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# INVESTIGATING EFFECTS OF INFODEMIC ON STORE VISIT INTENTION

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**Abstract**

This study aims to statistically investigate the effects of an infodemic as an external stimulus on consumer decision processes based on the stimulus-organism-response theory (SOR). An infodemic is known as an epidemic of misinformation, and the literature on infodemics in marketing is quite limited. With the research model created for this purpose, the mediating role of brand trust (organism) in the relationship between both infodemic and positive word-of-mouth marketing (stimulus) and consumers' store visit intentions (response) is examined. The findings suggest that infodemic news and positive word-of-mouth marketing influence consumers' shopping behaviour. Being influenced by infodemic news does not have a significant effect on store visit intention directly, but it has a positive effect through the mediation of brand trust. In addition, both direct and indirect effects of positive word-of-mouth marketing on store visit intention are positive. This suggests that brand trust functions as a coping mechanism for consumers to deal with the uncertainty or negative impact of infodemic news and that consumers' store visit intentions can be increased by enhancing their trust in the brand. As a result, it emphasises the importance of brands developing various communication strategies to increase their credibility and influence consumer decision-making mechanisms.

**Implications for Central European audience:** The study aims to investigate the effects of infodemic posts and positive word-of-mouth marketing on consumers' trust in a brand and their intention to visit a store. By doing so, it seeks to provide strategic recommendations that companies can apply in their communications with customers. Data analyses show that being influenced by an infodemic does not have a significant direct effect on store visit intention, but it does have a positive impact through brand trust. Additionally, positive word-of-mouth marketing has both direct and indirect positive effects on store visit intention. The study highlights brand trust as a critical element that can mitigate the negative effects of infodemic news. It is recommended that businesses focus on sustainability projects, ethical practices and the principle of transparency to enhance brand trust.

**Keywords:** Infodemic; S-O-R model; word-of-mouth marketing; brand trust; store visit intention

**JEL Classification:** M30, M31, M37

# Introduction

Although historical records indicate that false and deceptive information is nothing new, many scholars concur that misinformation, disinformation and fake news have noticeably increased in frequency over the past decade (Broda & Strömback, 2024). Considering that fake news is six times faster than true news and reaches ten times more users (Vosoughi et al., 2018), it can be said that a significant portion of the information that consumers are exposed to today is untrue. The most prominent reasons for this rapid spread can be summed up as the fact that false information causes emotional reactions, is sensational and easily understandable; moreover, the algorithms that social media platforms employ expose users to this content more (Erdoğan et al., 2022; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Today, consumers, like every decision-maker, try to maximise their benefits by using digital environments in their search for information due to the advantages they provide in terms of costs, speed and quality. However, since these environments facilitate the circulation of false or misleading information, they can also cause consumers to make wrong decisions. Misinformation predates the internet; the internet, on the other hand, has reduced the expenses associated with creating and disseminating misinformation (Wilson et al., 2023).

In recent years, a limited number of studies have been conducted on the impact of fake news on brands (Berthon & Pitt, 2018; Bezbaruah et al., 2021; Chen & Cheng, 2020; Flostrand et al., 2020; Junior et al., 2023; Mills & Robson, 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Flostrand et al. (2020) emphasised that fake news poses a complex threat to brands because exposure to fake news can increase consumers' belief in the veracity of subsequent misinformation. Similarly, Talwar et al. (2019) argued that fake news shared by consumers can have highly harmful and negative consequences for any brand.

Moreover, in the digital landscape, consumer-generated content plays a pivotal role, potentially amplifying the dissemination of misinformation about brands. Consumers' posts, especially on digital platforms, can lead to the spread of information of unknown origin and increase rumours about the brand (Oh et al., 2013). The brand's messages can get lost among consumer-generated content, and consumers' harsh reactions online can quickly gain volume (Baccarella et al., 2018). Consequently, understanding and effectively managing consumer-generated content and reactions online is paramount for brands navigating the landscape of fake news and misinformation.

Hansen et al. (2018) stated that 58% of brands affected by the digital brand crisis with negative posts created on social media experienced a decrease in short-term brand perceptions and 40% witnessed a decline in long-term brand perceptions. This effect can endure for an extended period, particularly when these posts include live visual elements such as videos. Furthermore, the quality of the content shared also enhances the probability of it being reshared by other consumers.

This study investigates the effects of the infodemic (World Health Organization, 2020), a concept formed by combining the words "information" and "pandemic," on consumers' brand decisions. An infodemic is defined as the inability to access accurate, reliable information due to the prevalence of fake information, and this misinformation causes panic in society and makes crisis management difficult (WHO, 2020). According to another definition, it is defined as the rapid and widespread dissemination of both true and false information about anything (Pian et al., 2021). Unlike the concept of positive or negative word-

of-mouth marketing, which refers to sharing one's experiences about brands/products, etc. with others, the infodemic refers to the confusion in individuals in the face of information presented in a large number of correct/incorrect ways through various channels, and as a result, it becomes difficult for them to make sound decisions.

