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Research Article

THE EFFECT OF FOOD INFLUENCERS ON CONSUMERS' INTENTION TO PURCHASE FOOD PRODUCTS/SERVICES**

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ABSTRACT

Information related to food products/services conveyed by food influencers has the potential to affect consumers' food purchasing behavior through mechanism of social influence. This study aimed to examine the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation on the intention to purchase food products/services. The study also tested the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation on consumers' attitudes, and the mediating role of consumers' attitudes between perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and intention to purchase food products/services. The questionnaire was designed from previous studies consisting of perceived usefulness, consumers' attitudes and purchase intention. Data were collected from 394 participants, responding the questionnaire Instagram influencers posted. Hypotheses were tested by explanatory factor and regression analysis. All hypotheses were supported. The study results provide important inferences to food brands/businesses in terms of brand collaborations with influencers. The results are also expected to contribute to the relevant literature investigating the effects of food influencers on consumers' purchase intention.

Keywords: food influencer, influencer marketing, consumers' attitudes, purchase intention

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become more and more common with the technological advances and the increasing use of the Internet. As of 2018, more than 3 billion people worldwide use social media and 90% of these users access their social media applications via their mobile devices. Internet and social media use demonstrates no significant rise in advanced economies but continues to increase in emerging economies or markets, which play a significant role in the current world economy (Poushter, Bishop and Chwe, 2018; Le-Anh and Nguyen-To, 2020). Turkey takes place among the emerging economies with steady economic growth and high Internet and social media use rates in recent years. While its economy is considered to be developing, Internet and social media in the country demonstrate quite similar levels of use and growth rate compared to developed countries (HootSuite, 2018; IMF, 2020). In Turkey, the number of Internet users amounting 48 million in 2017 has exceeded 54 million in 2018. Also, the number of social media users has reached 51 million in 2018, with

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3 million increase compared to 2017. Furthermore, 86% of the users have accessed to social media through mobile devices, and the number of mobile social media users in the country has increased by 2 million compared to 2017. Turkey is one of the countries spending the most time on social media, with an average of 7 hours a day on the internet and almost 3 hours on social media (We Are Social, 2018).

The most preferred social media platform in the world in 2018 is Facebook, reaching over 2.2 billion people, followed by video sharing platform YouTube and instant messaging platforms WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Besides, Instagram, comprised of almost two-thirds of the youth between the ages of 18-34, increased the number of global users by one third in 2018, exceeding the threshold of 1 billion users. The most actively used social media platform in Turkey is YouTube. Facebook is the second most actively used social media platforms in Turkey, with Instagram following them. LinkedIn, Pinterest and Tumblr draw attention as social media platforms with low popularity among Turkish users (We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2018).

With the increase in the use of social media, influencers who gain appreciation in social media, are given importance to their advice and thoughts, and have a certain number of audiences. There are many influencers posting in almost every sector such as fashion, makeup, and healthy lifestyle. Studies in the related literature examining the effects of influencers on consumer behavior are mainly on fashion, makeup, and beauty influencers. However, influencers and their posts are also effective on consumer purchase intention in food sector as well. Food influencers are the social media users who basically demonstrate gourmet enthusiasm for eating and post detailed and informative content about food (Cox and Blake, 2011). In this study, the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers on the intention to purchase food products/services, and the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers on consumers' attitudes were investigated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing activities carried out on social media play an important role in informing consumers about products/services and encouraging them to purchase (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011). In these social media marketing activities, influencers have become significant with their high potential to spread their ideas and advice about the products/services they experience to the masses quickly and easily (Veissi, 2017).

Influencers are the people appreciated by their posts on social media, followed by a wide audience, whose advice and thoughts are given importance, having the power to influence and direct their followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg, 2011). These people can be an industry expert or anyone with the potential to affect people, posting content regularly and having high engagement rates (More and Lingam, 2019; Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

The first example of the concept of influencers has been seen as opinion leaders in the literature. The widespread use of the concept however has been observed since the 1980s, with word-of-mouth marketing, in which products/services are recommended by the ones who form the immediate environment of people such as family and friends (Brown and Hayes, 2008). In this period, with the development of technology and the increasing use of social media, people can share their thoughts, images, and various posts online and certain people have become influencers in line with these posts. With the increase of social media platforms such as YouTube in 2006 and Instagram in 2010, marketers have started to discover the high-impact potential of these people and accounts on social media platforms (Brown and Fiorella, 2013).

