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Micro-influencers on Instagram: credibility, trust and engagement regarding sustainability

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Master in Marketing

Supervisor:

PhD Luís Pedro Miguel, Marketing

ISCTE Business School

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Resumo

As redes sociais surgiram há alguns anos, mas a sua utilização pelas marcas como estratégia de marketing tem sido utilizada mais recentemente devido ao seu uso exponencial por parte dos consumidores. Assim, as marcas notaram o crescimento de utilizadores com um grande número de seguidores, capazes de influenciar o seu público e dar-lhes confiança no que partilham – os chamados *influencers* -, principalmente no Instagram. Notando potencial nestes influencers, as marcas utilizam-nos para publicitar os seus produtos ou serviços, com bastante sucesso.

Os influencers caracterizam-se em diversos tipos, dependendo do seu número de seguidores. Neste estudo, o foco vão ser os micro-influencers, que têm um número menor de seguidores – 10.000 a 100.000 seguidores -, mas que demonstram ser mais confiáveis e credíveis, além de gerarem taxas de *engagement* superiores. Enquanto isso, a sustentabilidade é cada vez mais abordada nas redes sociais.

O objetivo desta dissertação é estudar a forma como os utilizadores do Instagram confiam, dão credibilidade e se relacionam com os micro-influencers, relativamente à sustentabilidade, inspirado por estes, explorando as palavras-chave e contribuições dadas por outros autores.

Baseado em entrevistas feitas a uma amostra de 25 mulheres, com idades entre os 18 e os 30 anos, concluiu-se que a confiança e credibilidade que os consumidores dão a micro-influencers é igual à que dão a macro-influencers, dependendo apenas do conteúdo e do próprio influencer e, concluiu-se também, que os consumidores interagem mais com micro-influencers. O presente estudo contribui para o conhecimento existente sobre o tema da importância dos micro-influencers.

Palavras-chave: redes sociais, Instagram, influencers, micro-influencers, confiança, credibilidade, *engagement*, sustentabilidade.

Abstract

Social media networks emerged years ago, although brands only started to use them as part of their marketing strategy more recently due to their exponential growth of users. As the number of eyeballs skyrocketed, brands also noticed a growth in users with a large following, capable of influencing their public and generating greater confidence in their shared content — so-called *influencers*-, especially on Instagram. Understanding the commercial potential of these influencers, brands use them in order to advertise their products or services, which has been proven to be very successful.

Influencers are categorized in several ways, depending on their number of followers. The focus of this study will be on micro-influencers, who have a smaller number of followers – 10.000 to 100.000 followers - but demonstrate being more trustworthy and credible, which typically translates to higher engagement rates. It has also been observed that sustainability is increasingly in the social media spotlight.

This dissertation aims to study how Instagram users trust, give credibility to and engage with micro-influencers regarding a sustainable lifestyle inspired by them, exploring the keywords and contributions given by other authors.

Based on interviews with a sample of 25 women aged between 18 and 30 years old, it was possible to conclude that the trust and credibility that consumers give to micro-influencers is the same as that they give to macro-influencers, it depends solely on the content and the influencers themselves. Interestingly, it was also concluded that consumers interact more with micro-influencers. This study contributes to existing knowledge on the role of micro-influencers in the broader social media paradigm.

Keywords: social media, Instagram, influencers, micro-influencers, trust, credibility, *engagement*, sustainability.

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1. Introduction

The present study begins with a theoretical conceptualization of the emergence of influencers – particularly micro-influencers -, within the social media network Instagram. It explores the dynamics of perceived trust, credibility and engagement in the context of sustainability. Subsequently, the research questions, objective, significance and structure of the study will be outlined.

1.1. Theoretical conceptualization

Digital communication has undergone a significant shift as a result of the introduction of Web 2.0 technology, which gave rise to the phenomenon of social media networks. These networks have grown swiftly, altering how individuals and brands connect and disseminate information globally (Bayer et al., 2020).

Social media platforms have permeated society, affected many aspects of daily life and facilitated in-person connection, knowledge sharing, and community development. A connected, global digital society has been created through these channels. (Bayer et al., 2020).

Additionally, Instagram has expanded dramatically over the last 10 years, revolutionizing digital communication and brand-consumer interactions (Atiq et al., 2020). Brands have created inventive methods for interacting with consumers by utilising their aesthetic appeal (Chen, 2018).

As Instagram gained popularity, a new kind of online communicator called "digital influencers" arose. These individuals made use of the platform to broaden their audience and become more well-known (Biegun et al., 2019). They had a significant impact on how consumers perceived products and conducted themselves, from celebrities to micro-influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencers are categorised differently according to their follower count and micro-influencers commonly agreed to be ranging between 10,000 and 100,000 (Park et al., 2021). The distinguished quality for micro-influencers is authenticity and cost-effectiveness, which is why they have garnered attention despite having small fan bases than celebrities or macro-influencers (Atiq et al., 2020).

That's not all - brands are beginning to recognize the unique advantages of collaborating with micro-influencers. Despite having a smaller audience, followers frequently have stronger relationships with micro-influencers because they perceive them as knowledgeable authorities in specialized fields (Park et al., 2021). Brands are increasingly relying on micro-influencers to take advantage of their ability to forge strong connections with their audiences (Britt et al., 2020).

Awareness and understanding of sustainability have grown concurrently all around the world. Significant environmental change around the world has prompted societies to think about the consequences of their behaviour and seek out ways to bring about improvement (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018).

As a reflection of the need to strike a balance between the demands of the present and those of the future, sustainability has assumed a significant position in society's discourse in this context (Burton, 1987). Consumers are starting to make morally and responsibly motivated decisions as a result of growing concerns over issues like climate change, pollution, and sustainable living. As society becomes more environmentally conscious, digital influencers, particularly micro-influencers, have come to understand the significance of sustainability. Some influencers have embraced the cause of environmental problems by using their power (Cancino-Gómez et al., 2023).

1.2. Research questions

In light of these developments, this dissertation sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How are micro-influencers perceived in terms of trust and credibility compared with macro-influencers?

RQ2: Do followers engage more with micro-influencers than they do with macro-influencers?

RQ3: How do followers perceive micro-influencers regarding sustainability?

1.3. Objectives

The goal of this study was to comprehend how consumers interact with micro-influencers on the subject of sustainability and how they perceive their credibility and

trust in them. This study tried to clarify the complex relationships between micro-influencers, consumers' trust, engagement, and sustainability by thoroughly examining these aspects.