Although the infodemic gained prominence especially during the coronavirus pandemic, it is a phenomenon not confined solely to the coronavirus era but is experienced continually. The groundwork for an infodemic is laid by the absence of information. In the absence of sufficient and accurate information, hearsay and interesting myths disseminate rapidly among people. The infodemic encompasses not only misinformation but also a plethora of confusingly presented information, even if accurate. Users become perplexed about which information to associate with which judgement, leading to unintended consequences in decision-making. This study aims to unveil how the infodemic, also referred to as the misinformation epidemic, affects both brands and consumer intentions and behaviour, thereby attempting to contribute to the limited existing literature.

As consumers grapple with discerning reliable information from misinformation, their decision-making processes are affected. By employing the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory, as proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), this study aims to uncover the intricate interplay between environmental stimuli, internal cognitions and behavioural responses within the context of the infodemic and its impact on consumer-brand interactions. The choice to utilise the SOR theory in this study is motivated by its incorporation of both cognitive and emotional states in understanding relationships within the researched model. Additionally, its widespread application in the field of consumer behaviour (Islam et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014) further justifies its selection.

According to the theory, external stimuli influence the internal state of an individual and the desired behaviour is shaped through the individual's decisions and behaviour. In other words, environmental elements affect emotional elements and regulate behavioural responses such as avoidance or approach (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

The present research investigates how excessive and unsubstantiated information disseminated through social media, as well as positive communication about brands, affects the consumer decision process. Consumers' susceptibility to infodemic news and positive statements about brands are addressed within the stimulus-organism-response theory framework. Specifically, the stimuli consist of "positive communication about brands" and "the propensity to be influenced by the infodemic (PII)". The organism is represented by "brand trust". Brand trust can be defined as an internal state which is dependent on consumer's perceptions and feelings (Elgammal et al., 2023; Bezbaruah et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Mim et al., 2022); for this reason, we define brand trust as an organism. The response is presented in the "intention to visit stores" for the respective brands. This study bridges the gap as it tries to examine the empirical associations between brand trust and store visit intention in light of the impact of exposure to infodemic news.

The research model, crafted in accordance with our objectives and based on the SOR framework, is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 | SOR theory**
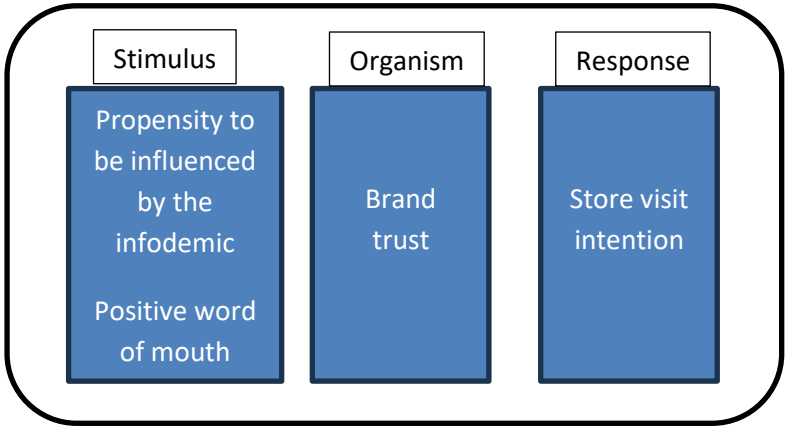


Source: Own elaboration

# 1 Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

## 1.1 Infodemic and store visit intention

In today's dynamic realm of the internet, online platforms are extensively employed for sharing consumers' experiences with brands, like any other transaction (Clemons et al., 2006; Freedman, 2008; King et al., 2014; Klein & Ford, 2003; Kotler & Keller, 2012). The rapid and voluminous exchange of information has given rise to a predicament: the infodemic. A case in point is New Balance, a brand that fell victim to online misinformation, where an individual disseminating fake news misquoted a New Balance spokesperson, leading to widespread boycotts and shoe burnings (Morais da Silva et al., 2023).

For instance, in the North American Communication Monitoring (NACM) report, 80% of the 1,200 communication professionals surveyed reported the publication and transmission of fake news on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter) and blogs (Meng et al., 2019). The social media structure, including features such as likes, comments and re-shares that reveal and solidify users' emotional reactions, renders users more susceptible to infodemic posts (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The creation and dissemination of misleading information online have substantial effects on consumers' decision-making processes. This is particularly significant today, as the majority of customers follow brands on social media, with a significant number actively engaging with them (Etiya Marketting, 2020).

In an environment tainted by misinformation, current and potential consumers' purchase intentions, word-of-mouth marketing behaviour or even store visits may be delayed or negatively influenced due to misinformation across various communication channels. Consequently, businesses witness a decrease in revenues and the costs of marketing communication campaigns are profoundly affected, leading to an increase in expenses (Nagda, 2020). In an era where consumer behaviour is increasingly influenced by political ideology (Jung & Mittal, 2020), fake news assumes a pivotal role in shaping consumers' behaviour, resulting in adverse consequences for brands, such as product boycotts.

