Repositório ISCTE-IUL

The Impact of Digital Influencers' Characteristics on Purchase Intention of Fashion Products

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Abstract

Research on digital influencers' role in marketing strategies under ongoing development. This study explores the role of digital influencer marketing on consumer purchase intention in fashion products. The goal is to investigate the direct and indirect relationships of trustworthiness, expertise, content quality, similarity, para-social interaction, and attitude towards sponsored posts on purchase intention. A mixed-method approach was conducted combining interviews with five digital influencers and a consumer-based survey with a sample of 206 fashion consumers, among them 96.1% were women and 51.5% were between 18 and 31 years old. Results indicate that blog content quality and para-social interaction positively influence purchase intention in fashion brands. Additionally, blog content quality plays a mediating role between trustworthiness and purchase intention. Moreover, consumers' attitude towards sponsored posts influences directly and positively purchase intention and mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and purchase intention. Consumers' attitude towards sponsored posts was also found to mediate the relationship between expertise and purchase intention. This study highlights the digital influencers' marketing characteristics, which affect the fashion consumer purchase intention, enriching the research in this area and providing recommendations for further investigation. The results also highlight the importance of aligning communication strategies of fashion brands with influencers' lifestyle.

Keywords: Digital influencers; social media; influencer marketing; purchase intention; fashion industry.

1. Introduction

As technology is continuously evolving, consumers have an increasing access to online content, and therefore, they are more demanding and informed (Labrecque, et al. 2013). The growth of Web 2.0, which refers to a platform where users can collaboratively create and modify content and applications, has provided consumers with opportunities to produce their own content. Social media enables consumers to share globally their self-created and cocreated content with others, while bringing them a sensation of empowerment at the same time. The strength and the amount of social connections in an individual's network can increase their capability to influence others (Labrecque *et al*. 2013).

Since consumers are likely to trust the individuals who develop closer proximity with them, brands can use it as an advantage to create new ways of communication where the digital influencer would transmit a message while creating a closer relationship with customers. According to the two-step-flow theory, the opinion leaders clarify the obtained media information and then diffuse it to others, enhancing its influence (Church, Thambusamy and Nemati, 2020). Thus, mass media messages may not have a direct impact on the audience. Digital influencers can be considered like offline opinion leaders, as they can mediate dissemination of messages and influence digital communities.

Considering that in recent years brands have been increasingly interested in digital influencers, it is crucial to expand current knowledge about influencer marketing. Therefore, drawing on the opinion leadership theory, this study explores the role of digital influencers' marketing characteristics on consumer purchase intention in fashion products. More specifically, this study aims to examine the direct and indirect relationships between the characteristics of the marketing conducted by digital influencers, namely trustworthiness, expertise, content quality, similarity, parasocial interaction, as well as attitude towards sponsored posts on purchase intention. The research is focused on the Portuguese fashion industry, which strongly relies on digital influencers to promote and disseminate brand and product information among consumers. The active use of social

media leads brands to take advantage of several platforms in order to promote their products. One of the social media strategies adopted by brands is hiring digital influencers and using their role of online opinion leaders where they disseminate messages and influence digital communities.

By communicating brands' messages and promoting products among brands' followers, digital influencers are expected to generate positive outcomes. However, research on digital influencers is still scarce. Although there are some studies that address the theme of digital influencers, there are several topics that need to be further explored. Hence, it is fundamental to study the role of digital influencers on purchase intention, by identifying key characteristics which go beyond the number of followers as well as by exploring the relationships between digital influencers' characteristics and purchase intention. Moreover, it is highly relevant to study the effects of sponsored posts due to their increasing popularity regarding digital influencers (Hwang and Jeong 2016).

The research question is: how can digital influencers impact consumers' purchase intention in fashion? Bearing in mind that the aim of this study is to assess the role of digital influencers on consumers' purchase intention in fashion industry, the following objectives were defined: (i) verify which characteristics associated with digital influencers have a positive impact on purchase intention of a recommended fashion product; (ii) verify if the attitude towards sponsored posts has a positive impact on purchase intention of a recommended fashion product; (iii) explore the direct and indirect relationships between the variables associated with digital influencers (trustworthiness, expertise, content quality, similarity, para-social interaction, and attitude towards sponsored posts) and the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Influencers and opinion leadership

Previous research indicated that social media advertising, such as blogs, is more effective than traditional digital media advertising, for instance online magazines (Colliander and Dahlén 2011). The growing use of social media has enlarged the effects of consumers' recommendations and

experiences (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). In consequence, it has given consumers a capacity to create their own content and gain visibility, which in turn led to the emergence of the digital influencer (Khamis *et al*., 2017). Digital influencers can be described as content producers who have a great number of followers (De Veirman *et al*. 2017) and defined as "a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg 2011, p.90).

