



## Evaluation of Generation Z and Influencer Interaction in the Scope of Religious and Cultural Values

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### ABSTRACT

Social media, where popular culture is created and strengthened, religious issues are discussed and people openly share their preferences, is a tool that directly affects young people today. Therefore, Generation Z is under the influence of influencers on social media tools more than family, values, religion and cultural education during adolescence. In light of all this information, the purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of intense influencer interaction created by Generation Z through social media tools on religious and cultural values. The importance of this research is to deepen the social understanding of the impact of Generation Z and influencer interaction on religious and cultural values and to develop a perspective on the subject. With the basic judgment that young people are the next generation, this issue is seen as important in terms of shaping the future. The method of the research is in-depth interview. In-depth interviews were conducted and data was collected with 15 Generation Z members who actively use social media and follow influencers. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. Within the scope of the study, 8 basic questions were determined and it was aimed to expand the answers by asking related questions depending on the answers given to these questions. These people were selected by simple random sampling and all of them are undergraduate university students. Gender and socio-economic status are not a means of discrimination within the scope of this research. However, 9 of the 15 people are female and 6 are male. Although all students reside in different provinces, they all continue their education at universities in Istanbul. Although socio-economic status was not prioritized in the study, it was deemed necessary for the individual to have a smart mobile phone and to interact with influencers by actively using social media tools. According to the results of the research, interviewees clearly stated that influencers' opinions are important to them. No significant differences based on gender were detected. The main gender-based difference here is the diversification and change of influencers followed. It is thought that social tastes and tastes based on gender are effective here. Interviewees also revealed that influencers share posts that are far from religious and cultural values. In particular, following non-Turkish influencers of this age group causes them to become alienated from their own culture and religion and admire foreign religions and cultures. As a result of all the interviews, it is possible to say that Generation Z, who follows influencers and actively uses social media, moves away from religious and cultural values and approaches their lives within the framework of more non-religious and popular culture elements. In general, when all the results are evaluated, individuals during the youth period, with the influence of social media and influencers, tend to remove religious elements from their lives and adopt a secular lifestyle by taking it as an example.

**Keywords:** Religion Sociology, Social media, Generation Z, Influencer, In-depth interview

## Z Kuşağı ve Influencer Etkileşiminin Dini ve Kültürel Değerler Kapsamında Değerlendirilmesi

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### ÖZ

Popüler kültürün oluşturulup güçlendirildiği, dini konuların konuşulduğu ve insanların açık bir şekilde tercihlerini paylaştıkları sosyal medya bugün gençleri doğrudan etkileyen bir araçtır. Dolayısıyla Z kuşağı ergenlik döneminde en fazla aile, değer, din ve kültürel eğitimden daha fazla sosyal medya araçlarındaki influencer etkisi altındadır. Bütün bu bilgiler ışığında; bu araştırmanın amacı, Z kuşağının sosyal medya araçları aracılığıyla oluşturduğu yoğun influencer etkileşiminin dini ve kültürel değerlere olan etkilerini araştırmaktır. Bu araştırmanın önemi, Z Kuşağı ile influencer etkileşiminin dini ve kültürel değerlere olan etkisine ilişkin toplumsal anlayışı derinleştirme ve konuya ilişkin bir bakış açısı geliştirilmesinin sağlanmasıdır. Gençlerin gelecek nesiller olduğu temel yargısıyla bu konu geleceğin biçimlendirilmesi açısından önemli görülmektedir. Araştırmanın yöntemi derinlemesine görüşmedir. Sosyal medyayı aktif kullanan ve influencer takip eden 15 Z kuşağı mensubu ile derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmış ve veri toplanmıştır. Derinlemesine görüşmeler yarı-yapılandırılmış biçimde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında 8 temel soru belirlenmiş ve bu sorulara verilen yanıtlara bağlı olarak ilişkili sorular sorularak yanıtların genişletilmesi hedeflenmiştir. Bu kişiler basit tesadüfi örneklem yöntemi kullanılarak seçilmiş olup hepsi lisans düzeyinde üniversite öğrencisidir. Cinsiyet ve sosyo-ekonomik durum bu araştırma kapsamında bir ayırt etme aracı değildir. Ancak 15 kişinin 9'u kadın ve 6 tanesi de erkeklerden oluşmaktadır. Tüm öğrenciler farklı illerde ikamet etmesine karşın hepsi İstanbul'daki üniversitelerde öğrenimlerini sürdürmektedir. Çalışmada sosyo-ekonomik durum öncelenmemekle beraber bireyin bir akıllı cep telefonuna sahip olması ve sosyal medya araçlarını aktif kullanarak influencerlar ile etkileşim içerisinde olması gerekli görülmüştür. Araştırmanın sonuçlarına göre; bu yaş grubundaki görüşmeciler açık bir şekilde influencerların görüşlerinin kendileri için önemli olduğunu belirtmiştir. Araştırma kapsamında cinsiyet ayırt edici bir unsur olmamasına karşın cinsiyet dayalı öne çıkan bir farklılık saptanmamıştır. Buradaki cinsiyete dayalı en temel farklılık takip edilen influencerların çeşitlenmesi ve değişmesidir. Cinsiyete dayalı sosyal beğeni ve zevklerin burada etkili olduğu düşünülmektedir. Görüşmeciler influencerların dini ve kültürel değerlere uzak paylaşımlarda bulduklarını da ortaya koymuşlardır. Özellikle bu yaş grubunun Türk olmayan influencerları takip etmeleri de onların kendi kültürleri ve dinlerine yabancılaşarak yabancı din ve kültürlere hayranlık duymasına neden olmaktadır. Bütün görüşmelerin sonucunda, influencer takip eden ve sosyal medyayı aktif kullanan Z kuşağının dini ve kültürel değerlerden uzaklaşarak yaşamlarını daha din dışı ve popüler kültür öğeleri çerçevesinde yaklaştıklarını söylemek mümkündür. Genel olarak tüm sonuçlar değerlendirildiğinde, sosyal medya ve influencer etkisiyle gençlik döneminde bireyler dini öğeleri yaşamından uzaklaştırarak seküler bir yaşam tarzını örnek alarak benimsemiye yaklaşımı göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din sosyolojisi, Sosyal Medya, Z Kuşağı, Influencer, Derinlemesine görüşme