While visit intention is commonly associated with tourism, there are studies in the literature where it is interpreted as the intention to visit a store (Visentin et al., 2019). One of the stages in the consumer's purchase decision process involves store visits. Consumers, whether exploring physical or online stores, afford the brand an opportunity. Store visit intention can be an intention to visit a store of a specific brand such as Apple, Nike, Zara or Gucci, or retailers such as Aldi, Walmart, Carrefour for food products or Best Buy and Media Markt for technology products. Store visit intention includes not only physical store visits but also online store visits due to the increasing daily online shopping. In this study, the consumer's intention to visit a store for general products of a brand rather than a specific product of the brand, as well as a physical or online store of the brand, is discussed.

Research suggests a strong connection between visit intention and attitudes and preferences towards a brand or product (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Chen et al., 2014). Visentin et al. (2019) discovered that fake news influences store visit intention. It can be hypothesised that provision of more accurate information for the customer is likely to positively affect their purchase intention and likelihood of revisiting an online store (Shelat & Egger, 2002). Based on the previous studies, our first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

*H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between the propensity to be influenced by the infodemic and store visit intention.*

## 1.2 Infodemic and brand trust

Trust, defined as belief, openness to company messages and easy acceptance of information, is a quality that cannot be purchased but has to be earned (Light & Kiddon, 2009). Particularly in situations characterised by high uncertainty and risk, trust becomes crucial, providing customers with a sense of comfort (La Roche et al., 2012). Consumers are more inclined to choose products they trust and believe in because the perception of trust eliminates the possibility of risk and related uncertainty (Power et al., 2008). Fake news targeting brands can adversely affect consumers' perceptions of these brands and influence their behaviour towards them, as previous studies have indicated that consumers may lose trust in brands associated with fake news production (Chen & Cheng, 2020).

It can be argued that existing trust in a brand may render consumers more vulnerable to fake news, and trusted brands are better equipped to mitigate the risk of fake news (Bezbaruah et al., 2021). Conversely, an increase in the level of fake news has been observed to negatively affect the trust-building process (Farte & Obada, 2021). To mitigate the adverse effects of fake news, organisations are recommended to thoroughly analyse customer behaviour and incorporate it into the decision-making process. A report by Iresearch (2022) suggested that businesses should concentrate on fostering trust among employees, customers and affiliates to counter the dangers of misinformation and disinformation. This effort is particularly relevant because brand trust strengthens the brand's position in the eyes of the consumer against infodemic influences (Visentin et al., 2019). Additionally, brand awareness and credibility can shield a brand from the harmful effects of fake news (Mishra & Samu, 2021). Building on this, our second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

*H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the propensity to be influenced by the infodemic and brand trust.*

## 1.3 Positive word-of-mouth marketing and store visit intention

Word-of-mouth marketing is defined as consumers sharing their comments about their experiences with products, services or brands with people around them (Ditcher, 1966). According to Farzin and Fattahi (2018), word-of-mouth marketing is generally considered to play a significant role in influencing and shaping consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions. Reasons why individuals prefer word-of-mouth communication include the desire to be approved by others and the desire to help others (Çepni, 2011).

The potential impact of consumer decision-making processes by comments on digital platforms requires businesses to be always vigilant about this risk. Through word-of-mouth communication, consumers are directed towards specific products or brands (Chauan et al., 2015). Word-of-mouth marketing is known to exert a strong influence on consumer purchase decision processes (Duan et al., 2008; Farzin and Fattahi, 2018; Goldenberg et al., 2001). Positive word-of-mouth marketing occurs when consumers share their positive experiences with goods and services, brands and organisations with each other (Çepni, 2011). Businesses aim for their customers to recommend their brands to others, as positive word-of-mouth marketing enhances brand image and transforms individuals into brand ambassadors. Brands are among the most crucial assets that firms manage (Madden et al., 2006). This is because they act as the primary determinant and differentiating factor in consumer decision-making (Berthon & Pitt, 2018). Therefore, brand management is as important as, if not more important than, other assets. As marketing approaches evolve, marketing professionals should base their practices on social factors rather than traditional ones and safeguard against inaccurate information by engaging directly with their target audiences. Hence, the third and fourth hypotheses are formulated as follows:

*H3: There is a statistically significant and positive relationship between positive word-of-mouth marketing and store visit intention.*

*H4: There is a statistically significant and positive relationship between positive word-of-mouth marketing and brand trust.*

## 1.4 Brand trust and store visit intention

Trustworthiness is one of the most desirable values for individuals, organisations or brands. Brand trust fosters the establishment of strong relationships between customers and brands, serving as an assurance that benefits both parties (Aaker, 1992). Whether for profit or not, all organisations need to instil trust in their stakeholders to achieve their goals and cultivate sustainable long-term relationships.

Positive brand experiences, coupled with brand trust and credibility, are recognised for fostering positive behavioural intentions towards brands (Sharif et al., 2022). A community cannot thrive unless its participants trust one another (Belanger et al., 2002; Corritore et al., 2003). Similarly, trust in a brand is anticipated to lead customers to develop positive attitudes towards the brand (Kamboj et al., 2018; Sharif et al., 2022).

Empirically, previous studies have demonstrated that different variables, such as purchase intention, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth marketing (Anaya-Snachez et al., 2020),

commitment (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002), brand love (Aydın, 2017) and information exchange (Usoro et al., 2007), are outcomes of brand trust.

