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#Instagram: Investigating the influence of healthy food posts on consumer purchase intention

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of Instagram's healthy food posts on consumers purchase intention and provides a baseline understanding of how factors such as physical appearance, gender and popularity of the users who make the specified posts may affect that purchase intention process. A survey was conducted and it gathered 156 results from Instagram users. The appropriate method of analysis revealed to be the Multiple Regression and it further conducted to results that suggest that physical appearance positively influences consumers purchase intention while gender and popularity showed no significant effect on consumers purchase intention.

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

In the past few years, there was a change in focus from individual computers to networks[6]. Previously the internet was only used for research, now it also opens to individuals. Thus nowadays people spend a significant amount of time on social media and undertake a high level of consumption acts in this environment. Social networking sites allow people to share consumption, lifestyle choices and brand attachment with their online community.

With the internet growing fast nowadays, social networking sites have become a great tool for selling products and allow their branding. Companies may do it through advertisements, or they may even tease customers to comment on a product after its launching on the official website, for instance. In addition, social networking sites are the major key to connect with customers. Companies deal with customers directly through the sites by settling a good base of communication about the products and the brand, which can lead to reviews and the increasing of reputation[3].

Social networking sites' members are consumers of existing networks and they may be seen as more trustworthy compared to total strangers, which leads social networking sites to become a crucial source of product information for consumers[3]. How close and important a consumer

feels to the source of information can have a great influence on that consumer's decision to search and pass feedback on social networking sites as well as a strong tool to facilitate electronic word-of-mouth[3]

Instagram seems to represent an ideal tool for electronic word-of-mouth, as consumers freely post pictures of food and consequently disseminate information between their friends and acquaintances[13]. Nowadays everyone is sharing more food in this way than ever before, and a huge amount of this food-centric media revolves around food photography on social networking sites such as Instagram[13]. Thus it seems to be pretty trendy the act of sharing healthy food posts that aim to influence others to follow the same healthy lifestyle or at least stay inspired. Consequently, there is this huge industry of food bloggers and instagrammers[13] whose goal is to provide inspiration for a proper health and aesthetics. Then certain food posts become so viral between the followers and the recipes become famous that everyone ends up trying them. A strong online culture is being built up continuously, these foods are becoming a "must-eat" and influencing the way we buy, cook and eat [13].

By analysing previous research on social networking sites, Instagram did not have enough attention yet and it seems to deserve high attention once it also contributes to the way people search for information[4]. It was launched in 2010 and it is a mobile photo-sharing application that creates a strong visual culture[4]. At the time it was bought by Facebook, in 2012, the app had around 30 million users[10]. According to recent statistics from 2016[10], Instagram has 400 million active users, over 60 percent of users log in daily, making it the second most used social network after Facebook. It was also stated that engagement with brands on Instagram is 10 times higher than Facebook, 54 times higher than Pinterest, and 84 times higher than Twitter[10].

With the rapid development of mobile technology, Instagram has been growing steadily and becoming increasingly popular[21]. Although it now provides a website where users can view posts, images still can't be posted from a Web interface[21]. Plus, Instagram reaches a younger, more diverse audience than other social networks, such as Facebook, for instance[22]. Even though users have a less number of followers comparing to Facebook, they have much more interaction, which might be due to Facebook fatigue[22]. Moreover, previous research shows that Instagram, comparing to other photo sharing websites, has a stronger social attribute[21]. Therefore there is a huge need for researchers to explore social relationships on Instagram and their consequences nowadays[21].

To be the best of my knowledge, this is the first attempt to deal with Instagram data regarding consumer purchase intention. Experiences on Instagram are presented to show the efficiency of the proposed framework. Therefore my research question relies on how Instagram's healthy food related posts have an influence on consumers purchase intention.

2. Literature Review

The advances in the internet and the emergence Web 2.0 lead to a bigger connection between people and this has emerged through social networks that allow people to have social interactions and generate content[1]. A wide range of social networks enable people to share information and experiences with other users, for instance Instagram, where the popularity of food imagery is growing really fast.

