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**СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКО ПЛАНИРАНЕ  
В ДИГИТАЛНИЯ СВЯТ**

**STRATEGIC PLANNING  
IN THE DIGITAL WORLD**

**СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЕ ПЛАНИРОВАНИЕ  
В ЦИФРОВОМ МИРЕ**

# THE EFFECT OF INSTAGRAM INFLUENCER MARKETING: WHAT AFFECTS CUSTOMER'S PURCHASE INTENTION? THE ROLE OF INVOLVEMENT IN INFLUENCER FOLLOWING AND PERCEIVED TRUST IN INFLUENCER'S BRAND RELATED CONTENT

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**Summary:** *Social media marketing allows brands to gain advantage by building relationships with customers. In that direction, influencer marketing is experiencing a rapid growth. This study is based on the integrated social media influencer value model, which among other things, examines how customers' trust in influencer branded content and involvement level in social media influencer following affect customer's purchase intentions. With the purpose to determine the impact of involvement in Instagram influencer following and perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content on customer's purchase intention, this study aims to fill the gap due to lack of research, as known by the authors, by investigating involvement level and perceived trust and how they affect customer's behavioral intention, with a focus on Instagram. Non-probabilistic purposive sampling was used to conduct an online survey to Instagram users in the Republic of North Macedonia that follow influencers. Multiple linear regression was applied to an effective set of 76 responses using SPSS, resulting in confirmation of hypotheses. At the end, a conclusion is given with the focus on theoretical contributions and practical implications that will act as recommendations for marketing-managers on how to affect customer's purchase intention and increase sales by collaborating with Instagram influencers.*

**Keywords:** influencer marketing, social media, involvement, trust, purchase intention

**JEL:** M31, M37

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## Introduction

Today people use social media so intensely and on an enduring basis. Being turned into a basic need, social media became an important marketing platform for brands in their relationship marketing with customers (Saima and Khan, 2020). In that direction, social media marketing allows brands to gain advantage by building relationships with customers and enhance their value (Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018; Dodoo, 2018; Pinto et al., 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2020; Saima and Khan, 2020). Furthermore, the rise and proliferation of social media contributed to the appearance of new type of digital marketing, called social media influencer marketing (Saima and Khan, 2020). Influencer marketing as an affordable form of celebrity endorsement (Hall, 2015) is experiencing a rapid growth.

Digital influencers, a growing brand communication tool, are individuals who shape customers' perceptions (Saima and Khan, 2020), attitudes (Freberg et al., 2011) and affect customers' behavioral intention regarding recommended brands (Castillo and Fernández, 2019) by posting content on social media such as photos, videos, or other updates to their topic of expertise (Saima and Khan, 2020). Moreover, by posting content regarding a certain topic, digital influencers generate a base of followers interested in that topic (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Saima and Khan, 2020). Digital influencers gain income by collaborating with brands in their area of expertise, and when they endorse brands similar to their topic of expertise customers believe and accept their opinion (Saima and Khan, 2020). Previous studies in the digital context suggest that the more customers interact with social networks, the more likely they are to engage in shopping-related activities (Ruiz-Mafé and Sanz-Blas, 2006; Hahn and Kim, 2013).

A solid base of previous studies regarding this topic focus on investigating the effect of influencer marketing on purchase intention (Lim et al. 2017; Rebelo, 2017; Castillo and Fernández, 2019; Trivedi and Sama, 2019; Chetioui et al., 2020; Saima and Khan, 2020) and yet no previous study, as known by the authors, examined the direct effect of involvement in Instagram influencer following and perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content on customers' purchase intention, and especially with a focus on a specific social network. Moreover, we intent to fill that gap in the growing and yet still limited literature that tries to understand the effect of influencer marketing on consumer behavior i.e., behavioral intention (Lim et al. 2017; Rebelo, 2017; Castillo and Fernández, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Trivedi and Sama, 2019; Chetioui et al., 2020; Saima and Khan, 2020).

According to McGuire's communication-persuasion matrix the source, message, channel, receiver, and destination, determine its effectiveness (McGuire, 2001; Lou and Yuan, 2019). We align our study with McGuire's matrix, so as the study of Lou and Yuan (2019), by focusing on the message and the source regarding influencer marketing.

This study is based on the integrated social media influencer value (SMIV) model developed by Lou and Yuan (2019) which examines the effects of influencer marketing on social media by focusing on advertising value and source credibility and their effect on brand awareness and purchase intentions through the pivotal factor trust in branded posts and the covariate involvement in influencer following.

