

Bachelor's thesis

International Business programme

2019

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CREDIBILITY OF BLOGGERS' POSTS COMPARED TO BRAND POSTS: IHERB CASE

SMM research



BACHELOR'S THESIS | ABSTRACT

TURKU UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

International Business programme

2019 | 41+4

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CREDIBILITY OF BLOGGERS' POSTS COMPARED TO BRAND POSTS: IHERB CASE

Due to explosive growth of social media during past years, amount of social media bloggers is also growing. Bloggers with decent number of followers become new advertising channels, alternative to brands' own social media promotion. However, there is a controversy in literature concerning trust to blogger advertising.

In this research, it was intended to define whether Instagram bloggers would be a trustable advertising tool when compared to brand posts for the iHerb online store promotion.

Action research was used where participants (n=84) were exposed to different conditions: blogger advertising and brand advertising on the Instagram. The results have shown that for iHerb advertising on the Instagram, blogger advertising was less trustable tool for consumers than were brand posts. Limitations of research were discussed.

KEYWORDS:

Social Media Marketing, bloggers, promotion, advertising, brand credibility

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Explanation of abbreviation (Source)
MAU	Monthly Active Users (Lua, 2019)
UGC	User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)
SMM	Social Media Marketing (Wee, 2009)
FGC.	Firm Generated Content (Kumar B. R., 2015)
A _{ad}	Attitude toward the ad (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989)

2 INTRODUCTION

I am currently working in advertising agency, and every day I get in contact with different tools of brand promotion. Bloggers and social media posts are used very often, so I consider it very important for a marketing specialist to know all the trends and all the specificities of these fields.

Personally, I also have a deep admiration on how much internet development and social media have changed the world. I see people routinely doing things they would never do 10 years ago – and all thanks to internet and social medias. Similarly, advertising has changed also – I understand that 10 years ago I would never work at the position I currently work at now, because there was no such thing as digital copywriting.

Thus, I decided to explore all the intricates of marketing on social media and bloggers marketing, as I consider these two phenomena to be extremely influential for modern marketing.

2.1 Background

From my own experience and from literature review I learned that social medias are actively used as a promotion tool by marketers. One of the most popular social networks used for this purpose is Instagram – ranking the second in popularity after Facebook (Stelzner, 2018). With 1 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018) it has proven to be an effective platform to reach brands' target audience.

Two of the competing tools for Insta-promotion are promotional posts (or sponsored) and influencers' posts (Adweek, 2015). First are paid posts promoted by the means of the social network itself – brands pay for the promotion and selected posts are displayed to selected audience segments. Second – influencers' posts – are 'authentic' user posts featuring the product (for which brands also pay) that bloggers and celebrities place into their feed – this way

most of their followers, amounts of which may reach over 100'000'000 (Socialblade, 2018) see the post about a product.

Effectiveness blogger and brand posts is widely discussed both in the industry and academia (De Veirman et. al., 2017; Hughes et. al., 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016). It mainly stems from the notion that bloggers are not as a trustworthy source of information for consumers anymore: for instance, Mitchell & Rodak (2018) argue that level of trust on Instagram influencers is falling and so is its effectiveness as a promotion tool. They point out that with the rising number of bloggers' accounts, with high number of followers (also considering the simplicity of getting lots of followers via paid account promotion) Insta-followers have become more sophisticated and do not trust to authenticity of advertising posts by influencers. Djafarova & Rushworth (2016), on the other hand, argue that Instagram bloggers are influential in the purchase behavior of young female users and that the level of trust to Insta-influencers is high. De Veirman et. al. (2017) call influencers' marketing to be sometimes more effective than traditional advertising due to its high trustability among consumers. It all suggests that there is a research controversy concerning bloggers: it is unclear, whether they are indeed credible for potential customers ad source.

2.2 Target company, research question, novelty of research

In this thesis, iHerb was chosen as a case company. It is US-based online store with natural products, cosmetics and food supplements (iHerb, 2018). I picked iHerb because this service is very popular worldwide with 2,5 million followers on Facebook community (iherb, 2018) and is less popular in Russia with 64 000 users on vk.com – Russian-language social network (iherb_russian, 2018). Based on Russian emerging trend of healthy lifestyle (Euromonitor, 2018), iHerb could gain more popularity among Russian customers in the following years, so it is important to see, how a company like this could develop. So there was risen research question:

Q1: Would the iHerb influencers' posts be a trustable promotion tool when compared to brand posts?

This research focus on comparison between influencers' posts and promoted brand posts trustworthiness.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenge of the research is literature controversy – while the concerns about influencers' posts effectiveness are being vocalized, marketers still spend solid amounts of promotion budgets (eMarketer, 2016) on this credibility-wise questionable tool.

The novelty of this research is based on:

- a. timing – in 2018 there have been changes on Instagram which prove network's concerns about authenticity and trustworthiness of bloggers' accounts (Instagram help center, 2018), so the situation in blogosphere is clearly changing;
- b. methodical approach – although a lot of studies looked into Instagram influencers' marketing, Existing body of research is somewhat missing of comparison of Instagram influencers effectiveness to Instagram promoted posts.

Therefore, this study could possibly create useful insights into the nature of Instagram promotion.

In literature review, first explored Instagram as a social media and looked into basic theories concerning Instagram and other social media. Then I explored brands on the Instagram – their development ways. The following section covered brand posts as a traditional way of brand's presence on the Instagram.

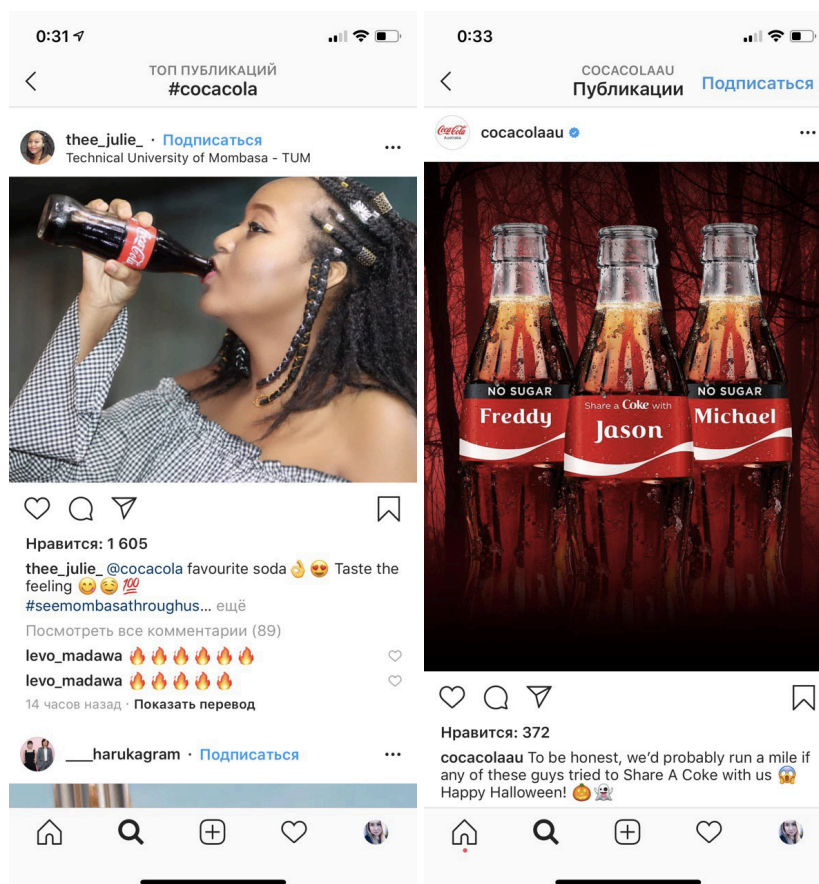
Afterwards I looked into blogger advertising, providing insights into discussion concerning its trustworthiness. The last part was about iHerb – research target company.