Previous research says that 13% of consumers who have dinned out recently have posted a picture of food or drink on their social media accounts[11]. Also, 49 percent of consumers learn about food through social media networks[12]. Thus electronic word-of-mouth is becoming more powerful between consumers. Electronic word-of-mouth is defined as the act of exchanging market information among consumers, and it plays a crucial role in influencing consumer attitudes towards food products[3]. Nowadays potential consumers are more interested in other users' opinions rather than merely vendor-generated product information because they are seen as more trustworthy[1].

This study offers theoretical insights into the links between Instagram's healthy food related posts and purchase intention, and it contributes to literature on advertising on social media. Managerially, understanding the variables that affect consumer behaviour on Instagram could help marketers to identify influential individuals that could effectively give social support to their healthy products. Plus, once consumer conversations in social media engage a high level of voluntary self-discourse between the users, an investigation of electronic word-of-mouth delivered on Instagram could provide implications for policy makers to develop effective social media regulations when it comes to consumer privacy.

2.1. Social Networking

Existing research focus on many important aspects regarding consumer behaviour on social networks. They are platforms where consumers have social interaction and become familiar with one another, providing a source of trust, which can deeply influence the users' intention to purchase[1]. Plus, it is shown that written communication on social networks leads consumers to discuss more products and brands compared to oral communication[5]. This happens because written communication allows people to think carefully about what they write and say as well as offers them the opportunity of self-enhancement[5]. Research also shows that consumers' usage of social networks is related to learn about brands[5].

There is a wide range of studies that look into the motivation for consumer behaviour on social networks. After all, social networks are becoming fast the stage of consumer voices[9]. In the past 8 years, social networking sites became a phenomenon that engage millions of users that share content daily and play an important role on the media landscape[14]. Actually it is estimated that more than a half of the world population now uses the internet and there are 2.80 billion global social media users[15]. Social networking can be defined as a service that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view their list of connections and those made by others[16].

Over the years, many social networking sites have been launched (e.g. Friendster and MySpace). In 2005 the "like" culture arrived with Orkut, Mixi, Hi5, Bebo, LinkedIn, Twitter[16], and Instagram following. All of these networks became popular worldwide and provided communication tools such as sharing photos and videos as well as blogging[16]. According to statistics, Facebook is now the most popular social network followed by Instagram[17].

Individuals are increasingly attracted online to exchange information[1]. Some authors approach reviews as one of the key areas that have emerged from social networks[1]. Now customers are constantly encouraged to review products and rate them. This kind of activities will produce electronic word-of-mouth and help other consumers in their purchasing decisions. Research shows that customer reviews have grown fast on the social networking sites as well as the recommendations[1]. Recommendations are a tool used by consumers and really helpful for potential consumers as they trust more other users' recommendations rather than sellers'[1].

There is also research on the consumer profiles on social networks that divides them into categories, namely the devotees, the connection seekers, and entertainment chasers[5].

2.2. Instagram and Healthy Food Related Posts

Academic research surrounding Instagram is increasing as user uptakes increases. This mobile application is an all-in-one package that allows users to take, edit, and upload pictures with high quality[4]. There are also other features such as the live option, the stories, the photo map, the explore page as well as the personal messages. Research says that being a photo-based platform makes it unique as well as the fact that it is mobile-only accessible experience[4].

It is the fastest growing SNS and there are five primary social and psychological motives why people use Instagram: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking[4]. Not surprisingly, social interaction is a strong factor as the main aim of users is to maintain social relationships. Archiving is related to users recording daily events and tracing, as well as creating their own personal cyber documentary. The self-expression motive shows that Instagram users utilise pictures of all sorts of things in order to present their lifestyles and personalities as photographs are much better than texts for self-expression. Finally, escapism and peeking are related to users' feelings when they try to avoid reality and see another one in others' pictures. They try to escape from their own lives and engage with other people they never met before. To many Instagram users, gathering as many followers as possible can be a motivator[4]. Research shows that motives play an important role in users forming positive attitudes towards this social network[4].

