INVESTIGATING CONSUMER TRUST IN INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS AND ITS IMPACT ON BRAND RELATED CHARACTERISTICS AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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Özet

Günümüzde birçok pazarlama uzmanı, etkili bir strateji olması nedeniyle dijital kanaat önderleri ile işbirlikleri gerçekleştirmektedir. İnternet kullanıcılarını etkileşime, bağlantılılığa ve üretime teşvik eden günümüz katılımcı ve çevrimiçi İnternet kültüründe doğru dijital kanaat önderleri ile kurulan işbirlikleri, ürünlerin ve markaların satış ve itibar grafiğini yukarı çekme potansiyeline sahiptir. Mevcut çalışma, Instagram kullanıcılarının dijital kanaat önderlerine duydukları güven ve kurdukları marka etkileşimlerini incelemektedir. Veri toplamak için çevrimiçi platformlarda Instagram kullanıcılarını hedefleyen bir anket çalışması gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışmanın bulguları, en anlamlı ilişkinin dijital kanaat önderlerine duyulan güven ve marka sadakati arasında çıktığına işaret etmektedir. Aynı zamanda dijital kanaat önderleri ve marka imajı arasında da anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmaktadır. Bu durum, tüketicilerinin marka sadakatini ve markalarının imajını perçinlemek isteyen şirketlerin, Instagram'da aktif olan dijital kanaat önderleri ile işbirlikleri kurmaları gerektiğine, bu pratiğin bir opsiyon değil, zorunluluk haline geldiğine işaret etmektedir.
Anahtar kelimeler: Tüketici Güveni, Dijital Kanaat Önderi, Marka Sadakati, Marka Imajı, Instagram.

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Abstract

Collaborating with digital influencers has become a common and useful strategy for marketers. In a participatory online culture that encourages interaction, connectivity and production among Internet users, it is essential for marketers to select and work with the right digital influencers, who have the potential to elevate the promoted product's reputation and desirability in the eyes of followers. In line, the present study aims to examine the potential relationship between Instagram users' trust in digital influencers and their potential associations with characteristics related with promoted brands. The survey data was collected via an online questionnaire that specifically targeted Instagram users. Findings of the study reveal that the most significant positive relationship exists between consumer trust in digital influencers and brand loyalty, which is followed by the relationship between consumer trust in digital influencers and brand image. Findings indicate that it is essential for today's companies to collaborate with digital influencers if they wish to strengthen their brand image and the feeling of loyalty among their consumers.

Keywords: Consumer Trust, Digital Opinion Leader, Brand Involvement, Brand Image, Brand Loyalty, Instagram.

Extended Abstract

The increasing usage of online social networks has led to the emergence of new business models in recent years. Companies have started integrating digital services in to their sales and marketing processes, while a segment of the newly emerging actors have established their business on solely online platforms. Another emerging form of business model has been related with the users, who curate their own unique contents in order to promote various products and services. Influencers mainly utilize from video- and visual-based platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, in which they can incorporate their narratives into relevant visuals of themselves or shots they (or their production team) take. Instagram has also become one of the most popular online social networks that compete with Facebook in terms of usage in various geographies.

The current study focuses on Instagram users, since Instagram is one of the main platforms alongside with YouTube, where influence culture is better grounded. Therefore, it stands as one of the most efficient platforms where researchers can explore the impact of influencers over users' association with promoted brands' related characteristics and purchasing decisions. The study explores how trust on Instagram influencers impacts on consumer's association with brand related characteristics and their willingness to buy the promoted product/service. To reach this aim, a quantitative study was conducted.

The Internet-based survey instrument was pilot tested before the actual online fieldwork. A total of 372 respondents took part in the survey. Following the removal of submissions with missing data, 364 participants remained in the main analysis. All participants were aged 18 and older and the average age of the participants was 26. The data was compiled between November 2018 and January 2019.

Findings revealed influencer trust determined brand involvement, brand image, brand loyalty and purchase intention. This situation indicates the importance of influencer support to boost brand related characteristics, as trusted influencers can contribute to the brands' presence on online social networks such as Instagram, by encouraging their followers to participate and engage in brand-related activities.

An interesting finding has been related with the relationship between influencer trust and purchase intention, which shows that consumers have the potential to take action (which is purchasing behaviour in the context of the current study), when trusted influencers promote and/or suggest certain products and services via their Instagram profiles.

Introduction

Internet technologies have transformed the traditional marketing practices in recent years. Especially, the increasing usage of online social networks has intensified interactions between producers and consumers. The role of consumers in this process has also evolved, as thanks to the interactive nature of online social networks, average Internet users can emerge as influential community leaders, who have the potential to play essential roles in the marketing process. These people, who obtain influential power, are called influencers, that curate their own unique visual and written contents in order to promote various products and services, in collaboration with companies or agencies.

