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Citation: Serman, Zehra Ece (2022) Believe it or not: what factors affect the blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in bloggers' recommendations. [Thesis] (Unpublished)

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**BELIEVE IT OR NOT: WHAT FACTORS AFFECT THE BLOG
READERS' PERCEPTION OF BLOGGERS' CREDIBILITY AND
BLOG READERS' TRUST IN BLOGGERS' RECOMMENDATIONS?**

By
ZEHRA ECE SERMAN

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Management**

**School of Business, Economics, and Informatics
DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT
BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

2022

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I declare that this research project is my own only, Zehra Ece Serman

Date.....12.09.2022.....

ABSTRACT

Bloggers have a strong influence on others, such that they have become far more than just a means for recording and sharing personal interests but an effective marketing tool for influencing consumers' decision-making processes. The main aim of this study is to develop and propose a conceptual framework for assessing the factors affecting the perception of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust.

A review of the existing literature showed that the psychological theory of social attractiveness can provide an explanation of how people can gain the confidence of, and influence over, other people. There is a gap in the literature in terms of examining the effect of influencers from a psychological point of view. Therefore, this research adopts the social attractiveness theory from psychology and extends it within the context of bloggers' "effectiveness".

A total of 348 questionnaires were distributed to university students in the UK. Covariance-based structural equation modelling was conducted to analyse the collected data.

This research offers a conceptual model integrating the factors affecting bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations. This study analyses the effects of social attractiveness, perceived bloggers' experience, sponsorship, social influence and gender on bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust. The findings show that social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience positively affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in relation to the adoption of recommendations. This study also examines the moderating effect of gender on the relationship

between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and loyalty in relation to adoption of bloggers' recommendations.

This research contributes to knowledge by proposing a conceptual framework for understanding the effect of blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility in relation to the adoption of bloggers' recommendations. This research also provides practical contributions that can benefit brands and bloggers. Understanding the effects of trust and credibility can assist both brands and bloggers to apply these strategies to their customers/readers which may increase the possibility of meeting customers' needs.

Keywords: Bloggers, social attractiveness, blog readers' trust, perception of bloggers' credibility

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to express my appreciation to those who have contributed to this thesis and always supported me during this period.

First, I would like to thank to my supervisor, Dr Julian Sims, for giving me the opportunity to do my PhD project under his supervision and expert guidance. I would like to thank him for his supervisory support and encouragement during the entire PhD stage, and for the opportunity to benefit from his academic experience, suggestions, and support. Second, I would like to thank my second supervisor, Dr Nisreen Ameen, for her advice, support, and suggestions to improve my thesis and articles. Without their guidance and persistent support, this thesis would not have been possible. I want to give my special thanks to my dearest friend, Dr Zeynep Ozde Kurter, for always supporting me during this period by sharing her research experiences and knowledge with me.

My gratitude is also due to Prof. Savvas Papagiannidis and Prof. Amany Elbanna members of the viva examination committee, for their precious time and valuable feedback. I would like to thank to my father, Seref Serman, and my mother, Esin Serman, for always believing in me and being great role models in my life. Words cannot express the feelings I have for my parents and for their unconditional love and support. Very special thanks are also due from the bottom of my heart to my precious childhood friends Melike Demirbilek and Kivilcim Korkmaz for their steady support and unconditional love. Without them, none of this would have been possible. I love you all.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGFI	adjusted goodness-of-fit
CB-SEM	covariance-based structural equation modelling
CMIN/DF	chi square adjusted for degree of freedom
GFI	goodness-of-fit index
SAHP	social attention-holding power
RHP	resource-holding potential
TRA	Theory of Reasoned Action
SEM	structural equation modelling
EFA	exploratory factor analysis
eWOM	electronic word of mouth
CFA	confirmatory factor analysis
KMO	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin
RMSEA	root mean square error of approximation
NFI	normed fit index

NNFI	non-normed fit index
CFI	comparative fit index
SRMR	standardised root mean square residual
WOM	word of mouth

Applying the right strategic attitudes has a great influence on others' attitudes.

Our attitudes can notably shape others' perception of trust and credibility, which leads to changes in their behaviours.

Zehra Ece Serman

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

A blog can be defined as a website where there are updated entries or posts concentrating on specific subjects. Blog posts allow consumers to comment directly to the shared post, creating an accessible way to communicate and grow an audience (Filimon et al., 2013; Van Esch et al., 2018). Bloggers become a foundation for online communication because they make it easy for the public to share knowledge (Ellahi & Bokhari, 2013; Van Esch et al., 2018).

Considering the characteristics of online interactions, such as the availability of large amounts of information, ease of accessibility to the information, as well as low search costs and the possibility of accessing a wide number of websites, it is understandable that online is a challenging environment for both consumers and bloggers. Recognition of these challenges and changes to the social web arising from Web 2.0 technology have led to the development of a range of features to assist consumers when shopping online. These include search engines, comparison engines, recommender systems, as well as a wide range of social media platforms. For example, by using search engines, consumers can find most of the products and services they wish to purchase and can compare prices. This gives consumers the opportunity to find products or services that best match their preferences.

An increasing number of people globally now engage in blog platforms; almost all types of businesses, including fashion retailers, cosmetics shops, technological and travel shops, have some form of online presence (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). The popularity of social media platforms among consumers continues to rise. Blogs and vlogs have achieved dramatic growth among millions

of people (Croes and Bartels, 2021). There are currently more than 600 million blogs online and 4.4 million new blog posts are published every day (WordPress, 2019). According to recent reports, over 500 million people watch videos on Facebook and on other video-sharing websites. YouTube has reached 1.86 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2021). The expanding growth of social media platforms has risen microcelebrities, such as bloggers and vloggers, who gained a reputation on social media through self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017; Croes and Bartels, 2021).

Park and Kim (2018) argued that blogs have a strong electronic word of mouth (eWOM) effect, such that they have become far more than just a means for recording and sharing personal interests. According to Alsaleh (2017), blogging is now widely viewed as one of the most important platforms to influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) also argued that bloggers influence consumers and alter their perceptions. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) defined bloggers as influencers and opinion leaders who have the potential to influence consumers' decision-making processes when purchasing a product.

Although studies of social media and bloggers began in 2012, ten years later the relationship between consumers and bloggers, their way of communication and the effects of bloggers on consumers are still controversial (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). Despite the rising number of studies on blogging, significant aspects of its usage in relation to its effectiveness remain unclear (Alsaleh, 2017; Hsu et al., 2013). For example, Hsu et al. (2013) and Alsaleh (2017) claimed that understanding of how blog recommendations affect consumers' decision-making processes remains inadequate and more studies in

this area are needed. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) also argued that more studies need to be conducted into bloggers. Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) highlighted that research has been done into the influence of bloggers, but more studies are needed, especially in integrating human behavioural theories with the area of the effect of bloggers. Studies on the effectiveness of bloggers in influencing the online buying behaviours of customers can be carried out from the perspective of the blogger, of the consumers, or both. The focus of this study is to fill the gap in the literature by examining the factors that can affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations. This raises the questions: "How are bloggers likely to affect consumers' choices?" and "To what extent do consumers trust and find bloggers' recommendations credible enough to adopt their recommendations before purchasing a product?"

1.2 Research gap

This section presents the literature gap in the blogging context and identifies the objectives of this study.

The revolution in social web platforms and rise in Web 2.0 technology led to the formation of blog platforms. As of 2009, over 900,000 new articles were shared each day on blogs (Singh et al., 2008); this was when blogging was in its infancy. The number of articles shared on blogs has increased significantly since then. WordPress (2020) confirmed there are now over 600 million blogs globally, that 77.8 million new blog posts are published each month along with 54 million new

comments. This shows that the number of blog posts have increased sharply from 2009 to 2022.

Alsaleh (2017) pointed out that 55% of consumers review blogs more than 10 times before purchasing a product. Although bloggers' effectiveness has been studied, very few of these studies focused on the impact bloggers have on consumers' purchasing habits, and what factors affect the formation of trust in, and the credibility of, their recommendations.

First, there is a gap in the existing literature related to the effect of bloggers on consumers in terms of integrating factors related to the formation of blog readers' trust in bloggers and blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility (specifically, integrating with the help of psychology theories). Previous studies have examined the effect of bloggers and extended theories including Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991), Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and Choice Theory (Tacconi, 1996). Alsaleh (2017) examined the effect of bloggers extending the Technology Acceptance Model and TRA. Hsu and Lin (2008) adopted TRA in their development of a model involving technology acceptance, knowledge sharing and social influences. Lada et al. (2009) also applied TRA to develop a model to predict consumers' intentions to choose halal products. Otieno et al. (2016) applied TRA in their research that investigated technological innovation adoption. Moreover, Sokolova and Kefi (2019) studied the effect of YouTube bloggers by extending communication theory. Although most of these studies highlighted the theories mentioned above, bloggers' effect needs to be investigated and more studies in this area are needed. Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) also supported the idea that more studies

need to be conducted into bloggers, especially those that integrate psychological theories with the area of the effect of bloggers. Therefore, an objective of this study is to investigate “the psychological factor”, social attractiveness to examine whether the construct of social attractiveness affects blog readers’ trust in bloggers’ posts and their perception of bloggers’ credibility.

Second, there is a gap in the existing literature in terms of the blogging habits of bloggers of different genders. There are some studies on gender differences and gender inequalities in bloggers. Pedersen and Macafee (2007) found that both genders use blogs for leisure activity and both genders find the same satisfactions in blogs. The same study also argued, however, that more women use blogging as a hobby or as a livelihood than men. This work was conducted 15 years ago though, when blogs were still in their infancy. Similarly, Lu and Hsiao (2009) examined gender effect on motivations of blog posting. Findings indicated that women’s intentions are influenced by self-expression where men’s intentions are related to personal outcome expectations. Lu and Hsiao (2009) study was conducted when blogging was still in its early stages. Armstrong and McAdams (2009) found that perceived credibility of informational bloggers varies by gender. Gender differences in blog authors were investigated, and blog interactions of posting behaviour of both females and males. Male authors were found to be more credible than female authors.

Some other past studies investigated correlation between gender and visual preferences of young people (Hsu, 2012) and blog interactions of posting behaviour of both females and males focusing on factors such as flow, satisfaction (Lu et al., 2010).

Although gender differences in blogging were investigated, most of the studies are now quite dated and limited their scope by only focusing on weblogs. No recent studies have identified the gender distribution of blog readers and blogging habits of both female and male blog readers. Therefore, an objective of this study is to identify the blogging habits of genders based on the blog platforms and frequency of blog visits. Additionally, this study also examines the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers.

Third, previous studies have not focused on how consumers' attitudes are formulated or how they affect their decision to adopt bloggers' advice (Hsu et al., 2013; Alsaleh, 2017). Instead, most previous studies have solely analysed bloggers and their motivation for blogging (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). Some studies have only discussed the possible advantages of blogs as a marketing tool (SanMiguel and Sádaba, 2018). In general, the literature has limited scope, focusing mainly on fashion blogs or travel blogs (SanMiguel and Sádaba, 2018; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) examined the characteristics of bloggers and how visitors interact with a blog's content and the blog visitors' goals of visit. Zhou et al. (2019) examined network theory to determine differences between fast influencers and late-time influencers. Some literature examined bloggers' reputation and the usefulness of the information they provide (Cosenza et al., 2015; Hsu et al., 2013; van Reijmersdal, 2016). While there are a few studies that have focused on the trust and credibility of blogs, which is an important factor in understanding attitudes (Hsu et al., 2013; Alsaleh, 2017), these studies have not investigated other important factors, such as perceptions of bloggers' experience, social influence, and social attractiveness.

Croes and Bartels (2021) conducted a study to examine the motivations of young adults to follow influencers. This study focused on information seeking and social identification as factors that influenced young adults to follow influencers. Some other studies examined the trustworthiness and attractiveness of branded posts and brand awareness.

Similarly, studied that consumer are more likely to see advertisements authentic Although trustworthiness was investigated, this study limited its scope to only examining trustworthiness in branded posts. However, in the blogosphere, posts shared by bloggers may be branded or sponsored or not branded or unsponsored. Rungsisawat et al. (2019) studied factors such as security, privacy and trust in online buying behaviour and found these factors have a significant relationship with online buying behaviour. However, this study was only applicable to Malaysia, other important factors such as credibility, experience and social influence were not covered.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) examined the impact of Instagram and social identification focusing on different types of celebrities. They found that female celebrities were the most influential and credible. This study limited its scope by only focusing on Instagram, and the majority of their sample of respondents were women. Moreover, the importance of “sponsored blogs” was not studied in detail. Giuffredi-Kähr et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine and compare the trustworthiness of the sponsored posts of mega influencers and nano influencers. However, they only focused on two different types of influencers and did not address the other types of influencers. They also did not focus on sponsored blogs and their credibility, which is important to understand (i.e., whether paid blogs affect bloggers’ credibility and the blog readers’ trust in, and adoption of, the

bloggers' recommendations). Therefore, an objective of this study is to examine the effect of sponsorship and social influence on blog readers' trust in bloggers and their perception of bloggers' credibility.

1.3 Research aims, research objectives and research questions

This study aims to examine the factors affecting perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in bloggers' recommendations. This study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the effect of "social attractiveness" on blog readers' trust and their perception of bloggers' credibility.
2. To investigate the effect of perceived bloggers' experience on the blog readers' trust and their perception of bloggers' credibility.
3. To examine the effect of social influence and sponsorship on blog readers' trust in a blog post and their perception of the blogger's credibility.
4. To analyse the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perception of bloggers credibility and their own loyalty.

The study will therefore answer the following research questions.

Research question 1: What factors affect blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations?

Research question 2: What factors mediate the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers?

Research question 3: Does gender have a moderating effect on blog readers' perceptions of bloggers and their loyalty to bloggers?

To achieve these objectives, a quantitative research method will be adopted to test the following hypotheses.

1.4 Theoretical contributions and practical implications

The originality of this thesis is composed of two parts. This study contributes to the literature concerning the effect of bloggers on blog readers' trust and perception of credibility by underlying psychological mechanism "social attractiveness" that explains two important signals: social attention-holding power (SAHP) and resource holding potential (RHP). SAHP is composed of signals such as positive attention, talent, and friendliness, whereas RHP mainly refers to signals showing high self-esteem and overconfidence. Bloggers who display both SAHP and RHP are likely to increase their likelihood of getting blog readers' trust and improve the credibility of their recommendations. This study is the first to introduce social attractiveness and its signals in the blogging context. Most studies in the past examined the trustworthiness of bloggers or bloggers' reputations, and the usefulness of the information they provide (Cosenza et al., 2015; Hsu et al., 2013; van Reijmersdal, 2016). Some studies focused on blog readers' motivations to follow bloggers and examined the characteristics of blogs (Croes and Bartels, 2021; Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). This study, therefore, contributes to the current literature on the formation of blog readers' trust and blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility by pointing to the important role of social attractiveness.

Moreover, this study investigates gender differences in blogging and in the type of blog posts blog readers read and compares both genders' blog habits and

preferences. It is essential to investigate the blogging habits of both genders to distinguish gender habits on reading blogs. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature by examining the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers. It is useful to investigate whether gender differences should be considered when studying the credibility and loyalty of bloggers as gender norms have a significant effect on preference for specific utilisations of social media. This study starts by examining gender habits in blog usage based on social media platforms and blog type preferences for both genders. Following that, the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers is examined. Past research focused on the impact of gender on the persuasiveness of a sponsored influencer's post (Lokithasan et al., 2019; Hudders and De Jans, 2022), or blog usage and satisfaction (Pedersen and Macafee, 2007), personality predictors in blogging (Guadagno et al., 2008) and factors behind purchase intentions (Oghazi et al., 2020).

In addition to these theoretical contributions, this study offers practical value for marketers, bloggers, and brands. From a practical point of view, the findings and recommendations of this thesis can help bloggers and brands use the psychological strategies of social attractiveness in their environment. Thus, brands and companies can positively form consumers' trust in, and perception of, brand credibility, which leads to customer satisfaction. Satisfied customers will be more likely to purchase from that brand again and increased sales will also raise the reputation of the brand.

The increase in the formation of blog readers' trust and perception of credibility on specific blogger is an important decision perceived by blog readers. There are not many specific guidelines concerning the importance of the psychological theory of social attractiveness and its signals: SAHP and RHP. Blog readers' characteristics, such as gender, age, race, religion, and economic status, are also significantly important. Hudders and Jans (2022) argued that most studies investigating these characteristics conducted a qualitative approach and failed to make causal inferences about their impact (Beta, 2019; Abidin, 2021; Campana et al., 2020). This study offers insight into the moderating effect of gender on the relation between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers.

Furthermore, in terms of originality, the empirical work of this study is original and composed of online surveys distributed to university students in the UK. This study extends the psychological theory of social attractiveness and tests how a new conceptual framework can be used to measure the effect of bloggers on blog readers in UK, which contributes to the originality of this research.

1.5 Thesis structure

This thesis is composed of six chapters. Chapter 1 consists of introduction, research problem and overall research objectives, including research questions. Chapter 1 also includes theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Chapter 2 includes an in-depth analysis of existing theories and studies related to bloggers, their strengths, and weaknesses as well as the literature gap. The second part consists of the model and hypothesis development.

Chapter 3 discusses several philosophical approaches and then presents the philosophical position of this research. It discusses research methods in detail and then describes the research methods of this study. Chapter 3 also includes the survey questions and describes each factor in detail. Research instruments and the sampling size of this study are also discussed.

Chapter 4 addresses the research problem described in Chapter 2 and presents the data analysis results. It presents the demographic profile of the respondents and gender distribution of the main data set. Data analysis included scale validation and model development. New scales were developed for two scales: social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience. To test the validity of these factors, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and validity tests were conducted. Following that, to test the hypotheses, covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) was computed. Chapter 5 presents discussions of results obtained in Chapter 4. Findings of the profile of respondents, patterns of using blogs, and hypotheses are discussed and compared with findings in the literature,

Chapter 6 is the conclusion and last chapter of this study. It is composed of four subsections: theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and future research areas, and conclusion. The theoretical contributions are discussed in detail with supporting literature arguments. Theoretical framework is presented. Practical implications of this study are defined and discussed. Finally, conclusion of this study is presented including limitations and further possible research area for future.

The appendices are composed of two parts. The first part includes pilot study findings and results of tests which were conducted to test the factors and questionnaire reliability and validity. The second part includes survey questionnaires.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions and characteristics of blogs

The popularity of social media platforms continues to grow. Blogs have become widely popular among millions of consumers (Croes and Bartels, 2021). Reports show that 6.77 million people published blogs on blogging websites and more than 12 million people write blogs using their social network (van Esch et al., 2018). Recent reports found that over 500 million people follow on Facebook, YouTube has 1.86 billion users and Instagram has 2 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2022; Salman, 2022). The dramatic growth of social media has also increased the number of microcelebrities, such as bloggers or vloggers, who have a reputation on social media. (Croes and Bartels, 2021; Khamis et al., 2017). Bloggers can be described as microcelebrities and social influencers (Croes and Bartels, 2021). Recent research found that people see bloggers as accessible and possessing a familiar personality (Monge-Benito et al., 2020).

Lin et al. (2018) suggested that bloggers can reach millions of consumers through social media platforms. Recent research found that young adults usually prefer to use platforms like Instagram and YouTube for checking reviews before purchasing a product and they purchase an item because of a blogger's recommendation on social media (Croes and Bartels, 2021).

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) described bloggers as opinion leaders and influencers. They stated that blogs are not solely the opinions of bloggers because, crucially, people are able to respond to the blogs, which represents a way of making contributions to the topic being discussed.

Huang et al. (2010) and Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) discussed the characteristics that make blogs attractive. These characteristics include that blogs are a low-cost medium that makes information sharing easier and they have no limitations in distance and time, thereby offering a form of global coverage and ease of entry (Huang et al., 2010).

It is therefore not a surprise that several authors agree that blogs have become a powerful tool that affects consumers' decision-making processes (Thelwall, 2007; Alsaleh, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019; Esteban-Santos et al., 2018). Sokolova and Kefi (2020) highlighted that the popularity of bloggers has led to a new form of marketing called influencer marketing. Most brands and companies compete to leverage social media influencers as brand ambassadors (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). According to Statista (Belton, 2018), investments in blogging are expected to reach between US\$5 billion and US\$10 billion in 2022, with a five-year compound annual growth rate of 38% in sectors of fashion, beauty, parenting and tourism (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Bloggers can influence the target audiences' attitudes, perceptions and even purchase behaviours, and this makes them very powerful in society (Uzunoğlu & Misci, 2014; Alsaleh, 2017) and explains why blogging has become a leading online medium (Schroeder, 2014). Uzunoğlu and Misci (2014) explained that consumer loyalty is essential in relationship building in today's competitive business environment and using the services of bloggers to engage with consumers can be important.

People's increasing dependence on blogs for information has been linked to the existence of blog search engines that provide the opportunity to search the

blogosphere for posts relating to any issue or product (Thelwall, 2007). That it is easy for consumers to find bloggers who discuss the information they are looking for is clearly a benefit.

Past studies have shown that reference groups play a significant role in influencing consumers' purchasing behaviour (Hsu et al., 2013). This is understandable considering that opinions or suggestions from others can help to reduce the risk and uncertainty associated with decisions about whether to buy a product, particularly online. When consumers shop online, many of them may not have seen the products they are trying to buy and they are therefore seeking genuine and honest recommendations (Liljander et al., 2015). It is in this context that the opinion of bloggers or other groups, who may have seen the products, becomes significant. Bloggers are also able to provide current and advanced information to consumers because they appear knowledgeable about the topic they discuss (Uzunoglu and Misci, 2014). Researchers who have empirically tested the motivation for following bloggers confirm that one of the main reasons is information seeking (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018).

2.2 Online consumer behaviour

Since the Web 2.0 revolution, mass communication channels, such as TV stations, radios, and newspapers, are no longer considered dominant sources of information for consumers. Consumers now prefer to use social media platforms for information exchange and relationship building (Hair et al., 2010). With the evolution of electronic commerce and online platforms there is a growing need to understand online consumer behaviours (Pappas, 2016). Typically, buying behaviour refers to the process through which consumers search for, select,

purchase, use and dispose of goods and services as they attempt to satisfy their needs and wants (Constantinides, 2004). As online consumer behaviour and decision-making processes have become more important, the number of studies in this area have increased markedly (Demangeot and Broderick, 2007; Stankevich, 2017; Alsaleh, 2017; Pappas, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2019).

With improvements in technology and web platforms, consumers now have more information, with a wide range of choices in different price ranges. Pappas (2016) highlighted that to achieve long-term success, e-businesses and retailers have to build trust. The wide range of choices and increased number of bloggers and blog posts creates a challenging environment for consumers in terms of finding the most trusted and credible recommendations from blog readers. This, therefore, directs us back to the research questions: What factors influence the formation of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in and adoption of their recommendations? Also, what factors mediate bloggers' credibility and blog readers' perceptions of their loyalty to bloggers? Thus, understanding consumer behaviour in this study centres on how consumers are influenced to make decisions in certain ways when they read blogs. In this vein, understanding the factors affecting blog readers' trust and their perceptions of the credibility of bloggers is essential and relevant.

2.3 Blogging and influencer marketing

Influencer marketing can be defined as a marketing strategy that adopts the influence of individuals or opinion leaders to affect consumers' brand awareness and their decision-making processes before purchasing a product (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Influencer marketing is critical to strengthening brand engagement and consumers' purchase habits (Newberry, 2018). Influencers usually specialise in specific areas or sectors when they promote a specific product or service. Lou and Yuan (2019) argued that this leads consumers to accept or trust influencers' opinions. According to recent reports, 94% of marketers find influencers effective (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Recent reports indicate that 75% of marketers use influencers to spread word of mouth (WOM) about their products and brands on social media. Influencers were defined as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs and other use of social media" (Freberg et al., 2011). Cooley and Yancy (2019) highlighted that influencers have become so powerful, with their WOM effect, that they can give life to a brand with one post or can cause a public relations nightmare.

Previous studies examined the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of influencer marketing across various contexts (De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Johansen & Guldvik, 2017). For example, De Veirman et al. (2017) examined Instagram influencers and product divergence on brand attitudes. It was found that influencers were more influential, credible and relatable than traditional celebrities. On the other hand, Johansen and Guldvik

(2017) argued that influencer marketing was not more efficient than traditional methods. Cooley and Yancy (2019) argued that studies have found that information from influencers and from people whom they know in real life affects Millennial consumers' purchasing decisions.

Cooley and Yancy (2019) claimed that the effectiveness of using influencers is not well understood. Schouten et al. (2020) agreed that despite the rise in deployment of influencers for brand endorsement, scientific knowledge of the value of influencer marketing is limited. Previous research lacks basic understanding of the mechanisms by which influencer marketing content and influencers themselves affect consumer behaviour. Therefore, this study covers the literature gap mentioned in the literature by examining influencers in depth. This study examines their effect on blog readers' trust in and perception of credibility.

2.4 Social attractiveness in relation to the influence of bloggers

Social attractiveness was studied by Gilbert in 1995 in the field of psychology. Recent literature has not applied this concept in different contexts. This study addresses that literature gap by studying social attractiveness in a blogging context. Social attractiveness theory is founded on the contention that humans have an innate need to be seen as attractive to others (Gilbert et al., 1995). These needs moderate evaluations of social acceptance, social status and social bonds (Gilbert et al., 1995). The loss of these needs causes shame and humiliation (Barkow, 1989). Hence, social attractiveness can be defined as the degree to which a person has the ability to influence other people's state of mind and be

socially accepted and approved by society. Social attractiveness is a very beneficial strategy to gain status and develop social bonds.

