

IMPACT OF MICRO-INFLUENCERS ON CUSTOMERS' BEHAVIORAL INTENTION: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FOOD INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become widespread due to its capacity to reach a large audience within a short time and for its low cost compared to traditional methods (Evans et al., 2017). Influencers are well-known on social media because of their knowledge and expertise in a particular area, such as food, fashion, technology, education, reviews, music, movies, sports, and so on (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Instagram has the highest number of influencers out of other social media platforms compared to other sites (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

In the Sri Lankan context, social media managers also claimed that working and collaborating with social media influencers and identifying profiles to connect their brands are becoming extremely difficult. A study conducted by Seven Media Group (2020), a digital management agency in Sri Lanka, found that the influencer engagement rate of Instagram influencers declined between the period of 2018 and 2020 as well. This declining trend of engagement rate is apparent in food influencers on Instagram. As a result, it has been a challenge for companies to choose the most effective and appropriate influencer while also considering the product they want to promote (De Veirman et al., 2017). As a result, instead of relying on influencers with a huge following, marketers should seek influencers that directly address their target audience and establish expertise in a specific area but with fewer followers (Hudders et al., 2020). Britt et al. (2020) also found this trend of brands moving away from prominent influencers. However, researchers observed a lack of studies identifying distinct characteristics of micro-influencers (Guruge, 2018). Therefore, to fill these gaps, this descriptive study aims to examine the impact of attributes of micro-influencers on customers' behavioural intention regarding food influencers on Instagram.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the quantitative research approach because this study involves developing hypotheses based on an existing theory and testing hypotheses. The researcher used the survey strategy as it is usually associated with the deductive approach, allowing to collection of data from a large sample relatively at a lower cost. A self-administrative structured questionnaire with a Five point Likert scale (From 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree) was distributed through WhatsApp and Instagram to accomplish the purpose of this study. The current study's population is Instagram users aged 18-24 years and following at least one food influencer with 10,000-100,000 followers. The researcher selected this age category because most Instagram influencers come under that. The non-probability snowball sampling technique was used to identify the responses. Once the initial contact is made, these respondents will most likely locate other potential respondents similar to themselves. This study used 385 Instagram users

following at least one micro food influencer in Sri Lanka as the sample. Out of 385, 285 participants have answered the questionnaire. Therefore, the effective response rate is 74.03%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the findings, Cronbach's Alpha values of all the variables of this study are above 0.7, indicating internal consistency reliability and the R square value of 0.588 interprets 58% variations of customers' behavioural intention can be explained by attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, familiarity, and similarity.

Table 1 Coefficient Table

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error				Tolerance	VIF
Constant	0.087	0.259		0.336	0.737		
Attractiveness	0.141	0.067	0.111	2.107	0.036	0.529	1.889
Trustworthiness	0.178	0.086	0.132	2.066	0.040	0.363	2.757
Expertise	0.171	0.080	0.132	2.135	0.034	0.384	2.606
Familiarity	0.056	0.070	0.055	0.791	0.430	0.309	3.231
Similarity	0.431	0.059	0.461	7.275	0.000	0.368	2.717

According to Table 1, similarity has the highest beta value of 0.431 at the 0.000 level of the significance level. Hence, similarity can be considered the most influential factor in customers' behavioural intention. Trustworthiness is the second most influential factor, and the third is the influencer's expertise in the customers' behavioural intention. Attractiveness can be identified as the least influential variable. Since the output p-value of familiarity is greater than the critical p-value (0.05), it can be concluded that familiarity does not influence customers' behavioural intention. The p-value (sig level) and B coefficient are used to test the hypothesis, and Table 2 depicts the overall conclusion.

