



THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON CONSUMERS' DECISION MAKING OF RESTAURANT CHOICE

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Social media uses the infrastructure provided by Web 2.0 technologies; They are virtual platforms that enable people to communicate online and create and share content such as text, images, and videos. With the transformation of the Internet into an effective and widely used media communication tool, it has reshaped the communication, information seeking and purchasing behaviours of consumers and has become an important information search source, especially in the purchase of experiential products such as tourism, food and beverage. Therefore, this research aims to examine the effect of SMI trust on the restaurant choice decision-making process. This research employed a questionnaire technique to collect primary data. A snowball sampling technique is employed. The customer journey theory is also adopted as a theoretical underpinning of the study to examine the influence of SMI trust on consumer decision-making in restaurant selection. The research data was analysed using Smart PLS. The study results showed that each step of consumers' decision-making of restaurant selection is positively correlated with trust in SMIs. According to the findings, consumers showed tendency feeling desire to visit a restaurant recommended by a SMIs and, search for information provided by influencers. There is also a significant correlation between trust and evaluating alternatives and buying decisions, indicating that consumers are significantly influenced in the pre-purchase stage. A significant association between SMI trust and satisfaction and experience sharing shows the significant effect of trust in the post-purchase. It is one of the first attempts to investigate the influence of social media influencers' trust on diners' decisions to choose a restaurant employing customer journey theory. Also, this research contributes to the consumer decision-making journey literature by investigating and providing evidence regarding each step of the decision-making journey in the context of restaurant selection.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of online social networks over the past two decades has turned the internet from a simple tool for communication to a cutting-edge technology that empowers consumers and enterprises connectivity (Kotler & Armstrong, 2017). Xiang, Magnini, and Fesenmaier (2015) mentioned a consequential shift in the behavioural patterns that tourists search and use information gathered through social media. According to Luo and Zhong (2015), the fundamental driver behind social media's increasing use is that it has become a significant instrument for moulding peoples' conceptions, feelings and experiences (Luo & Zhong, 2015). One of the most popular online activities is the use of social media. Globally, more than 4.26 billion people used social media in 2021, and that number is expected to rise to approximately six billion by 2027 (Dixon, 2023). Internet users can cooperate, interact, and post creative content on social media platforms like blogs, videos, wikis, reviews, or images (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013). Unlike conventional media platforms, it is associated with involvement and communication between internet users and the web, distinct from traditional media platforms (Dedeoğlu, Taheri, Okumus, & Gannon, 2020). There

are many different types of social media, including blogging (such as travel blogs), social networking sites (such as Facebook and LinkedIn), media sharing and review websites (such as Tripadvisor and Foursquare), collaborative projects (such as Wikipedia, Skylinewiki, and Wikitravel), and microblogging (such as Twitter) (Çakıcı & Cankül, 2022; Munar, 2012). These various social media channels have a significant influence on consumers. For example, according to a recent study by (Rahman, Zahin, & Akter, 2023), the most influencing factors on consumers' restaurant selection are the availability of online reviews and social media reviews. New behaviours were produced through social interaction with others, which also had an impact on customers' everyday buying selections. Virtual communities affect customers' purchasing decisions because consumers enjoy engagement and communication with one another and obtain advice about various (Li & Darban, 2012) goods or services. Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as

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a result of the growth of online social networks (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). Freberg et al., (2011) highlighted that SMI is unanimously described as a “a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media”. Trust is the fundamental concept to understand intention of purchasing tourist good and services and acknowledge the content produced by social media influencers. Past studies have investigated how trust impacts on the tourism industry in several context (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014), and studies highlighted that there is a not only significant positive correlation between trust and the peer-to-peer market (Ert & Fleischer, 2019) but also, the intention toward buying online tourism products (Ponte, Carvajal-Trujillo, & Escobar-Rodríguez, 2015), whereas similar studies using eWOM have demonstrated the benefits of influencer marketing (Hu & Olivieri, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Several studies investigated the influence of SMIs on buying decision process in tourism industry (Magno and Cassia, 2018) and found that SMIs have a significant impact on their followers’ intention to boost the probability of visiting a particular place (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Consumers use social media as a source of information and seek it mostly through social media (Dabija, Bejan, & Tipi, 2018; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Guerreiro, Viegas, & Guerreiro, 2019). Former researchers have investigated the impact of social media influencers on tourist buying intention via trust construct (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018), customer journey (Guerreiro et al. 2019), how quality of detected information impact on tourist destination (Magno & Cassia, 2018), and the influence of advertisement by SMI on consumers destination congruence (Xu & Pratt, 2018). In addition, previous researchers highlighted impact of SM on tourist attitudes (Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2020) and tourism sharing experiences (Wong, Lai, & Tao, 2020).