1.4. Significance

By uncovering what exactly influences consumer trust and engagement with micro-influencers, this study offers valuable insights to marketers aiming to harness the power of micro-influencer campaigns. Therefore, both academics and those who deploy paid media resources day to day can find useful insights in this study, impacting brands' bottom line directly. Not only that, in the context of sustainability, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on how digital platforms can be leveraged to promote eco-conscious consumer behaviour.

1.5. Structure

The following chapters of this dissertation will provide an extensive review of literature pertinent to social media, Instagram, influencer marketing, micro-influencers, as well as trust, credibility, engagement, and sustainability. This will lead into a detailed explanation of the methodology used for data collection and analysis, designed to address the research questions. Subsequently, the results of the study will be thoroughly discussed. In conclusion, the dissertation will present its main findings, outline the limitations encountered during the research, and offer recommendations for future studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media

Social media networks have existed since the beginning of the 1970s. However, the modern platforms only appeared in 1997. From then on, consumers exponentially started incorporating social media as one of their daily activities (Perret, 2021).

Social media are “computer-mediated communication channels that allow users to engage in social interaction” (Bayer et al., 2020, p. 2) and create online communities where people can communicate, share information, and gather (Li et al, 2021). The platforms are interactive and user-generated (Bayer et al., 2020) and incorporate several features into messaging that are intended to deliver pertinent content and facilitate the diffusion of messages (Pancer & Poole, 2016).

Social media now touches almost every dimension of the human experience. Brands now understand that the way consumers acknowledge them is influenced by their capacity to share fleeting ideas, brands’ characteristics, daily lives and actions on social networks (Bayer et al., 2020). These platforms update users in just a few seconds, leaning to users’ increasing desire for convenience and access (Pancer & Poole, 2016).

The relationship between users and brands is not one sided though. It’s not just that brands are sharing their launches through social media. It has become a proper exchange where social media users, their behaviours and trends as a *de facto* source of insights for the brand, fueling the actual creation processes behind products before they ever get to the public eye. Such processes include “decision-making processes, knowledge-based decision support systems, brand promotions, brand marketing, brand and product co-creation, product diffusion, etc” (Arora et al., 2019, p. 86).

Bayer et al. (2020) argues that four elements characterise these platforms and reflect how users used in practice - the profile, the network, the stream, and the message. The *profile* is the digital portrait of a user for the audience, where it is possible to show data about themselves in a customized place. Whereas the group of other users with whom an individual is connected and engages on the platforms is considered the *network*. The *stream* is the space in the platforms where user-generated content is displayed. Lastly, the

message is the foundation of any social media platform because it supports the other elements.

Brands are increasingly focusing on social media than traditional media to engage with consumers. Consumers do not look for purchasing advice in mass media – TV, radio, and newspapers – anymore. Moreover, the usage of these networks is mainly part of Generation Z's lives (Lou & Yuan, 2019) as the first generation considered to be *digital natives* (Wielki, 2020). Commonly referred to as Gen Z, this generation encompasses individuals born from mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Inan et al., 2023). Thus, brands have been prioritizing their presence on social media platforms, promoting products, and advertising in their accounts, which is commonly agreed to be the most efficient tool used nowadays (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

2.1.1. Instagram

Instagram is one of the social media platforms that is growing faster (Atiq et al., 2020). It was founded in 2010 by Meta (Richter et al., 2022) and defines itself as “a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures” (Chen, 2018, p. 1). It consists of graphical content, was developed for mobile devices, and it is free to download from the app stores (Chen, 2018).

The content provided on Instagram is interesting, simple to understand, and targeted toward young people (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Moreover, behavioural aspects such as personal fulfilment, feature utility, interacting with others, information and details about products, and amusement led to an increase in Instagram usage (Chen, 2018). Since 2014, the usage of Instagram has increased from 200 million to more than 1.3 billion active users (Statista., 2023a).

As Instagram continued to expand and attract a broader audience, a greater number of brands adopted this new channel to interact and connect with consumers (Chen, 2018). So, in order to present their products in an appealing manner, on Instagram brands have the chance to post content that is creative, delightful, and aesthetical, concentrating mostly on visuals (Casaló et al., 2020).

2.2. Influencer Marketing

Consumers are more and more informed, so brands started to use other ways to influence them in order to promote their products and/or services (Wielki, 2020). Influencer

marketing has appeared in the last 10 years, following the usage growth of social media platforms (Perret, 2021) and is “a form of marketing where marketers and brands invest in selected influencers to create and/or promote their branded content to both the influencers’ own followers and to the brands’ target consumers.” (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 1). Influencer marketing has been on the rise in the last few years because of Instagram (Atiq et al., 2020).

Biegun et al. (2019) defined an influencer as “an opinion leader, popular in a wider or higher group of regular recipients, who, with his or her credible actions, inspires trust, engages, and convinces the addresses of his or her communication to make specific choices”. They have established themselves as experts in particular fields, gathering information and communicating it to their followers, doing a spread effect based on electronic word-of-mouth, with the final goal of boosting online relationships between brands and followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Moreover, brands’ collaborations and their chosen platforms enable influencers to monetise their contents (Simón et al., 2022).

With this being said, brands must take advantage of influencers to create a connection with their potential and current consumers. Nevertheless, due to the enormous quantity of influencers – who can be tv celebrities, athletes, singers or your average neighbour – brands must be aware of which influencers can be related to the business, identifying the “right category of influencers at the right time” (Arora et al., 2019, p. 87).

Sokolova & Kefi (2020, p. 3) define a theory within the concept of social media influencers, the *theory of parasocial interaction*, which is “the relationship between a spectator and a performer with an illusion of intimacy as for the real interpersonal relationship”. This relationship is mainly appreciated by Generation Z due to their perception of personal attachment with the influencer, more than whether they view this person as credible or not.

As expected, since the last few years, Instagram has attracted the majority of social media influencers because it fosters a sense of immediacy and fosters communities (Arora et al., 2019).

Some studies indicate that social media influencers can be divided into *micro-influencers* and *macro-influencers*. However, there is still no agreement regarding the measures to distinguish both types of influencers (Kay et al., 2020). Campbell & Farrell

(2020) add a level to this classification – *celebrity-influencers* -, claiming that they possess more than 1 million followers, whereas *macro-influencers* have between 100 000 and 1 million followers, and *micro-influencers* have between 10 000 and 100 000, and *nano-influencers* collect less than 10 000 followers – which is not under the scope of the present study. These categories are present in the table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Types of social media influencers

Types of social media influencers	Number of followers
Celebrity-influencers	> 1 million
Macro-influencers	100 000 – 1 million
Micro-influencers	10 000 – 100 000
Nano-influencers	< 10 000

2.2.1. Micro-influencers

This study adopts the classification of Campbell and Farrell (2020) of what a micro-influencer is: an influencer who has between 10 000 and 100 000 followers (Park et al., 2021) and has the power to influence their community as well as has a strong commitment (Simón et al., 2022).

