

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECTS OF BLOGGING AS AN ADVERTISING TOOL IN INFLUENCING PURCHASE INTENTION

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of Master of Science (MSc) Digital Marketing is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years blogs have become a popular source of advertising and a trusted source for consumers to refer to during their decision-making process. However, little research has paid close attention to the impact of different blog types on purchase intention and their advertising effectiveness. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool and to examine the impact they have on consumer purchase intention. Using a mono method study and a deductive research approach the results of a survey involving 108 participants was analysed and indicated that trust in the blogger had a significantly influential effect on blog users' attitude towards the brand and purchase intention. The findings also demonstrated that the effectiveness of advertising can be determined by the interaction effect of blog type and product type. The results suggest the use of bloggers to be a promising marketing strategy for increasing sales.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the term “weblog” was conceived in the 1990’s, blogging has become one of the most popular forms of posting, linking, and sharing of content on the internet. With the continued rise of written blogs, it was only a matter of time before businesses saw the benefits of using this platform to advertise their products and services. Bloggers use this platform to share their opinion on different topics to online followers, and businesses saw this as an opportunity to gain more online visibility and promote their brands to a wider audience (Wright, 2005). It also brought about the creation of business blogging. Business blogging is a relatively modern term to describe a marketing tactic that uses blogging to get businesses more online visibility. Google requires that fresh, unique content be posted on a business website on a regular basis. This is just one of many components of search engine optimization (SEO), (Baltzell, 2016). The difference between business blogging and personal blogging is that a business blog is a marketing channel, e.g. social media, that helps support business growth, whereas, personal blogs are generally the primary way bloggers make money (Wainwright, 2017). The main motivation of business blogging is to drive traffic to a website and convert that into a lead or sales. Previous research focussed on the influence of bloggers (Stubb, Nyström and Colliander, 2019), a specific blog type such as celebrity, expert, or consumer (Ho *et al.*, 2015), and others focused on a product or service (Huang, 2015), this research intended to add to previous research using a broader scope by investigating the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool in Ireland.

In a marketing sense, a blog is “directly aimed at achieving business goals for brand awareness, lead generation, sales, and brand preference” (Chaffey, 2020). Blogging is an ever-evolving platform widely used throughout the business community as part of a digital marketing strategy. A recent report by HubSpot (2020, p.6) found that roughly 60% of marketers stated Content Marketing is ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’ to their overall marketing strategy, although only 24% of marketers plan on increasing their investment in content marketing for the remainder of 2020. WordPress users produce approximately 70 million new posts and 77 million new comments each month (*WordPress*, 2020). These statistics highlight the enormous popularity of blogging and is reflected in the fact that marketers have been using this platform to increase brand awareness, generate leads, engage with, and maintain repeat customers. Bloggers are a unique option for companies to advertise a product and promote their brand, they can provide information on products or services and have become trusted opinion leaders and experts in the process (I-Ping Chiang and Chung-Hsien Hsieh, 2011) (Uzunoglu and Kip, 2014). As blogs are an integral part of the overall content marketing strategy, the researcher decided to further provide companies with data on the effectiveness of blogging as an advertising tool so that they could make future digital marketing decisions based on solid and comprehensive research.

1.2 Research Focus and Academic Justification

1.2.1 Blogging as an Advertising Tool

Although the use of blogs has many benefits for businesses such as increased online visibility and high Search Engine Optimization (SEO) rankings, a 2019 Mintel report on Attitudes to Online Advertising in Ireland reported that only 9% of respondents considered sponsored article/blog posts as effective advertising (Mintel, 2019). This is evidence that perhaps

advertising through blogs is not an effective approach in Ireland. However, 15% considered online influencers as an effective online method. Mintel summarise the findings by suggesting that younger Irish consumers “are looking for and responding to more authentic and engaging content”, and that it reflects “how the internet has democratised information and created the era of consumer as PR piece”. This statement contributes to the argument that blogging, from consumers especially, can be an effective form of advertising to young consumers in particular.

Other examples of the effectiveness of blogging as an advertising tool can be seen from different blog types. Celebrity, expert, and consumer blogs enhance knowledge of products and services and increase brand awareness. Businesses use different types of blogs for advertising purposes depending on the target audience, all with varying degrees of success. In demonstrating the impact of different blog types on consumers and their advertising effectiveness, Ho *et al.*, (2015) argued that advertising effectiveness is affected by the “interaction effect between brand awareness and blog type”. In other words, blog types such as expert blogs can have a different impact on brand awareness or intention to buy than celebrity blogs due to perceived risks such as “trust” in the blogger. Other studies investigated consumer attitudes toward bloggers, paid blog advertisements, and the products they endorsed (Esch *et al.*, 2018) (Stubbs, Nyström and Colliander, 2019), (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019). However, this researcher intended to use a different approach in demonstrating the effectiveness of blogging. The aim of the study was to close the gap in the existing literature and examine how effective blogging is as an advertising tool in terms of increasing brand awareness and affecting purchase intention among young generations in Ireland.

1.2.2 Purchase Intention

With the increase in consumer online engagement in recent years, many companies have integrated digital marketing strategies alongside traditional marketing strategies (de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang, 2017). The effectiveness of advertising is no longer just measured by sales, companies now look online to measure the impact of advertising campaigns on purchase decisions. E-WOM, online community platforms, recommendations from other consumers or experts, experience of products or services, and quality of information about product and brand are key factors that can influence making purchasing decisions (Stephen et al., 2010). This is where blogging can be effective for companies. Blogging allows them to access instant feedback in the form of comments, it helps to increase the spread of word-of-mouth, establish trust and expert analysis from consumers and industry experts, and drive traffic to a company website. The existing research is plentiful in terms of the impact social media has on purchase decision making but there is a gap in the information available on the effects blogging, and trust in the blog, specifically have on purchase intention, this research aimed to close that gap by evaluating this.

1.2.3 Brand Awareness & Brand Attitude

Driving brand awareness remains Irish marketers' top priority. Mediacom's Marketing Sentiment Survey of 2019 listed brand awareness as one of the top priorities for marketers in Irish businesses (*Marketing Ireland*, 2019). Previous studies have focused solely on brand awareness, brand knowledge (Keller, 2009), and brand attitudes (Keller, 2003). Others have expanded their research to include the effects of engagement on brand awareness and brand attitude through social media networking sites such as Facebook (Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro, 2018), but there is limited research on the effectiveness of using blogs to generate brand awareness and what impact blog types have on brand attitude. The objective was to see what people thought about a product or service they read about in blogs, and

whether the blog answered a consumer need they had. The researcher also wanted to determine whether the type of blog, be it expert or consumer, influenced brand attitude, and what variables determined this. With the intentions of adding to the existing literature, the researcher demonstrated the impact blogs have on brand awareness and brand attitude.

1.2.4 Trust

Another aim was to investigate the levels of trust that the respondents had for the blogs they interacted with. Previous studies have provided valuable information on how trust in the blogger can impact on consumer decision making (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan and Chiang, 2013), and the researcher intended to provide further evidence to support this theory. Previous research assessed whether trust in the bloggers' opinion was significant to the purchase decision making process (Alsaleh, 2017). Alsaleh (2017) admitted that some limitations experienced in the study was in part due to the research being carried out in Kuwait and factors such as cultural norms, traditions, and lifestyle may differ among people from Kuwait as opposed to Western democracies. The researcher assessed, in the context of consumers living in Ireland, the role bloggers have in consumer behaviour, and in particular trust in the content. Trust in the content can have a significant impact on the credibility of the blog (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2016).

1.2.5 Online Platform

Blogging is still considered a relatively modern form of marketing even though they have become a part of everyday life for people who use the internet frequently. Blogs also remain part of a social media marketing strategy that is rapidly changing and innovating. Influencers, working in paid partnerships with businesses to promote brands, use many different platforms to increase brand awareness of a products or service, including blogging (Esch *et al.*, 2018),

(Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019). With the rise in recent years of Instagram and the ever popular and immovable Facebook, the effectiveness of blogging in the overall social media marketing strategy has not been critically analysed when compared to these other platforms. One of the aims of this research was also to investigate whether blogging on websites had the same impact as an advertising tool as other platforms such as Facebook. The research would provide information to businesses on the perceived risks and benefits of blogging on a central location e.g. website, compared to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Investigating how respondents frequently found blogs on the internet could also add to the existing literature that focus on how consumers find information online when making purchase decisions (Chen *et al.*, 2017).

1.3 Value of Research

The core aim of the research lacks previous critical investigation. In terms of the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool, there is limited research in this area. Although there is a lot of existing research that covers the effect of brand awareness and purchase intentions on different social media platforms, not many cover the role that blogs play in this. The existing literature that does cover blogs and the effect they have on brand awareness and purchase intention may not be as relevant in a rapidly changing area that is social media marketing. The investigation into this would provide a more modern take on blog attitudes and prove whether blogging as an advertising tool was still as effective and relevant as years gone by.

Problem definition involves stating the general problem and identifying the specific components of the marketing research problem and is considered one of the most important steps in the marketing research project (Malhotra, 2013). The researcher defined the research

problem as; **“Can blogging be an effective advertising tool in influencing purchase intention?”**

The research aims were:

- 1. To investigate the effectiveness of advertising through blogs.**
- 2. To assess the impact that blogging has on purchase intention.**
- 3. To evaluate the effect that blogs have on brand awareness.**
- 4. To determine the impact of blog credibility on the consumer decision making process.**

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Blogging

Blogs “are consumer generated, digital ‘word of mouth’ transmission of information” that enable interaction between the blogger and the visitor, this allows consumers to exchange ideas or opinions with the author (Mutum and Wang, 2011). Blogs help to expand “opportunities for growth, product development, and quality control” (Wright, 2005) and allow for a two-way dialogue with the consumer. Blogs also provide a platform to search for and find new brands, compare alternative brands, and read comments and reviews from other consumers. An example of this is feedback, unlike traditional marketing, blogs allow for instant feedback from the customer giving marketers access to product and service information instantly. Blogs allow readers to decide how and when to interact with the blog. It gives readers the opportunity to engage with bloggers and provides readers with a platform to share their experiences of a product or service with friends, family, and colleagues.

According to Jeremy Wright (2005), blogs “encourage customers to become participants and

participants to become evangelists. And they encourage everyone to come together as a community” (Wright, 2005).

In the existing literature, bloggers’ influence on consumers has been explored as a critical aspect of the postmodern era. According to a study by McKinsey & Company, (Bughin, 2015) it was calculated that social recommendations account for 26% of purchases across all product categories. According to Smart Insights (2017), influencer marketing comprises of “brands organically engaging with relevant influencers to build long-lasting, authentic relationships” (Smart Insights, 2017). Influencers naturally advocate a brand they genuinely believe in, and as a result, they come across as more real, relatable, and trustworthy. As a tactical approach brands use social media influencers to promote and review products (Evans *et al.*, 2017).

Influencers have gained incredible sway over the last number of years and their scope and influence continues to grow. Previous studies have monitored social proof, mining comments, and emerging topics in the blogosphere to determine how influential bloggers are (Awotunde and Jimoh, 2019). However, social influence is defined as “an effort by one or more people to change the behaviour, attitudes, or feelings of one or more others” (Robert B. Cialdini, 2006, cited by Branscombe and Baron, 2017, p. 277). Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) argue that even though a blogger might have many followers and a blog they post may be shared or viewed widely, it may not have an emotional influence on the reader (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). This is where the existing literature seems to be divided somewhat, some argue that data-mining techniques are constrained as they do not measure cognition. Certain blogs may appear as popular because they have been viewed or shared many times, but perhaps they have not had an emotional impact on the readers, and this is not considered in the metrics and findings. Other studies have taken a different approach and looked at the blogger influence as a change in cognition, emotion, and behaviours and treated the bloggers

as opinion leaders, celebrities and experts (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Some researchers argue that social and physical attractiveness, and attitude homophily play a major role in how successful influencers are (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, (2019) investigated the effects of consumer engagement with sponsored blogs on different platforms (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019). These examples show how varied the approach is to measure the influence of bloggers and how many different variables there are.

Blogs have changed how marketers advertise products and services. Once marketers saw the reach that bloggers had with their followers, and that they could target new audiences by implementing advertisements on blogs, bloggers were then able to make money through blogging (Rettberg, 2013). This development changed the dynamic of blogging and advertisement. No longer would blogs be seen as somewhere to advertise banner and display ads (Baltas, 2003), they were now regarded as thought/opinion leaders (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014) (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan and Chiang, 2013). This has brought rise to paid sponsorships, bloggers post recommendations and reviews of products, and because they are generally thought as consumers themselves, or experts, they garner trust from the readers (Alsaleh, 2017) (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan and Chiang, 2013). Bloggers now have the power to influence purchase decisions based on their recommendations and opinions (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan and Chiang, 2013). According to Mutum and Wang (2011), the rapid growth of blogs has revolutionized the marketing/advertising industry. This statement appears to be considered as common consensus among academics and industry experts alike.

2.2 Advertising Effectiveness

Advertising has become a vital communications system for both consumers and businesses.

This is particularly significant in the age of social media, communications between both parties can go back and forth (de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang, 2017). In order to create more effective advertising strategies, advertisers generally concern themselves with how

advertising affects consumers so that they can make effective campaigns (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). Therefore, models and frameworks are designed to measure the effectiveness of advertising on the consumer. There are different models and arguments of how to best measure the effectiveness of advertising. Many different frameworks have been proposed and discussed but there is no one clear framework in the existing literature that defines how to best measure advertising effectiveness. Ho *et al.*, (2015), while citing Wright *et al.* (1977) affirmed that advertising can be seen from two perspectives, a marketing perspective and from a communication perspective (Ho *et al.*, 2015). As generally considered from the marketing perspective, advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor. From the communication perspective, advertising communicates “persuasive information through mass communication media” (Ho *et al.*, 2015). This is confirmed by Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) who proposed that advertising be evaluated in a “three-dimensional space using the dimensions of experience, affect, and cognition” (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). Based on the existing literature, the researcher considered the advertising effectiveness of blogs through the communication perspective as blogs produce recommendations and opinions and are commonly read when people are looking for information on a product or service (Alsaleh, 2017).

Cognition is a very important aspect of advertising effectiveness and is “conceptualised as: brand memory, brand attitude, and purchase intentions” (Zinkhan and Hong, 1991). Bruce F. Hall (Hall, 2002) expands on this by arguing that the developments and advances in the understanding of neuroscience means that the definition of what marketers understand as cognition, has changed. As a result, he proposes a new model to measure effectiveness in advertising and argues that advertising works conceptually and therefore can be measured using a Perception/Experience/Memory (PEM) framework. The Strata Model again adds to

this research by using neuroscience more prominently to measure advertising effectiveness (Reynolds and Phillips, 2019). Later studies have combined both neuroscience and social media to provide detailed information on the effectiveness of advertising on modern internet platforms. Harris et al. (2019) used consumer neuroscience to investigate how the encouragement of action based advertising such as sharing, posting pictures or completing social media challenges can improve the effectiveness of advertising (Harris, Ciorciari and Gountas, 2019). Brettel *et al.*, (2015) builds on the framework proposed by Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) and applies it to the question of what drives advertising success on the social networking site Facebook (Brettel *et al.*, 2015). Other studies have explored the relationship between brand engagement on social media and search engine advertising effectiveness (Yang *et al.*, 2016). These studies both support and add to the existing literature in determining the effectiveness of advertising of blogs and are important to consider when investigating blogs as part of the overall social media marketing strategy.

2.2.1 Advertising Effectiveness of Blogs

Ho *et al.*, (2015) determined that blog advertising effectiveness varies with different combinations of product constructs and blog types. Other studies revealed attitudes consumers have toward bloggers and paid blog advertisements as key factors, the researchers proposed that “similarity toward the ad creator is an important psychological reason behind consumers’ attitude toward blogs” (Esch *et al.*, 2018). Consumers who follow particular blogs generally have the same interest as those of the blogger, hence why they read their recommendations and reviews as they have a shared interest in the product or service. Consumers who share a similarity in enthusiasm and interests with the bloggers are more likely to be trustful of the authors opinion as they consider the bloggers to be credible and trustworthy (Alsaleh, 2017). This means that companies can be more effective in advertising

their products as consumers consider the content to be more credible and authentic (Esch *et al.*, 2018). As many consumers are becoming more disbelieving and mistrusting of advertisements (Matthes and Wonneberger, 2014), this is valuable information for businesses that wish to advertise effectively through the medium of bloggers.

