

Social Media Influencers in Albania

Self-promotion or a hyper-machine phenomenon _____

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Abstract

Background: Social media influencers are gaining special relevance in many studies related to media, communication, and advertisement. Whilst a lot of research has been conducted in several countries on possible effects on different fields, in Albania SMI-s are still considered a pure marketing tool and there is little evidence on trends related to this topic. Purpose: The purpose of this study was to understand why the younger generation tend to follow social media influencers and to identify the most notable features they are looking for when following a specific SMI. Methodology: The data collection method used for this study was a questionnaire, spread out to students at the European University of Tirana, and the sample population age range was from 18 years old up to 26 years old. Conclusion: It results that youth tend to spend more than three hours

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on social media, and they are inclined to follow social media influencers based on the similarities they share with them. One of the most relevant findings is their tendency to strongly disagree in considering reality shows characters and politicians as social media influencers.

Key words: Social Media Influencers, attractiveness, similarities, generation Z

Introduction

Social networks are already an old novelty. Arguments such as: have reshaped the public sphere, have brought the world closer, have made instantaneous communication possible, have created new traits of identity or they are just being copies of who we are, are some of the most common clichés discussed in the theoretical debates in the humanities and not only. Even though, they are nothing but a communication tool, their implications have been playing considerable effects on public discourse and social development, opening new paths of research on numerous fields of studies such as advertisement, public relations, media, arts and culture, all together trying to understand the influence of these networks on the new social, economic and political dynamics.

Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter etc, have become powerful communication platforms, where both private and public individuals have found a space to express themselves, leading the way towards three major changes such as giving to people the ability to stay connected (Mangold & Faulds 2009), providing access to technology to create and share information (Berthon et al., 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and last but not least to facilitate the process of knowledge's democratization.

In a previous study conducted by the Department of Communication at the European University of Tirana, entitled "Online Albania", resulted that Facebook and Instagram were somehow *fabricating* famous people, who had become famous for *nothing* and from all four theoretical categorizations, the "Entertainment" category marked the highest number of followers and produced the majority of VIP in the so-called Online Albania. Whilst that study was purely numerical and aimed to conduct a descriptive analysis of the most followed social media profiles in Albania, this study wants to take things one step further and to propose and build an analytical model, which could help us draw some important conclusions of the popularity of social media influencers in Albania and the reasons why people, especially younger generation, tend to follow and appreciate their online presence.

Theoretical framework

According to the Encyclopedia of Public Relations (2013, p.848) social networking sites can be defined as “(1) web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). If we closely analyze the first definition, we could see that it is within the genesis of social network to motivate people to build this so-called public presence, which can be used for commercial or political purposes, trying to influence or convince other users who operate within the same bounded system.

With the increasing level of public trust in these new categories of opinion leaders, who operate online and given the high engagement level that these platforms tolerate, it has become extremely significant to further discuss about the rising impact of social media influencers on our personal choices. Sugiharto (2019) suggests that social media influencers have a significant effect on purchasing decisions, while other researchers such as Connolly (2012), Casalo et.al (2018) and Hughes et.al (2019), suggest that consumers are turning to social media influencers to identify products and services that comfort with their lifestyles. Ebru Uzunoglu, head of the department of Public Relation and Advertisement, at the Izmir University, says that [social media influencers] influence others by their lifestyle, education...[and]...by their attitude and behavior (Uzunoglu 2018). With usually more than 10000 followers, Connolly (2012) says that a social media influencer is someone who engages with brands to promote them, share information and who is an expert in the given field.

Even though influencers have been here long before social networking, disguised as opinion leaders, celebrities or endorsers, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, have brought the game into a whole new level, because as Tuten & Solomon (2012) argument, they are using self- presentation to get a sort of intimacy with their audiences. For many researchers, SMI popularity and engagement are two fundamental elements, which have turned influencer marketing into a 10 billion dollars industry in 2021. According to Sinan Aral (2020) ... “Popularity is an influencer’s reach, typically measured by the number of their followers... [while] ... engagement is the rate of interaction that an influencer inspires in their followers, measured... [in] likes and comments and privately, by campaign managers, with click- through and conversation rates” (p.192).

When trying to understand the reasons behind the given popularity and engagement rate, scholars have agreed upon themselves, that there are some main features that followers are looking for in a social media influencer. Attractiveness, similarities, authenticity, and trust, seem to be some of the most relevant features that guide a social media user to follow someone on social media, each having specific definitions based on the type of industry/ field where the SMI is operating.

