#Influenced: The Impact of Influencer Marketing on the Travel and Tourism Industry of Ireland. A qualitative study.

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Declaration

I, Orlaith Deegan, declare that this research is my original work and that it has never been presented to any institution or university for the award of Degree or Diploma. In addition, I have correctly referenced all literature and sources used in this work and this work is fully compliant with the Dublin Business School's academic honesty policy.

Orlaith Deegan

Signed: Orlaith Deegan

Date: 21/09/2021

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Abstract

This research project aimed to investigate how influencer marketing impacts the sale of services in the travel and tourism industry in Ireland. This research was focused on this specific industry for multiple reasons. Some of those reasons being; a hard hit industry during the covid-19 pandemic and an industry that experiences more international than domestic contributions. The research involved a semi-structured design whereby the researcher conducted interviews through the online platform, Zoom. The purpose of the interviews was to gain rich insights from marketing managers to understand how effective influencer marketing can be on the sale of services in this industry. With these insights, marketers could correctly apply an appropriate strategy which will result in a higher contribution to the businesses and industry alike. The main objective of this research is to study the influencer marketing phenomenon and the impact it has on this particular industry by looking at the traits and characteristics influencers obtain and how these affect the success of a brands influencer marketing campaign. The results found that influencer marketing can be a highly effective communication tool for advertising services within this industry, however, the strategy implemented still needs to be carefully considered and applied to the overall marketing approach.

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Introduction

Rationale

It is no doubt that influencer marketing is on the rise. After a recent survey carried out by Influencer Marketing Hub concluded that "The majority (59%) admit to having a standalone budget for content marketing, and 75% of them now intend to dedicate a budget to influencer marketing in 2021" (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). "The spread of the internet and the rise of social media users worldwide have made influencer marketing the logical next step of digital marketing" (Jarrar, Aderibigbe and Awobamise, 2020). Each year, more influencers appear on our feeds and some work with organisations on virtually every post, story, video or reel they produce. As a result, marketers see this as valuable advertising space and a more personable advertising format. "The perception of the effectiveness of influencer marketing by marketers has been positive, playing an increasingly important role in the marketing strategy of brands " (Santiago and Castelo, 2020). However, are we as consumers impacted by influencer marketing when spending more substantial amounts of money?

This research aims to better understand the impact influencer marketing has on consumer behaviour regarding the sale of services in Ireland's travel and tourism industry. "Many hospitality companies have utilized social networking sites as one of the most important marketing mediums for improving the brand-consumer relationship" (Lee, Min and Yuan, 2021). Undoubtedly, influencers have produced a credible platform for their followers and continue to collaborate and work with brands to the advantage of all parties involved. However, with constantly new and upcoming influencers, are all influencers credible and

trustworthy across all industries? Does influencer marketing affect our purchase intent in the tourism and travel industry? Often when we book a holiday or an excursion, it is a thought-through purchase and often something consumers have saved long and hard for. Is e-word of mouth enough to encourage consumers to book an experience solely based on that person's word? Do we trust e-word of mouth when making a more substantial purchase?

"Present-day social media and social networking sites (SNSs) have dramatically affected how people receive information and news" (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Marketers are adapting their strategies and techniques to include social media as an outlet to promote their brand. Not only on their own social channels but on influencer platforms through collaborations, brand partnerships and paid ads. Influencers have become a more reliable and credible source to many social media users. "A recent Twitter study suggested that consumers may accord social media influencers a similar level of trust as they hold for their friends" (Lee and Eastin, 2020). Through influencers platforms, many followers feel a connection and a relationship between them and the influencer as they have been involved in many parts of the influencer's life. As a result of this, there is a great amount of trust instilled in said influencer which can consequently be the most impactful form of advertising for a brand. "Advertising informativeness, entertainment, and credibility determined consumers' perceptions of advertising value, which in turn influenced their purchase intentions" (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

With social media users spending more time online, particularly in the last year due to Covid-19, organisations have been using these influencer's platforms to increase brand awareness, product sales and conversions. With social media users and organisations noticing

the opportunity, more influencers are entering the social media world daily resulting in some platforms being cluttered by influencers.

This can create a difficult decision on deciding the best influencer for brands and social media users alike. This research will investigate what makes an influencer trustworthy and credible for both an organisation looking to invest in influencer marketing and for a follower. Is it the number of followers they have, the products they endorse, their personality and the image they portray? "…Users enjoy following, liking, and interacting with SMIs on Instagram, and they can decide to buy their products or visit the places they visit" (Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş, 2021).

By now, it has been established that influencer marketing is the way forward for digital marketing. We understand its effectiveness in the sale of products and services across multiple industries. However, research to date shows very little evidence on the impact of influencer marketing on the travel and tourism industry in Ireland and if this type of marketing is as effective and impactful for this industry when consumers are making larger purchases.

Research Question and Objectives

Research question

What impact does influencer marketing have on the sale services in the travel and tourism industry in Ireland?

Research objectives

- To evaluate the impact of influencer marketing on the sale of higher costing services

- To assess the level of credibility of influencers in relation to travel and tourism purchases

- To analyse the effects of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour in Ireland

- To understand the effect E-Word of Mouth (eWOM) has on consumer behaviour when making purchases within the travel and tourism industry

- To recommend best practices for the industry when using influencer marketing within their marketing strategies.

Dissertation Structure

- Chapter 2 will examine existing literature on topics such as marketing, digital marketing, influencer marketing, credibility, word of mouth and e-word of mouth, trustworthiness, the impact of SMIs on purchase and travel intentions and marketing in the travel and tourism industry in Ireland.

- Chapter 3 will discuss and outline the research methodology used for this study.

- Chapter 4 will review the findings from the research interviews.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

Introduction

This chapter will review existing literature on the topics of marketing and digital marketing. It will look at how we as marketers have shifted from more traditional techniques and adapted the advancement of the digital era into marketing strategies; it will explore influencer marketing, what it is, and how we use it in a social media infatuated world; it will discuss the elements of credibility, what makes an influencer credible and how brands need to consider this before working with a social media influencer; and it will debate how Word of Mouth and E-Word of Mouth play a heavy role in influencer marketing. This chapter will also review the elements of trust amongst social media influencers and examine marketing within the travel and tourism industry. The literature has been reviewed using previous national and international scholarly articles, academic journals, state websites, data reports and references books on marketing and digital marketing practices.

The Evolution of Digital Marketing

In the ever-changing world we live in, it is essential to remember that marketing is evolving almost daily. Marketing was once defined as "To the producer, it is the manner in which the product is disposed of the way in which it is distributed for him - often with his cooperation - thru the various channels of trade. On the other hand, merchandising, which parallels marketing at many points and is frequently confused with it, is the process from the jobbers' and the retailers' standpoints and includes not only the distribution of the goods but

their acquisition as well. Manufacturers market their products and jobbers and retailers merchandise their stocks of these products" (Brunswick, 2014). However, in more recent times, we know that there is much more to marketing. The American Marketing Association have defined it as "The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (What is Marketing? — The Definition of Marketing — AMA, 2017).

Marketing is an essential element in any successful company. The new digital environment we live in is becoming more accessible than ever to reach your target audience with your desired message. Over the years, we have seen some remarkable advancements in how we market our products and services. In more recent times, digital marketing (DM) has disrupted how we market. DM has been defined as "the use of digital technologies to create an integrated, targeted and measurable communication which helps to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them" (Langan, Cowley and Nguyen, 2019). DM has transformed the way marketers reach consumers and allowed brands to create a relationship between a brand and consumer. "By their nature, digital marketers interact with millions of customers and prospects daily. Their work shapes customers' and prospects' perceptions of your products and services" (O'Connor, 2015). Not only has it allowed marketers to build relationships but it also provides the opportunity to open up online discussions and offer a high level of interactivity, it enables marketers to reach potential customers in all corners of the world whilst delivering the correct message to the desired audience, it eliminates any geographical barriers marketers once experienced, and it helps to increase brand awareness in a more effective manner. With this shift in marketing techniques,

it is crucial to remember the importance of Social Media (SM) in this transition. According to Hootsuite's Digital in Ireland: DataReportal – Global Digital Insights (2021), out of Ireland's population of 4.96million, 76.4% of the population are social media users. With such a large population at marketers' fingertips, a shift in the methods we use to communicate with our audiences is inevitable. DM through SM allows marketers to reach our objectives more effectively and efficiently. Before this shift in strategies, when marketers thought of marketing, we immediately thought of traditional methods like television, radio, print, etc. Although these conventional methods are still used daily and can be used effectively, they have always lacked measurability. "Traditional can't be fully measured, only an approximate frequency value can be determined, based on best judgement" (Geraghty and Conway, 2016).

DM allows us to easily measure, monitor, track, and report on the success of marketing campaigns whilst targeting our audiences with personalised and specific messages. "A key difference between digital marketing and traditional marketing is that the former uses digital technologies that are inherently measurable, permit conversations to be targeted, and facilitate the creation of relationships between customers and firms, whereas the latter is much more mass communication oriented" (Wymbs, 2011). Undoubtedly, using measurable techniques is becoming more appealing for marketers. They can track and monitor where their budget is being used effectively and have a definite return of investment (ROI) to report on. "During the last five years marketing underwent a sea change. It adopted more tools, applications, and data than ever before. Collectively, these tools make marketing more efficient" (O'Connor, 2015). Undeniably, DM has created a vast number of opportunities for

brands to communicate with their customers. Having a database at your fingertips that you can target with a message in minutes has dramatically impacted the marketing world.

Alongside these opportunities for brands, the increase in internet connections and social media users have brought advancements in the techniques used to reach the targeted demographic more measurably and effectively. For many years we have seen the use of celebrities in advertising and marketing campaigns and how different brands have made a celebrity face, the face of their company. As we progressed into the internet era, we witnessed marketing's key strategies adapt and versify to the new generation of digital and social media marketing. Celebrity marketing has been genuinely profitable for advertisers over time (Francis and Yazdanifard, 2013) and has also adapted and grown with the new digital world and is now more commonly known as "Influencer Marketing".

Influencer Marketing

Influencer Marketing (IM) has become increasingly popular over the last 10 years and is inherently linked with social media platforms. Although hard to define, Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, (2020) have said, "influencer marketing is the act of an external person who influences the consumers buying choices." It has also been defined by The Association of National Advertisers, (2017) as "marketing that identifies and activates individuals who can sway the brand preferences, buying decisions, and loyalty of the broader population". "Social media influencers represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg *et al*., 2011). As we have seen an increase in brands and businesses using IM, we have also seen a rise in the amount of influencers available and open to collaborations with said brands broadening the

opportunities available to marketers. According to Haenlein *et al*. (2020), "The influencer marketing industry is forecast to reach $9.7 billion in 2020 or about 5% of the total online advertising market of approximately $250 billion."