Research shows that Instagram is a social networking site that is seen as an inspiration to users, more than Facebook, which is more seen as a web site do discover news about friends and family[23]. Research reveals that for people who use both feeds in the same way, while Facebook satisfies their need for empowerment and connection, Instagram satisfies their desire for fun, discovery and relaxation[23]. Moreover, a survey conducted by Facebook has shown that there are reasons why people use Instagram[23]. People follow celebrities, get *do it yourself* inspiration and are "visually transported to new places"[23]. As an example, an interview done by the Facebook company indicated that a woman in the United Kingdom checked Instagram as many as 10 times a day to get inspiration on lifestyle, fitness and food recipes[23]. In addition, people aged between 18-34 years old are more likely to follow fashion, beauty and

interior design on Instagram rather than Facebook[23]. To be more specific, the percentage of people that looks at photography, beauty and enjoyable posts from unknown people is higher on Instagram that Facebook[23].

A survey conducted of more than 2,500 social media daily users showed that 60 percent agreed that Instagram was the best platform for engagement in contrast to Facebook that only gathered 18 percent of support[24]. Reasons for this result rely on the fact that Instagram is mobile functional, thus people can immediately edit photos and post them on the application, making it a unique instant experience[24]. Moreover, other research studies also focus on the age of the audience, where it is shown that Instagram has more young users than Facebook[25]. The majority of the users are under 30 which can be very useful for companies who are trying to reach a younger audience[25]. On the other hand, Facebook has been losing its percentage of teenager users[25]. In 2014, between April and September, the number of teenagers using Facebook decreased from 72 percent to 45 percent of users[25]. Facebook is more informational while Instagram is about capturing moments[25]. This social network is used to engage by taking advantage of the visual culture it proportionates[25].

Regarding healthy food related posts on Instagram – the main focus of my research – as the previous mentioned research shows, a user might take more attention into a picture on Instagram rather than on Facebook, thus a healthy food post might have more attention from users on Instagram as it can inspire them with healthy food content.

There are also some studies particularly focused on "Fitspiration" on social networking sites. Studies regarding healthy food posts and consumer weight have shown that Body Mass Index play an important role on their response to a healthy food post[2]. Individuals that are classified as obese are more likely to react to a healthy food post compared to a normal weight individual. Obese individuals feel more comfort by receiving support and motivation by Instagram, thus it settles a routine that helps motivating them to follow a healthier lifestyle that reinforces a change. In these cases, social media can be a powerful tool that avoids feelings of loneliness and depression on individuals[2]. Also it was proved that obese individuals are more likely to comment these posts first. As Instagram likes appear as a total number rather than a list after 11 likes, comments will appear chronologically. This fact leads obese correspondents to be the firsts to like as well as comment once that helps feel included and validate their lifestyle[2].

Other studies reveal that these kinds of posts can also cause disordered eating and compulsive exercise between women[18]. Results showed that despite the apparent healthiness of the posts, some women suffer from disordered eating and compulsive exercise, especially the ones who post *fitspiration* images. Women can be divided in two groups: the ones who seek for thinness and the ones who seek for muscularity. The negative emotionality around exercise can put pressure on women to extreme levels of it, causing fatigue, injuries and social withdrawal[18]. Thus this actions lead to severe clinical implications[18].

Research also shows that the liking behavior is closely linked to the popularity of the posting user[19]. The connection between likes of the posts and the number of followers of the posting user is strong and the most popular Instagram users are the ones using healthy hashtags, at an average of 3,426 followers, compared, for example, to 2,432 followers of users posting unhealthy hashtags[19]. Results detect a social approval of health related content.[19] Healthy hashtags are the most liked, having an average of 87.6 likes, compared to 68.2 of unhealthy ones, similarly, 4.7 comments for healthy and 3.7 for unhealthy. Actually, the top posted and liked hashtags in this study's dataset include #eatclean, #fresh and #fitness[19].