Bloggers are opinion leaders whose success depends on being accepted and affiliated by society. There are more than 6 million blog posts every day (WordPress, 2019). This high volume shows that blogs and bloggers are becoming widespread and influencing others. There are also situations, however, where bloggers fail to influence other people positively and where they are faced with unpleasant comments, dislikes and unfollows. “Follow”, “like” and “dislike” can thus be used as measures of affiliation and attractiveness.

Previous literature identified that fighting and the ability to show overconfidence by undermining others used to be a way to gain status (Gilbert, 1997). Some bloggers think that showing self-confidence and dominance will enable them to gain more status over others and demonstrate to people that they are very intelligent. Argyle (1987), however, argued that fighting ability alone is a very poor way of gaining social rank and success. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), positive social relationships are crucial for maintaining self and others' happiness, meaning that social impact can be gained through cooperation and conformity. Maintaining social bonds and conformity is not easy, especially when there are millions of bloggers on online platforms. Bloggers should display some qualities that others will find interesting. Status can be easily lost on these platforms if the relationship between blogger and readers becomes weak.

Gilbert et al. (1995) explained three important dimensions of social behaviour: SAHP and RHP. SAHP is the ability to elicit positive attention: approval, respect and praise. RHP, in contrast to SAHP, is composed of threat and fear-based signals. A lack of any of these may result in negative outcomes. We can therefore

argue that, in order to gain and maintain status, bloggers need to ensure that they use and apply the dimensions of SAHP and RHP. Baumeister (1982) suggested that it is unattractive to be overly passive, and thus perceived to be weak, yet it is also unattractive to be seen as aggressive and assertive. Successful influencers balance between them to maintain popularity. Baumeister also added, however, that this might differ from culture to culture (Baumeister, 1982). The literature on consumer behaviour, and specifically on bloggers, has not yet studied how bloggers apply social attractiveness strategies to develop and maintain influence. Accordingly, it can be argued that the effectiveness with which social attractiveness strategies are applied is likely to affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations.

Thus, this study proposes that applying social attractiveness strategies, including SAHP and RHP, will help bloggers to maintain their credibility while also increasing the chance that blog readers will trust in, and adopt, their recommendations.

2.4.1 SAHP

Gilbert (1997) suggested that humans are more attracted to people when they feel they are valued by them; that person could be our friend, spouse, colleague or the most influential blogger. It is essential to pay positive attention and show care in order to influence others' decisions, choices and perceptions. Credibility forms the feeling of being cared for and valued. Hence, Kemper suggested that to be valued, chosen, admired and accepted provides high status in others' minds (Kemper, 1991). A credible person can be described as someone who is qualified, experienced and trusted and who has excellent communication skills. Esteban-

Santos et al. (2018) found that bloggers are more likely to gain status when they are credible and show positive attention when communicating with blog readers. Gilbert et al. (1995) identified strategies for gaining rank and success, which are called SAHP. This theory refers to the ability to elicit positive attention and social rewards, such as approval, praise, acceptance, showing talent, respect, desire and admiration (Allan and Gilbert, 1995). Thus, it can be argued that blog readers are likely to take more seriously bloggers who are talented and experienced or have tried their recommended products. SAHP also includes the concept of affiliative behaviours. Affiliative leaders are a type of leader who develop harmony among the people over whom they have influence. An affiliative leader tends to be connected to their followers and makes sure they can solve problems if questions or conflict occurs. People are more likely to build up trust when there is an affiliation, positive attention from others, and rapid communication and appreciation (Gilbert, 1995). This research proposes that this concept can be applied to bloggers, who are constantly communicating with blog readers and making sure to answer all their questions.

2.4.2 RHP

Another way of influencing others is through showing fighting ability by undermining other people. This approach has been used for a very long time to demonstrate power and gain status over others. Many leaders and politicians adopted this strategy to influence others to become socially accepted. RHP is opposite to SAHP. Signals of RHP are composed of threat, fighting ability, undermining others and showing authority over others (Price, 1988). Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that it is unattractive to be seen as weak and overly

passive, which might not be an efficient way to influence others. Figure 7 below illustrates strategies for gaining rank and status, adapted from (Gilbert et al., 1995). High self-esteem is one way of influencing others: it is likely that people are more likely to be influenced by bloggers who have high self-esteem. Bloggers who have high self-esteem might give blog readers the impression that they are experts in their domain; this would encourage belief in their work and recommendations, and positively affecting blog readers' intentions to purchase recommended products. Baumeister (1982) pointed out that people who have high self-esteem grab attention through their abilities and talents, whereas people with low self-esteem are shame avoidant.

2.4.3 Looking glass effect

Gilbert et al. (1995) stated that many people with a balanced mind scarcely care about what others think about who they are and what they do. In other words, we are image makers (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Scheff (1988) highlighted that people are not limited to their lives only, but they desire to have an imaginary life in another state of mind; that is why people make an effort to prove themselves. Bloggers can be seen as an example of this. Their aim is to influence people and they desire to have an imaginary life in others. Hence, they try to build up reputation and recognition amongst blog readers. Yeung and Martin (2003) stated: "self is a result of the social process whereby we learn to see ourselves as others see us" (p. 843). Moreover, Cooley (1983) called this well-developed idea in sociology the looking glass effect, and this indeed may be one way of understanding the influence of bloggers. Cooley argued that people are the result of imagination perceived in another's mind such as appearance, deeds,

characters, friends. This imagined judgement forms an emotion that Cooley introduced as “self-feeling”, which in turn influences actions. This idea can articulate the relationship between bloggers and blog readers. Bloggers influence consumers’ decisions and those decisions cause a domino effect in other factors too. The self-reflection of what blog readers and other bloggers think about a specific blogger can be seen as a mirror effect. Blog readers have specific expectations or imagined appearances that they want to find or see in bloggers. This could be in the way bloggers interact with blog readers or the way bloggers dress or behave: the way they represent themselves. Therefore, blog readers’ expectations, and bloggers’ imagined products or services, determine the mirror effect between blog readers and bloggers. The mirror effect can also be seen between bloggers, as they are competitors. Knowing that they are competitors makes them imagine what others think or expect of them, or how others judge them. This could potentially encourage them to do better, or could cause worry, envy and depression, leaving them scared of not being able to match the requirements of others’ state of mind.

2.4.4 Social comparison and its impact on gaining status

In many domains of life we are faced with situations where social comparisons take place, such as when giving a musical performance or taking a job interview (Gilbert et al., 1995). Social comparison is an efficient strategy to maintain or increase status since it motivates us to perform specific tasks better in order to obtain favourable attention (Wolfe et al., 1986). Gilbert et al. (1995) pointed out that comparing oneself with others enables one to estimate what other people will find attractive in others. In the blogging context, social comparison takes place

between blog readers and bloggers. It can be argued that blog readers who compare their lifestyle with a blogger's lifestyle, and the products/services they use, are more likely to be motivated to follow them and adopt their recommendations. Those bloggers who make the comparison and are positively open to change are arguably more likely to adopt SAHP. However, it can also be argued that bloggers who use RHP when influencing their blog readers, would arguably be less likely to be involved in any comparison. Thus, they might see themselves as best of all. Comparison could cause their self-esteem to break down. Hence, we can argue that this becomes a mediator between two strategies to gain success and maintain it. Social comparison might occur between bloggers and blog readers. Blog readers might compare themselves with bloggers in terms of their posts, the companies with which they work, the number of followers they have, and the numbers of comments, likes or dislikes they get. This might be motivation for them as it would encourage them to be like the blogger and increase their interest in the blogger's lifestyle/followers/posts, and to adopt their recommendations. All these factors would form social comparison between blog readers and bloggers. A loss of prestige in any of these factors might cause bloggers to lose their followers and be faced with dislikes and unpleasant comments. Although it is challenging to turn other people's success into one's own opportunity, if achieved, it could lead to success and higher social rank.

Figure 1 presents three dimensions of social attractiveness: SAHP, RHP. Figure 1 illustrates how these dimensions might affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust.

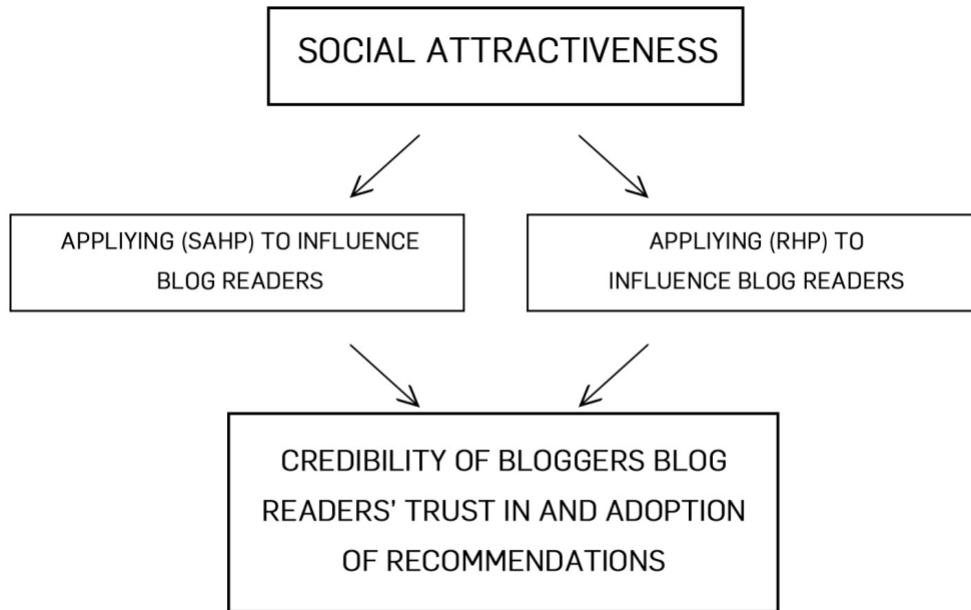


Figure 1. Illustration of the relationship between social attractiveness and blog readers

2.5 Gender differences in the blogging context

Gender differences in the blogosphere and gender inequalities in the reputation of bloggers have been examined in the literature. Lokithasan et al. (2019) argued that gender norms are important and have a significant effect on specific utilisation of social media. Lokithasan et al. (2019) examined gender differences in the style of promotions and found that women were significantly influenced by beauty products whereas men were drawn to technology and gaming products. According to Pedersen and Macafee (2007), both genders use blogs for leisure activity and both genders find the same satisfactions in blogs. It is argued, however, that more women use blogging as a hobby or as a livelihood. Similarly, Guadagno et al. (2008) conducted two studies to examine personality predictors in blogging. Their findings indicated that women, as compared to men, are higher

in neuroticism and agreeableness, and that these traits are linked to increased propensity to use social media and blogs to communicate with people. Lu et al. (2010) examined the effect of gender on blog owners' motivations to post information, finding that women's intentions were strongly influenced by self-expression while men's intentions were strongly influenced by personal outcome expectations. Additionally, Chiu et al. (2012) argued that men mainly use blogs for information purposes while women are interested in aesthetic issues and how bloggers express themselves. There thus appears to be a clear gender difference in the distribution of ideal blogs. Another study, however, investigated the presentation of identity and the language in the posts of male and female bloggers; the study found that men and women present themselves similarly in blogs (Huffaker and Calvert, 2006). Oghazi et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the factors behind women's and men's purchase intentions. They found that men only rely on perceived trust in developing purchase intentions. Although the literature has looked at gender differences, there remains a lack of knowledge about gender differences in the usage of blogs. No recent studies have focused on the differences in the purchase habits of both genders. Thus, this study initially identifies the blogging habits of both genders by comparing their answers to the question: "Which platforms do you usually use to follow and read blogs?" Second, the question, "For which products or services do you read blog recommendations?" was asked to distinguish their blogging habits. This study examines gender differences in blog usage, specifically, blog platform and blog type preferences.

There is also a gap in the literature on the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perception and bloggers' credibility and their

own loyalty to bloggers. To fill this gap, this study will examine the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between perception of credibility and perceived blog readers loyalty.

2.6 Model development

This research set out its aims and objectives, including the research questions, in Chapter 1. This section of the literature review presents the model development including the factors. The main constructs and mediating and moderating variables are also outlined in this section. Factors and the relationships between them are justified. The conceptual model was specifically tailored for understanding the factors affecting bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations. Examining the literature and theories used in relation to the effects of bloggers, it can be concluded that none of the studies were able to explain with the help of the psychological theory of social attractiveness (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Park and Kim, 2018; Alsaleh, 2017; Hsu et al., 2013). Similarly, studies in the literature did not fully explain the factors affecting bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust. The model was developed based on what was found in the existing literature relating to social attractiveness; social attractiveness was applied to the blogging context to examine bloggers' credibility and blog reader's trust. This research proposes a framework to assess the factors affecting perceptions of bloggers' credibility and factors affecting readers' trust in, and willingness to adopt, bloggers' recommendations. The research model integrates eight factors: social attractiveness, sponsorship, perceived experience of

bloggers, social influence, trust, credibility, perceived blog readers' loyalty and gender.

Table 1 presents definitions of the factors of this study, including references.

Table 1. Schematic presentation of research hypotheses, research questions and factor

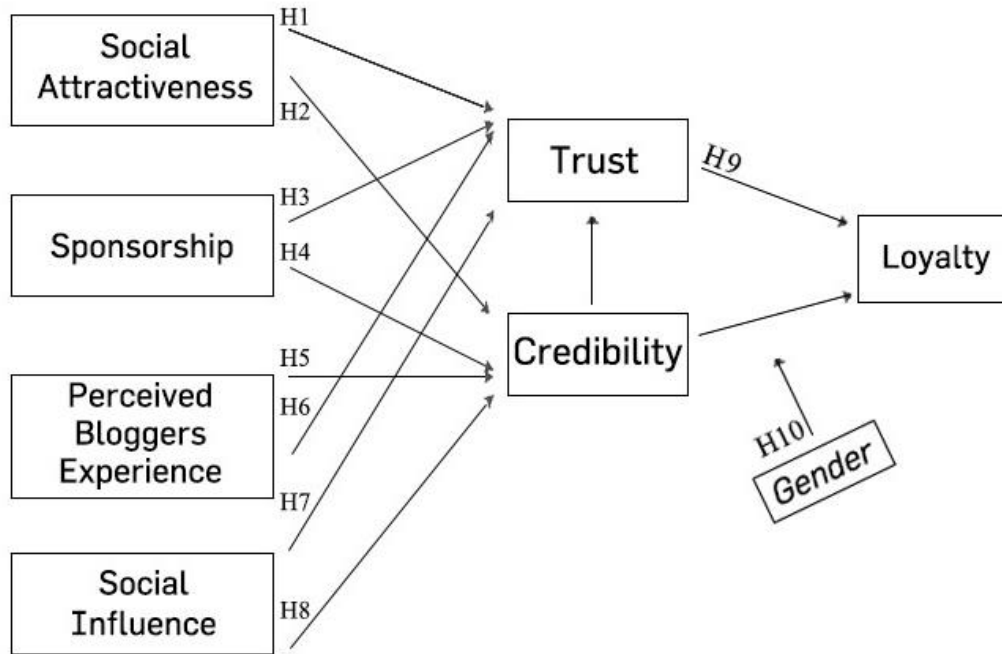
Constructs	Definition	Reference
Trust	Trust is defined as positive expectations regarding another's conduct. It is also defined as the particular level of subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action. Trust is used in this research as positive expectations of blog readers towards bloggers and their recommendations.	(F. Li and Betts, 2011)
Perceived Experience of Bloggers	Experience is defined as prior knowledge or skills gained. Experience is a perception or direct observation of events as a basis of knowledge. In this research, the perceived experience of bloggers is used to describe the prior knowledge or skills that bloggers have about a product/service they recommend.	(Bagozzi, 1981)
Social Influence	Social influence is defined as a psychological phenomenon in which people seek to generate a favourable reaction in others (Kelman, 1958) with the intention to affect their opinions (Yildiz, 2014). In this study, social influence is composed of blog readers' friends, family and colleagues, as well as the domain of people who are active online.	(Kelman, 1958; Yildiz, 2014)
Social Attractiveness	Social attractiveness is a theory used in psychology to explain gaining and maintaining status over others in society. It can be understood as the degree to which a person has an ability to influence other people's state of mind and become socially accepted and approved by society.	(Gilbert, 1995)

Sponsorship	<p>Sponsorship can be defined as direct or indirect monetary benefits received from a brand by an individual promoting that brand's products or services.</p> <p>In this study the construct is used to examine whether sponsorship affects blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations.</p>	(Park and Kim, 2018)
Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty	<p>Loyalty is defined as the quality of being faithful to someone and counting on them.</p> <p>In this study, loyalty is studied as blog readers' own perceptions of their loyalty to bloggers.</p>	(Brown, 1952)
Credibility	<p>Credibility is defined as the trustworthiness and reliability of a source. In this study, credibility is studied as blog readers' perceptions of the credibility of bloggers' recommendations.</p>	(Sokolova and Kefi, 2020)

The proposed research model is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research model

The effect of bloggers on blog readers attitude



2.7 Hypothesis development

This study examines the factors that influence the effect of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations. The factors are social attractiveness, sponsorship and perceived experience of bloggers. Social influence can be argued to have an effect on shaping bloggers' credibility and on blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations. Once credibility and trust are established, it can be argued that bloggers are more likely to be able to influence consumers' decision-making processes in a positive way.

The first eight hypotheses will answer the first research question, which relates to whether the factors of social attractiveness, sponsorship, perceived experience of bloggers and social influence have an effect on blog readers' trust and on the credibility of bloggers. Hypothesis 9 is related to whether trust has a mediating effect between credibility and blog readers' loyalty (the second research question). Hypothesis 10 will answer the third research question, which relates to whether gender has a moderating effect between credibility and loyalty.

2.7.1 Social attractiveness

Social attractiveness can be described as the degree to which a person has the ability to influence other people's state of mind and be socially accepted and approved by society (Gilbert, 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) pointed out that positive social relationships are crucial for maintaining one's own and others' happiness. Therefore, social impact can be gained through cooperation and conformity. Maintaining social bonds and conformity is not easy, especially when there are millions of bloggers on online platforms. Social attractiveness is composed of three dimensions: SAHP and RHP. SAHP helps people to maintain their status and conformity. The theory states that SAHP includes signals of altruism, positivism, and friendliness, which serve to increase the chances of being liked and accepted by others. In contrast, an RHP strategy seeks to influence others by showing dominant behaviour. RHP signals show high self-esteem, overconfidence, and undermining others by giving the impression that one is an expert in a particular domain.

Social comparison occurs when motivating oneself through comparison with other successful people. Thus, one could argue that applying these dimensions of social attractiveness is likely to influence blog readers' purchase habits, blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility. When the chance of influencing others increases, the chances of affecting their intentions is also more likely to be affected. It can also be argued that the more people are affected by social attractiveness strategies, the more people are likely to build up trust in bloggers' recommendations. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is composed to analyse the level of the effect of social attractiveness on blog readers' trust in respect to the adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Hypothesis 2 measures the level of effect of social attractiveness on the credibility of bloggers. SAHP proposes that showing positivity, a friendly attitude, altruism and some experience is one way of increasing the chances of influencing others. Thus, people who show a friendly attitude and altruism tend to be perceived as credible (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential to test the level of credibility of bloggers. Thus, the following two hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 1: Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations.

Hypothesis 2: Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.

2.7.2 Trust

The way blog readers perceive a message depends on several factors, including trust in, and credibility of, the blogger. One of the key factors that has been confirmed to shape consumer behaviour is trust (Hajli et al., 2017; Hajli & Sims, 2015; Chen & Shen, 2015). In the blogging context, trust measures the extent to which a consumer considers a blogger to know the most about a specific subject and can consider that blogger's recommendations to be honest and trustworthy (Van Esch et al., 2018).

Hovland and Weiss (1951) argued that the effectiveness of a product depends on the source. Castro-González et al. (2019) defined trust as a person's capacity to believe in something/someone without any investigation or evidence. Trust is the ultimate feeling where blog readers unconsciously or consciously believe that specific bloggers are honest without conducting further investigation. This study defines trust as perceived, and it is the trust that blog readers have in bloggers in terms of the adoption of recommendations.

Recent studies indicated that bloggers are seen as trustworthy sources of information (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). According to Bianchi and Andrews (2012), consumers are only happy to share personal information, make purchases or act on web vendor's advice when they feel comfortable because of trust. Cooley and Yancy (2019) confirmed that consumers will trust in a product based on their trust in that influencer. Xiao et al. (2018) stated that trustworthiness is an influential factor affecting consumers' credibility. Similarly, Schouten et al. (2020) examined the impact of celebrity versus influencers on advertising effectiveness using the factors of trustworthiness and credibility. Schouten et al. (2020) found that influencers are

more trustworthy than celebrities. Radtke (2017) argued that influencers have a significant effect on consumers' trust and intentions to buy clothing, hair and cosmetic products. Hsu et al. (2014) carried out a study to investigate whether the impact of blog readers' trust in a blogger is related to the perceived usefulness of that blogger's recommendations. The study also investigated the impact of the blog readers' perceptions of their willingness to follow the advice of the blogger. The study confirmed that trust is vital and consumer behaviour will only be influenced by bloggers when there is trust (Hsu et al., 2014).

The relationship between trust and blogger effectiveness has not been adequately explored, little is known about how the relationship is established. In other words, how do consumers interpret blogs in a way that develops the needed trust? Chung-Chuan (2011) discussed this from the perspective of credibility. The credibility of bloggers will be tested. Hsu et al. (2013) found a positive effect of a blogger's reputation on readers' purchasing intentions. In other words, a blogger will only have the desired influence on the target consumer's buying decision-making process when they have a positive reputation. However, Hsu et al. (2013) did not investigate the factors that influence blog readers' trust on the actual adoption of bloggers' recommendations.

Although trust is studied and defined in a blogging context, studies did not examine the factors affecting blog readers' trust that leads to their adoption of bloggers' recommendations. In order to understand how bloggers become effective in what they do and become compelling, there is a need to consider factors that influence blog readers' trust that leads to their adoption of recommendations.

2.7.3 Credibility

Several studies have focused mainly on the credibility of bloggers (Martensen et al., 2018; Esteban-Santos et al., 2018; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), credibility refers to the degree of the trustworthiness and reliability of the source, which is dependent on the receiver's perception of the quality of the information obtained from the source (Martensen et al., 2018). Castro-González et al. (2019) defined credibility as “the extent to which consumers feel that specific organisation or person have knowledge or ability to fulfil its claims and can be counted. Castro-Gonzales et al. (2019) added that perceived credibility can be achieved by gathering information about an organisation or person, in order to experience credibility.

Hovland et al. (1951) claimed that the credibility of a communicator or message source is an important factor in its persuasiveness. Past researchers studied source credibility to examine source's influence on the effectiveness of persuasive messages (Giffin, 1967; Hovland et al., 1951, McGuire, 1985). Some previous studies found that the effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' attitudes and intentions is determined by perceived credibility (Reichelt et al., 2014).

Djafavora and Rushworth (2017) investigated the effect of Instagram, focusing on source credibility, on consumers' buying intentions and social identification with different types of celebrities. Djafavora and Rushworth (2017) that celebrities on Instagram influence the purchasing habits of young female users. Additionally, findings show that bloggers and instafamous profiles are more powerful than celebrities as participants see them as more credible (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

Similarly, Reinikainen et al. (2020) studied the parasocial relationship which builds perceived credibility of influencers. Their findings showed that influencers build perceived credibility, and that influencer credibility positively affects brand trust and purchase intention.

A credible blogger is more likely to be effective since he or she would be counted by the blog readers. What is clear is that a credible blogger who tries to be always honest in their blogs may have information that is not credible if it was obtained from a source that is not credible. This study defines credibility as a perception in others' minds because it is discrete. In this study, credibility is perceived, and it is the credibility that bloggers have with blog readers with respect to the blog readers' adoption of their recommendations. For example, a business that a blogger promotes may have provided false information about a product to the blogger.

Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) discussed one of the ways through which a blogger can gain credibility: a blogger is more likely to be seen as credible when he or she is independent of the product they are promoting, and they only assume the role of experts. This obviously shows the difficulty associated with gaining credibility when a blogger is being used by a business to promote a particular product. The blogger's credibility is clearly linked to the message credibility, which is dependent on valence and quality (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018). The credibility of the site and its impact on that of the blogger and information has also been emphasised (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018).

Although credibility has been researched previously, there is a lack of research on the perception of bloggers credibility towards adoption of bloggers

recommendations. Therefore, this study examines factors affecting perception of credibility.

2.7.4 Sponsorship

There are inconsistencies in the literature in relation to the extent to which blog readers' attitudes are influenced by the nature of the sponsorship relationship that exists between the blogger and the brand (Lu et al., 2014; Park & Kim, 2018).

A sponsored blogger receives direct and indirect monetary benefits from the brand to promote a product, and this could influence blog readers' attitudes. Influencers may be seen as personal rather than commercial relationship with the product/service they promote. When influencers share sponsored content, consumers may have difficulty differentiating promotion posts from personal recommendations (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022).

However, the results of Park and Bora's (2018) study indicated that sponsorship itself does not affect blog trustworthiness. Similarly, Lu et al. (2014) found that bloggers' sponsorships have no significant effect on readers' attitudes towards their postings. Hsiu et al. (2014) supported the view that sponsorship type has no effect on attitudes towards sponsored recommendation posts, but they highlighted that the attitude of consumers towards sponsored recommendations does influence purchase intentions. Hsiu et al. (2014) also showed that product type influences consumer attitudes. On the other hand, Zhu and Tan (2007) found that bloggers are not very effective at influencing blog readers' decisions when they are sponsored.