The consumer is drawn to blogs when they are looking for information on a brand, product, or service. Blogs are invaluable to the consumer at the awareness stage of the marketing funnel. Motivations are different among consumers as to what blog they choose and why, there are many different variables that attract consumers to blogs and influencers. It varies, some will read certain blogs because of recommendations from peers, rankings of most influential blogs, trust, and expert analysis (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). Others may be attracted to blogs because of the emotional appeal of the content (Wang, 2012). Whatever the appeal, understanding consumer behaviour depends upon identifying factors that affect persuasion. Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Jen-Ruei Fu and Chen, (2012) show that blog advertising and readers' comments can be used to form or change attitudes towards targeted products. They theorise that the level of customer involvement is a motivational factor that can influence blog advertising effectiveness. Accordingly, the following hypotheses was proposed:

- *The effectiveness of advertising can be determined by the interaction effect of blog type and product type.*

2.3 Purchase Intentions

According to Hsiao, Hsu, Chu, and Fang (2014), purchase intentions represent “consumer intentions to buy a product or service” (Hsiao *et al.*, 2014). The most common model used to explain the consumer online purchase process is the hierarchy of effects model (HOE) (Chen

et al., 2017). According to this study the HOE framework states that a consumer goes through a three-stage process: cognitive, which refers to awareness or learning something new; affective, when feelings, interests or desires are developed; and thirdly, behavioural, this is when the customer takes action.

2.3.1 Role of Blog/Product Type and Credibility on Purchase Intention

According to Verhagen and Bloemers (2018), consumers tend to perceive the online purchase of most products as relatively risky, which makes them decide to collect information from the online environment, process this information cognitively, and then use it to make adequate online purchase decisions (Verhagen and Bloemers, 2018). A study conducted by Bouhlef *et al.* (2010) investigates the impact of trust in the blogger on purchase intention. They explore the communication between blog and reader, how useful the blog is, the readers' attitude toward the blogs and finally, the effect these factors all have on purchase intention. They conclude that the more credible the blog is, the more the visitor has positive thoughts about the blog and the more they are inclined to make a purchase. There appears to be a general consensus in the academic community that credibility of the blog has significant consequences on the purchase intentions of online consumers (Ho *et al.*, 2015, Dhar and Jha, 2014). What these studies also confirm is that blog types can have a positive or negative effect on purchase intention. Expert blogs are more credible than celebrity blogs when consumers are looking for reviews or experiences of a certain product or service (Ho *et al.*, 2015). When someone is looking for product reviews on rationale and high-involvement products such as tech products (Uribe, Buzeta and Velásquez, 2016), they will visit blogs and will expect analysis from industry experts of the product, whereas consumers looking to discuss fashion apparel will search for blogs that include recommendations from other consumers. Another example of this can be seen from travel blogs, travel blogs have become a very popular type of blog, they offer a platform where potential travellers can share and

access the travel experiences of others from articles, photos, and videos. Travel blogs influence potential customers' perceptions of destinations and thus, have a positive impact on their intentions to travel to the destinations shared by travel bloggers (Wang, 2012).

Kotler (2018) describes a product as “anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or need”. In their evaluation on the impact of brand names on search, experience, and credence attributes, Srinivasan and Till, (2002) cited Nelson (1970, 1974) by stating that search attributes are “ones that can be verified prior to purchase through direct inspection or readily available sources. Experience attributes are ones that can be verified only after use of the product” (Srinivasan and Till, 2002). Ho et al. (2015), while also citing Nelson (1974), argue that search products and experience products are both interchangeable in an online context as many products share both attributes (Ho *et al.*, 2015). They do however argue that consumers are unlikely to ascertain certain attributes of experience products through information search, for example, clothing. They can see the colour when searching online but not how it looks once they wear it, even though it may say a certain size, it may not fit properly. Instead, they are more likely to trust product recommendations and appraisals from other consumers. This is where blogs become so important for consumers.

- *Perceived trust of a blog recommendation will positively affect purchase intention.*

2.4 Brand Awareness

Researchers have studied brand awareness and its impact on consumer behaviour and business outcomes for many years. Understanding the impact blogs have on brand awareness is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool. According to Hoyer and Brown (1990), brand awareness is defined as “a rudimentary level of brand knowledge involving, at the least, recognition of the brand name” (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). Brand awareness relates to the likelihood that the name of a brand will come to mind and the

ease with which it does so (Keller, 1993). When someone thinks about a product they connect that to a brand because of repeated and memorable exposure to brand names, slogans, packages etc. (Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro, 2018). The effects of brand awareness and the value it brings to businesses is considered a highly important topic in marketing (Keller, 2009).

The process of building brand awareness is expressed in two ways: it consists of brand recall and brand recognition (Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro, 2018). Brand recall “relates to consumers' ability to retrieve the brand from memory when prompted to the product category or usage situations”, in other words, the consumer can differentiate the brand as “having been seen or heard previously” (Keller, 1993). Brand recall requires that consumers correctly generate the brand from memory (Keller, 2003). According Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro (2018) brand communication is a key element to assure brand recall and recognition. This is done through a higher frequency of communication with consumers and through widening the scope of exposure which brands use to communicate with consumers. This is where social media plays an important part in this process.

2.4.1 Social Media, Brand Awareness & the Relationship with Blogs

Social-media-based advertising differs from traditional media such as TV advertisements, e-mail communications, and online banners in that it enables interaction between firm and consumers, as well as among consumers (Xie and Lee, 2015). The interaction consumers have with others in online brand communities is an important part of consumers' brand experience and this elevates brand meaning to another level. Online brand communities are groups of consumers that come together because of a shared interest or feeling for a particular brand (Willis and Wang, 2016). An example of this would be online forums for coffee lovers. Blogs are an example of an online tool that provide consumers with a platform to come together to share thoughts and recommendations (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019).

The sense of belonging that consumers get from the ability to meet others online is invaluable to driving brand awareness and blogs can play a significant role in this process.

Social media plays an integral part in increased brand awareness. Through engagement, social media can be used to increase brand awareness (Momany and Alshboul, 2016). The degree to which a product/service arouses emotions and creates pleasant experiences has a positive impact on Facebook engagement (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019). An example of how important social media can be in increasing brand awareness is seen in the case study of Nestlé UK (Mount and Garcia Martinez, 2014), they reported that the company was able to increase brand awareness among 18-24 year olds with a social media campaign for its Kit Kat brand. Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro (2018), also established that social networking sites such as Facebook have a “positive impact on brand awareness” and “are an effective communication channel to improve the cognitive brand perceptions existing in consumers’ minds”. So, by using social media as a platform to share information and drive engagement, blogs can play a pivotal role in increasing brand awareness. If consumers have a high level of brand awareness of a product recommended in a blog article, their attitudes toward a sponsored recommendation post will become positive (Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014).

The role of blog type is also important in increasing brand awareness, an example of this is an expert blogger. Advertising effectiveness is affected by the interaction effect between blog type and brand awareness (Ho *et al.*, 2015). When consumer brand awareness of the recommended product in the blog post is higher, their attitudes toward the sponsored recommendation post are more positive than when consumer brand awareness of the product in the post is low (Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014). In other words, a credible advertising source is positively related to consumer attitudes toward advertisements, and thus, the brand.

Brand awareness also plays a significant role in consumer purchase decisions. Consumers tend to choose familiar brands with high brand awareness when making purchase decisions (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan and Chiang, 2013). Hoyer and Brown (1990) also provided evidence that, when consumers are aware of a brand, they are more likely to select that brand when they make purchasing decisions (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). Online consumers have higher intention to purchase familiar brands of products than to purchase those of unfamiliar brands. Accordingly:

- *The attributes of advertising effectiveness are affected by the interaction effect between the expertise of the blogger and brand awareness*

2.5 Brand Attitude

Three elements are essential in building a strong brand with the consumer: a positive brand evaluation, an accessible brand attitude, and a consistent brand image (Farquhar, 1990).

According to Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro (2018), brand attitudes “represent the synthesis of all relevant brand elements present in consumers' memory and derived from experiencing the brand in various levels”. One of the elements that Farquhar alludes to is brand image. Brand image is defined as “the set of associations attached to the brand in the mind of the consumer, reflecting the way that brands are perceived” (Keller 1993). The associations that Keller refers to are as follows: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are the descriptive characteristics that define the brand name (Keller, 1993). Benefits represent “the value delivered by the brand attributes, as perceived by consumers” (Keller, 1993), and brand attitude is closely related to brand image. Keller again describes attitude as the “results from consumer’s beliefs and feelings towards the brand’s attributes and benefit” (Keller, 2003).

Responses to blogs can also be a telling indication of the consumers attitude and preference towards the product or the blogger. A high proportion of negative customer comments in a

blog can be an important factor that affects customer attitudes toward products (Jen-Ruei Fu and Chen, 2012). A high proportion of negative customer comments in the blog can affect the credibility and trustfulness of the blog. Credibility in the blog can also be tarnished by other forces. Studies show that there is a negative effect on a blog, or bloggers, once they have disclosed that the article is sponsored by a brand (Colliander and Erlandsson, 2015).

Furthermore, studies have proven that it not only damages the reputation of the blog, but it also has a negative effect on brand attitude. Research carried out on the persuasion effects of sponsorship disclosure in blogs and resistance strategies used by consumers has shown some interesting findings. Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) theorized that disclosures can activate a person's persuasion knowledge, resulting in the use of cognitive and affective resistance strategies, which in turn mitigate persuasion (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the consequences of this can be that attitudes toward the sponsoring brand become more negative and purchase intention is lower. Other factors that can impact a blog negatively is perception of celebrity bloggers. As celebrity bloggers are more noticeable and publicly well-known, an indiscretion in their private lives can also influence perception of the brand (Lake, Reece and Rifon, 2010).

The source-credibility model (Figure 1) represents an established theory of source credibility that can help explain or predict message efficacy (Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018). Source credibility is determined by generally focusing on trustworthiness and expertise of the source (Housholder and LaMarre, 2014). Expertise refers to the extent to which the source of a communication is perceived to be capable of making correct assertions by virtue of having relevant skills, whereas trustworthiness refers to the degree to which an audience perceives that the communicator considers the assertions to be valid (Homer and Kahle, 1990). Homer and Kahle also declare that high source credibility is known to increase message persuasiveness. Therefore:

- *A negative review of a product/service has a negative impact on brand attitude towards the product/service.*

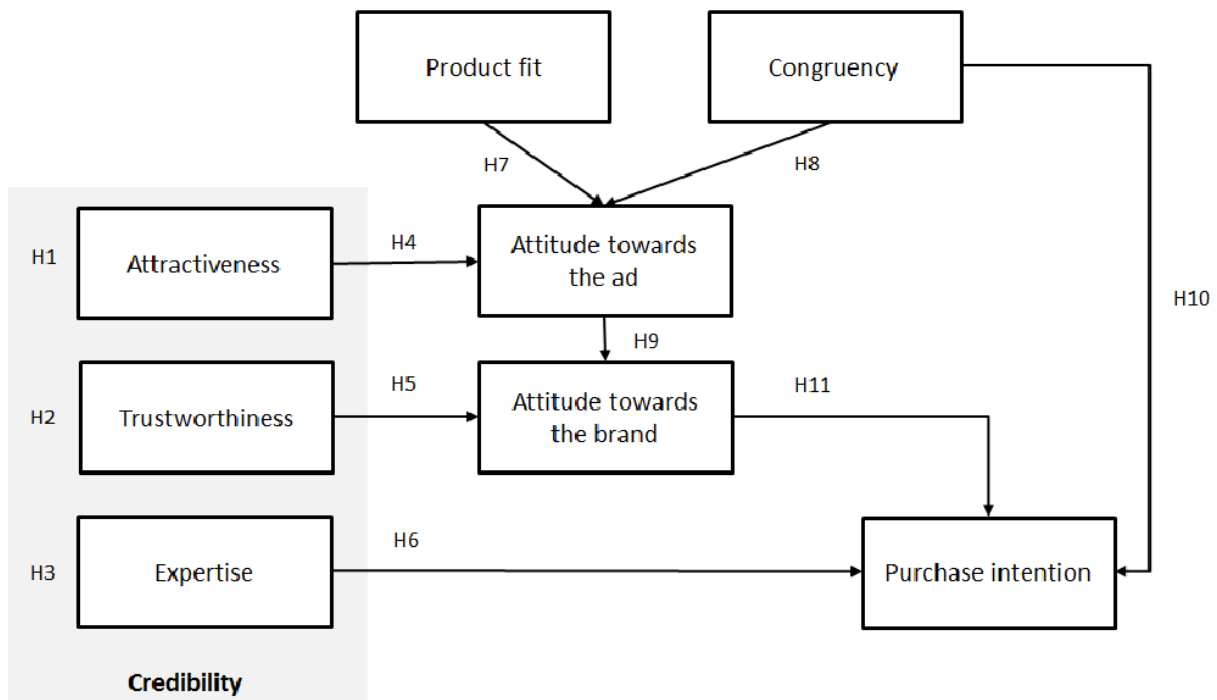


Figure 1: Source Credibility Model

Source: Wang and Scheinbaum (2018)

2.6 Perceived Credibility – Trust in Blog

Trust and credibility in the blogger are important factors in the overall effectiveness of blogs from an advertising perspective (Esch *et al.*, 2018). However, trust in the blogger does not always translate to sales (Esch *et al.*, 2018). Source credibility and the effectiveness of blog advertising is higher when bloggers do not explicitly express on blog posts their advertising intent (Uribe, Buzeta and Velásquez, 2016). Trust in the blogger as a credible source can also be influenced by the type of blog, and whether it is endorsed by a celebrity, expert, or consumer (Ho *et al.*, 2015). Social influencers, for example, are neither traditional celebrities, like famous actors or athletes, nor are their posts considered traditional advertisements (Abidin, 2016). It has been shown that bloggers with high audiences are more likeable (De

Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017) and their posts that promote a brand or product are better appreciated by potential customers than traditional ads (de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang, 2017), even though their content may be less professional looking or that they have disclosed that they are indeed sponsored (Müller, Mattke and Maier, 2018).

Huang (2015) cites Panteli and Sockalingam (2005) when suggesting that trust means that others have “confidence in the language, actions, and decision-making abilities of trustworthy others, and thus they are also willing to take action”. Trust can be a broad term used to describe many things, in this context the researcher has defined trust as ‘trust in blogs and the blogger’ (Alsaleh, 2017) (Huang, 2015). There are many factors that influence the attitudes of the blog content and the blogger. It is generally perceived that sponsored blogs have less credibility than ones that are not sponsored (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2016). Attitudes toward the sponsoring brand become more negative and purchase intention is affected as a result of being exposed to a disclosure that a blog is sponsored. There are few empirical investigations done in the context of trust in online social media marketing. The researcher investigated whether this theory was relevant to consumers in Ireland and if consumers knowing that a blog was sponsored diminished the trust in the content and blogger. In their research of purchase intention from online stores in the context of online social media marketing, Dutta and Bhat (2016) found that trust plays a key part in the purchase decision making process.

Therefore:

- *A blog that discloses it is sponsored diminishes the readers’ trust in the blog.*

2.7 Online Platform

Companies often launch influencer marketing campaigns on multiple platforms simultaneously. The blog platform constitutes the primary environment for sponsored

bloggers to exert their influence (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019). Consumers have different reasons and motivations to engage with blogs. Some consumers may wish to read blogs because of their high involvement with the blogger i.e. followers, some may also seek out blogs for their content, whatever the main motivation some will go directly to the bloggers' website. However, they may go to another platform such as Facebook. Many bloggers post links to their blog posts on Facebook so this is a relevant platform to investigate (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019).

There have been many studies that have explored the effectiveness of engagement on blogs through different platform types e.g. Facebook (Ordenes *et al.*, 2019), and how Facebook can be leveraged to foster customer engagement behaviour (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Other studies consider how customers engage with brand-related content that is produced on social networking sites such as Facebook and the link between brand engagement on social media and search engine advertising effectiveness (Yang *et al.*, 2016).

There are two types of blogs that firms use to advertise directly or indirectly: public, and corporate. Public blogs are those generated by independent authors with no formal association with any specific corporation, and corporate blogs are those maintained by companies to communicate with consumers (Uribe, Buzeta and Velásquez, 2016). Corporate blogs offer companies a platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing (Iglesias-Pradas, Hernández-García and Fernández-Cardador, 2017).

Many websites of companies and organisations blog from a central location hub on their website. According to Chaffey, a central branded location is where an audience can access and interact with all the key content marketing assets, these include blogs, online customer magazines or a resource centre (Dave Chaffey, 2015). Jen-Ruei Fu and Chen (2012) argue that customers that are highly involved with a product use central routes to process product

information. In other words, people search directly for the information at source when they are followers of a blog, have a keen interest in the product, or are looking for recommendations from industry experts (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019).

Accordingly, the following hypotheses was proposed:

- *Consumers do not search blogs directly at source for low-involvement products i.e. blogger or company website*

3.0 HYPOTHESES

H₁: The effectiveness of advertising can be determined by the interaction effect of blog type and product type

H₂: Perceived trust of a blog recommendation will positively affect purchase intention.

H₃: Advertising effectiveness is affected by the interaction effect between the expertise of the blogger and brand awareness

H_{3a}: Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram have a positive impact on brand awareness

H₄: A negative review of a product/service has a negative impact on brand attitude towards the product/service

H_{4a}: The disclosure of sponsorship by a blogger affects brand attitude negatively

H₅: Credibility of the blog positively impacts purchase intention

H_{5b}: A blog that discloses it is sponsored diminishes the readers' trust in the blog

H₆: Consumers do not search blogs directly at source for low-involvement products i.e. blogger or company website

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction to Research Design

According to Naresh K. Malhotra, (2013) the marketing research process begins by defining the research problem and then formulating an approach and a research design. As mentioned previously the researcher defined the research problem as; **“Can blogging be an effective advertising tool in influencing purchase intention?”**

The following chapter looked at how the research was conducted, and the steps involved in doing so. This chapter included a detailed description of the main processes involved in the methodology such as participants, design, materials used, procedure, and ethics. This research determined the effectiveness of blogging, as an advertising tool, in influencing purchase intention. The design followed for this research was selected according to the Research Onion developed by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) shown in Figure 2 below.