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## Introduction

In today's digital age, the influence of social media and online platforms has become increasingly significant in shaping the behavior and attitudes of younger generations. Generation Z (Gen Z), those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, are no exception to this trend. They are known to be tech-savvy and highly influenced by social media and online platforms.

Influencers, individuals with a large following on social media, have become increasingly popular among young people in recent years. They have the ability to shape opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers. This has led to concerns about the impact of influencer interaction on the cultural and religious values of young people, particularly in countries where religion and culture play a significant role in daily life. With the rise of social media influencers and their ability to reach vast audiences, it is essential to examine how they interact with Gen Z, particularly concerning religious and cultural values.

In recent years, research has focused on the impact of social media influencers on the attitudes and beliefs of Gen Z.<sup>1</sup> Literature reveals that the studies focus on social media and young people. Apart from this, studies on influencers and young people did not fully address cultural and religious elements. Considering all these, this research is important because it deals with the influence of the influencer on the Z generation from a religious and cultural perspective. However, there is still limited understanding of how these interactions affect religious and cultural values. This topic is particularly crucial as Gen Z is becoming more diverse and multicultural, making it essential to evaluate how influencers interact with this demographic.

When we look at the literature on the subject, it is noted that the concept of youth is used more than the term Generation Z.<sup>2</sup> The common feature of these studies is that the impact of social media on Generation Z, specifically religion, is addressed with a more general approach. The concept of influencer youtuber is mentioned only in one place in the doctoral thesis written by Sarıtunç (2021). Sarıtunç claimed that these people, who are increasing day by day in the social media environment, have an impact on young people's view of religious life.<sup>3</sup> Apart from these, there is no study in the literature that examines the relationship of social media and young people with religion using the phrase Generation Z, similar to this research.

<sup>1</sup> Li, Chen – Zhong, Zhang “Influence of social media on the attitudes and beliefs of Generation Z: An exploratory study”. *Journal of Advertising Research* 60 / 2 (2020) 140; Pew Research Center, “On the cusp of adulthood and facing an uncertain future: What we know about Gen Z so far” (Accessed 04 May 2023) Pew Research Center, “In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at rapid pace” (Accessed 02 May 2023) Pew Research Center, “Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018” (Access 02 May 2023) Mine, Oyman – Semra, Akıncı, “Sosyal Medya Etkileyicileri Olarak Vloggerlar: Z Kuşağı Üzerinde Para-Sosyal İlişki, Satın Alma Niyeti Oluşturma ve Youtube Davranışları Açısından Vloggerların İncelenmesi”, *Akdeniz Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi* 32 / 1 (2019) 452.

<sup>2</sup> bk. Nida Sümeyya Çetin, *Gençlerin Dini Kimlik İnşasında Medyanın Rolü* (Ankara: Akademisyen Yayınevi, 2021); Berrin Sarıtunç, *Üniversite Gençliğinin Din ve Değerler Eğitimi Açısından Sosyal Medya Deneyimi (Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi Örneği)* (Bursa: Uludağ Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Doktora Tezi, 2021); Fatma Dolunay Öztürk, *Sosyal Medyanın 12. Sınıf Öğrencilerinin Dini Bilgileri Üzerindeki Etkileri* (Eskişehir: Osmangazi Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Sarıtunç, *Üniversite Gençliğinin Din ve Değerler Eğitimi Açısından Sosyal Medya Deneyimi (Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi Örneği)*, 91.

The problematic of this research revolves around the evaluation of the interaction between Generation Z and influencers in the context of religious and cultural values. The aim is to understand the influence of Influencer interaction on the formation, development and potential conflict of religious and cultural values of Generation Z. This study aims to provide insights into how social media influencers can positively or negatively influence Gen Z's religious and cultural values and how to mitigate potential negative effects. The findings of this study will help inform future research and provide practical recommendations for influencers, marketers, and religious organizations.

The method of the research is in-depth interview. In this context, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Generation Z members who actively use social media and follow influencers.