It is important to understand that each of these concepts falls under abstract categories of definitions and sometime attractiveness is related to physical appearance, sometimes to the campaign itself and sometimes to the product they are promoting. For example, Dekavalla (2019) believes that attractiveness is both related to how the followers perceive that influencer and the brand they are promoting. The same logic implies to the concept of similarities, where scholars have concluded that people tend to follow influencers with whom they identify with (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Authenticity and trust seem to be closely related to each other as followers, especially younger generations, tend to evaluate genuine content that offers a lot of personal insight.

State of art in Albania

Even though numerous studies have been conducted in several countries, research in Social Media Influencers in Albania, is still of little relevance. According to an article published in April 2020, in Monitor journal, we are still speaking about SMI, only in economic terms and... “as a profession that gets paid quite well”, having thus less and less discussion on the possible effects on society, media and communication in general. In a study published on March by a group of researchers, it was admitted that... “No scientific publication related to social and content media usage were discovered in Albania... [and] their study provided with incremental data that [would] facilitate future research [in this field]”² (Vukatana, et al 2022)

From the statistical data gathered online, it results that from 2,872,758 people, who live in Albania, in July 2022 there were 2,191,467 Internet users, or around 76.3% of the population had online penetration. From this percentage, 67,8% or 1,947,600 users have a Face Book profile³. Based on another statistical source, in December 2022 there were 1,127, 600 people on Instagram and most of the represented age were males from 25 up to 34 years old. ⁴ The use of Instagram seems to be growing in a higher speed, a trend which is reflected in the entire region and confirmed by the Balkan Barometer 2022, with 60 % of Balkan youth

² <https://ieeca.org/journal/index.php/JEECAR/article/view/965/450>

³ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>

⁴ <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/instagram-users-in-albania/2022/12/>

using Instagram. ⁵ TikTok seems to be the second social media with the highest growing rate in the last year and last statistics reveal that there are 227,974 people from Albania, who have a profile on this platform. Insights from statistical sources show that 68 % of the users are in an age range from 18- 24 and second highest group are adults of the 25- 34 age range.⁶

With a simple Google search, you can find numerous articles and pages who offer statistical data on the most followed Albanian influencers, but you can find very few detailed analysis on reasons why these profiles have the highest popularity and engagement rate or even more, discuss on possible role models they are creating for the people following them. If we refer to the study conducted in 2017, on the most followed social media profiles in Albania, the results are as follow:

Top Ten	
1.Ermal Mamaqi	2067285
2.Edi Rama	1124392
3.Sali Berisha	1066951
4.Bleona Qerreti	965565
5.Alban Skenderaj	931199
6.Elvana Gjata	925134
7.Xhensila Myrtezaj	886363
8.Luana Vjollca	840466
9.Angela Martini	835967
10.Eni Koci	741487

Five years later the general panorama doesn't seem to have changed dramatically. Facebook remains the most used social platform and somehow the same people are still leading the way as social media influencers. ⁷

Top Ten		Followers	Engagement
1.Luana Vjollca	Art/ Actors/ Music/ Singer	2.1 M	1%
2.Noizy	Art	1.9 M	5.8%
3.Elvana Gjata	Art/Music/ Actor	1.8 M	
4. Xhensila Myrtezaj	Art/Music	1.8 M	
5.Marina Vjollca		1.5 M	1.9%
6.Rashel Kolaneci	Celebrity	1.4 M	3.21%
7.Elvis Naci		1.3 M	0.6%

⁵ file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/BalkanBarometer2022_pocket_edition_final_prw.pdf

⁶ <https://www.start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-albania>

⁷ https://starngage.com/plus/dashboard/influencer/search?platform=instagram&sort_by=starngage&followers=1000000%2C5000000&followersIndex=7&countries=AL

8.Bes Kallaku	Art/ Celebrity/ Music	1.3 M	0.81%
9.Ariena Ara	Music/ Modeling	1.2 M	0.8%
10.Ermal Mamaqi	Actor	1.2 M	0.1%

It is vital to understand that this issue is both technological and ideological and that it should inspire further analysis in both these dimensions. Why the most followed social media influencers are celebrities? What do they reflect in terms of attractiveness, similarities, and trust in relation to the audience and how they can be instrumentalized by other influencing industries? All these are fundamental questions that we should pose to get some answers that could help us tackle challenges coming from this field and this study is a first step in creating a reference on further research. For Nils S. Borchers... “SMI-s...combine different roles, which, have traditionally been occupied by separate actors... [such as] intermediary, content distributor, creative content producer, community manager, testimonial, strategic counselor, and event host. The combination of these roles in just one actor opens new opportunities for strategic communication and can produce appreciated synergy effects...” (2019, p. 255). It is exactly in this synergy that we should focus our research and to better understand the dynamics of the society in the age of AI.