Followers relate, feel a link, connect, and trust in micro-influencers, who have less followers, more than on macro-influencers because they perceive the ladder as less authentic, and thus have some scepticism regarding their recommendations and honesty (Park et al., 2021). Moreover, on Instagram, micro-influencers tend to get more engagement because they have fewer followers and a higher interaction rate, which leads to a higher conversion rate (Atiq et al., 2022).

Brands spend less money with micro-influencers; so, if their public is the brands' target, it is a very effective marketing strategy (Elwood et al., 2021). Thus, as micro-influencers are regarded as more likable and trustworthy, which facilitates empathy from their followers and a connection, brands are opting for influencers with fewer followers (Britt et al., 2020).

Even when followers acknowledge that a content is sponsored by a brand, micro-influencers produce greater levels of consumer-brand engagement and are more convincing than others. The distinction between these two categories of influencers

represents a balance between familiarity and status. Micro-influencers typically convey a deeper feeling of intimacy than macro-influencers, who generally have more followers and popularity (Park et al., 2021).

2.2.2. Credibility and trust

Influencers' credibility and consumers' trust on influencers are essential for influencer marketing to be successful.

Trust refers to “the generalized expectancy that a message received is true and reliable and that the communicator demonstrates competence and honesty by conveying accurate, objective and complete information.” (Renn & Levine, 1989, p. 53). “Integrity, consistency, reputation, responsibility and predictability” all play a role in the development of trust (Tervo, 2021, p. 28). When numerous people have this kind of trust in a source of information, they give it credibility (Renn & Levine, 1989), which can be defined as “the degree of the trustworthiness and reliability of the source” (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 2). So, a crucial component of a message's persuasiveness is the communicator's or message source's credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019). When a person's reputation is already credible, information created by trusted and credible people is likewise more readily believed (Tervo, 2021, p. 28).

Rather than depending on data that describes influencers' following numbers and engagement rate, according to Peters et al. (1997, p. 44), credibility and trust can be measured through four determinants: “caring and empathy, dedication and commitment, competence and expertise and openness and honesty”.

For influencers, credibility is crucial for the development of their own media brands as well as for their success as product brand endorsers. If influencers are experts of their own lives and share presumably authentic moments with followers, they may be more persuasive than other online users (Wellman, 2023). Authenticity makes influencer marketing an effective means of advertising. From the perspective of the potential customer, it establishes the influencer's trustworthiness and credibility. Because the success of commercial collaboration depends on influencer marketing authenticity, authenticity must continue to be the top objective for influencer marketing (Tervo, 2021).

The important factors for the success of actions made by digital influencers “include trust in a given person being an authority, the credibility of the message communicated and the link between the message and a specific person (Wielki, 2020, p. 15). If followers believe in the influencers’ posts and opinions, consequently, they end up going after his/her recommendations, which have an effect on brands revenues (Arora et al., 2019).

Micro-influencers are less well known in the commercial sphere and do not have as celebrities status. Because of this, micro-influencers are seen by their followers as reliable and unbiased recommenders. Nevertheless, if an influencer consistently does paid collaborations with brands, followers can perceive them as sell-outs and the relationship between influencers and their community can be damaged. At least for brands partnerships, micro-influencers are viewed as typically having higher credibility than macro-influencers, precisely because they do less of them. Therefore, it may be inferred that the lower number of followers has a favourable impact on the credibility of commercial publications (Tervo, 2021).

2.2.3. Engagement

According to Calder, et al. (2016, p. 580), engagement can be defined as “motivational state occurring when people experience a product or service in terms of a personal life goal or value.”

Meanwhile, consumer-brand engagement is a “psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a brand in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 258). This type of engagement is multidimensional and has three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behaviour. Cognitive brand engagement is the set of thoughts a consumer may have when developing an interaction with a brand, whereas emotional brand engagement is the set of reactions that can strengthen consumer-brand relationships and the disposition of a consumer to get involved in these interactions, and behavioural engagement is the amount of effort consumers are prepared to devote to a particular consumer-brand relationship. (Stathopoulou et al., 2017).

Brands are increasingly focusing on social media than traditional media to engage with consumers (Li et al, 2021). The majority of the studies include behavioural metrics – likes, comments, and shares – in order to seize consumer-brand engagement. However, not always do these metrics lead to conversions, but they are a crucial indicator of the

thoughts and feelings followers have about contents and whether they are disposed to interact (Demmers et al., 2020).

Engagement rate measures the level of engagement that a piece of content receives from an audience. Factors that influence engagement rates include followers, comments, post shares, and likes. A low engagement rate is said to be at <1%, a medium engagement rate sits between 1% and 3.5%, whilst it is typically considered as a high engagement rate over than 3.5% (Levordashka et al., 2023).

Micro-influencers frequently engage in conversation with their followers, reply to comments, reveal personal struggles, and discuss subjects related to daily life. As a result, they connect closely with their followers and converse with them in a friendly manner. The amount of access and availability is enough to explain why their engagement rate is higher than the engagement rate of macro-influencers, who typically use a whole team of sanctioned social media managers and editors, adding more steps and time between a follower's message and the influencers' response. A post's perceived credibility can also be inferred when the engagement rate is high. (Tervo, 2021).

2.3. Sustainability

It is becoming more widespread in cultures to find value, fulfilment, and approval largely via our consumption. Cultural norms account for practically all of the amount of consumerism. The consumerism paradigm has become more widespread throughout cultures, and while this attitude presents itself differently in different societies, the outcome is stimulating general consumption mainly in ways that threaten human and environmental wellness. A sustainability paradigm would seek out an alternative group of objectives and look for ways to reinforce this by social norms, much like a consumerism paradigm pushes individuals to determine their state of wellness by their spending habits (Assadourian, 2010).

Sustainability was first approached in the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development by the United Nations Organization in 1987. "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (...) imply (...) limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social

organization on environmental resources and the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.” (Burton, 1987, p. 24)

According to Kuhlman & Farrington (2010), the term *sustainable* was first used in the field of forestry, where it refers to the principle of never harvesting more than the forest can produce in new growth.