With IM comes further refinement, Haenlein *et al*. (2020) has quoted that "the influencer marketing industry has created a large variety of terminologies, such as mega, macro, micro, and nano influencers, with no commonly accepted consistent definition." However, the Association of National Advertisers have claimed that micro-influencers can be defined as influencers with 50 to 25,000 followers, mid-level have 25,001 to 100,000 followers, and macro having 100,000+ followers (ANA, 2017). As such, a wide range of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) exist, this creates even further opportunities for brands to collaborate with SMIs with the following of their targeted demographic. Thus, resulting in an increase in IM across the globe. "Two-thirds of firms plan to increase the amount spent on influencer marketing within the next year, and 80% forecast to spend at least 10% of their marketing budget on it" (Haenlein *et al*., 2020).

Alongside the rise of IM has come an increase in daily consumption of social media. Consumers are receiving information, news, and product awareness in non-traditional manners. Previously brands would engage in social media advertising to appear on a targeted customer feed. Social media advertising has been defined by Boateng and Okoe (2015) as "…application of social media tools to create awareness, persuade and educate consumers about a firm's products and services." In more recent times, trends have suggested that customers trust social media advertising less and social media ads, banners and pop-ups are "sometimes seen as an 'intruder'" (Boateng and Okoe, 2015). According to Gucksman (2017),

consumers are looking for fellow consumers to advise them on buying new products and with consumers spending more time online daily and adapting to the world of online shopping, this has created an ample environment for SMIs and marketers alike, to benefit from this opportunity.

Creating a strategy to include influencer marketing can also be challenging. Brands that engage in IM need to be considerate when selecting the ideal influencer to collaborate with and keep in mind that a SMI with more followers does not mean that this influencer is better for your brand. There is no definite answer as to whether a micro-influencer will be more effective than a macro influencer. "Smaller influencers will have lower engagement in absolute terms; they tend to have higher engagement rates relative to the total number of followers and a more homogenous follower base" (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). A further study has shown "that micro-influencers have over 20 times more conversations than average consumers but also that 80% of people are very likely to follow their recommendations" (Haenlein and Libai, 2017). Considering that more followers doesn't always mean better in the world of influencer marketing, and taking time to select the right person for the job is essential for a successful influencer marketing campaign, "A common issue is that once they become famous, some influencers start to partner with too many or the wrong brands— sometimes out of mere excitement of being noticed" (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). As a result, there are several variables to be considered, such as Credibility, E-Word of Mouth, and Trustworthiness.

Credibility

According to Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş (2021), to manage customer relations, businesses have become more collaborative and network-oriented in their relationships with their customers. As we enter a new era of marketing directly looking at the impact of IM, brands are adapting and incorporating new techniques into their strategies. An essential element of successful influencer marketing is to look at the influencer as an individual brand and consider their credibility amongst their followers. The credibility of a brand or influencer can determine a consumer's attitude, engagement, and intent to buy. Recently influencers have become a more reliable and credible source to many social media users, "A recent Twitter study suggested that consumers may accord social media influencers a similar level of trust as they hold for their friends" (Lee and Eastin, 2020). Through influencers platforms, many followers feel a connection and a relationship between them and the influencer as they have been involved in many parts of their lives. As a result, there is an incredible amount of trust instilled in said influencer, which can consequently be the most impactful form of advertising for a brand. "Advertising informativeness, entertainment, and credibility determined consumers' perceptions of advertising value, which in turn influenced their purchase intentions" (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Many studies have been conducted to assess the credibility of influencer marketing, the elements required to hold credibility and consumer trust in SMIs. According to Lou and Yuan (2019), confidence in the post of an influencer increases due to the value of the content, its attractiveness, and the similarity to its followers. Jin *et al*. (2019) have contradictorily revealed that consumers rely more on messages issued by Instagram influencers rather than

traditional celebrities. However, Jin and Phua (2014) claim that the number of followers an influencer holds on Twitter can either negatively or positively impact their credibility. Experimental studies carried out by De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) "show that Instagram influencers with high numbers of followers are found more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular." Furthermore, Childers, Lemon and Hoy's (2018) study revealed that their participants indicated that influencers provided them with further brand reach using a unique approach, which built trust and credibility.

Two theories that can assist in deciding and understanding credibility are The Source Credibility Theory and The Halo Effect Theory. Source Credibility is often based on the source's trustworthiness, their ability to communicate clearly and effectively and their likeability or attractiveness. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) have defined Source credibility as "the extent to which the target audience views the source to gain expertise and knowledge in their understanding of the product/service." Understanding source credibility and its influence on consumers in an inundated media environment are vital.

There are very few limitations to becoming an influencer in the Influencer Marketing space, and essentially, there are no barriers to entry. As a result of this, source credibility has become even more critical to ensure any obtained information can be trusted and relied upon, whether through collaborations, advertising, reviews, and so on, as consumers all hold different perceptions of credibility. Of course, we are inclined to believe that any marketing conducted by a large brand (e.g., Coca Cola) is credible and reliable. We trust the brand; we believe what they are selling and perceive the brand as reliable. However, when we look at

the intent to buy, the importance of credibility in both the brand and influencer is vital for success.

The Halo Effect Theory was developed by American psychologist, Edward Thorndike in 1920. (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Thorndike conducted a social experiment to understand the reasons for which impressions were made from a single trait or characteristic which later influenced an individual's judgements. His study concluded that individuals tend to create a positive or negative 'halo' around themselves, resulting in distorting the reality of their personality and individual characteristics. This conclusion is often made from one outstanding trait to form a favourable view of a person's whole personality. The Halo Effect Theory would argue that the positive perception followers have of SMIs would positively affect the products advertised by the SMI (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). As a result, an influencer's credibility has a positive knock-on impact on purchase intent for their followers. The Halo Effect Theory results in favourable perceptions of attractiveness, likeability, and similarity, resulting in positive engagement with social media influencers (Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk and Jones, 2020).

One can argue that credibility is one of the essential elements in creating a successful platform as an influencer. However, the authenticity of Word of Mouth is equally as vital as it can be relied upon more by consumers than other forms of advertising.

Word of Mouth

While many consider E-Word of Mouth (eWOM) to be the social media or internet format of Word of Mouth (WOM), there are some noticeable differences between the two. WOM occurs when individuals share opinions, advice, and reviews amongst one another, often coming from someone you trust and value. Research has shown that consumers will instil trust in WOM more than in traditional advertising. Although not a new concept, WOM has been considered a significant factor in the purchasing behaviour of consumers (Meiners, Schwarting and Seeberger, 2010).

With 59.5% (Hootsuite's Digital in Ireland: DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2021) of the world's population being internet users, eWOM has become equally if not more significant in recent times. With the vast number of internet users, the characteristics of eWOM enhance its significance by the speed at which opinions, reviews, and recommendations spread. Litvin *et al.*, (2008) described eWOM as an informal communication via the internet addressed to consumers and related to the use or characteristics of goods and services or the sellers thereof. Although many positives can come from eWOM such as the reduced risk customers feel when making an online purchase after reading reviews and comments from other consumers, credibility amongst eWOM when a consumer has made a successful previous purchase by relying on eWOM, and the ease in which eWOM spreads. However, the lack of privacy with eWOM can cause issues for businesses alongside the "speed diffusion of the message; eWOM statements spread much

faster than WOM statements because of where they are published i.e., on the internet" (Huete-Alcocer, 2017).

Many social media platforms have enhanced the benefits of eWOM by the ease and increase of online sharing of information, with Instagram being a vital platform in this enhancement. "Across social network sites, an online friend becomes an effective medium for information dispersion, and eWOM generates a network of consumers connected to one another" (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Opinions formed and shared amongst Instagram users are valued by their followers and help form a strong relationship and bond between the user and follower. With the combination of celebrity or influencer endorsements and the credibility and accessibility of eWOM, it has become an essential tool for all businesses and many marketers.

To summarise, WOM is both the oldest medium for sharing opinions about products or services and the one most likely to influence consumer behaviour, due to the high reliability and credibility transmitted by family and friends. But with the rise of eWOM and the features that contribute to it, eWOM has become a powerful technique for both marketers and consumers alike. With easy access, shareability, credibility, and transparency in eWOM and the rise in influencer marketing, eWOM has collectively impacted how we receive information and how businesses market to their demographic. Despite this, few studies have examined the interaction between perceived risk and eWOM source credibility. As a result of this, marketers remain in the dark as to the importance eWOM source credibility contribute to their businesses, particular when it comes to creating an influencer marketing campaign.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the question of whether an individual is believable(Bauer, 2019). It has been defined by Hu, Zhang, and Wang (2019), as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party in situations involving risk". In terms of marketing in particular, Ohanian (1990) has defined it as "the degree of confidence the consumers place in influencers' intent to convey the assertions they consider most valid". As consumers, we evaluate the trustworthiness of an influencer by observation before investing in any products and services they advertise. We often query if their opinion of a product is honest or if a third party influences them for financial gain (a brand collaboration). Undoubtedly, trust is the core foundation for the success of influencer marketing.

According to research by McGinnies and Ward (1980), for customers, trustworthiness was more impactful than expertise. Undeniably, the trust of an influencer held by a follower positively impacts the relationship between the influencer and consumer and the consumer and brand. According to AlFarraj *et al*. (2021), "If a consumer trusts an influencer and the influencer likes a brand, the consumer will also like the brand." Also noted by AlFarraj *et al*. (2021), after a study carried out by FullScreen and Shareable (2018), they concluded that "...around 50% of a sample aged between 18 and 24 years old trust the posts of their influencers. Furthermore, 40% of them trust the influencer over brand promotion itself".

However, past literature has established that trustworthiness alone is not enough to convince consumers to purchase a product or service. Expertise, credibility, and likeability all play an important role in the overall trust instilled in SMIs, according to Nafees, Cook, Nikolov and Stoddard (2021). Munnukka, Uusitalo, and Toivonen (2016) claim that consumers seek

four critical dimensions before purchasing: trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness. In terms of influencers, similarity is contemplated in terms of similarities between SMI and the follower, and attractiveness is considered to be likeability. Finally, Lou and Yuan (2019) suggested that there are only three main elements: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

Based on the research above, we can argue that the trust we instil in influencers is based on credibility and the connection a follower holds with the influencer. However, there is more to trusting an influencer, brand, and product/ service than their likability, credibility, and expertise. According to Lou and Yuan (2019), "the perceived informativeness value and entertainment value of influencer-generated posts—will affect consumers' trust in their advertised content: branded posts". The quality of the information displayed by marketers on said products and services allows for a specific credibility ranking. Should the information be of high quality, it attains high credibility. Thus, a level of trustworthiness is instilled in the source of information, brand and product or service. "Trust in influencer's sponsored post is positively affected by its informative value, which eventually shapes the awareness about a brand as well as the purchase intention of consumers" (Saima and Khan, 2020).