The emergence of social media has prompted research on how it influences restaurant choice. Therefore, few studies have so far examined how social media affects consumer-related issues in the restaurant industry, including the dining experience of diners (Mhlanga & Tichaawa, 2017), buying intention, brand equity, and perceived image (Lima, Mainardes, & Cavalcanti, 2019), customers purchasing behaviour (Kumar, Konar, & Balasubramanian, 2020), and consumers restaurant choice (Hwang & Park, 2015; Ramos, Cuamea, Morgan, & Estrada, 2021; Yariş & Aykol, 2022). Most food and drink companies also have a social media presence (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020). The possible effects of social media influencers in the restaurant industry must be researched. The restaurant sector must comprehend how social media influencers affect consumer decisions about restaurant selection. It is thought that eating out is strongly associated with people’s lives. As highlighted in the literature, social media is a primary touchpoint used by consumers as a source of information (Dinc, 2023; Dinc & Huang, 2022; Hu & Olivieri, 2021). Although many studies were conducted on the influence of social media in different contexts, the influence of social media influencers trust on diners’ decisions to choose a restaurant has not been found. Therefore, it is crucially significant identifying the possible role of social media influencers in restaurant

sector. This gap needs to be addressed to provide a deep understanding of the influence of social media influencers on consumers restaurants choice. This research aims to investigate the influence of social media influencers trust- as an independent variable- on consumer restaurant choice as a dependent variable. period (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) highlighted that the customer journey not only encompasses all interactions between the client and the brand, but also, all customer experiences during the decision-making period (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many different restaurant options when choosing one in decision-making. Uncertainty is the one consumers encounter when choosing a restaurant. Concerns about uncertainty include not only the food served at the restaurant but also the entire eating experience, including the level of service quality, the flavour of the food, the menu options, the cost, and the location of the establishment. Uncertainty among consumers emerges, particularly when they do not have antecedents and enough experience while selecting accessible restaurants (Yariş & Aykol, 2022).

Customers seek several information sources to eliminate this uncertainty, including marketer-controlled and marketer-uncontrolled ones (Richards & Tiwari, 2014). One of the potential alternatives is social media, which can be used by businesses offering goods or services as well as restaurants to make decisions. Hence, the advent of social media necessitates harnessing the power of both consumers and stakeholders (Kim, Rahman, & Bernard, 2020). Previous studies showed that restaurant visitors have commonly made comments on social media on service quality dimensions, including food quality, flavour of the food, ambience, price and service speed (Ekincek & Öncel, 2017). According to the studies, consumers are significantly influenced by the photos, comments, physical evidence, popularity of social media, and social media advertisements (Dinc, 2023; Kumar et al., 2020; Oliveira & Casais, 2019; Ramos et al., 2021; Yang, Hlee, Lee, & Koo, 2017). In the same vein, the study by Çakıcı and Cankül (2022) noted that social media is used as a platform for consumers to gain information and share their thoughts (Kaygısız & Buyruk, 2022). The common argument from these studies is that social media is used as a source of information and has a significant role in consumers buying intentions and attitudes in restaurants. SMIs is regarded as opinion leader, and they can increase the influence of information that spreads to others (Çakıcı & Cankül, 2022; Jalilvand, 2017).

On social media, consumers see influencers as mini-celebrities (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021; Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021b). With the rise of SMIs, organisations have started adopting influencer marketing strategies (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Influencer marketing has arisen as an instrument for the online global business environment, enabling businesses to engage with their clients more directly and credibly (Backaler & Backaler, 2018). Organisations usually use celebrities to promote tourist destinations and create favourable attitudes among visitors (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Dabija et al. (2018) highlighted that

by using the power of social media, organisations can connect with more consumers than usual, particularly those more impacted by social media, such as millennials and Generation Z.