Digital influencers are also referred to as micro-celebrities (Khamis *et al*. 2017) and instafamous (Jin *et al*. 2019). Being instafamous is especially relevant as by posting content on Instagram, digital influencers generate eWOM (De Veirman *et al*. 2017; Kong, Witmaier & Ko, 2021; Hur et al., 2021) and spread fashion trends due to intrinsically visual nature of this application (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-sánchez 2018). In fact, as stated by De Veirman *et al*. (2017), products and brands can be visually presented in photos and identified in captions. Additionally, digital influencers can be perceived as trusted experts in one or several areas. Therefore, brands have been developing partnerships with digital influencers in order to promote their products and create a positive image among influencers' high number of followers (De Veirman *et al*. 2017).

Digital influencers, as opinion leaders, can be very relevant sources of advice for other consumers (Casaló *et al*. 2018), who fall in the concept of opinion leadership as they influence and share information with the consumer (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). Consumers' need for uniqueness appears to be positively related to fashion opinion leadership (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006; Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Opinion leaders can choose original and new products, which are more likely to be appealing for consumers. Consequently, the influence of fashion opinion leaders on consumers has changed the idea of what the consumers would originally choose (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006) Moreover, this influence has also led consumers to consider opinion leaders as sources of information and advice about fashion products (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Based on the opinion leadership theory, several dimensions emerge as antecedents for influencing and sharing information.

2.2. Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

Considering the assessment of the role of digital influencers on purchase intention in fashion, key variables were identified. Fashion consumer purchase intention, the selected dependent variable, is a common performance measure both for marketing and management literature (Spears and Singh, 2004). For this study, we adapted the definition of purchase intention proposed by Spears and Singh (2004) referring to the consumer's personal intention to purchase a fashion brand product. Past research described several characteristics associated with digital influencers, for instance, their credibility (Schouten *et al*., 2020), the PSI the audience develops with digital influencers (Hsu, 2020), and the similarity to digital influencers perceived by the audience (Magno, 2017), which may have a positive impact on purchase intention. Moreover, sponsorship is very relevant for marketing communication effectiveness (Lu *et al*., 2014). Digital influencers regularly share their recommendations about products and brands through social media posts and many of them are sponsored by brands (Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Wang, et al., 2021). Consequently, consumers' attitude towards sponsored posts may have a great role on purchase intention.

Therefore, for this study, according to the research, the most relevant variables associated with digital influencers are trustworthiness, expertise, content quality, similarity, PSI, and attitude towards sponsored posts. Considering the aim of this study and the literature review, to demonstrate all the variables and the relationships between them, the following conceptual model was created.

[Figure 1 near here]

2.2.1. Expertise and purchase intention

Expertise is a very relevant variable since it is the result of the communicator's knowledge and professional experience (Schouten, et al., 2020) and it has been considered in several celebrities and digital influencers studies (Esteban-Santos *et al*., 2018; Schouten *et al*., 2020). Furthermore, Lim et al. (2017) found influencer expertise to be an important variable influencing purchase intention. As such, consumers are more likely to take into consideration the content conveyed by influencers perceived as experts in their field (Yadav et al., 2103). As stated by Chetioui et al.

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(2020) "expert is generally perceived as highly qualified and therefore more likely to make assessments that are accurate and valid" (p. 365). In addition, Ki and Kim (2019) confirmed that expertise can have a positive impact on consumers' attitudes, which through their desire to imitate digital influencers may result in a great purchase intention. Therefore, we hypothesise:

H1: Expertise positively influences the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.

2.2.2. Content quality and purchase intention

A social media marketing message is considered to be credible when its content is accurate, authentic, and believable (Appelman and Sundar, 2016). Erkan and Evans (2016) realised that eWOM information quality can be positively related to the information usefulness, which in turn can lead to the adoption of the eWOM information as well as to purchase intention. Esteban-Santos *et al.* (2018) also considered that consumers' assessment of digital influencers' credibility depends on the source credibility and message credibility dimensions. In this context, Magno (2017) emphasised the importance of the content quality, in this case, the content quality of blogs. His findings revealed that when there is perception of high quality, it is likely to lead to a strong blog engagement and to increase purchase intention of the recommended products. Furthermore, Casaló et al. (2018) found the quality, originality, and uniqueness of the posts to be key factors in developing opinion leadership. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) also identified the attractiveness, the quality, and the composition of the images as essential elements for the user's decision to follow a digital influencer. Considering these studies, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H2a: Content quality positively influences the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.