Stubb et al. (2019) examined the effects of a particular form of sponsorship disclaimer in sponsored content by influencers. Results indicated that

sponsorship compensation justification creates more positive consumer attitudes towards influencers and increases source credibility.

A recent study investigated the impact of influencers and sponsorship disclosure. Findings revealed that micro influencers who disclose their sponsorship, consumers have higher level of purchase habit and intentions (Kay et al., 2020). Similarly, Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) found that both covertly and overtly sponsored blog posts have negative effects on both the credibility and behavioural intentions of consumers

Giuffredi-Kähr et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine sponsorship disclosure in influencer marketing. Their findings revealed that the disclosure of sponsorships can remove the negative impacts of persuasion knowledge on the trustworthiness of posts and evaluations of the influencers.

Although, sponsorship has been covered in the literature, there is inconsistency in relation to how blog readers' trust and credibility is affected by the nature of the sponsorship received by the blogger, and this therefore needs to be clarified. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 3: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, the bloggers' recommendations.

Hypothesis 4: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.

2.7.5 Perceived experience of bloggers

Experience can be defined as “the extent which communicator is perceived as a source that can make good assertions” (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21). Being knowledgeable in a specific subject, having experience of doing a specific thing and having a credible title on a subject, all contribute to the formation of perceived experience (Xiao et al., 2018; Gass and Seiter, 2018). Multiple studies argued that perceived expertise has a significant effect on the compliance-gaining process and that people are keen to agree with communicators whom they perceive as experts (Xiao et al., 2018; Crano, 1970; Crisci and Kassinove, 1973). Source credibility is defined by three factors: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Source expertise is defined as source quality, including the knowledge or skills to make certain claims about a certain subject (McCroskey, 1966). Previous research reported that celebrity endorsers’ expertise has a positive effect on consumers’ purchase intentions (Lafferty et al., 2002; Lee and Koo, 2015). Similarly, other studies claimed that influencers’ perceived expertise enhances product evaluation and purchase intention (Till & Busler, 2000; Fink et al., 2004).

In contrast to these findings, other studies found that expertise did not have an influencing effect. For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) claimed that influencers’ expertise does not have an effect on follower’s trust in branded content. This was explained by the reasoning that influencers have a status of expertise to their followers, but it does not promise followers’ trust in sponsored content. Similar to this finding, a recent study by Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2021) explored

influencers' expertise and its effect on their campaigns. Results indicated that an effect of influencers' expertise did not exist (Wiedmann and Mettenheim, 2021). Moreover, Schouten et al. (2020) investigated the mediating effect of expertise between type of influencer and advertising effectiveness. Their results showed that expertise was not a significant mediator and did not have any effect. Experience has been an important topic in consumer behaviour, but most studies only examined experience in terms of its effect on branded content, product evaluation and purchase habits. Furthermore, most studies in the context of influencers' expertise had some inconsistencies identifying whether experience is an influential factor or not. This study fills the gap by exploring perceived bloggers' experience its effect on blog readers' trust and credibility towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations.

Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 5: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, the bloggers' recommendations.

Hypothesis 6: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.

2.7.6 Social influence

Social influence is discussed in the literature as a psychological phenomenon by which people seek to generate a favourable reaction in others (Kelman, 1958) with the intention to affect their opinions (Yıldız et al., 2014). Social influence is considered one of the most important factors that influence attitude or opinion

formations (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Giffin (1967) defined social influence as shaping one's evaluation of source or information credibility.

Some studies focused on the importance of social influence and consumer behaviour (e.g., Chen and Xie, 2008; Narayan et al., 2011). The common use of third-party brand endorsements or recommendations confirms the power of social influence in marketing (Wang, 2005). Social influence, in a blogging context, is composed of individuals' (e.g., blog readers') friends, family, colleagues as well as the domain of people who are active online (Yildiz, 2014). Westermann and McAfee (2012) highlighted that individuals' capacity for achieving online influence can be analysed by the repercussions of their practices on social media. Multiple studies confirmed that social influence affects one's opinions in a digital communication environment (Lin et al., 2016; Wu and Lin, 2017).

Huang et al. (2018) conducted a study to measure the effect of social influence, finding that social influence has significant effects on knowledge gains and negative effects on brand loyalty. Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of social influence as a key variable in understanding the success of bloggers (Wang and Chuan-Chuan Lin, 2011; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Thus, various studies suggest that social influence is positively related to bloggers' credibility (Huffaker, 2010; Edwards et al., 2013), blog readers' recommendation intentions (Iyengar et al., 2011; Wang and Chuan-Chuan Lin, 2011; Kerr et al., 2012), online purchase decision making (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012) and brand loyalty. Urrutikoetxea Arrieta et al. (2019) found that bloggers' social influence has a moderating effect on the formation of loyalty and credibility, and that the greater the social influence, the greater the level of loyalty and credibility. Xiao

et al. (2018) examined informational cues and their impact on the credibility of information posted by YouTube influencers. Their results indicated that social influence is an influential factor affecting perceived information credibility on YouTube.

Although some previous studies examined the effect of social influence on credibility, mainly, no study investigated the effect of social influence on trust. This study explores this by filling the gap. Social influence is a crucial factor in understanding the effect of bloggers on consumer behaviour and needs to be taken into consideration in this research.

Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 7: Social influence will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations.

Hypothesis 8: Social influence will positively affect blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.

2.7.7. Mediating effect of trust

Although some previous studies examined the importance of trust on blog readers' attitudes, no studies investigated the mediating role of trust in the perception of blog readers' loyalty. Hsu et al. (2014) examined the relationship between trust of blog readers and perceived usefulness. Similarly, Alsaleh (2017) found that trust had a positive effect on blog readers' intentions. A recent study conducted by Chetiou et al. (2020) found that trust mediates the relationship

between eWOM and customers' attitudes. Osman et al. (2013) found that trust mediates the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Many studies emphasised that trust is a key factor in understanding the attitudes of customers who are shopping online, and they examined the relationship between trust and customer in eWOM or in an online shopping environment (Hsu et al., 2014; Alsaleh, 2017; Osman et al., 2013; Chetiou et al., 2020). No established studies posit trust as a mediator between the perception of credibility and loyalty towards adoption of bloggers recommendations. Therefore, this study covers the literature gap on the mediating effect of trust between the perception of credibility and loyalty. This study argues that bloggers' recommendations create trust which converts into loyalty to their recommendations.

The mediation effect is analysed by conducting structural equation modelling (SEM). SEM is useful in examining hypotheses about causal relationships among observed and unobserved (latent) variables and it is useful in solving problems in formulating theoretical constructions (Reisinger and Turner, 2002). Mediation affects presents of how third variable affect the relation between two other variables. Reisinger and Turner (2002) stated that the mediation effect is essential to understanding the relation of the third variable. To improve understanding of trust and measure the causal relationship between credibility and the perception of blog readers' loyalty, Hypothesis 9 was generated.

Hypothesis 9: Trust has a mediating effect on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers.

2.7.8 Gender

Pedersen and MacAfee (2007) argued that both genders use blogs for leisure activity and both genders find the same satisfactions in blogs. Lu and Hsiao (2009) studied the effect of gender on blog owners' motivations to post information, finding that women's intentions were strongly influenced by self-expression while men's intentions were strongly influenced by personal outcome expectations. Oghazi et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the factors behind the purchase intentions of women and men, finding that men rely only on perceived trust in developing their purchase intentions. Although a few studies have examined gender differences, there is still a lack of knowledge about the gender differences in how blogs are used, especially in recent years when bloggers have more power over consumers' decision-making processes. There is also a literature gap in terms of identifying whether gender moderates the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers, as shown in their adoption of bloggers' recommendations. The tenth hypothesis is as follows.

Hypothesis 10: Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers.

2.7.9 Perceived loyalty of blog readers

Loyalty is an important factor in human behaviour when analysing attitudes. Loyalty is defined as the quality of being faithful to someone and counting on

them (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In this research (i.e., in the blogging context), loyalty can be defined as blog readers' loyalty to bloggers as perceived by the readers themselves. Previous studies have studied brand loyalty from a behavioural perspective (Brown, 1952). Park (1996) defined consumer loyalty as repeated purchases of a brand interest. Many studies examined brand loyalty and argued that it encompasses both attitudinal and behavioural factors. Jacoby and Kyner (1973) argued that examining both attitudinal and behavioural factors helps understanding of consumer loyalty. It is important, however, to highlight that this study uses the term "perceived loyalty of blog readers" rather than merely blog readers' loyalty since loyalty is only a perception in people's minds. Supporting that, it can be argued that perception is the new reality. The reality is only perceived in people's minds. Gustave Flaubert stated that there is not truth but only perception. Human attitudes or behaviours can be accepted as true in as much as it is perceived.

Ogba and Tan (2009) examined customer loyalty in bank marketing; they found that elements of bank marketing communications are predictors for customer loyalty. Fitriani et al. (2020) studied loyalty by focusing on channel loyalty in YouTube product review vlogs, finding that perceived enjoyment, credibility and channel engagement affected channel loyalty, but that informativeness did not affect channel loyalty. Lu and Miller (2019) highlighted that both altruistic and egoistic marketing posts have a positive impact on customers' loyalty.

Although loyalty has been examined in the literature, no studies have focused on loyalty in a blogging context. Therefore, this study defines loyalty in a blogging context and examines the mediating effects of trust and credibility on the perceived loyalty of blog readers.

2.8 Research questions and hypotheses table

Table 2 presents the research questions, hypotheses and factors, including references.

Table 2. Research questions, hypotheses and factors

Research Questions	Hypotheses	Factors
What factors influence the formation of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in and adoption of their recommendations?	Hypothesis 1: Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social Attractiveness ○ Trust
	Hypothesis 2: Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social Attractiveness ○ Credibility
	Hypothesis 3: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, the bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sponsorship ○ Trust
	Hypothesis 4: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sponsorship ○ Credibility
	Hypothesis 5: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in adoption of the bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Perceived Bloggers' Experience ○ Trust
	Hypothesis 6: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Perceived Bloggers Experience ○ Credibility

	readers' willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	
	Hypothesis 7: Social influence will positively affect blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social Influence ○ Trust
	Hypothesis 8: Social influence will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social Influence ○ Credibility
What factors mediate bloggers' credibility and blog readers' perceptions of their loyalty to bloggers?	Hypothesis 9: Trust has a mediating effect on the relationship between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Trust ○ Credibility ○ Perceived Blog readers' loyalty
Does gender have a differentiating effect on construct responses?	Hypothesis 10: Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gender

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology of this study. It presents the philosophical position of this research, including the epistemology and ontology. This is followed by research methods. Lastly, the chapter will provide information about research instruments, sampling and data analysis.

3.2 Philosophical position

Ontology and epistemology form the basis of any research project (Hussey and Hussey, 1997), since research requires a clear position on “the way knowledge is obtained” and the nature of existence. Hence, articulating the ontological and epistemological orientation within one’s personal paradigm is the first step that determines the rest of the project (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Ontology demonstrates the values the research holds about what can be known as real and what someone believes to be factual (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Blaikie (1993, p. 6) defined ontology as “claims or assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality”. The key ontological question is: What are the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? In other words, it includes “claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other” (Blaikie, 1993, p. 6). According to Richards (2003), ontology is assumptions made about the kind of nature of reality and what exists. Before a piece of research can start focusing on the concepts of truth and reality, however, it is essential to ask the question, “How we know what we know” (Mutum, 2011). The answer to this question leads us back to the fundamental theme of epistemology or the theory of knowledge.

Stoker (2018) defined epistemology as the reflection of the researcher's view about the nature of the world. Crotty (1998) explained that epistemology is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It involves knowledge and, necessarily, it embodies a certain understanding of what that knowledge entails. Crotty (1998) added that epistemology deals with the "nature" of knowledge, its possibility (what knowledge is possible and can be attempted and what is not), its scope and legitimacy. Kuhn (1970) defined and popularised the concept as a paradigm that refers to a set of linked assumptions about the world, which is shared by any given scientific community and includes beliefs, values and techniques (Suppe, 1979). Similarly, Bryman (2008) defined epistemology as concerning the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. Al-Saadi (2014) argued that researchers' epistemological assumptions will profoundly affect the uncovering of knowledge of social behaviour. For example, if knowledge is viewed as hard, objective and tangible, this requires the researcher to have an observer role along with methods of testing and measuring (Al-Saadi, 2014).

This research adopts a quantitative approach. The methodology in this research follows the six-step marketing research process (Figure 3) set out by Malhotra (1996). Malhotra (1996) highlighted how important it is to take these steps carefully in quantitative marketing research. The steps are: 1) starting with theory, 2) identifying the research question, 3) formulating a hypothesis, 4) data collection, 5) data preparation and analysis, 6) results and presentation.

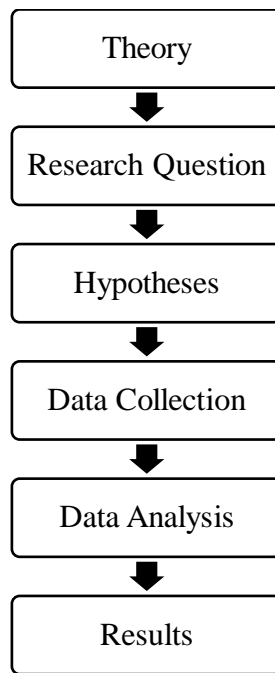


Figure 3. Schematic presentation of quantitative marketing research model

Source: Malhotra (2004)

3.3 Positivism in relation to consumer behaviour

Positivism comes from the French word “*Positivisme*”, which means “imposed on the mind by experience” (Carson et al., 2001). The positivist position is based on the idea that reality is stable, observable and can be objectively described (Carson et al., 2001). It emerged in the early nineteenth century in Europe and was first applied by August Comte. Logical positivism, which was developed in the twentieth century by Emile Durkheim, holds that statements or propositions are meaningful only if they can be empirically verified (P. F. Anderson, 1986). Later, the concept of verification was replaced by a liberal testability criterion: “the idea of gradually increasing confirmation” (Carnap, 1936). This newly

developed version of positivism came to be known as logical empiricism. Phenomena and their characteristics can be perceived by sensory experience (Saunders et al., 2012). It is fundamental to understand the positivist ontological position of objectivism, in which “social phenomena confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach or influence” (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 726).

In the positivist paradigm, epistemology is more straightforward, and more objective compared to the interpretivist paradigm. The basic positivist paradigm is based on methods and natural sciences. This philosophy believes that “reality exists beyond the researcher’s perception either as an entity, an attribute or cause” (Bruner, 1986).

There are some steps and protocols for establishing and testing hypotheses (Goulding, 1999). It is also believed that utilising a standardised research procedure makes it easier to replicate in different situations. After the research design, data collection is an essential part of research. Data collection is assumed to be true to reality and representative of the population. Most findings produce general assumptions, which contrasts with interpretivist research. Indeed, a positivist approach may be the only solution for research that involves large samples. An interpretivist approach might be difficult, expensive and time consuming.

In the consumer behaviour and marketing fields, there has been debate about using the relevant philosophy for research. In 1982, the American Marketing Association pointed out in conference that logical empiricism is the dominant philosophical approach that is employed in marketing. There are two main alternative research philosophies that can be applied: positivism and interpretivism. Indeed, Simonson et al. (2001) argued that consumer behavioural topics, and specifically research into purchase decision making, is considered positivist. The field of this study is well defined and considered. This research aims to explain the effect of bloggers on blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility by extending existing psychological and human behavioural theories based on objectivity.

The literature was critically reviewed in Chapter 2; previous studies related to bloggers and their effects predominantly adopted a positivist philosophical position. Alsaleh (2017), Alzahrani and O'Toole (2017), Sokolova (2019), Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019), Buabeng-Andoh (2018), Otieno (2016) and Hsu et al. (2014) conducted studies related to blogging based on human behavioural theories, and mainly adopted a positivist philosophical approach. This leads to the conclusion that studies related to blogging mainly apply positivism, which underlines human and consumer behavioural theories as well as psychological theories. On this basis, this study adopted a positivist approach. This approach has its own limitations; however, it is the most suitable way to conduct this study successfully. This study mainly aimed to propose a conceptual framework that includes factors affecting blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility towards adoption of recommendations. Related theories and a significant amount of literature was reviewed to explore constructs. A

quantitative research method was adopted consistent with the positivist approach undertaken in this research.

3.4 Research paradigm

One of the most important factors after emphasising the theory and philosophy of the research is that whether the explicit in the design of research. The extent of clarity about the theory at the beginning of the research determines the approach of the study. A deductive approach occurs when the research starts with well-established theory and data collection is used to evaluate propositions or hypotheses (Saunders et al., 2012). This research aims to analyse the factors influencing blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their trust in bloggers' recommendations; it introduces the topic with the TRA, and tests hypotheses based on existing theory to develop generalised conclusions. Blaikie and Priest (2018) stated that a deductive approach measures causal relationships between concepts and variables. Those causal relationships are reflected in hypotheses and the results show whether the hypotheses are accepted or rejected. Blaikie and Priest (2018) added that this type of research is most likely to be quantitative in nature, although Saunders et al. (2012) argued there are also a few cases where a deductive approach uses qualitative data. Another important characteristic of a deductive approach is generalisation, for which the selection and size of the sample is very important.

An inductive approach explains the ways in which humans interpret the world. Followers of an inductive approach may criticise a deductive approach because of its tendency to construct a rigid methodology that does not allow for alternative explanations of what is going on. Researchers adopting an inductive approach

are more likely to work with qualitative data and use a variety of ways to collect data in order to establish a view of the phenomena.

Saunders et al. (2012) pointed out that the rigid divisions between inductive and deductive approaches may be misleading. They added that it is possible to combine inductive and deductive approaches in the same research, but often one approach is dominant. Understanding whether research is predominantly deductive or inductive depends on the emphasis of the research and the nature of the topic (Saunders et al., 2012). A topic on which there is existing literature, where one can define a theoretical framework and evaluate hypotheses, lends itself to be dominantly deductive. However, if the research starts with observations, it may be more appropriate to adopt an inductive approach. In a deductive approach, variables are measured quantitatively, while in an inductive approach a qualitative method is used to measure variables.

Although the attitude to theory is an essential prerequisite in research design, no one approach is superior to others: there are some situations where the right approach is clearly determined by the available questions and data, or by specific limitations, but equally there are other situations where researchers may make a convincing case for multiple approaches. This research will predominantly adopt a deductive approach because it starts with a theoretical framework and evaluates hypotheses from that theory to draw findings. The conceptual framework and research constructs were developed based on existing psychological theory and human behavioural studies. This study mainly aims to test the psychological theory of social attractiveness, developed by Gilbert (1995), in a blogging context; so, a deductive approach is the most suitable approach for this research. Based on that, hypotheses were generated and tested which generated new

information and contributes to knowledge. Supporting that, Bryman and Bell (2007) stated that following logical steps in research is one of the significant characteristics of a deductive approach.

Studies related to blogging and consumer behaviour predominantly adopted a deductive approach. A deductive approach was adopted in this study as well because this research proposed a conceptual model of the effect of bloggers, by testing hypothesised relationships that were established in existing studies in the context of blogging.

3.5 Criticisms of positivism

One of the major criticisms of the positivist philosophy is that science is “value-free”. Critics support the idea that exclusion of value judgements is itself a value judgement, while others contend that it is impossible to carry out analysis without making value judgements (Tacconi, 1996). Tacconi (1996) argued that it is impossible to be objective. According to Varney (1994), the positivist philosophy treats consumers as passive objects, and this results in an inability to convey the richness of consumer experience. Kruger (2003, p. 1) pointed out that “it is hard to get the real meaning of an issue by looking at numbers”. Similarly, Duhem (1953) noted that “it is impossible to conclusively refute a theory because realistic test situations depend on more than just the theory that is under investigation”. Other scholars, however, argued that these criticisms are misguided. The positivism/quantitative method is the most accepted by marketing professionals (Hunt, 1993).

Hunt (1993) explained that advocates of qualitative methods are often grounded in relativism, constructionism, and subjectivism, which some marketers prefer

not to use because of the limitations of these approaches. Hsu et al. (2013) identified a potential research bias in the positivist approach when the sample is self-selected, since only people who have experience will be able to answer the questions. Thus, it can be argued that this bias can be reduced to a large extent by using a positivist approach. Hunt (1993) argued that the bias can be managed by using double blind research techniques and statistical methods, such as factor analysis (Cote and Foxman, 1987). Researchers adopting a positivist tradition also employ various measures of validity such as construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and statistical conclusion validity (Weber & Campbell, 2004).

Moreover, Hudson and Ozanne (1988) argued that interpretivists focus too much on the individual's consciousness, which may result in a failure to capture macro elements of consumer behaviour; thus, theoretical comprehension of the larger social context and structures, which is essential to generate knowledge, may be negatively affected. Hence, there have been many debates about the weaknesses and strengths of both positivist and interpretivist approaches. This does not mean one is superior to other as both paradigms have their own strengths and limitations. It is vital for researchers to decide which paradigm is appropriate and which path would lead them to "truth".

3.6 Ontology

The epistemological and ontological assumptions set in this research form the basis of the truth and reality that is claimed for this study. Positivism, which is an epistemological position, focuses on the importance of objectivity. In other words, truth is considered objective and objective truth can be investigated if the researcher adopts the right ways of discovering it. These ways of discovering knowledge and truth are exemplified by Newtonian methods, such as careful direct observations and not deduction from abstract propositions (Ritchie et al., 2014). Objectivity is therefore obtained through the acceptance of natural science as a paradigm to study human knowledge, and necessarily adopts methods for data collection and data interpretation similar to those used in natural science, including hypothesis testing, causal explanations and modelling (Al-Saadi, 2014). Accordingly, this research follows the objectivist approach.

This research starts with a theory and research questions; it then articulates the expected causal relationships between variables (factors affecting bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in bloggers), which are then set out in a conceptual model with formal hypotheses. This forms the basis for data collection and data analysis leading to results rather than researchers' personal assumptions. Thus, in this research, assumptions can only be made through hypothesis results. If a hypothesis is not supported, a researcher cannot argue about the result. Therefore, this research takes knowledge as objective and measures that knowledge by quantitative statistical methods.

3.7 Research design

One of the most significant factors after determining the overall approach of a piece of research, is deciding on the research method, including the questions that will be asked. It is beneficial to choose questions that will answer the research questions and will be helpful to test the hypotheses and interpret the results, although it may be challenging to articulate these. Based on the philosophical position articulated in Section 3.2, the most suitable data collection method for this research was to conduct a survey to gather the data.

The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, demographic questions were asked to obtain general information about the respondents. This included age, gender, level of education and occupation. Also, since Alsaleh (2017) argued that cultural factors, such as religion, morals, social environment, and education, may vary from nation to nation, a nationality question was included in the demographic part of the questionnaire. The author argues that due to religion and traditional norms, respondents' expectations of blog posts might differ from one nationality to another. There is a great opportunity to analyse this with the sample used for this study, since the students at Birkbeck, University of London, encompass a great variety of nationalities and cultures.

The second part of the questionnaire included the scales for measuring constructs for social attractiveness, sponsorship, perceived experience of bloggers, social influence, trust, credibility, and perceived blog readers' loyalty. To test the factors of trust and credibility, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) asked respondents whether they sought bloggers who are trustworthy and expert in their domain. Therefore, the survey included questions about trust and credibility. Recent studies have examined the constructs for intention to purchase by asking whether

consumers purchase products that they had not heard about before reading a blog's recommendations (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Therefore, it is important to include questions to check blog readers' intentions by asking them if they would purchase a product just because they heard about it from bloggers. Moreover, Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) analysed the characteristics of fashion blogs by identifying some factors, such as easy navigation, credibility, and ease of access. Hence, the survey included questions that aimed to find out the characteristics of blogs, what services consumers like to receive and what factors of bloggers will strength their intention to adopt the recommendation of blogs. Additionally, Hsu et al. (2013) argued that it is important to ask additional questions, such as: What kind of recommendations for products and services do you usually read on blogs? As technology and social media nowadays represent the progressive democratisation of communication, it becomes addictively habit forming (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018). Individuals constantly check on posts and this habit is becoming more widespread. Therefore, there is a question in the survey to classify consumers' habitual social media usage on blogs.

In order to test the impact of sponsorship on trust and credibility, a survey question asks what consumers feel about sponsored blogs. Past research emphasised the importance of asking respondents' what their feelings are about specific behaviour, rather than asking how much respondents enjoy or hate that specific behaviour. As Weigel and Newman (1976) stated, an adequate test of attitude-behaviour consistency under these circumstances would demand the use of several independent measures of behaviour designed to adequately sample the universe of action implications engaged by the attitude measure.

Another important factor to include in the survey is social influence. Asking from whom people hear about blogs or recommendations enables a simple analysis of the social environments that are most influential on decisions.

This research entails a survey conducted in London, UK, at Birkbeck College, University of London, which is the home of a variety of students who come from different cultural backgrounds, are of different age groups and have differing characteristics. Birkbeck was chosen because most research that has been published was conducted at universities, considering the variety of students, ages and the ease of ethical implications (Alsaleh, 2017).

The survey was conducted online, following the studies of Hsu et al. (2014), Alsaleh (2017) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020), and in recognition that online surveys have a wider reach and are more popular than conventional postal or face-to-face surveys Hsu et al. (2013) Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) examined the influence of attitudes by conducting an online survey of college students, arguing that online surveys are appropriate because people who read and follow bloggers are Generation Y, a generation that is recognised as digital natives. Besides, Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) mentioned that the use of an online survey makes it possible for the survey to be easily shared across different social websites and platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter; this makes it possible to reach more people. Hsu Chin et al. (2013), however, noted a potential for bias because such samples are self-selected and only people who have experience will be able to answer the questions.