Methodology

Based on the theoretical framework and similar studies conducted on this topic, the methods and instrumental tools to collect the necessary data for this paper were carefully chosen. Structured as an empirical study, this paper aimed to collect some preliminary data on the state of Social Media Influencers in Albania and to create a model for further analysis on this topic.

Given the lack of studies on the Albanian territory, the most suitable data collection method was a questionnaire, compound by 12 questions, divided in two main sections; the first session aimed to collect data on general attitudes on social media such as time spent and most used social networks, while in the second session, the sample population was expected to reflect on categories they consider as SMI-s, reasons why they follow them and in which industry they share a higher value. The questionnaire was spread out online and the target group for this study was compound by students at the European University of Tirana, in an age range from 18 years old up to 26 years old.

The main research objective of this study was to understand the perceptions of the younger generation on social media influencers and to identify which are some of the most important features they are looking for when following them

online. The questions reflect the current dynamics of the theoretical debates on this topic, especially those related to the main elements that make some followers choose their influencers. Finally, given that we were measuring perceptions, it was difficult to express our expectations in a concrete, cause effect hypothesis, but we were inclined to believe that:

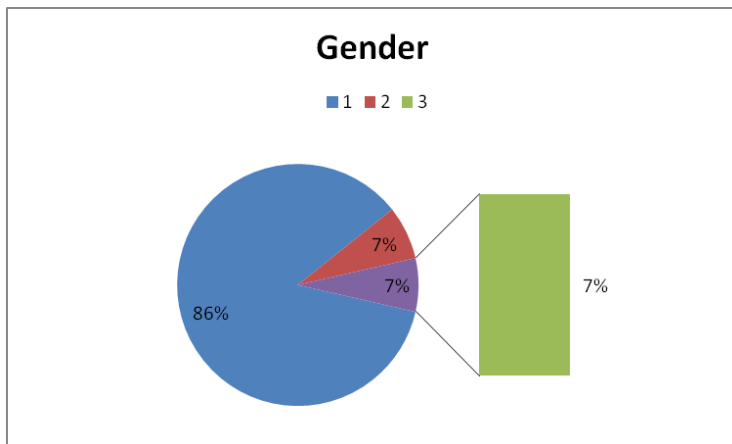
- Younger generations spend a considerable amount of time on social networks
- Younger generations tend to follow more celebrities on social media and consider them as main influencers
- Younger generations tend to select SMI-s based on similarities they share with them
- The data collected online were processed and they are further analyzed and discussed in the following session.

Results

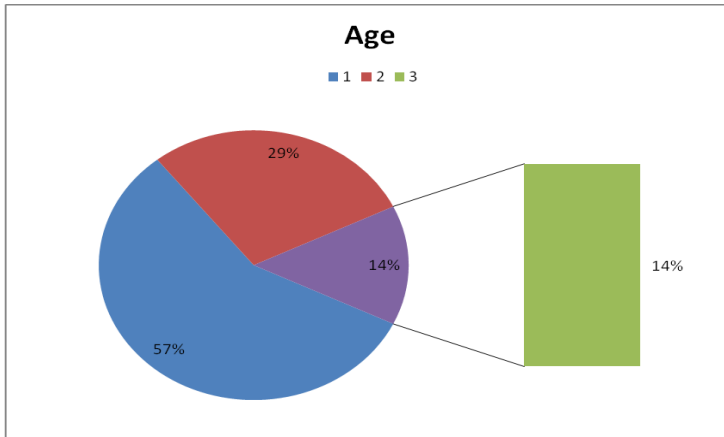
Daily habits

The questionnaire reached out to a sample of 140 students and most of the respondents were females, with 86% of the total sample, 7 % were male, and 10 of the respondents denied answering to this question. When we refer to age range of the respondents, more than half of them, 57 % were 21-23 years, 29 % were 18-20 years old and the least represented age range were those of the age range from 24 up to 26 years old.

