the perceived honesty of influencers does affect the buying decision of their Gen Z followers.

Table 3. Responses on Honesty

Question: *If an influencer who you think is honest promotes something which the general public does not like, would you think of buying it?*	
"I probably would after watching how the influencer is using it."	"Everyone has different experiences with things, so maybe other people are lying."
"I am still following them for a reason, so I will buy it most probably."	"They would not lie to all of their followers, that is not good for them. So I will probably believe them."
"Depends on the influencer. If it is someone I really love, I will."	"Yes, if I have the money for that product I will buy it."
"Yes, I mean they have never lied before so?"	"If I have used their recommended products before and liked them, I will probably listen to them again."

4.3. Brand loyalty due to Influencers

Very direct questions were asked from the participants to check whether RQ3 had any significance. For this question two variables were identified; the participant needed to have a favourite influencer they were attached to was counted as the independent variable, and what affect this had on the participant's buying decision when it came to interacting with a brand was the dependent variable. After the Pearson Correlation test was done on the data, it showed a positive correlation of 0.157 with a significance of 0.254. This proved that a correlation did exist between the two variables, however it does not seem to very strong.

Figure 3. Pearson Correlation test result output

The weakness of the correlation was further proved when the participants were asked if they would continue using a brand their favourite influencer endorsed if they were not happy with the products of that brand previously. The following responses were collected.

Table 4. Responses on Brand Loyalty

Question: *If you have been disappointed by a brand before, and the influencer is still promoting it, will you still by from that brand?*		
"Maybe the product is good now, so I might try it."	"Not really, unless one of my friends recommend it."	"Yes, if it is my favourite influencer then yes."
"No it will be hard for me to trust the brand now."	"I will first see how they are using it and also do my research."	"I will do my research and ask about it first."

We understood that the reason for the correlation being is weak is the effect of extraneous factors; friend and family recommendations, previous experiences and public reviews, on the participants' thinking process. So RQ3 was answered positively as well, but it is not recommended to believe that the answer would not change if this aspect was to be studied more deeply. This answer is specific and valid to only this study.

4.4. Is Gen Z's Buying Decision Affected by Influencer Marketing?

After revıweing the literature available, running tests on the data and analysing it by categorizing it under different themes (attraction, honesty and brand loyalty), enough evidence was derived to answer all the research statements of this study. Since, the research questions have been majorly answered affırmatively, H1 was accepted. H1 clearly stated that the relation between influencers and Gen Z's purchasing decision is positive meaning that an influencer's content does influence the way Gen Z think before making a purchase which has been proved to hold a lot of truth based on the data that was collected in this study.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to understand how widespread influencer marketing is gradually becoming and how it is increasingly influencing the way young people think. Both primary data collected through interviews and secondary information gathered from literature available was analyzed to the determine the Gen Z consumer's purchasing behavior. The research examined the relationship between Gen Z consumer behavior and influencer marketing, producing favorable results. Turkish youngsters spend a significant amount of time on social media everyday and take in a lot of information subconsciously on a daily basis. This study proves that influencer marketing is an effective marketing tool which can derive a young mind to make a purchase, even when the individual is uncertain about the quality of the product.

In Turkiye, the involvement of influencers in marketing is constantly increasing and is heading towards more growth professionally in the upcoming years. Even when it has already become so common now, this phenomenon is still just at the very beginning of all that it can become. During the course of this study, it became increasingly obvious how influencer marketing has become a very versatile and impactful marketing tool due to the convenience through which it can be used and financial viability. Due to having such a diverse and large

audience, that has social media integrated into their lives, it can be considered as one of the most well-targeted and profitable marketing tools.

One of the major reasons why influencer marketing is growing is its accessibility and approachability. Viewers cannot only access the content easily, but they feel like approaching influencers is easier than reaching out to A-list celebrities and brands. The trust factor between an influencer and follower also plays a huge part in the purchase behavior. If the consumer sees that the influencer has been authentic in the past and has a trustworthy personality, the trust for the companies endorsed by the influencer increases.

The findings of this study support the findings of the prior research done by Hermanda et al. in 2019, confirming that social media influencers have an impact on the purchase intentions of Instagram users. ◎[26] Leveraging social media influencers as a marketing strategy is particularly effective in capturing the attention of Generation Z. Given their tendency to spend a significant amount of time on social media and their susceptibility to influence, marketers should actively pursue influencer marketing strategies to engage Generation Z.

In conclusion, this study enforces the idea that influencer marketing is a very effective tool when it comes to influencing Gen Z's buying decision. However, we need to keep in mind that behavior is a very subjective concept and is ever-changing. Thus, the results of this study cannot be generalized over a large time period or a large geographical area. Behaviors of individuals can change over time, and also from place to place. This study was done to understand this concept a little more in-depth so that the phenomenon of influencer marketing could be understood from a business point of view. The findings of this study can aid brand owners in Turkiye to understand how they can utilize influencer marketing to attract more consumers and grow their brand. Moreover, it can help Turkish advertisers and marketeers to make their promotions and marketing more effective, and understand better what speaks to the younger consumer population.

As mentioned before, the research was limited to a small population. Even though it had a very smooth and reasonable progress, it could have encompassed more if the resource and time management wasn't there. Not a lot of literature that involved Gen Z in Turkiye could be found, which was an obstacle faced during the secondary research process. However, literature and articles from all around the globe aided the study hugely. This was a mixed-methods research, since it used both the quantitative and qualitative approach when collecting and analyzing data. This gave the opportunity to collect both very precise to-the-point data, as well as in-depth context which allowed the research subject to be comprehensively addressed. Although, this is a small scale research and could have been more advanced, it can be utilised as a secondary source to aid or support future studies that are conducted in the same domain.

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