Such practices of influencers can be evaluated in the context of the participatory culture notion, developed by Jenkins (2015), who argued a participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to user/member contributions, where they feel social connection with one another. This situation is in line with the arguments of Kotler et al. (2016), who argue that customers care more about the opinions of others – which they perceive as different from the situation companies and brands expected: "Given the connectivity we live in today, the weight of social uniformity is increasing across the board (…) In fact, most personal purchase decisions will essentially be social decisions. Customers communicate with one another and converse about brands and companies" (p.13). Within such context, online influencers emerge as digital opinion leaders, who has the potential to impact on consumer decision-making processes by marketing certain products and services that remain in line with their core values.

The present study aims to reveal how consumer trust in digital influencers impacts on consumers' associations with promoted brands. The study focuses on Instagram users, since Instagram is one of the main platforms alongside with YouTube, where influence culture is better grounded. Moreover, Instagram is among one of the most widely used online social networks worldwide, besides Facebook. In the United States and Turkey, Instagram ranks second as the most widely used online social networks (Pew Research Center, 2018; We Are Social, 2018). Therefore, Instagram stands as one of the most efficient platforms where researchers can explore the impact of influencers over users' association with promoted brands' related characteristics and purchasing decisions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Influencer Trust

Influencer marketing is one of the relatively new marketing strategies that companies employ to reach consumers. During the process, companies collaborate with experts, who are assumed to be trusted and usually have large number of followers on social media (Carter, 2016). Examples of influencer marketing range from blog posts to YouTube videos and Instagram pictures, in which influencers share their experience with the promoted products and services by

focusing on the advantageous features. Compensation for influencer marketing depends on the number of posts shared, influencers' number of followers and engagement rates.

Ferguson (2008) categorizes influencer marketing under online word-of-mouth (e-WOM) tactics. He explains marketers use such strategies-alongside with buzz marketing and crowdsourcing- in order to take control of the branded dialogues taking place among social media users (Ferguson, 2008). Evans et al. (2017) similarly suggest that influencer marketing can act as a strong mechanism for e-WOM. As influencers can reach a large group of consumers in a short period of time with low cost, influencer marketing stands as one of the most effective e-WOM strategies for brands to reach consumers online (Phua, et al., 2017).

Previous research mainly explored the impact of influencers on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter from various perspectives. For instance, Kim et al. (2014) applied a content analysis to find out the frequency of branded tweets, re-tweeted by other users. Their study found out that the number of consumers who followed brands on Twitter and re-tweet brand messages outscored those who did not (Kim et al., 2014). In the context of YouTube, the experimental study of Lee and Watkins (2016) revealed participants who watched vlogs reviewing luxury products had higher purchase intentions when compared with the control group, who did not watch the vlog. In the context of Instagram, Veirman et al. (2017) explored influencers' likeability and found out that Instagram users with higher number of followers were found more likeable. In another study, Evans et al (2017) revealed that disclosure language featuring "paid ad" sign positively impacted on ad recognition. By drawing reference to the previous literature, the current study aims to measure how trust felt towards influencers impact on consumers' attitude towards various characteristics of the promoted trend and purchase intentions.

2.2. Brand Related Characteristics
2.2.1. Brand Involvement

One of the most essential variables related to brand-related characteristics is brand involvement. Involvement refers to a state of motivation or interest specific to an individual that involves personal characteristics (e.g. needs and goals) situational factors (e.g. perceived risk related with the purchasing decision) and stimulus attributes (e.g. the category of the product) (Andrews and Shimp, 1990; Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; Zaichowsky, 1986).

The current study embraces a similar approach to that of Celsi and Olson (1988) who define involvement as an individual's subjective experience with a particular brand. Advertising or an influencer has more general relevance for consumers who perceive the brand as important personally for themselves (Harari, Lehman-Wilzig and Lampert, 2009). In other words, an ad message becomes more influential if an individual perceives the promoted product as relevant with his/her world (Muratore, 2003).

Considering e-opinion leaders (or Instagram influencers as influencer marketers) as virtu-

al brands, one can assume that the involvement with the influencer would generate higher involvement with the brand of the product marketed. Previous research supports this situation as the study of Cohen (1983) and Mitchell (1979) found out that individuals who are highly involved with a brand are more likely to draw attention related to a brand-related conversation, or post in the case of online social networks (Zaglia, 2013).