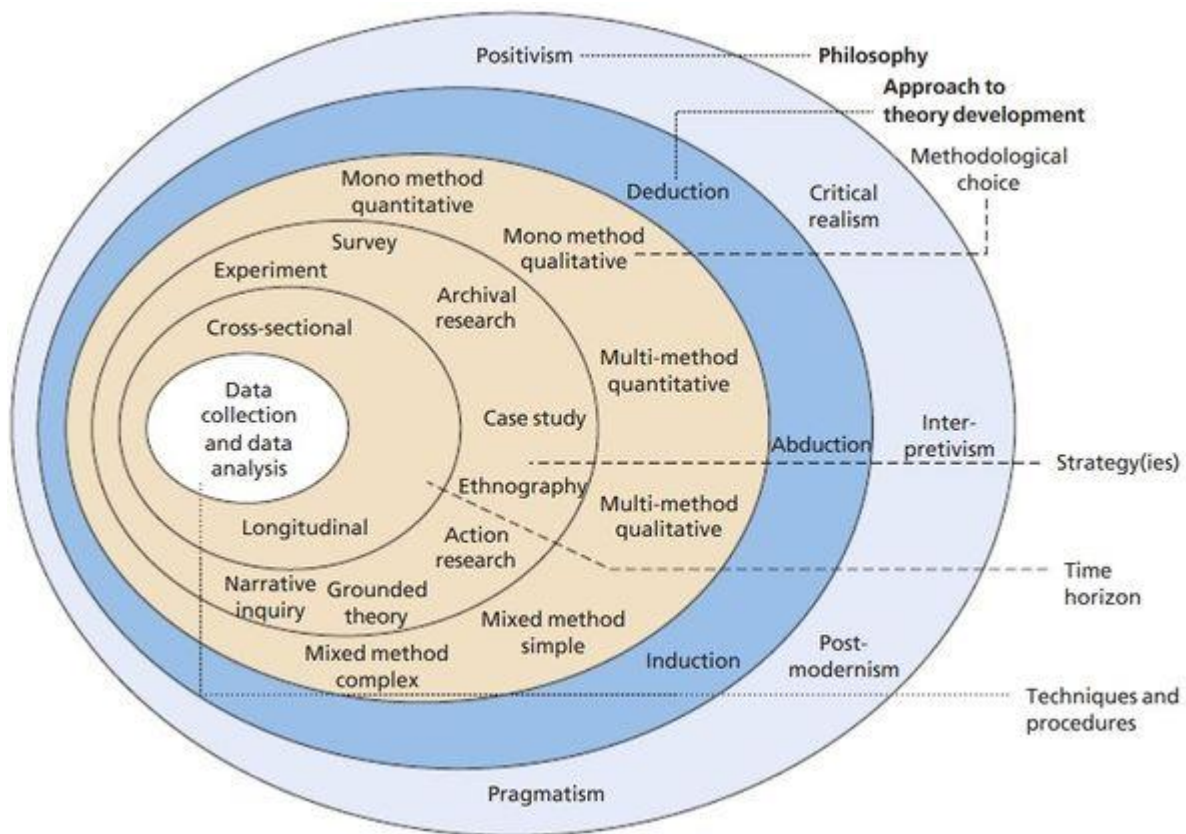


Figure 2 Research Onion –

Source: Saunders et al

4.2 Research Philosophy

According to Saunders et al. the term research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The main research paradigms are Positivism, Interpretivism, Realism and Pragmatism. Realism claims that things exist independently of how the human mind sees them. Realism focuses on the sensations of what we experience, which are some of the manifestations of the things in the real world, rather than the actual things. Realists often highlight how often our senses deceive us (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Pragmatism combines both Positivism and Interpretivism. It does this by considering theories, concepts, ideas, hypotheses and research findings not in an abstract form, but in terms of the roles they play as instruments of thought and action, and in terms of

their practical consequences in specific contexts (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Interpretivism emphasises that humans are different from physical phenomena because they create meanings. It argues that human beings and their social worlds cannot be studied in the same way as physical phenomena, it is therefore considered a critique of Positivism.

Positivists believe that reality can be observed and described objectively and relates to the philosophical stance of the natural scientist and entails working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Saunders et al. (2019) also believe that as a positivist the researcher might use existing theory to develop a hypothesis. According to Saunders et al. “statements provide hypothetical explanations that can be tested and confirmed, in whole or part, or refuted, leading to the further development of theory which then may be tested by further research”. As the researcher has developed a number of hypotheses and intends to test them by distributing a questionnaire among a large sample size, it is only natural to follow a positivist research philosophy.

4.3 Research Characteristics

According to Saunders et al. (2019), a quantitative research design generally uses a single data collection technique, such as a questionnaire, and the corresponding procedures involved in the collection of that data. In other words, the researcher used a mono method quantitative study as a questionnaire. This was the single technique used to collect data.

4.4 Research Approach

The researcher chose to use the deductive research approach. Deductive reasoning is the term given to the instance when a conclusion is logically derived from a set of statements or hypotheses (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010). In other words it involves the development of a theory that is then subjected to a rigorous test through a series of propositions (Mark N.K.

Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The researcher developed hypotheses based on existing theories and literature and thus designed the research strategy to test the validity of the hypotheses. The deductive approach is also usually associated with quantitative analysis so the researcher decided that this was the best approach, as a questionnaire would form the main part of the primary research.

4.5 Research Strategy

The main research strategies identified by Saunders et al. (2019) are:

- Experiment
- Survey
- Archival and documentary research
- Case study
- Ethnography
- Action Research
- Grounded Theory
- Narrative Inquiry.

Some are inductive in nature and some deductive. The researcher selected “Survey” as the research strategy, as it is usually associated with a deductive approach and the use of a questionnaire as the means to collect data (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). A survey is a representative selection from the population of a particular type (Biggam, 2015). Surveys can be conducted using a number of techniques such as: personal interviews, telephone interviews, postal, email, online or group questionnaires.

According to Saunders et al. surveying is a popular strategy in business and management research and tends to be used for exploratory and descriptive research most frequently. It is generally used to answer ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘how much’ and ‘how many’ questions

(Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Surveys provide insights into who the consumers are, how they behave, and why they behave in certain ways (Malhotra, 2013).

The survey strategy offers the researcher more control over the research process and the data collected can be used to suggest possible reasons for particular relationships between variables. Although surveying is a popular and effective strategy, it does however have drawbacks too. It is known to be time-consuming and is unlikely to be as wide-ranging as other research strategies, however, even though Saunders et al. (2019) also highlight the dangers of doing a questionnaire badly, it is an effective strategy in gathering data from a large number of respondents. Disadvantages of the survey method also include the inability or unwillingness of respondents to provide the desired information, an example of this could be that they do not know why they chose one brand from another. Other examples could be that respondents might be unwilling to respond if the information requested is sensitive or personal (Malhotra, 2013).

4.6 Time Horizon

Time horizon relates to the timeframe of the research and if the research is a “snapshot” taken at a particular time, or a series of snapshots representing events over a given period (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Cross-sectional studies are studies conducted by analysing a defined population at a single point in time or over a particular period of time (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Due to time constraints the researcher felt it necessary to use the cross-sectional method. Furthermore, as the primary research was conducted using a survey the cross-sectional approach was employed.

4.7 Materials

4.7.1 Questionnaire & Procedure

As discussed previously, the researcher chose to administer the survey in the form of a self-completed questionnaire, using the online survey platform Google Forms. Online survey tools have many advantages; they are relatively inexpensive, responses are generally well considered and high in quality, and they are quick to carry out (Paul N. Hague, 2016). They also offer flexibility, convenience for the respondents, and ease of data entry and analysis for the researcher (Evans and Mathur, 2005). As opposed to online survey tools such as Survey Monkey, Google forms provided the researcher with more options such as higher functionality and less restrictions. One difficulty related to conducting a questionnaire is the phrasing of questions, many authors argue that producing a questionnaire is more difficult than one might imagine (Waters and Bell, 2018), but despite this the researcher felt that the positives far outweighed negatives in terms of using a questionnaire as the primary research for the study.

According to Regmi *et al.*, (2016) when designing an online survey, researchers should consider a number of principles such as simplicity in items included, feasibility, appropriateness of online surveys for the target participants, being culturally and ethically sensitive, completeness and neutrality (Regmi *et al.*, 2016). Saunders et al. (2019) notes that certain considerations must be taken into account when designing the questionnaire: careful design of individual questions, clear and pleasing visual presentation, lucid explanation of the purpose, pilot testing, carefully and appropriately planned and executed delivery, and return of completed questionnaires (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The researcher was strongly influenced by the models proposed by Hsu et al (2013) and Dhar and Jha (2014).

Dillman et al. (2014) distinguishes between three types of data variable that can be collected through questionnaires: factual or demographic, attitudes and opinions, and behaviours and events. Factual and demographic variables contain data that are readily available to the respondent e.g. age, attitude and opinion variables contain data that respondents may have needed to think about before answering e.g. how respondents feel about something, and finally, behaviour and event variables contain data about what people have done in the past and present and what will happen in the future (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019).

Shorter questions are easier to understand than longer ones and questions should, ideally, be no longer than 20 words, excluding possible answers (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Closed ended questions provide two or more alternative answers from which the respondent is instructed to choose. Saunders et al (2019) mention that closed questions are quick and easy to answer (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). From the researcher's point of view the answers are easier to compare as they are predetermined. The researcher felt that this was the most suitable approach in terms of question types because of time constraints and length of questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of 22 short closed ended multiple-choice questions.

Rating questions are often used to collect opinion data. Rating questions most frequently use the Likert-style rating in which the respondent is asked how strongly he or she agrees or disagrees with a statement or series of statements, usually on a four-, five-, six- or seven-point rating scale (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019).

Throughout the literature review, the researcher noted a pattern from previous methods of research, that being that many researchers used the Likert Scale throughout the questionnaires. However, the researcher felt that ordinal closed-ended questions were better suited to this research.

Ordinal closed-ended questions are generally made up of two types; vague quantifiers and natural metrics (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). According to Dillman et al. there are some drawbacks to using these vague quantifiers as respondents can misinterpret what they mean. An example the author gives is the term “often”, some may interpret the frequency of the term differently to others. But he concedes that that they are still commonly used because they reduce the burden on respondents. The researcher wanted to make the questionnaire as clear and precise as possible, while also making it easy to navigate. This is why he decided upon this form of questioning.

Saunders et al. recommends that researchers should include both positive and negative statements to ensure that the respondent reads each one carefully and thinks about which box to tick. List questions offer the respondent a list of responses from which she or he can choose either one or more responses (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Category questions are designed so that each respondent's answer can fit only one category. This type of question form is useful for collecting data on behaviour or attributes. The researcher used a mix of structured closed ended and multiple-choice questions to collect the data. Thus, this assured the researcher that respondents considered all possible responses and that they had a selected set of answers to choose from.

4.8 Participants

4.8.1 Population & Sampling

When selecting a sample to study, it should represent the population from which it is taken in a way that is meaningful and which we can justify in relation to answering the research question and meeting the research objectives (Becker 1998). According to Saunders et al. (2019) sampling saves time, it also simplifies the data collection process and makes it more manageable (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). Sampling also provides the researcher with a suitable alternative to a census, which can be costly and

involves collecting data from a much larger sample population. The researcher was aware of the need to choose a target population, in other words, a subset of the population sample. For reasons that include both past research and ethical considerations, the researcher felt it necessary to survey anyone over the age of 18 that read blogs. As there are many people who do not read blogs regularly it was not necessary to narrow the age group and thus, narrow the representation of the population to younger age groups. The researcher also wanted to be inclusive in terms of age groups and felt it necessary to avoid generalising demographic groups or denigrating them by suggesting that only millennials read blogs. The researcher was also aware that the term “millennials” could be construed differently by individuals.

4.8.2 Sample Technique

There are two types of sampling techniques: probability, and non-probability sampling.

Probability sampling is often associated with survey and experiment research strategies, this technique means that each case is selected from the target population and is known and generally equal for all cases (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The selection is not random, therefore, only some members of the population will have an opportunity to take part in the study (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The selection of respondents was chosen based on probability sampling, more specifically, cluster sampling. Random cluster sampling also allowed the researcher to select the sample without bias and therefore, the sample would be considered representative of the population (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The researcher targeted blog readers from the Dublin region, and then selected the sample clusters using random sampling.

4.8.3 Sample Population

When selecting a study, it should represent the population from which it is taken in a way that is meaningful and which can be justified in relation to answering the research question and meeting objectives (Becker, 1998). Although cluster sampling may decrease the

representativeness of the sample (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019), this particular sampling technique was chosen mainly due to geographical concerns. Dublin and its surrounding commuter areas were the suitable option as it provided the researcher with different ages, sex, education, background, and cultures. As discussed by Saunders et al. (2019), the sample may not be entirely representative of the whole country but as the Dublin region is home to over 1.3 million people and the largest age group of that population is between the age of 18-44 (CSO, 2020), the sample was reflective of the key age groups that use the internet most regularly. In terms of the demographics the respondents had to be over the age of 18, living in Dublin city, or surrounding areas of Dublin county, effectively communicate in English, somewhat computer literate and to have read an online blog within the last few months. Exclusion from the survey would apply to those who do not read blogs, those below the age of 18, and those deemed as computer illiterate or inactive online.

To encapsulate an appropriate number of responses social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter were used to attract respondents to the online survey. The researcher, for example, used Facebook pages, groups, and other channels to promote the online survey.

As it is difficult to identify regular blog readers from the population it was necessary to narrow this down to people living in Dublin, which according to the CSO is over 1.3 million approximately (see Figure 3). The survey would be accessible to any age group over 18 years old who read blogs. Using a mix of the 2019 CSO population estimates of Ireland by region and by age, a confidence level calculated as 95%, and with a Margin of Error at 5%, the figure of 384 was determined as an acceptable sample size.

Due to reasons outside of the researcher's control, this number was not a realistic target to reach in terms of responses. The target number may not have been reached but the final

number of completed surveys was 120, which was still a satisfactory representation of the population. Even though the questionnaire was produced with the intention of including as many blog readers as possible so that there would be a high response rate, and thus the sample would be more reflective of the population, there were challenges and obstacles that prevented this from coming to fruition. The difficulty in motivating people to complete the survey was one of the challenges encountered. The response rate was initially good, but dropped significantly. Due to GDPR reasons and financial limitations, the scope of channels to post the survey was limited to social media networks only and not through other means such as email. The Dublin region was also not entirely representative of the entire country in terms of culture and education.

Population estimates by age group and sex

Age Group	2018	2019
Both sexes		
0 - 14 years	1,008.7	1,008.9
15 - 24 years	605.5	618.1
25 - 44 years	1,395.2	1,397.0
45 - 64 years	1,174.3	1,201.2
65 years and over	673.4	696.3
All ages	4,857.0	4,921.5

Figure 3: (CSO, 2019)

4.9 Research Ethics

According to Saunders et al (2019), research ethics refer to “the standards of behaviour that guide your conduct in relation to the rights of those that become the subject of your work or are affected by it” (Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, 2019). The

ethical part of this study was important in determining the credibility, quality, and validity of the research. To ensure this, a number of actions were taken:

The researcher followed important steps to ensure that ethical requirements were strictly followed. The respondents were informed of the scope of the research and how the information collected would be used by the researcher. The data collected was completely anonymised, no names or contact information was required in the survey. Assurances were provided to the respondents about privacy. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured before completion of the survey and respondents were informed of how the data would be used for the study. Information was provided on the nature of the research, the requirements for taking part in it, the respondents' rights, and how the data would be stored, analysed, and reported, which was all subject to informed consent in the form of a consent form.

Respondents were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and of the voluntary nature of the questionnaire. All respondents were over the age of 18 and of sound mind, and therefore could consent on behalf of themselves.

In terms of the design of the questionnaire there were also ethical standards to consider. The researcher has the ethical responsibility of designing the questionnaire to obtain the required information in an unbiased manner (Malhotra, 2019). The researcher ensured that the questionnaire had an appropriate design and that framing questions in a leading way was always avoided. The questionnaire was thoroughly pre-tested before fieldwork was conducted to ensure that no breaches of ethics occurred.

5.0 RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The results section of this study represented the core findings derived from the methods applied to collect and examine the data from the questionnaire. The following data

corresponded to the central research question and the hypothesis formulated based on previous research.