Being conscious of the ways we live or think and the attitudes that guide our behaviour is the first step towards sustainability (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020), as this is an approach that addresses current demands without compromising the capacity of future generations to address their own needs. There is a “triple-bottom-line” definition of sustainability that contemplates “economic viability, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility, in order to create ‘long-term value’” (Yu & Zhao, 2005, p. 290). Moreover, according to Johnstone & Lindh (2018), sustainable behaviour entails a gradual, long-term shift in lifestyle.

The most known division of sustainability is *environmental*, which is needed because of climate change’s effects. This alludes to the significant and durable changes in the environmental framework brought about by normal environmental fluctuation or by human practices, which include “warming of the atmosphere and oceans, diminishing ice levels, rising sea level, increasing acidification of the oceans, and increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases” (Reddy & Thomson, 2015, p. 5-6).

According to Reddy & Thomson (2015, p. 5), *social* sustainability takes on significant importance, after that. Climate change has a huge impact on health, so this type of sustainability depends on environmental sustainability. “The risk of water-borne diseases, contamination of water supplies, malaria, drowning, injuries, and disruption of health services is increasing.” Besides health, there are several other components of well-being, such as “living standards, social capital, education, employment, wealth, and freedom.”

The author also states that environmental and social sustainability are inextricably linked to *economic* sustainability. If natural resources are utilised to their maximum, economies will not be sustainable (Reddy & Thomson, 2015).

Human needs are outpacing natural resources, and “the historical trend in non-renewable resources remaining, food per capita, services per capita, population, industrial output per capita, and global pollution” (Reddy & Thomson, 2015, p. 6) confirms that.

According to Cancino-Gómez et al. (2023), 72% of the emissions of greenhouse gases and the generation of water and household waste are the result of families’ consumption.

Recently, sustainable consumption awareness has made significant inroads into mainstream society's beliefs (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018). Consumers are now making ethical and responsible purchases since “food waste, fashion industry pollution, fast fashion, and fossil fuel pollution” (Cancino-Gómez et al., 2023, p. 163) are affecting human health. Thus, the impact of consumers’ behaviour at home is being attenuated, at the same time of the development of “population, economic development, and individual wealth.” (Cancino-Gómez et al., 2023, p. 163).

Every transformation to sustainability and sustainable lifestyles will be slow and progressive, but it is important to view it in the light of a more comprehensive shift to new lifestyles that includes factors connected to consumption and habits that go beyond current behavioural norms (Gilg et al., 2005).

Given this, society needs to be adjusted regarding its “knowledge, education, production, consumption, and lifestyles” (Cancino-Gómez et al., 2023, p. 164). Moreover, the business sector is being pressured by society to take responsibility for consumption. In this way, through sustainable consumption and practices, this sector has the power to increase consumers’ responsibility and awareness to meet their demand. Sustainability marketing has the objective of meeting or satisfying consumers' needs and positively positioning a brand in the market through an explanation of the way a brand addresses environmental, social, and economic issues (Cancino-Gómez et al., 2023)

2.3.1. Sustainability and influencers

Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro (2020) state that influencers play a significant role in promoting sustainability due to their capacity to set trends and influence consumer behaviour. These influencers have re-examined their way of life and desire to make worthwhile use of their following (Schorn et al., 2022).

Influencer marketing seeks to increase interest in a brand and its products, not necessarily encourage direct product purchases. So, influencers seek to guide and stimulate interest in learning more about the product, mainly in new and unknown circumstances, which frequently arise when talking about sustainability. Thus, there are more and more influencers talking about this topic, drawing attention to environmental issues (Schorn et al., 2022) and impacting awareness of sustainability issues (Palazzo et al, 2021). Therefore, they should be regarded as “experts, likeable, and trustworthy” (Schorn et al., 2022, p. 346).

Due to their growing collective purchasing power, early Generation Z’s population is seen as an extremely powerful generation (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018). They are increasingly using the social media platform Instagram and following influencers who support the topic of sustainability. Furthermore, the involvement of this influential individuals can significantly impact sustainable advancements simply by informing the public on a topic which may not be addressed in depth by governments, media or brands. This not only strengthens the connection between sustainable consumer practices but also elucidates the elements necessary for socially responsible sustainable purchasing intention (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018).

3. Methodology

The following section discusses the methodology employed to meet the research questions addressed.

3. 1. Research methods

This study comprised a qualitative approach since it allows investigation and understanding of the research questions through an interpretive analysis (Levitt et al., 2018). It was done by means of semi-structured interviews to a sample of 25 women, aged between 18 and 30 years old. The participants agreed to take part in the study as they assigned the Declarations of Data Protection of the Appendix B.

The interviews were analysed in MAXQDA 2022, and the questions are presented in the Appendix A.

“Face-to-face interviews are verbal exchanges in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to acquire information from and gain an understanding of another person, the interviewee.” (Rowley, 2012, p. 2-3). This is a method used in qualitative research in order to provide the collection of “facts, (...) insights, understanding of opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviours, or predictions.” (Rowley, 2012, p. 2-3) with high flexibility and participation. It allows having some freedom in the questions and in their order according to the reactions of the participants. It requires both the interviewer and the participant to join in an interactive discussion. So, the participants share their experiences which makes the interviews a more private approach to get information from participants than the surveys (Kuter & Yilmaz, 2001)

3. 2. Research sampling

The method of sampling was the snowball, which is “one of the most popular methods of sampling in qualitative research, central to which are the characteristics of networking and referral. The researchers usually start with a small number of initial contacts (seeds), who fit the research criteria and are invited to become participants within the research. The agreeable participants are then asked to recommend other contacts who fit the research criteria and who potentially might also be willing participants, who then in turn recommend other potential participants, and so on.” (Parker et al., 2019, p. 3). As the answers were saturated and redundant due to the *theoretical saturation concept* - “the

point where the main ideas and variations relevant to the formulation of a theory have been identified” (Weller et al, 2018), no more than 25 interviews were conducted.

Two ranges were defined: between 18–24 years old and 25–30 years old, based on Pordata (2023). The majority of the participants (84%) were aged between 18 and 24 years old. According to Statista (2023b), around 31% of the population using Instagram is aged between 18 and 24 years, and around 30% are aged between 25 and 34 years old. The sample age is detailed in table 3.1.

Table 3.1. - Sample's ages

Ages	Participants
18-24	21
25 – 30	4
N	25

The first generation to have grown up surrounded by digital communication is Generation Z, who are referred to as "digital natives." They were born between 1995 and the mid-2010s. This public consumes content more than some other age groups and they are almost certain to be presented with digital ads via social media platforms and look at Instagram no less than five times each day (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The range from 18 to 30 years old was chosen because the 18s are the age when people become officially adults, and until 30 years old because it is the end of the decade of the 20s.