A study carried out by Saima and Khan (2020) highlights the importance of an influencer's credibility. This was said to be the most impactful attribute contributing to the intention of buying. Further research confirmed that information quality and entertainment value was equally and significantly crucial to consumers. Not only is it essential to create a reputable brand as an influencer by being honest and transparent, but consumers value the quality of content influencers use to convey a message on their platforms. They look for

entertainment in the content they view and advertisements they act upon. "Influencers stamp their posts with personal aesthetic touches and personality twists, which usually create an enjoyable experience (entertainment value) for their followers" (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

It should be remembered that multiple interpretations have been made to conclude the trustworthiness of a person, business, or influencer. All of which have an impact on the consumers intent to buy. As consumers now rely less on traditional research methods, it is more important than ever to create a trustworthy digital campaign. An Influencer's characteristic may not be able to convince a follower to make a purchase, but they can encourage the consumer to consider the investment. Purchase intention comes down to several factors afterall: price, product, perceived value, and many others.

Impact of SMIs on purchase and travel intentions

As aforementioned, multiple factors contribute to the success of influencer marketing, mainly the credibility and trust that followers hold for an influencer. However, consumers require more than just characteristics to make a purchase. Purchase intent has been defined as "the conscious decision of someone to buy a particular brand" (Spears & Singh,2004). Before making a purchase, consumers generally collect information on the particular product/service and brand, they gain further knowledge and insights to evaluate the product or service and, from this information, conclude their decision on purchase intention. This is where the role of an SMI comes in to benefit consumers and brands mutually. As mentioned above, SMI's play a positive role in purchase intention. As an SMI is a third-party advertising a brand that has previously created trust and credibility amongst their followers, they have positively impacted the purchase intentions of followers (Nafees, Cook, Nikolov and Stoddard,

2021). "Social media users' purchase intentions are greatly influenced by eWOM as they are exposed to a vast amount of information on a daily basis" (Lee, Min and Yuan, 2021).

Ki and Kim (2019) look at the role SMIs play in our daily lives. Throughout their research, they discuss the willingness of consumers to mimic SMIs, "When people develop positive attitudes about individuals, they exhibit a strong desire to doppelgang, that is, mimic their consumption behaviour consciously, particularly when those individuals are consumption role models" (Ki and Kim, 2019).

When thinking of SMIs and travel intention, we need to consider the influence SMIs have on purchase and travel intention combined. Often SMIs will collaborate and promote brands within the travel and tourism industry with the goal of increasing conversions. With SMIs holding all characteristics as discussed throughout this literature review, it can be assumed that the higher credibility they hold, the more persuasion they have amongst their followers, irrespective of the industry they are promoting. According to Han and Chen (2021), "In the tourism field, researchers indicated that travellers' attitudes toward user-generated content were positively related to their intention to use the information in planning their trips". However, as noted by Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş (2021), there few studies research the direct link between source credibility and travel intention which leaves a question as to whether SMIs are as effective in the travel industry. Thus, important questions remain including how consumers perceive travel and tourism influencers and if travel intent converts to purchase intent with the contribution of SMIs.

To summarise, an SMI who holds the above characteristics and qualities that is willing to collaborate with a brand and create high-quality content has the capability to impact the

purchase intentions of their followers. With followers wanting to mimic a particular lifestyle and social image, IM is exceptionally beneficial to brands. The majority of research has looked at purchasing intentions of smaller products such as clothing or beauty products but there is limited research on the impact of SMIs on the purchase intent for more costly purchases including travel.

Marketing the Travel and Tourism Industry

When making a more costly purchase such as a holiday or overnight stay, consumers thoroughly research before entering purchase intent. As noted by Szymkowiak, Gaczek and Padma (2021), "In the tourism domain, purchase intentions (e.g. willingness to book a hotel room) are dependent on perceived website flow, price level, perceived quality of service and hotel brand image, the emotional valence of reviews and their credibility, customer engagement in social media and customer values."

Tourism marketers would previously consist of bloggers and journalists but with the evolution of the digital age and the lack of barriers SM marketing presents, it has become common practice for this industry to advertise and promote through SMIs. "With the rapid growth of this consumer-to-consumer medium, and given the experiential nature of tourism, travel blogs have become very popular in the cyberspace, becoming an interesting virtual arena in which tourists share experiences, moods and feelings" (Volo, 2010).

As we know, influencer marketing relies on eWOM, credibility and trustworthiness. Although little research has been carried out in Ireland on this marketing technique in this industry, studies carried out by Szymkowiak, Gaczek and Padma (2021) suggest that

"influencers may improve sales conversion, while content spread by travel influencers is especially persuasive for millennials." However, according to Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2019), "influencer marketing in the travel and tourism domain has been mainly used by international hotel firms, while the use by destinations is increasing but still lagging behind." As social media plays a vital role in the marketing of most brands, it is no different for the travel and tourism industry. "Companies can communicate with their customers and customers can talk to companies via social media" (Lim, Chung and Weaver, 2012).

Due to Covid-19, Ireland experienced seriously travel restrictions. According to a survey carried out during wave one by Failte Ireland (2020), "Most of the responding businesses (93%) are currently closed." As businesses began to re-open, a shift in travel intent occurred, domestic travel thrived, but international travel plummeted. Failte Ireland, Tourism Ireland and individually owned travel and tourism businesses engaged in SM marketing to boost the industry during one of its most difficult times. As a result, 2020-2021 has seen an influx of social media travel and tourism influencers collaborating to boost the industry. Failte Ireland created and executed multiple marketing campaigns that highlighted the natural beauties and attractions of each county. From Discover Dublin to Hidden Heartlands, The Wild Atlantic Way and many more.

Specifically, Failte Ireland invested €750,000 in the "Come here to me Dublin" campaign, which was a collaboration between Imelda May and Failte Ireland. "The 'Come here to me Dublin' campaign specifically aims to drive greater footfall to businesses across Dublin that have been significantly impacted by Covid-19" (Failte Ireland, 2020). Tourism Ireland worked with TV personalities such as Nicola Coughlan to "create a series of short films

which was shared with Tourism Ireland's fans and followers on its social platforms – including Facebook (almost 4.6 million fans worldwide), Instagram (804,000 followers), Twitter (530,000 followers) and YouTube" (Tourism Ireland, 2020).

Alongside these campaigns, multiple brands throughout the country worked with SMIs to drive footfall to their tourist attractions around the country. Tourism and travel marketers have realised the mutual benefit of influencer marketing for both the brand and influencer which is why offering a free service or product in return for social media coverage is becoming a more common technique in this industry. However, "One challenge that both travel marketers and influencers face is how to communicate authenticity when influencers are compensated for their endorsements/contents" (Gretzel, 2017).

To summarise, marketing within the travel and tourism industry has drastically shifted along with the advancements in digital marketing. What once was blogging and writing is now more digitally based in the format of vlogs and influencer marketing. The primary reason for my research is the lack of research directly on influencer marketing and its impact on this industry.

Conclusion

As shown above, through the literature analysis on Marketing, Social Media Influencers and the Travel and Tourism industry, we can understand the requirements to achieve a successful influencer marketing campaign, the considerations needed when selecting an influencer to collaborate with, and the qualities they must hold for optimal results. Previous literature provides a great insight into the impact IM can have on industries

in general, and vastly examines the characteristics required for IM. Despite this, there is a substantial research gap on the travel and tourism industry resulting in a noticeable difficulty to confirm the exact impact IM has on the industry, including purchase, and travel intent. Currently, marketers can take advantage of using a platform to market their product or service in a non-traditional ad format with an influencer who holds excellent trust and credibility amongst their followers. Despite this, it is clear that there is a need for further research amongst marketers within the travel and tourism industry in Ireland to gain a better understanding of IM strategies implemented and the results they have achieved. Through the research in the following chapters, we will explore the impacts of IM on this industry and examine how marketers have strategised to gain optimal outcomes on each IM campaign.

Methodology

Introduction

According to Goddar and Melville (2004), research can be defined as a process of answering unanswered questions or exploring what currently does not exist. This chapter aims to outline the research methodologies used to identify the impact of Influencer Marketing on the Travel and Tourism industry in Ireland. It outlines the research design, philosophy, approach and strategy, the time horizon of the research, data collection and analysis methods, population and sampling methods, research apparatus, the procedure followed, limitations presented and ethics considered.

The main objective of this research is to study the influencer marketing phenomenon and the impact it has on this particular industry by looking at the traits and characteristics influencers exhibit and how these affect the success of a brands influencer marketing campaign. Current literature has identified multiple types and roles of the social media influencer (SMI). This research is focused on the elements that are required when carrying out IM and how SMIs can play a positive or negative role in the sale of a service in the travel and tourism industry, especially given that the price of the service is more costly than products in other industries who successfully use IM.

Research Design

A "research design is a plan for collecting evidence that can be used to answer a research question" (Vogt, 2006). Given the industry discussed in this research, an exploratory research design has been applied which aims to examine the research topic and identify directions for further research. Although marketers are inundated with research on influencer marketing, there is a large gap in research on influencer marketing within this specified industry. By taking an exploratory research design, this allows for clarification on IM strategies used by marketers, facilitates further background information and lastly, due to the lack of existing literature, this design will enable this research to bridge the gap in the literature. To further understand the research design, this study follows the research onion design to discuss research philosophy, approach, strategy, and time horizons.
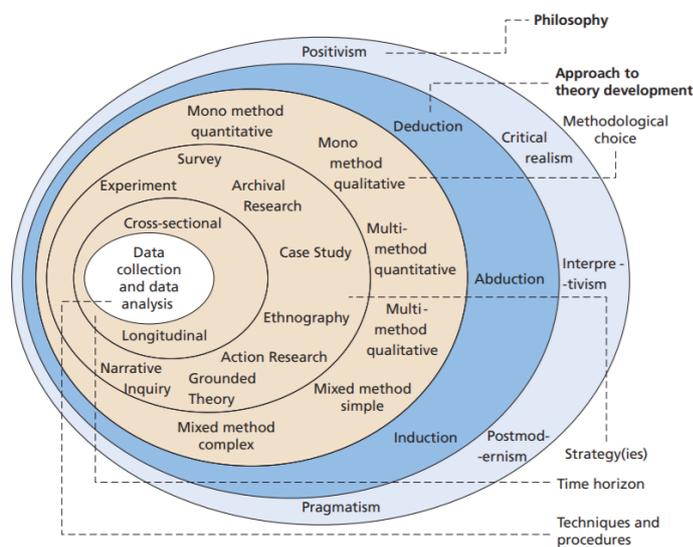

Figure 1: Research Onion (Saunders, Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019).