### 1. Approach of Generation Z to Cultural and Religious Values

As stated earlier, the Z Generation, also known as Gen Z or Zoomers, refers to individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s. This generation has grown up in a world of rapid technological advancement and cultural globalization, which has had a significant impact on their approach to Turkish culture and religious values. Although the influencer interaction of the Z generation will be discussed in terms of Turkish culture and Islamic religion in this study, the researches show that similar situations are experienced all over the world. Therefore, while examining the literature, the situation in the whole world as well as in Turkey has been discussed.

According to a study conducted by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Z Generation is less interested in traditional Turkish cultural practices and more drawn to global trends and pop culture. They tend to consume media from all over the world, including American movies and TV shows, K-pop music, and social media influencers from various countries.<sup>4</sup> Religious values also appear to have less impact on the Z Generation's worldview than previous generations. A survey conducted by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts found that only 18% of Turkish Gen Z members identified as *very religious*, compared to 37% of their Gen X parents.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, this issue has become controversial for the whole world. Pew Research Center has done a research on the subject. According to this research, it was stated that the decrease in religious affiliation among young people is a global phenomenon and influencer interaction is only one step of it. The study found that young people across the world are becoming less religious, with many citing reasons such as a lack of trust in religious institutions and a desire for personal freedom.<sup>6</sup>

According to another study, members of Generation Z are less likely to identify as religious than previous generations. In the United States, for example, 40% of Gen Zers identify as religiously unaffiliated, compared to 29% of millennials, 21% of Gen Xers, and 16% of Baby Boomers.<sup>7</sup> Another study conducted in Australia found that while members of Generation Z still value aspects of traditional

<sup>4</sup> Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, "The Cultural Habits of the Z Generation in Turkey" (Accessed 8 May 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, "Youth in Turkey: Culture, Values and Attitudes" (Accessed 8 May 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, "In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at rapid pace" (Accessed 02 May 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, "On the cusp of adulthood and facing an uncertain future: What we know about Gen Z so far" (Accessed 04 May 2023).

religious beliefs, such as spirituality and community, they are also more open to questioning and exploring alternative perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a study conducted in Indonesia found that members of Generation Z are more likely to value individualism and personal freedom over traditional cultural and religious values.<sup>9</sup>

After evaluating the researches in the world and their results, examining the researches done in Turkey will be a guide in this study. A study conducted by Erciyes University in Turkey examined the attitudes of Generation Z towards religion. The results showed that while most members of this generation still identify as Muslim, they are more likely to question traditional religious practices and beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

A study conducted in Yalova University by Kavlak and Akova explored the relationship between religiosity and social media use among Generation Z. The results showed that while social media use can have a positive impact on religious beliefs and practices, it can also lead to a decrease in religious commitment and an increase in exposure to alternative viewpoints.<sup>11</sup>

However, it's important to note that these findings should not be generalized to all members of Generation Z, as values and beliefs can vary widely based on factors such as cultural background, upbringing, and individual experiences. On the other hand, research both in Turkey and in the world clearly shows that Generation Z is generally distant from religious and cultural values. In general, this situation may be related to the fact that the Z generation spends more time in social media, influencer interaction, digital games, virtual environments, etc. than cultural elements and religious images. For this reason, in connection with the study, in the next title, the literature on the effects of the influencer interaction of the Z generation on religious and cultural values is examined.

## **2. Religious and Cultural Effects of Influencer Interaction on Generation Z**

This generation is characterized by their overuse of technology, social media, and their reliance on influencers for information and guidance. As a result of this, influencer marketing has become an increasingly popular strategy for companies looking to reach this demographic. In this context, one of the most significant effects of influencer sharing on Generation Z is its impact on their purchasing behavior. Several studies have found that Gen Z is more likely to purchase products recommended by influencers than those recommended by traditional advertising methods.<sup>12</sup> Influencer marketing allows companies to reach Gen Z through social media platforms where they spend most of their time, and influencers' recommendations help establish trust and credibility for the products they endorse. For example, a study by Ki and Kim found that influencers' product recommendations have a significant

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<sup>8</sup> Christine Robinson, "But First, Spirituality: Spirituality and Religious Education in Western Australian Catholic Early Learning Contexts", *Journal of Religious Education* 14 / 2 (2023) 269-281.

<sup>9</sup> Said Imam Ghazali et al., "Problematizing Gen-Z Muslims' Historical Literacy About the Pandemic and Its Impact on Muslim Worship Practices", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26/1 (2021) 321-334.

<sup>10</sup> Filiz Öztürk – Mustafa Genç, "Understanding the religious attitudes of Generation Z: A study on university students in Turkey", *Journal of Education and Practice* 11/23, 117-124.

<sup>11</sup> Kavlak Ebru – Akova Sibel, "Y ve Z Kuşağının Kahve Kültürünün Popüler Kültür Bağlamında Değerlendirilmesi", *Namık Kemal Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Meslek Yüksek Okulu Dergisi* 4/2 (2022) 1-33.