Influencers promote their product and service experiences by posting them on social media. These posts are perceived as advice by their followers (Lee and Watkins, 2016). Influencers' recommendations are considered more effective than traditional ads. Since consumers find influencers' opinion towards products/services more sincere and reliable than brands' own promotions and see them more accessible. In addition, consumers are exposed to too many marketing messages in their daily lives. Therefore, many traditional ads lose their attractiveness and credibility (Hesse, 2015). Brown and Hayes (2008) interpret this as most marketing messages are blocked by a wall of indifference. Accordingly, brands can reach their target markets, which they have difficulty in reaching with traditional marketing methods, through influencers.

Influencers can be addressed in factors such as their number of followers, engagement rates, and quality of their posts and frequency of sponsored content (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). While the number of followers and the frequency of the posts are crucial in reaching more people, engagement rate is remarkable to measure whether the content of the posts really matches the target audience that influencer appeal to (Sammis, Lincoln and Pomponi, 2015).

The application that brands aim to get influencers' support by offering them a tester and to create a positive image in the eyes of influencers' followers is called influencer marketing (Sammis et al., 2015). Influencers' contents can be used to increase consumer loyalty along with brand awareness and appreciation, to contribute to the word-of-mouth of consumers regarding the products or services included in these contents, and to increase traffic to the brand online or offline (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Influencer marketing can include various interaction and promotional applications such as branded content creation, sponsored blog posts, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, tweets, Instagram posts and Snapchat stories (Rhythm Influence, 2016). Instagram is ranked first in the use of social media for influencer marketing (48%), followed by Facebook (21%), YouTube (16%) and Twitter (15%). In terms of sectors, 19% of the posts are related to beauty/makeup sector, followed by fashion (18%), travel (13%), food and lifestyle (12%) (Influencer Marketing, 2017). According to the research of TapInfluence and Altimeter Group, 25% of brands use influencers as a means of promoting their brands and products, and see the influencer marketing as one of the most effective marketing methods (eMarketer, 2017).

In Turkey, the use of social media is widespread, and it offers an environment quite favorable in terms of influencer marketing. There are many Turkish influencers specializing in areas such as fashion, sports, food, beauty and health lifestyle, and including content about brands in their posts. The platforms where influencers are active the most are Instagram and YouTube. When Instagram Turkey's first 20 most followed influencers are listed; there are 3 influencers posting food, and 2 influencers producing content related to beauty/makeup and lifestyle areas (HypeAuditor, 2019; BoomSocial, 2019a). When YouTube Turkey's most followed influencers are examined, 4 beauty/makeup and lifestyle channels, and 3 channels preparing informative contents draw attention (Social Blade, 2019; BoomSocial, 2019b). According to the data belonging to CreatorDen and LikePublic & Big Cat Research (2018), the most preferred platforms in influencer marketing in Turkey are Instagram (65%) and YouTube %30. Twitter and Facebook lag far behind these platforms. 51% of consumers purchase products with the recommendation of the influencer they follow on Instagram, while 26% of people purchase products with the recommendation of YouTube influencers. 92% of the consumers suggested the influencer they follow to their relatives; 73% stated they follow the influencers because they find them sincere. In addition, 71% of consumers find influencers' cooperation with brands positive, while the rate of those thinking the brands that influencers collaborate with are reliable is 72%. The brands that benefit from influencer marketing mostly provide services in sectors such as beauty and makeup, clothing, travel, food. 63% of consumers claim that if the influencers they follow respond to their comment below the post, they can buy the product included in that post. Lastly, the engagement rate of influencers up to 20.000 followers is 7%, while those up to 50.000 followers is 5.21% and the interaction rate of influencers with 1 million and above followers is 4.14%, indicating that the number of followers is inversely proportional to the engagement rates.