GRAPH I. Gender

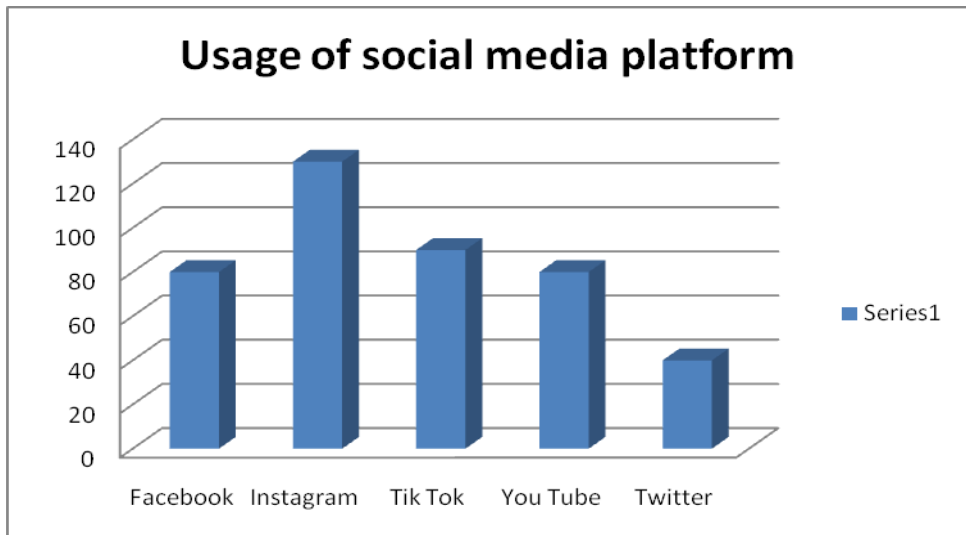


GRAPH II. Age range



One of the most important questions of the first session of the questionnaire was the question related to the most used social media platform. From the answers, 92 % of the sample population was using Instagram. You tube and Facebook shared similar percentage with 57 % and TikTok was used by 64 % of the sample population. Twitter was the least favorable social platform online with only 29 % of respondents.

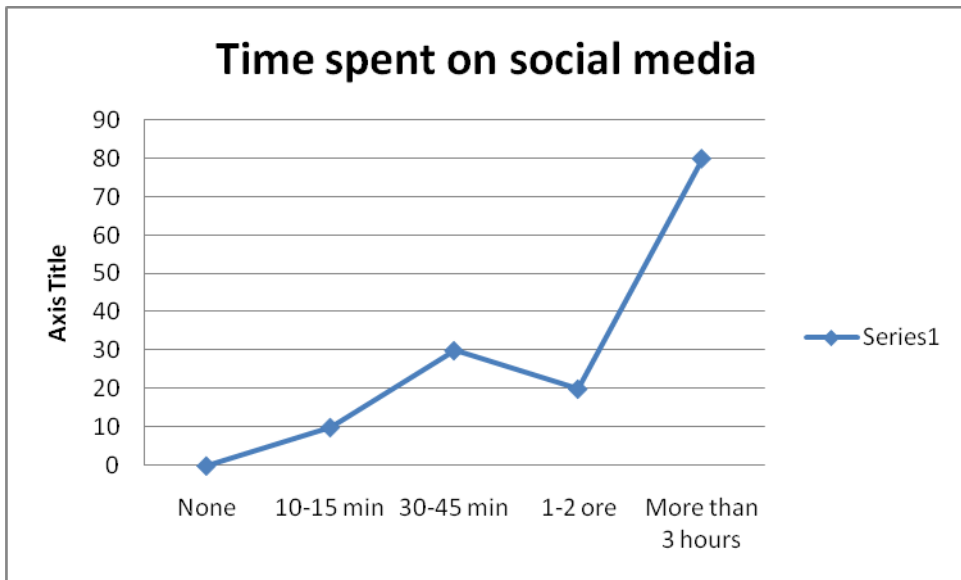
GRAPH III. Social media platform



The respondents in this question had the chance to give more than one answer and as we may notice from the data, most of them were active in at least three social media platforms and it would be interesting for further studies, to discuss on possible reasons why they choose one over the others.

A deep discussion happening around the topic of social media is the amount of time people, especially younger generations, tend to spend online. In the digital report published for 2022, on the daily time spent using social media, there is a noticeable growing tendency to spend more than 2 hours scrolling, sharing, and commenting on social media⁸. From the data we gathered from our sample population, most of the respondents use more than 3 hours on social media.