Within this generation, women are one-third more likely to follow an influencer, compared with the one-quarter likelihood of men following an influencer (Statista, 2023c).

To conduct the interviews, the participants had to follow influencers and micro-influencers in a balanced manner so that it could be significant and relevant.

This study focused on the influencers who are present on Instagram, so 23 of the participants affirmed that Instagram is the platform where they most find and follow influencers. The other two participants mentioned TikTok and YouTube. It is possible to find the characteristics of the sample in Appendix B.

4. Results

The qualitative data has been assessed through an appropriate program of qualitative analysis – MAXQDA 2022. Thereafter, the results of the analysis were presented by topics:

- Concept of an influencer
- Opinions about influencers
- Concept of sustainability
- Importance of the number of followers
- Opinions about micro-influencers
- Credibility of micro-influencers
- Engagement of micro-influencer.
- Credibility and engagement of micro-influencers, regarding sustainable aspects

Before the interviews the participants elected three micro-influencers they liked the most and interacted with, among micro-influencers on general. There was not a choice pattern. The majority of the participants did not follow those micro-influencers for a matter of sustainability, but for the following reasons:

They perceive those micro-influencers as normal people with whom they identify:

“She is a normal young person, with an age similar to mine.” (BC),

“She is very genuine, normal, and not very extravagant.” (FA).

Because it is a topic of their interest, such as fashion, lifestyle, and trips:

“They talk about lifestyle, fashion, products they utilize, and places they go.” (CS).

They inspire and motivate their followers:

“She is an inspiration and motivates people my age who do not already have this self-esteem.” (DC).

“She also likes to show the reality of when she feels bad about herself and wants to get better.” (MS).

However, even if not a lot, some of the participants also referred to reasons linked to a more sustainable lifestyle:

“She can transmit this idea of sustainability in plenty areas of life. I think she is very complete and makes us understand things that probably we would not imagine that could exist more sustainable ways of doing them” (JD),

“I adopted some behaviours she has; she talks about sustainability in a very practical way and in a way that people can do.” (RR).

Regarding the way the participants reached the three micro-influencers, the majority were exploring Instagram, then by friends and family's recommendations, and by means of other platforms (YouTube and TikTok).

4.1. What is an influencer and what is your opinion about them?

Firstly, the participants were questioned if they knew the concept of an influencer. 100% of the participants know what influencers are and define them as individuals who inspire and influence others, who transmit who they are in their platforms, who advertise and position brands on the market and who have visibility, as presented in the table 4.1.

Table 4.1: How participants defined influencers

Definitions	Number of answers
Influence others	16
Transmit who they are	7
Advertise and give position to brands	7
Inspire others	6
Have visibility	3

The participants were asked about their opinion regarding influencers, which can be contradictory. Some of the participants mentioned negative aspects of influencers, which discredits them, and others mentioned positive aspects, which compliment them.

The participants’ negative opinions about influencers included encouraging consumerism, doing it solely to earn money, and also that it is not a job like the others and that not everyone can be considered an influencer, as it is possible to see the number of answers in the table 4.2. The following statements provide support for these opinions:

“Influencing people to buy something that they might not be able to do” (BC),

“I think influencers have worsened the level of consumerism” (CB),

“I think there are influencers who do not bring anything, they are simply associated with brands and do it for the money” (MS).

The participants’ positive opinions about influencers highlighted their importance for brands, their potential to influence doing something good, such as promoting a sustainable lifestyle, and that is a job like the others, as it is possible to see the number of answers in the table 4.2 The following statements provide support for these opinions:

“Being an Influencer is a very dignified job.” (SC),

“We spend lots of time in our phone consuming things on social media, much more than ads on TV, for instance; so, it makes more sense that brands look for influencers in order to advertise their products.” (MG),

“They can lead people to have better behaviours, in the case of influencers with more sustainable lifestyles.” (JD).

Table 4.2.: Negative and positive opinions about influencers

Opinion about influencers		Number of answers
Negative	They encourage consumerism	3
	It is not a job	3
	Not everyone can be considered an influencer	3
	They do it for the money	2
	They are futile	2
Positive	It is a job like the others	9
	They influence doing or buying something good	7
	They are important for brands	4

Whether in a positive or negative way, influencers have an impact on people’s lives. Some participants mentioned the following statements:

“They have an impact in people’s lives that consume their content” (CS),

“A person with an impact on society” and “They are a lot of influencers who do not know what they are saying, and with their very wide audience, they have a big influence on us; sometimes they do not mean it, but they are not aware of their reach, and end up saying non-politically correct things” (FA).

However, some of the participants do not consider themselves very influenced:

“I am not very influenced to do what they do just because they do it.” (JV)

4.2. What is sustainability?

Entering the topic of sustainability, the participants were questioned about its definition and what a sustainable lifestyle meant for them.

It has been verified that 100% of the participants perceive sustainability on an environmental level. Some of the definitions presented by the participants were the following:

“Sustainability is having a lifestyle and practices that do not question the well-being of the environment.” (CS),

“Having a sustainable lifestyle means being someone who has the ability to stop and think that this is an alternative product to purchase that involves few resources.” (BC),

“For me, a sustainable lifestyle is when we do good for us and, mainly, for the world.” (CG).

From the responses, six key sustainability aspects were identified, as shown in the table 4.3. These includes food consumption practices (like reducing meat intake), plastic usage, recycling and reusing, curbing excessive consumerism, transportation choices (favouring public transport or bicycle over cars -, and water usage.

Table 4.3.: Environmental sustainability (aspects)

Environmental sustainability	Number of answers
Food consumption	16
Plastic usage	13
Recycle and reusing	13
Excessive consumerism	12
Transportation	7
Water usage	6

The following statements support the environmental aspects of sustainability that the participants mentioned:

“A sustainable lifestyle is when someone worries about it in various ways: firstly, ecological footprint, i.e., what a person does in the daily life, e.g., whether he uses public transportation or a car; whether he buys animal original products or not; secondly, consumerism sustainability, i.e., clearly very consumerist people do not have concerns about sustainability.” (BC),

“Sustainability means having a lifestyle and practices that do not question the well-being of the environment. It can start with having glass tupperwares in our house instead of plastic, doing recycling, making food choices, using a bicycle instead of a car, etc.” (CS).

Also, it was possible to identify 60% of the participants referring to social aspects of sustainability, which are fast-fashion – opt for eco-friendly clothes -, health and inequalities. These aspects and respective number of answers are indicated in table 4.5.