Content quality also plays a mediating role in the consumer behavioural intentions. For example, previous research recognised that the value of perceived quality influences the relationship between social influence and the user willingness to use ebooks (Li et al., 2018). This influence was seen by Gao et al. (2021) as a mediating factor in the relationship between social media character-

istics and the people's fitness behaviour intentions. The role of content quality on followers' behaviour depends not only on the segment perceptions, as argued by Munsch (2021) but also on digital service innovation (Kim et al., 2021). More specifically, Chetioui et al. (2020) recognised that perceived credibility and trust only influence purchase intention indirectly. Also, Jiménez-castillo and Sánchez-fernández (2019) verified that consumers are more likely to appreciate or recommend a brand that was recommended by influencers that they find reliable. Lim et al. (2017) found no direct relationship between trustworthiness and purchase intention, revealing that instead of credibility, "the main reason was identified as social media influencers' inadequate expertise knowledge about the endorsed product" (p. 29). As such, we raise also the following the mediation hypothesis:

H2b: Content quality mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.

2.2.3. Similarity and purchase intention

Lee and Watkins (2016) suggested that when people identify similarities between their beliefs and the ones media personalities convey, they are more likely to continue a regular interaction. As it was mentioned before, similarity, or homophily, refers to the similarities between individuals, concerning beliefs, values, and other aspects (Eyal and Rubin, 2003). Considering the perception of similarities between digital influencers and followers, Lee and Watkins (2016) and Chia Lin Hsu (2020) confirmed that similarity can greatly affect PSI, but they also mentioned that PSI between followers and digital influencers can be developed though shared characteristics.

Furthermore, online fashion communities can also be significant for eWOM, as consumers share their values and feelings and interact with each other independently of brand communications (Parrott, Danbury, and Kanthavanich, 2015). These authors examined brand advocacy behaviour within online communities of luxury fashion brands. The selected communities were not

enabled by any commercial organisation. Participants of that study showed high levels of engagement and involvement as well as fondness for the brand. In their opinion, luxury fashion accessories could improve their image, associating these products with their self-concept.

Magno's (2017) study also showed that the similarity between the blogger and the reader can positively influence engagement of blog readers, as well as the purchase intention of the recommended products. Moreover, the study accomplished by Casaló *et al*. (2018) indicated that the greater the congruence between digital influencers' content and the consumers' values, the greater the possibility to follow digital influencers' suggestions. Hence, we hypothesise:

H3: *Similarity positively influences the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.*

2.2.4. Para-social interaction and purchase intention

Luxury fashion brands can also benefit from social media, by communicating effectively and creating long term relationships with consumers (Kim and Ko, 2012). Fashion digital influencers' recommendations can be considered credible and authentic. Credibility may depend on digital influencers' trustworthiness and expertise, on the level of para-social interaction (PSI) developed with the digital influencer, but also on the message credibility. The theory of PSI defines it as an illusory, one-sided face-to-face relationship, for instance, between spectators and performers on radio and television. Esteban-Santos et al. (2018) showed that digital influencers' impact on consumer behaviour can depend on consumers' assessment of digital influencers' credibility. As a consequence, it might be imperative that influencers share credible information in order to increase their purchase intention regarding fashion products. Engagement corresponds to the monthly sum of likes and comments on an influencers' Instagram account.

By following digital influencers' channels, consumers can be exposed to their personal life details, resulting in an apparent intimacy, developing the PSI by potentially considering the digital influencers as their friends (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011). Past research showed that PSI may generate positive outcomes for brands. For instance, Labrecque (2014) confirmed that PSI can lead

to great loyalty intentions and willingness to share information with the brand. Furthermore, PSI can positively influence brand perceptions (Lee and Watkins, 2016), WOM intention (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), and purchase intention (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Thus:

H4*: Para-social interaction positively influences the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.*

2.2.5. Attitude towards sponsored posts and purchase intention

Sponsored blogging is a relevant category of influencer marketing, as bloggers can help create WOM about a brand through their sponsored posts (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks, 2019). Hughes *et al*. (2019) highlighted that the hedonic value of a sponsored post's content, which refers to the pleasure, emotions, and entertainment acknowledged by a consumer through reading the post, may lead to higher engagement.