Research Philosophy

As defined by Saunders *et al*. (2019), "research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge". With this Saunders *et al*., have outlined five research philosophies that are detailed in the first layer of the onion: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism (Figure 1). For this study, the philosophy of interpretivism was applied to understand the role influencer marketing has on the impact of sales in the travel and tourism industry. "Interpretivism is the scientific philosophy that social order—including markets and the entrepreneurial processes within them—emerges from intentional action and interaction at the individual level" (Packard, 2017). This philosophy was selected as it recognises the difference in individual humans, we are not all the same. It recognises that research needs to be conducted in a larger scope, which coincides with the purpose of this research in exploring if IM is as effective across all industries. Interpretivism suggests that there are no "one fits all" realities but interpretations of reality can be influenced by multiple factors such as personal beliefs, culture, and ethnicity. "Interpretivist approaches highlight human intentionality as a key determinant of behaviour, in addition to other internal and external causal factors" (Packard, 2017).

Research Approach

In the second layer of the onion (Figure 1), we can see Saunders et al. (2019) references that there are three approaches to take in research: deduction, abduction, and induction. A research approach is selected to either test or develop a theory. In the case of this research, an inductive approach has been applied. Saunders et al. (2012) explained that

the inductive approach theory first gathers data to establish a set of observations. The information collected is then analysed to identify commonalities which allow the researcher to discover common themes. From these patterns, a theory can then be developed.

To date, in Ireland, no substantive research has been conducted on influencer marketing in the travel and tourism industry. Unlike other industries, where the impact of influencer marketing has been thoroughly examined. The inductive approach was selected for this research to gain as much information and data as possible on. This research will aim to identify the rise of influencer marketing in the industry, the main objectives for influencer marketing campaigns, the desired traits, and characteristics of SMIs and the results of IM campaigns in this industry. Saunders et al. (2019) assures that the purpose of the inductive approach is to gain further insights and understand better what is going on in a particular situation. By doing so, a theory will emerge from the data collected that can answer and conclude the study of the research question.

Research Strategy

Qualitative research is generally associated with both interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach as it is used to explore and understand individuals' perceptions of a problem. It will support obtaining further knowledge and conclude with a theory. "Qualitative research suits a more inductive approach to reasoning and theorising" (O'Reilly, 2009). As the researcher aims to develop a theory on the impacts of influencer marketing on the travel and tourism industry in Ireland, a mono-method qualitative approach has been applied. The main strategy for data collection for this research is grounded theory by conducting semi-

structured interviews with marketing managers within the travel and tourism industry. By applying a qualitative approach to data collection, interviewees can express their true opinions in a natural and neutral environment. With this strategy and method in mind, questions must be complex, open-ended and large in number to gain a deeper insight on their current influencer strategies and results of past campaigns. The researcher took a systematic approach to all interviews.

Time Horizon

The time horizon of research can be either cross-sectional or longitudinal depending on what is being studied over what period of time. Cross-sectional research has been defined by Daniels (2011), as "a study in which subjects of different ages are compared at the same time." It is often used in social science, education, development psychology, and other sciences. Whereas longitudinal research as defined by McKinlay (2011) is "the analysis of data collected at multiple points in time." Longitudinal research examines changes over a set period of time as shown in Figure 2 below.
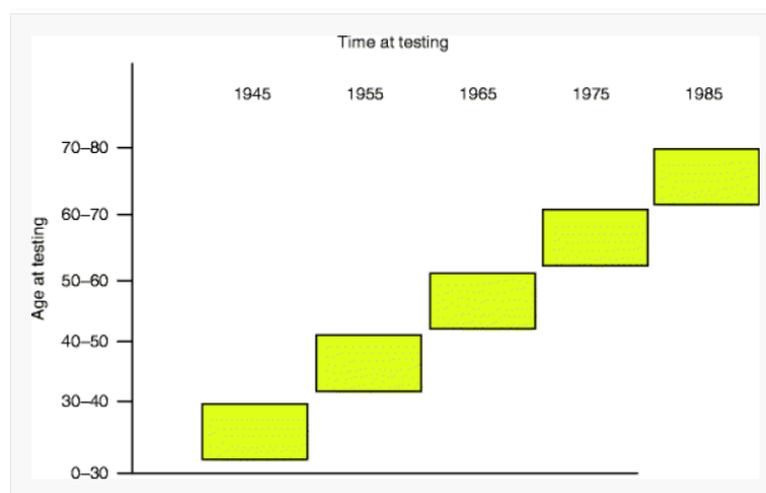
Figure 2: Longitudinal Research (McKinlay, 2011).

For this study, cross-sectional research was applied. This research project was given a three-month timeline to conduct and complete therefore, due to time constraints, it would have proven very difficult to conduct longitudinal research. A cross-sectional research method was applied to conduct the research fastly, within the set time frames, cost effectively and to establish the impact of influencer marketing on this particular industry. It was also imperative to carry out the research with different participants comparing the same time period (Figure 3). The aims and objectives of this research were concerned with present time, however, due to the nature of the research strategy, interviewees had the opportunity to speak about their past experiences of using influencer marketing during their careers.

Figure 3: Cross-Sectional Study (Scribbr, 2020).

Sampling and Population

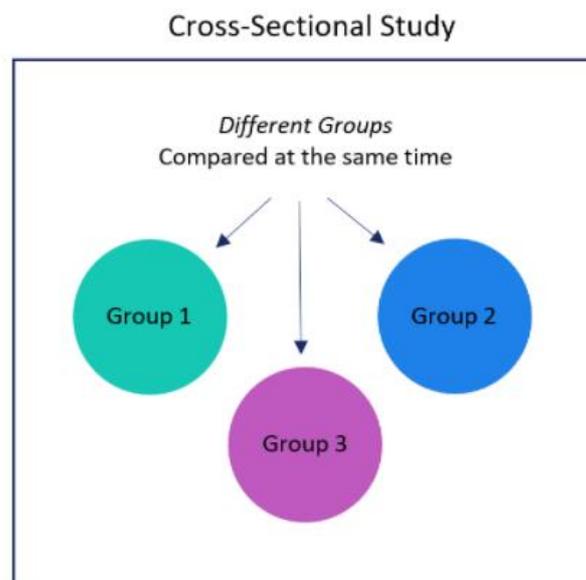For this study, the research population was marketing managers working within the travel and tourism industry in Ireland. According to Kumar (2019), with qualitative research, "you purposely select 'information-rich' respondents who will provide you with the information you need." As the overall research population is quite large, the sample employed was non-probability heterogenous purposive sampling. Creswell and Plano Clark (2009), state that the purposiveness sampling technique is used to access individuals who are particularly conversant or experienced with a particular phenomenon. When selecting a sample, it is important to remember you need to select an appropriate among that will give you both a genuine and realistic representation whilst not limiting the overall population that is being studied; . Unfortunately, the population of marketing managers within this industry is unknown. According to GradIreland (n.d), "The tourism and hospitality industry in the Republic of Ireland employs between 150,000 and 250,000 employees across all areas." As a result, the researcher contacted a variety of participants in numerous businesses in the industry to evenly distribute research gathered with the aim of ensuring fair representation. The researcher contacted participants through LinkedIn and Gmail. Interviews were conducted with six participants who ranged in level of expertise, type of company, gender, location in Ireland, and age. There was an equal divide of gender with three male and three female participants. Due to the occupation of the participants and the gap in existing literature, participants were willing to participate to benefit the industry. Interviewees were asked a set of 18 structured questions. This allowed participants to expand on any information

they wanted to give and also for the researcher to add additional questions that arose from the interview.

Interviewee	Gender	Position	Date	Method
MM-1	M	Sales and Marketing Manager	20/08/2021	Zoom sound recorded and transcribed
MM-2	F	Marketing Director	20/08/2021	Zoom sound recorded and transcribed
MM-3	F	Business Owner	20/08/2021	Zoom sound recorded and transcribed
MM-4	M	Marketing Manager and Social Media Executive	23/08/2021	Zoom sound recorded and transcribed
MM-5	F	Marketing Manager and Social Media Executive	24/08/2021	Zoom sound recorded and transcribed
MM-6	M	Marketing Manager	29/08/2021	Zoom sound recorded and transcribed

Table 1: Interview participants.

Apparatus

Due to the differences in location between the researcher and participants and Covid-19 restrictions, the study was carried out in a fully digital environment. A software-as-a-service (SaaS) product (Zoom) was used to conduct interviews, along with other SaaS products and social media. The Zoom interviews were audio only to ensure the anonymity of participants. Zoom was also used to transcribe the interviews for the researcher's reference and accuracy purposes. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software, was used to carry out the coding and analysis of the collected data.

Procedure

All participants were contacted through LinkedIn by the researcher explaining the research project. Participants were given a brief introduction and information regarding the study's aims and objectives, and the requirements of them. Once the participants confirmed their willingness to partake in the research, email addresses were exchanged and a letter of participation was completed before the interview date. All interviews were conducted virtually due to Covid-19 which allowed for a wider geographical demographic of participants and a more accurate collection of data through Zoom transcript. Before the interview commenced, the researcher reiterated the reason for the research by reading the interview protocol (Appendix 1) and confirmed the willingness to participate with the interviewee. Interviews were then conducted using a semi-structured design to gain further insight into the strategies used, desired characteristics of influencers, changes in strategy, and outcomes of influencer marketing in the travel and tourism industry in Ireland.

To gather the most beneficial data the interviewer remained unbiased and non-judgemental, conducted all interviews in a light and friendly environment, encouraged the interviewee to continue the conversation to avoid awkward lull's, and focused on the topic from beginning to end. After the interviews were conducted, the researcher assessed the audio files and transcriptions to assure all information was correctly transcribed. Any errors in the transcript were corrected before being uploaded to Nvivo for data analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis outlines how the data used in the research will be collected and subsequently analysed to acquire valuable insights (Saunders et al., 2012). For this study, primary research was conducted through interviews with marketing managers working in the travel and tourism industry in Ireland who use influencer marketing in their company marketing strategies. The objective of this data collection was to obtain primary data which has been defined as "an original data source, that is, one in which the data are collected first-hand by the researcher for a specific research purpose or project" (Salkind, 2010). For the qualitative research carried out for this study, a grounded theory research strategy was applied. As previously discussed, this refers to a theory being developed from gathered information that is currently limited in existing literature.