Table 1. The literature review of the effects of influencers' on consumer preferences and purchase intention

Researchers (year)	The aim of the research	Research method	Sector	Variables
Lou and Yuan (2019)	Examining how message value and reliability affects consumers' trust in branded content on social media within the context of influencer marketing	Questionnaire	Lifestyle, food	Informative value, entertainment value, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, trust in branded posts, brand awareness, purchase intention
Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2019)	Investigating the effects of influencers' posts on consumers' attitudes towards advertising and product and their purchase intentions compared to the use of celebrities	Questionnaire	Fitness, beauty, fashion, food	Endorser type, advertising effectiveness, product-endorser fit
Sokolova and Kefi (2019)	Testing the engagements of influencers with consumers and the impact of influencers' perceived reliability on purchase intention	Questionnaire	Beauty, fashion	Social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily, credibility, intention to purchase
Magno and Cassia (2018)	Investigating the effects of influencers on consumers' attitudes and decisions regarding tourism sector	Questionnaire	Tourism, travel	Information quality, influencer trustworthiness,

				behavioral intentions
Nunes et al. (2018)	The effect of influencers' recommendations on their followers' purchase intention	Questionnaire	Lifestyle, fashion, makeup	Persuasive messages, information acceptance, attitude, purchase intention
De Veirman et al. (2017)	Determining the effect of the # of followers and product difference on brand attitude and purchase intention in marketing through Instagram influencers	Questionnaire	Fashion, travel health, food	perceived Popularity, ascribed opinion leadership, likeability
Djafarova and Rushworth (2017)	Investigation of Instagram celebrities' source credibility in influencing young female users' purchase decisions	In-depth interview	Lifestyle, fashion, makeup	Source credibility, consumer buying intention, social identification with different types of celebrities
Evans et al. (2017)	Investigation of the effect of Instagram influencers' emphasize that their content contains ads on ad recognition, brand attitude and purchase intention	Questionnaire	Food	Ad recognition, brand attitude, purchase intention, intention to eWOM
Lee and Watkins (2016)	Investigation of the effects of YouTube influencers' on consumers' luxury brand perception and purchase intention	Questionnaire	Luxury fashion brands	Parasocial interaction, luxury brand value, purchase intention

The studies on the influencers generally investigate the effects of the use of YouTube and Instagram influencers by brands as a source of message and promotional element on consumer purchasing behavior through content analysis, in-depth interviews and questionnaires. In these studies, the effects of influencers are mostly examined without making a sector distinction (Nunes, Ferreira, Freitas and Ramos, 2018; Lim, Radzol, Cheah and Wong, 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans, Phua, Lim and Jun, 2017), or in beauty/makeup and fashion sectors in which the sample consists of young female users (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Sudha and Sheena, 2017).

In one of the limited studies on food sector, Saldamlı and Özen (2019) examined the effects of influencers on consumer preferences specifically for food businesses. The results obtained in the study demonstrate that influencers have a remarkable impact on consumers' food preferences. However, the study lacks including any findings regarding which influencers the participants find effective in the food sector, and which food influencers' effects were examined. De Jesus Oliveira et al. (2019) examined Instagram influencers' food and nutrition posts, determined that the engagement between the influencers and followers is high and the followers see the perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation as a source of inspiration and model. The study, in which the posts, likes and comments of 3 selected influencers were subjected to content analysis, is limited only by addressing the selected influencers and does not include which food influencers the participants find effective on their food preferences. Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen and Boyland (2019) investigated the effect of YouTube influencers' snack posts on children's behavior to consume snacks and found that children consume the snacks posted by influencers 41% more than other similar brands. However, the study is limited by examining the posts related to a particular food product, a sample with a particular age group and only 2 YouTube influencers' posts. Si and Kom (2015), on the other hand, determined that food sector partners collaborate with food influencers in their marketing activities and have their products/services posted by them, thus encouraging consumers to experience their products/services. In the study, 4 participants including food influencers and sector members in Indonesia were interviewed and their opinions on the use of food influencers in the sector were presented. Hanifati (2015) investigated how bloggers' restaurant reviews impact consumers' attitude and behavior using the variables employed in the technology acceptance model. The results obtained determined that food bloggers' recommendations have a remarkable impact on the consumers' intention to follow the recommendations.

Based on the literature and explanations, the researchers developed the model and hypotheses as follow:

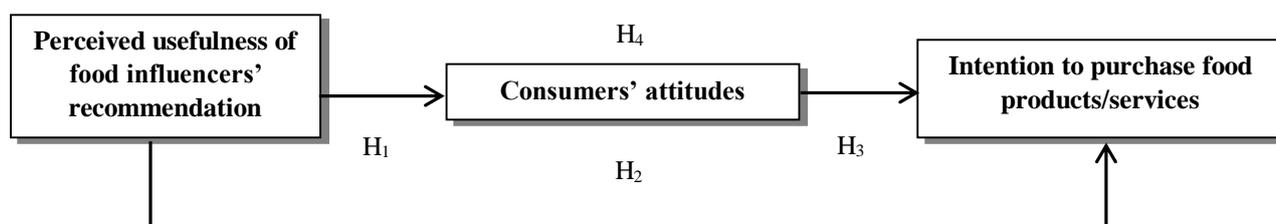


Figure 1. The proposed research model

H₁: Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation has a statistically significant effect on consumers' attitudes.