There is also research focusing on how the community reacts specifically to healthy versus non-healthy food posts[20]. These studies selected a sample of 1000 posts with calories information and engaged two human raters. They were familiar with Instagram and were given access to photos and videos to help them make a judgment. Raters agreed on most of the cases. The approach was found to be effective in 89 percent of the cases[20]. Also the studies investigated how the Instagram community responds to food with different calorific content focusing on likes and comments. The conclusion was that comments and likes are higher in moderate calorie range posts rather than very high or very low calorie food items. Findings also showed that the community tends to share more photos and videos of moderate calorific food content rather than un-healthy ones[20].

3.   Research Problem and Objectives

Looking at the current studies, it becomes apparent that existing research focus more on Facebook[9]; how consumers react to virtual worlds[6]; how social media in general affect consumers[1]; how electronic word-of-mouth influence consumer engagement in social networking sites[3] and consumers' social media brand behaviours[5]. However, consumers exhibit other preferences, namely the choice of a different social network (e.g. Instagram)

rather than Facebook, and also the content they post and the influence they want to reflect on others with that content.

Social networking sites are becoming a crucial tool for sales as well as consumer-to-consumer interaction[9]. Instagram is growing really fast and it is becoming increasingly important when it comes to the way users look at the posted items, by their friends and other users. In addition, it is particularly growing a new feature on this social network – the healthy food related posts, by bloggers, *Instagrammers* and simply regular users. The possibility that this new trend will become even more well-known and have an impact on society is really high and that will lead to a change on consumer perspectives and purchase intention. Nevertheless, there has been little research that investigates whether the nature of these posts affect consumer purchase intention. As it is the fastest growing social network after Facebook and it is quite influential, I believe it would be really useful to focus research on this specific topic. Increased understanding of it will also help managers to better engage with customers online, for instance.

The paper aims to survey a comprehensive range of Instagram users in order to understand how they feel when a friend or an acquaintance post healthy food pictures and how that will affect their purchase intention. This raises a question to whether healthy food imagery can serve as an influence for consumers. Consequently, the research question is: "do Instagram's healthy food related posts have an influence on consumer purchase intention?"

4. Hypothesis Development

To provide a baseline understanding of Instagram users, the following research questions are proposed:

Physical appearance can influence someone's mindset thus it is mean to change opinions by influencing people by their style and look. Instagram users might feel more or less attracted to a users' post or product depending on their appearance and that will further influence their purchase intention. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1: Physical Appearance – The physical appearance of the person who makes a post influences followers' purchase intention.

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Gender can influence the users' mindset as he/her might feel less or more or less close to the person he/her following and that might further influence their purchase intention. Therefore:

Hypothesis 2: Gender – **The gender of the person who makes a post influences followers' purchase intention.**

Instagrammers are becoming more popular overtime, thus the way a follower looks at them might influence their purchase intention. The more popular users there are, the more might change the way a follower sees them as well as their further purchase intention. Therefore:

Hypothesis 3: Popularity: The popularity of the person who makes a post influences followers' purchase intention.

5.   Methodology

The current study conducted both online and printed questionnaires on individuals in order to validate the proposed model. The participants are mostly residents in Portugal, although the research attracted some UK participants.

The survey addresses two major purposes: the first one is to analyse the relationship between the different independent variables (physical appearance, gender, and popularity) and the dependent variable (purchase intention); the second one is to collect information about different quality of the respondents that can recognise the variations in different categories. This survey mechanism was divided in two sections. It includes personal demographic variables, in order to obtain the respondents information about gender, age, education level and work experience. The second one includes the dependent variable and the independent variables. This section of the study is based on the previous literature review.