Table 4.4.: Social sustainability (aspects)

Social sustainability	Number of participants
Fast fashion	13
Health	4
Inequalities	2
Leisure	1

The following statements support the social aspects of sustainability that the participants mentioned:

“I am conscious that lots of the practices of this industry, which is the second-most pollutant practice, are very wrong and pollutant and only denigrate the environment.” (SC)

“I know that the countries’ population where these clothes are produced have very poor conditions, and there are some human rights’ violation in that way.” (MG),

“I think a lot about the health of the own person, whether a person is managing his own resources’ sustainability, not for future generations, but for the own person’s future, for instance, by trying to do more physical exercise and keep more in shape, feeding a bit better, with more sustainable products.” and *“Social sustainability is the most necessary for me and finds the word ‘empath’, i.e., building equal conditions for everybody, fighting inequalities, and not using minorities.”* (MS),

Besides that, one of the participants mentioned economic sustainability, which is at the level of companies, as the following citation supports:

“Financial sustainability itself does not go too far; it is very associated with companies and not people – that is the concept of saving, not being sustainable.” (MS).

The participants gave additional important insights about sustainability, such as the following statements:

“I do not think a person who buys fast fashion clothes, has necessarily to not be concerned about sustainability; we all know that fast fashion involves lots of things that are not sustainable at all, but if they buy an item of clothing at Zara every 6 months, they do not worry less with sustainability than someone who buys a Portuguese brand 3 times per month.” (BC),

“Sustainability ends up being almost a label, and even a marketing strategy for brands, by showing they are “green.” (CB),

“I think the topic of sustainability has been developing in the last few years, but still there is not enough change in most of the companies and people.” and *“I really think that people who don’t practice sustainable behaviours do so because they are not concerned about it and do not put an effort on it, because there are easy things we can do.”* (RR),

4.3. Is the number of followers important for trusting influencers?

In a way to understand how the participants perceive micro-influencers, they were asked if the number of followers that an influencer has is important to them and if they trust an influencer more for having more followers, i.e., whether they trust less in micro-influencers for having fewer followers, and the reasons that led them to answer *yes* or *no*, as well.

To 80% of the participants, the number of followers of influencers was not important, so they do not trust an influencer more if he/she has more followers; whereas 20% of the participants give importance to the number of followers which affects consequently their trust in them.

In the table 4.5., it is possible to find the reasons given by the participants to justify their answers.

Table 4.5.: Importance given to the number of followers

Importance given to the number of followers	Number of answers	
No	I follow if I like and identify with them	14
	I do not notice the number of followers	5
	It depends on the influencer	4
Yes	The higher the number of followers, the higher the credibility and confidence	5
	It is a reflection of their work	1

The participants who disregard the number of followers primarily said their reasons to do so are based on personal liking and identification, not noticing the number of

followers and depending on the influencer in question. The following statements provide support for these reasons:

“The important thing is what a person shares, the ethics, the content...” (JS),

“I didn’t know the difference between being nano, micro or macro-influencers, I was not aware that some influencers I follow had so many followers and that others had so few followers.” (RT),

“I think there are influencers with plenty of followers who absolutely do not have anything relevant to say and might pass very dangerous or unclear messages; and there are others with fewer followers that are much more interesting, create interesting content, try to teach things, or simply make short comedy videos, and they are funny.” (FC).

The participants who regard the number of followers affirm that their trust in an influencer increases with the respective increase in the number of followers and that a higher number of followers reflects the quality of an influencer’s work. The following statements provide support for these reasons:

“A bigger number of followers makes a person more credible.” (IM);

“Maybe I trust an influencer more who has more followers, as they can reject working with some brands.” (MS),

“The number of followers reflects a person’s work, and if that person has more followers, it means the content is better and has more interactions.” (IT).

4.4. Opinions about micro-influencers

With this question, it was concluded that some of the participants who answered *no* in the table 4.5. have formed opinions regarding micro-influencers, such as being more genuine and truthful, interesting, and closer to their public; as they have less campaigns, it transmits more confidence to their followers; and also because micro-influencers have less pressure when producing their content. This is presented in the table 4.6.

Table 4.6.: Some participants' opinion about micro-influencers

Opinion about micro-influencers	Number of answers
They are more genuine and truthful	12
They are closer to their public	9
They have fewer campaigns which transmits more confidence	6
They have less pressure in their content	5
They are more interesting	3

To support their opinions, the following citations will be presented:

“A micro-influencer is a person who has fewer followers, is closer to his audience, and is more genuine.” (CS),

“Sometimes I even prefer micro-influencers, who do not have a wide number of followers, but they feel less pressure and are more genuine.” (FA),

“I feel that an influencer with fewer followers ends up talking about products in a more organic and subtle way.” (BC).

The participants who answered *yes* in the table 4.6. have the opposite opinions regarding micro-influencers.

The participants were asked if they had ever made a purchase or followed any recommendation by means of the three micro-influencers they had chosen. 92% of the participants have already done it, but the majority were not sustainable actions – it was restaurants, hotels, trips, clothes, and beauty products. However, the participants who have already bought sustainable products or followed the sustainable recommendations of the three micro-influencers they had chosen did so with second-hand clothing, bamboo toothbrushes, reusable make-up discs, solid shampoos, and cloth shopping bags. Within this question, they were asked if they have already done it, but influenced by influencers

in general, and 80% of them had already done it. Thus, the majority of the participants did not take sustainability actions influenced by micro-influencers, but did so because of influencers in general, regardless of the followers count.

4.5. Credibility of micro-influencers

The participants were also asked whether they think micro-influencers have more or less credibility, given that they have fewer followers compared with macro-influencers.

48% of the participants said their perceived credibility of micro-influencers *depends* on the person itself, on the content, on what they communicate, and on their brand-fit with the influencer. The following statements provide support for these reasons:

“I follow because of the content I like, which gives confidence and seriousness.”
(DJ),

“Micro-influencers share what they communicate in a more organic way and generate more interaction with their followers, but it always depends on what is being communicated.” (BC),

“I think the credibility comes from the value I recognize that person has to add with what she shares; if it is a brand that does not fit with the lifestyle of that influencer and if she usually shares, it does not make sense for me.” (AS).