Hsu et al. (2013) informed respondents they would have a chance to enter a draw for US\$300 bookstore certificates as prizes if they finished the survey. This research followed this approach by giving respondents a chance to enter a draw

to motivate and encourage them to complete the survey. In the case of this study, respondents who completed the questionnaire were offered the chance to enter a draw for a £50 Amazon voucher or donate that £50 to a preferred charity. This small incentive is similar to the approach applied by Hsu et al. (2013) and can be considered motivation for potential respondents to take part in the survey.

Online surveys are widely used nowadays to collect data on account of the ease and efficiency of distributing the questionnaires and collating data from the responses. Hsu Chin chose a Yahoo blog to post the survey questionnaires because of the popularity of that platform in Taiwan (Hsu et al., 2013). This research utilised Google Forms to conduct the survey. Google Forms was chosen because most of the academic research utilised Google and Yahoo Forms to gather data. The link to the survey was posted and shared through WhatsApp, Twitter and other social platforms, such as through emails and Facebook. Moreover, Google Forms is a survey platform that helps to gather data for free while also providing some basic initial analysis.

Another advantage of online surveys is the ability to track repeated emails and IP addresses that have been used online, which helps to eliminate repeated and unusable responses (Hsu et al., 2013). Furthermore, people are less nervous when conducting online surveys as there is no pressure to complete them right away. They are given an option to fill it later when they have free time. Nonetheless, because finding 348 respondents with fully completed surveys online in the limited time available may be challenging, the option of conducting some surveys on paper was retained.

Table 3 presents the survey questions and factors, including the references. Each factor is linked to represents the matching survey questions.

Table 3. Survey questions, factors and references

Survey Questions	Factors	References
<p>Bloggers who have high numbers of followers and likes are more trustable and I feel confident about the information provided</p> <p>Bloggers who post about products/services are knowledgeable</p> <p>Bloggers who share information about products/services are trustable and make me adopt their advice</p> <p>Bloggers who share products/services are not reliable</p> <p>Bloggers who are active on blogs and preparing vlogs are not honest</p> <p>I feel information given by bloggers is sincere and honest</p> <p>I feel bloggers who are promoted are not trustworthy and credible</p>	Trust	<p>(Esteban-Santos et al., 2018)</p> <p>(Sokolova and Kefi, 2020)</p>
<p>I feel bloggers who communicate with me and reply to my questions make me adopt their recommendations</p> <p>I feel bloggers who try and share their advised products through videos make me adopt their recommendations</p> <p>I feel bloggers are not credible</p> <p>I feel bloggers are trustworthy</p> <p>I feel bloggers are efficient in their domain</p>	Credibility	(Sokolova and Kefi, 2020)
<p>I buy a new product that I never bought because of bloggers' recommendations</p> <p>I adopt bloggers' recommendations when I see that bloggers are using or trying the products that they recommend through live videos or vlogs</p> <p>Bloggers who are not trying the products/services before promoting put me off purchasing a recommended product/service</p> <p>I buy a new product that I never tried because I see that bloggers tried and were happy with the results</p>	Perceived Bloggers' Experience	(Developed by author)
<p>I find bloggers recommendations trustable because my friends and people around me following</p> <p>I will buy the products that my friends tried, which they heard of from bloggers as they are considered credible</p> <p>I will not buy the products hearing from my friends</p> <p>I will not buy the products that my friends tried hearing from bloggers are considered credible</p> <p>I buy new products because my friends told me they have seen from bloggers.</p>	Social Influence	(Alsaleh, 2017)

<p>Sponsored blogs introduce me to brands I never knew about, and they are credible on making me purchase their recommendations</p> <p>Sponsored blogs are trustable even if they get paid</p> <p>Sponsored blogs are not trustable because they are getting paid by the sponsors</p> <p>I do intentionally ignore sponsored blogs on the blog</p> <p>I would prefer that there is no sponsored post on blogs</p>	<p>Sponsorship</p>	<p>(Developed by author)</p> <p>(Esteban-Santos et al., 2018)</p>
<p>I would purchase the products/services promoted by bloggers in the future</p> <p>I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers</p> <p>I would not recommend people close to me to buy products promoted by bloggers in future</p> <p>I feel I would not purchase the products/services promoted by bloggers in future</p>	<p>Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty</p>	<p>(Esteban-Santos et al., 2018)</p> <p>(Sokolova and Kefi, 2020)</p>
<p>I think bloggers who have high self-esteem, who are overconfident, and dominant are credible and make me adopt their recommendations</p> <p>I think bloggers who are positive, talented, and instantly communicating are credible and make me adopt their recommendations</p> <p>Bloggers who have dominant behaviors make me adopt blog's recommendation</p> <p>Bloggers who have friendly attitude are trustable and make me adopt their recommendations</p> <p>I think bloggers who are friendly and positive put me off adopting their recommendations</p> <p>I think bloggers who have high self-esteem and dominant behaviors are not credible and put me off adopting their recommendations</p>	<p>Social Attractiveness</p>	<p>(Developed by author)</p>

3.8 Survey Design

The decision to adopt a positivist philosophy and to follow a quantitative method clarified what data would be needed and how best to collect it. Surveys have been defined as a data collection technique where structured questionnaires are used as an instrument to collect data that makes the measurement of perception, attitude, opinions and self-reported behaviour possible (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019). A survey research design was employed to collect the primary data required to test the hypotheses. Thus, the data that was used to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions was obtained through a structured questionnaire. Survey research design has been described as a “procedure in quantitative research in which investigators administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviours, or characteristics of the population” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This involved using a questionnaire designed from the findings from the literature review, to collect the primary data. The questionnaire in this study was structured into two sections: the first part sought to acquire the demographic profile of respondents; the second part focused on the factors under investigation, which were social attractiveness, sponsorship, social influence, perceived experience and credibility of bloggers, and trust and loyalty towards bloggers as perceived by blog readers.

It is important to acknowledge that studies such as that of Dockery and Bedeian (1989) pointed out the danger of assuming that questionnaire-assessed “attitudes” lead to actual behaviour in specific situations. In other words, using questioning as a data collection tool for studies on attitude may not provide accurate results.

This challenge will be managed in the questionnaire design, particularly in relation to the questions asked and the scale of measurement.

A validity test involves pilot testing of the questions in the questionnaire after designing it. According to Lada et al. (2009), pilot studies are important because they help researchers detect any problems relevant to the instrument, they want to use for data collection in their studies. Thus, a pilot test will help with the establishment of the validity of the study based on the knowledge of experts in the field, thereby avoiding situations where the wrong design of the questionnaire will lead to results that are not valid. The feedback obtained from a pilot test can be valuable since it makes it possible for the questionnaire to be revised and improved before collecting data from the main participants. Another method of enhancing the validity of the questionnaire in this study was by basing it on questionnaires already used successfully in the literature; specifically, it was adapted from studies by Ajzen and Fishbein (1977), Lada et al. (2009) and Buabeng-Andoh (2018), Alsaleh (2017), Otieno et al. (2016) have tested the validity of the TRA.

The survey itself was conducted online over a period of four weeks to ensure that as many students as possible were able to take part in the research. Gaining a large sample size was a factor behind the decision to collect the data through an online survey, since online data collection is convenient and easily accessible for participants, both in terms of the option to access the survey at a time of their choosing and the option to access it through multiple devices (e.g., on their mobile devices, tablets, laptops and desktop computers). All this serves to increase the likelihood of students agreeing to participate.

3.9 Scale Selection

A Likert scale method was used in the design of the questionnaire. According to Bishop and Herron (2015), Likert scales are widely used as psychometric item scoring schemes that attempt to quantify the opinions, interests, or perceived efficacy of participants in a research study. The decision to use a Likert scale was made because they have been widely used in a range of studies to measure attitude (Lada et al., 2009). To develop scales for measuring constructs, such as trust, perceived blog readers' loyalty, credibility, sponsorship and social influence, scales were adapted from previous studies (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Lim et al., 2006; Hsu and Lin, 2008; Alsaleh, 2017) with modifications to suit the particular focus of this work.

New scales were developed for the constructs of social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience. Scale development and validation needs to follow some stages. Initially, constructs should be defined based on the literature review. The dimensionality of the construct can be explained: a construct conceptualised as a single variable scale is referred to as unidimensional, whereas a construct conceptualised as a combination of a number of subcomponents is referred to as multidimensional (Tay and Jebb, 2016).

After writing up the scales, scale validation was supported by reliability and dimensionality tests. The number of dimensions was confirmed by EFA and verified by CFA results. The constructs of perceived bloggers' experience and social attractiveness were defined and conceptualised based on the literature. An extensive review of the literature was conducted to generate items for each construct. Perceived bloggers' experience was conceptualised as a single variable

scale. Social attractiveness was conceptualised as a multiple variable scale to describe the construct clearly. As social attractiveness is a theory composed of SAHP and RHP, a multiple variable scale was generated to identify the factor based on the literature. Following that, both scales were tested for scale validation and reliability. Jebb et al. (2021) argued that examining internal consistency is the most common method for calculating reliability. This study examined Cronbach's alpha results and found that results were within the acceptable range of between 0.7 and 0.8. (see Subsection 4.6.1). Following that, EFA and CFA were conducted for scale validation. As part of EFA, Bartlett's test of sphericity was conducted and found to be statistically significant ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), which showed that sufficient correlations existed among variables for factor analysis to proceed. Following that, CFA was conducted to verify the tested factor structures and set of variables (Oksuz and Malhan, 2005).

Fit indices were analysed, and metrics were within the general standards (scale validation analysis can be found in pp. 102–108). However, adopting a multiple scale for the construct social attractiveness could be considered a potential methodological limitation, which is addressed in Section 6.3.

Each item was measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The participants were required to rate their level of agreement with statements given in the questionnaire. Some previous studies added more points to the scale to increase the accuracy (Krosnick, 1991). According to other researchers, however, a five-point scale eliminates neutral mid-points and forces the respondents to make a choice (Garland, 1991; Alsaleh, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

3.9.1 Research ethics

Ethical considerations are one of the most important factors to follow in any research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). This research was consistent with all Birkbeck University of London's ethical guidelines. Ethical form was submitted in October 2019 and approved in November 2019. Participant information sheet was shared with participants. Proposal form for ethical review and questionnaires are presented (Appendix p.222). All the information and data obtained from questionnaires were kept anonymous and deleted after used. All personal information or names of the participants were kept anonymous which was also written in the participant information sheet. This research followed Birkbeck University of London's guidelines to ensure all the data and personal information will carried out following ethical rules.

3.10 Sampling strategy

The population for this study was all those reading and following bloggers worldwide. Since it is impossible to survey this entire group, however, a sample was selected from this population. The sample for this study was students at Birkbeck College, University of London.

One of the key issues that was given detailed consideration was how the participants in this study would be selected. A range of sampling methods was considered before the decision was made to adopt convenience sampling. Bornstein et al. (2013, p. 359) described convenience sampling as “a nonprobability sampling strategy where participants are selected based on their accessibility and/or proximity to the research”. This sampling technique has been

used in previous studies that have tested the validity of the TRA in other areas. For example, Lada et al. (2009) used convenience sampling to select participants when they investigated whether TRA can be used to predict intention to choose halal products. The primary selection principle relates to the ease of finding and recruiting the sample. This sampling technique was also selected because the researcher does not have control over the participants. Thus, participants in the study were members of the population who were conveniently available to participate, and these were students who volunteered as study participants.

This unsystematic method of recruiting participants for this study has several limitations. For example, Battaglia et al. (2019) claimed that this technique is not scientific, raising a question about the validity and reliability of the data as a true representative of the population. This can be a major concern, but the impact of this limitation will be addressed by having a large sample of about 300 to 500 participants. Sample size is a major concern in most research. Hence, Gorard (2001) pointed out that a sample must be large enough to accomplish what is intended by the analysis and should be at least five or 10 times the number of variables in use. Small samples can cause loss of potentially valuable results and power in tests used for analysis (Stevens, 2009). Gorard (2001) explained the reasons behind this by pointing out that there is the possibility of some unreturned surveys, some unanswered questions and some answered unintelligibly. Therefore, data might be lost before analysis is even started. However, the sample size in this study was similar to the sample size in other studies on consumer behaviour towards adoption of technology. The sample size in the study of Lee and Watkins (2016) was 206 respondents while Rauniar et al. (2014) collected primary data from a sample of 398 users of Facebook. Similarly, Phang Ing and

Ming (2018), who carried out a study to investigate the antecedents of consumer attitudes towards blogger recommendations and their impact on purchase intention, collected data from a sample of 384 participants. Thus, the planned sample size for this study is consistent with the number selected in many published studies. This is important from the perspective of generating reliable results.

3.11 Data collection

Prior to conducting the survey, the research instrument went through some stages of pretesting, including a pilot test. Summers (2001) pointed out that pretesting a questionnaire can help to improve it considerably.

On that basis, a pilot study was conducted at Birkbeck, University of London, initially comprising 38 students and 13 experts. The students were selected randomly from both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The experts were PhD students who were considered expert in research. They were asked to answer the questionnaire and provided their feedback to improve the structure of the questionnaire.

3.12 Data analysis

The first data to be analysed was the demographic data, as suggested by Hsu et al. (2013) and Alsaleh (2017). This involved descriptive statistics and tables of the overall demographic information of the respondents. These data were reported in narrative or table format, with frequencies. Connelly (2013) pointed out that demographic data includes information on gender, age, income level, socio-economic status, as well as topic-specific characteristics. Connelly (2013) argued that demographics is a fundamental part of any type of research and

should not be skipped. It is essential to divide the profiles and backgrounds of participants into sections to have a better understanding of the different characteristics of respondents and whether demographics can influence their responses.

Then, a two-step approach to analysis was conducted, as suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). This involved conducting EFA and CFA. EFA was used to test for reliability, to define initial evidence of unidimensional (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988) and discriminant validity (Farrell, 2010).

Cronbach's alpha is the most frequently used and important test to estimate internal consistency. Thus, this study estimated the internal consistency of each dimension by using Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated from the variables. An acceptable coefficient value is recommended to be between 0.7 and 0.9 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Traditionally, normality of the sample is one of the basic assumptions required to carry out SEM analysis. Normality simply means that the distribution of data is normally distributed with mean=0, deviation=1 and with a symmetric bell-shaped curve. Skewness and kurtosis ranges were checked for a normal distribution to inform decisions as to which tests or steps to adopt. In the event of any non-normal data, bootstrapping would be applied (Hayes, 2004). The final step involved SEM, which is used for testing hypotheses and checking the mediating affects.

Ten hypotheses were tested by conducting CB-SEM. To assess the relationship between the variables and estimate the cause-effect relationship between them, CB-SEM was conducted. Additionally, CB-SEM parameter results allow and reports analysing mediation and moderation effects. Therefore, CB-SEM was

also computed to analyse the mediator variable and moderator of this study and how these variables affected the construct variables.

3.13 Limitations of Methodological Approaches

This section outlines the potential limitation of methodological approaches in this research. This research adopted a positivist approach because it is based on hypothesis testing, objectivity, and quantitative data. Although it is suitable for this research, a positivist approach does not allow for in-depth understanding as it gives more generalized results (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Consistent with a positivist paradigm, an objective approach was adopted because the findings of this research were driven from data rather than personal interpretation of data. Consistent with a positivist paradigm, an objective approach was adopted because findings of this research were driven from data rather than personal interpretation of data. Objectivism limits the understanding because information is extracted from data rather than personal interpretation of data. Similarly, a deductive approach was undertaken consistent with a positivist paradigm. A deductive approach is based on theory testing, limits the level of flexibility in the research (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

Questionnaires were developed and adopted to collect quantitative data from university students in UK. Although, using a questionnaire allowed opportunity to generalize findings and conduct correlational statistical techniques, this does not provide in-depth understanding, human perceptions, or beliefs (Saunders et al., 2012).

Moreover, adopting a Likert scale method is another limitation of this study. A Likert scale response is in a suitable form for testing the reliability of the data,

the hypotheses and answering the research questions (Bishop and Herron, 2015; Carrasco and Lucas, 2015). Most studies widely adopt Likert scale to measure opinions attitudes, beliefs and interests (Bishop and Herron 2015). According to Carrasco and Lucas (2015), a significant challenge when using a Likert scale is that there could be potential biases within the measurement process. It is difficult for all the participants to establish exactly the distance between each of these choices. For example, there is always the possibility that a participant may answer “strongly agree” to a statement while another will answer “agree” to the same statement, even though they both feel the same way about the statement. Bishop and Herron (2015) claimed that Likert scales are seen as ordinal and that they violate important statistical assumptions that are needed if the decision is to apply statistical analysis that requires data to be normally distributed and parametric. This is a limitation because there is a general acceptance that parametric statistics provide more statistically powerful results when compared to non-parametric ones (Bishop and Herron, 2015).

Another significant limitation of this study was in scale development. Novel scales were developed for two constructs: social attractiveness and perceived bloggers’ experience, although scale validation took place by conducting validity and reliability tests. Social attractiveness was composed of multiple scales in a single construct. Adopting a multiple scale for the construct social attractiveness was a significant limitation, as measuring each scale separately could have given in-depth analysis and more understanding of the concept.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the main data analysis of this study. Section 4.2 describes the demographic profile of the respondents. It is followed by the characteristics and blog usage of respondents. Next, the gender distribution of the respondents in terms of their blog usage is set out. The third section presents the findings of the factor analysis, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test results and Cronbach’s alpha results. The fourth section presents CFA results, including convergent and discriminant validity. The fifth section presents the hypothesis results, including SEM for mediation effects. The last section gives a brief conclusion of the analysis results.

A total of 358 responses were received. Out of total responses received, 348 were usable for the final analysis because 10 respondents skipped half of the questionnaire. Thus, the final analysis was carried out with a sample size of 348 respondents.

4.2 Demographic profile of respondents

This study involved a diverse group of students with varied demographic backgrounds and blog user experience. The demographic results showed that the proportion of male respondents who read blogs was 42.8%, which was much less than the proportion of female respondents who read blogs (60.7%). Multiple literature studies have examined gender differences in social media usage. According to Su et al. (2020), women tend to spend more time on social media than men. Some studies explained this from a medical aspect: women tend to

have higher social media addiction than men (Andreassen et al., 2017; Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2018; Romero-Abrio et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2010) confirmed that women use social media more than men and suggested that this is because women value relationships more than men. This supports the findings of this study as the number of female blog readers who agreed to participate in this study outnumbered the male blog readers.

In contrast to this, Alnjadat et al. (2019) found that men are more addicted to social media than women. The dramatic difference in usage of social media may be explained by a culture factor. Alnjadat et al. (2019) conducted their cross-sectional study in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. They found that women were less likely to expose their own identity through social media or blogs and they were less likely to use social media for entertainment purposes. Thus, this study finds that, in 2020, women are still considered to use blogs more than men. However, men also use blogs actively to seek advice and recommendations.

Most of the respondents who read blogs were between the ages of 20 and 29 (60.3%) and can be defined as Millennials (Generation Y). According to the literature, generational cohorts are a significant way to segment markets and groups of peers, in that they tend to possess similar values, beliefs and attitudes (Lissitsa and Kol, 2016). Generation Y, composed of people who were born between 1980 and 1990, is considered to be consumption oriented and open to innovation, they are also a high technology generation in terms of using social media and online shopping. According to the findings of this study, it would be safe to suggest that Generation Y is more likely to use blogs and adopt their recommendations because they are considered digital natives. Lissitsa and Kol

(2016) supported the idea that Generation Y put greater emphasis on socialisation with their friends, family and colleagues and they are more likely to be affected by other choices and recommendations. Lissitsa (2016) argued that bloggers and marketers should focus on Generation Y as they are more likely to be influenced because shopping is not only a purchasing style for them but also entertainment. Table 4 illustrates the demographic distribution results of this study.

Table 4. Demographic profile of respondents

		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	<i>Female</i>	199	60.7
	<i>Male</i>	149	42.8
Age	<i>19 and under</i>	78	22.4
	<i>20–29</i>	210	60.3
	<i>30–39</i>	46	13.2
	<i>40–49</i>	12	3.4
	<i>50–59</i>	2	0.6
Education	<i>Foundation degree</i>	50	14.4
	<i>MPhil/PhD degree</i>	41	11.8
	<i>Postgraduate degree</i>	105	30.2
	<i>Undergraduate degree</i>	152	43.7
Nationality	<i>Afghanistan</i>	1	0.2
	<i>Australia</i>	2	0.6
	<i>Chinese/Asian</i>	10	2.9
	<i>South/North America</i>	10	3.0
	<i>EU country</i>	62	17.8
	<i>Indian/Pakistani/ Bangladeshi</i>	68	19.5
	<i>Middle East/Turkey/North Africa</i>	103	29.7
	<i>Iceland</i>	1	0.3
	<i>United Kingdom</i>	75	21.6
	<i>USA/Canada</i>	16	4.6
Marital status	<i>Married</i>	39	11.2
	<i>Single</i>	309	88.8
Current occupation	<i>Full-time work and student</i>	66	19
	<i>Part-time work and student</i>	80	23
	<i>Student</i>	202	58

4.3 Blog and bloggers' distribution

In terms of the pattern of use of blogs, all respondents (total sample size of 348) read blogs; of these, 199 were female respondents and 149 were male respondents. This shows how frequently blogs are read by people. In 2009, 900,000 articles were posted on blogs every day. (WordPress, 2021) confirmed that more than 88 million new blog posts were published in April 2021, which shows a significant increase in blogs users and readers over the past two decades. In this study, respondents were also asked about the frequency of their blog visits in a year (see Table 5). It was found that the largest group of respondents (40.2%) visited blogs weekly, followed by those who read blogs daily (21.6%), and those who read blogs 3 to 5 times (18.4%). Some respondents visited blogs 1 to 2 times (11.8%). The smallest group of respondents visited blogs 2 to 3 times (8.0%). In the literature, bloggers and bloggers' effects on consumers' purchase habits were examined, including bloggers' demographic profile and blogging habits. Hsu et al. (2013) asked respondents about the frequency of their blog visits and found that 18% of respondents read blogs 1 to 2 times per year, and 25% read blogs more than 4 times a year. Alsaleh (2017) founds that the largest group was people who read blogs between 1-2 years by (37%), following that less than a year (28.2%), 2 to 3 years (19.8%). This study asked respondents about their weekly experiences on blogs, which was not asked by Alsaleh (2017) or Hsu et al. (2013). This study indicated that the largest group of respondents (29.2%) read blogs weekly even though they were asked about their yearly experience. Differences

may be explained by the time factor, because the popularity of blogs is growing dramatically every year.

Respondents were asked how long they spent on blogs. Most of the respondents spent 1 to 3 hours per week (42.8%). Some respondents spent less than 1 hour per week (33.3%) or 4 to 10 hours per week (19.3%). Surprisingly, there were some respondents who spent more than 20 hours per week on blogs (2.0%).

The questionnaires included questions about the reliability of bloggers' recommendations. The answers revealed that 270 respondents found bloggers' recommendations reliable, equal to 68%, which shows the strong bond between the blogger and blog readers. This indicates that more than half of respondents found bloggers' recommendations credible regardless of sponsorship disclosure. According to the studies of Boerman et al. (2017) and Lu et al. (2014), blog readers find recommendations reliable even when they are promoted by brands or companies. This study found that 73% of respondents would sometimes recommend the products that are promoted by bloggers to their friends and family. This high proportion of respondents indicates that blog readers have built up a high degree of trust in bloggers' recommendations, to a degree that they recommend them to their social circle. Izuagbe et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of subjective norms, which are composed of respondents' social circle, including friends and family. Izuagbe et al. (2019) found that a social circle of people significantly affect the perceived usefulness of social media.

This study found that some respondents have their own blog (28.7 %), although most did not (71.3%). Previous studies about bloggers did not ask respondents whether they have their own blog. Thus, the popularity of bloggers is rapidly

increasing, it is essential to analyse the growth in the number of people who own blogs too.

This study has identified the factors affecting blog readers' trust in bloggers' credibility, namely: social attractiveness, sponsorship, perceived bloggers' experience, social influence and gender. All these constructs were tested for validity and reliability and their factor loadings found to be acceptable (as set out in detail in Chapter 4).

Table 5 presents the findings about blogs and bloggers.

Table 5. Blog and bloggers' distribution

		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>How often do you read blogs in a year?</i>	<i>1–2 times</i>	41	11.8
	<i>2–3 times</i>	28	8.0
	<i>3–5 times</i>	64	18.4
	<i>Daily</i>	75	21.6
	<i>Weekly</i>	140	40.2
<i>How many hours do you spend per week browsing blogs?</i>	<i><1 hour</i>	116	33.3
	<i>1–3 hours</i>	149	42.8
	<i>4–10 hours</i>	67	19.3
	<i>11–20 hours</i>	9	2.6
<i>Do you have a blog?</i>	<i>No</i>	248	71.3
	<i>Yes</i>	10	28.7
<i>Did you buy any products or services with the recommendations of bloggers?</i>	<i>No</i>	147	42.2
	<i>Yes</i>	201	57.8
<i>Do you find the products promoted by bloggers reliable?</i>	<i>No</i>	136	42.0
	<i>Yes</i>	202	68.0
<i>Would you recommend the products promoted by bloggers to your friends?</i>	<i>Always</i>	9	2.6
	<i>Never</i>	40	11.5
	<i>Often</i>	45	12.9
	<i>Sometimes</i>	254	73.0

4.4 Gender distribution

The gender distribution of the respondents in terms of type of blog usage is presented below in Table 6. According to the results, travel/lifestyle blogs were the most popular and widely read by both women and men. The results showed that 79.9% of male respondents read travel/lifestyle blogs, and the percentage of female respondents who read travel/lifestyle blogs was similar at 75.9%. The next most popular type of blog was food/restaurant blogs for recommendations. The results showed that 62.3% of female respondents and 57.7% of male respondents read food/restaurant blogs for recommendations. It was found that female respondents who read fashion blogs outnumbered male respondents. More than half of the female respondents (55.8%) read fashion blogs for recommendations, whereas only 24.8% of male respondents read fashion blogs. Similarly, female respondents who read cosmetic blogs outnumbered male respondents. According to the data, 48.2% of female respondents read cosmetic blogs, whereas only 0.7% of male respondents read cosmetic blogs. Moreover, 46.2% of female respondents read health and fitness blogs, whereas 49.7% of male respondents read health and fitness blogs. Interior design/DIY blogs were read by 20% of female respondents, but by only 10% of male respondents. Lastly, parenting blogs were the least read by both groups of respondents, with 7% women and 3% men.