Many digital influencers publish sponsored posts about products and brands (Stubb and Colliander, 2019), but they need to disclose it, which may lead to negative perceptions of source credibility (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). However, when digital influencers add a note stating that the opinions expressed are their own, the negative impact of sponsorship disclosure on the source credibility perceptions and the attitude towards sponsored messages diminish (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Furthermore, Hwang and Zhang (2018) realised that PSI can lessen the negative impact of followers' persuasion awareness. Consequently, it is crucial to study consumers' attitude towards sponsored posts to understand their impact on purchase intention. Consumers' attitude towards sponsored posts is described as a psychological approach in relation to the credibility of a sponsored post (Lu *et al*., 2014). According to these authors, if individuals trust a sponsored post content of a specific fashion product, this means that the attitude is positive, which can positively influence their purchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H5a*: Attitude towards sponsored posts positively influences the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.*

The following mediation hypotheses are also proposed:

H5b: *Attitude towards sponsored posts mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.*
H5c: *Attitude towards sponsored posts mediates the relationship between expertise and the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study is based on an explorative research design since it aims to determine the direct and indirect relationships between variables. As such, a mixed method approach was conducted combining an online survey online with in-depth interviews, as described below.

3.2. Qualitative study

In-depth face-to-face interviews were selected to collect the data to assess the interviewees' opinions and experiences. In this case, Portuguese digital influencers in the fashion and fashion-related areas. The aim of this study is to provide the influencers' perspective about the influence of the study variables on the purchase intention and to complement the quantitative study described below. The individual interviews were composed of previously defined open questions; however, the interviewees were free to talk about their opinions. The interviewees were selected using Brinfer (2020) proposal to identify the digital influencers in fashion and fashion-related areas that generated higher engagement on Instagram, such as beauty and lifestyle. A total of 38 digital influencers were initially contacted by email and Instagram Direct and invited to participate in this study. A total of 5 interviews were accomplished between July and September 2020. On average, each interview took 74 minutes. The digital influencers who participated in this study were Ana Gomes, Anita da Costa, Catarina Cabrera, Margarida Marques de Almeida, and Maria Guedes.

3.3. Quantitative study

The online survey was created on Google Forms platform and shared through social media platforms, namely WhatsApp, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram Direct. People were invited to answer an anonymous questionnaire and they were informed about its aim. The data was collected in Portugal and for this reason, the questionnaire was translated into Portuguese. Answers were received between May and July 2020.

3.3.1. Sample

The target population refers to Portuguese consumers who follow or search for at least one digital influencer, particularly in a fashion area. Thus, it was also vital for the investigation that the interviewed consumers actively used social media. As the total of the population was not possible to be analysed, a non-probabilistic sampling method was used, as the sample was primarily selected by the researcher based on the researcher's accessibility. The snowball sampling was also used, because some participants were asked to share the questionnaire with their friends and acquaintances that could also belong to the target population.

Most respondents were female (96.1%) out of 206 answers. Regarding age, most respondents belonged to the 18-24 age group (51.5%); followed by the 25-31 group (27.2%); 9.7% of the respondents were under the age of 18; 3.4% of them belonged to the 32-39 age group; 3.4% corresponded to the 40-45 and 3.4% to the 46-52 age groups. 1.5% of the respondents were more than 52 years old.

3.3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire items were adapted from previous research. More specifically, it was fundamental to adapt the items to blogs as well as to the fashion industry. Furthermore, they were translated into Portuguese. The following table shows the constructs, the adapted items as well as their sources. All the items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1-Strongly disagree; 5-Strongly agree). The questionnaire also included some screening questions concerning the frequency of use of digital influencers' blogs and following of fashion digital influencers blogs.