Editing is the review of the questionnaires with the objective of increasing accuracy and precision (Malhotra, 2019). As discussed in the previous section there were 120 responses to the questionnaire. Using Microsoft Excel, the researcher analysed the data and “cleaned” it to improve the accuracy of it. During this process there were a number of inconsistencies found in the data, even though all questionnaires were completed, some responses were left blank. As a result, the researcher discarded unsatisfactory responses by deleting the questionnaires that had not been fully completed. This approach has merit when the discarded responses amount to 10% or less of the overall completed surveys (Malhotra, 2019). The number of deleted questionnaires was 12, leaving 108 surveys to analyse comprehensively. These figures represented a high response rate.

Descriptive analysis is the process of using statistical analysis to describe, summarise and explain a set of data (Christensen, L.B., Johnson, R.B. and Turner, L.A, 2015). Descriptive analysis is the process of using graphs, tables, and numerical summaries such as averages and percentages to present a simpler and more understandable form without distorting or losing much information. The following data set comprised of the data collected from the respondents of the questionnaire and was presented in a simple and clear format. It coincided with an inferential analysis; this type of analysis focuses on making inferences about population based on sample data (Christensen, L.B., Johnson, R.B. and Turner, L.A, 2015). Predictions based on the analysis were provided using a cross-tabulator approach. Cross-tabulation describes two or more variables at once, it helps us to understand how one variable relates to another variable (Malhotra, 2019). The following is a summary of the key findings arranged in a logical sequence in a similar format to the sequence of questions in the questionnaire.

5.2 Descriptive Analysis

5.2.1 Age of Respondents

As the researcher felt that gender was irrelevant to the key research aims and hypothesis the one demographic question asked was related to age. Out of 108 respondents, 71.3% were aged between 25-34 showing this age group to be the clear majority (n=77). 22.2% was made up of 35-45-year olds (n=24). The remaining age groups compiled of 18-24-year olds and 46+ year olds, both 5.6% (n=6) and 0.9% (n=1) respectively. The mean age was 27.

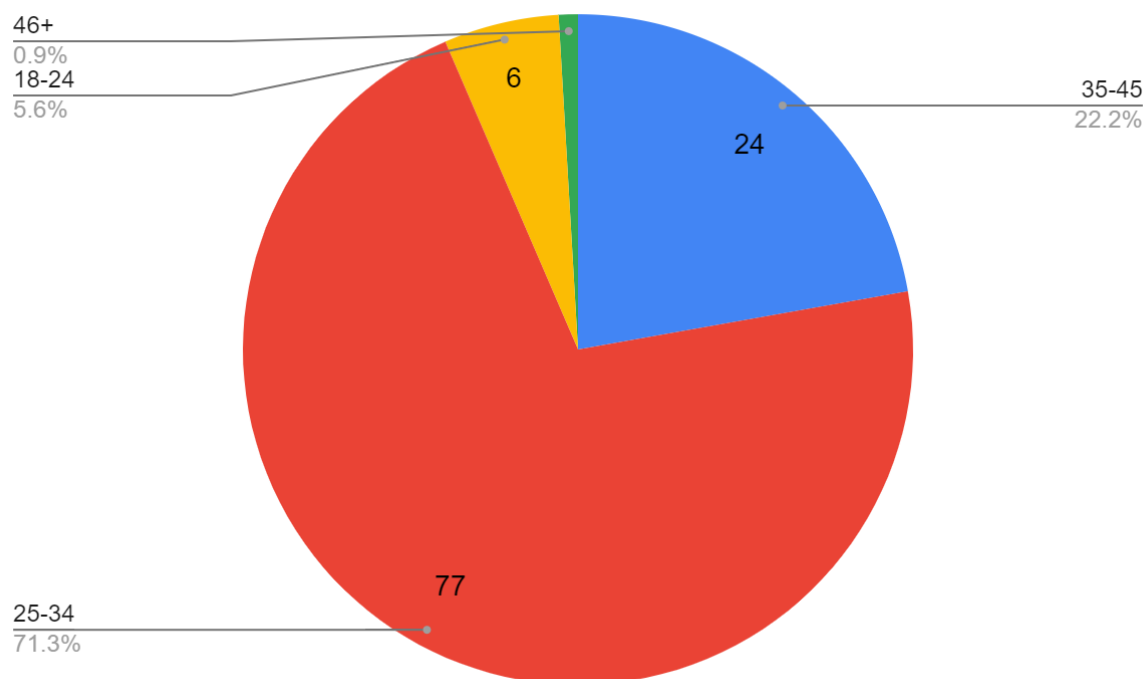


Figure 4: Age of Respondents

The age groups represented here adequately show that the majority of people that took part in the survey are generations in their 20's and 30's. It can also be concluded that the majority of people that are active online and who read blogs are people aged between 25-34.

5.2.2 Interaction with Blogs in Last Three Months

To ascertain the number of blogs the respondents have read recently they were asked to give an indication of how many times they have read blogs within the last three months. 48.1% of

respondents said that they read blogs 1-3 times within the last three months (n=52). 33.6% (n=33) said zero. 13% said between 4-6 times (n=14), and 8.3% said seven or more (n=9).

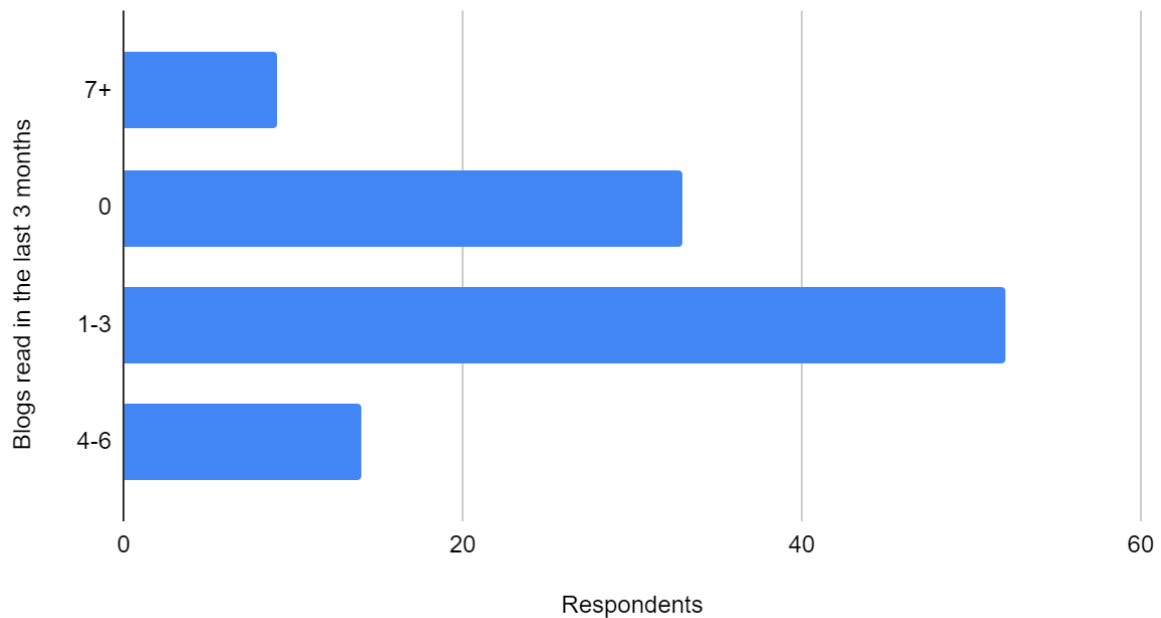


Figure 5: Blogs Read in Last 3 Months

The indication here is that people have not been actively reading many blogs over the last few months. This suggests that blogs are not hugely popular, as only 21.3% of respondents have read more than four blogs in the last three months. Furthermore, the fact that a third of people said that they have read zero blogs in the last three months perhaps indicates a lack of interest in blogs.

5.2.3 Frequency of Reading Blogs

To find out how often the respondents read blogs they were given a choice of six options to choose from. The modals of frequency were used to determine the regularity of reading blogs. As you can see from the bar chart below 41.7% said once a month (n= 45); 19.4% chose 2-3 times a month (n=21); 9.3% said 2-3 times a week (n=10); 6.5% said once a week (n=7), and 6.5% said daily (n=7); 16.7% said never (n=18).

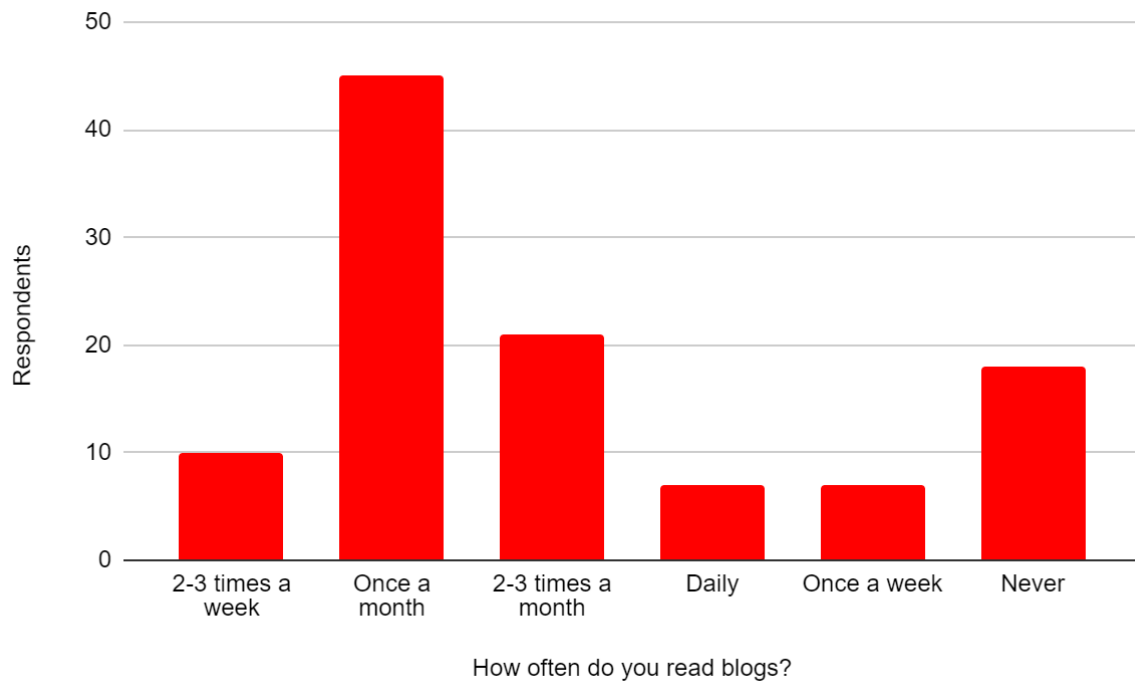


Figure 6: Frequency of Blogs Read

Although the previous data reflected how many times people had read blogs in the last three months, this data showed how often they read blogs in general. 83% of respondents said they read blogs at least once a month. This indicates that even though the majority of people do not read blogs regularly, there is still an active audience for reading blogs that marketers can target.

5.2.4 Type of Blog

Respondents were asked to select from a list provided what the most common blogs were that they read. Travel was the most popular blog to read with 63.9% (n=69) of respondents selecting it; Food was the second most common at 58.3% (n=63); Fitness + Health was third with 38.9% (n=42), and closely followed by Fashion with 28.7% (n= 31) of respondents choosing that. The remaining blog type statistics can be seen on the graph below.

Which of the following blog types do you read?

108 responses

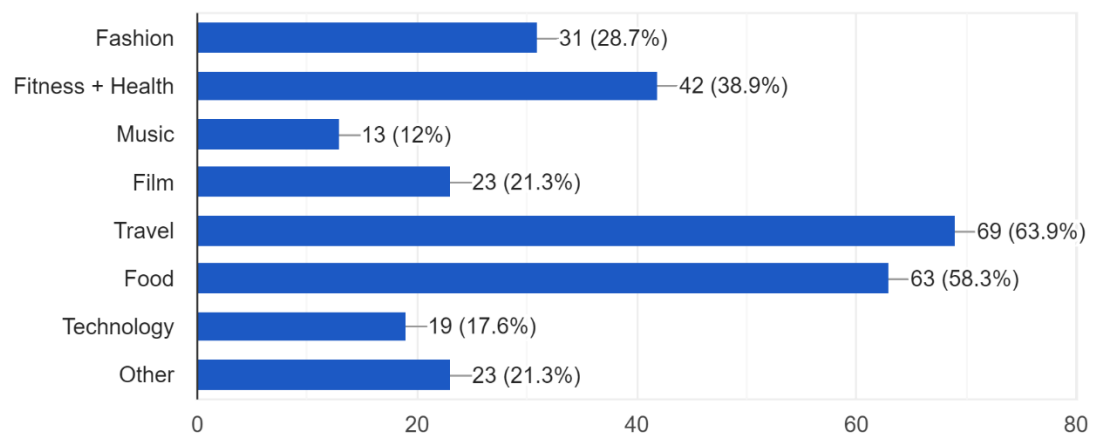


Figure 7: Blog Type

The graph above indicates that travel is the most common blog type to read. For instance, if travel agencies or hotels are looking to advertise it shows that travel blogs could be a useful platform to use. The same applies to food, fashion, and fitness and health, these are other popular blog types, and this does reflect the wider market in terms of the most read blog types.

5.2.5 Reasons for Reading Blogs

The following question explored the motivations behind reading blogs. The respondents were given a list to choose from and could choose more than one answer if they so wished to. The majority of respondents, 70.4% (n=76), said that they read blogs to get information on products and services; 37% (n=40) said that they read blogs so that they can discover new products or services; 17.6% (n=19) said it was a hobby; 22.2% (n=24) chose other and 7.4% (n=8) said so that they could meet like-minded people online.

Why do you read blogs?

108 responses

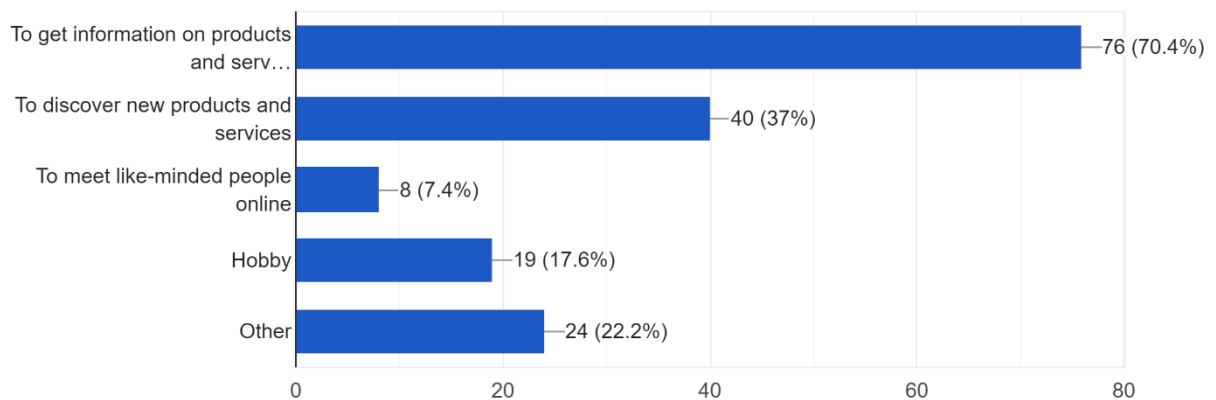


Figure 8: Reasons for Reading Blogs

The statistics above suggest that most people read blogs to either learn more about a product or find a new one. This reveals that bloggers' online credibility as influencers is high and that they are a source for many consumers to search for when looking to get more information about products and services. This data further adds to the study of Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014), that suggest that companies should leverage the influence that bloggers have as thought leaders to spread their message.

5.2.6 Online Channels

The following section examined the role that different online channels play when people interact with blogs. The following questions were designed to understand how people search for blogs online.

The respondents were then asked to choose, from a list of online channels, where they search for blogs online. Again, they were given multiple options to choose from. The majority said that they search for blogs on Google's search engine, 75% to be exact (n=81); Instagram was the second most popular online channel to search for blogs, 55.6% (n=60) of respondents answered this; 38.9% (n=42) said Facebook.

Where do you search for blogs online?

108 responses

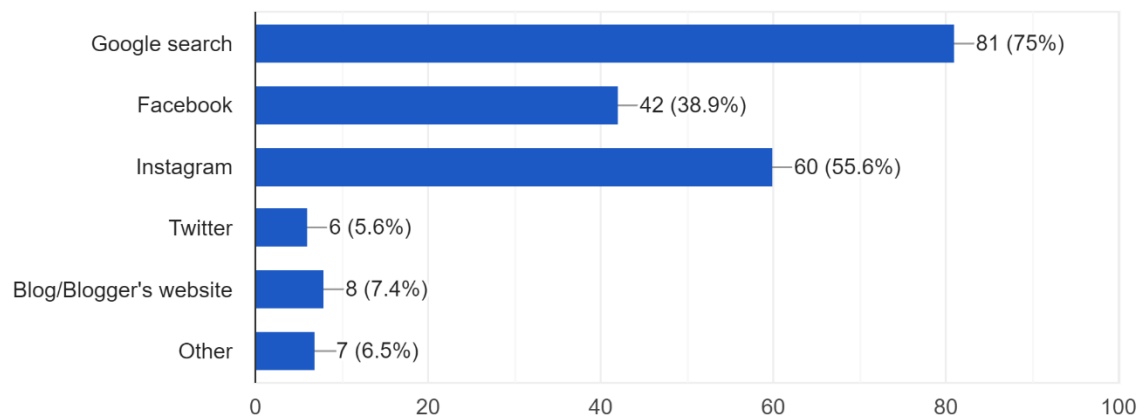


Figure 9: Online Channels

Interestingly only 7.4% (n=8) of respondents said that they go directly to the blog/blogger's website. The majority of people find blogs through online search engines. Although if you combine the number of respondents that said they find blogs on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, then that number far exceeds those that search online using Google. This proves how influential social networking sites are in promoting blog content.