H₂: Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation has a statistically significant effect on the intention to purchase food products/services.

H₃: Consumers' attitudes have a statistically significant effect on the intention to purchase food products/services.

H₄: Consumers' attitudes have a statistically significant mediating effect between the perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and the intention to purchase food products/services.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants in the questionnaire comprise of those who actively use at least one social media platform and follow at least one food influencer. The participants were reached by the survey prepared on Google Forms and posted on social media platforms between May 15, 2019 and May 31, 2019. By having the questionnaire posted by 3 food influencers with over 40.000 followers on Instagram, the required sample size required for quantitative studies was achieved (Bartlett, Kotrlik and Higgins, 2001). Instagram was chosen to share the questionnaire since it is one of the most actively used social platforms and because the visually factor comes to the fore in food posts, influencers posting food photos and videos are mostly active on Instagram (We Are Social, 2018).

The calculated sample size was 420 social media users. Pre-testing was carried out with 20 social media users. The data were treated and cleaned before performing of statistical analysis and the data were checked for missing data. After the elimination of incomplete or incorrect forms, 394 questionnaires were subject to analysis. Skewness and Kurtosis values were examined for normality test. The Skewness value was found to be between -0.66 and 1.43, and the Kurtosis value ranged from -0.51 to 1.03. When Kurtosis and Skewness values are between -1.5 and +1.5, it is accepted that there is normal distribution (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013). The scope of the study and the sampling method applied are the limitations of the study.

3.2. Data collection method and measures

In the study, perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation scale developed by De Veirman et al. (2017), consumers' attitudes scale developed by Wang et al. (2010), and intention to purchase scale developed by Dhanesh and Duntler (2019) were used. The variables were prepared on five-point Likert scale (5= Strongly Agree, 1= Strongly Disagree) is applied. SPSS 22.0 and Sobel test were used to test hypotheses.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Descriptive statistics of demographic variables, social media usage and food influencers

The demographic profile is given in Table 2. The participants are mostly female (73.6%), university graduates (59.4%), single (72.6%), aged 18 to 25 years (51.3%), student (37.8%) and working in the private sector (27.4%), with a monthly income of 2020 TL (42.4%) and 2021-4000 TL.

Table 2. Demographic profile of the participants

Sex	n	%	Occupation	n	%
Female	290	73.6	Student	149	37.8
Male	104	26.4	Private sector employee	108	27.4
Age	n	%	Servant	33	8.4
0-17	7	1.8	Unemployed	24	6.1
18-25	202	51.3	Other	80	20.2
26-39	148	37.6	Marital Status	n	%
40-60	37	9.4	Married	108	27.4
Income	n	%	Single	286	72.6
0-2020 TL	167	42.4	Education	n	%
2021-4000 TL	108	27.4	High school	34	8.7
4001-6000 TL	63	16.0	Associate's degree	38	9.6
6001-8000 TL	25	6.3	Bachelor's degree	234	59.4
8001 TL +	31	7.9	Graduate	88	22.3
Total	394	100		394	100

Table 3 represents the participants' social media usage and the influencers they follow. It is seen that more than half of the participants spend an average of 2-4 hours, and about a quarter spend less than 2 hours a day on social media. In addition, almost all the participants follow the influencers on Instagram, more than two-thirds on YouTube, and a third on Twitter.

Table 3. Frequency analysis of the participants' social media usage and the food influencers they follow