This research is a quantitative study and data was collected using a convenience sample of 200 people, mostly in Portugal. The data was evaluated in SPSS software version 23 before analysis where it was tested for validity and reliability. The established scales were based on past literature and published studies that collected data with proper reliability and validity. They were used to measure the constructs of physical appearance, gender and popularity. Also for the dependent variable – purchase intention – the same scales were used. They were adapted

from Baker and Churchill's[26] purchase intention scale that measured the physical attractiveness of models in advertising, in order to measure consumers' purchase intention of products on Facebook rather than purchase a particular product[9]. The scale measured consumer's cognitive, affective, and co-native components of a person's evaluation[26]. It uses a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = definitely not and 5 = yes, definitely. Thus it was chosen for its validity, reliability, and usefulness in addressing the research question. This method was chosen because it seems to represent a simple way to draw conclusions and determine the strength of the relationship between the constructs of my research.

6. Results

The data from the questionnaires was collected over a three week period in August 2017, mostly in Portugal. They took part in both online and printed surveys with an average time of four minutes to complete. There were a total of 200 questionnaires distributed, however only 156 were usable, of which 78,2 percent of the responses were from females and 21,8 percent from males, see table 1. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions plus 4 more demographic questions focused on age, gender, level of education and work experience. 71,2 percent of the sample was between the ages of 16-24, with 64,7 percent of males and 73 percent of females. Thus the research reached more females than males.

Table 1: Frequency of respondents by age and gender

Age	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
16-24	22 (64,7%)	89 (73%)	111 (71,2%)
25-40	6 (17,6%)	33 (27%)	39 (25%)
41-65	5 (14,7%)	0	5 (3,2%)
65+	1 (0,6%)	0	1 (0,6%)
Total	34 (21,8%)	122 (78,2%)	156 (100%)

6.1. Measurement Scales

Regarding the measurement scales, all the data was tested for reliability and validity before further analysis. Table 2 shows the approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing[8] by

reporting the Cronbach's Alpha, the average variance extracted and factor loadings for each scale. According to research, the factor loadings must be equal or above 0.50 in order to prove convergent validity of the scales[7]. All of the scales from the questionnaire range between 0.86 and 0.94 thus validity was statistically checked as they are above 0.70. Moreover, the Chronbach's Alpha coefficients must remain at a minimum value of 0.70 and all the presented values range between 0.92 and 0.97 indicating evidence for adequate internal consistency and reliability[7]. Next the average variance extracted also supports convergent validity as its estimates are higher than 87% percent therefore for each measure they exceed the recommended value of 0.6[7].

According to the previous done tests, it is possible to conclude that the scales present statistical reliability and validity thus they were adequate for the questionnaire.

Table 2: Scale items, factor loadings, Chronbach's alpha and variance explained

Scale Items	Loadings	α	Variance explained
Purchase Intention			
I would like to try a healthy food product recommended on Instagram.	0.858	0.923	87,4%
I would buy a healthy food product recommended on Instagram.	0.872		
I would actively seek out a healthy food product on Instagram to purchase it.	0.893		
Physical Appearance			
I pay attention to the physical appearance of the Instagram user when I follow his/her account.	0.855	0.929	87,5%
I would like to try a healthy food product I see on Instagram if the user who posts it looks fit.	0.881		
I would buy a healthy food product that a user who looks fit posts on Instagram.	0.890		
Gender			
I pay attention to the gender of the Instagram user when I follow his/her account.	0.962		

I would like to try a healthy food product I see on Instagram if the user who posts as the same gender as me.	0.963	0.975	95,2%
I would buy a healthy food product I see on Instagram if the user who posts as the same gender as me.	0.933		
Popularity			
I pay attention to the number of followers that the user has on Instagram when I follow his/her account.	0.940	0.977	95,6%
I would like to try a healthy food product I see on Instagram if the user is popular on his/her posts.	0.960		
I would buy a healthy food product I see on Instagram if the user is popular on his/her posts.	0.969		

6.2. Hypothesis testing

As the research is testing the dependency of the variable "consumer purchase intention" in relation to other three independent variables, the appropriate test for the hypothesis seems to be the multiple regression analysis[7]. In this type of analysis, the value of R^2 represents the percentage of variance of the dependent variable that is justifiable by the independent variable[7]. The β coefficients can be negative or positive, and have a t-value and significance of that t-value associated with each variable. If the β coefficient is not statistically significant (e.g. the t-value is not significant), no statistical significance can be interpreted from that variable. The T test is used to test the nullity of the coefficients and the results must be above 1,96 for the variables to be considered statistically influent[7]. The F test is used to analyse the significance, influence and adequacy of the proposal, thus if the level of significance is under 0,05 the regression is considered appropriate and the variables significantly correlated[7].