5.2.7 Discovery of Blogs

This question was related to the one preceding this. It was asked to get more information on where people search for blogs. The outcome had some similarities to the one that came before. Again, the majority of respondents answered Google search, 55.6% (n=60); Instagram was the second most chosen option at 46.3% (n=50); Facebook was 32.4% (n=35); word of mouth was 22.2% (n=24); YouTube was 18.5% (n=20). Further information can be seen from the graph below.

How did you first discover the blogs/bloggers you read/follow?

108 responses

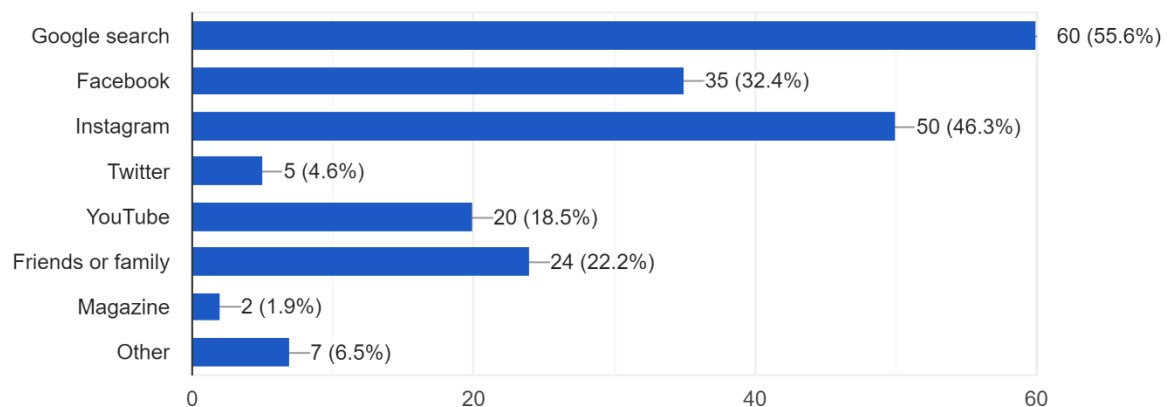


Figure 10: Discovery of Blogs

The responses here were similar to the previous question. Most people discovered blogs from search engines such as Google. Although like the previous answers, once social networking sites and YouTube are added together it indicates that most people found their blog content for the first time on these social media platforms.

5.2.8 Purchase Intention

Data collected on the influence that blogs have on purchase intention was integral to the hypothesis and research aims of this study.

In order to understand more about consumers' relationships with blogs throughout the decision-making process, respondents were asked if they read reviews of a product/service before making a purchase. 95.4% said yes (n=103); 4.6% said no (n=5).

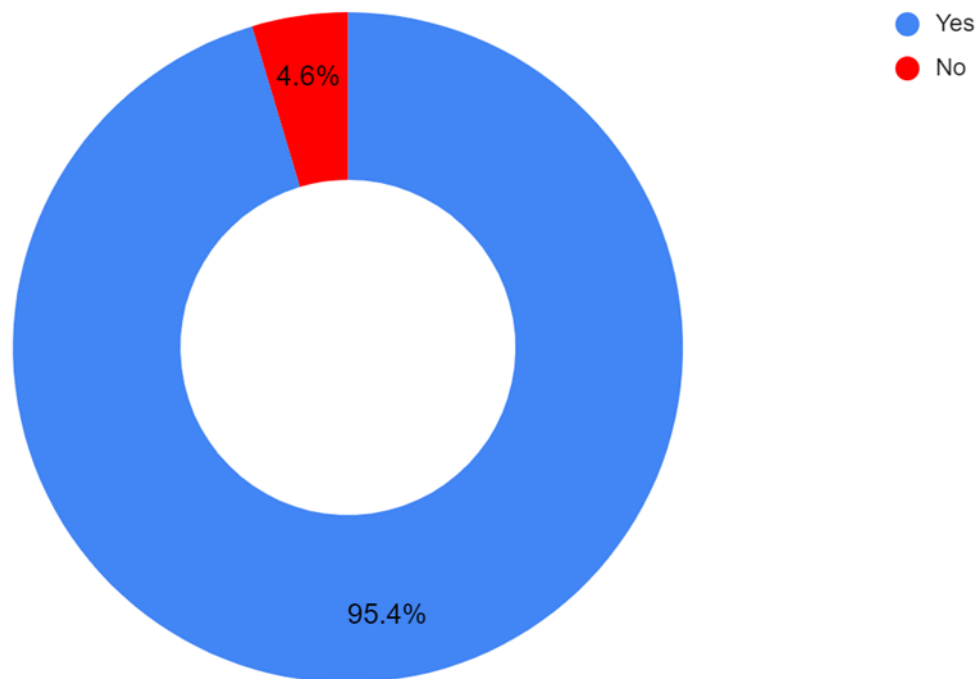


Figure 11:Purchase Intention

A resounding 95% of respondents said that they do refer to blogs when considering purchasing a product or service. This indicates that blogs have a very influential role to play in the purchase-decision-making process.

5.2.9 Impact of Reviews

Multiple choice questions were provided to respondents on the impact that blogs have on their intention to buy products. The majority of respondents (68.5%) said that they would consider buying a product advertised by a blogger if it was a product they were in need of (n=74); a further 7.4% (n=8) said they were likely to buy a product advertised by a blogger; 13.9% (n=15) said they were unlikely and 10.2% (n=11) said that they would never purchase a product advertised by a blogger.

Impact of blogs on purchase intention

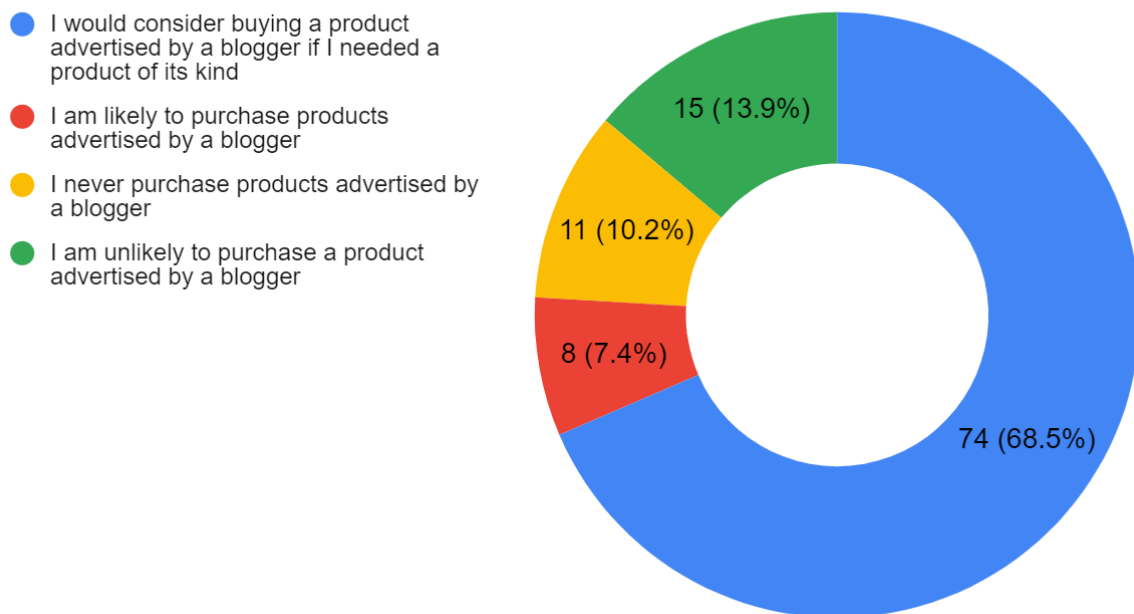


Figure 12: Impact of Reviews

The answers above reveal that the majority of respondents are influenced by blogs in terms of purchase intention. This is important as one of the main aims of this research was to prove that blogs effect purchase intention, in this case, it has a positive effect on over 70% of respondents.

5.2.10 Purchase Intention Based on Reviews

The respondents were asked to rate the frequency at which they would buy something based on a review from a blogger. 52.8% said sometimes (n=57); 18.5% very often (n=20); 18.5% rarely (n=20); 6.5% never (n=7); 3.7% always (n=4).

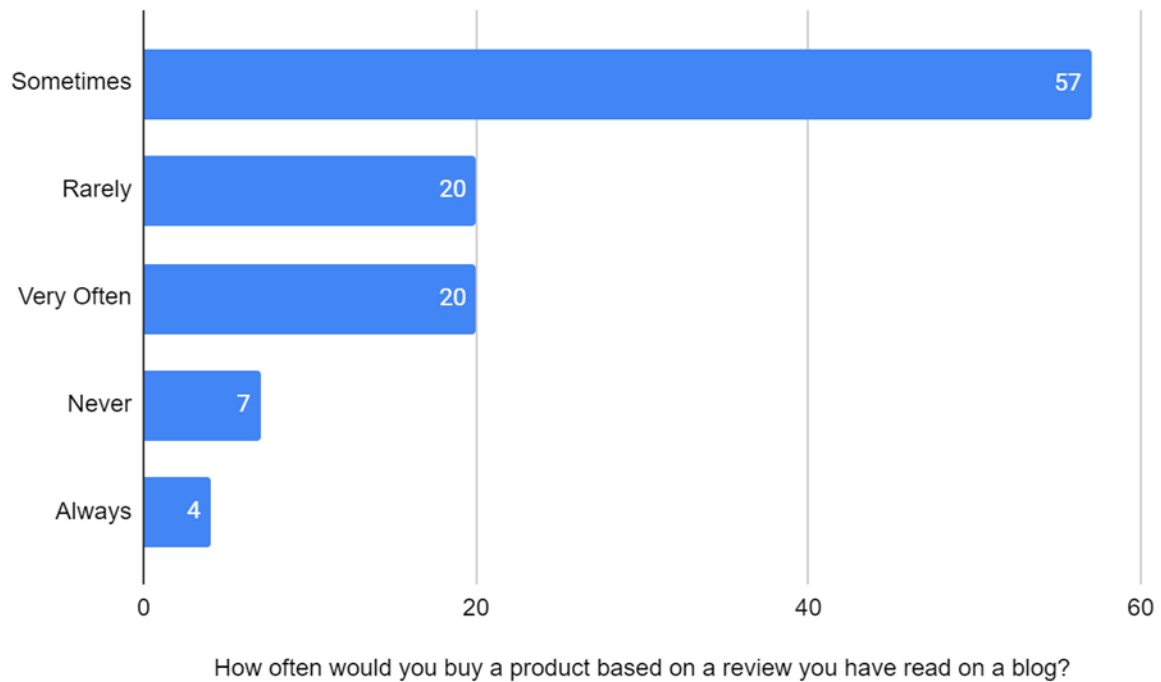


Figure 13:Purchase Intention Based on Reviews

Most people responded that they would sometimes or often buy something based on a review from a blog. This again highlights the influence blogs have on purchase intention. A review of a product can play a significant role when consumers are considering buying something.

5.2.11 Negative Reviews on Purchase Intention

Another critical question that respondents were asked was if negative reviews of products or services in a blog they had read would affect their purchase intent in the future when considering purchasing that product. The respondents were given 3 multiple choice answers to choose from. 54.6% of the 108 respondents said maybe (n=59); 39.8% said yes (n=43); 5.6% said no (n=6).

Would a negative review of a product change your intention to buy that product when making future purchase decisions?

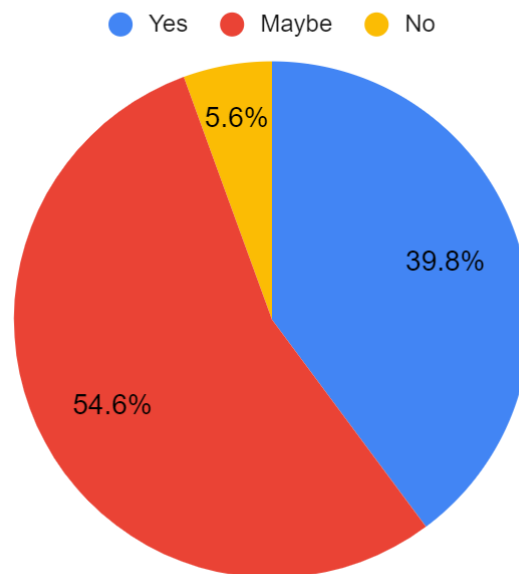


Figure 14: Negative Reviews on Purchase Intention

Perhaps not surprisingly, only a handful of people said that a negative review would not affect their purchasing decisions. The majority either said maybe or yes. This further proves how influential blogs can be when reviewing products or services and the impact it can have on purchasing decisions. A negative review by an influential blogger can have serious consequences in terms of sales and reputation.

5.2.12 Brand Awareness

This section focused on brand awareness and the impact that it has on consumers. The respondents were required to answer if they had discovered a product or brand through reading a blog. 85.2% said yes (n=92); 14.8% said no (n=16).

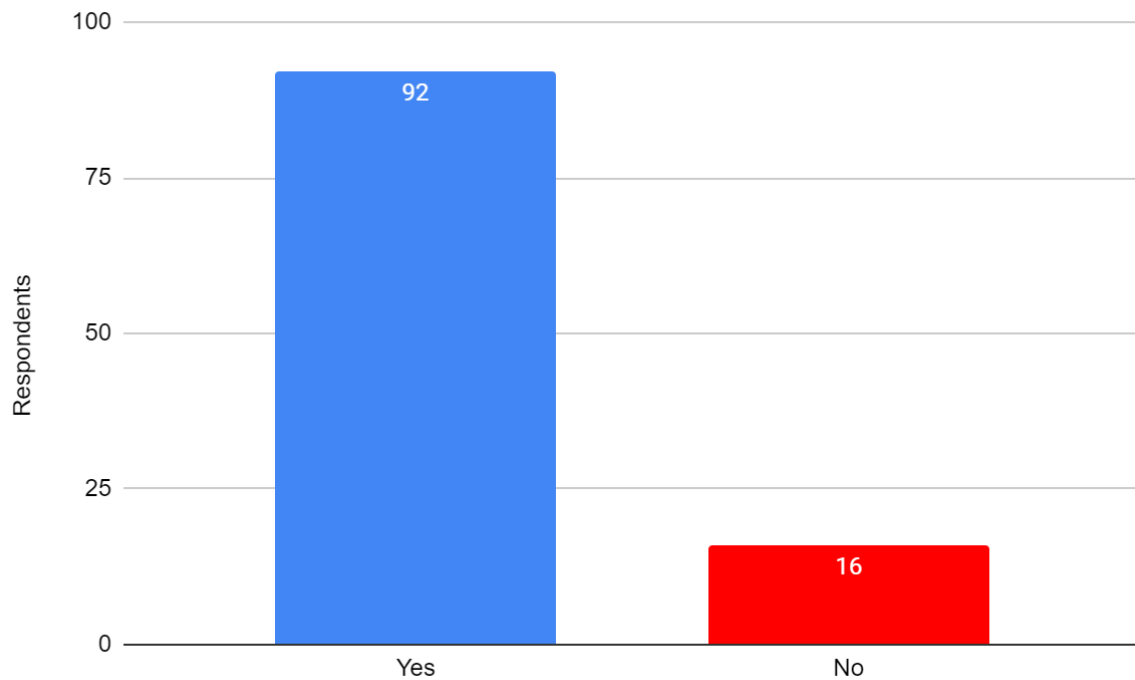


Figure 15: Brand Awareness

With over 85% of people saying that they have discovered new brands from reading blogs, it suggests that a high proportion of the population can be introduced to new brands and products through this platform and that reviews of products and services, combined with blog credibility, can play an important role in promoting products from an advertising perspective.

5.2.13 Blog Reviews and Awareness of Brand

The following question examined the relationship between product reviews and brand awareness. They were required to answer it through a multiple choice-based question, the options provided ranged from strong to no impact. 55.6% of people said it had a moderate impact (n=60); 19.4% said a strong impact (n=21); 17.6% said it had a low impact (n=19); 7.4% said it had no impact (n=8).