The rest of the paper is organized in the following manner: first a literature review is given with the hypotheses to be tested, followed by methodology and results, and lastly conclusions, implications and recommendations are identified.

## **Literature review**

*Involvement:* Several studies define involvement as a relational variable that predicts and affects customers' purchase behavior on an enduring basis (Evrard and Aurier, 1996; Martin, 1998; O'Cass 2000). The four types of involvement identified by O'Cass (2000): product involvement; purchase decision involvement; consumption involvement and advertising involvement are important not only prior purchasing but also for certain customer's behavior regarding products (Choo et al., 2014). The consumer involvement theory encompasses purchasing occasions since it activates customer's motivation (O'Cass, 2000). Previous studies connect involvement with brand attitude and by that with purchase intention (Trivedi, 2018; Trivedi and Sama, 2019). According to Krugman (1965) customers' response to advertisements is under effect of their involvement with the message and for an involvement to occur there need to be some kind of interaction (Cohen, 1983). Higher advertisement attention and cognitive efforts are the results of higher involvement (Celsi and Olson, 1988). The study of Park and Mittal (1985) reveals the goal-oriented nature of involvement which can be applied in the digital context as well i.e. involvement in influencer following results with a purchase decision.

*Perceived trust:* Trust is a broad term, analyzed and covered in many different areas, including marketing and communications (Lou and Yuan, 2019). As a psychological state (Rousseau et al., 1998), trust can be cognitive (rational reasons why the object initiates trust) and affective (positive feelings towards the object of trust) (Chang and Chen, 2008). Cognitive trust is acquired through one's own common knowledge (Li et al., 2008; Wu and Lin, 2017). According to Wu and Lin (2017) source trustworthiness is commonly examined in the literature of eWOM. Trust is an important factor in the customer-brand relationship (Kwon et al., 2020) and can be described as customer's belief that a brand will perform a specific function (Singh et al., 2012). In that direction, Moorman et al. (1993, p.82) define trust as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence". Furthermore, Kwon et al. (2020) investigated and confirmed among other things, the positive effect of advertising/promotion on brand trust.

According to Wu and Lin (2017) perceived review trustworthiness positively affects customer's attitude toward the product. Wu and Lin (2017) point out that users perceive personal blogs or product reviews on independent review sites to be more trustworthy in comparison to official brand sites. Customers can change their attitudes and buying behavior in a positive manner by following an influencer that is trustworthy (Hsu et al., 2013). Furthermore, Chetioui et al. (2020) investigated fashion influencers and according to their study the fashion influencer that is perceived as trustworthy impacts not only followers' attitudes but their purchase intention as well. In that direction, the study of Chang and Chen (2008) reveals that, when it comes to online brands (retailers), consumers' trust positively affects purchase intention. This is in line with the study of Kooli et al. (2014) which confirmed that online trust is positively related to purchase intention.

*Purchase intention:* According to Castillo and Fernández (2019), social media users influenced by digital influencers have a greater purchase intention for the advertised brands. Purchase intention can be explained as conscious planning to try to buy a particular brand (Spears and Singh, 2004) or the consumer's propensity of buying the brand in the future (Yoo et al., 2000; Trivedi and Sama, 2019). Moreover, purchase intention precedes purchase behavior and is a relevant indicator by which consumer activities are measured (de Magistris and Gracia, 2008; Kim et al., 2008). The four stages in the consumer purchasing decision process are: (a) consideration; (b) assessment; (c) purchase; and (d) enjoying, advocating, and bonding and social media is important in the evaluation phase (Hudson and Thal, 2013). Purchase intention is considered to be the mental phase in the buying decision process (Wells et al., 2011). The largest percentage of purchasing decisions are made by consumers when searching online and consequently the largest percentage of purchases are made online (Lecinski, 2011).

Based on all the above, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Involvement in Instagram influencer following positively affects customer's purchase intention.

H2: Perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content positively affects customer's purchase intention.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample and measures*

The multiple linear regression method using SPSS statistical software was applied to analyze the effect of involvement in Instagram influencer following and perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content on customers' purchase intention.

For conducting the regression analysis, we used data acquired by online questionnaire distributed to Instagram users in the Republic of North Macedonia, by purposive sampling method. A total set of 126 responses were collected. The

questionnaire started with three eliminatory questions that filtered the responses to an effective set of 76 responses of Instagram users, that actively use Instagram and follow influencers. The recommendation by Hair et al. (2010) regarding the sample size indicate the minimum level of at least five times as many observations as the number of variables to be analyzed. Accordingly, we can confirm that the sample size in this research study is above the minimum level as recommended by Hair et al. (2010).