The materials explored helped me to design practical part of current research. It is also worth mentioning that there may be some confusion for a reader between 'blogger posts credibility' and 'blogger posts trustworthiness'. I use these concepts as synonyms, as definitions on the research are very similar and I have found no comparison of them in the literature (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Kumar et. al., 2015).

3.1 Instagram

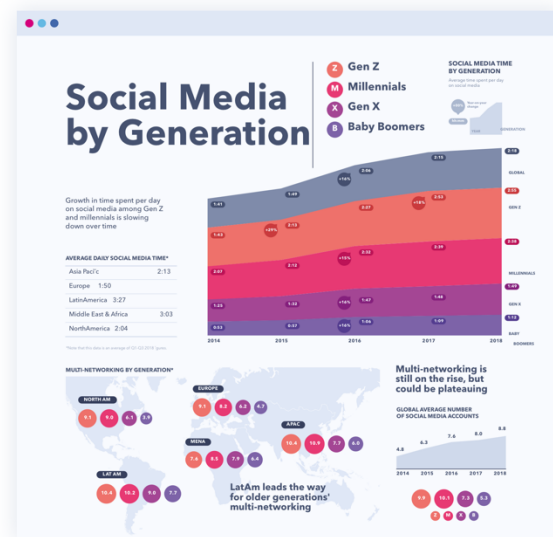
Instagram is one of the top used social media websites and apps (Lua, 2019). It was launched in 2010, its popularity has been constantly growing. Hu et. al., (2014) refer to Instagram as the most popular photo sharing and capturing service and social media application. Wide Instagram influence on people and, thus, consumers, constitute the importance of current research.

One way to explore Instagram is to explore concept of social media first. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) defined social media as all forms of User Generated Content (UGC) – all sorts of media-content that are publicly available and created by end-users. Kumar et al., (2015) adds social media content with the FGC (Firm-Generated Content) definition – meaning the case of UGC when the content creator is presented as a firm, not as a person.



Picture 1. Examples of Coca-Cola UGC and FGC (Instagram, 2019)

Another way to look at social medias is to see them as websites, where UGC and FGC are created. For example, Social Media by Generation infographics Webindex (2019) refer to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as social media.



Picture 2. Social Media by Generation (Webindex, 2019)

Numbers of social media users keep growing every year — even though millennials seem to stop creating new accounts, older and younger generations keep joining social media (Webindex, 2019). Lua (2019) presents number of Monthly Active Users (MAU) for various social media as follows:

Social media	MAU
Facebook	2.23 billion
YouTube	1.9 billion
WhatsApp	1.5 billion
Messenger	1.3 billion
WeChat	1.06 billion
Instagram	1 billion
QQ	861 million

Table 1. Social media sites in 2019 (Lua, 2019)

There are global social media, meaning they are used worldwide. There are also local social media, where certain country/language group speakers communicate. As such, we may mention vk.com — social media of Russian-speaking community or Chinese WeChat.com (Lua, 2019).

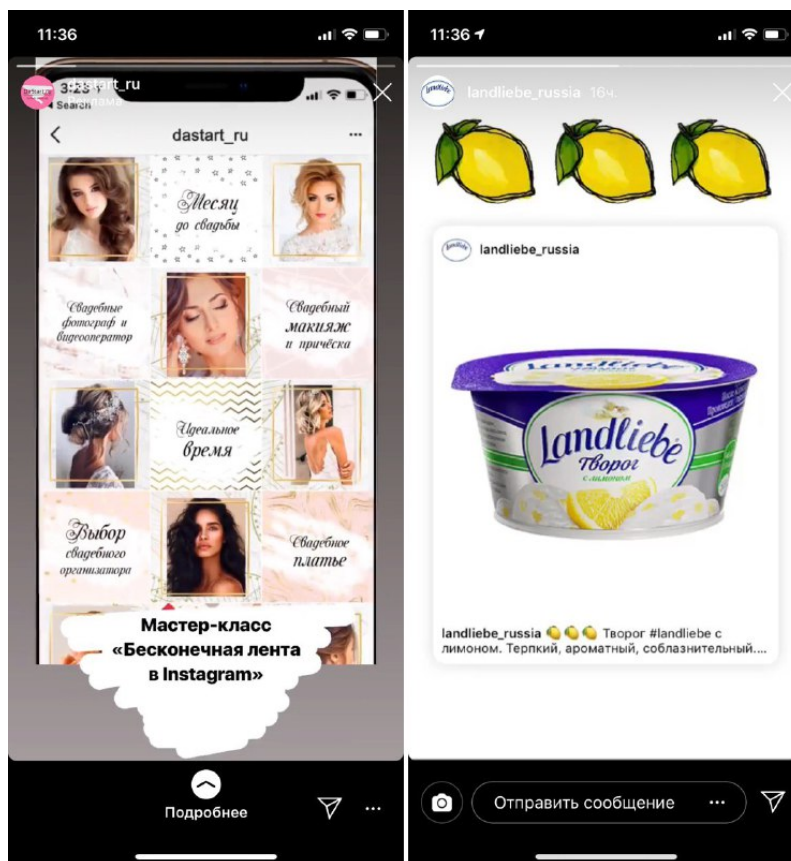
There are many types of content which can be shared on social media: links to websites, videos, pictures, animated GIFs, PDF documents, etc (Nations, 2019). Instagram is focused on visual information and is marketed as *picture-first, text second* platform (Lee et. al., 2015). Users on the platform communicate via videos and pictures, for which there is an interface with many features. There are in-built opportunities for taking pictures/videos, for editing and uploading them and several additional features that make a platform 'all in one' for sharing visual content (Lee et. al., 2015).

One more important Instagram feature is called *stories*. It was introduced on Instagram in 2016, and the idea was originally copied from Snapchat (Alexander, 2018). Stories is a content type which normally features everyday moments, as opposed to posts, normally feature highlights only (Stelzner, 2018). Stories are pictures or videos with or without texts, posted to a separate 'feed', available for only 24 hours after publication, after which they get 'archived' and disappear for everybody except creator, who can still view them via 'archive' tab (Instagram Help Center, 2019).

As content format, stories have multiple advantages. They can be quick to create – as Kumar (2019) points out, Instagram post requires a good quality photo and some time for making it meaningful, while stories format requires just a simple idea, interesting shot and being a little creative. Stories help to engage people via in-built functions, such as tagging friends, adding music to videos and broadcasting life events in real time (Instagram Help Center, 2019).

Stories are generally perceived as 'fun' in regards to both creation and consumption – they do include fun features as augmented reality camera add-ons, stickers and GIFs that can make content even more entertaining (Kumar, 2019). Besides, the third of all Instagram stories is created by brands, so this content type is already widely embraced by various marketers (Kumar, 2019).

There are also some limitations to stories. 24-hour availability may seem annoying to the user – especially if creating of one took time (to take picture or video, edit it, create copywrite and more) (Kumar, 2019). But for this case Instagram provides *highlights* — specific field of a profile, where all the archived stories can be kept and even categorized for future viewers (Instagram Help Center, 2019).