32% of the participants answered that micro-influencers have *less* credibility, affirming that credibility is higher for influencers with a higher number of followers and that micro-influencers only want to grow and have less experience than macro-influencers. The following statements provide support for these reasons:

“If there are more people following an influencer, it is because they believe more in them than in a micro-influencer.” (MH),

“I think micro-influencers have less credibility because they really want to grow on the platforms, so they might end up advertising anything; they do not have the capacity to know what they really want.” (MS),

Whereas 20% of the participants answered that micro-influencers have *more* credibility because, as mentioned before, they are more genuine and closer to their

audience, mentioning also that they work with less brands. The following statements provide support for these reasons

“They are more spontaneous and truthful.” (RT),

“They start from the bottom, and there are not that many people to reach; they are much closer to the public.” (CS).

The results are detailed in table 4.7.

Table 4.7.: How followers perceive credibility of micro-influencers

		Number of answers
It depends	On the person itself	5
	On the content	4
	On the way they communicate	2
	On their fit with brands	1
Less	A wide public is what strengthens credibility	4
	They only want to grow and earn money	2
	They have less experience	2
More	They are more genuine and real	3
	They are closer to the audience	1
	They work with less brands	1

4.6. Engagement of micro-influencers

The participants were questioned about whether they interact with the influencers they follow and what kind of interactions they have.

There was only one person who answered that she does not interact with influencers and only watches their content. Thus, 24 participants affirmed they interact with influencers through likes, shares, saving, surveys/questions, comments, and messages, whose number of followers is mentioned in table 4.8.

Table 4.8.: Participants' interactions with micro-influencers

Interactions with micro-influencers	Number of answers
Likes	22
Share	20
Savings	18
Surveys/questions	11
Comments	2
Messages	2

Within the participants who interact with the influencers they follow, 92% of the participants interact with the three micro-influencers they chose and the majority of the interactions they have are with those three, within influencers in general.

As it is possible to see in the table 4.9., the participants were asked if they feel – or would feel – more comfortable interacting with micro-influencers, when compared with macro-influencers.

56% of participants answered *yes*, justifying their greater comfort when interacting with micro-influencers due to their ease of reach and their closeness.

Whereas 44% of participants answered *no*, justifying mainly that they do not notice the number of influencers; two participants said that they prefer to interact with macro-influencers, while one participant said that she does not intend to interact with influencers, in general. This is summarized in the table 4.9.

Table 4.9.: Do consumers feel more comfortable interacting with micro-influencers?

Feel more comfortable interacting with micro-influencers? – and why?		
		Number of answers
Yes	Micro-influencers are more reachable	12
	Participants feel closer to them	1
	Both	1
No	Participants do not notice the number of followers	5
	Other	3
	Participants prefer influencers with more followers	2
	Participants do not intend to interact	1

The following citations support the table 4.9.:

- Feel more comfortable interacting with micro-influencers if:

“It is more likely that I get an answer and my comment or message does not go unnoticed among so many others.” (CS).

“I feel more comfortable with micro-influencers; it is like a closer public, more personal.” (CG).

- Do not feel more comfortable interacting with micro-influencers if:

“For me, it is the same; I still don’t know them; I would still be talking with them through a platform” (FT),

“For me, it is the same to interact with every level of influencer, as long as I can identify myself.” (JS).

4.7. Credibility, trust and engagement of micro-influencers, regarding sustainable aspects

Participants were asked whether they consider that influencers raise awareness among their followers regarding the topic of sustainability - 23 people answered *yes*, whereas 2 people answered *no*. The following citations support this:

“I think this topic started to be more talked about because of influencers, since it would not work if it was shown on TV—we are not watching TV all day, we are scrolling on our phones all day.” (DC),

“All the world's alerts and news we have come from social media, and as the influencers speak about it, obviously it is the way that we raise our awareness about sustainability.” (PP)”.

However, participants also affirmed that there are only a few influencers addressing this subject and that the concept has not been well developed yet. Moreover, other participant affirmed that the role in raising awareness regarding sustainability depends on the influencer, justifying the fact that the role is solely effective when the influencer grounds what is said.

Lastly, participants were asked again whether micro-influencers are more trustworthy and have more or less credibility compared with macro-influencers – now regarding sustainability. The majority still said it depends on the influencer itself i.e. no change in the levels of trustworthiness when the sustainability is address by the influencer. The same applies to engagement: even if the participants interact with micro-influencers more, they do not do so because of sustainability – they interact more with micro-influencers regardless of the category.

This is supported by the following citations:

“Credibility is in the consistency of the content they share, not the number of followers.” (JD),

“Micro-influencers can suggest more accessible pieces to their followers, maybe for having fewer possibilities.” (IM)

5. Discussion

The analysis, consisting of semi-structured interviews with 25 women aged between 18 and 30 years old, contributed to the study of how followers perceive micro-influencers' trust and credibility and how they engage with them, regarding sustainability.

Almost all the participants consider Instagram to be their most used platform, with checks out with what was previously said in the literature review that the usage of Instagram has increased from 200 million to more than 1.3 billion active users (Statista, 2023a)

Furthermore, all the participants are aware of what an influencer is. Participants claim that influencers' role is mainly to influence and inspire others, as well as advertising and giving positing to brands.

Participants are in line with the definition of what an influencer is given by Biegun, et al. (2019), who states that an influencer is “an opinion leader, popular (...), credible actions (...), inspires trust, engages and convinces the addresses of his or her communication to make specific choices”.

Moreover, the participants also have formed opinions about influencers, which were split into positive and negative aspects. The main positive aspects were that being an influencer is a job like the others and that they have the power to influence doing or buying something good – which is the case of sustainability. Regarding less positive aspects, the participants are balanced in their opinions: influencers encourage consumerism, being an influencer it is not a job and not everyone can be considered an influencer. In this regard, there are more participants affirming that being an influencer is a job just like the others than saying the opposite, not forgetting the impact influencers have on followers' lives.

5.1. Trust

Concerning trust, 80% of the participants are not influenced by the number of followers of an influencer to determine their trust in them, being the main reason the fact that the participants follow influencers due to their personal liking and identification with the content and the person itself. The 20% of the inquired to whom the number of followers

an influencer has is important affirm mainly that macro-influencers transmit more confidence.

5.2. Credibility

In terms of the credibility that influencers transmit to the participants, the majority of them claim that this credibility depends and has nothing to do with the number of followers. Their justification is similar to the one given to *trust*; it depends on the influencer itself, on the content, on the way the influencer communicates, and if the brand advertised fits with the influencer.

Following that, the next most mentioned answer was that the credibility of a micro-influencer is lower than that of micro-influencers, mainly because a broader public strengthens the credibility of an influencer:

The ones who have answered that micro-influencers have more credibility justified as a main reason the fact they are more genuine and real.