GRAPH IV. Time spent online



The last question of the first session wanted to shed some light on the reasons why younger generation use social media platforms. If we refer to the data gathered worldwide⁹, around 50% of the respondents, affirm that social media platforms help them to remain in touch with friends and family. Other mentioned reasons are: *filling spare time, reading news stories, finding content, seeing what is being talked about and finding inspiration for things to do and to buy.*

We posed the same question to our sample population and from the answers we got, the majority of the respondents perceive social media platforms as a place where they can spend their free time, while other reasons they mentioned were:

⁸ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report>

⁹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report>

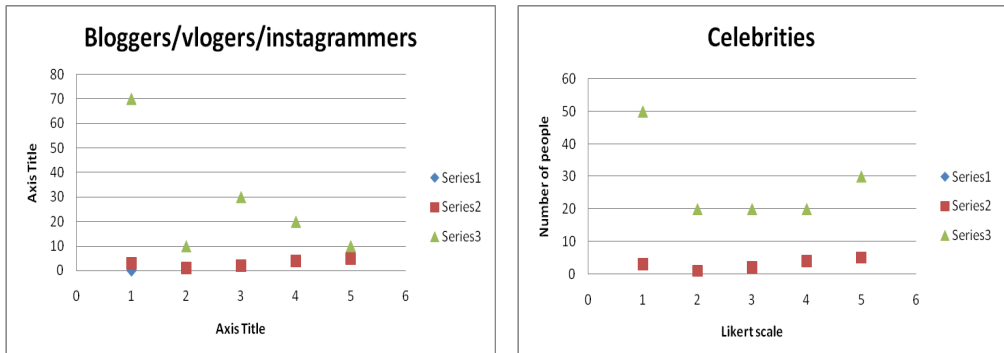
to maintain communication, to search for the latest information, to watch videos, to get acquainted with the latest trends etc. Following the trend of their answers, it is surprising to see that social media influencers for this sample are not perceived as a clear reason why they use social media, giving us an idea that SMI-s operate more as subliminal messages and they are tools integrated within the social media system.

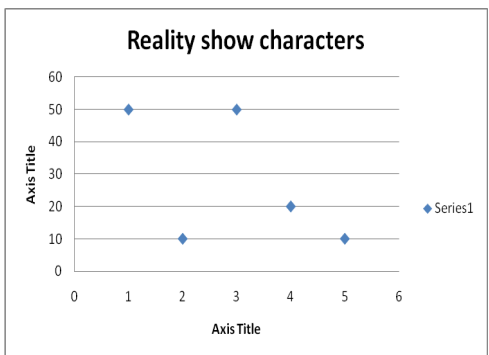
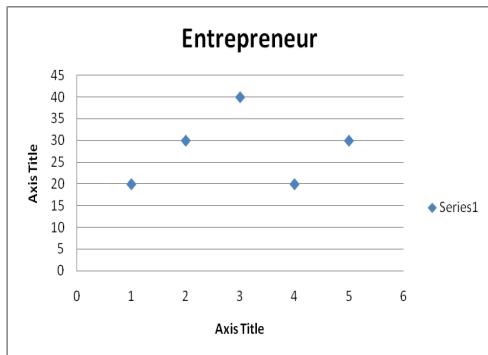
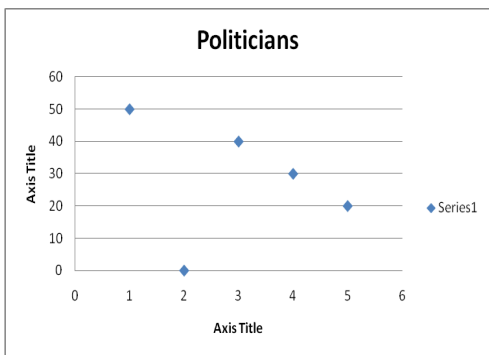
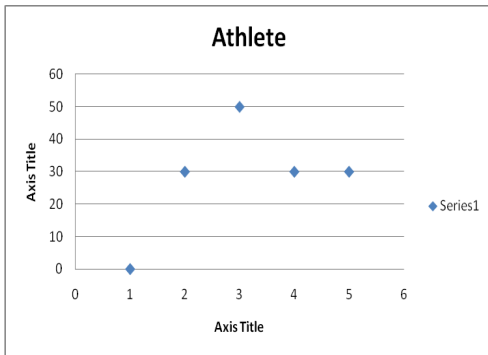
Power of the influencers

The second session of the questionnaire aimed to open a deeper discussion on reasons why they follow social media influencers and which categories they considered as such. When asked if they follow social media influencers on social platforms, 36 % of the sample said no and 65 % of them gave a positive answer. Given that most of the sample affirmed that they were following SMI on social media, the outcomes of the next question can offer some interesting data as they consider all categories (blogger/vlogger/instagrammer, celebrity, athlete, politician, and entrepreneur) to be fitting the theoretical description of SMI-s.