[Table 1 near here]

5. Results

5.1. Qualitative Study

The majority of the interviewees started their activities by creating a blog. The description of the starting year and main digital medium are presented in table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

Regarding sponsored posts, all the interviewed digital influencers said that in order to accept a paid partnership with a brand, first they need to identify themselves with it. Moreover, Anita da Costa and Margarida Marques de Almeida emphasised that the product or service must be fully or at least partially part of their lives, to see the point in promoting it. Catarina Cabrera added that she only considers accepting a partnership if it is a product that she really uses and if it is based on her principles and after that, it depends on the budget. Margarida Marques de Almeida also mentioned that if she had to promote a product which she does not identify herself with, it would distort her job and it would not be positive both for the influencer and for the brand. In relation to the promotion process, Maria Guedes stated that it occurs in a natural way and it involves posting content about her relationship with the product. Margarida Marques de Almeida added that brands contact her, so that she can evaluate her interest in the product or service. If all her requirements are met, a partnership is initiated.

Concerning what characterises a good digital influencer, according to all the interviewed participants, the number of followers is not what matters most. Anita da Costa mentioned that the number of followers is frequently related to fame and not necessarily to the quality of a job. Ana Gomes also said that a digital influencer can have many followers but does not necessarily interact with them or convey any message. Yet, interactivity is an advantageous tool that digital influencers possess in relation to other forms of advertising. Margarida Marques de Almeida supported this point of view by mentioning that the most important is to connect with the audience as well as to be consistent with what is communicated. According to Catarina Cabrera, the most important characteristic of digital influencers is to be genuine and show what distinguishes them from others. For Maria Guedes, a good influencer is someone with a peculiar taste and lifestyle. In this influencer' opinion, digital influencers with less followers are more effective in their jobs due to their niche positioning and authenticity.

Regarding the followers purchasing the product, most of the interviewees feel that they motivate their followers to search for more information about a product or brand and that in the end

they are convinced to buy it. Ana Gomes mentioned that she usually receives photos from her followers showing that they bought the product. Furthermore, Maria Guedes regularly has this kind of feedback from the brands, adding that the displayed products that are in her markets and the products that she uses daily have a higher demand. Margarida Marques de Almeida also shares this point of view, emphasising that when the communication is consistent and it is part of the influencer's lifestyle, it will create interest among the audience. Catarina Cabrera highlighted that she likes what she uses or does and if her followers identify themselves with the product or service, this way they can also buy and enjoy it. Anita da Costa also added that, in regard to the brands, she gives the product a story, making it part of her life and in relation to her followers, she offers daily inspiration on several topics.

5.2. Quantitative Study

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using SmartPLS3 software (Ringle, Wende, and Will 2015). A total of 345 responses were collected, but only 206 respondents declared to follow fashion digital influencers. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) by means of SmartPLS 3 (Ringle *et al*. 2015) was used to test the conceptual model.

Firstly, the reliability and the validity of the measurement model were examined. The reliability, convergent validity, internal consistency reliability, and discriminant validity of the constructs were analysed to evaluate the quality of the measurement model (Hair, et al., 2017). The results indicated that the standardised factor loadings of all items are higher than 0.7, $p < 0.001$ (with a minimum value of 0.735 and a maximum value of 0.91). The internal consistency reliability was also tested, since all the constructs' Cronbach alphas and composite reliability (CR) values are higher than the recommended value of 0.7 (Hair *et al*. 2017). The constructs also showed convergent validity: (i) the factor loadings of all the items on their corresponding constructs are positive and significant; (ii) the CR values are greater than 0.70; (iii) the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs are above 0.50 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), as shown in table 3. Additionally, two methods were considered in order to evaluate the discriminant validity: (i) the Fornell and

Larcker (1981) criterion was used, confirming that the square root of AVE is greater than its highest correlation with any construct, (ii) the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion was used (Hair *et al.*, 2017). All HTMT values are lower than the reference value of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2017), supporting the discriminant validity.

[Table 3 near here]

The collinearity was also tested (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The VIF values ranged from 1.00 to 2.13. As the values are lower than the reference critical value of 5 (Hair *et al.* 2017), no collinearity was found.

The structural model was evaluated by means of the sign, magnitude, and significance of the structural path coefficients; the magnitude of R^2 value for each endogenous variable as a measure of the model's predictive accuracy; and the Stone Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values as a measure of the model's predictive relevance (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The R^2 coefficient of the three endogenous variables of content quality, attitude towards sponsored posts, and purchase intention show values of 43.4%, 25.6%, and 48.2%, respectively. Consequently, these values are above the reference value of 10% (Falk and Miller 1992). The Q^2 values in regard to all endogenous variables are 0.274, 0.188, and 0.348, respectively. As these values are higher than zero, the predictive relevance of the model was confirmed. Bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples was accomplished in order to assess the significance of the parameter estimates (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