2.2.2. Brand Image

Brand image is defined as an idea about a brand, which is linked to associations in a consumer's memory (Hung, 2008). In another definition, brand image is explained as a system of visuals and thoughts existing in human awareness regarding a brand and attitude towards it (Kotler & Barich, 1991; Zhang, 2015). Additionally Upshaw (1995) considers brand image as part of brand identity, as brand image forms the identity of the brand with words, images, ideas and associations.

Previous research explored brand image in various contexts (e.g. Schmidt et al., 2018; Whitler & Farris, 2017; Allman et al., 2016). In the context of online hotel booking, Lien et al. (2015) found out that brand image, perceived price and perceived value are critical determinants of the purchase intentions. Additionally, the study of Aghekyan-Simonian et al. (2012) revealed that product brand image impacts on consumers' online purchase intentions within the context of online stores. Thus, it can be stated that a favorable brand image creates higher desires among consumers for purchase.

In the context of influencer marketing, there is more need for empirical evidence to assess the role of influencer in terms of strengthening brand image. Thus, one of the hypotheses developed for the current study specifically focuses on the relationship between these two variables.

2.2.3. Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver 1999, p. 34). A group of previous literature argues brand loyalty has been associated with repeating purchasing behavior (e.g. Tellis, 1988), while others define loyal consumers as those who re-purchased a brand and did not seek for information prior to their purchase (e.g. Newman & Werbel, 1973).

Aaker (1991) conceptualizes brand loyalty as a part of the brand equity. He further argues that brand associations represent what a brand means to a consumer, and it can be "anything linked in memory to a brand" (Aaker, 1991, p. 109). Additionally, Gil et al. (2007) explain that brand loyalty is an important indicator of brand perception, since brand loyalty brings value to a brand that can provide a long-lasting feeling of devotion among consumers, despite price advantages

competitive brands offer. Previous research also revealed that consumers who show loyalty to a brand hold a deeply positive attitude toward it (e.g., Lobschat, et al. 2013).

In the context of social media, as consumers become more engaged with a brand, they are more likely to produce information about it for the other users (Yeh & Choi, 2011). Influencers on social media have a critical role in this process, for potentially enhancing a more positive outlook about brands they promote on the Internet-sphere, as their posts may encourage their followers to produce further positive messages related to the promoted products and the services. Posts curated by influencers on Instagram can potentially enhance customer loyalty, especially towards established brands, when incorporated with a feeling of trust between the influencer and the user. In line, it is proposed in this study that trust in the influencer will lead to an enhanced loyalty towards the promoted brands among social media users.

2.3. Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is one of the most effective criterions in terms of understanding and estimating a customer's behavior. Purchasing decision-making process begins when a customer wishes to satisfy her need by obtaining particular products or services. Thus, the purchasing behavior can be perceived as an either goal-oriented or an exploration-oriented activity (Janiszewski, 1998). The difference between goal oriented behavior and exploration oriented behavior is that, goal-oriented consumers purchases only once, while exploration oriented consumers tend to make several unplanned purchases.

In traditional terms, Arum and Sung (2018) explain, purchasing decision process includes five stages; "the first stage is the need of recognition; the second stage is the pre-purchase browsing, the third stage is the evaluation of alternatives, the fourth stage is the actual purchase, and the last stage is post-purchase evaluation" (p.14). Hence, convincing potential consumers to obtain certain products and services is a longer path than it seems. As previous literature suggests (e.g., Chung & Shin, 2010; Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLray, 2015; Pappas, 2016; Yu & Chen, 2018), trust is an essential factor for companies to build sustainable relationship with their customers. Employing influencers while mediating the purchasing decision-making process, companies are also taking a risk, despite the previously mentioned benefits of influencer marketing strategy. Thus, the current study also aims to explore how trust in influencers impact on the purchasing behavior of consumers.

3. Methodology
3.1. Hypotheses and Measures

The hypotheses of the current study are as follows:

H1: There is a significant relationship between influencer trust and brand involvement.

H2: There is a significant relationship between influencer trust and brand image.

H3: There is a significant relationship between influencer trust and brand loyalty.

H4: There is a significant relationship between influencer trust and purchase intention.

For measurement, the 4-item brand trust scale is adapted from Ballaser et al. (2003) and re-interpreted in the context of influencers. As Chailani (2015) argues, digital influencers are brands on their own right, as they keep their every post engaging and in accordance with their core values. The re-interpreted scale included items, including "Instagram influencers never disappoint me with their product/service suggestions" and "I feel confidence in products/services suggested by Instagram influencers".