An inductive approach was used to analyse the data. As the researcher is studying a topic that lacks previous relevant research, there is no existing framework for analysis. The data collected on strategies used by interviewees have been combined with an understanding of the current literature review and for this reason, the researcher has used conventional content analysis. "Conventional content analysis is generally used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Limitations

Kumar (2019), defined limitations as "structural problems relating to methodological aspects of the study". With the Covid-19 pandemic, naturally, several restrictions presented

themselves. Due to lockdown restrictions and social distancing, along with the recommendations from the Irish Government for employees to continue to work from home, interviews were required to be conducted in a fully digital environment, which was via the video platform Zoom. This presented limitations in itself due to internet connections, suitable environments for the interview to take place, and disruptions during the interviews. As a result of this method of interviewing, it had the potential to skew data without having the full attention of the participants.

Another limitation was the timeline in which the research had to be conducted. Due to time constraints of three months, a cross-sectional approach was used. This presented certain limitations with influencer campaigns companies had not run due to seasonality. With a longitudinal approach the researcher would have been able to collect more in-depth results of recent campaigns carried out by participants, assessing a year of strategy and gathering more information on multiple campaigns per participant.

In addition to this, multiple businesses hugely reduced their marketing budget due to the Covid-19 pandemic, long periods of no business, and a variety of other elements. Due to this, marketing departments across the sector made conscious decisions to roll back on paid marketing activities and focus on growing their awareness, online presence, and advertising efforts organically. As a result, many SMIs were unwilling to negotiate a "non-fee paying" collaboration with said companies.

Ethical consideration is required for any research being conducted. Saunders *et al*. (2009), argues that ethical issues can arise in almost every stage of the "research onion". Therefore, it is vital to ensure participants of the process behind data collection, storage, and usage whilst remaining entirely transparent during the research process.

This research consisted of the participation of 6 human subjects. However, this study gathers minimal human data ("non-numerical, or unstructured" (Kanowitz, 2017)) and did not require the participation of the vulnerable of society. It focuses on the influencer marketing strategies of companies in the travel and tourism industry. All interviewees were briefed on the nature of the interview, interview protocol and process, intentions on data collection and retention, and were made aware of their privacy and discretionary rights before voluntarily signing a permission letter to participate in the research. Participants who declined to take part in this research were not coerced in any way and alternative participants volunteered to take part.

Complete anonymity was maintained throughout the research and the participants' names were replaced with coding to ensure confidentiality. All participants were aware that the interview would be recorded by audio on Zoom and that all Word documents stored on the researcher's personal laptop will be password protected and only accessible to the researcher. It was outlined that any personal data that was collected (name, title, and company of employment) was only accessible to the researcher and will be destroyed once the research is complete.

All interviewees were informed of their rights to withdraw at any stage throughout the interview process and there was no requirement for them to answer questions they were uncomfortable with. The research does not foresee any conflict of interest that might affect the integrity of the study. All secondary research sources were appropriately referenced to maintain the legitimacy and veracity of this research project.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research aims to answer the question of the impactfulness of influencer marketing on the travel and tourism industry in Ireland. To do this, an inductive approach was employed to X. Six marketing manager interviewees were recruited through non-probability heterogeneous purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. Limitations and ethics were discussed. The research design, philosophy, approach strategy, time horizon, sampling and population, apparatus, procedure, qualitative data collection and analysis, limitations and ethics have all been outlined in this chapter. The research aimed to identify the IM strategies implemented in this industry, the desired outcomes, and the characteristics marketing managers look for in an influencer. The impact of IM on this particular industry will also be established.

Introduction

This chapter aims to outline the findings and results discovered. It concentrates on the central themes that emerged from the interviews. The interviews covered the rise of influencer marketing in recent years, the utilisation of influencer marketing amongst this industry, the characteristics marketing managers look for when choosing an appropriate influencer to work with and lastly, the impact it has on sales of services. The themes that were assessed in the researchers' interviews were; The rise of influencer marketing, industry utilisation of influencer marketing, desired characteristics and the impact on sales of services within the travel and tourism industry.

Theme 1- The rise of influencer marketing

All interviewees are current marketing managers involved in the creation of the marketing strategy for their current business. A range of marketers from different companies were selected to give the industry's most accurate results. An equal gender divide was applied, with 50% of interviewees being male and the other female. Some participants are working in hotels in different locations across Ireland whilst others market various tourism attractions. Sixty-six per cent of interviewees only begun incorporating influencer marketing into their strategies within the last three years. This was due to multiple factors such as new launches that they felt IM would assist with, lack of budget to incorporate it before then and lastly, due to uncertainty around the return of investment the activity would generate.

Participants who used IM before 2018 slowly began introducing it into their strategy, increasing the use steadily over the last three years. The main reason amongst five out of six interviewees for not using more IM in their strategy was budget restraints.

"I like to think that we were early adaptors with influencer marketing."

When asked if they would like to allocate more budget towards IM, all interviewees responded positively and argued that they would as they feel it does work well. However, one interviewee argued that they prefer a more traditional type of marketing and believe that IM works best when complementing traditional marketing methods such as print and out of home marketing techniques.

When asked about the current allocation of budget towards IM in their strategies, only 16.6% of interviewees allocated <20% of budget towards IM, whilst 33.3% allocated between 5-10% annually, and a further 50% allocate less than 5% of budget towards influencer marketing. These findings coincide with the length of time the marketer has been included IM in their strategy. The results highlight that the marketers using IM who have increased their budget recently, allocate a higher percentage towards this technique. Common amongst those interviewed was the want to increase IM year on year as they advance. All interviewees planned on continuing to incorporate it into their strategies as they felt it, for the most part, benefited their company and complimented their overall marketing strategy.

A shared opinion amongst interviewees was the observation of the increase of influencers available in the market. As opposed to acting as a deterrent for marketers, the volume of influencers has positively impacted their opinions of this technique. They are looking at adapting and growing with the evolution of IM.

"I suppose the whole area of influencer marketing has increased so I suppose at the start there was only a handful of influencers and they're still going, but more and more have come in, and then certain influencers are specific to certain areas and would suit certain events and campaigns that we would do."

"There's a lot more micro influencers in place now. Probably because of the pandemic, people are looking for different avenues to make money and probably build the brand themselves."

The majority of interviewees acknowledged that in the ever-evolving world we live in, they have more recently looked at alternative ways to market, which resulted in them leaning towards a more digital approach and integrating IM into their strategy. The common thread would show that the longer the marketer uses IM, the higher budget allocation they give to this technique. Thus, although different interviewees stated that their objectives for IM varied on various campaigns, they found it useful in their industry.

Theme 2- Industry utilisation of influencer marketing

When analysing IM usage per annum with interviewees, only two out of six participants use IM more than four times per year, whilst the average amongst the interviewed marketers was two to four times per year, with the remaining participants opting for this usage amount. Of course, with every marketer comes different techniques, strategies, campaigns, and desired objectives; how marketers use influencer marketing differs between interviewees. All interviewees stated that at some stage, they have "gifted" or agreed on a

"contra" deal with influencers in return for coverage on their channels. Some mentioned that they felt it was a more natural way of advertising their brand and appeared more "organic". Sixty-six per cent stated that they offer the influencer and their followers a discount code which has resulted in influencers being more willing to promote their brand and go that extra step further than what is being asked of them. Many interviewees revealed that this would be their most common form of influencer marketing, with 66% saying they use take-overs and collaborations. Another 16.6% indicated they mainly use gifted stays as their primary form of IM due to budget restraints. Interviewees noted that they feel a "gifted" approach to IM is a more effective technique as they believe that followers place more trust in the opinion of an influencer who is not perceived to be giving their opinion for financial benefit.

In addition, all participants of this research revealed that their influencer marketing strategy was entirely seasonal. Unlike other forms of marketing that they execute in their strategy, influencer marketing was only used at specific times of the year. They wholly agreed that during crucial moments for their business, influencer marketing was used to directly reach the target demographic for that event or key period.

"Because of the package that we were running, we decided to go with this couple as we wanted to attract young couples into the hotel for Valentine's Day which was midweek. We thought that because Valentine's Day was midweek it was best to target younger couples as opposed to, maybe couples who are married with young kids and possibly couldn't take time off work and leave the kids with a babysitter during the week."

Three out of the six participants mentioned that they look for an influencer willing to do more than just one day's coverage and look for the influencer to bring the followers along

on the journey from the first day until the activity/stay is complete. They then look for the influencer to follow up a couple of days later with a Q&A on the influencer social channel. The marketers have seen direct benefits from this type of influencer marketing and have seen conversions and a higher level of brand awareness from their demographics.

"When they come and then follow up and I suppose a huge thing for us is the Instagram stories where they're explaining what's happening and allow them will do Q&A as well, and on how their experience was and kind of giving tips to the people, that are the customers, that are coming to the park which is a huge help to us."

Furthermore, three out of six participants spoke about the effects. Covid-19 had on their marketing strategies and how this impacted how they used influencers.

"We aren't commuting to and from work, listening to the radio or seeing billboards on out of home advertising in key locations. We are now seeing more brands advertising online and through influencers and social media."

Lastly, 33.3% of interviewees explained that when their main objective was brand awareness through IM, they witnessed an influx of followers to their own channels which later resulted in conversions. One participant quoted:

"She probably contributed to a growth of maybe six to eight percent on Instagram followers, which is very beneficial for something that we've seen very slow growth on so there's definitely a definitely successful."

With all marketers interviewed, the commonality was seasonal use of influencer marketing and the desire to use a "gift" or "contra deal" as their preferred method of IM.

However, they collectively set out to achieve one outcome and often benefited in more than one way due to a successful campaign. Participants mentioned having a campaign objective of conversions and sales but due to a concise campaign, they also experience brand awareness.

Theme 3- Desired characteristics of an influencer

Interviewees were questioned on the desirable characteristics or traits of an influencer they wish to work with. Contradictory to the literature review in this study, the main desirable amongst all participants was the number of followers. This came down to multiple reasons as to why they required the follower have a high following. Some felt that it was more economical that you were reaching more people. Others stated that it allowed them to explain their strategy to senior management staff and will enable them to see the benefits of IM in numerical terms, as they may not have been aware of the benefits IM can present and preferred a more traditional route. Only 66% thought that trustworthiness was a desirable characteristic, whilst an even lower 50% believed credibility was important. 83% of participants believe equally that demographic and number of followers are the most vital element to look for when choosing the right influencer to create a campaign with.