Table 6 presents the products and services preferences of both female and male blog readers.

Table 6. Gender distribution in answer to the question, “For which products or services do you read blog recommendations?”

	Gender			
	Female (n=199)		Male (n=149)	
	n	%	n	%
Fashion	111	55.8	37	24.8
Cosmetics	96	48.2	1	0.7
Health and Fitness	92	46.2	74	49.7
Food/restaurant	124	62.3	86	57.7
Travel/Lifestyle	151	75.9	119	79.9
Interior Design/DIY	40	20.1	15	10.1
Parenting Blogs	14	7.0	5	3.4

Table 7 presents female and male respondents’ pattern of usage of blogs and social media platforms. According to the results, Instagram was the most widely used platform by female respondents (70.4%), whereas YouTube was the mostly widely used platform by male respondents (53.4%). Facebook was used by 27.4% of male respondents and 16.3% of female respondents to follow bloggers.

Surprisingly, blog websites were still a popular platform to read and follow blogs for male respondents: 36.1% of male respondents usually read blog websites, whereas only 25.9% of female respondents read blog websites.

Table 7. Gender distribution in answer to the question, "Which platforms do you usually use to follow bloggers?"

	Gender			
	Female (n=294)		Male (n=219)	
	n	%	n	%
Blog/Websites	76	25.9	79	36.1
Facebook	48	16.3	60	27.4
YouTube	160	54.4	117	53.4
Instagram	207	70.4	110	50.2

4.5 Normality test results

Table 8 summarises the normality test for the final analysis. A normality test can be defined as a statistical test to check whether the data is normally distributed before computing any parametric tests. Ghasemi and Zahediasl (2012) highlighted the importance of normality tests. It is stated that normality should be checked for many statistical procedures, specifically parametric tests, because their validity depends on it. To find out the normality of data, skewness and kurtosis ranges were checked for normal distribution. Constructs were tested so that a decision could be made on which steps needed to be taken in the case of any non-normal data, such as bootstrapping (Hayes, 2004). Bootstrapping was not needed, however, as the values for skewness and kurtosis were within an acceptable range. Skewness values may be within the range +1 to -1 for a normal distribution

and kurtosis values may range between +3 and -3 for a normal distribution (Kline, 2011). According to the normality test results for the main data set, both the skewness and kurtosis values of the factors are between the recommended cut-offs, which indicates that the main data set is normally distributed. Table 8 presents the normality test values of this data set.

Table 8. Normality test results

Factors	Skewness	Kurtosis
<i>Perceived Blog Readers' loyalty</i>	-0.232	-0.059
<i>Social Attractiveness</i>	-0.130	-0.291
<i>Trust</i>	-0.188	-0.591
<i>Perceived Credibility</i>	-0.361	-0.560
<i>Perceived Bloggers' Experience</i>	-0.087	-0.538
<i>Social Influence</i>	-0.575	-0.036
<i>Sponsorship</i>	-0.306	-0.189

4.6 Scale validation

This study developed a novel scale for the factors of social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience. Thus, to validate the model and factors some statistical calculations were carried out. Initially, EFA was conducted to examine the internal consistency of the model. Following that, CFA was done to verify the tested factors and set of variables. Validity tests for the model were also examined.

4.6.1 EFA

The results of the factor analysis are given below, along with the results of the test for internal consistency and reliability. Items with factor loadings of 0.40 and above are considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2010).

As part of EFA, Bartlett’s test of sphericity was conducted and found to be statistically significant ($p=0.000 <0.05$) (see Table 10), which shows that sufficient correlations exist among variables for factor analysis to proceed.

The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was measured as 0.918 (Table 10) and this value is considered appropriate for this research. Kaiser (1970) recommended that the baseline criterion for the KMO value should be greater than 0.5 to be ready for factor analysis. Table 9 presents the EFA results for scale validation.

Table 9. Exploratory factor analysis results

Factors/Items	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance (%)
<u>Trust</u>			
Bloggers who have high numbers of followers and likes are more trustable and I feel confident about the information provided	.824		
Bloggers who post about products/services are knowledgeable	.767	10.383	37.084
Bloggers who share information about products/services are trustable and make me adopt their advice	.673		
I feel information given by bloggers is sincere and honest	.686		
<u>Credibility</u>			
I feel bloggers are efficient in their domain	.791		
I feel bloggers who communicate with me and reply to my questions care about their followers and make me adopt their recommendations	.656	2.670	9.536
I feel bloggers are trustworthy	.557		
<u>Perceived Blogger Experience</u>			
I buy a new product that I never bought because of bloggers’ recommendations	.797		
I adopt bloggers’ recommendations when I see that bloggers are using or trying the products that they recommend through live videos or vlogs	.638	1.854	6.620

I buy a new product that I never tried because I see that bloggers tried and were happy with the results	.598		
<u>Social Influence</u>			
I find bloggers' recommendations trustable because my friends and people around me following them	.832		
I buy new products because my friends told me they have seen from bloggers.	.784	1.571	5.610
I will buy the products that my friend tried from bloggers as they are considered credible	.751		
<u>Sponsorship</u>			
Sponsored blogs are introducing me the brands I never knew about, and they are credible on making me purchase their recommendations	.501		
Sponsored blogs are not trustable because they are getting paid by the sponsors	.877	1.247	4.454
I do intentionally ignore sponsored blogs on the blog	.846		
Sponsored blogs put me off purchasing a recommended product/service	.849		
<u>Social Attractiveness</u>			
I think bloggers who have high self-esteem, who are overconfident, and dominant are credible and make me adopt their recommendations	.661		
I think bloggers who are positive, talented, and instantly communicating are credible and makes me adopt their recommendations	.664	1.094	3.908
Bloggers who have dominant behaviours make me adopt blog's recommendation	.611		
Bloggers who have friendly attitude are trustable and make me adopt their recommendations	.554		
<u>Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty</u>			
I would purchase the products/services promoted by bloggers in the future	.723		
I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers	.814	0.944	3.372
I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers in future	.792		

According to the results of EFA, the items of the scale formed into seven factors which I renamed as Trust, Perceived Experience, Social Influence, Credibility, Sponsorship, Social Attractiveness, and Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty. The eigenvalues, variance explanation ratios of factors and the factor loadings of each item are also given in Table 11. The total variance explanation ratio of these nine factors is calculated as 37.084. Under Sponsorship, the item "Sponsored blogs advice are not trustable because they are getting paid by the sponsors" has the greatest loading with 0.877. The item with the greatest loading under Social Attractiveness is "I think bloggers who are positive, talented and instantly communicating are credible and makes me adopt their recommendations" (0.664). Under Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty, the item "I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers in future" has the greatest loading with 0.792. Under Social Influence, the item "I find bloggers' recommendations trustable because my friends and people around me following them" has the greatest loading with 0.832. Furthermore, for one of the most important factors, credibility, the item "I feel bloggers are efficient in their domain" has the greatest loading with 0.791. Under Trust, the item "Bloggers who have high numbers of followers and likes are more trustable and I feel confident about the information provided" has the highest loading of 0.824. Higher loadings refer to the internal consistency and reliability of the item.

Table 10 presents the KMO measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity results. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy statistics value varies between 0 and 1, determining the degree to which a variable in a set is predicted without error by other variables (Kaiser, 1970). A KMO value closer to 1 indicates that factor analysis can be computed. The KMO measure of

sampling adequacy was conducted to assess the appropriateness of using factor analysis on the main data set of this study. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was used to test the null hypothesis that the variables in the sample size correlation matrix are uncorrelated. The KMO value for the main data was 0.906 while the Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant with a p -value of <0.001 . The results demonstrate that the data set is adequately sampled, and that factor analysis of the data is appropriate. Kaiser originally recommended that the baseline criterion for KMO value should be greater than 0.5 to be ready for factor analysis. This study determines that KMO was 0.906 in the main data analysis. Thus, it is appropriate to compute factor analysis.

Table 10. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and sampling adequacy results

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.906
Chi-Square	5880,499
Df	378
Sig.	<0.001

Cronbach’s alpha coefficient values indicate measure of internal consistency and reliability. Any value lower than 0.7 indicates low internal consistency and reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Peterson, 2000). Moreover, Cronbach’s alpha cannot be improved any further by deleting any of the items and thus the whole factor is removed from further analysis. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of the main data set are presented below. The factor of Trust was measured as 0.83, Credibility had a coefficient of 0.76, Perceived bloggers’ experience had a coefficient of 0.76, that of Social Attractiveness is 0.80, Social Influence had a

coefficient of 0.79, lastly, Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty was 0.82. Since all the values are between the range 0.7 and 0.9 it can be said that all factors show (acceptable) good internal consistency and reliability (see Table 11).

Table 11. Cronbach's alpha results

	Cronbach's Alpha
Trust	0.839
Credibility	0.764
Perceived Bloggers' Experience	0.768
Social Influence	0.792
Sponsorship	0.855
Social Attractiveness	0.801
Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty	0.825

4.6.2 CFA

CFA of the final data set was computed following EFA results. EFA was conducted to build up a model theory and test factors and influencing variables. CFA is conducted to verify those tested factor structures and set of the variables (Oksuz and Malhan, 2005). Therefore, CFA is conducted to confirm the measurement theory of the final data set. Bollen (1989) suggested that for a good model fit, the ratio chi-squared (χ^2) divided by degrees of freedom (df) (χ^2/df) should be as small as possible (Bollen, 1989). Usually, a ratio between 2 and 3 is indicative of a "good" or "acceptable" data model fit (Bollen, 1989). For the main data set of this study, this calculation was χ^2/df , that is, $995.0/431=2.30$, which indicates that the model is acceptable and has a good fit to the data. CFA therefore

confirmed the factor structure and theory as the model fits well and is statistically significant. The figure of CFA results illustrated in appendix.

Table 12 presents the fit indices and their thresholds for CFA: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), non-normed fit index (NNFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI) and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR).

Table 12. Limits and results of confirmatory factor analysis

Fitness Criterion	Perfect Fitness	Acceptable Fitness	Model
RMSEA	$0 < \text{RMSEA} < 0.05$	$0.05 \leq \text{RMSEA} \leq 0.10$	0.098
NFI	$0.95 \leq \text{NFI} \leq 1$	$0.90 < \text{NFI} \leq 0.95$	0.90
NNFI	$0.97 \leq \text{NNFI} \leq 1$	$0.95 \leq \text{NNFI} \leq 0.97$	0.91
CFI	$0.97 \leq \text{CFI} \leq 1$	$0.95 \leq \text{CFI} \leq 0.97$	0.95
SRMR	$0 \leq \text{SRMR} < 0.05$	$0.05 \leq \text{SRMR} \leq 0.10$	0.093

RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI:

Non-Normed Fit Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, SRMR: Standardised Root Mean Square Residual

The above fit indices provide reliable evaluation of the fit of the model. Hu and Bentler (1999) suggested guidelines for model fit indices for acceptable model fit. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), RMSEA values should be close to 0.06 or below. Here, RMSEA was measured as 0.098, which is in the range of acceptable fitness. The NFI=0.90, which shows a good fit as it fulfils Bentler and Bonett's (1980) recommended cut-off. Furthermore, the NNFI=0.91, which is within the range of acceptable fitness (Hair et al., 2010). Moreover, Hu and

Bentler (1999) argued that a recommended cut-off for CFI values should be close to 0.95 or above for acceptable fitness criteria. In this study, the CFI value is equal to 0.95 which indicates that it is within the acceptable fitness range. Finally, the SRMR was measured as 0.093, which fulfils Hu and Bentler's (1999) guideline criterion of a value of 0.08 or below for a well-fitting model.

4.6.3 Validity tests

The convergent validity and discriminant validity results for this research are presented below. The internal consistency of the measurement model is examined by computing the composite reliability. Data results indicate that the reliability of the items ranged from 0.70 to 0.998, which exceeds the acceptable value of 0.50. Thus, having a value greater than 0.50 for each dimension shows that the study results are genuinely related to reality (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; s.42; Peterson, 2000, s.264). The composite reliability of all the items exceeded Fornell and Larcker's (1981) benchmark of 0.60. The average variance extracted for all constructs also exceeded the threshold value of 0.5 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Thus, the test results of the measurement model were satisfactory for both convergent and discriminant validity measures. Table 13 below illustrates the validity test results of this study.

Table 13. Convergent and discriminant validity results

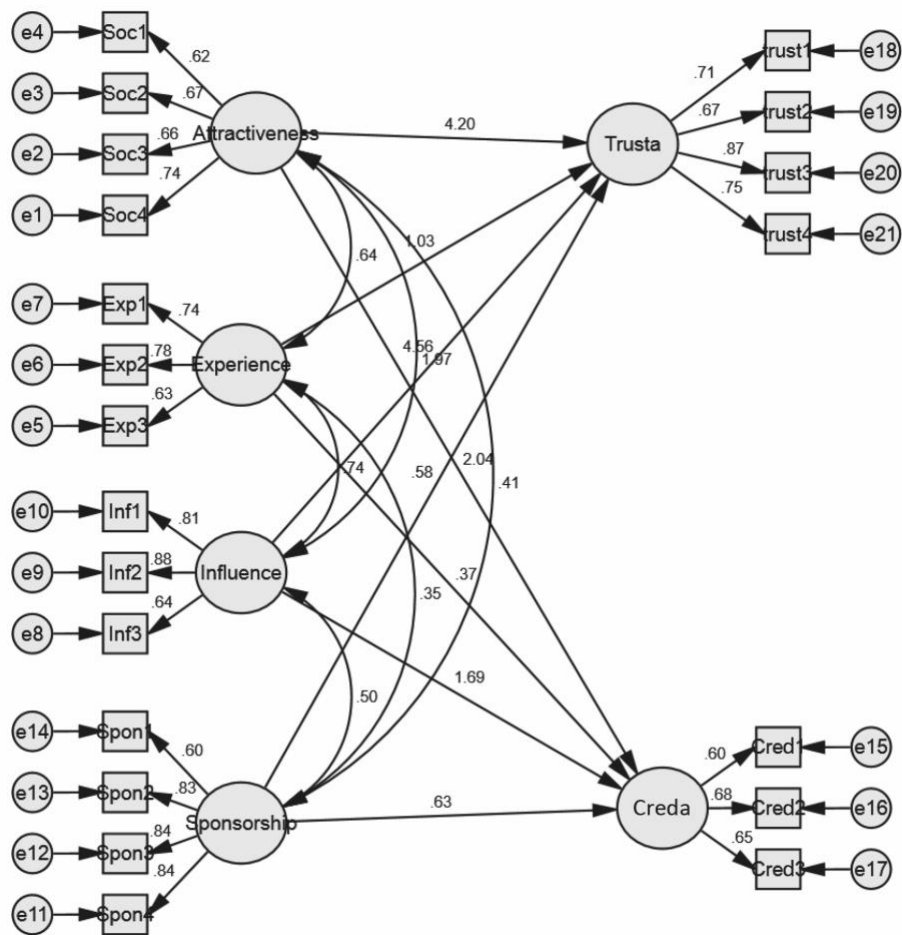
	Factor Loading	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
trust_1	0.71	0.564	0.837
trust_2	0.67		
trust_3	0.86		
trust_4	0.75		
Exp_1	0.75	0.527	0.768
Exp_2	0.78		
Exp_3	0.64		
Inf_1	0.83	0.640	0.840
Inf_2	0.9		
Inf_3	0.65		
Soc_1	0.66	0.503	0.801
Soc_2	0.7		
Soc_3	0.69		
Soc_4	0.78		
Spon_1	0.59	0.612	0.861
Spon_2	0.83		
Spon_3	0.84		
Spon_4	0.84		
Creb_1	0.66	0.550	0.725
Creb_2	0.74		
Creb_3	0.65		
Loy_1	0.83	0.567	0.796
Loy_2	0.76		
Loy_3	0.66		

4.7 Model development

4.7.1 Summary of CB-SEM results

Figure 4 below presents the CB-SEM results to examine hypotheses.

Figure 4. Covariance-based structural equation modelling results



CMIN/DF=4.28 GFI=0.86 AGFI=0.83 CFI=0.85 RMR=0.094 RMSEA=0.097

CB-SEM was conducted using SPSS/AMOS (analysis of moment of structure) to test the relationships among the factors and the constructs. AMOS is statistical software that is commonly used to examine SEM (Meyers et al., 2006). The sample size of this study ($n=346$) is sufficient for conducting SEM (Kline, 2005). CB-SEM is one of the most important and powerful data analysis tools of choice of many recent studies in organisational and management research (Zhang, 2021). This research adopted the CB-SEM technique because it has some beneficial appealing features. Firstly, it is an integration of multivariate techniques such as regression analysis, path analysis and CFA (Cheung et al., 2015). Secondly, CB-SEM can examine and for measurement error for both predictive and outcomes variables (Grewal et al., 2004), offering a more accurate estimate of model parameters and their effects. Thirdly, CB-SEM can also work with a series of contrasting models, allowing them to be interpreted and compared quantitatively. Thus, this helps to find out the best approximate models that are theoretically precise (Burnham & Anderson, 2004).

A set of goodness-of-fit indices was used to examine the adequacy of the structural model. The goodness-of fit indices are: chi square adjusted for degree of freedom (CMIN/DF), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI), NFI, CFI, incremental fit index (IFI) and the RMSEA. The model fit indices results are presented in Table 14; they were: CMIN/DF=4.28, GFI=0.86, AGFI=0.83, CFI= 0.85, RMR=0.094 and RMSEA= 0.097. All the values are within the acceptable recommended value (Anderson and Gerbing, 1984).

Table 14. Covariance-based structural equation modelling fit indices

Fit Index	(CMIN/DF)	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMR	RMSEA
*Recommended Value	≤5	≥0.90	≥0.90	≥0.90	≥5	0.05-0.08
Actual Value	$\chi^2/df=4.28$	0.86	0.83	0.85	0.094	0.097

Table 15 presents the standardised parameter values and hypotheses results of SEM.

Table 15. Parameter results of structural equation model

Factors		Standardised parameters estimate values	T-value	P-value
H1: Social Attractiveness – Trust		4.200	4.009	<0.005
H2: Social Attractiveness – Credibility		2.040	3.893	<0.005
H3: Sponsorship – Trust		0.580	2.463	>0.005
H4: Sponsorship – Credibility		0.632	5.094	<0.005
H5: Perceived Bloggers’ Experience – Trust		1.030	2.854	<0.005
H6: Perceived Bloggers’ Experience – Credibility		0.374	2.117	<0.005
H7: Social Influence – Trust		4.561	-3.619	<0.005
H8: Social Influence – Credibility		1.723	-2.799	<0.005
Trust	Trust1	0.710		<0.005
	Trust2	0.665	11.434	<0.005
	Trust3	0.865	14.343	<0.005
Credibility	Trust4	0.748	12.774	<0.005
	Creb1	0.603		<0.005
	Creb2	0.678	10.542	<0.005
	Creb3	0.648	10.191	<0.005

Sponsorship	Spon1	0.597		<0.005
	Spon2	0.830	17.867	<0.005
	Spon3	0.842	17.559	<0.005
	Spon4	0.836	11.526	<0.005
Social Influence	Inf1	0.810		<0.005
	Inf2	0.880	13.265	<0.005
	Inf3	0.637	14.360	<0.005
Perceived Bloggers' Experience	Exp1	0.744		<0.005
	Exp2	0.783	10.768	<0.005
	Exp3	0.634	10.980	<0.005
Social Attractiveness	Soc1	0.618		<0.005
	Soc2	0.668	11.202	<0.005
	Soc3	0.663	12.149	<0.005
	Soc4	0.737	12.048	<0.005

Out of eight hypotheses, only H(3), “Sponsorship will affect the blog readers’ trust towards adoption of the blogger recommendations”, was rejected. Results show that all other hypotheses results were statistically significant.

4.7.2 Mediating and moderating effects

Bootstrapping method

A bootstrapping method was conducted to examine the mediating and moderating effects through IBM SPSS and AMOS. Bootstrapping is a commonly used method for testing indirect effects and to generate confidence intervals that use resample data to estimate sampling distribution of maximum likelihood parameters (Byrne, 2016). In the bootstrapping method, the sampling distribution does not need to be known (Byrne, 2016). Therefore, they provide reliable and straightforward methods to estimate the confidence level (Nelson, 2008).

This study measured both H(9) and H(10) for both mediating and moderating effects by conducting bootstrapping method.

4.7.3 Mediating effect

Hypothesis 9: Trust has a mediating effect on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers.

Figure 5 below shows the mediating effect of this model.

Figure 5. Mediating effect of trust between perception of bloggers' credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty

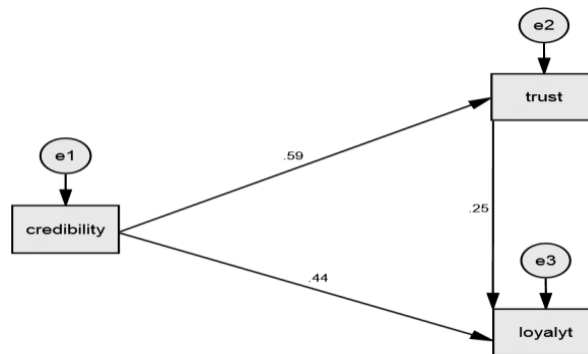


Table 16 below illustrates the mediating effect results.

Table 16. Mediating effect analysis results

Mediator Variables	Total Effect	β	Mediation	Lower Limit	Upper Limit	P-value	Supported
H9: Credibility – Trust – Loyalty	0.659	0.586	0.073	0.088	0.200	0.019	Accepted (Partial)

Results showed that indirect effect of variables trust-credibility-loyalty is significant. Trust mediates between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty. The lower limit of the confidence level is 0.088 and the upper limit is 0.200, $p < 0.05$. Explained variance rate was determined as 33.9%.

4.7.4 Moderating effect

H(10): Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and blog readers' loyalty to bloggers. Figure 6 presents the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between the factor's loyalty and credibility.

Figure 6. Moderating effect results

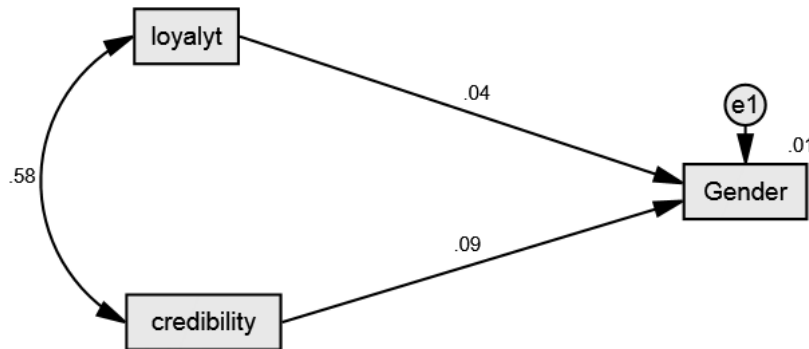


Table 17 below presents the model fit indices for the moderator variables.

Table 17. Moderating effect – fit indices

	X ²	df	CMI N/DF	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMSEA
Moderating Effect	146.839	35	4.19	0.81	0.62	0.90	0.03

Results showed that the model is within the acceptable goodness of fit because CMIN/DF is 4.19, which is less than 5. The value of RMSEA is 0.03 which is below 0.08 threshold.

Table 18 presents the moderator variables, including estimates, standard error, critical ratio and the significance level.

Table 18. Moderating effect results

<i>Paths</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Critical Ratio</i>	<i>Significance Level</i>	<i>Supported</i>
<i>Gender-Loyalty</i>	0.042	0.041	2.265	0.027	Accepted
<i>Gender-Credibility</i>	0.089	0.037	2.317	0.018	

Results indicated that indirect effect of variables gender-loyalty-credibility is significant. Thus, gender has mediating affect between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets and discusses the results presented in the previous chapter, linking to the research questions and the literature. This research aimed to assess the factors forming blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility towards adoption of recommendations. This study extended the psychological theory of social attractiveness and applied it to the blogging context to fill a literature gap: identifying the relationship between bloggers and blog readers from a psychological point of view. The chapter begins by looking at the demographic profile of the respondents and discusses some of the interesting findings. The next section interprets the conceptual and measurement issues arising from the constructs and the findings. The discussion then revisits the research questions and looks at the hypothesised relationships that are supported as well as those that are refuted. The penultimate section looks at the SEM and the mediating effect between credibility and blog readers' loyalty. The last section presents a conclusion that summarises the whole chapter.

This study has developed and empirically tested a conceptual model which incorporates:

- 1) The factors affecting the extent to which blog readers form trust in and perceive the credibility of bloggers and their recommendations (social attractiveness, social influence, perceived bloggers' experience, sponsorship).
- 2) The mediating effect of trust between perceived credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty.

4) The mediator effect of gender on perceived credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty.