N=364	Min	Max	μ	SD	Items	α
Influencer trust	1	5	2,45	,94	4	,911
Brand involvement	1	5	2,5	,735	5	,834
Brand image	1	5	2,36	,924	4	,827
Brand loyalty	1	5	2,18	,958	7	,932
Purchase intention	1	5	2,55	,898	4	,943

Table 1: Measures of The Study

Scales about brand related characteristics are adapted from Cho (2013) (brand involvement), Baalbaki (2012) (brand loyalty) and Chang & Chieng (2006) (brand image). Lastly, the 6-item purchase intention scale is adapted from the study of Funk et al. (2009). All scaled questions were asked through the use of the 5-point Likert scale (1: Totally Disagree, 5: Totally Agree) except for questions on demographics. A cross-sectional design was employed that contains several self-report measures. Reliability estimates were obtained for each of the construct domains. Cronbach's α values range from 0.827 to 0.943 for each construct.

3.2. Participants

The Internet-based survey instrument was pilot tested before the actual online fieldwork. A total of 372 respondents took part in the survey. Following the removal of submissions with missing data, 364 participants (50.5 % females and 49.5 % males) remained in the main analysis. All participants were aged 18 and older and the average age of the participants was 26. The data was compiled between November 2018 and January 2019.

4. Findings

All analyses were performed using SPSS statistical program. Following the assessment of the variable reliabilities, Pearson Product-moment correlations analysis was conducted to find out whether there exists overlap between the determined dependent and independent variables. Pearson Product-moment correlations (with pair-wise exclusion of missing cases) analyses revealed that the dependent variable and the all independent variables are positively correlated (Table 2).

		Influencer trust	Brand involvement	Brand image	Brand loyalty	Purchase intention
Influencer trust	Pearson Correlation	.801**	.684**	.464**	.690**	.517**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	364	364	364	364	364
Brand involvement	Pearson Correlation	.614**	.685**	.527**	.637**	.687**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	364	364	364	364	364
Brand image	Pearson Correlation	.464**	.527**	.679**	.800**	.747**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	364	364	364	364	364
Brand loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.690**	.637**	1	.802**	.622**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	364	364	364	364	364
Purchase intention	Pearson Correlation	.517**	.687**	.802**	1	.715**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	364	364	364	364	364

Table 2. Correlation Matrix (N=364)

To assess the relative predictive value of the independent variable, dependent variables; brand related characteristics (involvement, image and loyalty), and purchase intention were entered into a linear regression analysis with the independent variable, influencer trust. Liner regression analysis allows researchers to track potential relationships between dependent and independent variables, in positive or negative directions. Findings of the linear regression analyses revealed influencer trust determined brand involvement, brand image, brand loyalty and purchase intention.

Independent variable	Dependent variable	B	SE	t	Sig	F	Adj. R^2
Influencer trust	Brand involvement	,947	,045	20,926	,000	437,909	,546
	Brand image	,764	,035	21,617	,000	467,287	,562
	Brand loyalty	,815	,029	28,383	,000	805,602	,689
	Purchase intention	,694	,041	16,851	,000	283,958	,438

Table 3: Findings of The Regression Analyses

The ß coefficients indicate the highest relationship between brand influencer trust and brand involvement (ß=,947, t=20,926, p=,000), followed by brand loyalty (ß= ,815, t=28,383, p=,000) and brand image (ß= ,764, t=21,617, p=,000). Additionally, purchase intention (ß= ,694, t=16.851, p=,000) significantly determined by influencer trust. Thus, H1, H2, H3 and H4 are accepted.

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed to reveal potential relationships between brand related characteristics, purchase intention and influencer-trust. Findings indicate that higher levels of influencer trust positively impacts on the brand image, loyalty as well as involvement. This situation indicates the importance of influencer support to boost brand related characteristics, as trusted influencers can contribute to the brands' presence on online social networks such as Instagram, by encouraging their followers to participate and engage in brand-related activities.

An interesting finding has been related with the relationship between influencer trust and purchase intention. This situation indicates consumers have the potential to take action (which is purchasing behaviour in the context of the current study), when trusted influencers promote and/ or suggest certain products and services via their Instagram profiles. In other words, brands can utilize from influencer marketing strategies that target Instagram influencers to boost their sales, and go beyond recognition in Instagram-sphere.

There is still empirical evidence needed that explores which factors or motivations enable consumers to trust particular influencers on Instagram. Future research can focus on characteristics such as the number of followers, influencer recognisability and presence, and influencer-follower interaction patterns while determining the motivations that build trust towards influencers among consumers. Another research area worth of exploration is the factors that encourage and allow influencers to establish their own personal brands on social media.

Instagram is currently one of the most rapidly growing marketplaces -in a low-key manner, since it is mainly recognized as a sphere that is mainly known for personal/influencer brands. However, recent experiences have indicatedthat the interaction between influencer brands and company-based brands are flourishing, and there is a higher need for empirical findings that explore these interaction patterns from various meaningful perspectives.

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