"I'd look at the demographics so the followers that they have, as well as the engagement, that they have on their posts."

Although marketers understood there was more to selecting an influencer than its followers, it was evident that the number of followers was still a prominent deciding factor.

"We would be looking for them to have a very big following like that need to have over, 100,000, followers for him to bother with them really or to give them any money."

Contrary to this statement, 16.6% of interviewees noted that it is not solely based on follower numbers when choosing an influencer. A marketer in this research preferred to work with micro-influencers because, when they are new to the market, they tend to have a more loyal following, work with fewer brands and come across as more authentic.

"When they are new in the game, they have a certain naivety to them and show all aspects of their lives and really are honest in their opinions."

Depending on the type of business the interviewee worked in, they looked for specific influencers' traits. Five out of six participants looked for an influencer who had high engagement and interacted with their followers daily. They also looked for an influencer who had a creative side and a sense of "fun". Giving the industry they are promoting, it seemed crucial for all interviewees to collaborate with an influencer who could show a level of excitement that matched their brand tone of voice and values.

"We just have to kind of align our values."

"As we're a family brand we would have to look at all those elements and make sure that they are suitable and fit the brand."

Multiple interviewees conveyed their opinions on trust in marketing and, more precisely, in the world of influencer marketing. They highlighted past experiences that have placed distrust in influencer marketing from the consumers' point of view. It was mentioned that "Fyre Festival" has negatively impacted the way followers and businesses view

influencers and resulted in scepticism and the requirement of further research before carrying out any activity from the business side and before purchasing from the consumers' point of view.

Only 50% of participants spoke on the importance of credibility before picking an influencer to collaborate with. The common factor that helped these marketers decide on the credibility of a particular influencer was lengthy research on previous collaborations that the interview had participated in. Participants stated that they like to see the brands they have worked with and their content previously created. They also mentioned that it is vital to see that they have a level of expertise in the area they are promoting and not attempting to dabble in all industries.

"I look deeply into the brand they have worked with. If I see a beauty influencer with a high following and they collaborate with a brand that is totally off their own brand image, it immediately puts me off. I know they don't truly believe in the product they are promoting, and they are definitely only promoting the product for their own financial gain"

When decided on the influencer these participants worked with in the past, they considered multiple characteristics such as trust, credibility, and the influencers demographic. However, one element all interviewees highly valued was the number of followers the influencer has.

Theme 4- Impact on sales of services and purchase intentions.

To establish the direct impact influencer marketing campaigns have had on sales of services within this industry, whilst keeping a comfortable environment for the interviewees, they were asked to speak on a successful campaign they have run in the past and the desired outcome of the said campaign was. Four out of six participants could pinpoint the exact return of investment on successful marketing campaigns whilst increasing brand awareness and online engagement.

"We gave the influencers a discount code to work with so we could track and have a definite return of investment which benefited us massively."

These four out of six participants associated a discount code to monitor the success of the campaign. One participant spoke of a campaign with brand awareness as their primary objective. Although the company did not see direct results from the activity initially, they believe the spread of awareness was beneficial in the long run and did impact the sales of services further down the line.

"We've got a huge online following, and we got an increasing of followers from that. The awareness was out there. People were mad to come and experience the attraction."

However, it was revealed by participants that amongst the success stories of influencer marketing came failures. One of the six participants talks about when the company collaborated with two local influencers who were venturing on a road trip around Ireland. They decided to collaborate with the influencers and offer a discount code to their followers, but unfortunately, the return of investment was meagre.

"We wanted to be as organic as possible so we didn't really brief them too much on us. And then return we got from it was very low we put a discount code in place for our collection of hotels."

Conflicting to this, the same marketer this year witnessed great success from a campaign ran this summer with a handful of micro-influencers. The establishment saw a spike in bookings and completely sold out at different stages across summer. This was a similar experience for four out of the six participants. The interviewee mentioned that they would continue to use influencer marketing but take a cautious approach and reduce their spending per campaign. They hope to work with more micro-influencers in the future.

The researcher questioned participants on the impact influencers have on the purchase intentions of their followers. Although all participants agreed that they positively impact purchase intentions, it can often depend on where the consumer is on the customer journey. At times, it was stated that followers want to live similarly to the influencer and will make the purchase to do so.

"It's the service and experience they are looking for."

However, it was discussed that consumers are slower to purchase in this particular industry than in other industries with a lower cost of service or product. Consumers want to be more informed before making a more significant purchase. They will further research the service, consider word of mouth, look at the amenities and what the service has to offer and lastly, look for the best deal possible. Four out of six interviewees believe that consumers are more reluctant to make an immediate purchase within this industry. The other two out of six

participants believe that if you use the correct influencer following your target demographic, the discretionary income will be there for larger purchases.

"I think it's specific to the kind of people that are on certain pages."

To summarise, this study revealed that influencers have the impact to influence the purchase intentions of their followers. Nevertheless, the stage of the where the consumer standon the customer journey needs to be respected. If the consumer is only at the brand awareness stage and still requires more research before making a purchase, influencer marketing activity alone might not be the success factor marketers are hoping for. With this being said, marketers must consider the level of existing brand awareness amongst this demographic. Should the brand awareness be high, the impact on purchase intentions should complement this.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided interesting insights into the influencer marketing campaigns used in this industry, the elements considered, and the impacts influencer marketing has had to date. Much of the information acquired from the research coincides with the literature review. However, there are some contradictory opinions of marketers. Perhaps this is due to the lack of existing literature specific to this industry. This will be discussed in the following chapters.

Discussion

Introduction

In order to discuss this research, this chapter will explore critical findings and compare existing literature to the findings that emerged whilst relating it to research interpretations, implications, limitations, and the researchers' recommendations. Before concluding this chapter, it will endeavour to recap the research aims and objectives. Whilst the main objective of this research is to create further literature on the topic and assist in bridging the gap in the literature, it has also been conducted to answer the research question. The primary aim was to explore the impact influencer marketing has on the sale of services, specifically in Ireland's travel and tourism industry. This study has indeed made a significant step towards answering this question.

Key Findings

This research aimed to bridge the knowledge gap and provide valuable and usable information to marketing managers promoting services through influencer marketing in Ireland's travel and tourism industry. The research aimed to evaluate the impact of influencer marketing on the sale of high cost services, assess the level of credibility of influencers concerning travel and tourism purchases, analyse the effects of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour in Ireland, understand the impact that eWord of Mouth (eWOM) has on consumer behaviour when making purchases within the travel and tourism Industry and lastly, recommend best practices for the industry when using influencer marketing within their marketing strategies.

The findings discovered that marketers who had been utilising influencer marketing for a longer period of time allocated a higher budget to this technique. Most participants wished to allocate more budget towards influencer marketing as they believe that it can be impactful in this industry despite the higher-priced services on offer. However, findings have shown that marketers are not looking to completely dive into influencer marketing as they believe it can still be a hit or miss technique. They have had multiple successful campaigns and equally multiple failures in their strategies. One participant described it as a "risky approach". As a result, it is understandable that there are questions around the usage of this technique in this particular industry.

Of course, every business has its individual needs, requirements, and targets. During the research, it was noted that all interviewees carried out multiple campaigns, all with their own set of objectives. Often these marketers were promoting a seasonal event such as Valentine's Day, school holidays, and the Christmas period. One commonality that emerged from the research was the success of paid campaigns. Often participants were unhappy with the results of a "gifted" promotion or "contra deal". The objectives these marketers set out to achieve were unobtainable without a budget behind them. This was a result of many campaigns ran by the interviewees. In the literature review, Francis and Yazdanifard (2013) touched briefly on the impact celebrity marketing had on advertising in the past. When converting celebrity marketing to the more digital term and considering influencer marketing, it is essential to remember that although "gifted" and "contra" deals can work exceptionally well, an employee is more likely to do a better job when they feel as if they are being

rewarded appropriately. Perhaps this applied to influencers too. We should remember that they are providing a service to the company.

Contradictory to the literature review carried out in this research, credibility and trustworthiness were not the primary desired characteristic of participants. Instead the number of followers and demographics were said to be the most fundamental traits of influencers. In the literature review, we have seen various pieces of literature explaining the benefits of using micro-influencers. Haenlein *et al*. (2020) stated that although micro-influencers have fewer followers, their engagement rate in total is much higher, and they have a more homogenous following. As a result of the interviewed marketers choosing followers over other characteristics, this resulted in a less deserved campaign result. As stated by Haenlein and Libai (2017), " micro-influencers have over 20 times more conversations than average consumers but also that 80% of people are very likely to follow their recommendations." Not only do micro-influencers have an impact on conversions but they also positively contribute to word of mouth amongst consumers - which ultimately creates brand awareness and can also lead to further conversions.

Following on from the Halo Effect Theory as discussed in this paper, the multiple traits generate a halo effect for the influencer in the eyes of a follower. In other words, there are certain characteristics that will positively benefit the following of an influencer. However, when marketers select the influencer based on followers, the halo effect of said influencer could have been over a brief period. This would have allowed the influencer to quickly grow their following but this could have a negative impact on their engagement which, in turn, could have a negative impact on the brand's campaign objectives.

The literature review chapter in this research discussed the impact of influencer marketing on the sale of services and purchase intentions. "Social media users' purchase intentions are greatly influenced by eWOM as they are exposed to a vast amount of information on a daily basis" (Lee, Min and Yuan, 2021). As noted above, Ki and Kim (2019) looked at SMIs' role in our daily lives and the desire for followers to mimic their lifestyle. The results of this study corroborated this finding. For example, interviewees mentioned the need or want for consumers to have what influencers have - whether that be achievable. It emerged from the findings that if the followers have the budget to afford the promoted service, the influencer will have the ability to progress the customer journey resulting in a conversion.

Furthermore, the literature from AlFarraj *et al*. (2021), FullScreen and Shareable (2018), and De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) showed that it was essential to collaborate with influencers who held specific characteristics and created high-quality content. Even if an influencer has a high number of followers, it doesn't necessarily mean they hold these qualities. Existing research states that should an influencer hold these characteristics, they can be genuinely impactful and provide exceptional campaign results as noted by McGinnies and Ward (1980), customers consider trustworthiness to be more important than expertise and in studies has proven to be more impactful . The findings from the interviews suggest that influencers were only selected on some qualities varying from paticipants, and the number of followers were wrongly prioritised. As a result of this, the marketers interviewed may not have reached the desired impact on sales of the campaign.