Time spent on social media	n	%	Platforms participants influencers	where follow	n	%	Posting type of followed influencers	n	%
< 2 hours a day	94	23.9	Instagram		384	97.5	Food	394	100
2-4 hours a day	204	51.8	YouTube		267	67.8	Fashion	157	39.8
5-7 hours a day	69	17.5	Twitter		124	31.5	Lifestyle	164	41.6
> 7 hours a day	27	6.9	Facebook		45	11.4	Travel	196	49.7
			Pinterest		35	8.9	Beauty/Makeup	120	30.5
			Blogs/Forums		19	4.8	Healthy lifestyle	219	55.6
			Podcasts		20	5.1	Entertainment	125	31.7
			Twitch		2	0.5	Expert	204	51.8
							Hobby/Decoration	123	31.2
Most followed food influencers	n	%	Most followed food influencers (continued)	n	%				
Refika Birgül	140	35.5	harbiyiyorurum	27	6.9				
Arda Türkmen	76	19.3	Oğuz Yenihayat	24	6.1				
gurukafa	57	14.5	simplyfitdays	20	5.1				
Vedat Milor	55	14.0	yemekneredeyenircom	16	4.1				
İdil Yazar	48	12.2	ucakyolcusutr	15	3.8				
tatdedektifi	37	9.4	yyielimguzelleselim	14	3.6				
bugunnereyegitsem	34	8.6	Ece Zaim	12	3.0				
Dilara Koçak	34	8.6	Ömür Akkor	12	3.0				
Bengi Kurtcebe	28	7.1	gurmemory	10	2.5				
Yağız İzgül	28	7.1	myfoodsteps	8	2.5				
			Other	186	30.2				

The findings revealed that the participants mostly follow food, fashion, lifestyle, healthy lifestyle, expert and travel influencers. The participants stated a total of 206 different Turkish food influencers. Refika Birgül (35%), with 799.373 Instagram and 1.190.000 YouTube followers, ranked first among these food influencers. Other most followed Turkish food influencers by the participants are Arda Türkmen (19.3%), with 1.645.080 Instagram and 505.000 YouTube followers; Vedat Milor (14.5%), with 488.508 Instagram followers; and gurukafa (14%) with 225.196 Instagram followers.

4.2. Reliability and factor analysis

Cronbach's α coefficients were calculated to measure the internal consistency of the scales and shown in Table 4, and all coefficients were found to be above the generally accepted reliability coefficient of 0.70 (Bonett and Wright, 2015).

Explanatory factor analysis was conducted on all constructs. After the factor analysis was performed to assess purchase intentions, the statement "I would actively seek out the food products/services posted by food influencers to purchase" was excluded due to its insufficient factor loading of less than 0.40, and the analysis was repeated.

Table 4. The results of factor analysis

Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation	Factor loads	Variance explained (%)	
Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation affects my opinions about food.	0.879	68.995	
Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation affects my opinions about food products/services.	0.875		
If I follow food influencers, I choose food products/services based on their recommendation.	0.809		
If I want advice related to food products/services, I turn to food influencers' recommendation for advice.	0.753		
KMO=0.752; Bartlett Test of Sphericity= $p<0.000$; Cronbach's alpha= 0.848			
Consumers' attitudes	Factor loads	Variance explained (%)	Cumulative variance (%)
Factor 1: Information ($\alpha=0.808$)			
Food influencers are a good source of food products/services information.	0.812	50.079	50.079
Food influencers supply relevant information about food sector.	0.812		
Food influencers provide timely information about food sector.	0.735		
Factor 2: Entertainment ($\alpha=0.893$)			
Food influencers are interesting.	0.837	11.330	61.409
Food influencers are entertaining.	0.784		
Food influencers are enjoyable.	0.754		
Food influencers are pleasing.	0.717		
Factor 3: Credibility ($\alpha=0.893$)			
Food influencers are credible.	0.646	7.142	68.551
Food influencers are trustworthy.	0.621		
Food influencers are believable.	0.575		
Factor 4: Usefulness ($\alpha=0.803$)			
Food influencers have positive effects on food sector.	0.856	5.116	73.667
Food influencers raise my standard of choosing quality food preferences.	0.724		
Food influencers result in better food products/services for the public.	0.625		
Factor 5: Value corruption ($\alpha=0.819$)			
Food influencers promote undesirable values in our society.	0.922	4.390	78.057
Food influencers distort the values of society's personal, social and cultural values.	0.918		
KMO=0.922; Bartlett Test of Sphericity= $p=0.000$; Cronbach's alpha= 0.902			
Intention to purchase food products/services	Factor loads	Variance explained (%)	
I would also like to purchase other products/services of brands/ businesses that offer food products/services promoted/endorsed by food influencers.	0.878	54.353	
I would encourage people close to me to purchase the food products/services promoted by food influencers.	0.852		
I would like to purchase the food products/services promoted by food influencers.	0.834		
I would like to try the food products/services promoted by food influencers.	0.726		
KMO=0.797; Bartlett Test of Sphericity= $p=0.000$; Cronbach's alpha= 0.839			

According to the results of the factor analysis regarding the scale of perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value (KMO) was found 0.752, and the Bartlett spherical test value was found to be below 0.05 ($p=0.000$). Factor load values, which should be at least 0.40, have a good acceptance level between 0.879-0.753 for 4 expressions in the scale. In addition, the scale explains 68.995% of the total variance. Accordingly, the total contribution of the factors to the variance is quite good and sufficient.