Picture 3. Examples of Instagram stories (Instagram, 2019)

A basic research on Instagram content types and user types by Hu et. al., (2014), studied the set of Instagram pictures to define what types of pictures are most posted on social network. Among other important findings they found that user's most posted type of content is not dependent on user's number of followers. As for user categories, Hu et. al., (2014) defined 5 categories of users, depending on the content they shared:

1. Selfie-lovers with prevalent self-portrait content

2. Users who post photos of food mostly, but include other categories in their newsfeed almost equally as well
3. Users with captioned photo as a dominating content type, posting other categories as well
4. Users who have friends and selfies to be of equal amount on their newsfeed
5. Users who most often post activity and gadget photos, with few photos of other categories

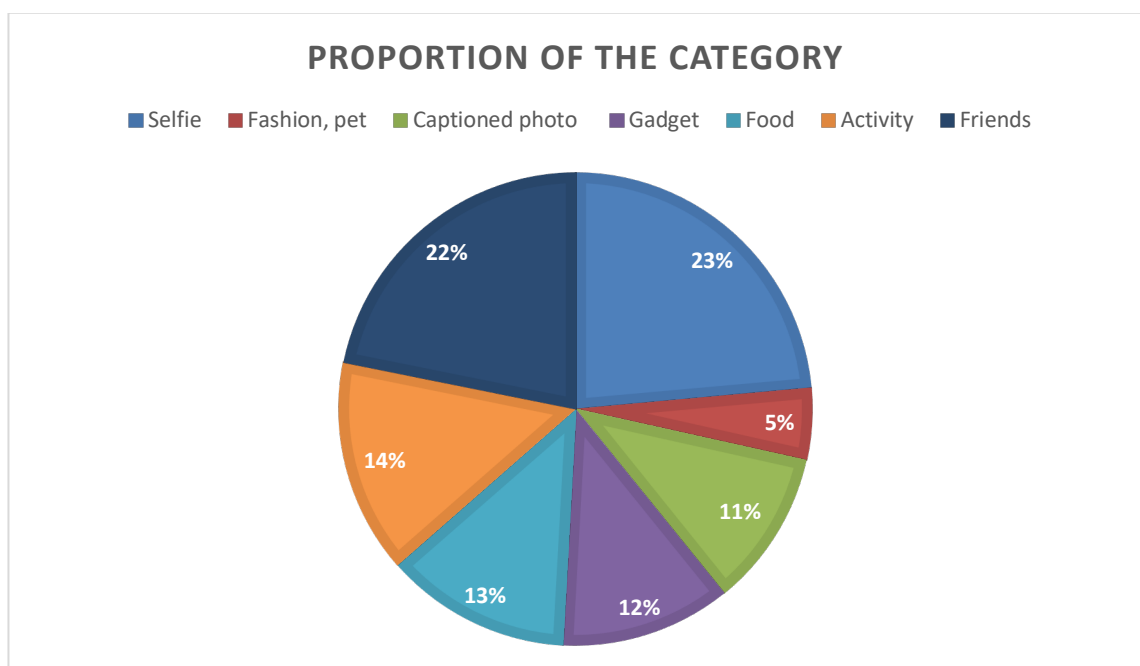


Figure 1. Photo categories on Instagram (Hu et. al., 2014)

As for the categories' popularity, *selfie* category was the most posted content, while *pet* and *fashion* were the least popular categories to post.

Thus, Hu et. al., (2014) came to the conclusion that in-line with conventional wisdom, that Instagram is often used to promote oneself and network with friends. For marketers employing Instagram as a promotion tool, it is important to understand why people use this social network.

Lee et. al. (2015) also explored Instagram as a modern phenomena of a social network, rising rapidly in popularity to find out what are user motivations for using Instagram. Most important motivating factors turned out to be social interaction,

archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking. They found that social interactions were one of the important things users seek on the platform. Looking for social support and escaping loneliness were other important social motivators. Another motivator from this research was creating a cyber-documentary of one's life – and presenting one's personality in a creative way. Authors came to the conclusion that Instagram has become new, empowering way of self-presentation, especially among the youth – once again underlining social importance of Instagram phenomenon.

In addition to Lee's findings, Sheldon & Bryant (2015) found that basic motivations to use Instagram among the young users were:

1. Coolness or popularity – younger users had an urge to use social platforms, used by their peers as well;
2. Surveillance – users wanted to acquire knowledge about others via Instagram;
3. Creativity – users wanted to share their artistic pieces online, find people with similar interests and let people see their photography skills;
4. Documentation – users employed Instagram as an archive which contained the highlights of their lives.

Psychological aspects of Instagram influence on people can be of importance for marketing research as well. Pittman & Reich (2016), for example, studied how Instagram influenced loneliness in young adults and found that, compared to Twitter, it has been reducing such feelings and promoting happiness and SWL – satisfaction with life. Authors connect such influence with the fact that Instagram communication is mostly visual – while Twitter is mostly text-based. Moreover, Lee et. al., (2015) even noticed that Instagram creates its own strong visually-oriented culture. This conclusion is important for understanding how deeply Instagram may influence its users.

Wide Instagram growth induced some research suggesting its negative influence (Lup et. al., 2015). Following this trend, Lup et. al., (2015) explored Instagram influence on psychological well-being. Researchers found the link between the Instagram usage and experienced depressive symptoms – but with important moderators of this influence, such as amount of strangers followed and frequency

of Instagram use. Lup et. al., (2015) concluded that with growing frequency of Instagram use increases depressive symptoms in those who follow more strangers and decreases depressive symptoms in those who follow mostly acquaintances. Such influence is explained through social comparison mechanism – when using Instagram frequently and seeing many strangers, users tried to compare their successfulness with bloggers' and celebrities based solely on Instagram and, as the pictures were always overly 'fancy', users had the increase in depressive symptoms. But those who followed mostly friends and relatives felt more connected and happy – and did more grounds to compare themselves with people they knew. Findings of this study contribute a lot to research on bloggers and their followers.

To sum it up, Instagram is an important phenomenon of modern life, so the mechanisms by which it works for all the different parties should be studied thoroughly.

3.2 Social Media Marketing

Rapid development of social media gave a boost to Social Media Marketing.

Tuten & Solomon (2017) define Social Media Marketing (SMM) as *utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders*. Authors underline specifically that SMM differs from traditional 4P marketing mix in compulsory including one more P – participation. Social Media Marketing slightly differs from 'traditional' marketing. Tuten & Solomon (2017) describe this difference as such: traditional marketers employ 'vertical' or one-way communication with consumers while social media marketing needs and allows a consumer to participate in communication, thus making brand-consumer relationship more personal.

Wee (2009) refers to SMM as a very powerful tool that creates an opportunity for modern marketers to reach out to the audience using a very 'native' channel. According to him, social media cannot boost sales immediately, but rather they help to interact with consumers and humanize the brand. Besides, SMM creates

an opportunity for a brand to 'go viral' – meaning that information about it will spread via digital 'word of mouth' or user's shares with each other.

Stelzner (2018) surveyed more than 5700 marketers to compile her work Social Media Marketing industry report. The aim of the research was to find important insights inside the industry and provide readers with up-to-date information on SMM business effectiveness. She mentions following outcomes of social media marketing for brands:

1. Increased brand exposure – 87% respondents confirmed that due to employing SMM, their business got wider audience reach.
2. Increased traffic to the website – 78% marketers stated that SMM generated increased traffic on their websites, thus making it second important business benefit, according to the survey results.
3. Generating leads – this index, however, somewhat decreased for marketers asked and was mentioned by 64% of respondents, versus 66% in 2017.
4. Developing loyal fans – index also dropped since 2017 from 69% to 63%.
5. Providing marketplace insight – this index dropped since 2017 from 66% to 54%.
6. Improving sales – overall, more than half of marketers surveyed who used SMM for more than 2 years, stated that it helped them improve sales.
7. Growing business partnerships – more than half of marketers surveyed who invested SMM for more than 3 years, stated that it helped them grow business partnerships.
8. Increasing thought leadership – this index was high just for those who employed SMM for more than 5 years.