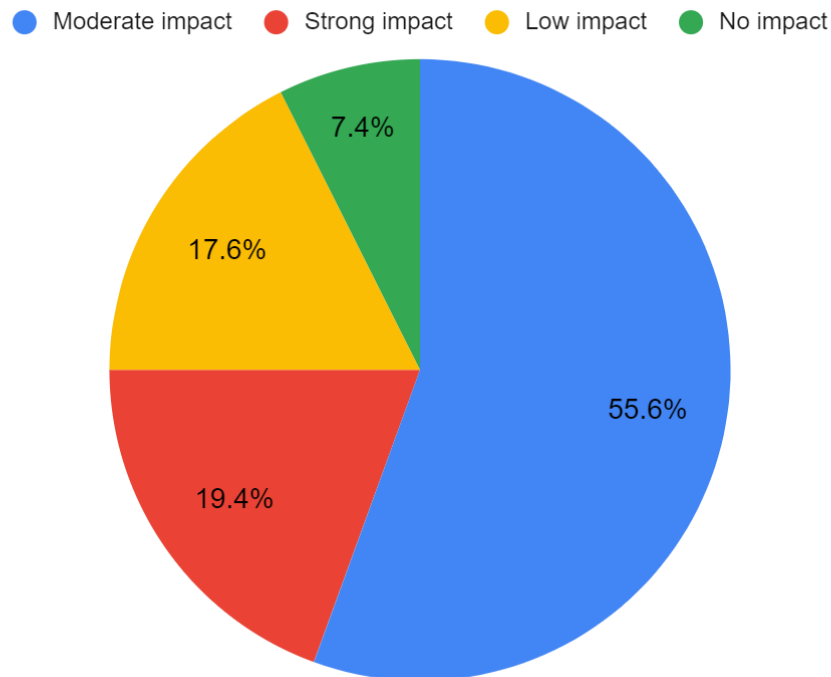


Figure 16: Blog Reviews and Awareness of Brand

75% of respondents said that reviews of products have had a strong or moderate impact on their awareness of the brand. This indicates that bloggers can influence how consumers relate products or services to a particular brand. For example, a negative review in a blog could change the perception consumers have of a brand name. Consumers connect a product to a brand because of repeated and memorable exposure to the brand, a negative review means that consumers then see that brand more negatively.

5.2.14 Brand Attitude

The next section focused on brand attitude and if a negative review of a product had a negative impact on brand attitude towards the product/service. Participants were asked if a negative review of a product changed their view of a brand negatively. 63% answered maybe (n=68); 27.8% answered yes (n=30); and 9.3% answered no (n=10).

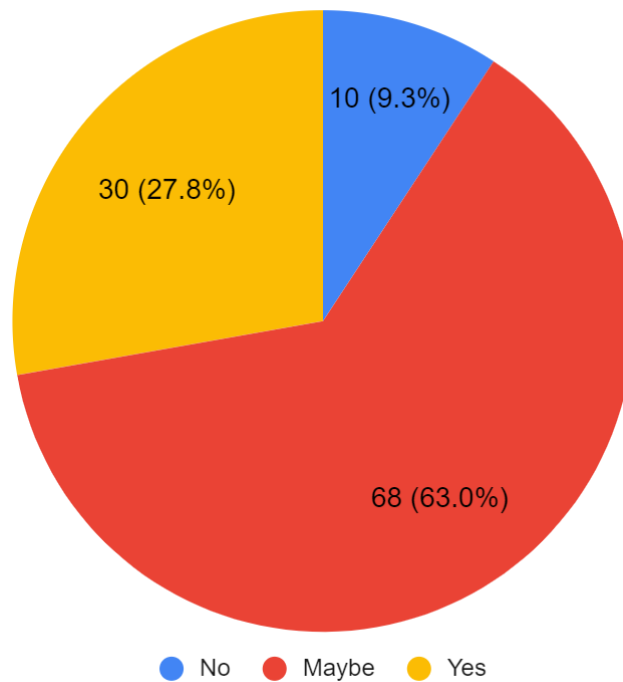


Figure 17: Brand Attitude

Over 90% said that a negative review of a product or service would have some sort of negative impact on their attitude towards the brand. These results indicate that blogs are extremely effective in changing perceptions of brands and how consumers perceive them. The brand image could be damaged because of a bad review, consumers could associate the negative review with the brand name or slogan in future.

5.2.15 Effect of Sponsorship Disclosure on Brand Attitude

Respondents were asked the following: when a blogger discloses that the blog is sponsored, how does this effect your view/opinion of the product? The answers would provide important data with regards to the hypothesis, which states that sponsorship disclosure impacts brand attitude negatively. 50.9% said it would make no change to brand attitude (n=55); 44.4% said it would have a negative impact (n=48); and 4.6% said it would have a positive impact (n=5).

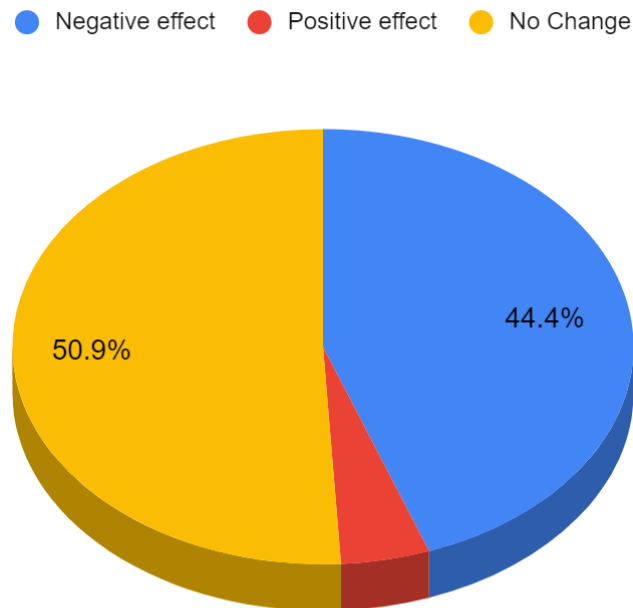


Figure 18: Effect of Sponsorship Disclosure on Brand Attitude

Almost half said that their attitude towards the brand would be impacted negatively.

However, with over a half of respondents saying it had no change the results indicate that brand image is not significantly affected as a result of a blogger disclosing that they are sponsored. This may suggest that bloggers lose credibility when disclosing paid sponsorships with companies, but that the brand associated with this is not affected as much.

5.2.16 Blog Credibility

In the next section questions were asked to examine whether credibility of a blog impacts advertising effectiveness and the factors that may increase or decrease credibility. The first question in this section asked was a broad question about overall trust in blogs. 66.7% of respondents answered yes (n=72); while 33.3% answered no (n=36).

Trust in blogs

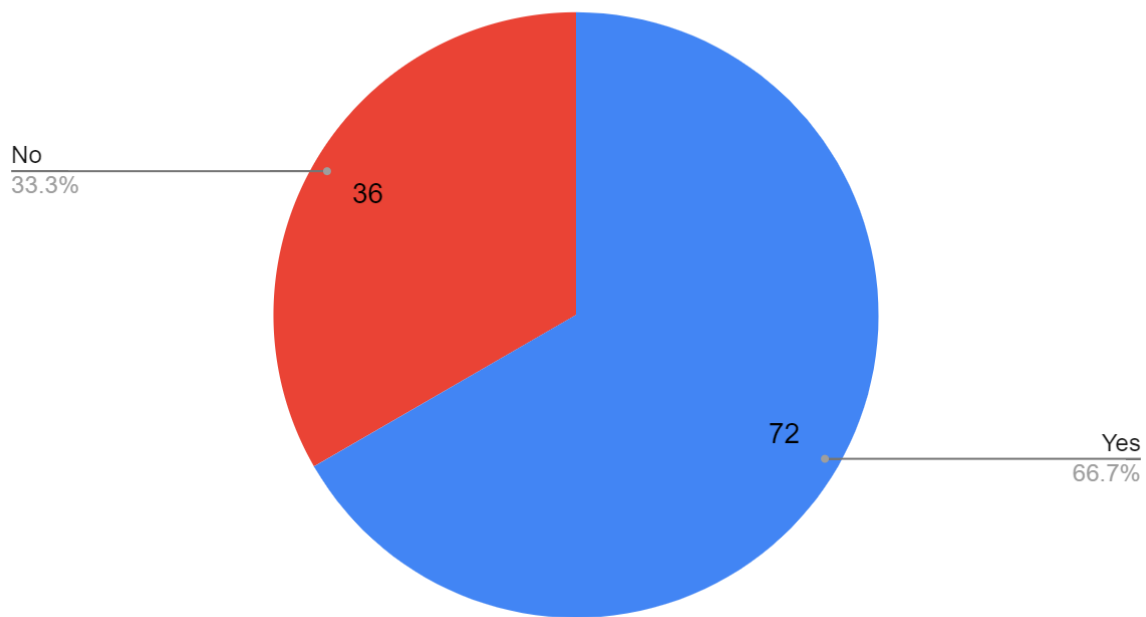


Figure 19: Blog Credibility

In this section the ratio was approximately 2:1 yes to no. The majority of people trust what they read in blogs but the percentage of people that said no is relatively high. This illustrates that even though people tend to trust blog content and bloggers, there are still many people that are cautious and sceptical as to what they are reading in blogs.

5.2.17 Blog Revisits

To understand more about consumer trust in blogs the next question asked was if the respondents revisit the same blogger/blog when they need information about products? 40.7% said maybe (n=44); 39.8% said yes (n=43); and 19.4% said no (n=21).

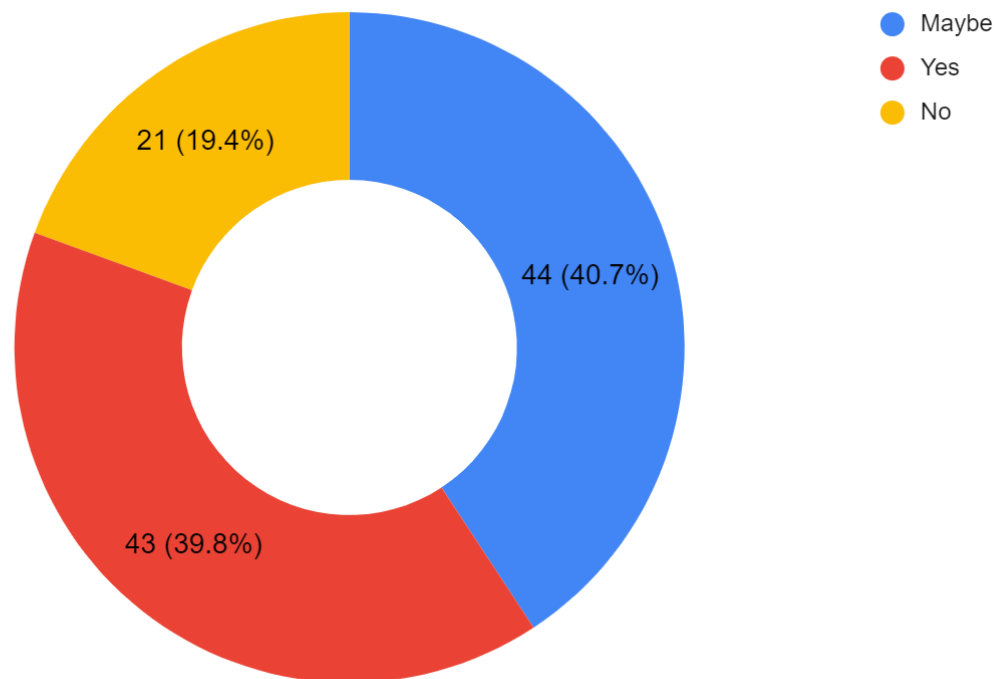


Figure 20: Blog Revisits

The response to this question was quite divided. Although many said that they would revisit a blog/blogger to seek information about products, there were a lot of people that were not entirely convinced that they would. This suggests a doubt in the mind of some, with over 40% saying maybe. Interestingly nearly one fifth of those that responded said that they would not revisit a blog at all. Although there are many factors that could explain this, it does however show a lack of trust in the blog.

5.2.18 Trust in Disclosed Sponsorship

One of the significant hypotheses formulated in this study was of the impact blogs have on trust if a blogger discloses that the content is sponsored. The hypothesis was that it would affect the credibility of the blog negatively. However, the results paint a different picture. As can be seen from the graph below 49.1% said no change (n=53); 41.7% said that it would have a negative impact (n=45); 9.3% said it would have a positive impact (n=10).

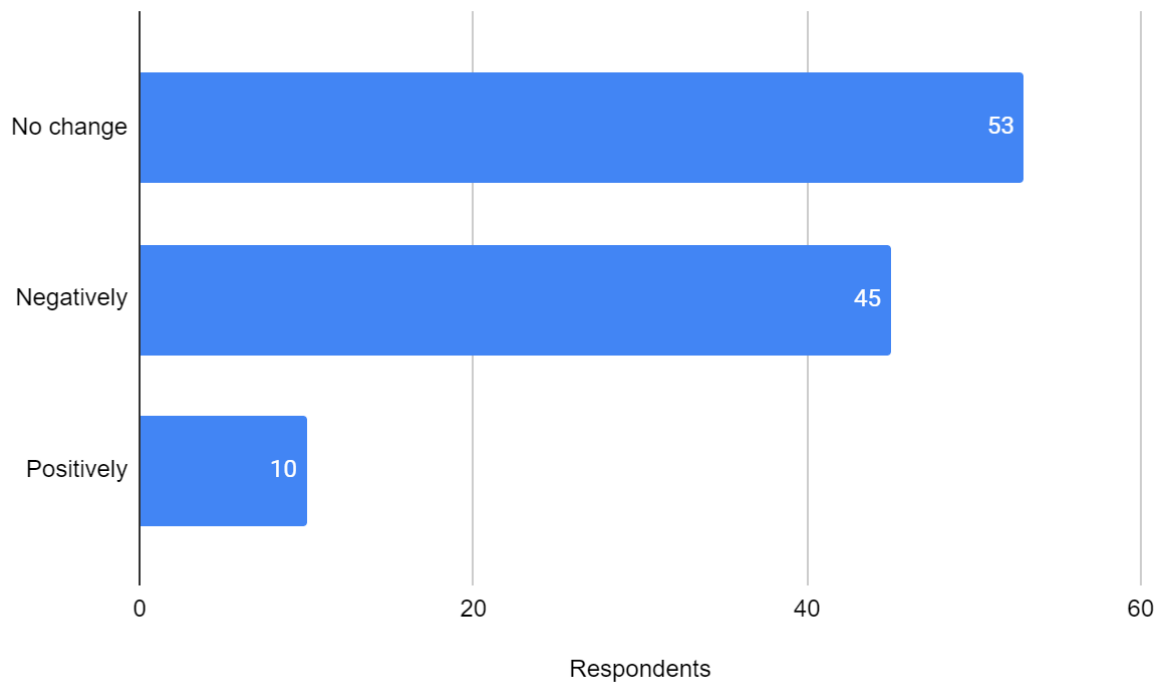


Figure 21: Trust in Disclosed Sponsorship

This response shows that many people were not affected by the disclosure of sponsorship in the blog, these results conflict with the evidence collected throughout the literature review. Although there is a large percentage that would have their trust in the blog negatively impacted, it clearly shows that, for the majority, their trust in the blog/blogger would not change negatively as a result. This demonstrates a shift in the mindset of people compared to previous research.

5.2.19 Advertising Effectiveness and Expertise of Blog

One of the main objectives of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool. The following section comprised of questions related to this area.

The next question evaluated whether the level of expertise of the blogger affected the view/opinion of the product. 79.6% of respondents answered yes (n=86); 20.4% answered no (n=22).

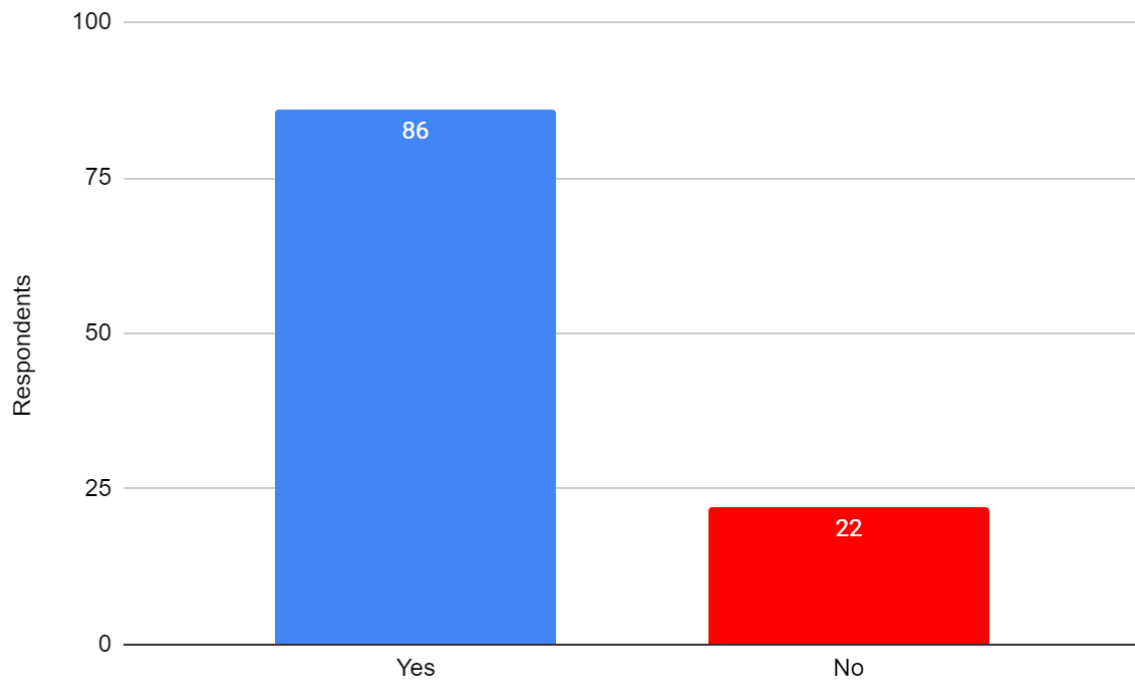


Figure 22: Advertising Effectiveness and Expertise of Blog

This response corresponds with previous research in that people generally trust bloggers that are considered thought leaders in their area of expertise. Judging from this set of data, people are more inclined to be more responsive to bloggers that are experts, and this effects how they view the product. There is a correlations effect between how readers view the expertise of the blogger and the product to which the blogger is reviewing or recommending.