The results of the factor analysis regarding the scale of consumers’ attitudes show that 15 expressions in the scale were collected in 5 factors. The factors are named as stated in the study of Wang, Sun, Lei and Toncar (2010) in which the scale was adapted from, accordingly to the field they relate to as “Information”, “Entertainment”, “Credibility”, “Usefulness” and “Value Corruption”. In the factor analysis, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was determined to be 0.922, and the sample adequacy was high enough for the analysis. In addition, the value obtained below 0.05 as a result of Bartlett’s sphericity test reveals that the scale is suitable for factor analysis. The factors explain 78.057% of the total variance. In addition, factor loads are at the desired level and there are no overlappings.

The results of the factor analysis of the intention to purchase food product/services scale demonstrates that Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value (KMO) was found to be high enough (0.797), Bartlett spherical test value was found to be below 0.05 meaningful, and reliability coefficient was found to be highly sufficient (0.839). Expressions in the scale have a good enough acceptance level with factor loads in the range of 0.878-0.726. The scale can explain 54.353% of the total variance and is in the range of 40%-60%, which is considered sufficient.

4.3. Hypothesis tests

Regression analysis was performed in hypotheses testing. As seen in Table 5, R and R² values are 0.657 and 0.432, respectively. According to the R² value, perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation can explain 43.2% of the change in consumers’ attitudes. Also, the positive correlation coefficient (R=0.657) indicates that this effect is positive. In this case, as the level of perceived usefulness increases, the level of attitude increases as well.

Table 5. Regression analysis of the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation on consumers’ attitudes

R	R ²	F	Model (p)	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t	p
0.657	0.432	298.454	0.000	0.491	0.657	17.276	0.000

*p<0.05

The significance level value (p=0.000) obtained as a result of the analysis and corresponding to the F value (298.454) is below 0.05. This indicates that independent variable is statistically important enough to explain the dependent variable and the model established is meaningful. In line with the findings regarding the B value (0.491), t value (17.267) and the level of significance (p=0.000<0.05) for the independent variable; H₁ hypothesis, which predicts that perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation has a statistically significant and positive effect on consumers’ attitudes, is supported.

In order to test H₂ hypothesis, simple linear regression analysis was used to determine whether perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation has a statistically significant effect on the intention to purchase food products/services. As seen in Table 6, the R² value was found to be 0.487. Accordingly, 48.7% of the change in dependent variable, the intention to purchase food products/services, can be explained by independent variable, perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation.

Table 6. Regression analysis of the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation on the intention to purchase food products/services

R	R ²	F	Model (p)	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t	p
0.698	0.487	372.178	0.000	0.634	0.698	19.292	0.000

*p<0.05

The F statistic showing the significance of the model and the p value (sig.) showing the significance level of this value reveals that the model created is statistically significant (F=372.178; p=0.000<0.05). According to the unstandardized coefficient (0.634), t value (19.292) and significance level (0.000), the coefficient of the variable, perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation, is meaningful and has a statistically significant effect on the intention to purchase food products/services. The positive R value (0.669) indicates that this effect is positive. This can be interpreted as the increase in the perceived usefulness of food influencers’ recommendation will also increase the intention to purchase food products/services. In accordance with these findings, the H₂ hypothesis is supported.

In order to test H₃ hypothesis, simple linear regression analysis was applied to determine whether consumers' attitudes have a statistically significant effect on the intention to purchase food products/services. As seen on Table 7, R² value was determined to be 0.487. Accordingly, 48.7% of the change in the dependent variable, intention to purchase food products/services, can be explained by the independent variable of consumers' attitudes.

Table 7. Regression analysis of the effect of consumers' attitudes on the intention to purchase food products/services

R	R ²	F	Model (p)	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t	p
0.698	0.487	371.959	0.000	0.849	0.698	19.286	0.000

*p<0.05

The F statistic showing the significance of the model and the p value (sig.) found to be below 0.05 reveal that the model created is statistically significant (F=371.959; p=0.000<0.05). According to the unstandardized coefficient (0.849), t value (19.286) and significance level (0.000), the coefficient of the variable, consumers' attitudes, is significant and has a statistically significant effect on the intention to purchase food products/services. The positive R value (0.669) indicates that this effect is positive. The increase in consumers' attitudes enhances the level of intention to purchase food products/services. Based on the findings, the H₃ hypothesis is supported.