Benefits of social media marketing

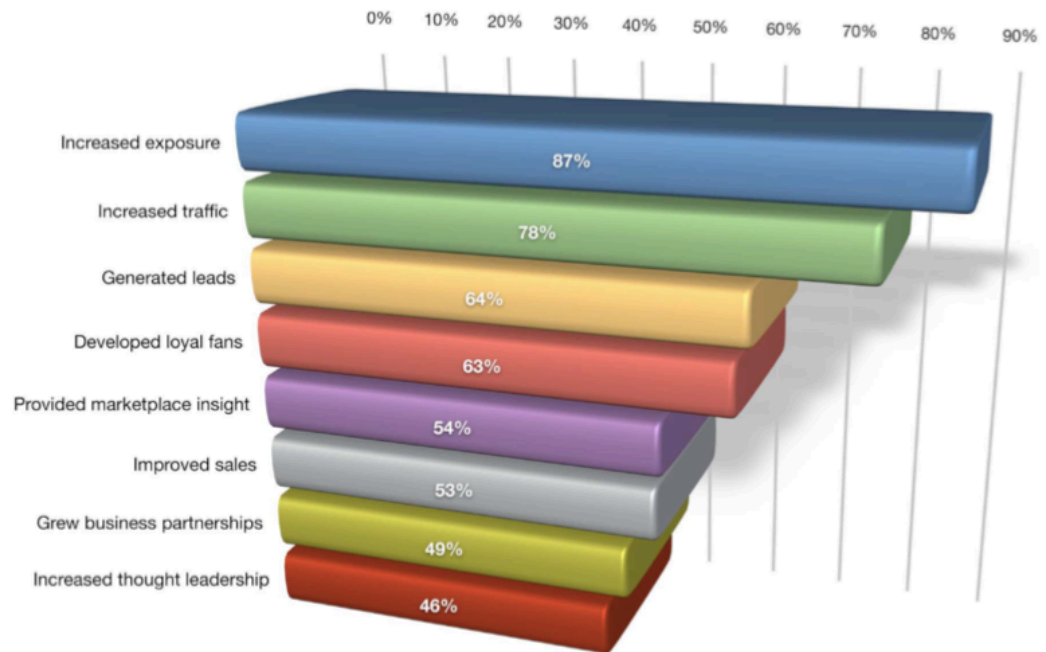


Figure 2. Benefits of SMM for business (Stelzner, 2018)

Other outcomes from using social media for marketers may include (but not limited to) reaching out to micromarkets – small groups of consumers, inaccessible for marketers before the Internet (Tuten & Solomon, 2017) or empowering consumers to co-create products, hence increasing product value (Dahl, 2018).

3.3 Brand advertising on social media

Brand posts are messages posted by firms on their official social media pages, also referred as FGC – firm generated content. (Kumar et al., 2015). Kumar and colleagues argue that FGC can help firms develop one-on-one relationships with their customers through social medias interactive nature - and that this tool works synergistically with other types of advertising (TV and e-mail marketing). Brand posts may be located on brand pages (Kumar et al., 2015) and may also be promoted from the brand's name (Facebook, 2007). Promoted posts feature was

first introduced by Facebook in 2007 as Facebook Ads – Facebook Ads, *an ad system for businesses to connect with users and target advertising to the exact audiences they want* (Facebook, 2007). It was later introduced and is still present also on Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn and Twitter (Sproutsocial, 2019).

Promoted, targeted or sponsored posts are brand posts that are shown to specific audience to deliver advertiser's message (Facebook, 2019). As Kumar et al. (2015) consider FGC to be of similar value for customers spending, cross-buying, and customer profitability, it was decided to compare them to blogger advertising for the purposes of this research.

3.4 Blogger advertising on social media

Thevenot (2007) defines blogging as social networking tool, often combining author's personal life description with reflections upon topic author is interested in – thus it combines features of diary and a social guide. Blogs have become new form of self-expression and they are evolving in-line with the internet (Guadagno et. al., 2008) .

Thevenot (2007) splits blogging up to following types:

- Individual blogs – which are a format of online diary
- Collaborative blogs – blogs written by many users, often being feedback pages, for example in tourism industry
- Corporate blogs – blogs written from the company's point of view
- Media blogs – web pages for posting news and updates on a certain topic.

Guadagno et. al. (2008) describe bloggers to be mostly young, educated, urban-dwelling individuals often actively engaged in online shopping. In their research, they explore about what factors influence people to become a blogger. To learn about it, they examined whether Big Five (trait theory that defines personality based on five key traits: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness) influence proneness to blogging. Indeed, research has stipulated that openness to new experience and high neuroticism

are traits that do influence proneness to becoming a blogger (Guadagno et. al., 2008).

Another important thing for a blogger is content. Instagram is considered a photo-sharing app, but importance of visual content cannot be underestimated elsewhere – for example, Sheldon & Bryant (2015) mention that pictures are the most engaging content type on Facebook as well, with highest percent of activities on the website, attracted by it. While being in-line with previous research about content importance, Du & Wagner (2006) emphasize the role of technology in blog success as well. In their study, authors claim that technology affects the opportunity of a blog to provide tools for content creation as well as to help mobilize social circles around posts. They propose a theoretical framework of blog success, where technological value enhances blog popularity through inducing content value and social value.

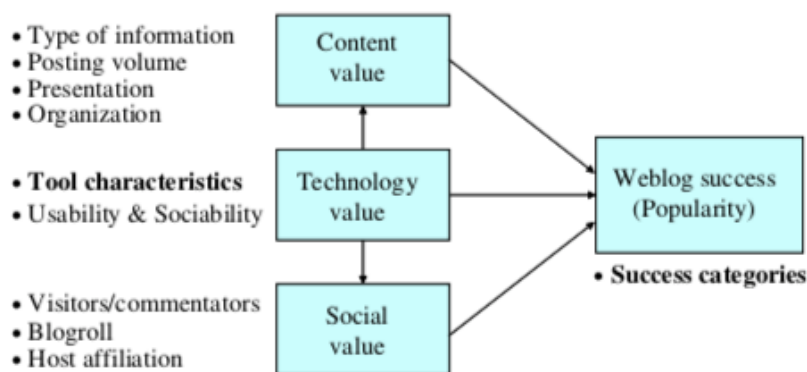


Figure 3. Blog popularity determinates (Du & Wagner, 2006)

Mohr (2016) has also studied social and content factors influencing the success of a blog by exploring development timelines of the most famous blogs. In this research it was revealed that most successful blogs were created by individuals with many social connections and those who were able to create content that could not be found anywhere else. Those factors resulted into authors' ability to better target audiences and make their followers count grow quickly.

Because of explosive growth of blogs amount during the past decade (Mohr, 2016), blogger advertising has become a common way to advertise brands on social media. Most bloggers feature advertising on their blogs (Fan & Chang, 2011). One reason for this is quantitative: Instagram influencers usually have a big and loyal fan base – therefore increasing opportunities for brand reach (Singh J. et al., 2018). Another reason is qualitative: Instagram is generally perceived as a positive-review platform, so it is very uncommon to see a negative review there – thus, when brands appear on influencer's page, they are to reach loyal fans, who perceive followed influencers as their friends, so followers are very likely to believe a positive review (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

Advertising called *native* – meaning it is integrated into bloggers' content often without users being aware of it – has risen a concern of Instagram team. Lately Instagram introduced 'sponsored post' label for such posts for the sake of blogger-brand collaboration transparency (Instagram, 2017). Introduction of this feature has been motivated by cases like Fyre Festival lawsuit when bloggers and the brand got sued for fraud and misrepresentation of the festival online (Flanagan, 2017).