As discussed thoroughly in the literature review, IM is on the rise. The primary reason for this is the shift towards a more digital world. As stated by O'Connor (2015), "By their nature, digital marketers interact with millions of customers and prospects daily. Their work shapes customers' and prospects' perceptions of your products and services". With this being said, the findings of this research suggests that although marketers in Ireland are adapting to the new digital world in other formats such as PPC, Google Ads and more, they are only recently beginning to incorporate influencer marketing into their strategies. The data analysed supports this development, with most interviewees only adapting a more digitally focused approach in the last three years. Alongside this development comes an increase in the budget being allocated towards this type of activity. The analysis of data supports the theory that "Two-thirds of firms plan to increase the amount spent on influencer marketing within the next year, and 80% forecast to spend at least 10% of their marketing budget on it" (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). All participants would like to increase their budget allocation towards influencer marketing, and the early adopters interviewed have allocated a steady year on year increase.

In addition to this, recent trends have suggested that consumers trust social media advertising less and sometimes consider it intrusive (Boateng and Okoe, 2015). This coincides with the results as participants want to create a more "organic" campaign using "gifted" or contra deals with influencers. One interviewee indicated that it has a more natural and organic feel to it resulting in a more persuasive form of advertising for the consumer. Furthermore, the results offer support for Gucksman (2017) statement that consumers are

looking for fellow consumers to advise them on buying new products. If influencers are appearing in a more organic form and there is no evidence of financial gain for the influencer, they are viewed in the eyes of a consumer as a "normal" consumer.

It is crucial to keep the research question in mind to interpret the findings from both the literature review and this research. Do influencers have the ability to impact sales of services in the travel and tourism industry? Considering the findings from this research, it is reasonable to think that some influencers can be very persuasive and impactful for particular brands that they work with. Not all influencers are the same, and a brand should take a cautious approach when carrying out influencer marketing. The above literature suggests that an influencer marketing campaign can either be highly successful or a major disappointment. Given the results of the data collected in this study, it is clear that influencer marketing, when conducted appropriately, can shift the way marketers strategise.

It was noted by multiple participants that "Digital is the way forward" in terms of their marketing strategy. Although these participants continue to use traditional methods, they focus more on traditional approaches to complement their digital strategies. This has implications on the world of marketing and what it once encompassed. For example, to date, we have seen how newspapers and magazine corporations have evolved with an online subscription available. As a result of this, print advertising is becoming less relevant and being substituted with online advertising.

The generalizability of the results show that marketers should be adapting and including influencer marketing into some element of their marketing strategy. Nevertheless, it is crucial to research the influencer thoroughly and understand their values and online

perception. Substantial planning is required before incorporating this technique into a company's strategy, and the decision should not be made lightly. The marketers interviewed longed for an organic "looking" campaign with anticipated results that were unachievable by doing so. Thus, marketers should consider taking a different approach and consider a more authentic influencer. By doing so, they are paying for the authenticity of a more organic influencer instead of trying to appear organic.

Industry Utilisation of Influencer Marketing

The study results show that, for the most part, marketers are only willing to work with influencers who have a big following. Even though research like that of Haenlein and Libai (2017) found that micro-influencers have over 20 times more conversations than average consumers and that 80% of people are very likely to follow their recommendations. As a result, interviewees occasionally saw a disappointing campaign result.

The discoveries from interviews confirmed that objectives were achieved and exceeded when marketers were careful in their selection of influencers. Participants spoke of conversions of campaigns resulting in a sell-out of services, brand awareness increase with a result of rising social media followers and online engagement from company followers who craved the lifestyle or experience that the influencer had.

Seasonality played a big role in the success of the interviewee's campaign. This topic of seasonality was something that existing literature lacked discussion and research on. These results provided new insights into the relationship between the influencer and this industry. When marketing a service, time is of the essence and pinpointing that critical period to run

campaigns and see results is a crucial element of this industry. There are peak times in this industry and a shorter window for objectives to be met. As mentioned in the findings, two out of six interviewees explained that their main objective was brand awareness through IM. Although they witnessed an influx of followers to their channels which later resulted in conversions, there was a window of time between influencer marketing activity to conversion.

Conceivably, the lack of IM budget in this industry has negatively impacted the perception of influencer marketing. It was identified from the study that participants often looked for a contra deal or gifted opportunity to work with an influencer, which resulted in a disappointing outcome for these marketers in the content that was produced and also the outcomes that were achieved. Having said this, marketers from this study are still willing to allocate an increasing amount of budget to influencer marketing as they have seen the benefits it has had on businesses in other industries. As observed from this study, with time, marketers are allocating more budget and seeing better results. Furthermore, participants decided to intensify the use of influencer marketing and saw high campaign conversions. The data collected of interviewees stating that consumers are looking for an experience or a service to mimic the choices of influencer compliments the Halo Effect Theory. The Halo effect theory states that when followers have a positive image of an influencer and consider them likeable, trustworthy, and credible, it has a knock-on effect of positive purchase intention of their followers. This data would suggest that with an appropriate budget, selection of influencers and utilisation of this technique, influencer marketing can transform how

marketing operates in this industry and create remarkable brand awareness, online engagement, and conversions.

Existing literature revealed a lack of data on the most used and successful forms of influencer marketing. As a relatively new phenomenon, further studies need to be conducted to distinguish the best utilisation of this form of marketing. The findings above suggest that working on a "contra" or "gifted" basis can be a risky approach and, more likely than not, result in a disappointing outcome. The want of marketers to appear more organic in their advertising has been proved to result in a less than desirable outcome.

Additionally, current literature is highly deficient in this phenomenon relevant to the travel and tourism industry. Due to the lack of data on both the drive and utilisation of influencer marketing, it cannot be concluded that influencer marketing impacts this industry equally in comparison with other industries such as fashion or retail. To establish the exact techniques suitable to this industry, further studies must be conducted. As a result, no recommendations for best practices in implementing influencer marketing can be made under the generalisation of the entire industry.

Desired Characteristics of Influencers

One of the most variable outcomes of this study was the desired characteristics of influencers. Depending on the type of business participants were marketing, they reported looking for fun, creative, engaging, family-orientated influencers. This corresponds with research from Lou and Yuan (2019) who found that influencers stamp their posts with personal aesthetic touches and personality twists, which usually create an enjoyable

experience (entertainment value) for their followers. Minimal participants focused on the actual characteristics of the influencers that contribute to a successful campaign and mainly opted for a high following and similar demographic to their brand. Although this is still beneficial for marketing campaigns, existing literature has shown that specific characteristics should be considered higher substance.

Existing literature speaks on the importance of credibility, trustworthiness, the halo effect theory, and source credibility. However, amongst interviewees, these traits were rarely the primary desired characteristic of influencers. From the research carried out in this study, it can be interpreted that marketers are in the frame of mind that bigger means better. This is supported by experimental studies carried out by De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017), who conveyed that Instagram influencers with high numbers of followers are found more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular. However, literature from Haenlein *et al.*, (2020), states that micro-influencers tend to have higher engagement rates relative to the total number of followers.

This study revealed that the credibility of a brand or influencer could determine a consumer's attitude, engagement, and intent to buy. Without this being a priority of the interviewees' selection of influencers, the implications are damaging to their campaign results. This can be implied as the interviewed population prioritised the wrong characteristics when trying to achieve particular objectives.

With that being said, some interview results built on the evidence of existing literature. For example, Lou and Yuan (2019), believe that confidence in the post of an

influencer increases due to the value of the content, its attractiveness, and the similarity to its followers. Similarly, several marketing participants looked for an influencer with a creative element to "bring the campaign to life". With that, Childers, Lemon and Hoy (2018), the study announced that their participants indicated that influencers provided them with further brand reach using a unique approach, which built trust and credibility.

After carefully reviewing the existing literature and the data collected in this study, it can be interpreted that a specific type of influencer should be selected depending on the campaign objective. If the desired campaign result is brand awareness, a macro influencer could be the best fit for this campaign. Similarly, if a campaign aims to convert leads to sales, a micro-influencer has the potential to be more impactful.

As noted in the literature review, the work of McGinnies and Ward (1980) found that for customers, trustworthiness was more impactful than expertise. This is confirmed by Lee and Eastin's (2020) who found that trust in influencers can be more beneficial "a recent Twitter study revealed that social media influencers are considered to be as trusted as consumers' friends". To create trust amongst followers, the influencer must hold a level of credibility with their followers. However, in this study, marketers looked for expertise over trust. They believed that it is vital to see influencers with a level of knowledge in the area or industry they are advertising to appear more credible online to their followers. This data contradicts the work of McGinnies and Ward (1980), as participants prioritised the level of expertise in influencers over the level of trust the influencer holds amongst its followers.

With these interpretations being made, there are implications on the desired characteristics for influencer marketing. Specific influencer should be assigned to campaigns

based on the campaigns' objectives. It is beyond the scope of this study to outline an exact characteristic that will benefit all campaigns with different goals and target audiences. This industry needs to continue research to identify a desirable trait.

Impact of Sale of Services and Intent to Buy

Social media influencers can impact products and services in many industries through online advertising. After researching the impact on the sale of services within the travel and tourism industry, it is clear that influencer marketing can significantly impact sales when correctly strategised. Word of mouth and e-word of mouth can also affect the sale of services in this industry, from consumer to consumer or with social media marketing, influencer to the consumer.

The lack of existing literature relating to this industry presented limitations during this study. It is evident that more studies are required to truly explore this industry. This is reiterated in studies conducted by Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş (2021), who stated, "While there are many studies examining the factors that affect travel intention, there are relatively few studies investigating the effect of source credibility on travel intention".

Research conducted by Ki and Kim (2019) looks at the influence SMIs have on their followers' lifestyles. As discussed in the literature review, the mentioned that "When people develop positive attitudes about individuals, they exhibit a strong desire to doppelgang, that is, mimic their consumption behaviour consciously, particularly when those individuals are consumption role models" (Ki and Kim, 2019). This research confirms this idea as the marketers observed a significant impact on sales of services through influencer marketing

resulting in sold-out services. In addition to this, multiple participants saw an immediate return on investments during an influencer marketing campaign with people wanting to be the first to experience events or post an "Instagram worthy" picture similar to the influencers. Thus, it can be assumed that consumers buy the service as they want to mimic the lifestyle of the influencer.