Brand trust provides consumers with several benefits by reducing perceived risk, subsequently lowering the consumers' costs of information search and evaluation for the branded product (Shamim & Butt, 2013). When consumers trust a brand, they have insights into the manufacturer and product quality, making their expectations more realistic and lowering perceived risk. Consequently, the purchase decision becomes more straightforward, reducing the costs of searching for information about the product and offering time, effort and cost advantages to the consumer. Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*H5: There is a statistically significant and positive relationship between brand trust and store visit intention.*

*H6: Brand trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between the propensity to be influenced by the infodemic and store visit intention.*

*H7: Brand trust mediates the relationship between positive word-of-mouth marketing and store visit intention.*

Managers' concerns about brand equity stem from the prevalence of negative misinformation, rumours or news that can affect brand equity. Instances include Apple's stock falling after a fictitious news story about Steve Jobs' heart attack in 2008 or market losses for Toyota and Boeing due to misleading tweets by Donald Trump (Hargreaves, 2008; Revesz, 2017). The spread of fake news stories, such as the one affecting Pepsi's shares before the 2016 US presidential election, highlights the real and significant consequences of the infodemic (Berthon & Pitt, 2018). Brand managers must be prepared and always equipped to address this danger.

To summarise, the hypotheses derived from the literature review delineate the interplay of infodemic news, word-of-mouth marketing, store visit intention and brand trust. These hypotheses propose that infodemic news and positive word-of-mouth marketing influence store visit intention, with brand trust serving as a mediating factor in these relationships. Consequently, these hypotheses present a theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between the infodemic and consumer behaviour (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 | Research hypotheses**
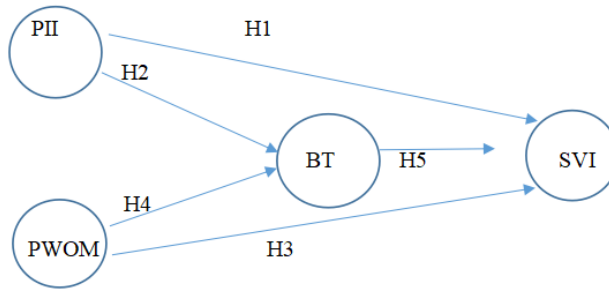


Source: Own elaboration

# 2 Material and Method

## 2.1 Measurement

The model consisted of two independent measures (infodemic news and positive word-of-mouth) and two dependent measures (brand trust and store visit intention). The data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire, which comprised four parts. In the first section, visuals of infodemic news selected from various sectors were incorporated to prompt associations in the respondents' minds (Annex 1). The second part contained questions pertaining to participants' interactions with infodemic news and social media. The response options for the questions in this section were designed to allow participants to select more than one option. The third section encompassed statements related to the variables under investigation in the research.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". This section included a total of 23 items, with five items used to measure the respondents' level of influence from the infodemic, which scale was developed by Kumar et al. (2021), eight items for measuring brand trust scale developed by Delgado-Ballester (2004), six items to measure store visit intention adopted from Matzler et al. (2016), and positive word-of-mouth communication was measured with four items from Godes and Mayzlin (2004).

In the final part of the questionnaire, five demographic questions were included to gather information about the participants' gender, age, marital status, educational status and occupation.

## 2.2 Sampling and data collection

This study aims to explore the attitudes and behaviour of consumers in Turkey who are exposed to infodemic posts on social media. The inclusion criteria for participants involve residency in Turkey, being over 18 years old and having the ability to actively use the internet and social media. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (2022), the cities with most intensive internet use are metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Konya, Bursa and Kocaeli. For this reason, data were collected online from consumers living in metropolitan cities of Turkey.

According to the "Digital 2022: Global Overview Report" by Datareportal, a yearly publication on internet and social media usage worldwide, the total number of internet users in Turkey reached 69.95 million in 2022, constituting 82% of the country's population. The report also indicated that Turkey is the 6th most active social media user globally and holds the top position in Instagram usage (Datareportal, 2022). Given this high level of digitalisation, individuals are likely to be exposed to increased information pollution. Due to the unpredictability of individuals' social media usage and exposure to the infodemic, the research opted for convenience sampling, a type of non-random sampling.

The data collection utilised an online survey form created using Google Forms, designed to be compatible with both computers and smartphones. At the beginning of the survey, we presented participants with real examples of infodemic news shared on social media containing misleading information about various industries to make it clearer what kind of infodemic news was in the consumers' minds, so that consumers consciously answered the questions about what infodemic news is while collecting data. Participants were informed about the infodemic nature of these messages. The visual examples (in Turkish) used in the survey are provided in Annex 1.