<sup>12</sup> Ross Gordon et al., "A framework for sustainable marketing", *Marketing theory* 11/2 (2011) 152.

positive impact on Gen Z's purchasing intentions, with this effect being stronger for higher-priced items.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Gordon et al. found that Gen Z consumers perceive influencer marketing as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertising, leading to a higher likelihood of purchasing products recommended by influencers.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to its impact on purchasing behavior, influencer sharing can also affect Gen Z's brand loyalty. Studies have found that Gen Z consumers are more likely to be loyal to brands recommended by influencers.<sup>15</sup> This loyalty is due to the trust and credibility established by the influencers' recommendations and their personal connection to their followers. For example, Khamis et al. found that Gen Z consumers are more likely to trust and be loyal to brands recommended by influencers who align with their values and interests.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Lee and Watkins found that influencers' recommendations can lead to increased brand loyalty by creating an emotional connection between the brand and the consumer.<sup>17</sup>

While influencer sharing can have a positive impact on Gen Z's purchasing behavior and brand loyalty, it can also affect their perception of influencer marketing as a whole. Some studies have found that Gen Z consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of influencer marketing, as they are aware of the sponsored nature of many influencer posts.<sup>18</sup> For example, Brinkman found that Gen Z consumers perceive influencer marketing as inauthentic and fake, leading to a lack of trust in the influencers and the products they endorse.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Chen and Li found that the perceived authenticity of the influencer has a significant impact on Gen Z's trust and purchase intentions.<sup>20</sup> All these researches show that the Z generation is closer to popular culture rather than their own culture. All these studies were conducted with individuals in the researchers' countries. Therefore, individuals exhibit a behavior closer to popular culture with the influence of social media tools rather than the cultural environment in their physical environment. Another prominent observation is that popular culture directs the individual to consumption and keeps them away from value judgments in real life. Popular culture products marketed through influencers are in demand by Generation Z. Considering the close relationship between religion and culture, consumption, in other words, with the influence of popular culture, it is seen as a possible result that Generation Z, who moved away from their own culture, will also move away from religious values.

<sup>13</sup> Chung-Wha (Chloe), Ki- Youn-Kyung Kim, "Investigating the mechanism through which consumers are "inspired by" social media influencers and "inspired to" adopt influencers' exemplars as social defaults". *Journal of Business Research* 144/1 (2022) 270.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon et al, "A framework for sustainable marketing", 155.

<sup>15</sup> Susie, Khamis, et al. "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers". *Celebrity Studies* 1 / 1 (2016) 14-16; Jung Eun, Lee- Brandi, Watkins, "YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions". *Journal of Business Research* 69 / 12 (2016) 5753-5760.

<sup>16</sup> Khamis, et al. "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers", 15.

<sup>17</sup> Lee-Watkins, "YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions", 5760.

<sup>18</sup> bk. Wouter J. Brinkman, "Generation Z and Influencer Marketing: A Consumer Perspective". *Journal of Advertising Research* 60/1 (2020); Yuanfu Chen – Xuesong Li, "Do Influencers Help to Enhance the Perceived Authenticity of User-Generated Content? A Study of Generation Z Consumers", *International Journal of Advertising* 39/1 (2020).

<sup>19</sup> Brinkman, "Generation Z and Influencer Marketing: A Consumer Perspective", 23.

<sup>20</sup> Chen-Li, "Do Influencers Help to Enhance the Perceived Authenticity of User-Generated Content? A Study of Generation Z Consumers", 18.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, social media use is associated with a decline in face-to-face communication skills, empathy, and trust in others, particularly among younger generations.<sup>21</sup> This erosion of social skills can lead to a disconnection from cultural heritage and a lack of understanding of the values and traditions that are important to different communities. Furthermore, the promotion of certain products or lifestyles by influencers can reinforce negative cultural stereotypes and undermine the efforts of communities to preserve their cultural heritage. For example, the portrayal of Native American culture in fashion campaigns can perpetuate stereotypes and undermine efforts to preserve and promote traditional Native American culture.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the use of social media and influencers can lead to a loss of critical thinking skills and independent thought, as individuals become more reliant on others' opinions and recommendations.<sup>23</sup> This loss of critical thinking can lead to a further erosion of cultural values, as individuals may not have the tools or skills to evaluate the impact of certain behaviors or decisions on their cultural heritage. Therefore, it is important to understand the potential negative effects of social media influencers on cultural values, particularly among Generation Z.

On the other hand, several studies have been conducted in Turkey to explore the effects of social media and influencers on the cultural and religious understanding of young people. A study by Taşdelen examined the role of social media influencers in shaping the cultural values and beliefs of young people in Turkey. The study found that influencers have a significant impact on the cultural understanding of young people, particularly in the areas of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. According to the results of this study, young people are alienated from national culture and religious values. Instead of religion and cultural values, they prefer to position their lives more instantly and on entertainment.<sup>24</sup>

A study by Arıcan ve Arıcı explored the negative impact of social media and influencers on the cultural and religious understanding of young people in Turkey. The study found that exposure to non-traditional lifestyles and values on social media can lead to a decline in religious and cultural values among young people.<sup>25</sup> As it can be understood from here, young people find the views of social media phenomena important instead of values such as religion and culture.

A similar research was conducted by Varsak. This research basically examined the impact of young people's social media use on their religious beliefs and behaviors. Within the scope of the research, 760 students were reached. According to the results of the study, a decrease in religious beliefs and behaviors was determined with the increase in social media use. According to the study investigating culture and religion together, the effect of the intensity of social media use on young people's distance from their own cultural values has been determined.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018", 9-13.