5) Gender differences in how blogs are used (comparison of social platforms used by female and male respondents, comparison of types of products/services bought through blogs by female and male respondents).

5.2 Discussion

This study was the first to examine the effect of social attractiveness on blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility in a blogging context. This study examined the moderating effect of gender on perceived blog readers' credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty. The results indicate that social attractiveness has a positive significant effect on blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility. This study defined social attractiveness as the degree to which a person can influence others' state of mind. Social attractiveness includes two important strategies: SAHP and RHP. A SAHP strategy focuses on showing care, being friendly and positive rapid communication to increase the chance of influencing others. A RHP strategy seeks to influence by exhibiting authority over others by undermining them, showing dominancy and overconfidence. This study finds that social attractiveness has a significant effect on blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility. Therefore, it can be argued that showing positive attention to blog readers by updating them about the latest products and updates, showing talent, being friendly and keeping up communications, are significantly linked with blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility. People are more likely to build up trust when there is an affiliation, positive attention from others, and rapid communication and appreciation.

This study indicates that some bloggers may apply an RHP strategy to influence blog readers' purchase habits by showing dominant behaviours with their followers as well as presenting themselves as an expert in their domain. This is also a successful way to influence others' state of mind. Gilbert (1995) argued that one of the most common strategies for gaining status was through dominant behaviours, such as the signals of overconfidence, aggressiveness and interpreting high-self-esteem. This study supports this view, particularly in the blogging context.

As social attractiveness includes all these signals, it can be concluded that a combination of these signals are likely to shape blog readers' trust and bloggers' credibility in decision-making processes before purchasing a product.

Comparing the results with previous studies, Lee and Watkins (2016) identified social attractiveness as attraction to a media personality, while Sokolova and Kefi (2020) defined social attractiveness as media figure as social or work partner. Social attractiveness has not been looked at previously by scholars as a set of strategies applied by bloggers to influence blog readers' trust and perceptions of credibility. Thus, this study has filled this literature gap by incorporating psychological theory within the blogging context to measure the influence of bloggers.

Moreover, the results revealed the significant positive affect of perceived bloggers' experience on blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility. Past studies found that celebrity endorsers' expertise has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intentions (Lafferty, Goldsmith, and Newell 2002; Lee and Koo, 2015). Multiple studies found that influencers' perceived expertise enhances product evaluation and purchase intention (Till and Busler, 2000; Fink

et al., 2004). Thus, the findings of the current study are in line with these studies. This suggests that bloggers who demonstrate experience in the products/services they promote are more likely to be trusted, more likely to be seen as credible and, accordingly, more likely to influence blog readers to adopt their recommendations. This accords with the theory that having experience in something, being critical about the products/services and showing that to others, is one way to influence other people's attitudes, choices and behaviour. Using vlogs, including images and videos in posts, trying the products/services and showing visually are ways to show experience about something and thus have a positive effect on blog readers' trust and perceptions of credibility.

Moreover, the findings of this study also show that social influence positively affects blog readers' trust in bloggers' recommendations and their perceptions of bloggers' credibility in respect to their recommendations. According to the results, social influence has a positive effect on blog readers' trust in bloggers and on blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility (the data shows statistically significant positive relationships between the variables in each case). Various studies suggest that social influence is positively related to bloggers' credibility (Huffaker, 2010; Edwards et al., 2013), blog readers' recommendation intention (Iyengar et al., 2011; Wang and Lin, 2011; Kerr et al., 2012), online purchase decision making (Sridhar and Srinivasan, 2012) and brand loyalty. Urrutikoetxea Arrieta et al. (2019) found that social influence increases the level of credibility and loyalty. Xiao et al. (2018) examined informational cues and their impact on credibility of information posted by YouTube influencers. Their results indicated that social influence is an influential factor affecting perceived information credibility on YouTube.

Thus, the results in this study support the consensus in the literature since they also found that social influence has a positive effect on the perception of bloggers' credibility. However, previous research did not investigate the relationship between social influence and trust. This study extends the information about social influence because it finds that social influence has a significant effect on trust.

Furthermore, the results of this study revealed a significant effect between sponsorship and credibility, but the effect between sponsorship and trust was not significant. Comparing the current study's findings with those of previous studies, Lee et al. (2021) found that disclosure of sponsorship boosts trustworthiness of consumers. Park and Kim (2018) supported this and stated that disclosing sponsorship does not have a negative effect on blog readers' intentions. Hwang and Jeong (2016) also found that disclosing sponsorship affects consumer attitudes positively.

In contrast to this, some past studies have analysed the negative effects of disclosing sponsorship (Campbell et al., 2013; Carr and Hayes, 2014; van Reijmersdal, 2013). Boerman et al. (2017) found that sponsorship disclosure indirectly decreased intentions to engage in eWOM. Boerman et al. (2017) also found that more than half of the participants in their study were not aware of the disclosure. Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) also argued that unsponsored bloggers are considered more credible as they are perceived to be the "real experts". Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) added that the quality of information shared is crucial. Hence, being an unsponsored blogger is not enough on its own to be seen as credible. This difference in result can be explained because Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) limited their scope to Spanish-language fashion blogs. Other studies

argued that blog readers' attitudes will not be influenced by the nature of bloggers' sponsorship (Park and Kim, 2018). On the other hand, Zhu and Tan (2017) took the opposite position, arguing that bloggers are not as effective in influencing blog readers when they are being paid by brands.

The finding of a negative effect on disclosure of sponsorship can be explained because of the time factor. At the time when these studies took place, bloggers' disclosure of sponsored posts was not common; however, according to the UK Advertising Standards Authority, it became mandatory in 2021 to disclose whether a blog post was sponsored (ASA, 2020). Consumers should not work too hard to find ads or sponsorship. Additionally, bloggers should disclose whether they are "gifted", promoted a product by companies by writing "affiliate" on their post.

According to the findings of this study, sponsorship has a positive effect on bloggers' credibility but a negative effect on blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations. This apparent paradox of findings clearly highlights the differences between credibility and trust. Sponsorship has a positive significant effect on blog readers because the act of bloggers revealing their sponsorship is likely to increase their credibility. Knowing that bloggers are honest is more likely to increase the perceived credibility of their recommendations. However, according to the findings of this study, this is not applicable to trust.

These different claims make it important to pin down the exact nature of the relationships here. The research presented in this PhD thesis contributes to theory by using up-to-date data from a large sample of blog readers to show that sponsorship will not have a negative effect on blog readers' perceptions of

bloggers' credibility but will have a negative effect on their trust in, and adoption of, bloggers' recommendations.

This study also analysed the gender distribution of respondents' blogging habits. According to the findings, this study indicates that both female and male respondents' blogging habits are similar. According to the results, both genders read travel/lifestyle blogs the most. Following that, 111 female respondents and 37 male respondents preferred to read food/restaurant blogs. Results for blogs about cosmetics products were like these results: 96 female respondents preferred to read cosmetics blogs where only 1 male respondent read them. Parenting blogs were the least read type of blog. According to the results, only 14 female respondents and 5 male respondents read parenting blogs. Supporting the findings, Hsu (2012) found that women do not use blogs for informational purposes as men does. Similarly, Pederson and McAfee (2007) examine that woman prefer using blogs as a hobby and leisure activity. No study has classified the blog types read by both women and men. The data analysis in this study showed that the type of blogs read by both genders are like each other. The only dramatic difference was seen in cosmetics blogs, which were read by 96 times more female respondents than male respondents.

People have different preferences for the type of blog platforms they use and follow blogs from those platforms. This study indicates that Instagram is the most popular platform for female respondents (207 respondents). Men prefer to read/watch blogs on YouTube (117 respondents). Both genders seldom use Facebook to follow blogs: 60 male respondents and 48 female respondents. Previous literature did not examine gender differences on blog platforms in detail. Hence, there are few studies identifying Facebook usage by gender.

Horzum (2016) studied gender differences in Facebook usage; it was found that women tend to spend more time on Facebook than men (Horzum, 2016; Moore & McElroy, 2012). Horzum (2016) added that men prefer using Facebook for the purposes of expressing themselves and meeting new people, whereas women use Facebook for more educational purposes, including reading blogs. Additionally, in the current study, 79 male respondents and 76 female respondents used blog websites to read blogs.

5.3 Mediating effect of trust between credibility and loyalty

This study examined the possible mediating effect of trust by conducting SEM (bootstrapping) method. The results showed that both mediated effect between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their perception of their own loyalty to those bloggers, on trust were significant at the 0.05 level ($p=0.019$). Results also indicate that indirect effect between credibility-trust-loyalty was significant. This shows that there is partial mediation effect, as there is both a significant relationship (mediation effect) between trust and blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their perception of their own loyalty to those bloggers, and significant direct relationship between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their perception of their own loyalty.

5.4 Moderating effect of gender between credibility and loyalty

This study assesses the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers through conducting bootstrapping method. The regression weight results indicated that moderating effect of gender-loyalty-credibility relationship was statistically significant (significance level between gender-loyalty was 0.027 and gender-credibility was 0.018 $p < 0.05$). Therefore, this shows that gender may determine blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers. Comparing the results with the literature, past studies examined the role of gender in the use of social networking sites and bloggers. Most studies found that gender differences occur in relation to factors affecting bloggers for usage of networking sites (Chai et al., 2011; Flanagin and Metzger, 2003; Lin et al., 2017). Lin et al. (2017) examined the effect of gender on social networking sites and found that gender is a key moderator of factors such as satisfaction, perceived usefulness, perceived reputation and community identification. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2009) investigated the role of gender on bloggers' behaviour. Zhang et al. (2009) found that gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between satisfaction and intention to switch behaviour. Their study had limited scope, it only focused on weblog sites such as Microsoft, Yahoo and Google. Although they explored the moderating effect of gender, other important blog platforms were dismissed. Moreover, recent studies analysed gender differences on mainly social websites or internet gaming (Su et al., 2020; Oghazi et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2017)

Past studies examined the effect of gender on the characteristics of bloggers and blog readers and identified the differences both genders and why they read blogs or social media websites (Pedersen and McAfee, 2007; Guadagno et al., 2007; Armstrong and McAdams, 2009). Although gender differences in social networking sites and weblogs have been explored in the past, there is a literature gap: identifying the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Therefore, this study finds that gender moderates the relationship between bloggers' credibility and loyalty. This study supports the findings of the literature which showed that gender differentiates the factor's credibility and loyalty.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Theoretical contributions

This study makes several contributions to theory on the factors affecting blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility towards bloggers' recommendations.

6.1.1 Analysing the effect of bloggers on blog readers

This research provides a framework that offers better understanding of the factors that affect both perception of bloggers' credibility and readers' willingness to trust in, and adopt, bloggers' recommendations. This research fills a gap by examining the effect of bloggers with the help of the psychological theory of social attractiveness. This research extends knowledge about bloggers and their effect on blog readers by proposing a model which helps us to understand it from a psychological point of view.

This research identified a literature gap on the factors that affect both perception of bloggers' credibility and readers' willingness to trust in towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations. The literature review (in Chapter 2) showed that there were no studies that examined bloggers' effect with the help of psychological theory, specifically social attractiveness. Although the popularity of bloggers has risen dramatically, significant aspects of its usage in relation to its effectiveness remain unclear. Alsaleh (2017) claimed that the understanding of how bloggers affect the consumer decision-making process in their adoption of recommendations remains inadequate, and more studies in this area are needed. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) stated that more studies need to be conducted into bloggers. Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) highlighted that research has

been carried out into the influence of bloggers, but more studies are needed, especially in integrating human behavioural theories with the area of the effect of bloggers. Thus, the ongoing debate in the literature shows that the effect of bloggers' influence needs to be studied with the integration of psychological and human behavioural studies. This study provides a new outlook and offers a framework that integrates two important factors into the model: social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience. This study advocates the importance of including the factors of social attractiveness, related to psychology, and perceived bloggers' experience, related to human behaviour. This research empirically found that social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience positively affect the perception of bloggers' credibility and readers' willingness to trust in, and adopt, bloggers' recommendations.

Thus this research provides new information to researchers intending to study the effect of bloggers on blog readers. It helps researchers to understand the influence of bloggers with the help of psychological strategies. It also extends the studies related to bloggers, brands and blog readers because the forming of perceptions of credibility and willingness to trust are essential not only for bloggers, but also for brands and other types of organisations. Social attractiveness is composed of two important signals (SAHP and RHP) and this study empirically tested them. Similarly, perceived bloggers' experience is also a significant factor in building up the relationship between blogger and readers. The application of both social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience has a significant effect on the

perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to trust to adopt their recommendations.

This study also contributes to the literature by extending research about social influence. Previous studies did not examine the relationship between social influence and trust. Thus, this study extends the debate about social influence and found that social influence has a significant effect on blog readers' trust towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Trust found to be prominent factor as credibility when examining its relationship between social influence.

To conclude, the importance of three significant factors that this study offers adds new knowledge to the literature and extends the literature of bloggers and influencers. Additionally, the conceptual framework can be applied by organisations and brands.

6.1.2 Extending the literature by understanding blogging habits in relation to gender

This research extends knowledge of the effects of gender distribution on blogging habits. This is a significant contribution, since previous literature did not examine the blog platforms used by genders or the types of blogs read by both genders. Thus, this study is novel and offers insight into classifying and comparing the blog platforms used by both genders.

The literature review found that there were only a few studies that examined gender differences on blogs (Pederson MacAfee, 2007; Horzum, 2016). Pederson and MacAfee (2007) found that both genders use blogs for leisure activity and both genders find the same satisfactions in blogs. There is a lack of studies in the literature classifying the blog platforms and blog types read by both genders.

Hence, this study offers insight into the phenomenon by empirically examining the types of blog platforms and blog types read by both genders. This approach provides detailed and deeper understanding by identifying similarities and differences between the blogging habits of both genders and their adoption of recommendations. This study finds that women prefer to use Instagram whereas men prefer to use YouTube for following bloggers. Furthermore, this study provides evidence that blog types read by both genders are found to be like each other. Travel/lifestyle blogs were the most read type of blog for both genders. More female respondents read cosmetics blogs than male respondents. Parenting blogs were the least read type of blog by both men and women.

Additionally, this study also conducted SEM (bootstrapping method) to assess the moderating effect of gender on blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty. Findings showed that the moderation effect of gender is significant: gender moderates the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Therefore, this study finds that the relationship between credibility and loyalty would differ between men and women.

There are no studies examining the moderation effect of gender in relation to factors affecting blog readers' trust and perception of credibility towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Thus, this study is the first that investigates the role of gender on the relationship between blog readers' perceptions of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations.

Gender differences are a significant factor in the blogosphere. Su et al. (2020) analysed gender differences in specific internet use behaviours and disorders.

They found that both genders have different types of internet use and addiction (Su et al., 2020). Zhang et al. (2009) examined bloggers' post-adoption behaviours and their intentions to switch their blog services. They highlighted the importance of gender in the role of blogs and emphasised that the number of female bloggers is usually higher compared to male bloggers. Female bloggers tend to be more sensitive to satisfaction and less responsive to attractive alternatives than men (Zhang et al., 2009).

Similarly, Lin et al. (2017) found that gender is a key moderator on social networking sites. Social networking sites usage varies on different sets of factors for men and women. Male users' satisfaction with social networking sites was found to be based on perceived usefulness, perceived privacy risk and satisfaction, whereas female users' satisfaction was negatively affected by perceived privacy risk and perceived reputation (Lin et al., 2017).

Prior literature has found that perceived credibility of informational bloggers varies by gender (Armstrong and McAdams ,2009). Blogs authors were examined, and male authors were found to be more credible than female authors. This shows that perception of credibility differs by gender even though blog authors were tested. Flanagin and Metzger (2003) examined the gender differences on the impact website author and visitor. It was found that male users have higher credibility than female users.

Additionally, Chai et al. (2011) conducted a study to measure the factors affecting bloggers' knowledge sharing in blogs. Their findings showed that trust and social ties have a stronger effect on female bloggers' knowledge sharing than male bloggers.

Most past studies focused on social networks sites and bloggers' characteristics when focusing on the role of gender. To cover the literature gap, this study highlights and focuses on the role of gender in blog readers' perception of credibility and their own loyalty towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations. It was found that blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and bloggers' loyalty may differ between male blog readers and female blog readers. The findings of this study support the findings of the literature. Therefore, it can be argued that gender is a determinant factor in blog readers' characteristics. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on how a demographic factor (gender) can become a significant factor in understanding the effects of bloggers and it increases understanding of their effect on blog readers' adoption of recommendations.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study have some contributions for practitioners. Theoretical contributions are strongly linked with practical implications. The formation of blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility are likely to result in increased purchase habits. Thus, knowing strategies that positively form and increase trust and credibility can benefit bloggers, organisations, and policy makers. Stakeholders who can gain an advantage from the practical implications of this research are:

1. bloggers,
2. brands (all types of organisations, including companies promoting their products/service through bloggers),
3. policy makers.

This thesis contributes valuable information to these stakeholders based on data collected from University of London students in the UK. Student populations are considered to have the highest proportion of blog readers because most students are Generation Y or Generation Z. The findings of this thesis can help brands and bloggers to be perceived as credible and help them to develop consumers' trust and willingness to opt into their product/services. A positive formation of (consumers') trust and perception of credibility of a specific brand may result in increased customer satisfaction and sales.

The findings of this study indicate that there are two significant factors that affect perceptions of bloggers' credibility and readers' trust and willingness to adopt

bloggers' recommendations: social attractiveness and perceived bloggers' experience.

This means that bloggers who apply psychological strategies, including SAHP and RHP, are likely to positively affect blog readers' trust and perception of bloggers' credibility. Thus, this suggests that bloggers who instantly communicate with blog readers with positive attention are likely to achieve this through adopting SAHP. Bloggers should also consider projecting a dominant and self-confident persona and should compare themselves with other bloggers to ensure that they remain motivated and focused on their blog readers' needs by applying RHP. The findings of this study suggest that applying this psychological strategy will have a positive influence on blog readers, encouraging them to adopt bloggers' recommendations and purchase the products and services that they promote.

Another significant finding of this study is that bloggers who demonstrate experience with the products/services they promote will be more effective at influencing blog readers to purchase those products/services. Thus, bloggers should consider sharing their experiences about a product/service through vlogs in interactive ways that highlight their experience and familiarity with the product/service, such as through in-depth explanations of the product/service or demonstrations of its use.

Brands and companies can adopt these psychological strategies to increase consumers' perceptions of the credibility of a specific brand, as well gain consumers' trust. Increased consumer trust and perception of credibility leads to customer satisfaction which can lead to increased sales of that brand. A high level of customer satisfaction and increased sales increase the reputation of a brand.

Furthermore, policies about bloggers and digital marketing are changing as the number of sponsored (paid) bloggers is increasing. According to the UK Advertising Standards Authority, it became mandatory in 2021 to disclose whether a blog post was sponsored (ASA, 2020). Consumers should not have to take too long to figure out ads or sponsorship. Additionally, bloggers should disclose whether they are “gifted”, promoted a product by companies by writing “affiliate” on their post.

The findings of this study indicated that sponsorship negatively affects blog readers’ willingness to trust in, and adopt, bloggers’ recommendations. In other words, blog readers are less likely to trust sponsored bloggers or sponsored blog posts. However, this does not mean that bloggers should avoid sponsored blogs. Sponsored bloggers are becoming inevitable in the blogosphere, nearly 75% of businesses use bloggers to spread eWOM about their products and services (Hughes et al., 2019). A recent study found that 65% of multinational brands were increasing their spending on sponsored bloggers, and spending reached US\$10 billion in 2020 (Belton, 2018). This level of spending demonstrates that sponsored bloggers form an increasingly influential component of marketing spend. Hughes et al. (2019) pointed out that the largest and most important category of bloggers is sponsored bloggers. However, with the new policies bloggers should make sure to disclose sponsored posts and should avoid hiding any ads or affiliated links. This can be managed with honest and sincere communication with their followers. It can be argued that explaining the reasons behind the cooperation between a business and a sponsored blogger would lead to a positive effect on shaping blog readers’ trust.

6.3 Limitations and further research areas

As with all studies, this research has some limitations which in turn enlighten and identify areas for future research. The first limitation is in the sampling technique. While it is hardly possible to survey the entire population of blog readers, this study conducted a non-probability sampling technique rather than stratified or random sampling. The sample for this study was students at Birkbeck College, University of London. This sample was selected because normally, sample size can be taken as the whole population who are reading and following bloggers. However, it is highly challenging to do this considering the time, cost and possibility of conducting a survey with all the blog readers in the world. Hence, this is one of the limitations for this study.

A second limitation of this study is that completion of the questionnaire was not limited only to blog users. Thus, respondents who do not read blogs or who read them less often were included in the data set. In respect to both these limitations it is recommended that future studies should seek a more carefully constructed sample, while applying a criterion to exclude those who do not read blogs or who do so only infrequently.

The third limitation is the sample group of this study. The sample group of this study is university students, which narrows the age group of the respondents. Most respondents were expected to be in between Generation Y to Z, even though Birkbeck University also has some older students taking evening classes. Thus, the number of respondents who were over 30 is relatively low, which limits the scope of the study.

The fourth limitation is the methodological limitations due to developing a multiple scale for the single construct “social attractiveness”. Social attractiveness is composed of two important signals: SAHP and RHP. A single scale was developed to measure these two important signals within the social attractiveness factor. Future studies can investigate each signal in depth by developing a novel scale for each of them.

Additionally, sample size is an important concern in all quantitative research. Scholars argue that having larger sample sizes increases the reliability of the study (Steven, 1992). Gorard (2001) stated that a sample must be large enough to accomplish what is intended by the analysis and should be at least five or 10 times the number of variables in use. Similarly, most studies on consumer behaviour collected data with a sample size between 200 and 300 (Rauniar et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2016; Alsaleh, 2017). This study conducted a survey with a sample size of 513, which is much higher than the minimum threshold recommended by scholars. Sample size was therefore not considered a major limitation in this study, but the larger the sample size the better.

Although this study analyses important factors (gender, social attractiveness, sponsorship, perceived bloggers’ experience, trust and credibility), future studies could also analyse “physical attractiveness” as physical attractiveness may have become a mediator for gaining followers in social media.

Moreover, future work could focus on differences arising from the advent of COVID-19. The new rules and restrictions caused by the pandemic have had dramatic effects on business, on consumers’ purchasing habits and on conventional social interactions. It has served to drive all these activities further online. This is likely to have further increased the importance of blogs, bloggers

and social influence marketing. On the one hand, this highlights the importance and topicality of this PhD, but it also calls for continuing research in this area to be able identify any developing and changing trends in how bloggers influence. Future studies could also seek to investigate specific platforms in more detail. According to recent literature, 60% of blog readers use Instagram to discover new products and services. It would be worth conducting research that builds on the general insights in this study to see if these are replicated, or can be extended, in the context of bloggers' activities in specific platforms. Lastly, future studies could focus in depth on the age factor and study how different ages and generations shape trust in, and credibility of, bloggers when considering adopting their recommendations.

6.4 Conclusion

Blogs create opportunities for both bloggers and blog readers to have interactive communication with each other and exchange ideas. As the number of bloggers and blog posts has risen, their influence on consumers' purchase habits has become undeniably powerful. Thus, analysing the relationship between bloggers and consumers is essential to understand the influence of bloggers. The increasing power of bloggers raises questions about bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations. Therefore, this study is important as it is the first of its kind to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the trustworthiness and credibility of bloggers.

Specifically, this study is the first to apply social attractiveness to the blogging context. Social attractiveness is composed of three strategies, which are SAHP and RHP. This study finds that using SAHP strategies, such as showing positive

attention, inspiration and rapid communication to blog readers, will positively affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations. Similarly, adopting RHP strategies of behaving dominantly with high self-esteem is likely to positively affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations.

Moreover, this study examines the effect of perceived bloggers' experience, confirming that bloggers who exhibit experience in the use of the product/services they are promoting will be more credible and trustworthy to blog readers.

Furthermore, the factors of sponsorship and social influence are shown to affect bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations. Sponsorship is shown not to have a significant effect on blog readers' trust, whereas social influence has a positive effect on bloggers' credibility and on blog readers' trust in, and adoption of, their recommendations. Furthermore, this study empirically tests the mediating effect of trust on the relationship between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty by using SEM. It was found that there is a positive strong relationship between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty.

Additionally, this study explores gender-based variations in blogging habits, revealing that both genders are especially interested in travel/lifestyle blogs, and that women prefer to follow bloggers on Instagram whereas men prefer to use YouTube to watch and follow bloggers. This study shows that gender is a moderator between blog readers' perception of credibility and their own loyalty towards adoption of bloggers' recommendations.

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APPENDIX 1: PILOT STUDY

Introduction

This section presents the pilot analysis results of this study. It initially gives information about the sample and scale development of the pilot study. Next, it presents the data analysis results of the pilot study.

Sample

Prior to the main survey, a pilot study was carried out to test whether the factors and hypotheses were valid and reliable for the main analysis. Summers (2001) argues that a study without a pilot is like demanding biased advice without objectivity. Summers (2001) states that conducting a pilot study can greatly improve a study since it can be used to confirm whether the instruments and questions are appropriate and well understood, thus preventing any problems that might occur in the main analysis. A pilot study was therefore carried out with Birkbeck students with a sample size of 51 which included 38 students and 13 experts. According to the literature, there is no fixed number appropriate for a pilot, however it is argued that collecting a sample of at least 30 is ideal. Anything above 30 is considered acceptable (Hertzog, 2009). Additionally, it is important to remember that the data collected might go through a clarification process. This happens when some participants are not answering the questionnaires properly and/or omitting questions. Hence, it is always beneficial to collect more than the targeted number. The online survey was conducted by sending the link through social media and email. Some students were reached through email addresses and some others through WhatsApp and Instagram. 51 individuals, who met the criteria of the sample (Birkbeck students) were asked to fill the questionnaires. Additionally, five experts, who were PhD students, were asked to participate in

the survey. Their feedback about the questionnaire was noted and some modifications were applied. Those modifications were mainly related to the question about nationality. Some respondents wanted to be able to choose their own specific country rather than a continent. Accordingly, the nationality question was modified by adding specification brackets allowing respondents to write their own country in specification brackets.