The survey was shared across various social media platforms, leading to the voluntary participation of 518 individuals. After eliminating nine respondents due to missing answers, the study was conducted on the responses of 509 participants. Shmueli et al. (2019) stated that the sample size should be 10 times the number of items in studies applying PLS-SEM; 509 samples meet this criterion. Descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 | Descriptive statistics of the sample (n = 509)**

| Age | | Occupation | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 18–27 | 26.70% | Jobless | 4.90% |
| 28–37 | 29.80% | Retired | 3.90% |
| 38–47 | 25.00% | Housewife | 11.50% |
| 48–57 | 13.60% | Student | 10.40% |
| >57 | 4.90% | Self-employed | 7.90% |
| | | Public sector | 30.60% |
| **Gender** | | Private sector | 30.80% |
| Female | 54.40% | | |
| Male | 45.60% | **Education** | |
| | | Secondary school and below | 5.30% |
| **Marital status** | | High school | 22.50% |
| Married | 69.90% | Associate degree | 13.60% |
| Single | 30.10% | Bachelor's degree | 45.60% |
| | | Master's degree | 13.00% |

Source: Own elaboration

It is seen that the majority of the participants (81.5%) are aged 18–47. This shows that the sample was suitable for the purpose of the research; that is, we studied a group of participants who actively use the internet. It is seen that the distribution of men and women is close to each other (54.40–45.60%) and married people are in the majority (69.90%). In

terms of occupational distribution, the public sector (30.60%) and private sector (30.80%) are concentrated. In terms of education level, it is seen that the participants are predominantly undergraduates, with 45.60%.

The concept of the infodemic is a contemporary issue that has garnered attention in recent years in the literature, but there exists a limited number of studies on this subject. Notably, research exploring the relationship between the infodemic and brands is even more scarce. The shifts in consumer behaviour, particularly with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, have underscored the necessity for scientific inquiry into this phenomenon.

This study is motivated by the hypothesis that shared news about brands has the potential to influence consumers' thoughts and attitudes, subsequently affecting their behaviour. In the current era, individuals can easily reach large audiences through social networks using smartphones, essentially assuming a role akin to a modern-day messenger, facilitating the swift dissemination of unverified information. Consequently, companies face substantial risks in the context of the infodemic. This study, which delves into how infodemic posts may shape consumers' intentions and behaviour towards brands, is deemed to hold unique value in this regard.

## 2.3 Data analysis

The study data were analysed using the SPSS and SmartPLS statistical program packages. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in the SmartPLS program to assess the similarity of the previously dimensioned scales in the sample under investigation. Within the scope of measurement validity and reliability, construct validity was first examined through convergent and divergent validity in the confirmatory factor analysis. This involved checking factor loadings, standard deviation, t-value, p-value, CR (composite reliability), AVE (average variance extracted) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

In the subsequent stages, the analysis included the examination of the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity, the HTMT (heterotrait-monotrait) ratio for discriminant validity and VIF (variance inflation factor) values for multicollinearity assessment. The SmartPLS software facilitated path analysis using the structural equation model to uncover the interrelationships between variables, determine direct, indirect and mediating effects and test the study hypotheses.

**Reliability and validity analyses**

The internal consistency method, a commonly employed reliability analysis technique, indicates that all individual statements on a scale measure the same construct and are highly correlated with each other. In this study, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) coefficients were utilised as measures of internal consistency reliability. The generally accepted threshold for both Cronbach's alpha and CR coefficients is ≥ 0.70 (Hair et al., 2006).

Upon examination of the standardised factor loadings ($\lambda$) in the measurement model, the values of the standardised factor loadings for observed variables explaining latent variables were assessed against the threshold value of 0.708 set by Hair et al. (2020). Given that the AVE and CR coefficients exceeded the threshold, no indicators were excluded from the measurement model. Consequently, it can be asserted that the internal consistency reliability of the constructs was upheld, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.90 to 0.921 and CR coefficients from 0.906 to 0.928 (Table 2).

**Table 2 | Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, CR and AVE coefficients**

| Measures | Measurement items | Factor loadings (λ) | Cronbach's alfa | CR | AVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Propensity to be influenced by the infodemic (PII)** | 1. Infodemic news about brands caused me to give up these products. | 0.723 | 0.920 | 0.928 | 0.731 |
| | 2. Infodemic news about brands made me choose another brand. | 0.889 | | | |
| | 3. Infodemic news about brands reduced my trust in these brands. | 0.838 | | | |
| | 4. Infodemic news about brands caused me to inform my friends and family about this issue. | 0.911 | | | |
| | 5. Infodemic news about brands caused me to prevent people around me from using these brands. | 0.903 | | | |
| **Brand trust (BT)** | 1. The brand that I came across in infodemic news on social media generally meets my expectations. | 0.645 | 0.901 | 0.906 | 0.594 |
| | 2. Even though I came across infodemic news on social media, I trusted the relevant brand. | 0.759 | | | |
| | 3. Even though I have come across infodemic news on social media, the relevant brand does not disappoint its consumers. | 0.797 | | | |
| | 4. The brand whose infodemic news I came across on social media shows great care/effort to please its consumers. | 0.713 | | | |
| | 5. The brand I came across in infodemic news on social media is honest in its promises (declarations). | 0.851 | | | |
| | 6. The brand I came across in infodemic news on social media is sincere in its promises (declarations). | 0.823 | | | |
| | 7. It is easy for me to contact the brand whose infodemic news I encounter on social media. | 0.770 | | | |
| | 8. The brand I encounter in infodemic news on social media solves any problems that may arise with the product. | 0.791 | | | |
| **Store visit intention (SVI)** | 1. The brand whose infodemic news I came across: I've been to physical (mall/street) stores before. | 0.673 | 0.900 | 0.923 | 0.671 |
| | 2. The brand whose infodemic news I came across: I've browsed online (web/mobile) stores before. | 0.675 | | | |
| | 3. The brand whose infodemic news I came across: I may consider going to physical (mall/street) stores in the coming periods. | 0.890 | | | |
| | 4. The brand whose infodemic news I came across: I may consider visiting online (web/mobile) stores in the future. | 0.885 | | | |
| | 5. The brand whose infodemic news I came across: I would consider going to | 0.892 | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | their physical stores (inside a shopping mall/on a street) if I had the opportunity. | | | | |
| | 6. The brand whose infodemic news I came across: I would consider visiting their online store (web/mobile) if I had the chance. | 0.863 | | | |
| **Positive word-of-mouth marketing (PWOM)** | 1. Even though I came across infodemic news, I can recommend the relevant brand. | 0.894 | | | |
| | 2. Even though I came across infodemic news, I can tell you about the good aspects of the relevant brand. | 0.905 | | | |
| | 3. Even though I came across infodemic news, I can say positive things about the relevant brand. | 0.907 | 0.921 | 0.921 | 0.808 |
| | 4. Even though I have come across infodemic news, I can sometimes recommend people to buy the products of the relevant brand. | 0.889 | | | |