Most of the respondents are female (73.8%), students (42.5%), with an average age 20 years (23.8%), that spend an average 1,5 up to 2 hours per day on Instagram (18.8%), and post on Instagram at least once a week (45%).

For the purpose of the research study, we used 7-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree and 7 - strongly agree) to determine respondents' level of agreement to statements defining users' involvement in Instagram influencer following. Furthermore, we used twelve 7-point semantic differential scales to measure perceived trust in influencer's brand related content (1 - lowest rating and 7 - highest rating). The statements regarding involvement in Instagram influencer following and the twelve differential scales that measure perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content were adapted from the study of Lou and Yuan (2019). We also applied 7-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree and 7 - strongly agree) to capture degree of agreement with statements regarding users' purchase intention. Purchase intention statements were adapted from Rebelo (2017).

## **Results**

### ***Assessment of reliability and construct validity***

Prior running the regression analysis we examined the scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each variable. Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicated high internal scales' reliability. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for involvement (0.931), perceived trust (0.937), and purchase intention (0.932) are above the threshold value 0.7 as recommended by Hair et al. (2010).

We furthermore assessed the construct validity by Exploratory Factor Analysis. Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was applied and the analysis confirmed the factors as conceptualized in the literature. The adequacy of the sample is measured by Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO). KMO value (0.860) exceed threshold value 0.5 recommended by Kaiser (1974). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity with a p-value less than 0.05 was considered significant. The factor loadings are above 0.5 threshold level as recommended by Hair et al. (2010). The three factors extracted (involvement – 5 items, perceived trust – 12 items and purchase intention – 3 items) explain 70.057% of variance and all items were retained in the EFA model as no deletion was required. Table 1 is a complete representation of factors and factor loading after Varimax rotation.

**Table 1:** Factor analysis results, factor loadings (N=76)

No.	Indicator	Factor		
		1	2	3
	<i>Perceived trust</i>			
1	Sincere	0.858		
2	Reliable	0.856		
3	Reasonable	0.832		
4	Credible	0.813		
5	Authentic	0.751		
6	Convincing	0.747		
7	Conclusive	0.706		
8	Genuine	0.706		
9	Honest	0.696		
10	Trustworthy	0.689		
11	Ethical	0.675		
12	Unquestionable	0.609		
	<i>Involvement</i>			
1	Following their posts/updates on social media is an important part of my life.		0.886	
2	I am very much involved in following their posts/updates on social media.		0.870	
3	Following their posts/updates on social media is a significant part of my life.		0.834	
4	I pay a lot of attention to following their posts/updates on social media.		0.832	
5	I am very interested in following their posts/updates on social media.		0.783	
	<i>Purchase intention</i>			
1	I pretend to buy the products promoted by the influencers on Instagram.			0.875
2	It is likely that I will buy the products promoted by the influencers on Instagram.			0.860
3	I am willing to buy the products promoted by the influencers on Instagram.			0.836

Source: Authors' calculations

### ***Multiple linear regression method results***

The multiple linear regression model is represented with the following equation (1):

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where: Y = purchase intention;  $x_1$  = involvement;  $x_2$  = perceived trust;  $\varepsilon$  = standard error

To run the regression analysis of the proposed model we firstly examined whether the model meets all the assumptions when it comes to normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity. The first three assumptions: normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were captured and confirmed by visually examining the diagrams of standardized residuals as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2012).

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance values confirm the absence of multicollinearity among variables. Specifically, Hair et al. (1995) posits the value 10 as the maximum acceptable value for VIF. Furthermore, when it comes to Tolerance, several authors recommend different threshold values: 0.10 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001), 0.20 (Menard, 1995), and 0.25 (Huber and Stephens, 1993). In that direction, we can conclude that both tests exceed the various threshold values as recommended by different authors.

The Durbin-Watson test in general with a value closer to 0 or 4 is a clear indicator for autocorrelation in the residuals from a regression analysis. However, in this study and proposed regression model the value *d* is closer to 2 indicating the absence of autocorrelation as recommended by Durbin and Watson (1971). Values for linear regression model assumptions are given in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Linear regression model assumptions

	<b>Model values</b>
<b>Durbin-Watson test</b>	2.149
<b>Tolerance</b>	0.898 – involvement 0.898 – perceived trust
<b>Variance Inflation Factor</b>	1.113 – involvement 1.113 – perceived trust

*Source:* Authors' calculations

The proposed regression model is also statistically significant with a p-value 0.000 for the F-test of overall significance less than the significance level 0.05.