According to the analysis, the combination of the hypothesis - physical appearance, gender and popularity – accounted for a significant 88 percent of the variance in consumer purchase intention (R^2=0.880), as table 3 shows. It also shows that physical appearance construct is the one that has the largest significant influence on consumer purchase intention as the β value indicates comparing to the other constructs' values. Throughout the analysis, physical appearance reached the higher β value (β= 0.809), while gender (β=0.072) and popularity (β=0.077) reached lower β values. Physical appearance has a positive and statistically significant influence (β=0.809; t=12.464), however, gender (β=0.072; t=1.356) and popularity

(β= 0.077; t=1.324) do not have a significant influence on consumer purchase intention once the t value is under 1,96. Consequently, hypothesis 1 is supported while hypothesis 2 and 3 are not supported. This suggests that physical appearance plays a great influence on consumers' mindset as they consider a match between the physical appearance of the Instagram user's account and the possibility of purchasing a product.

Regarding the F test, it demonstrates that the model is adequate to describe the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The level of significance remains above 0,05 (F=372,255) thus the regression is appropriate to predict the outcomes and the variables are significantly correlated.

Table 3: Multiple regression analysis results

Independent Variables	β	T
Physical Appearance	0.809	12.464
Gender	0.072	1.356
Popularity	0.077	1.324
R^2	0.880	
F test	372,255	

7. Discussion and Conclusions

From the results, it appears that Instagram can play an important role in consumers' purchase intention. Consumer behaviour literature has recognised before that consumers' intention to buy products is strongly affected by social interactions[9]. In the current study, the physical appearance of the Instagram user's account has shown to have the strongest effect on the consumers' purchase intention when it comes to healthy food products, however the other two hypothesis – influence of gender and popularity - revealed to be null. Thus results show that the way a consumer feels about a healthy product on Instagram is due to the physical appearance of the user who posts it, meaning that the consumer feels more influenced to try and buy a certain product if the person who posts it looks fit. This reinforces the importance of active *Instagrammers'* presence on Instagram, specifically in what concerns healthy food posts, that seems to be a tendency that is growing[18]. Plus, these results are consistent with

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previous research that has show that Body Mass Index plays an important role on consumers' response to a healthy food post on Instagram[2].

The gender and popularity of the user do not affect significantly affect consumer purchase intention. Even though findings from previous research[19] have show that the most popular Instagram users are the ones using healthy hashtags, the current study attributed no significance for the popularity related hypothesis. It would be beneficial to test further the impact of users' and posts' popularity on purchase intention.

The contribution of this research is to highlight the role of Instagram and its influence on consumer purchase intention, more specifically in what concerns healthy food products. Users are using social information to purchase healthy food products, therefore marketers could focus their campaigns on a healthy lifestyle base, by using Instagram and also by trying to reach certain *Instagrammers* in order to get advertisements or recommendations. When consumers pursue a certain food product that satisfies them they will use electronic word-of-mouth to spread their feedbacks to other consumers. Moreover, as marketers realise the potential for Instagram to become a powerful tool for sharing photos of products they need to train suitable staff for improving Instagram as a potential tool for sharing reviews.

The main limitation of this research is the sampling process as it was a convenience sample and therefore based on the researcher's judgement which may affect the generalisation of the study. In addition, the purchase behaviour was not measured, only purchase intention. Addressing these limitations may lead to promising directions for future research.

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