When customers have online information shared by an opinion leader, they are more likely to have more trust towards information (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010). Based on the previous visitors' comments on restaurant ambience, cleanness, service quality, taste and employees' behaviour, consumers' decisions can be favourably or adversely affected when making restaurant selections (Aydın, 2016; Çakıcı & Cankül, 2022). Persuasion and information appraisal are positively influenced by source credibility (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). In Internet marketing literature, the researcher extensively studied the concept of trust and source credibility (Ye, Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021). Due to the popularity of this subject, social media influencers are described as active and empowered social media users who other social media users listen to and see as a trusted source of information (Agostino, Arnaboldi, & Calissano, 2019). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), the information provided in the content produced by SMIs, reliability, attractiveness and relative familiarity with the product act as precursors for trust in the brand in the post.

Also, followers' trust in influencer-branded post significantly influences followers' willingness to buy a product. Trust has a predicting power of post credibility, which leads to a stronger interest in the influencers' posts (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Moreover, it is highlighted that trust positively influences information credibility and, through trust favourable brand attitude could be led (Xiao, Wang, & Chan-Olmsted, 2018). When consumers have positive experiences with SMI, they tend to build stronger trust. As a result, the significant predictor of eWOM could be a trust created by SMI (Konstantopoulou, Rizomyliotis, Konstantoulaki, & Badahdah, 2019). From the consumer's standpoint, celebrities appear to be less reliable than SMIs. Their fans can relate to them less, whereas SMIs have a bigger influence on consumers' buying intentions (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Pop, Săplăcan, Dabija, and Alt (2022) noted that each stage of travel decision is positively influenced by consumer trust in social media influencers.

However, some studies contradict previous study findings. For example, Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman (2021a) found that consumers' perception of influencers' trust could be negatively affected by the sponsorships. Additionally, according to Singh et al. (2020), utilising influencers to manage a company's reputation during an organisational crisis may result in a decline in brand credibility and trust, which may affect customers' brand attitudes.

2.1. Customer journey theory

This study used customer journey theory to gain a thorough insight into the impact of SMI trust on consumers' restaurant selection decisions, as well as to assess the role of customer journey variables (such as desire, information search, assessing alternatives, buying decisions, satisfaction, and experience sharing). The customer journey is described by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) as the overall customer experience. Pre-purchase, buy, and

post-purchase behaviour are just a few examples of the various touchpoints that make up the consumer journey. The pre-buying stage comprises the customer experience before they do a buying transaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). When it comes to restaurant decision-making, consumers have a variety of available alternatives. When choosing a restaurant, consumers encounter uncertainty such as service quality, taste, and price. Such uncertainties lead consumers to search various information marketer-controlled and uncontrolled sources (Richards & Tiwari, 2014). One potential alternative is social media for consumers in the decision-making process (Kim et al., 2020). Hence, the information, views and suggestions provided by social media become more significant for consumers. In the first phase of the process, as Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) noted, online communication significantly influences consumers' desire to visit a place. The traveller's interest in visiting a place can be increased through videos (Kumar et al., 2020). Cornejo (2017) highlighted that consumers' decisions influence others' decisions, and the number of posted images, likes or posts can determine it on the internet. The common argument noted by studies is that social media has become an increasingly important source of information influencing consumers' buying intentions and attitudes (Lima et al., 2019; Yarış & Aykol, 2022), and it has changed consumers seeking, reading, and trustworthy behaviours (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012). During the information-seeking process, the expectations about the place are built, which is further strengthened by consumers' trust in SMIs (Hudson & Thal, 2013). One of the important determinants of consumers' restaurant selection is social media (Cornejo, 2017). When consumers assess the alternatives, social networking and previous tourist experiences play a significant role in their decision-making (Chen, Nguyen, Klaus, & Wu, 2015; Kumar et al., 2020). The evidence from the study indicated that if it is a new restaurant, consumers are more likely to check the review and ranking of the restaurant before they visit (Santos, 2017). Similarly, Yarış and Aykol (2022) noted that an individual's restaurant choices are impacted by factors including searching for services, social interactions, and searching for products. There is a complete interaction between the buying stage and the brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In showing the post-buying behaviour, people internally make comparisons the experiences they had with what was their expectations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Additionally, the positive or negative attitudes of influencers shared on social media is likely to impact the decision of another consumer (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Also Lemon and Verhoef (2016) confirmed the interplay between good consumer experience and trust towards the brand.

3. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

3.1. The influence of SMIs in pre-buying decisions

Considering the evidence that social media has become an increasingly important source of information influencing consumers' buying intentions and attitudes (Dinc, 2023; Yarış & Aykol, 2022). As Kumar et al. (2020) highlighted, videos significantly influence travellers to strengthen their interest in visiting a place. In the same vein, Beeton (2010) noted that advertising campaigns promoted

by hotels have less influence on travellers than travel photos posted on social media by travellers. Various social media channels are used to obtain information when planning a travel plan (Verma, Stock, & McCarthy, 2012). However, consumers encounter a problem in the phase of problem recognition and information seeking (Dabija et al., 2018). When consumers want to visit a new restaurant, they tend to check the review and ranking of the restaurant before they visit (Santos, 2017). Also, according to the findings of Cox et al. (2009), 80 % of SM users give significance to prior comments and reviews in arranging destinations and accommodation. In addition, the study by Yarış and Aykol (2022) supported that consumers' restaurant choice is affected by social media use factors, including seeking services, social interaction and products. Before tourists make their final buying decisions, they use social media as a source of information (Fotis et al., 2012). Through a various social network such as blogs, social media, webpage, the information is gathered. The study by Dinç (2023) highlighted that advertisement through social media has significantly influence on consumers' organic food consumption behaviour in restaurants.

On the other hand, the study by Guerreiro et al. (2019) argued that travel plans can be made via social media, but SMIs do not have an influence on the choice of alternatives. Similarly, travellers do not heavily rely on social media to plan international leisure trips (Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). As a result, the influence of social media influencers on the assessment of alternatives is controversial and unclear; hence, the following hypotheses have been developed:

H1: A positive correlation exists between trust in the content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and consumer desire to visit restaurants.

H2: There is a positive correlation between trust in the content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and information searching for restaurants.

H3: There is a positive correlation between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and evaluating restaurants among restaurants.

3.2. The influence of Social media influencers on buying

Guerreiro et al. (2019) noted that people devoted to SMIs tend to frequent the same locations and respect quality in terms of trustworthiness, credibility, and honesty. When social media has a greater impact on consumers' destination choices, they tend to switch holiday plans (Fotis et al., 2012). Also, a significant association between restaurants' presence on social media and purchase intention is identified (Lima et al., 2019). Based on the above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H4: There is a positive correlation between trust in the content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and visiting restaurants.

3.3. The influence of Social media influencers in the post-buying stage

When the content of an SMI is seen as non-sponsored content, consumers tend to build trust in the content, and the credibility of the content is increased in consumers' eyes. It increases the chance of a potential consumer to select a particular

destination (Marketing, 2019). Visitors evaluate their post-purchase tourist product experience to earlier expectations (Dunne et al., 2011), which results in pleasure or dissatisfaction. In hospitality literature, the strong association between trust and satisfaction is noted (Christou, 2010). Social media is used by consumers as a place where they can express their views and experiences in the form of positive or negative posts (Kang & Schuett, 2013). The influence of social media influencers is noticed in this regard, which is significantly impacted by the credibility and quality of the information shared (Popescu & Ciurlău, 2019). A brand that creates a positive experience can lead its customers to price positive recommendations through social media (Bigne, Andreu, Perez, & Ruiz, 2020). In this way, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: There is a positive correlation between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and post-purchase satisfaction.

H6: A positive correlation exists between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and customer experience-sharing behaviour.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of SMIs' trust on the consumer decision-making of restaurant choice. It aims to identify the link between the social media influencers' trust and each stage of the decision-making journey. This research carried out empirical research among social media users in Turkey to test research hypotheses. After setting up an internet connection in Turkey in 1993, technology has permeated every part of Turkish society, enabling local and international connections as well as the discovery and exchange of knowledge. As of January 2022, Turkey had experienced significant growth in the number of internet users, with approximately 70 million internet users, and Turkey has become 15th among all countries in terms of digital population (Statista, 2022). The developed hypothesis was tested to identify the influence of social media influencers' trust on each stage of the consumer decision-making process.