Based on a Likert scale range from 1 up to 5, respondents were asked to express the rate of approval on who can be called a SMI and from the answers, it seems that all given categories are eligible to be named/ called influencers. Below you may see all the data for all given categories. For specifications, 1 was equal to “strongly disagree”, 5 was equal to “completely agree”

GRAPH V





As we may notice from the graphics, most of the respondents are inclined to perceive athletes, entrepreneurs, and celebrities as social media influencers, whilst there is a tendency to strongly disagree in considering reality shows characters and politicians as social media influencers. If we refer to the data, more than 50 respondents strongly disagree with the idea of considering them as influencers and the same number affirms the same for reality show characters.

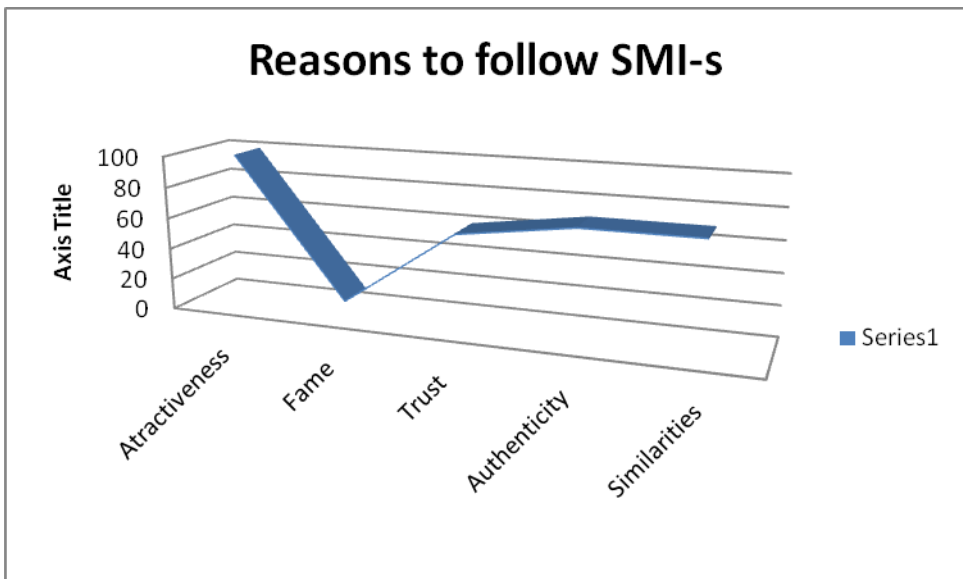
To understand more on profiles of people they follow on social media, we asked them two other relevant questions. First, we wanted to know some of the SMI-s that they follow and secondly, we wanted to know more about topics that these SMI-s post/ share on their profiles. One of the main findings related to the first question is the diversity of names that come up as social media influencers such as: *Blendi Fevziu, Aulona Musta, Angela Merkel, Chiara Ferragni, Arbana Osmani, Elvis Naci, Sara Karaj, Dojna Mema, Dorina Mema, Estela Ujka etj*. These findings bring into attention another important theoretical statement related to the social media platforms, which has to do with the scale of the influence.

Even though all this debate is still relatively new and undefined... “it seems that the industry is sorting influencers into five common levels...[which are] Nano influencers- from 10-to 1000 followers, Micro influencers from 1000 to 10000 followers, Macro influencers from 10000 to 100.000 followers, mega influencers

from 100000 to 1000000 and Celebrity influencers more than 1 million followers” (Miles 2019; p. 228) . If we search for the names given by the sample, it results that we have a representation of all five scales, but the tendency remains on Macro Influencers, as a middle category, where followers can still have a personal contact with the SMI, while flavoring the sense of being influenced by a Celebrity. Concerning topics these influencers post more on their social media profiles, Beauty, Fashion, Fit& Health, and Travel, are some of the most mentioned key words, results that reflect somehow the interests that the sample share and what they are fond of finding on social media. The result might also reflect the fact that most of the respondents were younger women, indicating that might be a need to find out if gender is a considerable variable in defining differences on this topic and social media in general.