<sup>22</sup> University of Sheffield. "Fashion brands must do more to tackle stereotypes of Native Americans", (Accessed 03 May 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Jenkin Thomas, "Is Instagram ruining your life?", (Accessed 05 May 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Birgül Taşdelen, "Dijital Çağın Yeni Trendi Sosyal Medya Etkileyicileri: Vloggerların Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Satın Alma Davranışı Üzerindeki Etkisi", *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Science* 19/3 (2020) 1071-1098.

<sup>25</sup> Sümeyra Arıcan – Handan Arıcı, "Sosyal Medyanın Gençlerin Din Algısına Etkileri." *Pamukkale Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 8/2 (2021) 1062-1106

<sup>26</sup> Varsak, Osman, "Sosyal Medyanın Dinî Yaşantıya Etkileri: Bursa İl Merkezindeki Lise Öğrencileri Örneği", *Din ve Bilim - Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi İslami İlimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 5/1 (2022), 87-108.

These studies, along with the ones mentioned earlier, provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of social media and influencers on the cultural and religious understanding of young people in Turkey. On the other hand, studies both in Turkey and in the world clearly reveal that the Z generation is much more open to the influence of social media and influencers.

### **3. Method**

First a basic research question was determined and then related questions were formed. During the interview, the study was supported with semi-structured questions. At the same time, some basic questions were asked to the interviewees before the interview in order to find suitable interviewees. Interviews were continued with those who gave appropriate answers to these basic questions, and ended with those who did not. In this context, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 people. The main problem is to understand whether the interaction of the Z generation with influencers distances them from the religion of Islam and Turkish culture. Throughout the research, the researcher conducted the interviews one-on-one. Each interview lasted approximately 1-2 hours, depending on the scope of the interviewer's answers.

Within the scope of semi-structured in-depth interviews, 8 basic questions were asked to the interviewees, and the interview was deepened by asking parallel questions to these questions during the interview. The basic questions of the research are;

1. How many influencers do you follow?
2. Can you evaluate the influencers you follow based on Turkish culture and religious structure?
3. Can you evaluate the posts of the influencers you follow within their religious and cultural context?
4. Have you purchased any products recommended by influencers you follow? Can you evaluate influencer influence on your purchasing opinions?
5. In your opinion, what religious and cultural codes do your friends around you behave against due to the influence of social media?
6. Could you evaluate the impact of social media and influencers on individuals' opinions within the scope of Turkish culture and Islamic religion? Are you a religious person who performs religious rituals? If yes, are your views and lifestyle shaped by influencers? If yes, how?
7. What is the role of your peer circle in choosing the influencers you follow on social media?
8. Are you physically distant from your family? Can you evaluate its relationship with your presence in the social media environment?

### **4. Findings and Analysis**

There are always videos of influencers in the discover sections of social networks so that people can follow more influencers. Therefore, whether people want it or not, if they use social media, they are definitely exposed to influencer shares. When a member of the Z generation is exposed to these, it is possible to be affected faster and to follow similar posts. In general, it has been observed that the Z generation is more affected by what they see and hear. As a result, it is possible to say



that they are influenced by more influencers than they follow along with their exposure to social media tools.

Influencers serve a common and subsequently formed culture, whether they are Turkish or foreign. It is possible to say that especially Turks are influenced by foreign influencers and share. In this context, it continues its life under the umbrella of a common culture formed by the effect of globalization in the world. It is possible to call this culture consumer culture or popular culture. In this context, *I position Influencers very differently from my family and the society I live in. They themselves constitute a reality. I think this reality is far from religion and Turkish culture. I am aware and I try to control myself* statements support these views. However, this statement belongs to only one of the 15 interviewees. The remaining 14 people stated that they care about their influencer sharing, that they enjoy them very much and that they care more about what they say than their family. At the same time, there is an interviewee who stated that there is no place for religion and national culture in this new world: *It cannot be said that they are not suitable for Turkish culture and religious structure, as they do not directly share content related to Turkish culture and religious structure. I think religion and culture no longer matter in this new world. The important thing is to somehow exist and be successful. I can say that the influencers also do this very well.* As can be understood from these view, it is possible to say that the main problem is the lack of culture and religion in influencer posts. The abstraction of individuals from everything is based on influencer shares. This is not *atheism* being talked about here. The main thing to draw attention to is the absence of religion. It is possible to say that there is a more neutral attitude. According to the answers of the interviewees, influencers base their posts on consumption, happiness, entertainment, popular culture elements, beauty, wealth, and perfection by excluding religion or culture completely. Therefore, it is possible to say that influencers have built a world and that this world has certain rules.

All interviewees stated that influencers aim to politicize the public. In fact, influencers express their views on politics, just like an opinion leader. Therefore, this shows that they are aware of their own effects. It would not be wrong to say that they aim to shape the political views of their followers by imposing their own views. On the other hand, an interviewer stated that influencers shared special videos about the need to respect everyone, especially during Ramadan, within the scope of Islam, and that people should respect everything, not just religious rituals. This statement actually supports the idea of establishing a neutral judicial system in society.