The quantitative research method, a self-administered questionnaire technique, is used to collect primary data in May 2023. Based on the literature as shown in Table 2, several scales were adopted for this research: the desire scale from Goldsmith, Lafferty, and Newell (2000); Pop et al. (2022); Prestwich, Perugini, and Hurling (2008); information search from Kang and Schuett (2013); Pop et al. (2022); evaluating alternatives from Pop et al. (2022); Magno and Cassia (2018); purchase decision from Cox et al. (2009); Pop et al. (2022); satisfaction from Tseng (2017); Pop et al. (2022); experience share from Kang and Schuett (2013); Pop et al. (2022) and trust from Goldsmith et al. (2000); Pop et al. (2022); Cox et al. (2009); Fotis et al. (2012). Respondents anchor their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. This research used snowball sampling which is suggested as a useful technique when researcher encounter a challenge to strictly identify desired population (Bryman, 2016). Research collected the data via an online questionnaire that was posted on several social media sites, particularly on specific Facebook groups for foodies who discuss their dining

experiences with other group members. After removing 23 incomplete questionnaires, the further analysis is conducted with 268 questionnaires. The demographic characteristics of the participants is presented in table below.

Table 1: Demographic profiles of respondents (n=268)

	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	126	47
	Male	142	53
Age	10-25	40	14.9
	26-40	161	60.1
	41-55	54	20.1
	56- and over	13	4.9
Income	9.999TL and under	53	19,8
	10.000-19.999 TL	111	41,4
	20.000-29.999 TL	81	30,2
	30.000-39.999 TL	11	4,1
	40.000 TL and above	12	4,5
How much time do you spend on social media	Less than an hour	36	13,4
	1-2 hours	123	45,9
	3-5 hours	91	34
	More than 5 hours	18	6,7
How many SMIs you follow in relation food	1-3	204	76.1
	4-6	39	14.6
	6-8	11	4.1
	More than 8	14	5.2

4.1. Data analysis

Smart PLS 3 is used to analyse the research data. This research modelled SMI trust as a reflective construct with the travel customer journey stages desire, information search, evaluating alternatives, buying decision, post-purchase satisfaction and travel experience sharing. Table 2 below shows the details of the reflective measurement model assessment, including item loadings, assessment of internal consistency, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The test results showed that all measured item loadings have adequate values above 0.70 (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014a), showing that all items provide convergent validity criteria. The construct reliability is tested through Cronbach's α and composite reliability test. Those values are expected to be above 0.6 for exploratory purposes, whereas above 0.7 is an acceptable value for confirmatory purposes. All measured items Cronbach's α and composite reliability score is above 0.7 indicating reliability is given. The common rule is that an AVE value of at least 0.5 or above shows sufficient convergent validity (Hair Jr et al., 2014a). The differences between each construct are measured by discriminant validity. The construct correlations are less than the square root of each AVE, hence showing sufficient discriminant validity for all constructs.

Table 2: Reflective measurement model assessment

Construct	Item	Measure	Loading (>0.7)	Cronbach's Alpha (>0.7)	AVE (>0.5)	CR (>0.7)	Adapted from
Desire	Q1	I aspire to visit a restaurant that SMI advertise.	0.842	0.900	0.751	0.901	Goldsmith et al. (2000);Pop et al. (2022); Prestwich et al. (2008)
	Q2	I am willing to buy restaurant products that SMIs recommend.	0.897				
	Q3	I feel desire to visit the restaurant that SMIs recommend.	0.860				
Information search	Q1	I use SM to search for information about my next restaurant visit.	0.767	0.765	0.621	0.767	Kang and Schuett (2013); Pop et al. (2022)
	Q2	I research online by reading about SMI diner's experiences via social media.	0.808				
Evaluating alternatives	Q1	Likely to consider SMI's restaurant experiences when making my restaurant decisions.	0.872	0.856	0.748	0.856	Pop et al. (2022); Magno and Cassia (2018)
	Q2	When I have to make restaurant-related decisions, I will take suggestions from digital influencers.	0.858				
Purchase decision	Q1	I make final decision in relation to booking a restaurant because of the SMI.	0.809	0.796	0.662	0.796	Cox et al. (2009); Pop et al. (2022)
	Q2	Change existing restaurant visit plan because of the SMI.	0.818				
Satisfaction	Q1	I am comfortable with one's own buying decision.	0.761	0.864	0.685	0.874	Tseng (2017); Pop et al. (2022)
	Q2	I feel comfortable with the buying decision SMIs recommend.	0.915				
	Q3	Wise choice to visit this restaurant.	0.800				
Experience Share	Q1	I share about my own personal dining experience to make a good impression.	0.740	0.873	0.699	0.884	Kang and Schuett (2013); Pop et al. (2022)
	Q2	I share my dining experience to take positive feedback from others.	0.818				
	Q3	I sharing my own restaurant experience with Social media showing similarity with SMIs.	0.938				
SMI Trust	Q1	SMI is trustworthy.	0.906	0.952	0.739	0.954	Goldsmith et al. (2000); Pop et al. (2022); Cox et al. (2009); Fotis et al. (2012)
	Q2	SMI is reliable	0.869				
	Q3	SMI is honest	0.787				
	Q4	SMI is believable.	0.839				
	Q5	I trust the information about restaurant that influencers provide.	0.967				
	Q6	SMI is more trustworthy than mass media.	0.876				
	Q7	SMI is more trustworthy than official restaurant sites.	0.806				