5.2.20 Recommendations to Family/Friends

The next question asked the respondents whether they would recommend blogs to people they know. 70.4% answered yes (n=76); 29.6% answered no (n=32).

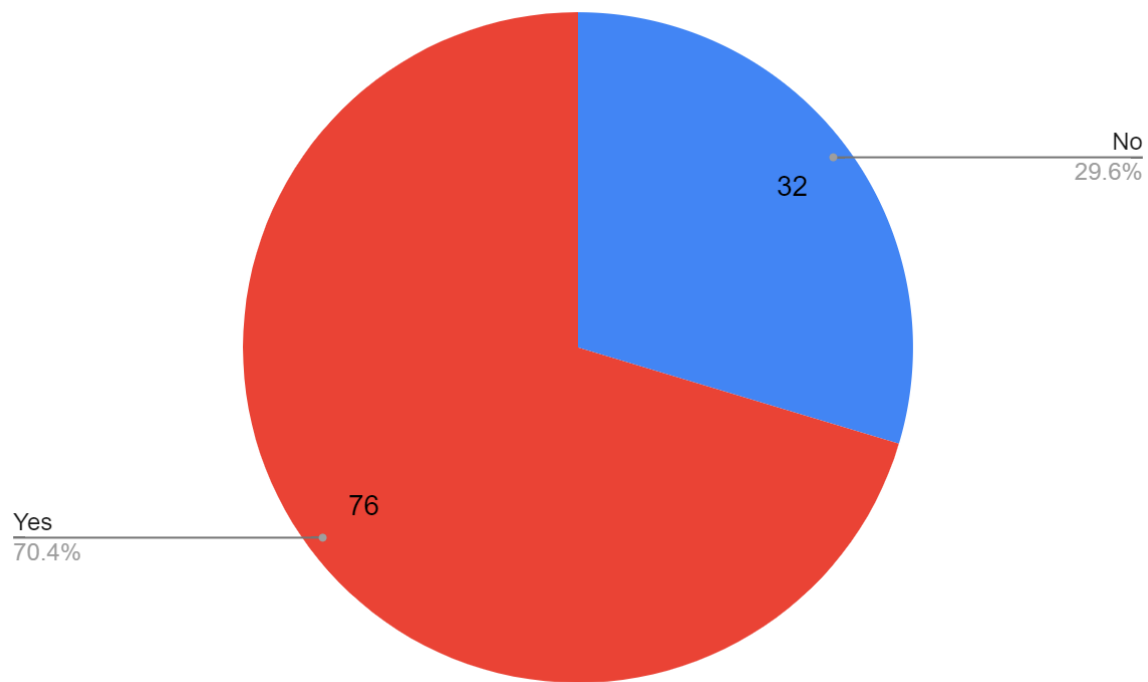


Figure 23: Recommendations to Family/Friends

The fact that 70% of respondents would recommend a blog to a friend demonstrates that blogs are trusted by the majority of respondents. Therefore, it can be speculated that there would not be as high a percentage of people that would recommend a blog if it was not considered useful or trustworthy by people.

5.2.21 Blog Promotion of Products

In this question the respondents were asked if they felt blogs were a good way for companies to promote their products. 82.4% answered yes (n=89); 17.6% answered no (n=19).

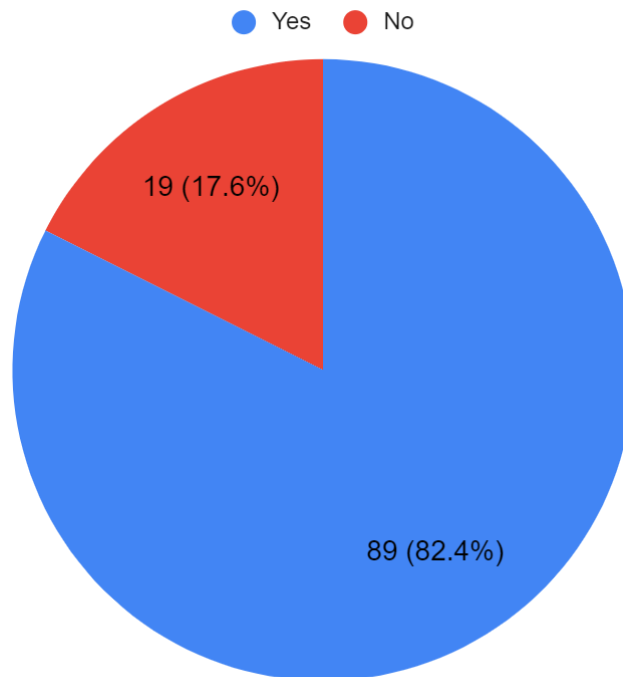


Figure 24: Blog Promotion of Products

Most respondents felt that blogging is a good way to promote products. It demonstrates an understanding by the respondents and a validation that advertising through blogs or bloggers is a good way to promote a product or service.

5.2.22 Blogs as an Effective Advertising Platform

Finally, the respondents were asked to rate blogs as an effective advertising platform for companies from very effective to not effective. 52.8% of the 108 respondents answered moderately effective (n=57); 38.9% answered very effective (n=42); 8.3% answered not effective (n=9).

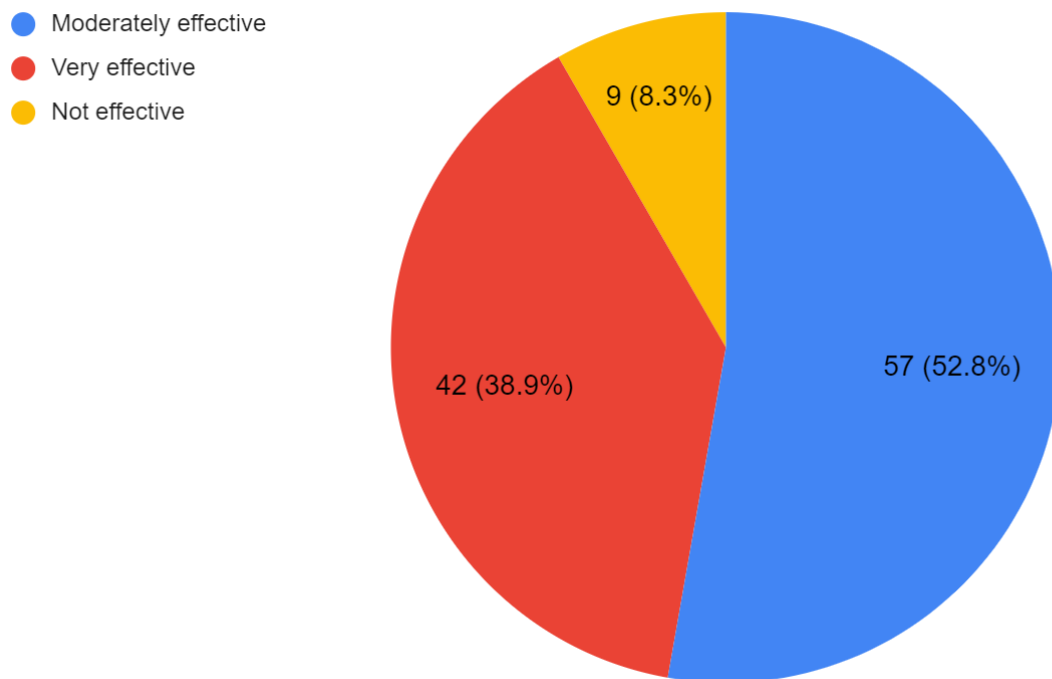


Figure 25: Blogs as an Effective Advertising Platform



The answers here show that over 90% of respondents rate blogs as an effective advertising platform for companies either moderately or strongly.

5.3 Cross-Tabulation

The following is a summary of findings, patterns and trends found using pivot charts on Microsoft Excel. The data collected was used to analyse the relationship between multiple variables of key information related to the hypothesis. Key information can be seen in the tables and bullet points below:

5.3.1 Relationship Between Age and Purchase Intention

Table 1: Relationship Between Age and Purchase Intention

Count of Age		Column Labels 				
Row Labels		18-24	25-34	35-45	46+	Grand Total
I am likely to purchase products advertised by a blogger		0	8	0	0	8
I am unlikely to purchase a product advertised by a blogger		0	11	4	0	15
I never purchase products advertised by a blogger		0	6	4	1	11
I would consider buying a product advertised by a blogger if I needed a product of its kind		6	52	16	0	74
Grand Total		6	77	24	1	108

From the table above it is clear that purchase intention is related to the impact blogs have on the reader. The majority of people are likely to or would consider buying a product they have seen in a blog. What is interesting though is that the majority of 25-34-year olds are likely to or would consider buying something based on a blog they have read. This would indicate that this age group is more tech-savvy and likely to be in full-time employment * (CSO, 2020). It also coincides with figures released in 2020 by Mintel on online shopping trends that indicate that consumers in this age group are more likely to shop online using devices such as smartphones because “younger consumers are typically more tech-savvy compared to older consumers” (Mintel Report, 2020).

**These figures were taken from February 2020 – Pre Covid 19 Lockdown*

5.3.2 Impact on Brand Awareness

Table 2: Impact on Brand Awareness

Count of Age	Column Labels				
Row Labels	18-24	25-34	35-45	46+	Grand Total
Low impact	0	13	6	0	19
Moderate impact	4	39	16	1	60
No impact	0	7	1	0	8
Strong impact	2	18	1	0	21
Grand Total	6	77	24	1	108

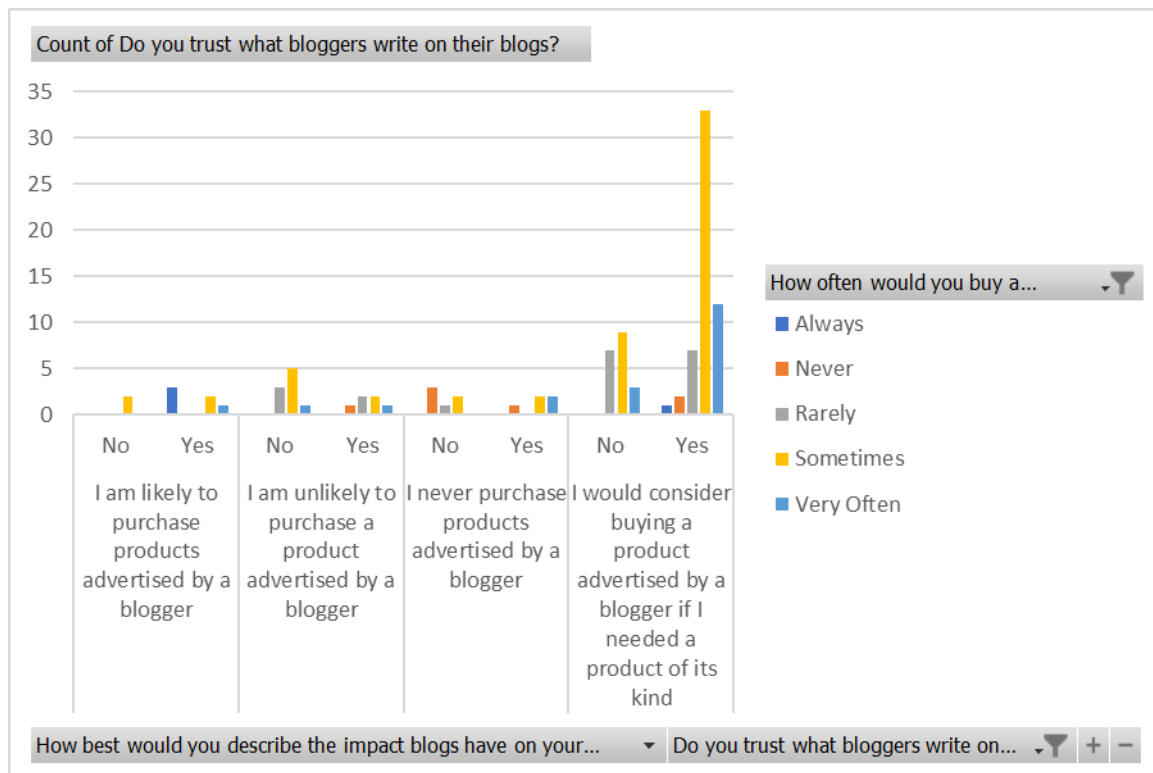
In terms of age groups, there is a theme throughout this data that suggests 25-34-year olds are more likely to be impacted on brand awareness, attitude, and purchase intention than other age groups. The table above breaks down the affects blogs have on brand awareness; the breakdown of age groups suggests that 25-34 years olds are more aware and responsive to these forces than other age groups.

5.3.3 Correlation Between Trust in Blog and Intent to Buy

The graph below illustrates a pattern among those surveyed. It shows that those that are more likely to trust a blog are more likely to buy a product based on a review or recommendation

from a blogger. It also shows that those who are more likely to consider purchasing a product after reading a review on a blog are the very same people that would either sometimes or frequently buy products based on reviews. This demonstrates a link between purchase intent and trust in blog, the higher the trust in a blog, the higher the purchase intent.

Table 3: Correlation Between Trust in Blog and Intent to Buy



6.0 DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

Bloggers are a unique option for companies to advertise a product and promote their brand, they can provide information on products or services because they are considered trusted opinion leaders and experts in the industry. The present study investigated the role that blogs play as an advertising tool and the influence they have on purchase intent. The study departs from previous research that focused more on specific aspects such as credibility, information seeking motivations, communication, influencers, celebrity, expertise, and so on. This study took a broader approach incorporating aspects such as brand awareness, brand attitude and trust into the study. The research did however focus on specific aims throughout, and the findings represented this. The main aims of the research, as set out at the beginning, were as follows:

1. To investigate the effectiveness of advertising through blogs.
2. To assess the impact that blogging has on purchase intention.
3. To evaluate the effect that blogs have on brand awareness.
4. To determine the impact of blog credibility on the consumer decision making process.

This chapter focused on discussing the results as analysed and presented in the previous section. The purpose of the discussion was to interpret and describe the significance of the findings in relation to the research problem that was investigated. The following paragraphs in this section include information that consists of a brief overview of the findings, whether they support the hypothesis or not, and why, the findings in relation to previous research, and finally, the implications for future research.

6.2 Demographics

It was key to the findings that age groups surveyed represented generations that tend to use the internet more than other generations. The researcher was conscious of discriminating against age or generalising groups based on a name, i.e. millennials, but the findings do suggest that this cohort of people are more inclined to read blogs. As this survey was intended to reach a broad spectrum of blog readers there was no reason to include whether respondents were male or female. Previous studies have narrowed the scope to participants that read only a certain blog such as fashion, and thus narrowed their research further to allow females only (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020, Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). This study encompassed all genders as it was a broader study on blogs in general. However, the geography was made up of those living in Dublin city, or the surrounding areas of the Dublin region.

6.3 Key Findings

6.3.1 Advertising Effectiveness

One of the key hypotheses was to investigate the effectiveness of advertising and if it could be determined by the interaction of blog type and product type. There was a resounding yes to the question that asked respondents if the level of expertise of the blogger effected their opinion of the product. This therefore supports the hypothesis that the effectiveness of advertising can be determined by the interaction effect of blog type and product type. It also supports previous research that determine that the effectiveness of advertising can be measured by linking the type of blogger, be it expert or consumer, with the product they are discussing in their blog. This supports theories brought forth by Esch et al. (2018) that state that in the online world, trust and credibility are still paramount in attracting consumers' engagement; hence, promoting companies' products and services through blogs can be an effective strategy to lower consumer scepticism barriers (Esch *et al.*, 2018). It also supports Ho et al., (2015) who determined that blog advertising effectiveness varies with different

combinations of product constructs and blog types (Ho *et al.*, 2015). The findings in this research support these theories as they provide clear and conclusive evidence that a clear majority of people respond positively to a product when the blog content is written by someone who is perceived as an expert in that area. When blogs or bloggers are considered as expert opinion leaders, or influencers, they are perceived as popular due to the number of followers they have, this is then likely to elicit higher perceptions of opinion leadership compared to an influencer who is perceived as less popular (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017).