In the context of the views of the interviewees who evaluated the influencer interaction in terms of religion and culture, it is possible to say that, in general, with this interaction, the young people sympathize with the views imposed by the influencers. They stated that this situation is basically related to the fact that the people around them follow and care about the same people. In this context, it is thought that influencer follow-up and influence are also related to peer selection. Since the closeness between peers directly affects the choice of influencer, young people follow the influencers and shape their lives in line with their suggestions. One of the interviewees said: *All my friends follow influencers and dress, travel, talk and act like them. If I don't follow the same influencers and exhibit the same behaviors, I may be ostracized by my friends.* Another view that supports this is: *I usually choose and follow influencers according to my own taste and perspective, but if there are influencers that I often hear from my peers with similar lifestyles, I definitely follow them as well. Because we talk about their*

posts and sometimes exchange ideas. Another example of this is: *Sometimes I care about and adopt the ideas that my friends share with me, assuming they are their own. But then I see an influencer on social media has a similar opinion.* Accordingly, instead of developing their own ideas, individuals present what they hear from influencers as their own ideas. Therefore, peer selection and interaction should also be evaluated in the context of influencer interaction.

Another important issue is that influencers emphasize Western codes instead of cultural or religious codes. The interviewees stated that the influencers presented Western examples as the best and that these influenced them. One interviewee even stated that he preferred not to go to family visits during religious holidays, influenced by the opinions of an influencer he followed. Because the influencer he followed used the following statements: *Holidays should not become a ritual of visiting relatives, if people cannot rest and have a holiday, when will they. Eid is the ideal time for a person to go on vacation and have fun.* However, another interviewee stated that when the influencers he followed stated that religions consisted of holidays, Ramadan and religious holy days, what is important is to be tolerant, not religion and religious rituals, and he agreed with these ideas. Within the framework of all these views, it is possible to say that the members of the Z generation are affected by these judgments and that influencers build and present a lifestyle and idea structure.

Another interviewee said: *I wear headscarf and I follow influencers that fit my opinion. For example, there are influencers I follow who wear headscarves and have very beautiful make-up. I even started to tie my headscarf just like her.* This view is also quite remarkable from a religious point of view. Therefore, it is clear that influencers have an impact on the views of individuals with all perspectives. A person who fulfills his religious duties and is also an influencer appeals to consumption and a certain lifestyle, similar to the others. This is an indication that influencers are diversifying to appeal to everyone.

At the same time, influencers advertise certain products based on their own preferences. In fact, these characteristics can have an encouraging effect on young people. Young people are influenced by almost all the shares of influencers such as clothing, food, beverage, vacation, living space and try to integrate them into their own lives.

Another interviewee said: *Even when influencers post about religion, there is always a related product or reference. I haven't seen them make a religious post just to express an opinion. As it can be understood from here, even religious values are made a part of commodity culture. At the same time, all of the interviewees stated that they bought at least one of the products recommended by the influencers they follow. This clearly reveals the influence of the influencer. Influencers, who share a certain lifestyle, clothing style, make-up, hair, home, decoration, on every imaginable subject, easily cause buying behavior in their followers. This explains why Gen Z is becoming more and more alike day by day, both in ideas and in appearance. One interviewee used the following statement: As I see the products shared or praised by influencers outside, or when I see other people sharing them, I believe that they are good. Sometimes, more than one influencer can share certain products. In this case, my confidence grows even more. I also feel the need to share them with my friends or on my social media page. There are 8 interviewees who gave similar answers. Therefore, we can say that young people serve to spread the style and style shared by influencers.*

It should be noted that there are a lot of young people who are affected by influencers, as they openly reveal their lifestyles, homes, boy/girl friends, preferences and opinions in all their posts. For example, establishing relationships with the opposite sex at a young age and living in the same house, the presentation of clothes that commodify the female body, and the sharing of information by ignoring privacy attract the attention of the interviewees. 10 of the interviewees stated that they found these to be correct and that they did not bother them. At the same time, they added that these are no longer important in this age and that a more modern and contemporary life should be prioritized. However, when the Turkish culture, family structure and religious beliefs are taken into account, on the contrary, these are situations that are not welcome and should not happen.

12 of the interviewees clearly stated that they take influencers as an example and emulate their lifestyle. In fact, all of them used the expression *it is impossible not to be affected by influencers*. Therefore, influencers have a high impact power. It is not an exaggeration to say that all cultural expressions that have become common among young people today are shared by influencers on social media. For example, all of the young people stated that they celebrated Halloween (or some even Christmas) because they saw influencers. This shows that Christian and Western culture was transmitted by influencers and became widespread among young people.

At the same time, influencers are accepted because they share friendly and sincere posts. They even negate and corrupt religious and cultural codes by transforming them from negation into a different form. Therefore, the following impression is formed in people's minds that *influencers respect every idea, they have no bad intentions*. This strengthens their sphere of influence. However, since influencers normalize many issues in their minds, the interviewees state that they are not against and even respect the Turkish culture and religious structure.

The interviewees stated that their friends on social media also influence each other. For example, Generation Z spends more time with their friends in social media tools than face to face. Their likes, shares and interests are clearly visible on social media tools. Therefore, a Z generation member who follows the influencer actually shares it with all his/her friends on social media tools. In this sense, we can say that young people also affect each other's influencer choices. 10 of the interviewees openly stated that they notice and follow influencers through their friends' posts. The most important reason why young people are affected by these influencers is their consumption-supportive posts. For example; issues such as discount coupons, free gifts, redirected pages, discounted product information make influencers attractive to young people. On the other hand, the discover sections of social media tools allow people to see the posts of influencers that they do not follow but followed by the people they interact with.