Both, the coefficient of determination  $R^2 = 0.312$  and adjusted coefficient of determination  $R^2 = 0.294$  indicate that involvement and perceived trust are the cause of 31.2% and respectively 29.4% variation in purchase intention.

Analyzing the p-values for each of the independent variables in this model we can confirm both hypotheses H1 and H2 since both p-values (involvement p-value = 0.048 and perceived trust p-value = 0.000) are less than the significance level 0.05. Accordingly, we can conclude that involvement in Instagram influencer following and perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content positively affects customers' purchase intention. Coefficients at model level and p-value for each variable are given in Table 3.



**Table 3:** Multiple regression model results

Dependent variable	Purchase intention	
	Involvement	Perceived trust
Independent variables		
F-test	16.581*	
coefficient of determination R <sup>2</sup>	0.312*	
adjusted coefficient of determination R <sup>2</sup>	0.294*	
p-value	0.000**	0.048**

\*at model level \*\*at variable level

Source: Authors' calculations

## Conclusions and implications

The results indicate that both variables, involvement in Instagram influencer following and perceived trust in Instagram influencer's brand related content positively affect customers' purchase intention. The results of the study are in line with the research of Lou and Yuan (2019). This means that when social media users perceive that the content related to brands that influencers generate is trustworthy, they intent to purchase the product. In other words, social media users will considerate the product or brand into the mental phase in the buying decision process (Wells et al., 2011). The more social media users are involved in following the influencers they mostly follow, the greater their intention to purchase a certain product or brand that is being advertised by those influencers. Several previous studies confirm that trust (Chang and Chen, 2008; Kooli et al., 2014) and involvement (Trivedi, 2018; Trivedi and Sama, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019) have positive effect on customers' purchase intention.

### *Theoretical contributions*

The proposed model in this study hypothesized that involvement in Instagram influencer following and perceived trust in Instagram influencers' brand related content positively affect customers' purchase intention. The findings of the study add to the value of the growing and yet limited literature regarding digital influencer marketing. The study is the first, as known by the authors, to examine the effect of influencer marketing (effect of involvement and perceived trust on purchase intention) in the digital context i.e., with a focus on influencers on Instagram, as the fastest growing social network nowadays (Garifova, 2016). Regarding influencer marketing, previous studies focused either on involvement and perceived trust as covariates (Lou and Yuan, 2019) or their effect on brand attitude (Trivedi 2018; Trivedi and Sama, 2019; Chetioui et al., 2020) and none of the studies focused on the direct effect of involvement and perceived trust on customers' purchase intention when it comes to following influencers on Instagram. By filling the gap in the literature, the findings of this study have a great

contribution to the scientific community by providing an in-depth review of the Instagram influencer marketing effect on customers' purchase intention regarding their perceived trust and involvement in influencer following.

### ***Practical implications***

Besides being valuable to the scientific community, this study is of a great value for marketing practitioners as well since the results and recommendation suggested in the findings will guide brands activities on social media. Depending on the goal to be achieved that is influencing customers' intention to purchase a product or a brand, marketing managers, alongside with other marketing and advertising activities, should invest in collaboration with influencers on Instagram, especially influencers that have an expertise area similar to the nature of the brand, and that have a solid base of active followers. The solid base of active followers means they see the potential in influencers' content to satisfy their psychological need and they become more involved in the following of the influencers (O'Casey, 2000). On the other hand, social media users trust in the content generated by influencers positioning themselves in the similar way as the brand or company and accept their opinion (Saima and Khan, 2020).

### **Limitations and future research**

The study is of great value for the scientific community and for marketing practitioners as well. However, the research has several limitations that are also recommendations for future research that will either expand the analysis of the research area or deepen the knowledge in a specific segment of the research field. First, the research is based on a sample from one country, which makes the generalization of data more difficult. In that direction, future research should include a sample from several different countries that will also be based on probability theory as opposed to the purposive sample used in this research. Furthermore, an insight into Instagram users' preference on types of influencers based on their level of involvement would be of great value to marketing practitioners. This will provide marketing-managers with knowledge of which area interest the most those social media users with higher level of involvement and accordingly to invest in collaboration with influencers regarding that area of expertise. This will maximize the results from brands' marketing efforts.

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**STRATEGIC PLANING AND MARKETING  
IN DIGITAL WORLD**

**СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКО ПЛАНИРАНЕ И МАРКЕТИНГ  
В ДИГИТАЛНИЯ СВЯТ**

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