Blogs are therefore a critical cog in the overall advertising campaigns for marketers. Blogs are highly effective at shaping the mindset of consumers towards a particular product, but it is important for companies to choose the correct blogger for their campaigns. These findings and the supporting theories from previous research illustrate the important role blogs play in influencing consumers' opinions of a product, but it is of paramount importance that marketers carefully choose the correct blogger to review or promote their product. The level of expertise the blogger has can undeniably affect the views and opinions of consumers and therefore, companies must develop strategies that enable them to maximise the influence that expert bloggers have and what they can deliver to a target audience.

6.3.2 Purchase Intention

The other aim essential to this study was investigating the effects that blogs have on purchase intention. Firstly, respondents were asked in the survey if they read reviews of a product/service before making a purchase of a product, and over 95% answered yes. Over two-thirds also said that they trust what they read in blogs. Respondents were then asked how often they would buy something based on a review that they read from a blogger, almost 75% gave an indication that they would purchase something advertised by a blogger (Section

5.3.3, Table 3). This demonstrates the impact blogs have on the decision-making process. A large segment of individuals seek information in various ways before making a purchase decision on the product in mind. This can be seen from the responses to the question that asked why people read blogs, the majority said it was to learn more about products. In this case, blogs provide an outlet to seek reviews and recommendations, and learn more about a product from like-minded individuals, and to interact with other bloggers and consumers alike. As cited in the literature review; blogs enable interaction between the blogger and the visitor, this allows consumers to exchange ideas or opinions with the author (Mutum and Wang, 2011). The fact that most respondents said that they seek reviews of a product before making a purchase shows the effects that blogs can have on the purchase decision-making process.

The main hypothesis formed in this section was that the perceived trust of a blogger's recommendation would positively affect purchase intention. Respondents were first asked if they trust what bloggers write on their blogs, over two thirds of the sample population answered that they do indeed trust what bloggers write. They were then asked to describe the impact blogs have on their purchase intention. 75% of respondents answered that they would consider or were likely to buy something advertised by a blogger. Therefore, this supports the hypothesis that blogs can affect purchase intent when they are trusted by consumers.

However, it is important to acknowledge that a little over 20% of respondents said they were either unlikely to or would never buy something advertised by a blogger, which does undermine the hypotheses slightly. Notably, recommendations by bloggers may not have a direct effect on purchase intention in every individual case. Blog recommendations may not always drive purchase intention. One possible explanation for this result is that shopping is a complex decision and not always straight forward for people. Price, usefulness, budget, market, and economic forces that are out of one's control are but some of the things that need

to be considered first before purchase. Although having a useful recommendation from a credible and trustworthy source may ease some of the concerns, it is by no means the deciding factor in all consumers' final purchase decisions. It does however need to be remembered that over 75% were inclined to buy something recommended by a blog which is a significant proportion of the sample population.

Therefore, the findings support previous theories and studies that investigate the correlation between trust in the blogger and purchase intent. As mentioned previously in the literature review an example of this can be seen from the study conducted by Bouhlef et al. (2010) that investigated the impact of trust in the blogger on purchase intention. They concluded that the more the blog is credible, the more the visitor has positive thoughts about the blog and the more they are inclined to make a purchase (Bouhlef *et al.*, 2010). Other studies support this theory too and concluded that credibility of the blog has significant consequences on the purchase intentions of online consumers (Ho et al., 2015, Dhar and Jha, 2014). The reason this confirms the theories presented by previous studies is because it demonstrates that people are more likely to purchase something advertised by a blogger that they trust, as opposed to those bloggers that they distrust.

These findings imply that trust in the blogger plays an incredibly important role in the purchase decisions made by consumers. A blogger that holds an authoritative position in terms of expertise or celebrity and is considered a trustworthy source of information on a product can positively effect sales. This illustrates the importance of companies choosing the right bloggers to promote their brands and products. A trusted source that is considered an expert or thought leader in their industry is the type of blogger that companies should be using to promote their goods and services.

6.3.3 Brand Awareness

The purpose of this section was to determine whether advertising effectiveness is affected by the interaction effect between the expertise of the blogger and brand awareness. Over 85% of respondents said that they had discovered a new product after reading a blog. This is a substantially high indication that blogs play a key role in introducing consumers to new products and brands and in increasing brand awareness. Brand awareness plays a crucial role in consumer decisions. Consumers tend to choose familiar brands with high brand awareness when making purchase decisions. Brand awareness is a tool that simplifies purchase decisions. When consumers choose from among several products in the same category, the products with high brand awareness are likely to be in their list of considerations (Keller, 1993). If consumers do not find information about a brand, the brand will not be in the consumer's thoughts when making purchase decisions, so it is important that businesses target consumers using strategies that offer information on the product, and blogs are an effective platform to do this on.

Consumers' interaction with blogs can also play a crucial role in determining how they view a brand. A negative review can negatively impact how consumers view a product. The interaction effect of blog type and brand awareness on brand attitude is significant (Ho et al., 2015). 80% of respondents said that the level of blogger expertise played a key role in their opinion of the product. The other important information to come from this section was that after reading a review of a product or service in a blog, 75% of respondents said that their awareness of the brand had increased in some capacity, be it moderately or strongly. This supports the hypothesis that advertising effectiveness is affected by the interaction effect between the expertise of the blogger and brand awareness and supports previous findings that among products recommended in articles composed by experts, high brand awareness products can form a better brand attitude (Ho et al., 2015). In other words, the higher the

credibility of the blogger, the higher the impact is on brand awareness. However, it is essential to highlight that 25% of respondents felt that blogs had either a low or zero impact on their awareness of a brand. This adds up to one in four respondents.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram have a positive impact on brand awareness. Many of the respondents discovered brands through these platforms, this supports the hypothesis that social media has a positive impact on brand awareness. It also illustrated that while this study focused on blogs and social networking sites, the findings can be extended to other media platforms such as YouTube. As platforms continue to develop, the extent of involvement generated by a platform can help inform decisions on influencer marketing strategies (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019).

6.3.4 Brand Attitude

In terms of brand attitude, only 10% said that a negative review of a product or service would not have an impact on their attitude towards the brand. This illustrates how effective blogs can be in terms of attitude towards the brand. A recommendation by a blogger or a bad review about a product could not only have a negative effect on the product, but also the brand. This supports the hypothesis that a negative review of a product/service has a negative impact on brand attitude towards the product/service. With almost 90% of respondents indicating with either a “yes”, or “undecided”, and only 10% categorically answering “no”, the findings in this study support the above hypothesis. The statement is also supported by the findings of previous research. As alluded to in the literature review Fu al, et. (2019) determined that a high proportion of negative customer comments in a blog can be an important factor that affects customer attitudes toward products (Jen-Ruei Fu and Chen, 2012).

Respondents then submitted answers on how blogs that disclose that they are sponsored effect their view of the product. Over 50% indicated that there would be no change to their

opinion of the product. This is surprising and conflicts somewhat with previous theories and research. It is also contrary to the hypothesis formed that stated that the disclosure of sponsorship by a blogger affects brand attitude negatively. The majority of respondents said that it did not change their opinion of the product.

Previous research discussed in the literature review by Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) theorized that disclosures can activate an individual's persuasion knowledge, resulting in the use of cognitive and affective resistance strategies, which in turn mitigate persuasion (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the consequences of this can be that attitudes toward the sponsoring brand become more negative and purchase intention is lower. The finding from this study do not categorically support this theory as only 44% said it had a negative impact on their view of the blog. These findings may not support previous research for a number of speculative reasons. Some reasons could include cultural norms differing here in Ireland, perhaps previous studies are outdated. However, it is of the opinion of the researcher that perhaps due to cultural influences such as Instagram, people have become more desensitized to seeing sponsored content online and consequently, are less affected negatively as a result due to the regularity of promoting such content online.

The results of this survey illustrate the importance of blogs in influencing attitudes towards products and brands. It also demonstrates how important it is to keep bloggers onside when it comes to promoting goods. Keller, in the context of discussing brand image and associations attached to that, described attitude as the consumer's beliefs and feelings towards the brand's attributes and benefits (Keller, 2003). If blogs are writing negative reviews about products and that damages the reputation of the brand, the consumers' beliefs and feelings towards that product's attributes are negatively affected too, and the image the consumer has of that brand is negatively affected in the long-term.

6.3.5 Blog Credibility

Trust in the blogger plays a key role in determining how effective bloggers are in influencing purchase intention. The higher the blogger's credibility, the higher the impact the purchase intention is with followers (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). The findings from this research align with most previous research in terms of the correlation between trust in the blogger and purchase intent. As mentioned in the literature review, previous studies provided a mixed bag in terms of the correlation between trust in the blogger and purchase intention, with some studies suggesting that trust in the blogger did not influence consumers' purchase intent (Esch *et al.*, 2018).

The results indicate that two thirds of respondent's trust what bloggers write, and that the majority of people would consider purchasing something reviewed by a blogger.

Furthermore, with most people answering that they read blogs before purchasing something, it illustrates the significance of having trust in the blogger. These findings support the hypothesis that credibility of the blog positively impacts purchase intention because there is a clear correlation effect between trust in the blogger and intention to buy something as a result of reading a blog review.

The other aim of this section was to determine whether a blog that discloses that it is sponsored diminishes the readers' trust in the blog. Much like the question about trust in the brand, once sponsorship is disclosed the majority of respondents said that they felt no change towards the blogger. This contradicts previous research and is contrary to the hypothesis that it diminishes trust in the blogger. Other studies argue that disclosure of sponsorship does in fact affect trust in the blog negatively, and it is generally perceived that sponsored blogs have less credibility than ones that are not sponsored (Uribe, Buzeta and Velásquez, 2016), (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2016). However, the finding here suggests that less than half of respondents view the blog more negatively as a result. This contradicts the studies mentioned,

it does however suggest a trend that has been discovered throughout the research. The impact of blog disclosure does not have the same impact as it once did, and this may be due to the increase in sponsored content and paid partnerships in recent years. As a result, the disclosure of sponsorship does not have as significant an impact on trust in bloggers as it once did, trust levels in fact remain relatively high, and thus, credibility of the blogs remain high.

6.3.6 Online Platforms

The final section focused on the multiple online platforms that companies often launch influencer marketing campaigns on simultaneously, and the findings were related to where and what sources people find blogs from online. Many websites of companies and organisations blog from a central location hub on their website, however the findings suggest that this is not the best channel to source blogs from. Jen-Ruei Fu and Chen (2012) argue that customers that are highly involved with a product use central routes to process product information, have low level involvement with products. The findings show that most people search for blogs on search engines such as Google, and on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram. The findings also observed that the majority of people first discovered blogs from these channels too. The findings comply with Hughes et al. who suggest that in a Facebook environment, in which users' motivations are more focused on sharing information with peers, awareness campaigns have a more positive impact. In other words, blogs are shared by friends and family and this is where many find blogs. With over 70% of respondents saying that they recommend blogs that they like to friends and family, these findings support the hypothesis that consumers do not search blogs directly at source for low-involvement products i.e. blogger or company website. As consumers may access blog information via different channels, as seen from the findings, future researchers can also compare advertising effectiveness between blogs accessed via different channels.

When asked where they search for blogs online, 56% of respondents said that they use Instagram as one of the channels, and 39% said they use Facebook. Therefore, social networking sites represent a large proportion of the channels through which people search for blogs. This supports the findings of Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro (2018), who established that social networking sites such as Facebook have a positive impact on brand awareness. Also, Momany and Alshboul (2016) stated that the use of social media was an effective tool for generating brand awareness and increasing sales revenue through online channels. Using these channels to promote blogs and increase brand awareness can be an effective strategy for businesses.

Surprisingly, a high proportion of people first discovered blogs because of word of mouth (WOM), this was an interesting development that indicates WOM is a powerful tool that cannot be underestimated. Unsurprisingly, more traditional marketing channels such as magazines had a low response rate as the majority appear to find blog content online.

6.4 Conclusion

6.4.1 Strengths

The results give practical insights into factors that can be used to improve blog advertising effectiveness for businesses. Brands benefit from social media influencers because they can create trends and encourage their followers to buy products that they promote through their platform. This research will enable businesses and future researchers to see the impact that bloggers have on advertising and purchase intention. Researchers will also be able to refer to this research to investigate trends in the impact that blogs have. As technology evolves bloggers are using different methods to reach followers. An example of this is Instagram, influencers play an important role in marketing using this platform but there has been a

generational switch in how bloggers engage with their followers. There appears to be a shift from bloggers posting on their own websites to bloggers now being more active on Instagram and reaching a wider audience there. The findings in this research enables researchers and businesses to see those trends.

This research also enables marketers and researchers to allude to the findings when making important digital marketing decisions. It will also benefit smaller businesses that have tighter budgets to research the effectiveness of using blogs to promote their products. Another positive outcome of this study was that there was a good response rate to the survey, and thus, it was a decent representation of the sample population.

6.4.2 Future Research

Interestingly, the impact of bloggers disclosing that the blog was sponsored did not have a hugely negative affect on the respondents' trust of the brand or blogger. The researcher believes that this is an area that could be further researched in order to get a deeper understanding of why the disclosure of sponsorship in blogs does not have a negative impact on readers as the previous research suggests. As these finding contradict the findings in previous research it is important to understand why that is. Future research should also focus on factors that affect consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts and establish why consumers are not negatively impacted by them.

6.4.3 Implications

This research gives marketers greater opportunities to choose low-cost alternatives to traditional marketing campaigns via the use of paid blog advertisements as a way of communicating with existing and potential customers. Discovering, engaging, and using the services of influential bloggers will allow businesses to improve their relationships with the

target audience as well as provide unique opportunities to increase sales and reduce advertising costs.

6.4.4 Research Limitations

One of the key limitations of this study was that the survey was conducted with those only from Dublin, therefore it is not representative of those throughout the entire country.

Education, culture, age, and profession in this region may differ to other areas of the country.

Also, as this is a study on the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool in influencing purchase intention, it only represents a small portion as many age groups and other demographics do not read blogs regularly.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge a possible design flaw in the survey. One flaw in the study that was observed post-survey was a question related to the regularity with which people read blogs. One of the answers chosen by a small proportion of respondents was that they never read blogs. In hindsight the researcher acknowledges that these people perhaps should have been removed from the study once they chose this option. Even though participants were aware that the survey was for those that read blogs, this question may have been interpreted differently by some. However, it did not have a significant impact on the overall study and did not undermine the key findings.

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8.0 APPENDICES

8.1 Introduction form for Respondents

Dear Participant,

I am conducting research on the effectiveness of blogs as an advertising tool and their impact on purchase intention. The research is directed to those who read blogs occasionally, for example, anyone who has read a blog in the last 6 months. The survey will take between 3-5 minutes to complete.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

All the information you provide will be held in strict confidence and will be deleted when the research is complete. Google Forms does not collect identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address. Therefore, your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study.

Thank you for your help.

8.2 Questionnaire

Impact of Blogs on Purchase Intention

1. What age are you?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-45
- ☐ 46+

2. How many blogs have you read in the last 3 months?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1-3
- ☐ 4-6

- 7+

3. How often do you read blogs?

- Never
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Daily

4. Which of the following blog types do you read?

- Fashion
- Fitness + Health
- Music
- Film
- Travel
- Food
- Technology
- Other

5. Why do you read blogs?

- To get information on products and services
- To discover new products and services
- To meet like-minded people online
- Hobby
- Other

6. Where do you search for blogs online?

- Google search

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Blog/Blogger's website
- Other

7. How did you first discover the blogs/bloggers you read/follow?

- Google search
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Friends or family
- Magazine
- Other

8. How best would you describe the impact blogs have on your purchase intention?

- I am likely to purchase products advertised by a blogger
- I would consider buying a product advertised by a blogger if I needed a product of its kind
- I am unlikely to purchase a product advertised by a blogger
- I never purchase products advertised by a blogger

9. Would a negative review of a product change your intention to buy that product when making future purchase decisions?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

10. How often would you buy a product based on a review you have read on a blog?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Very Often
- ☐ Always

11. Do you read reviews of a product/service before you make a purchase?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. Have you ever discovered a new product/brand through reading a blog?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

13. When reading a review of a product or service how would you rate the impact of blogs on your awareness of the brand?

- ☐ Strong impact
- ☐ Moderate impact
- ☐ Low impact
- ☐ No impact

14. Would a negative review of a product change your view of a brand negatively?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe

15. When a blogger discloses that the blog is sponsored, how does this effect your view/opinion of the product?

- ☐ Negative effect

- Positive effect
- No Change

How the trust in blogger/blog impacts credibility.

16. Do you trust what bloggers write on their blogs?

- Yes
- No

17. Do you revisit the same blogger/blog when you need information about products?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

18. If a blogger discloses that the content is sponsored, how does this impact your trust in the blogger?

- Negatively
- Positively
- No change

19. Does the level of expertise of the blogger effect your view/opinion of the product?

- Yes
- No

20. Would you recommend blogs to friends/family?

- Yes
- No

21. Do you feel that blogs are a good way for companies to promote their products?

- Yes
- No

22. How would you rate blogs as an effective advertising platform for companies?

- ☐ Very effective
- ☐ Moderately effective
- ☐ Not effective