Source: Own elaboration

Discriminant validity was assessed using two criteria: the one proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio criterion proposed by Henseler et al. (2015). The results based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion are presented in Table 3, while the HTMT coefficients are displayed in Table 4.

**Table 3 | Discriminant validity results (Fornell-Larcker criterion)**

| | | Fornell-Larcker criterion | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **BT** | **PII** | **PWOM** | **SVI** |
| **BT** | **0.771** | | | |
| **PII** | 0.123 | **0.855** | | |
| **PWOM** | 0.666 | - 0.060 | **0.899** | |
| **SVI** | 0.629 | 0.037 | 0.721 | **0.819** |

Source: Own elaboration

**Table 4 | Discriminant validity results (HTMT criterion)**

| | | HTMT criterion | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **BT** | **PII** | **PWOM** | **SVI** |
| **BT** | | | | |
| **PII** | 0.133 | | | |
| **PWOM** | 0.726 | 0.095 | | |
| **SVI** | 0.690 | 0.064 | 0.773 | |

Source: Own elaboration

According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), the values highlighted in bold in Table 3 are higher than the correlation coefficients with other constructs, indicating that discriminant validity is achieved (Hair et al., 2017; Franke & Sarstedt, 2019).

Regarding the criterion of Henseler et al. (2015), the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio is defined as the ratio of the mean correlations of the statements of all variables in the study

(heterotrait-heteromethod correlations) to the geometric means of the correlations of the statements of the same variable (monotrait-heteromethod correlations). The authors suggested that the HTMT value should be below 0.90 for theoretically close concepts and below 0.85 for distant concepts (Hair et al., 2020). The HTMT coefficients obtained are presented in Table 4 and it is observed that these coefficients are below the threshold value (< 0.85).

# 3  Results and Discussion

The study incorporates a structural model with a single mediating variable. The mediation model analysis involved measuring both the indirect and direct effects of infodemic news on positive word-of-mouth marketing, as well as its direct effect on store visit intention. On the direct level, the study measured the direct impact of infodemic news on positive word-of-mouth marketing and its influence on store visit intention, while on the indirect level, the effect obtained through the mediating variable was assessed.

In the evaluation of the structural model, various analyses were conducted, including assessments for multicollinearity (VIF, variance inflation factor), $R^2$ (explained variance) values, $f^2$ effect sizes, $Q^2$ (predictive relevance) values and path coefficients of the structural model (Hair et al., 2017). The PLS algorithm was employed for the first research model to calculate linearity, path coefficients, $R^2$ and effect size ($f^2$), while PLS-Predict analysis was utilised to compute predictive power ($Q^2$). To assess the significance of PLS path coefficients, t-values were calculated through resampling (bootstrapping) by taking 10,000 subsamples from the sample. The results for VIF, $R^2$, $f^2$ and $Q^2$ values are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5 | Research model coefficients**

| Paths | VIF | $R^2$ | $f^2$ | $Q^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *PII → BT* | 1.004 | 0.471 | 0.050 | 0.462 |
| *PII → SVI* | 1.054 | 0.560 | 0.003 | 0.520 |
| *PWOM → BT* | 1.004 | | 0.861 | |
| *PWOM → SVI* | 1.867 | | 0.372 | |
| *BT → SVI* | 1.889 | | 0.079 | |

Source: Own elaboration

**Table 6 | Structural model direct effect coefficients**

| Paths | Original sample (*O*) | St. dev. | T-statistics | P-values | Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *PII → SVI* | 0.039 | 0.038 | 1.031 | 0.303 | Not supported |
| *PII → BT* | 0.164 | 0.053 | 3.078 | 0.002 | Accepted |
| *PWOM → BT* | 0.676 | 0.031 | 22.143 | 0.000 | Accepted |
| *PWOM → SVI* | 0.553 | 0.045 | 12.225 | 0.000 | Accepted |
| *BT → SVI* | 0.256 | 0.044 | 5.782 | 0.000 | Accepted |

Source: Own elaboration

According to the direct effect analysis results, as presented in Table 6 and illustrated in Figure 3, it is observed that being influenced by the infodemic does not have a statistically significant effect on store visit intention ($\beta$ = 0.039; $p$ = 0.303). However, being influenced by the infodemic does positively affect brand trust ($\beta$ = 0.164; $p$ = 0.02). In this context, it can be concluded that hypothesis H1 is not supported and hypothesis H2 is accepted.