In the last two questions we wanted to understand the reasons that motivate younger generation in following a social media influencer, and from all 4 theoretical features such as, attractiveness, trust, authenticity and similarities, attractiveness seems to be the most noticeable feature that drives them in choosing their SMI-s. Authenticity and similarity, seems to be highly valuable as well, as 70 respondents believe that they are also solid reasons that take into analysis when following someone online. In the questionnaire we put also fame as a variable, but as it is reflected by the date, being famous is enough reason to draw genuine interest.

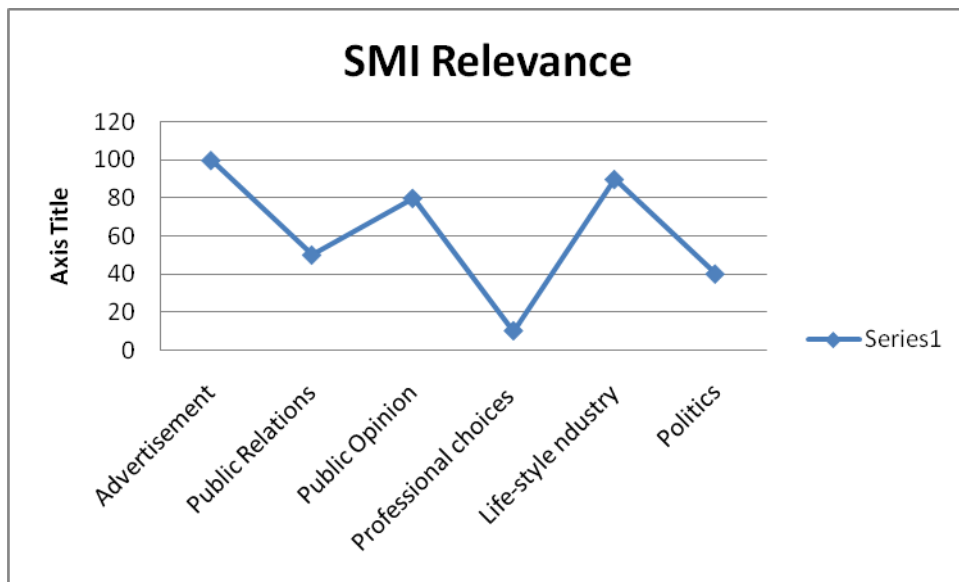
GRAPH VI



When asked about the industry where they believe SMI-s can be more relevant, the sample clearly states a tendency to connect them with advertisement, the

life-style industry and public opinion and less with professional choices, political campaign, and public relations. The graph below offers more detailed insight on these findings:

GRAPH VII



In most of the questions of the second session, respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, because we were interested in analyzing main trends and later this data can be used for more sophisticated statistical analysis, because as we may guess from the data, each variable can play an important role in better decoding the relevance of SMI-s in today’s world.

Discussion and further research

Internet has given a voice to everybody. It doesn’t matter if it comes from a phone, from a blog or from a Facebook profile; a statement can become viral within a second and influence audiences in taking and making drastic decisions and changes. Social Media Influencers are absolutely one of the most powerful mechanisms of this system, as they can amplify audience’s reach and at the same time making people believe, that they are making these choices based on their free will. Research show that audiences neglect the supremacy of algorithms and how the data we offer on Meta verse, are used to make a better profile of our own likes and dislikes.

At the beginning of this research, we stated three main believes such as:

- Younger generations spend a considerable amount of time on social networks
- Younger generations tend to follow more celebrities on social media and consider them as main influencers
- Younger generations tend to select SMI-s based on similarities with themselves.

The data gathered by the sample affirmed that youth tend to spend more than 3 hours on social media and that a considerable part of their activity on these platforms was focused on interactions with SMI-s. For them, celebrities were considered to fit best their idea of influencers and the main reason why they follow them was the similarities they shared with what the celebrities posted on their profiles. Even though, the results of this study cannot be generalized for a higher percentage of population, it opens a path of further research and to investigate the perception of the messages, age and gender similarities and differences and how this new industry can influence the nature of art, communication and even politics in the years to come.

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