It was stated by the interview participants that, when running influencer marketing, they often included a discount code to directly linked activity to return of investment. However, on multiple occasions, the brand awareness generated from the campaign later positively impacted the sales.

The participants in this study also spoke about the positive impact that both WOM & eWOM had on sales for their businesses. This complements Lee, Min and Yuan's (2021) research which found that "Social media users' purchase intentions are greatly influenced by eWOM as they are exposed to a vast amount of information daily." Although WOM and eWOM can be directly linked to influencer marketing, studies rarely link the two techniques and consider them different marketing techniques. Nevertheless, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) concluded that "Across social network sites, an online friend becomes an effective medium for information dispersion, and eWOM generates a network of consumers connected to one another."

This can be interpreted that influencer has the same ability, as they can often be considered an online friend to multiple followers if they possess the desirable characteristics mentioned throughout this research. Furthermore, studies carried out by FullScreen and Shareable (2018) concluded that 40% of study participants trust an influencer over brand

promotion itself, resulting in an increase in purchase intent amongst followers followed by increased conversions.

Although further extensive research is required to make an ultimate recommendation for this theme related to this industry, it is fair to give a recommendation. Influencer marketing is a phenomenon that needs to be specifically applied to the industry and, more importantly, to the company. Marketers should take the correct precautions and research thoroughly the influencer they wish to work with before commencing any campaign. It should also be considered by marketers the number of followers and your campaign objectives. A recommendable consideration would be to use influencers with your target demographic for campaigns. It has been recommended in multiple studies that micro-influencers can make a significant impact. All participants in this study have previously seen failed campaigns when working with macro-influencers.

Discussion Conclusion

The results discussed in this chapter look at the rise of influencer marketing, how marketing managers utilise this technique, the desired characteristics of influencers, and the impact influencer activities have had on the sale of services in the travel and tourism industry. Although there are many variations and differences in existing literature and data collected, it can be determined that influencer marketing is rising within this industry. Data shows that marketers using influencer marketing over a long time tend to have higher success rates. This can be down to multiple reasons; however, a commonality is genuinely understanding the demographic of both the brand and influencer and using alternative influencers to reach

them. Participants of this research who have been using influencer marketing over a longer period of time, have begun to explore using micro-influencers and focused less on the number of followers they hold. This coincides with existing literature highlighting the benefits of micro-influences.

Furthermore, it can be said that how marketers currently use influencers need to be considered when outlining campaign objectives. There is no clear framework to be followed by marketers stating the correct implementation of influencer marketing. Contrary to this statement, it established from this study that macro-influencers could achieve high brand awareness. In absolute terms, micro-influencers have the most significant ability to impact sales and generate conversions. Undoubtedly, further research is required on every aspect of influencer marketing within this industry. The next chapter will conclude this research in its entirety.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the impact influencer marketing has on the sale of services in the travel and tourism industry, whilst exploring the rise of influencer marketing and its uses, along with desirable influencer characteristics. Additionally, it looked at marketing within this industry and considered influencer marketing as a form of WOM or eWOM. The results of this research can help today's marketers understand how to create and manage influencer marketing campaigns in the travel and tourism industry.

This study found that controversial marketing decisions can negatively represent influencer marketing in this industry. Such marketing activity requires extensive research to impact the campaign positively and genuinely demonstrate the abilities of influencer marketing. In this particular study, the marketers looked at the wrong influencer characteristics, which resulted in negative campaign outcomes. It can be assumed that not all marketers interviewed conducted appropriate research before carrying out their campaigns.

Unquestionably, not all brands across all industries will be impacted in the same manner by influencer marketing. A generalisation from this research is that consumers are less likely to purchase an expensive service. However, with careful consideration and a thoroughly researched and executed campaign, influencer marketing can move the consumer along the customer journey, increase brand awareness, and increase conversions.

In this study, no significant relationship was found between credibility and trustworthiness, which are considered the top desirable characteristics that have a direct impact on sales of services in this industry, according to previous research. This may be

because the concept of having a high level of followers is more attractive to marketers than that of trustworthiness, expertise, and credibility. Nevertheless, whether considered amongst consumers when purchasing a service within this industry will need to be studied in further research.

Based on existing literature and the results of this study, it can be stated that the number of followers an influencer has needs to bear less weight in marketers' decisions in selecting an appropriate influencer to collaborate with. Marketers are often focused purely on numbers and demonstrating the return of investment to business stakeholders, as clarified by the participants of this study. But there needs to be more consideration for why an influencer's characteristics, trustworthiness, and personality as well as keeping the phrase "bigger is not always better" in mind.

Currently, there are no clear-cut recommendations on what type of influencer marketing works best for specific marketing objectives within the travel and tourism industry. Thus, future research should aim to investigate what types of influencer marketing and influencer characteristics are most effective for different objectives.

Despite the conclusions made, this study is not without its limitations. For example, this study solely looks at Irish Instagram influencers and the travel and tourism industry in Ireland. Due to these limitations, the study's findings are only relevant to this specific context, and future research should test these findings in broader contexts with SMIs from other locations and... Suppose subsequent literature follows the above recommendations and researches the best use within this industry and the implications of solely using macro-

influencers, this would provide a valuable tool to marketers in how to run a successful marketing campaign in the travel and tourism industry.

Furthermore, the lack of current influencer marketing campaigns in Ireland due to the Covid-19 pandemic was problematic. Many companies reduced their budgets and, due to limited capacity, could not heavily advertise their business.

The time constraint of the research is also a limitation. Due to the short period of time to conduct this research, participants could not speak on more recent campaigns post Covid-19 and the results these campaigns provided.

Appendices

Information Form

#Influenced. A qualitative study investigating influencer marketing within the travel and tourism industry in Ireland.

Through this research, I aim to provide marketers in the travel and tourism industry with information on the credibility and insights into consumer behaviour when making a purchase in their industry and how heavily influenced they can be by social media influencers.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

Who I am and what this study is about?

As you know by now, my name is Orlaith Deegan. I am a MSc student at Dublin Business School studying Digital Marketing. Explain who you are and why you are doing this study. I have worked in the travel and tourism industry for 5 years and have a particular interest in Influencer Marketing. Through this study, I hope to

- To evaluate the impact of influencer marketing on the sale of higher costing services
- To assess the level of credibility of Influencers in relation to Travel and Tourism purchases
- To analyse the effects of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour in Ireland

- To understand the effect E-Word of Mouth (eWOM) has on consumer behaviour when making purchases within the Travel and Tourism Industry

- To recommend best practices for the industry when using influencer marketing within their marketing strategies.

What will taking part involve?

Taking part in this study will mean I need to interview you based on your experiences in running Influencer Marketing campaigns in this industry. I will ask you questions based on past or current experiences. The interview will be conducted via zoom or phone.

Why have you been invited to take part?

I have selected a handful of marketing managers to participate in this interview from various sectors within the industry. This is to give the best possible overview of experiences throughout the industry.

Do you have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntarily, and you can withdraw consent at any time prior to the interview.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

As this is professional research, there are very few risks involved. Of course, with collecting data there are some risks involved however, I have stated how this data will be protected in the following questions. Taking part in this will benefit the industry with further research and insights on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour.

Will taking part be confidential?

Taking part in this research will be somewhat confidential. However, if you prefer to remain anonymous this can also be facilitated. In order to give the best all-round view, it may be necessary to mention the type of organisation your campaigns were for.

How will information you provide be recorded, stored and protected?

As research is being conducted through interviews, I will need to collect some data on the organisation and the interviewee (very minimal humane data. Name, job title and company of employment). All interviews will be recorded by audio and or video. Data will be permanently deleted once the project is complete and the dissertation is submitted. All word documents stored on my personal laptop will be password protected and only accessible to the researcher (i.e. myself).

What will happen to the results of the study?

I plan to submit my dissertation to the college in September 2021. This research is only for dissertation submission. After grading, I can provide participants with a copy.

Who should you contact for further information?

Researcher: Orlaith Deegan

Email: 10570626@mydbs.ie

Phone: +353 85 1593452

Supervisor: Juan Fravega

Email: juan.fravega@dbs.ie

Interview Protocol- Influencer Marketing

Brief Introduction to the interviewee

Thank you for joining me and agreeing to the interview. I greatly appreciate your time as I am sure you are very busy. I am just going to talk you through exactly how our interview will go. Please feel free to stop me at any time with any questions you may have. To facilitate my notetaking, I would like to audiotape our conversations today. Are you happy for me to continue?

I will ask you a set of open questions in which you can answer to the best of your ability and relate to any campaigns or experiences you may have. You can stop the interview at any time by just asking me and any questions you are unwilling to answer, please just say so. Any data collected in this interview will be used in my research however I will keep full anonymity in the results of the research. Just to confirm, you have signed confirmation of participation to the interview. Are you happy to proceed and begin the interview?

I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

I have asked you to speak with me today because you are currently working in a marketing position in the travel and tourism industry. My research project as a whole focus on the impact of influencer marketing on the sale of services within this industry with particular

interest in consumer behaviour, influencer creditability and reliability along with the impact of e-Word of Mouth from Influencers to followers. My study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or strategies. However, I am trying to gain further insight into the impacts this marketing technique does have on larger purchases within the industry. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview begins.

Interview questions:

1. When did you begin to incorporate influencer marketing into your strategy?

2. Do you use Influencer Marketing often?

3. What would your allocation of budget be (in percentage) towards Influencer Marketing? Has this increased in recent times?

4. Would you like to allocate more budget to Influencer Marketing, if possible?

5. How do you choose the right influencer for your campaign?

6. Does the number of followers come into consideration when picking your influencer?

7. Do you consider characteristic traits of the influencer before collaborating with them?

8. What are the main traits and qualities you look for in an Influencer?

9. What are your main objectives for influencer marketing campaigns?

10. What would be your most used form of influencer marketing? (Advertisements, collaborations, takeovers etc.)

11. Have all influencer marketing campaigns that you have ran been successful?

12. Do you plan on continuing to use influencer marketing?

13. Can you tell me more about a successful campaign you have run, why it was successful and what your desired objectives were for this campaign?

14. Is there any form of marketing you have stopped since using influencer marketing?

15. Have you worked in a different industry that you feel Influencer marketing was more successful in your strategies?

16. Do you think influencers have an impact on purchase intentions of their followers in this particular industry

17. Do you think consumers are less willing to make a larger purchase on more costly service (e.g. day out or overnight stay in a hotel instead of beauty or fashion products)

18. With the increase of use of social media in our daily lives do you think word of mouth or e-word of mouth affects your business or benefits the marketing?

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