In order to test the mediation effect and significance of the indirect effect of consumers' attitudes between perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and intention to purchase food products/services, regression analysis required for Baron and Kenny's (1986) 4 steps method and Sobel test were applied (Preacher and Leonardelli, 2001).

Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation, intention to purchase food products/services, and consumers' attitudes were considered respectively as independent, dependent and mediator variable, and subjected to regression analysis shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Analysis of the mediating effect of consumers' attitudes between perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and intention to purchase food products/services

Steps	R ²	F	B	t	P		
1. Step (Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation → Intention to purchase)	0.487	372.178	0.634	19.292	0.000		
2. Step (Consumers' attitudes → Intention to purchase)	0.487	371.959	0.849	19.286	0.000		
3. Step (Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation + Consumers' attitudes → Intention to purchase)							
Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation	0.588	278.547	0.383	9.772	0.000	0.568	1.761
Consumers' attitudes			0.512	9.764	0.000		
4. Step (Perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation → Consumers' attitudes)							
	0.432	298.454	0.491	17.276	0.000		

*p<0.05

When the results of the analysis are examined within the framework of the conditions specified in Baron and Kenny's method, it is seen that the first of these conditions which requires a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable was proved (B=0.634; p=0.000). The second condition which requires that the mediator variable should have a significant effect on the dependent variable was provided by the fact that the effect was found statistically significant (B=0.849; p=0.000). In the third step, the independent and the mediator variable are included in the model together and their effect on the dependent variable were tried to be explained. At this step, while the mediator variable still has a significant effect on the dependent variable, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is expected to decrease or become meaningless. The transformation of this effect into meaningless indicates the full mediating effect, and the weakening of the effect level indicates the presence of partial mediating effect (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Accordingly, the results obtained in the third step reveal that the mediator variable maintains its effect on the dependent variable, and the relationship between the independent and dependent variable does not become meaningless compared to the result obtained in the first step, but the level of effect decreases (B=0.383; p=0.000). This result can be interpreted as consumers' attitudes have a partial mediator effect within the model. In addition, since two different variables were included in the model as independent variables, results regarding

whether there are multiple correlations were obtained. When the values related to this ($VIF=1.761<10$; $Tol.=0.568>0.2$) were examined, it was understood that there was no multiple correlation between the variables (Field, 2006).

In order to be able to speak precisely about the mediating effect mentioned in the third step, it is necessary to determine whether the independent variable has a significant effect on the mediator variable, or to determine the significance of the amount of decrease in beta value. In the fourth step applied in this direction, whether the independent variable has a significant effect on the mediator variable was tested and existence of the effect was statistically supported ($B=0.491$; $p=0.000$). Sobel Test, another method, was performed to determine the significance level of the amount of decrease in beta value, and it was revealed that the decrease in beta value was significant ($Z=8.762$; $p=0,000$).

In the light of the findings, it can be said that consumers' attitudes have a partial mediating effect between perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and intention to purchase food products/services, and H_4 hypothesis defending this result is supported.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the study, the effect of perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation on consumers' attitudes and the intention to purchase food products/services was revealed. In addition, the most effective food influencers and in which platforms they are active the most were determined.

The study results provide important inferences and suggestions to brands/businesses in the sector in terms of brand collaborations with influencers. Moreover, since very little number of studies investigating specifically food sector and the effects of food influencers on consumers' purchase intention, the results are also expected to contribute to the relevant literature.

When the findings were analyzed, it was observed that the sample consisting of participants who followed at least one food influencer spends an average of 2-4 hours a day on social media platforms. Instagram and YouTube were found by far to be the platforms where the participants follow food influencers.

Another finding reveals that after the food influencers, the participants mostly follow healthy life, expert, travel, lifestyle and fashion influencers. It is also observed that some participants declared healthy living, expert, travel and lifestyle influencers as food influencers. Since their fields are similar and related, these influencers also post food products/services. In this regard, these influencers who were stated by the participants as food influencers, but whose main areas actually are healthy life, expert, travel and lifestyle, can be stated as that their effect on consumers' attitudes and purchase intention towards food products/services would be similar to actual food influencers.