Besides fraud, blogger advertising in general has been subject to trust discussions; celebrity endorsement in advertising is susceptible to customer bias in many ways – and controversy in research is showing it (Singh et. al., 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016). Some research suggests that collaborations between brands and key opinion leaders (i.e. bloggers) influence brand and product perception in positive way (Singh et al., 2018). Moreover, it has been proven for various product categories as well as for different attitudes to referent groups: online collaborations between influencers and brands has been shown to be effectively affecting consumer value in both cases (Singh et al., 2018).

Djafarova & Rushworth (2016) claim that influencers are able to make a product well-known via persuasion and generating positive associations via advertisements. They also point out that bloggers have more potential in this respect, than celebrities – but generally both have a positive impact on brand and product.

At the same time, other research has shown that negative information about celebrities negatively affects effectiveness of advertising campaign (Mitchell & Rodak, 2018; Amos et. al., 2015). Celebrity trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise has been shown to define all the key factors of ad effectiveness: brand attitude, purchase intention and attitude toward advertising (Amos et. al., 2015). It suggests that endorsing bloggers and celebrities should be done wisely – as not every collaboration would provide profit to the brand.

Supporting this point of view Mitchell & Rodak (2018), expert market analysis, point out the fact that marketers have used influencers too heavily, so consumers don't trust to brand-influencer collaborations anymore.

Thus, literature controversy described above constitutes the problem of current research.

3.5 Advertising credibility

In this section, I mention not just *credibility*, but also *trust* toward advertising when describing topic theory – this is due to similarity of definitions (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Kumar et. al., 2015) and the lack of separating statements in the literature, so for the purposes of current research I consider them to be synonyms.

Generally, when exploring advertising, it is crucial to understand *attitude toward the ad* construct – as it has been accepted by multiple advertising researchers (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Ducoffe, 1996; Kumar, 2015).

Attitude toward the ad, also called A_{ad} , is considered an important construct influencing the effects of advertising on brand attitude and purchase intention. It has been originally defined as a *situationally bound construct, an attitudinal reaction to the ad generated at the time of exposure* (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). According to MacKenzie & Lutz (1989) A_{ad} is compiled of several antecedents, all of which are interconnected.

They include:

- attitude toward advertiser – consumer perception of the advertised brand;
- attitude toward advertising – consumer's predisposition towards advertising institution in general;
- mood – the affective state of consumer when exposed to the ad;
- ad credibility – the extent to which potential customer believes the claims made in the ad;
- ad perceptions – the scope of consumer perceptions of executional part of the ad.

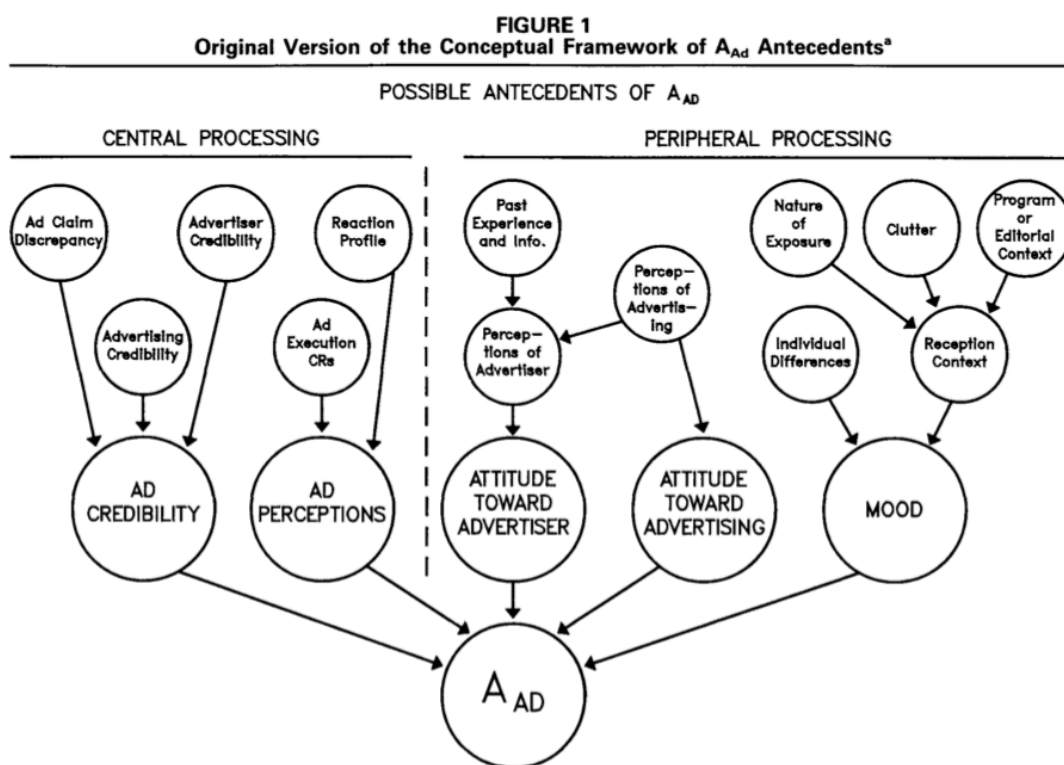


Figure 4. Attitude toward the ad components (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989)

Advertising credibility belongs to the array of many perceptual responses to the commercial stimuli and it is also a part of models defining advertising effectiveness (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989) – and this constituted importance of exploring this dimension when choosing advertising tools.

Advertising on social media allows users to feel their participation, so it is really important for a brand on social media to create trustable image (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Kumar et al. (2015) suggest that developing trustable brand communities and effective ways of employing social media support long-term company's financial interests.

Trust to advertising has been long linked to advertising effectiveness (Ishawerma, 2014). In his research on advertising credibility, Ishawerma (2014) reviews many authors who covered this field dating as long back as 1989. Credibility and trust in advertising consist of many different factors, but general conclusion all the authors make says it is not possible to discuss advertising effectiveness without considering trust to the ad and credibility of the ad.

Thus, it is important to look if the ad is credible to analyze its effectiveness – and this adds to managerial applicability of current research.

3.6 Case Company

According to Bloomberg (2019), iHerb Inc. *operates as an online retailer of nutritional supplements and wellness products. It sells vitamins, minerals, herbs, enzymes, superfoods, and botanicals, as well as bath and beauty, pet care, skincare, grocery, homeopathy, aromatherapy, sports nutrition, and children's health products to customers worldwide.*

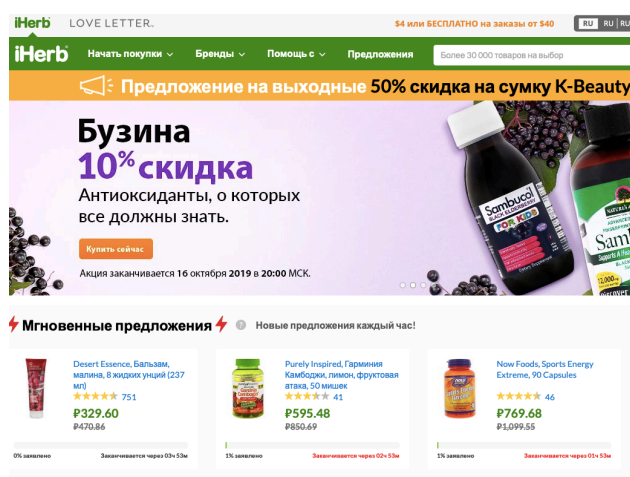


Figure 1. iHerb website in Russia (Iherb, 2018)

iHerb was founded on 1996, today with a team of 1,600 employees. Company's head offices are located at Irvine and Pasadena.