After conducting the pilot study, it was found that all 10 hypotheses were supported in terms of their factors and measured as valid and reliable. In terms of the relationships proposed in the hypotheses, all were accepted apart from hypothesis 4 which relates to the effect of sponsorship on the perceived credibility of bloggers' recommendations. For that hypothesis the *p*-value ($=0.079$; $p < 0.05$) indicating that the relationship between the two variables was not statistically significant.

Description of questionnaire

The online questionnaire is composed of 12 pages with a total of 17 questions concerning the demographics of the respondents and the profile of their engagement with blogs (Section A). Section B of the questionnaire is composed of nine subheadings, one for each factor, with each containing at least five questions (see Appendix 2). The first four pages seek to obtain personal information about the respondent, including their age, education, gender, income and blog habits. Their personal information is asked to determine the demographic distribution of respondents. The remaining pages contain seven factors measuring the effect of credibility, trust, perceived bloggers' experience, social influence, sponsorship, social attractiveness and perceived blog readers'

loyalty. These questions are Likert scale questions where respondents can tick the boxes between 1 to 5: where 1 is strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 neutral, 4 disagree and 5 is strongly disagree. This is used to give respondents the option to find the answer that closely represents their position, without forcing them with either yes or no questions. Moreover, instructions pointed out that all questions required an answer and are mandatory. The other important instruction in the questionnaire is about data protection. The beginning of the questionnaire highlights that all answers will be kept anonymous. This is crucial as it shows respondents that their personal information is being taken care of, thus building up trust and improving the chances of students agreeing to take part in the survey.

Development and validation of scale

There are seven factors examined in this study: trust, credibility, social influence, social attractiveness, blog readers' loyalty, perceived experience and sponsorship. Scales for social attractiveness were adopted by the author as this factor has not previously been applied in the literature in a blogging context. Scales for trust and credibility were adopted from Hsu (2013) and Esteban-Santos et al. (2018). These authors used a point scale ranging from 1=Strongly Agree to 5= Strongly Disagree. The Sponsorship scales were adopted and developed from Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) and Hsu (2013). Perceived blog readers' loyalty factor scales were adopted from Kosolova (2019) and Esteban-Santos et al. (2018). Social influence factor scales were adopted from Alsaleh (2017). To analyse the influence of bloggers on consumer behaviour and to test the factors' validity and reliability, we developed scales where each of the seven factors included at least five questions. The questionnaire was checked by an expert

(supervisors) before it was deployed and before any analysis was carried out, to be sure that all questions are clear.

Data Analysis of Pilot

Demographic Descriptions of the Respondents

The detailed demographics of the 51 respondents are illustrated in Table 6.4.1. Regarding gender distribution, there were nearly equal numbers of female and male respondents: Female 52.9%, male 47.1%. Our results show that a high number of men read blogs as well as women; the low gender differentiation has evolved with the improvements of technology and blogs. Regarding age, most of the respondents are between the ages of 20-29 at 51%. The second largest group of respondents were between the ages of 30-39 with 23.5%.

The respondents were mostly undergraduate students at 39.2%, postgraduate students 27.5%, and 25% MPhil and PhD students. MPhil and PhD students were included in this survey because their feedback about survey questions and structure was taken while conducting the survey before testing our factors (pilot). Regarding the blog distribution, 68.6% of respondents read blogs. 29.4% of the blog users check blogs weekly. The respondents were also asked if they owned a blog, and it was surprising that only 21.6% have a blog. Moreover, 60.8% of respondents said that they are more likely to recommend a product that is promoted by bloggers.

Table 19, below, gives information about the demographic profile of the respondents

Table 19. Demographic distribution of pilot study

		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	
Gender	<i>Female</i>	27	52.9	
	<i>Male</i>	24	47.1	
Age	<i>19 and under</i>	8	15.7	
	<i>20-29</i>	26	51.0	
	<i>30-39</i>	12	23.5	
	<i>40-49</i>	4	7.8	
	<i>50-59</i>	1	2.0	
Education	<i>Foundation degree</i>	4	7.8	
	<i>MPhil/PhD degree</i>	13	25.5	
	<i>Postgraduate degree</i>	14	27.5	
	<i>Undergraduate degree</i>	20	39.2	
Nationality	<i>Africa</i>	1	2.0	
	<i>Albania (British Citizen)</i>	1	2.0	
	<i>Chinese/Asian</i>	1	5.9	
	<i>Czech</i>	1	2.0	
	<i>EU Country</i>	6	11.8	
	<i>Indian/Pakistani/ Bangladeshi/Asian</i>	7	13.7	
	<i>Middle East/Turkey/North Africa</i>	16	31.4	
	<i>Non-EU Europe</i>	1	2.0	
	<i>United Kingdom</i>	13	25.5	
	<i>USA/Canada</i>	1	2.0	
	Marital status	<i>Married</i>	8	15.7
		<i>Single</i>	43	84.3
Current occupation	<i>Full-time work</i>	11	21.6	
	<i>Full-time work and Student</i>	7	13.7	
	<i>Part-time work</i>	1	2.0	
	<i>Part-time work and student</i>	5	9.8	
	<i>Student</i>	25	49.0	
	<i>Unemployed</i>	2	3.9	
Househ old income	<i>Under 10k</i>	8	15.7	
	<i>10k-20k</i>	7	13.7	
	<i>20k-40k</i>	6	11.8	
	<i>40k-60k</i>	4	7.8	
	<i>60k-80k</i>	6	11.8	
	<i>Prefer not to say</i>	20	39.2	

Table 20 presents the profile of respondents of pilot data. It summarises blogging habits of respondents.

Table 20: Blogging habits of respondents in pilot study

		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Read blogs</i>	<i>No</i>	16	31.4
	<i>Yes</i>	35	68.6
<i>How often do you read blogs in a year?</i>	<i>1-2 times</i>	8	15.7
	<i>2-3 times</i>	6	11.8
	<i>3-5 times</i>	6	11.8
	<i>Daily</i>	8	15.7
	<i>Never</i>	8	15.7
	<i>Weekly</i>	15	29.4
<i>How many hours do you spend per week browsing blogs?</i>	<i>Less than one hour per week</i>	29	56.9
	<i>1 to 3 hours</i>	14	27.5
	<i>4 to 10 hours</i>	6	11.8
	<i>More than 20 hours</i>	2	3.9
<i>Do you have a blog?</i>	<i>No</i>	40	78.4
	<i>Yes</i>	11	21.6
<i>Did you buy any products or services with the recommendations of bloggers?</i>	<i>No</i>	28	54.9
	<i>Yes</i>	23	45.1
<i>Do you find the products promoted by bloggers reliable?</i>	<i>No</i>	34	66.7
	<i>Yes</i>	17	33.3
<i>Would you recommend the products promoted by bloggers to your friends?</i>	<i>Always</i>	2	3.9
	<i>Never</i>	16	31.4
	<i>Often</i>	2	3.9
	<i>Sometimes</i>	31	60.8

Data- Analysis Methods

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Initial data analysis was conducted in a two-step approach as suggested by (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to test the number of factors and influencing variables. Anderson & Gerbing (1988) suggest that EFA is used to test the reliability and discriminant validity (Farrell, 2010). A basic hypothesis of EFA is that there are common 'latent' factors to be discovered in the data set, and the goal is to find the smallest number of common factors that will account for the correlations.

Another way to look at factor analysis is to call the dependent variables 'surface attributes and the underlying structures (factors) internal attributes. Common factors are those that affect more than one of the surface attributes, and specific factors are those which only affect a particular variable (Yong & Pearce, 2013). EFA was carried out using SPSS to test for the reliability of our initial data from the pilot study.

Cronbach's Alpha

This study estimated the internal consistency or reliability of each dimension using Cronbach's Alpha. Nunnally & Bernstein (1994) recommends that the coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha should not be lower than 0.7. According to the rule of thumb, item to total correlations should not exceed 0.50 and inter item correlations should exceed 0.30 (Hair et al., 2014). Cronbach's Alpha is essential: instruments with greater Cronbach alpha have smaller measurement error and have greater statistical power for any type of research settings (Hair et al., 2014).

Cronbach's alpha was between 0.7 to 0.9 for the instruments in this study. This shows that internal consistency is good and acceptable.

Kaiser Meyer Olkin Sampling Adequacy (KMO)

The Kaiser Meyer Olkin Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett tests are important tests to be sure that the sample is fitting the model properly. This test determines whether it is appropriate to apply factor analysis. This study applied the test to simplify the factor matrix so as to produce conceptually pure factors. For our pilot study, KMO sampling adequacy measured 0.828. This value is considered as a middling (appropriate) value (Bagozzi et al., 2017). The Bartlett sphericity test was conducted to determine if the correlation matrix has similarity. For this, the null hypothesis is rejected, and alternative hypothesis accepted because our $p < 0.001$ (Bagozzi et al., 2017).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA provides a theory-driven method for addressing construct validity by assigning the items in an instrument to their respective factors according to theoretical expectations (Aluja et al., 2003). CFA is used during the process of scale development to examine the latent structure of a test instrument (T. A. Brown, 2015). In this study, CFA was used to estimate the scale reliability of the test instruments in a manner that avoids problems of measurement errors.

Normality of the pilot data set

Table 21 below illustrates the normality test of the pilot study. It presents the kurtosis and skewness measures of the data.

Table 21: Normality test results of pilot study

	Skewness	Kurtosis
<i>Social Attractiveness</i>	0.073	-0.299
<i>Sponsorship</i>	-0.375	-0.111
<i>Bloggers' Experience</i>	0.071	-0.847
<i>Social influence</i>	0.588	-0.333
<i>Trust</i>	-0.210	-0.577
<i>Credibility</i>	-0.258	-0.407
<i>Perceived loyalty</i>	-0.200	-0.814

Normality of the sample is one of the fundamental assumptions required to be carried out before conducting any type of statistical methods such as structural equation modelling and regression analysis. Normality shows that distribution of data is normally distributed with mean=0, standard deviation=1 and a symmetric bell-shaped curve. Therefore, skewness and kurtosis measures are checked. The skewness value may be within the range +1, -1 for normal distribution. The Kurtosis value range should be between +3, -3 for normal distribution (Kline, 2011). Table 22 illustrates that the factors are between the recommended range for both skewness and kurtosis. Therefore, the pilot data set is normally distributed.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is an important statistical method for analysing the data. It is a simple method for investigating functional relationships among variables where the relationship can be explained in the form of an equation or model connecting the dependent variables and predictor variables (Chatterjee & Hadji, 2015). Linear regression is used to estimate the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Accordingly, for the pilot analysis, linear regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses and measure the relationship between dependent and independent variables. The analysis showed that nine hypotheses were accepted; the tenth hypothesis was not examined during the analysis of the pilot study data since, to examine the gender differences, a higher sample size is needed to distinguish between the variables in detail. The pilot study therefore examined only nine hypotheses.

Table 22 summarises the results of the hypothesis testing of the pilot data.

Table 22: Hypothesis testing results of pilot study

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Status</i>
Hypothesis 1: Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 2: Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 3: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of the bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 4: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 5: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of the bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 6: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 7: Social influence will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 8: Social influence will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 9: Trust has a mediating effect between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers.	<i>0,001**</i>	Accepted
Hypothesis 10: Gender does not affect the bloggers' purchase habits in relation to construct responses.		

Structural Equation Model (SEM)

SEM is a comprehensive statistical method used in testing hypotheses about causal relationships among observed and unobserved (latent) variables and is useful in solving the problems in formulating theoretical constructions (Reisinger & Turner, 2002). SEM analysis is essential since it is like an umbrella encompassing a full set of multivariate statistical approaches which include multiple regression, path analysis and factor analysis. SEM models are commonly presented in diagrams that summarise the suggested relationships among latent variables and indicator variables, and the directional and non-directional relationships among latent variables (Bowen, 2011). Additionally, SEM can interpret all correlated errors of measurement and predictions where other statistics techniques could end up with interaction effects among dependent and independent variables. SEM can also expand the explanatory ability and statistical efficiency for model testing within a single comprehensive method (Pang, 1996; Yilmaz, 2004).

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Table 23 below illustrates the exploratory factor analysis of the seven instruments of our research model. According to the results of the EFA, the items of the scale formed in seven factors which we renamed as Trust, Perceived Blogger Experience, Social Influence, Credibility, Sponsorship, Social Attractiveness, and Perceived Blog Readers' Loyalty. The eigenvalues, variance explanation ratios of the factors and the factor loadings of each item are also given in Table

23. The total variance explanation ratio of these nine factors is calculated as 85.874.

Table 23: Exploratory factor analysis results of pilot study

Factors/Items	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance (%)
Trust			
Bloggers who have high numbers of followers and likes are more trustable and I feel confident about the information provided.	.777	11.242	46.840
Bloggers who post about products/services are knowledgeable.	.628		
Bloggers who share information about products/services are trustable and make me adopt their advice	.743		
I feel information given by bloggers is sincere and honest	.758		
Credibility			
I feel bloggers who try and share their advised products through videos make me adopt their recommendations	.796	2.677	11.152
I feel bloggers who communicate with me and reply to my questions make me adopt their recommendations	.727		
I feel bloggers are efficient in their domain	.826		
Perceived Blogger Experience			
I buy new product that I never bought because of bloggers recommendations.	.665	1.932	8.048
I adopt bloggers' recommendations when I see that bloggers are using or trying the products that they recommend through live videos or vlogs.	.737		
I buy new product that I never tried because I see that bloggers tried and were happy with the results	.605		
Social Influence			
-I find bloggers recommendations trustable because my friends and people around me follow them	.851	1.613	6.719
-I buy new products because my friends told me they have seen from bloggers.	.909		
I will buy products the products my friend tried from bloggers they were happy with the results	.904		
Sponsorship			
Sponsored blogs are introducing me the brands I never knew about, and they are credible on making me adopt their recommendations	.796	1.215	5.062
Sponsored blogs are trustable even if they get paid.	.850		
I do intentionally ignore sponsored blogs on the blog	.844		

I would prefer that there is no sponsored post on blogs	.872		
Social Attractiveness			
I think bloggers who have high self-esteem, overconfident and dominant are credible and make me adopt their recommendations	.867		
I think bloggers who are positive, talented and instantly communicating are credible and makes me adopt their recommendations.	.797	1.052	4.384
Bloggers who have dominant behaviours make me adopt their recommendations.	.595		
Bloggers who have friendly attitude are trustable and make adopt their recommendations	.555		
Perceived Blog Readers' loyalty			
I would purchase the products/services promoted by bloggers in the future	.755		
I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers	.838	0.880	3.669
I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers in future	.881		

The factor loadings for each item arising from the EFA of the pilot data are illustrated in Table 23 above. Factor loadings represent the correlation coefficients for the factors of the pilot study. It shows the variance explained by the variable on that factor. The eigenvalues represent the variance explained by the factor out of the total variance. When the eigenvalue rises, the variance of that factor increases as well.

Regarding the factor loadings of each factor: factor (Social attractiveness), the item: “I think bloggers who have high-self-esteem, overconfident and dominant are credible and make me adopt their recommendations”. had the highest factor loading at 0.867 from the four items, whereas the item: “Bloggers who have friendly attitude are trustable and make adopt their recommendations” had the lowest factor loading, with 0.555. For factor (Sponsorship), the item: “I would prefer that there is no sponsored post on blogs” had the highest factor loading, at

0.872, whereas the item: “Sponsored blogs are introducing me to brands I never knew about, and they are credible on making adopt their recommendations”. had the lowest loading in that factor, at 0.796. For the factor (Perceived Blog Readers’ Loyalty), the item: “I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers in future.” had the greatest loading, with 0.881, whereas the item “I buy a new product that I never tried because I see that bloggers tried and were happy with the results” had the lowest loading in that factor, at 0.605. For Social influence, the item: “I buy new products because my friends told me they have seen from bloggers” had the greatest loading, with 0.909. Furthermore, in one of the most important factors (Credibility), the item: “I feel bloggers who are sociable and reputable are credible” has the greatest loading with 0.826, whereas in the item for Trust: “Bloggers who have high numbers of followers and likes are more trustable and I feel confident about the information provided.” had the highest loading, with 0.777. The results indicate very clean factor analysis since there are no negative factor loadings or loadings that are lower than 0.30, which is why loadings lower than 0.30 were suppressed. Additionally, loadings higher than 0.40 are considered high and indicative of the internal consistency and reliability of the item.

The KMO measure of sampling adequacy is conducted to assess whether it is appropriate to use factor analysis on the pilot data set of this study. The Bartlett Test of Sphericity is used to test the null hypothesis that the variables in a sample size correlation matrix are uncorrelated. The KMO value of the pilot data set was 0.828 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant with a p -value of <0.001 . Kaiser originally recommended that the baseline criterion for the KMO value should be greater than 0.5 to be ready for factor analysis. The value of 0.828 in the pilot study suggests that the data can be subject to factor analysis (Kaiser, 1970).

Table 24 shows the outcomes of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett Sphericity Test.

Table 24: Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure results of pilot study

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	0.828
Chi-Square	1411.505
Df	378
Sig.	<0.001

Table 25 presents the Cronbach's alpha coefficient values, which indicate the internal consistency and reliability of the data set in the pilot study. Cronbach's alpha presents how closely related the items in a data set are. Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.7 and 0.9 show good internal reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Peterson, 2000). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the pilot study were between 0.8 and 0.9, which indicates good and excellent internal consistency and reliability.

Table 25: Cronbach's alpha results of pilot study

	Cronbach's Alpha
<i>Trust</i>	0.895
<i>Perceived Bloggers' Experience</i>	0.892
<i>Social Influence</i>	0.945
<i>Perceived Blog Readers' loyalty</i>	0.950
<i>Social Attractiveness</i>	0.877
<i>Credibility</i>	0.918
<i>Sponsorship</i>	0.933

CFA

CFA is a multivariate statistical test to measure how well the measured variables represents the number of constructs. Thus, CFA confirms or rejects the measurement theory of the study. CFA makes it possible to test the hypothesis that a relationship between the observed variables and their underlying latent construct(s) exists. CFA depends on several statistical tests to determine adequacy of model fit to the data. For a good model fit, the ratio χ^2/df should be as small as possible. However, the problem of sample size dependency cannot be eliminated by this procedure (Bollen, 1989, p. 278). As there exist no absolute standards, ratios of 2 and 3 are indicative of a “good” or “acceptable” data-model fit, respectively. The χ^2/df obtained for the pilot study was $273,58/231=1.18$. It is important to highlight, however, that this was conducted for the pilot study and thus with a small sample size ($n=51$, and as Bollen (1989, p.278) observed the problem of sample size dependency cannot be eliminated in CFA.

Figure 7 below presents the confirmatory factor analysis results of pilot study.

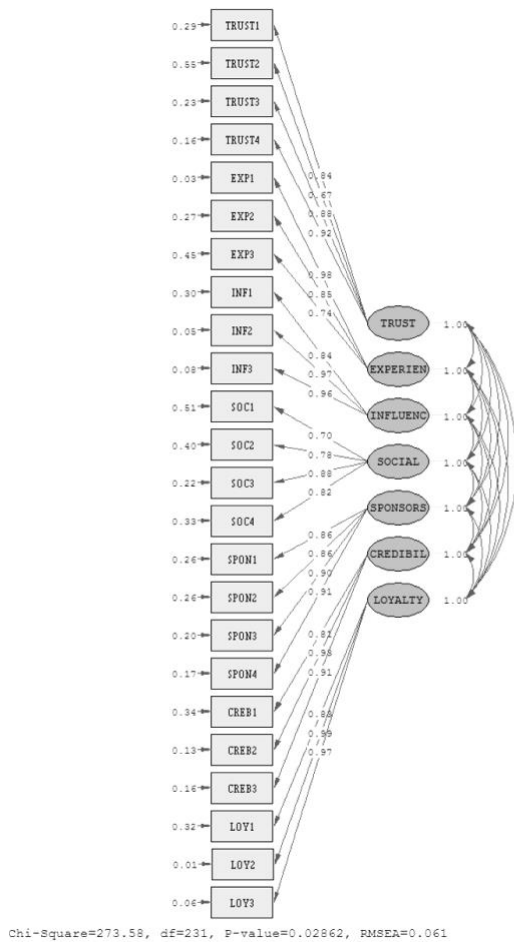


Figure 7. Confirmatory factor analysis results of pilot study

Table 26 presents the limits and fitness criterion for confirmatory factor analysis results.

Table 26: Limits and results of structural model of pilot study

Fitness Criterion	Perfect Fitness	Acceptable Fitness	Model
RMSEA	$0 < RMSEA < 0.05$	$0.05 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.1$	0.039
NFI	$0.95 \leq NFI \leq 1$	$0.90 < NFI \leq 0.95$	0.91
NNFI	$0.97 \leq NNFI \leq 1$	$0.95 \leq NNFI \leq 0.97$	0.95
CFI	$0.97 \leq CFI \leq 1$	$0.95 \leq CFI \leq 0.97$	0.96

SRMR	$0 \leq \text{SRMR} < 0.05$	$0.05 \leq \text{SRMR} \leq 0.10$	0.074
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Source: Schermelleh-Engel and Moosbrugger (2003). (RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, SRMR: Standardised Root Mean Square Residual)

Table 26 illustrates the limits and results of our factors by using CFA. Model fit indices are presented in the table, along with their thresholds. Specifically: RMSEA, NNFI, NFI, CFI and SRMR.

The CFI presents the discrepancy function adjusted for sample size. The CFI ranges from 0 to 1. Larger values indicate better model fit. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), a CFI value of 0.90 and higher is considered to indicate acceptable model fit. In this (pilot) study, CFI was measured to be 0.96 which shows acceptable model fit.

RMSEA) indicates the amount of unexplained variance of the residual. In this study RMSEA=0.039 which fulfils the recommended cut-off for acceptable fitness (0.06 or less). (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

The NNFI=0.95 is within the range of acceptable fitness (Hair et al., 2014).

The NFI=0.90, which again indicates an acceptable fit since it fulfils Hu & Bentler (1999) recommended cut-off for NFI.

Lastly, the SRMR was measured at 0.064 which is also in the acceptable fit range (Bentler and Bonett, 1980)

Table 27 illustrates the correlation results for the pilot study. This determines the correlation coefficient values of our factors and defines the negative or positive relationships between factors. The correlation analysis is conducted to analyse the strength of the relationship between variables. This test is only conducted here to improve statistical knowledge by better understanding the strength of the relationships between the variables to practice on calculations from the pilot study of the thesis.

Table 27 shows the correlation results between the factors.

Table 27: Correlation results of pilot study

	Trust	Experience	Social Influence	Credibility	Sponsorship	Social Attractiveness	Loyalty
Trust		0.624 0.001 **	0.396 0.004 **	0.564 0.001 **	0.488 0.004 **	0.640 0.001 **	0.545 0.001 **
Experience		<i>1</i>	0.487 0.020 *	0.415 0.002 **	0.347 0.013 *	0.611 0.001 **	0.590 0.001 **
Social Influence			<i>1</i>	0.279 0.059	0.358 0.010 *	0.526 0.001 **	0.395 0.003 **
Credibility				<i>1</i>	0.585 0.001 **	0.460 0.001 **	0.608 0.001 **
Sponsorship					<i>1</i>	0.385 0.001 **	0.506 0.001 **
Social Attractiveness						<i>1</i>	0.483 0.001 **
Loyalty							<i>1</i>

Trust and Social Attractiveness are positively related, as there is a statistically significant positive relationship between Trust and Social Attractiveness at 64.0%. Trust and Sponsorship have a positive relationship at 48.8%. It is unsurprising that trust and sponsorship does not have the lowest value. Thus, there are some blog readers still count on sponsored blogs and adopt their recommendations as they have built ultimate on that specific blogger.

Social Influence and Credibility have the lowest positive relationship at 27.9%. It is surprising that social influence and credibility have a lower value than other factors. This can be explained, however, on the basis that blog readers' friends, colleagues, purchase habits will not significantly increase the perception of bloggers' credibility because blog readers may not trust their choices all the time. The relationship is positive, but the correlation coefficient is lower than other factors. We can therefore conclude that those two factors affect each other but they are not highly correlated. Experience and Social Influence are positively related at 48.7%. When experience increases, Social Influence will proportionally rise too. Credibility and Loyalty have a positive relationship at 60%. There is a statistically significant relationship as ($r=0.506$; $p=0.001$; $p<0.01$).

Validity test

Table 28, below, illustrates the validity test for the pilot study.