Positive word-of-mouth marketing shows a positive effect on both store visit intention ($\beta$ = 0.553; $p$ = 0.00) and brand trust ($\beta$ = 0.676; $p$ = 0.00). Therefore, hypotheses H3 and H4 are accepted. Moreover, brand trust has a significant and positive impact on store visit intention ($\beta$ = 0.256; $p$ = 0.000). Consequently, hypothesis H5 is accepted.

**Figure 3 | Structural equation model**
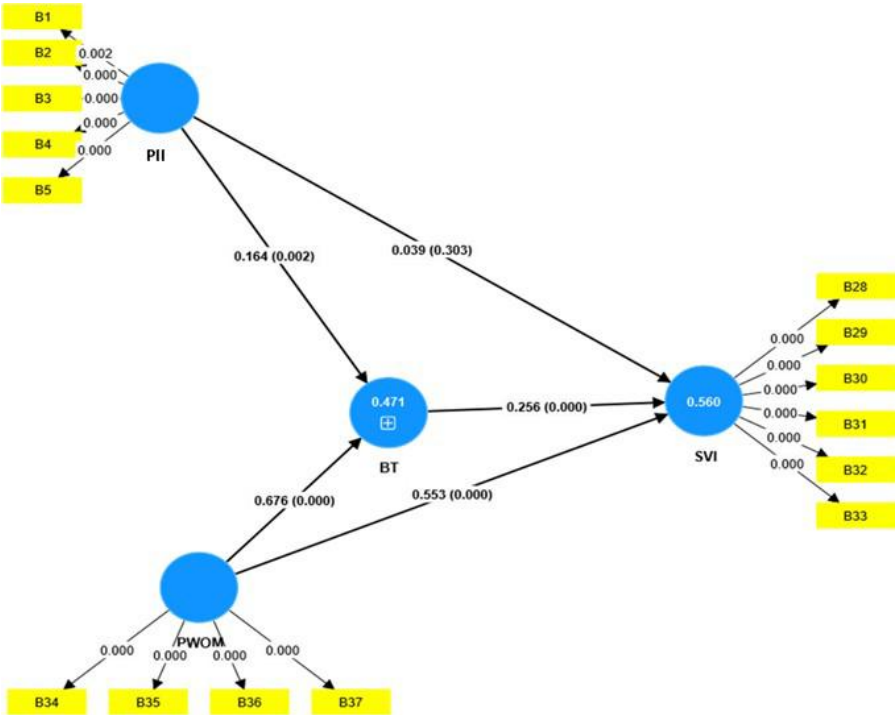


Source: Own elaboration

**Table 7 | Structural model mediation effect coefficients**

| Paths | Original sample (O) | St. dev. | T-statistics | P-values | Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *PII → BT → SVI* | 0.042 | 0.015 | 2.747 | 0.006 | Accepted |
| *PWOM → BT → SVI* | 0.173 | 0.031 | 5.519 | 0.000 | Accepted |

Source: Own elaboration

The mediation analysis results presented in Table 7 indicate that brand trust plays a mediating role ($\beta$ = 0.042; $p$ = 0.006) in the relationship between being affected by the infodemic and store visit intention. Additionally, brand trust acts as a mediator in the

relationship between positive word-of-mouth marketing and store visit intention ($\beta$ = 0.173; $p$ = 0.00). These findings support hypotheses H6 and H7.

Within the framework of the structural equation model established in the study, it was observed that being influenced by infodemic news has a direct and positively significant impact on brand trust. Consumers affected by infodemic news about brands tend to enhance their trust in the brand by seeking more detailed and objective information to clarify the ambiguous environment created by such news.

Although the study did not find a significant direct effect of infodemic news on store visit intention, this changes when brand trust mediates this relationship. In the presence of trust, the impact of an infodemic decreases, leading to a positive influence on store visit intention. This highlights the crucial role of trust as a mitigating factor in the impact of the infodemic on consumers' decisions to visit stores.

Our findings reveal that positive word-of-mouth marketing has a positive impact on store visit intention. In simpler terms, consumers who share positive experiences about a particular brand tend to have a higher intention to visit stores compared to other consumers. Moreover, the mediation of brand trust in this relationship is significant. This implies that consumers exhibiting positive word-of-mouth marketing behaviour have elevated levels of brand trust, contributing to an increased store visit intention. Additionally, there is a reciprocal relationship where consumers' positive word-of-mouth marketing behaviour increases with higher levels of brand trust.

These findings align with those of Farrell et al. (2019), emphasising that the perceived value of information plays a pivotal role in consumers' decisions to share it. To enhance credibility, brands are encouraged to incorporate field experts into their corporate communication. For instance, featuring experts such as food engineers or medical doctors in advertisements for a food brand or dermatologists for a cosmetics brand can effectively communicate accurate information about production techniques, product content and presentation. This strategy helps build trust in the brand.