As an e-commerce website, it sells over 30,000 kinds of products, with 95% of the company's sales being international (Levy, 2019). As for social media, iHerb profile on Instagram is followed by 432k followers (overall for all countries) (Instagram, 2019).

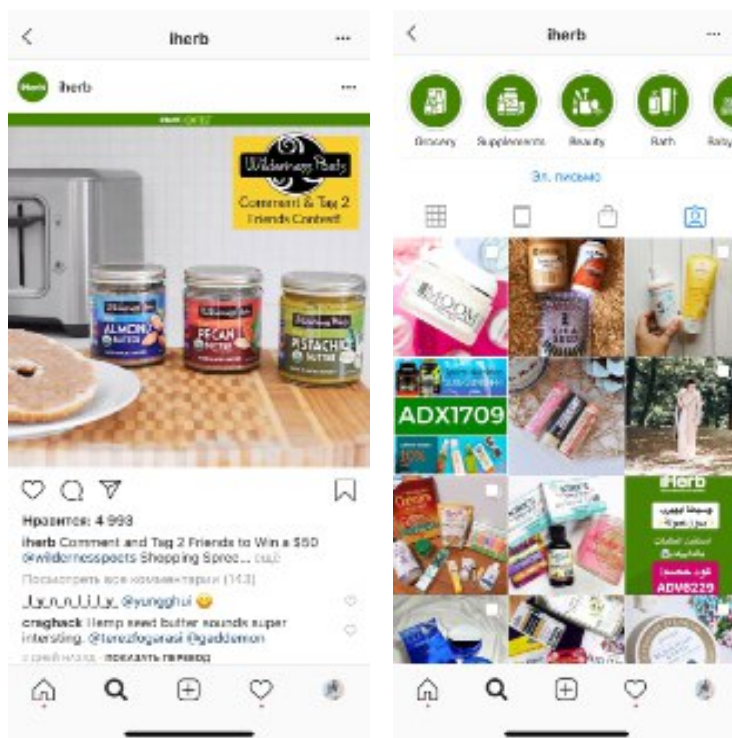


Figure 2. Instagram brand page of iHerb (Instagram, 2019)

In Russia, this website and products from it have quite controversial reputation. While the community of iHerb on VK is quite large compared to its competitors Lush and VkusVill, in 2019 website was forced to remove its apps from AppStore and GooglePlay so it would not possible to order food supplements not certified in Russia (Dubrovickaya & Posypkina, 2019).

This controversy makes research unique, as there was no previous research in Russia concerning iHerb social media promotion.

4 METHOD

This thesis focused on comparison between consumer trust towards iHerb blogger posts and iHerb brand posts. Thus, to answer research question, the direct comparison had to occur. It led me to group comparison method. To make this comparison, I used many features of an experiment (explained later) with the main difference of not controlling groups features (gender, age, etc.)

Experiment is a research way to investigate the connection between variables (Saunders, 2009) – in case of this research, connection between ad tool (bloggers vs brand posts) and perceived trust to the ad.

Experiment is conducted by first defining two participant groups (also called experimental and control conditions). Both groups are assigned certain stimuli, mostly identical between each other, with just one difference, the one called independent variable. By comparing effect of the intervention (variable change), it is possible to make conclusions about how one variable is influencing another variable (Saunders, 2009). In context of this research, it was intended to define how the change of advertising tool from bloggers' to brand posts would differ level of trust toward advertisement – given that the product and advertising approach (text and visual component) remain the same.

To employ this design, control group was presented with iHerb brand posts and experimental group – with iHerb blogger posts, so both groups were basically exposed to the same products' ads. Participants were then asked questions concerning their trust toward the post presented and their intention to purchase the product. To gather sample information, participants were also asked for their personal info – age, gender, experience with Instagram and iHerb.

Generally, experiment is considered the most *scientific* research method (Saunders, 2009), however current research is subject to limitations and may not be considered a scientific experiment per se. First, because of only one company picked and also its specificity (organic products and cosmetics), it is not possible to generalize results for other companies. Second, there was limited number of stimuli (2) provided to respondents in each of the groups, which, again, would not allow to generalize results for the whole range of iHerb products. Third,

convenience sampling method used for gathering responses is not a reliable sampling method and by itself might produce a confusion and bias in responses. Forth, as it was already mentioned, even though participants were assigned randomly to the conditions, there was no control of inside group features, such as gender, age, etc. Moreover, question section about the Instagram was not complete – there were missed questions concerning frequency of Instagram use and sort of content normally consumed on this social network.

Besides, not all of the theory studied in literature review, was applied to practical part. Reader may find Instagram users categories Hu et. al., (2014) missing in the questionnaire, as well as Sheldon & Bryant (2015) users' motivations for Instagram use and some more. Studying of these theories helped the author to better understand the subject of research, but was not applied in the practical part, namely survey creation. The decision was made taking into consideration Chudoba (2019) finding that users normally tend to give less thorough answers on surveys with more questions – thus, I decided to give participants less questions and more time to think about their attitude to key survey concepts – trust and following purchase intention. There is also a limitation concerning data analysis method – the between group comparison was not made using statistical approach, so the between group differences found cannot be considered statistically significant.

Thus, further research is needed on the topic of trust to Instagram influencers.

4.1 Stimuli

To maintain internal validity of the study, it was needed to make as few differences in group conditions as possible (Saunders, 2009). Thus, it was decided to create posts iHerb posts and bloggers posts – with the same pictures and selling the same product, but from different 'authors' – one 'posted' by brand itself, another by (supposedly, in mind of respondent) affiliated blogger.

Brand post pictures were taken from actual iHerb Instagram account, texts were translated from iHerb posts about these products. Bloggers posts were created

by combining same product pictures with 'blogger' texts written by an expert advising copywriter. To maintain external validity, it was needed to make posts as native-looking as possible (Saunders, 2009). To achieve this, texts for stimuli very similar and emphasized the same product qualities.

Ads of 2 different products were used to maintain generalizability of the study (Saunders, 2009) – meaning if, for some reason, one post would be perceived in a wrong and unexpected way, there would also be another one to compensate for that. First product was vitamins-enriched instant coffee and second was mint cookies.



Figure 5. Stimuli for two groups, product 1. Left – brand post, right – blogger post



Figure 6. Stimuli for control and experimental groups, product 2. Left – brand post, right – blogger post

4.2 Procedure

To answer research question, I needed to compare people's reaction to brand post stimuli to the blogger post stimuli.

The questionnaire with stimuli was compiled online via the means of 1ka.si survey platform. This platform allowed randomly assigning surveys with different stimuli to 2 different groups of respondents. Thus, 2 groups looked at posts with the same products advertised but advertised via different channels – a brand or a blogger.

Participants did not know there were 2 conditions in the study – each group saw just stimuli intended for the relevant condition. Besides from seeing different stimuli, participants in both groups were asked the same survey questions. All the questions were compulsory to answer.

4.3 Survey

Survey with stimuli was created via <https://www.1ka.si/d/en> platform, as it provided opportunities to create a study design with random condition assignment.

There were 8 questions for each group, 4 were stimuli questions and 4 were personal information questions.