Table 2 Summary of Hypotheses

No.	Hypothesis	p-value	Result
H ₁	There is an impact of attractiveness on consumers' behavioural intention of food influencers on Instagram	0.036	Accepted
H ₂	There is an impact of trustworthiness on consumers' behavioural intention of food influencers on Instagram	0.040	Accepted
H ₃	There is an impact of expertise on consumers' behavioural intention of food influencers on Instagram.	0.034	Accepted
H ₄	There is an impact of familiarity on consumers' behavioural intention of food influencers on Instagram	0.430	Rejected
H ₅	There is an impact of similarity on consumers' behavioural intention of food influencers on Instagram	0.000	Accepted

According to the study's findings, source attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity significantly impact food micro-influencers on customers' behavioural intention. Therefore, all the hypotheses have been accepted except one.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study aims to examine the impact of characteristics of micro-influencers on customers' behavioural intentions concerning food influencers on Instagram. Furthermore, this research is intended to find which variable of the conceptual framework has the highest impact and lowest impact on customers' behavioural intention. This study collected data from 303 respondents initially. However, only 285 questionnaires were used for the analysis. The data has been collected under a non-probability sampling technique, namely the snowball sampling method. Based on the previous literature, the researcher has identified five independent variables to conduct the study; source attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, familiarity, and similarity. The behavioural intention of customers' has been identified as the dependent variable. Five hypotheses were built based on the most recent studies to achieve the research objectives. The SPSS version 21.0 software has been used for the analysis. SPSS outputs indicate that each variable has reliability and validity. Correlation analysis has been used to test the relationship between independent variables and dependent variables. The impact of the variables was analysed using multiple regression analysis. According to the analysis results, four out of five hypotheses were accepted, and one was rejected. It was found that source attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity have a significant positive impact on customers' behavioural intention. In contrast, familiarity has no impact on behavioural intention of customers. According to the findings, similarity has the highest impact on customers' behavioural intentions. This study will be a guideline for marketers and advertisers in the food industry to understand the factors to be considered in selecting suitable influencers. Because in recent years, so many influencers have emerged on social media, causing it to become overwhelmed with them. As many influencers share their opinions on brands, it has become hard for viewers to keep in touch with all of the content, especially sponsored content from the influencers they follow on social media platforms. After being overfilled with sponsored content on social media platforms, social media users become less likely to connect with brands and influencers as they have become overwhelmed with all this. Hence this study intends to help marketing managers and advertisers overcome the challenge of identifying more suitable influencers for their marketing campaigns. Influencers with a smaller audience can connect more with their followers and build more closely related groups, resulting in increased engagement. Hence the current study has identified the most influential characteristics of those micro-influencers. Through that food, companies can identify the most effective micro-influencers on Instagram and positively influence customers' intention to change their behaviour. This study also provides valuable insights into how influencer marketing contributes to consumer behavioural intention. Social media has altered the way companies and firms connect with their consumers. Because of the widespread and frequent usage of social media sites, these platforms have become not only information sources but also appealing venues for businesses to perform promotional activities. It is found that source similarity has the most significant influence on customers' behavioural intention. It implies that customers tend to get product/brand suggestions from people they consider similar. Therefore, food companies should choose similar micro-influencers as they are more effective at connecting with followers. According to the findings, the trustworthiness of the influencer also has a considerable influence on customers' behavioural intentions. That means

customers tend to believe endorsements done by the most trustworthy influencers. Therefore, food companies should collaborate with micro-influencers who seem trusted by followers. The findings of the study show that source expertise has an impact on the behavioural intention of customers. It indicates that people believe in influencers with knowledge, experience, and expertise regarding food brands and restaurants. Hence when building a relationship between the customer and the product, the endorser's expertise plays an important role. Therefore, food companies must consider the micro-influencer's expertise when selecting one for their campaigns. It was found that source attractiveness positively impacts customers' behavioural intention. Since attractiveness focuses on a social media influencer's personality, lifestyle, and behaviours rather than just physical attractiveness, food marketers should focus on micro-influencers who display those attributes to collaborate. However, findings reveal that familiarity has no impact on customers' behavioural intention. Therefore, food companies do not need to focus on familiarity when selecting a micro-influencer to endorse their brand.

Keywords: Customers' behavioral intention, food influencers, micro-influencers

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