It is worth noting that students studying outside the city become more open to social media influence as they move away from their families. All but 2 of the interviewees stated that they used social media tools more intensively when they were away from their families. Therefore, it is important to note that when individuals disconnect from physical communication and spend more time in virtual environments, the rate of their exposure increases. This situation causes the information obtained from new media to be reflected more in the person's life in the process. All interviewees spend significant time on social media. It is quite natural for individuals to be

influenced by the cultural activities of influencers they have just met on social media, rather than the cultural activities in their physical environment.

Another important issue is the relationship between the rate of social media usage and religious rituals (such as prayer, fasting, reading the Quran). 5 of the young people clearly stated that they are committed to their religion and perform rituals whenever possible. On the other hand, 5 young people stated that they have a respect for religion inherited from their family, but they do not fulfill religious rituals. 2 of them revealed that they did not belong to any religion and 3 of them revealed that they cared about all religions. When asked about the increase in social media use or the impact of influencers' religious views and perspectives on their lives, it was revealed that all but three of them were affected. All 3 of them stated that they sometimes felt reluctant to fulfill their religious obligations. The most emphasized thing among the interviewees is that the individual should live the religion within him/herself, what is important is that the person's heart is clean. One of the interviewees expressed his views with the following statements: *In this era, I think religions should not be separated. All religions talk about the same thing. My belief in religion is decreasing day by day. I want to earn a lot of money and be happy. I think influencers guide us. I care about their opinions. They are happy and make a lot of money. I envy their lives. This is the new world and we must all adapt to it.* These sharp statements clearly reveal that the individual is under influence.

The interviewees' views on issues such as compassion, helpfulness, carrying out cultural and religious activities, individuality and social benefit are generally that they all prioritize individuality and that prominent cultural phenomena such as compassion and helpfulness are disappearing in this time. In particular, the individual's perception of material and consumption as important causes emotional weakness. It causes the person's spiritual feelings to be damaged and, over time, distance from cultural and religious phenomena. Even the habits of young people who are more interested in material facts than spiritual facts in daily life are changing. All of the interviewees clearly stated that they care about consumption and that the desire for consumption directs their lives today. They also added that social media had an impact on this.

As a result of all these interviews, it can be said that influencers have a high influence on young people. Young people are not fully conscious of this change, as they change their religious and cultural perceptions in general. Influencers and peers alike influence the views of young people. All young people care about the opinions of the influencers they follow and buy products depending on their recommendations and carry out various activities in their lives. Influencers who share discount codes, especially at times such as New Year's Eve, Halloween, Christmas, highlight such Christian and Western customs. Almost all of the interviewees stated that they celebrate such days. There are certain influencers who are popular among young people in general. This, in fact, causes the views and behaviors of young people to resemble each other over time. Influencers cause the commodification of everything with their lifestyles, posts and advertisements. This is the most important reason for alienation and cultural/religious corruption, especially among young people. *I think influencers are showing everyone, religious or secular, that it's possible to be whatever they want. Thanks to influencers, young people can express themselves politically, religiously and culturally as they wish.* As can be understood from this statement of an interviewer, the influence of influencers in shaping the general life is powerful and shocking.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Important data has been obtained within the scope of in-depth interviews conducted with 15 members of Generation Z concerning religious and cultural values. It is possible to clearly state that the interviewees are influenced by influencer posts. Influencers offer their followers a new reality and a constructed lifestyle. These individuals try to impose their constructs on their followers. Additionally, as influencer posts heavily focus on consumption within the framework of popular culture, young people tend to detach themselves from their own cultural and religious values, considering them insignificant. It is important to only respect every perspective and have a perspective that is free from religious/cultural elements.

This study also emphasizes that influencer influence occurs in conjunction with peer influence. Peer interaction takes place both face-to-face and on social media platforms. As a result, young people end up following the same influencers on average and discussing the same topics. Moreover, due to the fact that social media and the internet have allowed the emergence of influencers not only in Turkey but also in the West, these individuals value the opinions of Western influencers. In fact, Turkish individuals even create similar content to that of Western influencers. This leads to the emergence of Western codes and the assimilation of young people into this culture. Consequently, the lifestyle, opinions, relationships, and preferences of Generation Z are shaped by influencer influence. Influencer posts that commodify the female body, influenced by Western culture, can also have an impact on young people.