Furthermore, brands can foster collaboration by selecting influencers whose content is trusted by their followers. Trusted influencers are anticipated to contribute to the perception of the brand as trustworthy, as suggested by Sharif et al. (2022). Additionally, offering selected customers a tour of production or sales units can provide them with a firsthand experience of the company, further boosting trust in the brand. Ultimately, these trust-building strategies are expected to positively influence consumer decision-making processes.

## 4  Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This study investigated the correlation between the prevalent phenomenon of infodemics and consumers' positive word-of-mouth marketing behaviour and store visit intentions. It also delved into the mediating role of brand trust in these associations.

Trusted brands tend to be more resilient against the impact of fake news, experiencing less decline in sales and maintaining their market position. Conversely, brands that invest less

effort in providing consumers with positive experiences and building trust have been observed to fade away from the industry (Halazoich & Nel, 2017; Sharif et al., 2022).

The study recognises the significance of information circulating in the digital realm, a force that now significantly shapes individuals' attitudes and behaviour. It underscores the importance for marketing managers of considering the vast amount of digitally disseminated information, whether accurate or unverified, as it has the potential to influence consumers' perceptions and actions regarding products or brands. Consequently, companies might face severe consequences if they are not adequately prepared. The study aimed to unveil these intricate relationships, shed light on potential consequences and recommend measures to equip companies and their stakeholders for the challenges posed by the dynamic digital landscape.

The data analyses revealed that the direct impact of infodemic news on store visit intentions is not statistically significant. However, a positive effect is observed when brand trust acts as a mediator. Specifically, the results indicate that the confusion created by exposure to infodemic news is mitigated by brand trust, serving as a coping mechanism for consumers in the face of uncertainty or negative impacts ($\beta$ = 0.042; $p$ = 0.006). This implies that brand trust plays a pivotal role in reversing the impact of infodemic news, ultimately enhancing consumers' store visit intentions by fostering trust in the brand. This aligns with the finding of Sharif et al. (2022) that brand trust can effectively mitigate the negative consequences of fake news for businesses.

The study further demonstrated that both infodemic news and positive word-of-mouth marketing significantly influence consumers' shopping behaviour. From a strategic standpoint, this presents marketers with various opportunities. Brands can strategically focus on initiatives aimed at bolstering brand trust, which can counterbalance the effects of infodemic news on store visit intentions. Moreover, positive consumer endorsements regarding products or brands can exert a notable impact on brand-related behaviour.

Considering these findings, the study recommends that brands adopt trust-building strategies to navigate the challenges posed by infodemic news and positively shape consumers' purchasing behaviour. For instance, emphasising social responsibility projects, enhancing transparency by providing detailed product information and collaborating with trustworthy influencers on social media are suggested approaches to increase brand credibility.

The findings of this study yield several strategic implications and management recommendations for businesses. Considering the influence of infodemic news on consumers' shopping behaviour, it is important for businesses to focus on the following strategies to cope with and take advantage of these changing dynamics:

Brand trust has emerged as a critical element, acting as a mitigating factor against the adverse effects of infodemic news. Businesses should focus on sustainability projects, ethical practices and transparency to increase brand trust. Providing customers with more information about products can increase the credibility of brands and positively influence consumers' word-of-mouth marketing and store visit intentions.

The impact of infodemic news on consumer behaviour necessitates a thorough reassessment of businesses' crisis communication strategies. To adeptly manage negative repercussions, businesses should heighten their social media engagement and foster

consumer trust through the dissemination of accurate information. Simultaneously, the adoption of a transparent and honest communication strategy during crises is imperative for preserving brand trust.

Our findings indicate that consumers' emotional attachment mechanisms, particularly in word-of-mouth marketing, wield substantial influence. Businesses may concentrate on cultivating a profound emotional connection with consumers by using brand ambassadors. Human-to-human connections can contribute significantly to consumers forming positive brand associations and fostering brand loyalty.

Businesses should focus on building brand trust through initiatives such as sustainability projects, ethical practices and transparency. Engaging trustworthy influencers and providing detailed product information can also enhance brand credibility and mitigate the negative effects of infodemic news.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has two main limitations. Firstly, the study sample was selected from only one country, so it is difficult to generalise the findings. The results of studies conducted in different countries may differ from the results obtained in this study due to socio-cultural differences. Secondly, the survey within this study primarily captured a cross-sectional view of constructs. Thus, a longitudinal study is necessary to investigate time-variant impacts.

Future research could benefit from conducting more nuanced analyses to discern variations among distinct demographic groups. Businesses may then formulate personalised marketing strategies that consider consumers' demographic characteristics, fostering more profound and meaningful connections while bolstering brand loyalty. Furthermore, upcoming studies might explore the mediating impacts of brand interactions, including elements such as brand image, brand loyalty, brand awareness and brand love, on the influence of infodemic news on consumers' purchase intentions.

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# Annex

**Annex 1 | Examples of infodemic news**

**1. Claim that stale chickens in Turkey are washed with bleach**



**2. Companies that allegedly buy milk from a company where employees take milk baths**

**3. Claim that the new coronavirus was tried to spread with a fizzy drink**