In addition, it is understood that the participants generally stated the influencers with a low number of followers and a high level of recognition in the field of food and beverage, and declared a considerable number of different influencers (206) compared to the total number of participants (394).

Another remarkable point is that the results do not reflect the most followed food influencers on Instagram and YouTube. Among the most frequently mentioned food influencers by the participants, only Refika Birgül and Arda Türkmen take place among the most followed food influencers ranking. These two come to the fore as both famous and influencer. However, when the mentioned food influencers are examined, it is seen that the majority of them are composed of those whose followers do not exceed 200.000, but have higher engagement rates than the famous influencers such as Refika Birgül and Arda Türkmen. This demonstrates that the number of influencers' followers is not a significant factor concerning their level of influence and coming to mind first. Refika Birgül and Arda Türkmen can reach many more people with their posts as a result of the number of followers they have, and they can be influential across large mass in their choices of food products/services and their names are among the first ones coming to mind in food sector. On the other hand, food influencers, whose generally have 200.000 and less followers, are ordinary and commoner people rather than the people who are both celebrity and have become an influencer in social media. In addition, as a result of their high engagement rates, they are close to their followers and can establish intimate relationships with them (Schouten et al., 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). For this reason, it can be declared that the food influencers having a niche mass of followers and posting mostly in the region where they live in can also influence their followers in their food preferences such as going to a local restaurant.

In the study, it was determined that the followers were affected by perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and they developed positive attitudes towards the food products/services included in the influencers' content. This finding is supported by the findings obtained in the studies of Dhanesh and Duthler (2019), Schouten et al. (2019), Ing and Ming (2018), Lim et al. (2017) and Jargalsaikhan et al. (2016). In addition, the results revealed that perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation had a positive effect on the intention to purchase food products/services. This finding is supported by the findings found in the studies of Schouten et al. (2019) and Magno and Cassia (2018).

Moreover, as revealed in the studies of Schouten et al. (2019), Ing and Ming (2018), Nunes et al. (2017) and Lim et al. (2017), it has been determined in the study that consumers' attitudes significantly and positively affect the intention to purchase food products/services.

The study also revealed the fact that consumers' attitudes have a partial mediating effect between perceived usefulness of food influencers' recommendation and intention to purchase food products/services. This finding is supported by the results obtained in the studies of Sokolova and Kefi (2019), Ing and Ming (2018), Nunes et al. (2017) and Lim et al. (2017).

Managerial implication

The study presents various suggestions to the stakeholders of food sector. Since consumers follow the food influencers on Instagram and YouTube the most, sector stakeholders may be advised to opt for the food influencers on these platforms. It has been observed that among the food influencers that the participants stated they follow, besides the food influencers, there are healthy living, expert, travel and lifestyle influencers mentioned as well. In this regard, it is possible to suggest that the food and beverage sector stakeholders should not only focus on the food influencers, but also on the influencers that post about healthy life, expert, travel and lifestyle in their marketing activities.

Sector stakeholders should also not only pay attention to the number of followers in their food influencer preferences while conducting their marketing activities, they should also cooperate with the food influencers having high level of engagement rates, which describes the likes and comments received per post compared to the number of followers and the level of communication with the followers by responding to their comments. On the other hand, it may be recommended to the food and beverage sector brands/businesses to determine their target groups with different demographic qualities that they want to reach by conducting segmentation studies intended for them. In this way, it can be ensured that they can more accurately determine which social media platforms to use and which food influencers they to cooperate with in order to reach high level of access and engagement rates with these different groups.

As a result, being able to use and manage social media correctly for marketing activities can provide significant competitive advantages to the sector stakeholders who are also field practitioners (Akar and Topçu, 2011). Consumers do research on social media before their purchasing decisions and take into account the posts, comments and evaluations of the influencers regarding the products/services they think of purchasing (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). In this regard, it would be appropriate to conclude that finding a place in the food influencers' posts as a recommendation for followers will contribute to the marketing and promotion activities of the food sector stakeholders.

Limitations and further studies

This study is expected to include findings that may guide researchers who want to conduct research to evaluate the impact of influencers' posts in different sectors on consumer preferences and purchasing intentions. The results obtained include a limited sample due to the convenience sampling method chosen as the data collection method. Carrying out studies for a larger sample and the products/services of different sectors will allow for more diverse and comprehensive results. Additionally, whether the social and cultural characteristics differ on the consumer can be examined by comparing the impacts of the influencers on their followers in different countries posting in the identical sector.

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