Stimuli questions were as followed:

- Trust towards the ad: 'I trust to this ad' (5-point Lykert-type scale, where 1 is 'Do not agree at all' and 5 is 'absolutely agree')
- Purchase intention: 'During the next 90 days, if I have the need. I will buy this product'

Both these questions were repeated twice – one time for each of the 2 stimuli presented.

The remaining 4 questions asked about gender, age and experience of using Instagram and buying from iHerb.

4.4 Sampling

Business research is often associated with non-probability sampling due to its easier accessibility than probability sampling (Saunders et. al., 2009). Due to limited resources, convenience sampling was used in this survey, which is a *technique in which a sample is drawn from that part of the population that is close to hand, readily available, or convenient* (Bhattacheree, 2012). In other words, participants were picked haphazardly, based on their accessibility (Saunders et. al., 2009).

Participants were randomly assigned to each of the groups via 1ka.si survey system, that employed logic of randomization when showing 1st or 2nd versions of the survey with stimuli to each consequent person following the link.

It was implemented via features of 1ka.si survey platform. On this platform, there is an opportunity to randomly assign conditions to the respondents and show just the survey with brand/blogger post stimuli to everybody inside the certain group.

This is why I programmed the survey in a way when blogger post group has seen just the survey with blogger posts and another group – just the survey with iHerb brand posts. This ensured internal validity of the study – the intervention conditions were known to the author only (Saunders et. al., 2009).

It is worth mentioning, that according to Bhattacheree (2012), convenience sampling is subject to limitations, such as respondent bias, and undermine generalizability of the study results. Saunders et. al. (2009) warns that generalizations from such sampling research are not quite as accurate as they are expected for scientific research. However, in terms of current research, i.e. as the social media promotion was studied and taking into consideration that social media users constitute a vast majority of population (Statista, 2018), use of convenience sampling in this case is not completely detrimental for research generalizability.

5 RESULTS

The questionnaire was distributed via social media (Facebook and Instagram) and written in Russian, as most of the author's followers were Russian. Most of the respondents followed a link from Instagram – which ensured certain audience consistency. According to author's Instagram profile statistics, most of the followers (39%) reside in Moscow, and are aged 25-34 on the average. Such statistics ensure the sample was relatively homogenic and there were no radical differences between control and experimental conditions when the sample was divided.

The survey was active for 5 days, during which 84 people participated. The sample consisted of 84 respondents, mean age 30, with minimal age 12, maximum 50.

68 respondents were female, 16 male.

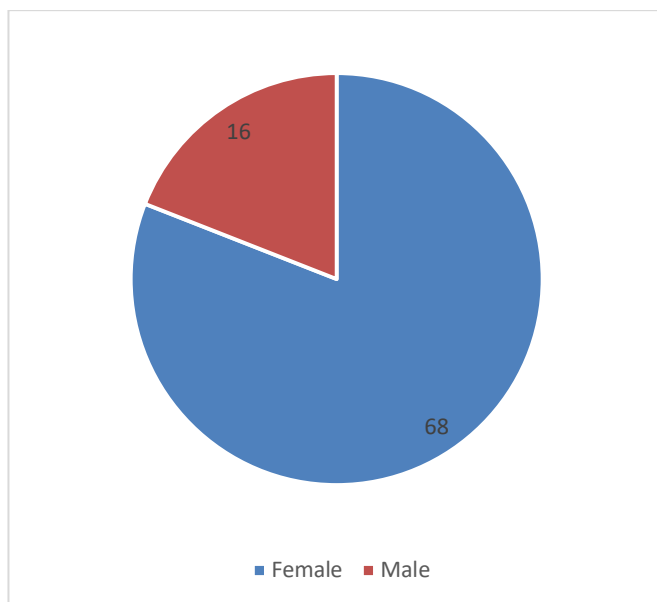


Figure 7. Respondents gender distribution

36 respondents had an experience of buying in iHerb, 48 did not.

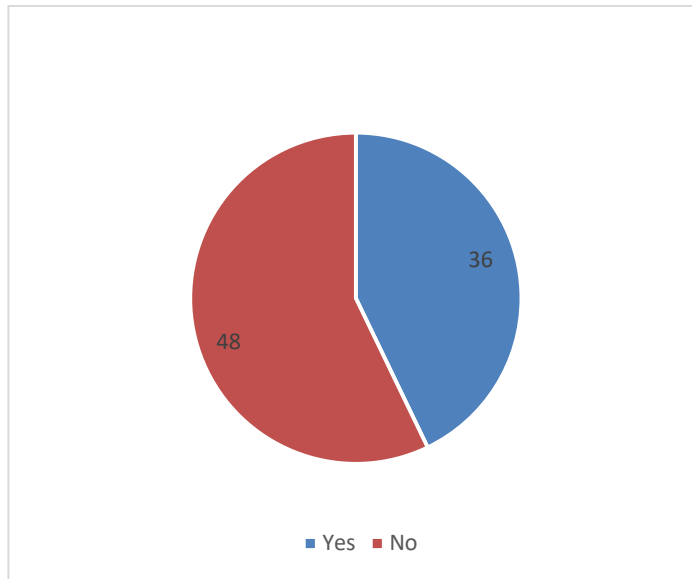


Figure 8. Experience of buying from iHerb distribution

76 respondents used Instagram, 8 did not.

Out of 84 respondents, 41 were randomly assigned to the control condition (brand posts) and 43 to the experimental condition (bloggers' posts).

Group 1, experimental condition 'brand posts', consisting of 41 randomly assigned respondents, answered as followed.

For the post with instant coffee, they mostly answered negative (53%) or neutral (39%) about trust to this ad.

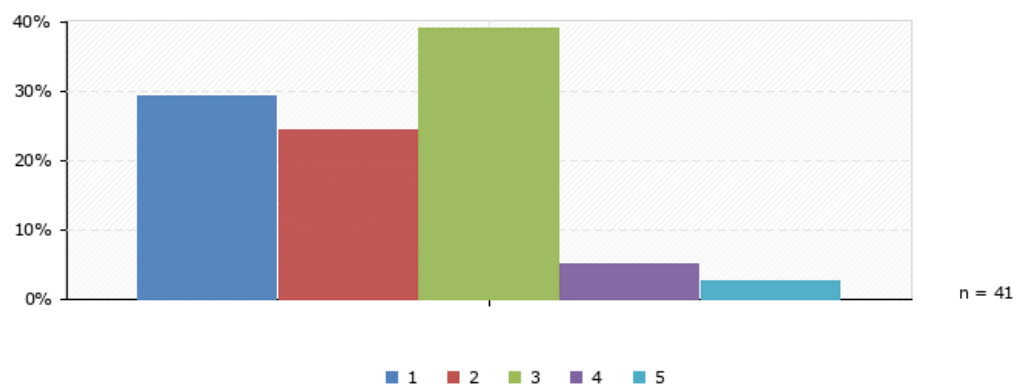


Figure 9. Brand post condition, instant coffee trust distribution

Besides, 80% of respondents answered negative about intention to buy the product during the next 90 days. This finding is in-line with Stelzner (2018)

report finding that leads generating indices has been recently falling for social media promotion – meaning less people are eager to buy product after being exposed to social media advertising.

For the post with mint cookies, the distribution of trust to the ad was almost even with slight inclination to negative (38%), neutral (32%) and positive (30%) perceptions.