Table 3: Discriminant validity

Construct	Buying decision	Desire	Evaluating alternatives	Experience share	Information search	Satisfaction	Trust
Buying decision	0.911						
Desire	0.623	0.913					
Evaluating alternatives	0.748	0.765	0.935				
Experience share	0.498	0.379	0.434	0.892			
Information search	0.586	0.667	0.733	0.357	0.899		
Satisfaction	0.755	0.723	0.776	0.522	0.599	0.887	
Trust	0.605	0.578	0.561	0.424	0.488	0.655	0.899

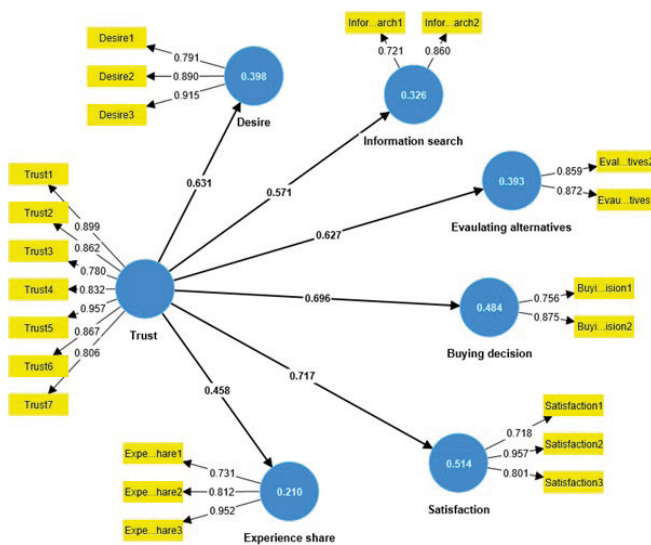


Figure 1: The structural model is here

As can be seen from the structural model above, the first association between SMI trust and consumers' buying decisions is examined to accomplish the research scope. Figure 1 above indicates the established relationship between the constructs and the results of the SEM-PLS path algorithm. The statistical analysis results showed that six assumed hypotheses are accepted, showing that SMI significantly and positively influences desire, information searching, evaluating alternative restaurants, buying decision, satisfaction, and experience sharing.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed that H1 that there is a positive correlation between trust towards the content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and consumer desire to visit restaurants was supported ($\beta=0.630$, $T=14.174$, $p<0.05$), indicating a positive relation between trust in SMI and desire to visit a restaurant. This result is in the same vein as previous studies (Çakıcı & Cankül, 2022; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008; Lima et al., 2019; Pop et al., 2022; Yarış & Aykol, 2022). H2 assumed a positive correlation exists between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and information searching for restaurants. The positive significant influence can be traced between the trust in SMI and

information search in the restaurant field ($\beta= 0.568$, $T=10.787$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, H2 was accepted, showing that the results of the study are consistent with previous findings that highlight that social media is used by consumers as an information search area (Dabija et al., 2018; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Pop et al., 2022).