In regard to this research hypotheses, the results demonstrated that expertise does not significantly influence purchase intention (β= -0.082; p= 0.234). Hence, these results do not support H1. In contrast, content quality has a significantly positive relationship with purchase intention (β = 0.158; $p < 0.05$). Considering this result, H2a is validated. The relationship between similarity and purchase intention is not significant ($\beta = 0.031$; $p = 0.690$) and thus the results do not support H3. As shown in table 3, para-social interaction has a significantly positive effect on purchase intention (β= 0.370; $p< 0.001$). Therefore, this result supports H4. Moreover, attitude towards sponsored

posts has a significantly positive influence on purchase intention (β= 0.366; p< 0.001). Consequently, this result provides support for H5a.

[Table 4 near here]

A bootstrapping procedure was conducted to test the significance of the indirect effects through the mediators, as recommended by Hair *et al.* (2017) to assess mediation hypotheses. The results regarding the mediation effects are shown in table 5. The indirect effect of trustworthiness on purchase intention through the mediator of content quality is significant (β= 0.057; p< 0.05). Thus, this result supports the mediation hypothesis H2b. Additionally, the indirect effects of trustworthiness on purchase intention and of expertise on purchase intention through the mediator of attitude towards sponsored posts are significant (β= 0.111; $p < 0.01$) and (β= 0.100; $p < 0.01$), respectively. Accordingly, the mediation hypotheses H5b and H5c are supported.

[Table 5 near here]

6. Discussion

Regarding the results of the quantitative study, the characteristics associated with digital influencers were particularly emphasised as they may have a direct and a positive impact on the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product. Consequently, the study found a significant positive relationship between content quality and purchase intention as well as between PSI and purchase intention. Hence, the content quality posted by digital influencers in social media has a significant and positive relationship with purchase intention in fashion. If consumers believe that the content provided by a digital influencer is accurate, reliable, and updated, it can generate purchase intention of a recommended fashion product. This result aligns with the findings of Magno (2017) and Duong and Sung (2021), who showed that the blogger's content quality can positively impact the purchase intention of the products suggested by the blogger. They also reinforce the research carried out by Erkan and Evans (2016), who indicated that the quality of eWOM information in social media appears to be a key factor in influencing consumers' purchase intention. In addition, the

quantitative study results indicate that content quality mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and purchase intention, reinforcing the importance of providing authentic content. Accordingly, digital influencers' trustworthiness indirectly influences consumers' purchase intention in fashion.

Furthermore, para-social interaction (PSI) between digital influencers and their followers positively influences purchase intention of a recommended fashion product. More specifically, this result suggests that consumers' purchase intention of a recommended fashion product is likely to occur if followers regard digital influencers as their close friends and if they feel they are part of their group. The results of this study are consistent with findings of past research, for example, Hwang annd Zhang (2018) as well as Lee and Watkins (2016). According to Lee and Watkins' (2016) study, PSI between YouTube vloggers and their viewers can positively influence the purchase intention in luxury fashion. Accordingly, Sokolova and Kefi's (2020) study demonstrated that PSI between digital influencers and their followers can have a positive effect on purchase intention in beauty and fashion, suggesting that consumers who are attached or even addicted to a digital influencer may show a great purchase intention.

Contrarily to the study conducted by Chin Lung Hsu *et al*. (2013), who showed that trustworthiness can positively impact purchase intention, in this study this variable was not found to have a significant influence. The mediating effect shows that trustworthiness is not a sufficient condition since it needs to be combined with content quality to influence the purchase intention. In the same way, the direct relationship between expertise and purchase intention was not statistically supported and hence this study does not reinforce the study of Ki and Kim (2019). This result can indicate that despite fashion digital influencers being sometimes perceived as experts in this area, this characteristic is not sufficient to influence purchase intention of a recommended fashion product. Instead, it must be combined with a positive attitude of the consumer in relation to sponsored posts.

Unlike the findings of the research conducted by Magno (2017), who confirmed that similarity can have a significant and positive effect on purchase intention, in this study the direct relationship between similarity and purchase intention did not find statistical support. As such, consumers may identify themselves with a digital influencer's values and behaviours, however, this characteristic may not directly lead to purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.