Table 28: Validity test results of pilot study

	Factor Loading	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
trust_1	0.84	0.694	0.899
trust_2	0.67		
trust_3	0.88		
trust_4	0.92		
Exp_1	0.98	0.744	0.896
Exp_2	0.85		
Exp_3	0.74		
Inf_1	0.84	0.856	0.947
Inf_2	0.97		
Inf_3	0.96		
Soc_1	0.7	0.636	0.874
Soc_2	0.78		
Soc_3	0.88		
Soc_4	0.82		
Spon_1	0.86	0.779	0.934
Spon_2	0.86		
Spon_3	0.9		
Spon_4	0.91		
Creb_1	0.81	0.815	0.929
Creb_2	0.98		
Creb_3	0.91		
Loy_1	0.88	0.898	0.964
Loy_2	0.99		
Loy_3	0.97		

Table 28 illustrates the results for measurements model of this study. The internal consistency of the measurement model was assessed by computing the composite reliability. The data indicates that the reliability of items ranged from 0.70 to 0.998, which exceeds the acceptable value of 0.50. Having greater value than 0.50 for each dimension shows that measures for this study were genuinely related (Fornell & Larcker, 1981, s.42; Peterson, 2000, s.264). Consistent with the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981) the composite reliability of all the items exceeded the benchmark of 0.60. The average variance extracted for all constructs exceeded the threshold value of 0.5 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Since the values for reliability were above the recommended thresholds, the scales for evaluating these constructs were deemed to exhibit adequate convergence reliability. To sum up, the test of the measurement model was satisfactory for both convergent and discriminant validity measures.

Hypothesis Test

Regression analysis was conducted to estimate the relationships between the dependent and independent variables. Hypothesis testing indicates whether the null hypothesis is accepted or not. The hypothesis test results are illustrated below and show that all nine tested hypotheses for the pilot study were accepted. Hypothesis 1: The relationship between social attractiveness and trust was tested and hypothesis 1 was accepted with the p -value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in social attractiveness increases the trust by 0.609. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 1: *Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations.*

Coefficient	Std.			
	B	Error	t	P
Constant	1.274	0306	4.167	0.000 **
Social attractiveness	0.609	0.104	5.832	0.001 **

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between social attractiveness and credibility was tested and hypothesis 2 was accepted with the p -value of ($=0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in social attractiveness increases the credibility by 0.478. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 2: *Social attractiveness will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.*

Coefficient	Std.			
	B	Error	t	P
Constant	1.756	0.386	4.549	0.000 **
Social attractiveness	0.478	0.132	3.629	0.001 **

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between sponsorship and trust was tested and hypothesis 3 was accepted with the p value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in sponsorship increases the trust by 0.460. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 3: *Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of the bloggers' recommendations.*

Coefficient	Std.		t	P
	B	Error		
Constant	1.532	0.382	4.009	0.000 **
Sponsorship	0.460	0.118	3.916	0.001 **

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between sponsorship and credibility was tested and hypothesis 4 was accepted with the p -value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in sponsorship increases the credibility by 0.603. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 4: Sponsorship of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.

Coefficient	Std.		t	P
	B	Error		
Constant	1.209	0.388	3.115	0.000 **
Sponsorship	0.603	0.119	5.048	0.001 **

Hypothesis 5: The relationship between perceived bloggers' experience and trust was tested and hypothesis 5 was accepted with the p -value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in perceived bloggers' experience increases the trust by 0.495. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 5: The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of the bloggers' recommendations.

Coefficient	B	Std. Error	t	P
Constant	1.494	0.281	5.321	0.000**
Bloggers Experience	0.495	0.088	5.592	0.001*

Hypothesis 6: The relationship between blog readers' perceived bloggers' experience and credibility was tested and hypothesis 6 was accepted with the p -value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in perceived bloggers' experience increases the credibility by 0.359. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 6: *The perceived experience of bloggers will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.*

Coefficient	B	Std. Error	t	P
Constant	2.016	0.357	5.642	0.000**
Bloggers Experience	0.359	0.113	3.193	0.002**

Hypothesis 7: The relationship between social influence and trust is tested and hypothesis 7 was accepted with the p -value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in social influence increases the credibility by 0.324. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 7: *Social influence will positively affect blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations.*

Coefficient	Std.			
	B	Error	t	P
Constant	2.154	0.293	7.358	0.000**
Social influence	0.324	0.107	3.021	0.004**

Hypothesis 8: The relationship between social influence and credibility is tested and hypothesis 8 was accepted with the p -value of ($= 0.001 < 0.01$). We can conclude that one unit rise in social influence increases the credibility by 0.249. Thus, the relationship between them is significant.

Hypothesis 8: *Social influence will positively affect blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and willingness to adopt bloggers' recommendations.*

Coefficient	Std.			
	B	Error	t	P
Constant	2.460	0.334	7.357	0.001**
Social influence	0.249	0.122	2.034	0.047*

Hypothesis 9: *Trust has a mediating effect between blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility and their own loyalty to bloggers.*

Figure 8 illustrates the results of Structural Equation Modelling between perceived blog readers' loyalty, trust and credibility.

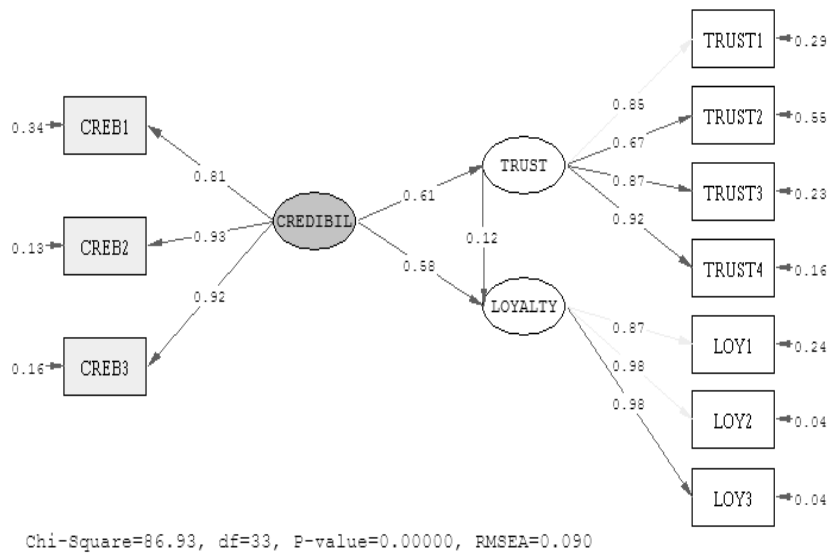


Figure 8. Structural equation modelling results of pilot study

Figure 8 shows the results of the SEM conducted to measure the mediating effect of trust between credibility and perceived blog readers’ loyalty. Kline (2011) recommends that a sample size ($n > 200$) is adequate for conducting SEM analysis. This study conducted SEM (SEM) for the pilot study as well as practice for the main analysis. Figure 13 indicates that there is a positive and strong relationship between credibility and perceived blog readers’ loyalty, with a coefficient of 0.58. The relationship between credibility and trust to adopt bloggers’ advice was also positive, with a coefficient of 0.61. The effect of trust on credibility to adopt bloggers’ advice is less than loyalty.

As figure 8 illustrates, among the variables acting as indigenous latent variables, CREB2 has the greatest effect, with a coefficient of 0.93, which means that any increase on CREB2 will also increase the effect of credibility and trust and perceived blog readers’ loyalty. Among the variables affecting trust and

perceived blog readers' loyalty as an exogenous latent variable, TRUST3 also has the greatest effect, with a coefficient of 0.92.

Table 29 indicates that the model given in Figure 14 is statistically significant and shows a good fitness according to all goodness of fit statistics. Besides these fitness criteria, the χ^2/df was obtained as $86.93/33=2.63$, which is less than 3 and means that the model is both statistically significant and an acceptable fit (Kline, 2005).

Table 29 shows the limits and the results of the structural model given in Figure 8.

Table 29: Limits and results of structural model of pilot study

Fitness Criterion	Perfect Fitness	Acceptable Fitness	Model
RMSEA	$0 < RMSE < 0.05$	$0.05 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.1$	0.090
NFI	$0.95 \leq NFI \leq 1$	$0.90 < NFI \leq 0.95$	0.92
NNFI	$0.97 \leq NNFI \leq 1$	$0.95 \leq NNFI \leq 0.97$	0.95
CFI	$0.97 \leq CFI \leq 1$	$0.95 \leq CFI \leq 0.97$	0.96
SRMR	$0 \leq SRMR < 0.05$	$0.05 \leq SRMR \leq 0.10$	0.067

Source: Schermelleh-Engel and Moosbrugger (2003). (RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, SRMR: Standardised Root Mean Square Residual)

The fit indices and their thresholds shown in Table 16 are, respectively: Root mean square error approximation (RMSEA), Non-normed fit index (NNFI), Normed-fit index (NFI), Comparative fit index (CFI) and Standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). RMSEA measured 0.090, which indicates acceptable fit. NFI is measured as 0.92, which is considered as indicating acceptable fit. NNFI is measured as 0.95 in this model, which is acceptable. Additionally, CFI is measured as 0.96 in this model which is also within the recommended cut-off for acceptable fit. Lastly, SRMR is measured as 0.067, which is also in the acceptable fit range. To sum up, the SEM model fit indices are all in ranges that indicate acceptable fitness.

Conclusion

This pilot study analysed the factors influencing bloggers' credibility and blog readers' trust in and adoption of their recommendations. Accordingly, this study conducted an online survey with Birkbeck students composed of a sample size of 51 where 46 people were students and five were experts (PhD students). The survey was composed of 12 pages. 52.9% of respondents were female and 47.1% were male. It was determined that 51% of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 29 and only 23.5% of respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39.

In order to analyse the influence of bloggers on consumers' purchase intentions, we adopted and developed seven factor scales, namely: trust, credibility, sponsorship, perceived bloggers' experience, social attractiveness, social influence, perceived blog readers' loyalty. All the variables were rated using five-point Likert-type scales: agreement – disagreement. According to the results of EFA, the eigenvalues, variance explanation ratios of factors and the factor loadings of each item were measured and the total variance explanation ratio of these seven factors was calculated as 85.874. The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett Sphericity was measured, and it was determined that the KMO measure was 0.828. This value is considered as an appropriate value for study (Bagozzi, 2012). Additionally, the Bartlett sphericity of this study was measured as between 0.7 and 0.9, which demonstrates that the internal consistency of our result is good (acceptable) (Bagozzi, 2012).

Moreover, this study conducted correlation analysis between the factors. It was determined that trust and social attractiveness had the highest coefficient at 0.64, while trust and sponsorship had the lowest coefficient with 0.487. It was

determined that all the hypotheses were accepted. Furthermore, Cronbach alpha coefficients were measured in this study, with the values for all seven factors lying in the range of 0.7 to 0.9, which are considered appropriate and good (Bagozzi, 2012).

SEM (SEM) was conducted to measure if trust has a mediating affect between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty. Our study determined that the value of $(\chi^2/df) 86,93/33=2.63$ which is less than 3, indicating that the model is statistically significant (Kline, 2005). The SEM model fit indices were measured as RMSEA=0.090, NFI=0.92, NNFI=0.95, CFI=0.96 and SRMR=0.067 are all in ranges that demonstrate acceptable fitness (Schermelleh-Engel and Moosbrugger, 2003).

According to our results in hypothesis testing, in hypothesis 1; It is found that the relationship between social attractiveness and trust was significant, and that social attractiveness increases blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Furthermore, hypothesis 2 measures the relationship between social attractiveness and credibility, and it was found that one unit rise in social attractiveness increases the credibility of bloggers in respect to blog readers' adoption of recommendations. Hypothesis 3 examined the relationship between sponsorship and trust, and it is found that one unit rise in sponsorship increases blog readers' trust in and adoption of recommendations. Hypothesis 4 measured the relationship between perceived bloggers' experience and trust, and it was concluded that one unit rise in perceived bloggers' experience increases the blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations. Hypothesis 5 examined the relationship between sponsorship and credibility and it was concluded that one unit rise in sponsorship increases the credibility of bloggers

in respect to blog readers' adoption of their recommendations. Thus, the relationship between them is significant. Hypothesis 6 examined the relationship between perceived bloggers' experience and credibility, and it was found that one unit rise in perceived bloggers' experience increases the blog readers' perception of bloggers' credibility in respect to the adoption of their recommendations. In hypothesis 7 the relationship between social influence and trust was tested and it was found that one unit rise in social influence increases the blog readers' trust in and adoption of bloggers' recommendations. In hypothesis 8 the relationship between social influence and credibility was examined it was found that one unit rise in social influence increases blog readers' perception of the credibility bloggers in respect to the adoption of their recommendations. In hypothesis 9, the mediating effect of trust between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty was examined.

Comparing our findings with the literature, Hsu et al. (2013) analysed the relationship between trust and credibility on consumers' shopping behaviour, finding that trust and credibility have no significant effect on shopping behaviour,

and that blog readers would still shop online if the blogger's recommendation was perceived to be useful, i.e., recommendations can decrease the search time and cost as well as improve the efficiency of evaluation in different alternatives choice. This research, however, finds that there is a positive and strong relationship between credibility and perceived blog readers' loyalty, with a coefficient of 0.58. The relationship between credibility and trust to adopt bloggers' advice is also positive, with a coefficient of 0.61. The difference with the literature might be explained by the date of the study. Hsu et al. (2013)

examined bloggers and consumer behaviour eight years prior to this study, and bloggers are now much more popular.

Moreover, Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) finds that sponsorship has a negative effect on credibility and behavioural intentions no matter whether the sponsorship is revealed or not. This study, however, argues that sponsorship increases the credibility and the relationship between them is positive. The difference in the findings compared to the literature might be explained by the fact that Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) only focused on Spanish fashion blog readers. Alsaleh (2017) argues that trust has significant effect on consumers shopping behaviour and their intentions. Supporting this Alsaleh (2017) finds that positive attitudes and intentions are shaped by trustworthy bloggers. Lastly, Hsu et al. (2013) finds that subjective norms by a reference group composed of friends, family, colleagues and partners, strengthen the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Hsu et al. (2013) highlights the importance of subjective norms shaping consumers purchase habits, which is in line with our finding that social influence increases the perceived credibility of towards adoption of recommendations and which thus supports the argument in this study that there is a positive relationship between social influence and credibility and trust in the adoption of recommendations. This chapter covers the pilot study prior to main analysis and finds that sponsorship, perceived bloggers' experience, social influence positively affects the trust in and perceived credibility of bloggers in respect to blog readers' adoption of their recommendations. It also finds that trust has a mediating effect between credibility and blog readers' loyalty.

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Ethical approval was taken on November 2019 and ethics form is provided below.



Proposal form for ethical review of research projects

This form is designed to guide the ethics approval processes of research projects carried out by staff and PhD students in the Department of Management at Birkbeck. There is a separate form for students on undergraduate and taught Masters programmes. There is a separate form for the ethics approval processes of funding applications.

The purpose of this form is to make sure that you as a researcher, your research participants and the College are safeguarded. Please think carefully about each of the questions and give as much information as possible about what your research with human participants or data from human participants will involve.

If this is a joint research project across Departments / Schools within Birkbeck or with partners in another UK HEI, only the principal investigator is required to submit a form. If you are part of an international research team, please submit a form to your Departmental Ethics Officer.

No research with participants may begin before ethics approval has been granted.

Your details

Name of researcher(s)	ZEHRA SERMAN
Contact email(s):	zehraeceserman@hotmail.com
Academic status (i.e., staff or PhD student)	PhD student
Name and contact email of supervisor (if you are a PhD student)	Dr. Julian Sims juliansims@hotmail.com
Proposed start date	7/10/2019
Funding source (if any)	

Your project

Title of your project: The effect of bloggers on consumer behaviour
What is your main research question (brief abstract of your project)? This research aims to analyse and understand the impact of bloggers on consumer behaviour. There are some factors behind the impact and this study will analyse and understand the factors behind this influence. So, the main question of this research is: Why do people influenced by bloggers and to what extent influence mediating by some factors?
How will you collect your data (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, group discussion, experiments, observations)? I will be conducting survey which will include questionnaires
Are you involving an external body (e.g., a company, charity or HE institution) in your data collection or for access to participants? No
If this is an application for approving a modification, please provide the title and date of your initial application.

Your participants

Who are your participants?	Birkbeck Students
How will participants be selected?	
How many participants are planned?	500
Are you involving staff or students of Birkbeck, or others closely related to Birkbeck, in your data collection?	All Birkbeck students will be included in this research
Are you recruiting participants from the Internet?	No
If, yes, does your Internet research take place in a private or public internet space?	Public Internet space. Google form will be used to conduct the survey.
If, yes, have you considered relevant legislations around unsolicited contact?	Google form have its own legislation about safety of data so all the data will kept anonymous.

Are you using any forms, questionnaires, interview schedules or other materials to gather your data? If yes, please provide copies.
Informed consent

<p>How will you explain to participants what will be involved in taking part in your study?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Information sheet distributed to each participant YES/NO- Information sheet displayed on screen for all participants YES/NO- Information included in header of questionnaire YES/NO- Other (please provide details):
<p>Are you using any inducement or payment to take part in the study? YES/NO If YES, please provide details.</p>
<p>Do your participants include minors (under the age of 16 years)? YES/NO If YES, please provide details of how you will obtain informed consent from both the children and parents/guardians.</p>
<p>Do your participants include vulnerable individuals or those with limited legal capacity? YES/NO If YES, please provide details of who else will give informed consent.</p>
<p>Will this study be conducted in a school or other institution where the researcher has a duty of care? YES/NO If YES, please provide details of how you will obtain informed consent from parents or guardians.</p>
<p>Does your project require institutional consent? YES/NO If yes, please provide details on how you will obtain institutional consent.</p>

**Please provide copies of your information sheet(s) and consent form(s)
Confidentiality and anonymity**

<p>Are you seeking to ensure confidentiality of information and the anonymity of your participants and their organisations? <u>YES/NO</u></p>
<p>If NO, provide details of what steps will be taken to ensure that participants understand and agree that their participation will not be kept confidential and the reasons why?</p>
<p>If YES, provide details of how you will ensure the confidentiality/anonymity of your participants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - During data collection and analysis - In the dissemination of your research (e.g., in essay, theses, talks, websites or research publications)

Risk

Risk to the research participant/materials
<p>Does your research involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sensitive topics (e.g., issues of discrimination, bullying and harassment, whistleblowing)? <u>YES/NO</u> - Any procedure that might <i>inadvertently</i> cause distress? <u>YES/NO</u> - Any procedure that could cause harm to the participant? <u>YES/NO</u> - Unpleasant or emotionally difficult stimuli? <u>YES/NO</u> - Unpleasant or emotionally difficult situations? <u>YES/NO</u> - Actively misleading or deceiving the participants? <u>YES/NO</u> - Withholding information about the nature or outcome of the study? <u>YES/NO</u>
<p>If you answered YES to any of these questions, please detail the steps you will take to additionally safeguard your participants.</p>
<p>Does your research involve sensitive materials (e.g., diaries, letters, confidential papers)? No, it does not include.</p>
<p>If your research involves minors or vulnerable individuals, have you had the necessary criminal background check required? No, it does not include.</p>
Risk to the researcher
<p>Where will your investigation take place?</p>

It will be conducted online through google forms.
Is the research environment potentially unsafe? YES/NO
If you answered YES, please provide copies of your Fieldwork Risk Assessment Form
If you are involving live participants, will you be alone with them? YES/NO
Will the investigation involve illegal activity or the discussion of illegal activity? YES/NO
If you answered YES to any of these questions, please provide a copy of a Fieldwork Risk Assessment Form.
Risk to the College
Might the research raise media/social/legal concern in the public domain? YES/NO
Could this research potentially compromise the reputation of the College? YES/NO
Do you envisage needing help or advice in managing legal or media attention? YES/NO
If you answered YES to any of these questions, please provide details.

Conflicts of interest

Is there a potential for a conflict of interest?	YES/NO
Are you involving participants to which you have access in a different capacity (e.g. through your place of work)? YES/NO	
If you answered YES to any of these two questions, please provide details.	

Storage and dissemination of data

How will your data be stored, transferred, transcribed? Using google drive all data will be collected and stored in and online google drive
How will your data be saved, shared and disseminated after the project is completed? Data will kept anonymous and will be used only for data collection for this research.

FOR COMPLETION BY THE RESEARCHER:

I have answered the above questions as fully and honestly as possible.

YES/NO

I agree to inform my supervisor/departmental ethics officer if there is any change to the research project detailed here and if my supervisor deems necessary will seek additional ethical approval.

YES/NO

I agree to carry out the study in an ethically informed way and to ensure that participants, researcher(s) and the college are safeguarded.

YES/NO

I agree to carry out the study in line with current Freedom of Information and Data Protection regulations, including storing and transferring data securely.

YES/NO

I confirm that the research conforms to expectations of ethical research in my discipline.

YES/NO

SIGNATURE of researcher:

Date:19.10.2019



The layout presented in following pages differs from actual look in online survey.

**FACTORS INFLUENCING FORMATION OF TRUST AND
CREDIBILITY OF BLOG READERS**

30.09.2019

PhD RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE:

THE EFFECT OF BLOGGERS ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

My name is Zehra Serman, and I am currently studying PhD in Management at Birkbeck University of London. This questionnaire is a part of my research which will help me to do my research and form a basis for my pilot study. I am conducting research in order analyse factors influencing the trust and credibility of blog readers towards the adoption of recommendations. This questionnaire is only for academic purposes and please be ensured that all responses will be kept anonymous, and no one will be identifiable in the research. Thank you for taking time to survey. I really appreciate your help, if you have any questions about research or questionnaire, please do not hesitate to contact with me.

Zehra Serman
zehraeceserman@hotmail.com

A) SECTION: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

[Please be ensured that any personal information you provide will remain confidential will **ONLY** be reported in aggregate group form]

Please **tick** the box or provide the information that most accurately describes you.

1. Gender:

- Male
- Female

2. In what age group are you?

- 19 and under
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60 +

3. In terms of your education, how would you characterize yourself?

- Undergraduate degree
- Postgraduate degree
- MPhil/PhD degree
- Short courses
- Foundation

4. What region are you from (your nationality)?

- United Kingdom
- EU Country
- USA / Canada
- Africa
- Middle East / Turkey / North Africa
- Indian / Pakistani / Bangladeshi

5. Marital Status

- Married
- Single

6. In terms of your current occupation, how would you characterize yourself?

- Full-time work
- Part-time work
- Student
- Full-time work and Student
- Part-time work and student
- Unemployed

7. What's your household income?

- Under 10k
- 10k-20k
- 20k-40k
- 40k-60k
- 60k-80k
- Prefer not to say

8. Do you read blogs?

- Yes
- No

9. How often do you read blogs in a year?

- 1-2 times
- 2-3 times
- 3-5 times
- Weekly
- Daily
- Never

10. How many hours do you spend per week browsing blogs?

- Less than one hour per week
- 1 to 3 hours
- 4 to 10 hours
- 11 to 20 hours
- More than 20 hours

11. Do you have a blog?

- Yes
- No

12. Which platforms do you usually use to follow bloggers?

- Instagram
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Blog Websites

13. Which products or services do you read blog recommendations?

- Travel/Lifestyle
- Food/restaurant
- Fashion
- Cosmetics
- Health and Fitness
- Parenting Blogs
- Interior Design/DYI

14. Did you buy any products or services with the recommendations of bloggers?

- Yes
- No

15. Please specify which products you purchased _____

16. Do you find the products promoted by bloggers reliable?

- Yes
- No

17. Would you recommend the products promoted by bloggers to your friends?

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

B) FACTORS INFLUENCING TRUST OF BLOG READERS AND PERCEPTION OF CREDIBILITY

FACTORS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
TRUST					
Bloggers who have high numbers of followers and likes are more trustable and I feel confident about the information provided.					
Bloggers who post about the products/services are knowledgeable.					
Bloggers who share information about products/services are trustable and make me adopt their advice					
Bloggers who share products/services are not reliable					
Bloggers who are active on blogs and preparing vlogs are not honest					
I feel information given by bloggers are sincere and honest					
I feel bloggers are not credible and trustworthy					
PERCEIVED BLOGGERS EXPERIENCE					
I buy a new product that I never bought because of bloggers' recommendations.					
I adopt bloggers recommendations when I see that bloggers are using or trying the products that they recommend through live videos or vlogs.					
I buy a new product that I never tried because I see that bloggers tried and were happy with the results					
SOCIAL INFLUENCE					

I find bloggers recommendations trustable because my friends and people around me following them					
I will buy the products that my friend tried from bloggers as they are considered credible					
I will not buy the products hearing from my friends					
I will not buy the products that my friend tried from bloggers.					
I buy new products because my friends told me they have seen from bloggers.					
SOCIAL ATTRACTIVENESS					
I think bloggers who have high self-esteem, overconfident and dominant are credible and make me adopt their recommendations.					
I think bloggers who are positive, talented and instantly communicating are credible and makes me adopt their recommendations					
Bloggers have dominant behaviours make me adopt blogs recommendation.					
Bloggers who have friendly attitude are trustable and make me adopt their recommendations					
I think bloggers who are friendly and positive putt me off adopting their recommendations					
I think bloggers who have high self-esteem and dominant behaviours are not credible and put me off adopting their recommendations.					
SPONSORSHIP					
Sponsored blogs are introducing me the brands I never knew about, and they are credible on making me purchase their recommendations					
Sponsored blogs put me off purchasing a recommended product/service					
Sponsored blogs are not trustable because they are getting paid by the sponsors.					

I do intentionally ignore sponsored blogs on the blog					
I would prefer that there is no sponsored post on blogs					
Sponsored blogs are trustable even if they get paid.					
PERCEIVED BLOG READERS' LOYALTY					
I would purchase the products/services promoted by bloggers in the future					
I would recommend people close to me to buy products/services promoted by bloggers.					
I would not recommend people close to me to buy products promoted by bloggers					
I feel I would not purchase the products/services promoted by bloggers in future					

END OF THE SURVEY AND PRIZE DRAW

Thank you for completing this survey.

If you would like to have chance to win £50 voucher from Amazon, please provide me your name and email address, so that I can notify the winner.

Please provide your name and email address below:

Name:

Email Address:

If you win the prize which of the choices, would you prefer?

- I will have the cash myself
- Donate to a charity of my choice