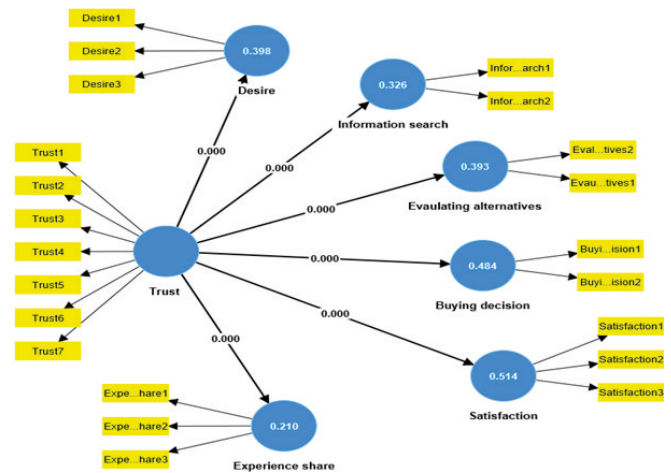


Figure 2: Structural model with P values is here

As for the H3, it presumed there is a positive correlation between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and evaluating restaurants among restaurants. This research disclosed the significant association between SMI trust and consumers' evaluation of alternatives among the restaurants ($\beta= 0.627$, $T=12.227$, $p<0.05$). Hence, H3 found support in the data. The respondents often use social media influencers in evaluating alternative restaurants. In other words, there is a positive association between the evaluation of alternatives and SMI trust, in line with similar research in the context of social media (Narangajavana, Fiol, Tena, Artola, & García, 2017; Pop et al., 2022).

Based on this positive influence, it can be suggested that respondents of this research tend to consider SMIs restaurant experiences as an important reference when making restaurant decisions in relation to restaurant choice, and they take recommendations from SMIs. As a result, SMI trust has a positive influence on consumer pre-buying stages and a favourable influence on consumer purchasing intention to visit restaurants, which is consistent with earlier studies (Pop et al., 2022; Xu & Pratt, 2018).

H4 presumed that there is a positive correlation between trust in the content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and visiting restaurants. According to the results of the analyses, the path coefficient and T-statistic were calculated as statistically significant ($\beta= 0.697$, $T=11.604$, $p<0.05$) between trust in the content created by influencers and their buying decision of restaurant visit; therefore, H4 was accepted confirming that consumer decision making in relation to restaurant visit is positively influenced by SMIs, showing similar result with previous research (Guerreiro et al., 2019; Pop et al., 2022). H5 assumed a positive correlation between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and post-purchase satisfaction. The results of the analyses found a significant relationship between SMI trust

and consumer restaurant satisfaction ($\beta = 0.718$, $T = 14.223$, $p < 0.05$) that provided evidence to support H5. This result shows similarities with the previous studies (Christou, 2010; Pop et al., 2022). Feeling safe with the purchase decision, as it is the wise and optimum decision recommended by SMIs, largely impacts respondents' satisfaction.

Table 4. Structural estimates of the model.

Paths	Path Coefficients	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	R-square	Hypothesis
Trust -> Buying decision	0.697	0.060	11.604	0.000	0.484	Supported
Trust -> Desire	0.630	0.044	14.174	0.000	0.398	Supported
Trust -> Evaluating alternatives	0.627	0.051	12.227	0.000	0.393	Supported
Trust -> Experience share	0.458	0.065	7.016	0.000	0.210	Supported
Trust -> Information search	0.568	0.053	10.787	0.000	0.326	Supported
Trust -> Satisfaction	0.718	0.050	14.223	0.000	0.514	Supported

Note: *p-value < 0.05; ***p-value < 0.001

Regarding H6, that assumed a positive correlation exists between trust in content that social media influencers (SMI) generate and experience sharing behaviour. According to the result, a significant positive relationship between SMI and consumers' experience sharing on social media was found to be significant. Therefore, there was enough evidence to support H6. The results of the tests support the findings of previous studies, which showed that consumers' experience sharing on social media is positively affected by SMI trust (Kang & Schuett, 2013; Lien & Cao, 2014).

The coefficient of determination is the most widely employed measure to assess structural models (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). This coefficient is a measure of the model's predictive ability. R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50 or 0.25 for endogenous latent constructs can be respectively defined as substantial, moderate, or weak (Hair Jr et al., 2016; Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). As indicated in the table above, the test results showed that the constructs with the highest explained variance ranged between $R^2 = 0.514$ and $R^2 = 0.210$. It is noted that the R^2 value of the variables can be described as moderate. According to Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011), there is no strict rule of thumb for acceptable R^2 values depending on model complexity and research discipline, which can vary. For example, in disciplines such as consumer behaviour, consider R^2 values of 0.20 as an acceptable level.

6. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to evaluate how SMIs' trust influences individuals' decision-making journey of restaurant selection. The results of SEM analysis with a sample of 268 social media users showed that SMIs' trust significantly influences consumer desire and information search, evaluating alternatives, buying decisions, satisfaction and experience

sharing. There is a positive association between the trust and such factors. When consumers trust SMIs, they tend to feel a desire to visit a restaurant recommended by an SMI. Also, social media users are more likely to be in search of informative content produced by SMIs. The results showed a positive relationship between trust, evaluating alternatives, and buying decisions, indicating that consumers are significantly influenced in the pre-purchase stage. Similarly, researchers highlighted that social media is considered an informatory platform, and SMIs are the opinion leaders who have the power to increase the impact of information and shape the consumers' opinion on certain products or services (Agostino et al., 2019; Jalilvand, 2017). A positive relationship between SMI trust and satisfaction and experience sharing shows the significant impact of trust in the post-purchase stage. All in all, as highlighted in the results of the previous studies, social media is now a significant information source that influences consumers' attitudes and purchasing decisions (Lima et al., 2019; Yarış & Aykol, 2022). The opinions of influencers expressed on social media, whether favourable or unfavourable, are likely to affect consumer's choices. Moreover, this research contributes to the consumer decision-making journey literature by investigating and providing evidence regarding each step of the decision-making journey in the context of restaurant selection.

Besides, this study provides some practical implications for marketing practitioners, policymakers and managers to develop a series of effective marketing strategies. Social media marketing is a successful technique to engage with customers and prospects for businesses of all sizes. The outcome of the study indicated the positive influence of SMIs on all stages of the consumer decision-making process. This finding may help guide policymakers, market practitioners and other stakeholders when they design tourism policies and strategies. If the trust towards content can be developed by the SMIs, it could help attract more customers and increase in sales. Businesses can engage with clients on social media more affordably and directly than through more traditional communication methods. Businesses can benefit from this to decrease their marketing cost, develop an effective marketing strategy, and reach their potential customers through SMI with lower costs. When SMIs provide information related to food, it is considered by consumers as more reliable than food that mass media or other food-related organisations promote. Also, the trust created by social media influencers may help eliminate the uncertainty in relation to food and service and may give consumers more confidence about the products and services. Restaurants should increase their visibility on social media and use SMI in promoting their business and develop marketing strategies through influencers. Also, social media should be used as a place where food is promoted and considered as a bridge between customers and business to maintain the relationship with customers. Policymakers should develop and implement effective strategies in order to increase technological, relational, marketing, management and innovation in relation to social media management in the industry. Tourism organisations can be promoted by implementing effective social media marketing strategies. Especially social media marketing can be benefited by restaurants, hotels, and

other tourism institutions that target non-resident clients. Consumers' desire to visit restaurants can be boosted by trust created by SMIs, which also helps raise brand awareness; the probability of choosing that restaurant when evaluating alternatives. Therefore, industry practitioners and marketers should use the SMI to enhance and trigger the desire to visit restaurants. Social media is a marketplace for businesses that can introduce and sell their products. Through social media, businesses can reach a huge number of people and attract more customers. The findings of the study indicated that consumers can alter their existing restaurant visit plans due to recommendations from trustworthy SMIs. Hence, businesses should benefit from the significant influence of SMIs' trust on consumers' purchase decisions to influence their customers' decisions using SMIs. Consumer satisfaction can be increased by SMIs, which may have a beneficial impact on consumers' behaviour to make repeat purchases. This could be beneficial for developing a healthy relationship in the long term and building customer loyalty. It may help increase restaurant revenue in the long term.

The present study identified limitations on the generalizability of the research findings due to the limited sample size of 268 respondents. Also, this research used snowball sampling to collect primary data, reducing the generalizability of the research data. Further research can use different sampling techniques and a bigger sample size. Also, this research is conducted in Turkey. There are diversified contextual approaches in the previous studies. There is a need to conduct cross-cultural studies, and researchers should examine the differences between countries. In the proposed model, some significant factors, such as subjective norms, attitude, quality, and loyalty, are not included. Researchers should pay attention to the other factors that may play a significant role in consumer decision-making.

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