In relation to the attitude towards sponsored posts, a significant positive relationship between this variable and purchase intention was verified. In other words, when consumers have a positive attitude towards a digital influencer's sponsored posts, believing that those posts are truthful and accurate, consumers are likely to develop a purchase intention regarding recommended fashion products. This result corroborates the findings of the study accomplished by Lu *et al*. (2014), who indicated that when consumers have a positive attitude towards sponsored recommendation posts, it can lead to purchase intention. Moreover, Hwang and Jeong (2016) realised that sponsorship disclosure can have a negative impact on the source credibility and message attitudes. Neverthe-less, when digital influencers add a note mentioning that the opinions expressed are their own, the negative impact can decrease, as consumers believe that the posts are honest. Therefore, the pre-vious studies also mention the importance of providing honest sponsored content. Additionally, the quantitative study results show that attitude towards sponsored posts mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and purchase intention as well as between expertise and purchase inten-tion. In other words, attitude towards sponsored posts contributes to the explanation of the effects of trustworthiness as well as the effects of expertise on the purchase intention of a recommended fashion product.

To complement the discussion of quantitative results, it is also important to highlight several topics that were mentioned in the interviews and that are relevant according to digital influencers. For instance, in the opinion of interviewed digital influencers, the number of followers does not imply that they do an effective job and thus the most important characteristics refer to the connec-tion between digital influencers and their audience, the consistency with what is communicated,

transparency, and creativity. This perspective aligns with previous research (e.g., Kato, 2021) and suggests that to be effective in their job, it is fundamental for the digital influencers to create a connection with followers based on consistency, transparency as well as creativity. Furthermore, all the interviewees mentioned that they interact with their followers through comments and messages. Only one interviewee stated that her interaction with followers is restricted, to protect her personal life, emphasising that her job is to inspire consumers and not make them feel that they are part of her life. Previous research highlights the importance of the alignment of the fashion brand and a specific lifestyle to improve consumption intention (Jeong & Ko, 2021).

7. Conclusions

7.1. Theoretical Contributions

Past research on digital influencers is scarce since the theme is recent. Although previous research emphasises the importance and interest in digital influencers, a broad investigation is necessary (Jiménez-castillo and Sánchez-fernández, 2019). This study addresses this research gap, by assessing the role of digital influencers on purchase intention in fashion industry. One of the main contributions refers to the digital influencers' characteristics, which were found to impact purchase intention significantly and positively.

Another relevant contribution is related to the mediating roles of content quality and attitude towards sponsored posts. Hence, this study broadens existing literature by evaluating the indirect relationships between trustworthiness and purchase intention through content quality and attitude towards sponsored posts. Also, between expertise and purchase intention through attitude towards sponsored posts. Furthermore, the interviews with digital influencers contributed to understanding their opinions regarding the most important characteristics that define quality of their job. In the interviews they also underlined the connection with their followers, transparency, consistency, and creativity. They also mentioned that they need to identify themselves with the brand or product in order to accept a partnership. All these findings contribute to shedding light on influencer marketing, enriching the investigation about the role of digital influencers on purchase intention.

7.2. Managerial implications

This study can inspire changes in social media marketing and eWOM strategies, when resorting to digital influencers. Accordingly, fashion brands can select the most suitable digital influencers based on the level of PSI established between the digital influencer and the target audience. This choice can also be based on the content quality provided by digital influencers. Thus, this study provides significant digital influencers characteristics that go beyond the number of followers. In fact, according to the interviewed digital influencers, the number of followers is not the most important and it does not result in true influence. In addition, when developing partnerships with digital influencers, fashion brands can benefit from the creative content generated by digital influencers whose lifestyle is aligned with the product positioning.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

Due to a lack of resources, the main limitation of this study was the use of a non-probability sample, namely the convenience sample, which implies that the results obtained cannot be statistically generalised to the population. Additionally, it is not possible to ensure that respondents fully understand the questions through an online questionnaire. Moreover, only the Portuguese respondents who follow or search for fashion digital influencers were considered, and they were mainly female. Hence, it is suggested that future research uses larger samples to represent the population more accurately.

Regarding future research, more studies on digital influencers are necessary. For instance, a further investigation of the relationships between characteristics of digital influencers and purchase intention is suggested. Considering the results of this study, future research may have to particularly assess the direct effects of trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity on purchase intention by exploring moderating effects, since previous research managed to establish these connections. Furthermore, there was no relationship found between similarity and purchase intention, suggesting that future research should examine factors that would influence purchase intention.

Finally, as this study focused on fashion industry, future research might investigate the variables that were used in this study to verify if they influence purchase intention in other industries.

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