In general, it is possible to say that Turks are influenced by foreign influencers. Within this context, they continue to live under a common cultural umbrella created by globalization. This culture can be referred to as consumer culture or popular culture. One of the interviewees supports these views by stating: *I position influencers differently from my family and the society I live in. They create their own reality. I believe this reality is far removed from religion and Turkish culture. I am aware of it and I try to control myself.* However, this statement belongs to only one of the 15 interviewees. The remaining 14 individuals expressed that they value influencer posts, enjoy them more than their families' opinions, and pay more attention to what influencers say. There is also an interviewee who states that there is no place for Turkish culture and religious structure in this new world: *It cannot be said that they are not suitable for Turkish culture and religious structure, even though they do not directly share content related to Turkish culture and religious structure. In my opinion, in this new world, religion and culture no longer have any significance. What is important is to exist somehow and be successful. I can say that influencers do this very well.* These opinions also indicate that the fundamental problem lies in the cultural and religious indifference displayed in influencer posts. The isolation of individuals from everything has been the basis of influencer posts. The term *atheism* is not mentioned here. It is more accurate to say that the focus is on the absence of religion. A more neutral attitude can be identified. What is important and imposed in influencer posts are phenomena such as *consumption, happiness, entertainment, elements of popular culture, beauty, wealth, perfection.* The interviewees particularly emphasized these phenomena in their responses. Therefore, it is possible to say that influencers have constructed a world and this world has certain rules.

According to the results obtained, it is possible to clearly see the effects of the intense influencer interaction created by Generation Z through social media tools, which is the main purpose of this research, on religious and cultural values. Individuals, especially during university periods, move away from their families and family values and become more open to the effects of social media. An individual falls within the cultural influence of wherever and with whom he/she spends the most time. Social media communication, which has over time surpassed physical communication, especially among Generation Z, covers an important part of daily life. As a result, it seems natural that young people are influenced by these environments where they spend a long time.

Culture and religion include many rituals. The influence of family and social environment has an important place in shaping a person's spiritual life.<sup>27</sup> The findings of the study clearly reveal that the Influencer effect on young people disconnects them from spiritual life and causes them to become more worldly. Young people, who are constantly exposed to entertainment and consumption elements during the time they spend on social media tools, believe that they will have a good time thanks to consumption. Generation Z, who has moved away from their families over time and increased their interaction time on social media, has started to secularize by prioritizing material life in order to have more fun and be like the Influencers whose lives they emulate. Studies in the literature revealing the negative impact of social media on cultural life indicate that young people are moving away from religion and becoming morally corrupt. Cultural values that are accustomed to in the traditional cultural society structure have been damaged by the influence of Influencers on social media. Values that stand out in traditional culture, such as privacy, contentment, sacrifice, humility, cooperation and solidarity, also suffered from this destruction.<sup>28</sup>

There are also various previous studies in the literature that support the findings of this study. One of these was realized by Arıcı. According to the findings of this research, social media constitutes an important area of influence in young people's alienation from religious beliefs and values.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, according to the results of the study conducted by Yazıcı, social media use distances individuals from religious life. The most basic finding of this research is that the increase in young people's use of social media increases their material perception, leading to an increase in the importance they attach to worldly interests.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the finding of another study conducted by Ghazni is that the use of social media turns religion and values into a consumption commodity and alienates individuals from religious life.<sup>31</sup> A similar study conducted by Kurttekin

<sup>27</sup> Varsak, "Sosyal Medyanın Dinî Yaşantıya Etkileri: Bursa İl Merkezindeki Lise Öğrencileri Örneği", 106.

<sup>28</sup> Asiye Kakırman Yıldız, "Sosyal Paylaşım Sitelerinin Dijital Yerlilerin Bilgi Edinme ve Mahremiyet Anlayışına Etkisi", *Bilgi Dünyası*, 2/13(2012), 541.

<sup>29</sup> Handan Yalvaç Arıcı – Sümeyra Arıcan, "Ergen Din Tasavvurunun İnşasında Sosyal Medya", *Kalemname*, 12(2021), 88.

<sup>30</sup> Tuğba Nur Yazıcı, *Gençlerin Sosyal Medya Kullanım Sıklıkları İle Materyalistlik Eğilimleri Arasındaki İlişkinin İncelenmesi*, (İstanbul, Üsküdar Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2018), 85.

<sup>31</sup> Didem Gazneli, "Tüketim Toplumu Bağlamında Türkiye'de Yeni Medyanın Muhafazakârlığın Dönüşümü ve Dinî Değerlerin Metalaşması Üzerine Etkisi" (Aydın: Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2020), 151-152

concluded that social media causes identity confusion by alienating young people from spiritual values.<sup>32</sup> The findings of this research differ from others in terms of influencer effect.

Today, individuals are under significant influence in digital spaces due to reasons such as popular culture and the corruption of culture. This effect is increasing day by day. The increase in time and interaction spent on social media tools also leads to an increase in impact. Young people's physical distance from their families and influencer communication in social media environments can cause religious and cultural changes in their lives. Today, young people are based on the lifestyles of influencers rather than the culture imposed on them by their families. Their view of life, interpretation of religious values, sense of entertainment and pleasure are under the influence of influencers. Accordingly, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Islamic identity has degenerated and the new generation has grown up lacking basic values such as identity and culture.

In conclusion, one of the most important findings of the study is that influencers have turned even religious values into part of the meta-culture and influenced their followers' purchasing behavior. This demonstrates the influence power of influencers and their effects on their followers. Additionally, it is evident that influencers openly share their lifestyles and preferences, and young people are influenced by these posts.

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<sup>32</sup> Kurttekin, Fatma, "Bilişim Çağında 'Gençlik, Din ve Değer' Konularını Ele Alan Makaleler Üzerine Bir İnceleme", *Eskiyeni*, 45(2021), 791.

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