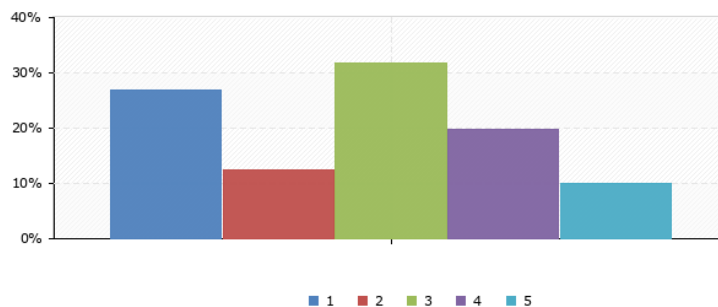


Figure 10. Brand post condition, mint cookies trust distribution

However, with purchase intention 46% were still negative about inclination to buy the product, and 32% were neutral. Again, it supports Stelzner (2018) findings about social media's decreasing effectiveness on ability to sell the product.

Group 2, experimental condition 'blogger posts', consisting of 43 randomly assigned respondents, had answered as followed.

For the blogger post with instant coffee, respondents answered negative for the most part in trust to the ad (63%). Neutral responses constituted 30% and positive just 7% with 0 participants stating they absolutely agree they trust to this ad. This supports conclusions of expert market analysis by Mitchell & Rodak (2018) claiming that general public does not trust to blogger's advertising anymore, as marketers have 'overused' it.

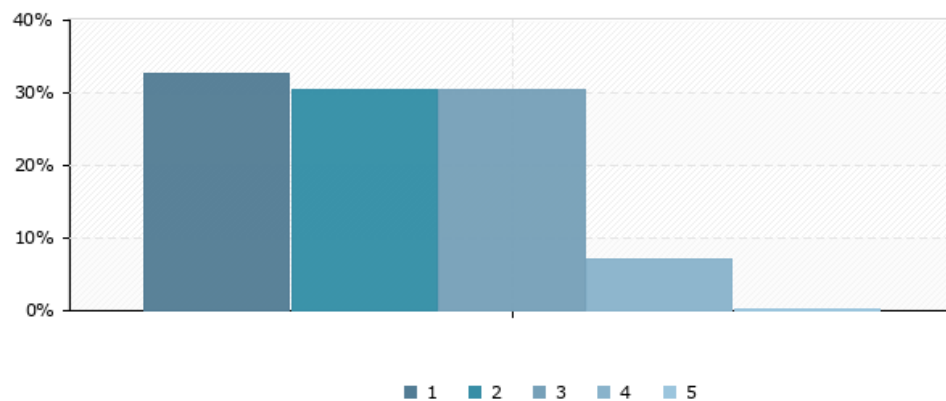


Figure 11. Blogger post condition, instant coffee trust distribution

Purchase intention was also mostly negative, with 86% respondents declining proposition about possibility of buying the product. This result could as well be obtained due to picked blogger's name – because, as Amos et. al. (2015) mentions, affiliated celebrity trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise has been shown to define all the key factors of ad effectiveness, including purchase intention.

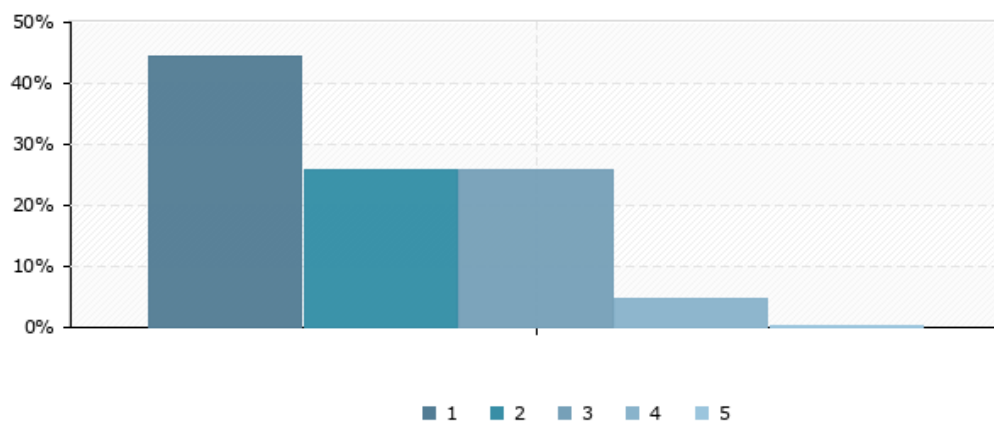


Figure 12. Blogger post condition, mint cookies trust distribution

For the blogger post with mint cookies, respondents answered negative for the most part in trust to the ad (70%). Neutral responses constituted 26% and positive just 5% with 0 participants stating they absolutely agree they trust to

this ad. Again, it supports findings of Mitchell & Rodak (2018), who claimed the trust to blogger's promotion has decreased.

Purchase intention was also extremely negative with 79% stating they would not buy the product. Again, it is possible that blogger's name was influential in negative way, as it was described on at Amos et. al. (2015) research.

More radical comparison of the groups can be implemented by comparing average index results of Likert-type scale answers.

On average, trust index for instant coffee post was 2,3 for the brand post group and 2,1 for the blogger's post. Purchase intention has shown results of 1,7 for the brand post group and 1,6 for the blogger's post.

Condition	Brand post	Blogger's post
Product		
Instant coffee	2,3	2,1
Mint cookies	2,7	1,8

Table 2. Trust indices for 2 research conditions: average level

This could be attributed to research limitations such as convenience sampling – however the results for mint cookies post has shown even more difference between 2 groups. Trust index for this product post was 2,7 for the brand post group versus 1,9 for the blogger's post. Purchase intention has shown results of 2,5 for the brand post group and 1,8 for the blogger's post.

Condition	Brand post	Blogger's post
Product		
Instant coffee	1,7	1,6
Mint cookies	2,5	1,8

Table 3. Purchase intention indices for 2 research conditions: average level

Again, it supports findings by Mitchell & Rodak (2018), who described the falling trust in influencers on social media and Amos et. al. (2015), who claimed that both purchase intention and level of trust are influenced by the chosen celebrity. Comparing the results of 2 groups, it may be seen that blogger advertising has worked more poorly for both instant coffee post and mint cookies post – both in terms of consumer trust and purchase intention.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this research, I wanted to explore the consumer trust to Instagram promotion tools. The research question was 'Would the iHerb influencers' posts be more trustable promotion tool when compared to brand posts?'. After conducting the study, I am, despite all the research limitations, still inclined to answer negatively to the research question. The results have shown that influencers' posts are less trustable promotion tool than brand posts.

In this study, participants were asked to assess brand advertising posts and blogger advertising posts in terms of trustworthiness and purchase intention invoked.

According to results, respondents mostly claimed to distrust both brand advertising and blogger advertising on the Instagram. However, there was difference between the latter. Even though negative, trust response to brand advertising was still higher than trust response to blogger advertising. Moreover, purchase intention was much lower in case of bloggers' advertising. This led me to conclude that influencers were a less trustable promotion tool than brand posts. The results of current research support conclusions of Stelzner (2018), claiming that in terms of SMM, developing loyal fans and generating leads due to this communication channel has dropped during last years. Current research results also support findings of Mitchell & Rodak (2018), which concluded that the trust to the influencers has been falling in the past years.

If we were to generalize these results for marketers' consideration, the first important conclusion would be that overall trust level to SMM is low. However, there are differences between trust to bloggers and trust to a brand – with the brand being more trustable.

In terms of managerial implications, that would mean that trust to blogger advertising on Instagram has decreased, as it was illustrated both by previous research findings and current study. Thus, we can make a conclusion that this advertising channel has become less effective in terms of brand trust development than brand promotion. Thus, it would be more reasonable to not

employ bloggers for the purposes such as developing brand trust and generating sales.

However, more research is needed on the topic to define differences between trust to blogger advertising and brand post advertising for various categories of brands and products.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire – blogger condition (translated and attached).