In the literature review, it was referred that followers connect and trust more on micro-influencers (Park et al., 2021). This explanation is in line with the participants who claim that micro-influencers are more authentic and honest. However, the majority of the participants do not place more credibility or trust on micro-influencers than they do with macro-influencers; it depends on the aspects previously stated. Thus, according to the sample, the author is when speaking of the reasons why followers trust in micro-influencers, but not that followers trust on micro-influencers more.

5.3. Engagement

96% of the participants engage with influencers in general. It happens mainly through *likes*, *sharing* with friends, and saving content in “*savings*”. Given the question: “Do you feel more comfortable interacting with micro-influencers?”, the participants who answered *yes* justified themselves mainly with the fact that micro-influencers are more reachable, thus it is more likely they see their comments or messages and answer them.

The participants who answered *no* justified their answer mainly with the fact that they do not notice the number of followers.

Furthermore, from what it is possible to conclude from the three micro-influencers that each participant chose, most of the interactions they have are with micro-influencers. This is in line with Park et al. (2021), which had already claimed that micro-influencers produce higher engagement.

5.4. Trust, credibility and engagement among micro-influencers regarding sustainability

The participants referred mainly to environmental sustainability, having mainly habits such as recycling, better feeding, using less plastic, and being less consumerist. In parallel, lots of the participants also commented about social factors, which the main factor was the usage of fast-fashion clothes, which is also linked with social inequalities that exist in this industry.

Participants claim that influencers have an important role in raising awareness of sustainability because consumers spend most of their time on their phones and checking social media platforms. This is in line with Schorn et al. (2022) and Palazzo et al. (2021) who state that nowadays there are lots of influencers talking about environmental issues and raising awareness about sustainable issues. Besides that, influencers have the power to influence progress in sustainability by correctly informing their followers about a sustainable lifestyle.

The participants chose the three micro-influencers they liked the most. However, these influencers are not followed as a matter of sustainability. The participants say they have already bought products or followed recommendations because of these micro-influencers, but most of them were not sustainable actions. When talking about influencers in general, they have a lot of influence on them regarding sustainable products and behaviours.

However, when the participants were asked if the number of followers influences their trust and credibility given to influencers regarding sustainability, the answer was the same regarding all the products - it depends; and even if the participants interact mainly with micro-influencers, it is not because of sustainability aspects.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore how consumers perceive micro-influencers regarding credibility, trust, and engagement in the field of sustainability. Regarding literature, the main concepts were studied: social media, Instagram, influencers, micro-influencers, trust, credibility, engagement, and sustainability. After that, the research questions were analysed by means of interviews with a sample of women aged between 18 and 30 years old. This allowed to address and answer the initial research questions proposed by this study.

As stated by Park et al. (2021), micro-influencers are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy. Contrary to this author, even if followers perceive micro-influencers in this way, the analysis suggests that it does not mean they trust and give more credibility to them. The present work also suggests that participants do not place importance to the number of followers, and it does not influence their trust in the influencer; It is clear that credibility comes with the influencer and not with the number of followers. Answering the first research question: “How are micro-influencers perceived in terms of trust and credibility compared with macro-influencers?”, the study suggests that micro-influencers are perceived in the same way that macro-influencers are regarding trust and credibility.

As Park, J., et al. (2021) stated, followers interact more with micro-influencers regardless of the topic transmitted (sustainable or not) due to their ease of reach, which makes them more comfortable interacting with them as opposed to macro-influencers. Answering the second research question: “Do followers engage more with micro-influencers than they do with macro-influencers?”, the study suggests that followers engage more with micro-influencers than with macro-influencers.

Lastly, the present work indicates that the participants neither trust micro-influencers more, give them more credibility, nor engage more with them in what comes to subjects about sustainability. Answering the third research question: “How do followers perceive micro-influencers regarding sustainability?” For sustainability, the study suggests that followers perceive all the influencers in the same way, regardless of their number of followers.

To conclude, the study suggests that followers trust and give credibility to all types of influencers in the same way, depending only on the content and the person itself. On the contrary, it is also suggested that followers engage more with micro-influencers than influencers with more followers because they are easier to reach.

Moreover, some participants said that the number of influencers speaking about sustainability is not enough to change consumers' lifestyles, and since influencers have the power to change it, they should use their voice and platforms more frequently to promote and spread content about sustainable and alternative lifestyles.

7. Managerial Implications

After suggesting theoretical implications, there are some implications for brands, influencers and micro-influencers, specifically, to be suggested.

Firstly, brands must keep investing in influencer marketing since it is proven to be one of the best marketing strategies to create a connection with customers nowadays. Within these strategies, brands should focus on micro-influencers. As mentioned in the literature review and in the qualitative analysis, micro-influencers are more genuine, generate more organic content and have a more active audience, which will bring them closer to their followers. These followers pay more attention to what is being said, and even if their level of trust and credibility is similar to that placed on macro-influencers, followers do engage more with micro-influencers' content. In parallel, as opposed to macro-influencers, micro-influencers typically have a specific niche – whether is fashion, beauty, travelling or sustainability – which makes it easier to reach brands' target.

It is known that micro-influencers have engagement advantages – so how can macro-influencers learn from their lesser-known colleagues? The present study shows that partnering with less brands, having a well-defined niche and posting more organic content is the recipe to having the best of both worlds. By following these steps, macro-influencers will preserve the superpowers of micro ones – getting their community to interact more with them, whether through likes, comments, shares or saves.

To finalize, the key is that micro-influencers maintain the way their followers see them – relatable and authentic - in order to keep having these high engagement rates and a close community who trust. Trust and reputation is, after all, the most valuable resource in 2023 and beyond.

8. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study will be considered.

Regarding methodology, it is important to note that the sample was chosen for convenience; therefore, the findings cannot be applied to Instagram's remaining users as a whole. Considering the vast amount of Portuguese users of Instagram, which are around 6.4 million (Statista., 2023d), the number of participants is not statistically significant.

Thus, as the sample was made for convenience, it did not make it possible to interview users from other markets, which could have provided a different perspective. Similarly, even if men are less likely to follow influencers on Instagram, it would be interesting to analyse their perspective and justifications for this statement, as well as those of generations other than only Generation Z.

This study features the opinion of followers and online communities, but in the future, it would be interesting to see micro influencers' and brands' own perspectives and on the research questions

Finally, since TikTok has been growing very fast in the last few years (Statista, 2023e), future research may analyse how micro-influencers are perceived on TikTok in these aspects.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview

Question n°1	What is an Influencer for you, and what is your opinion about them?
Question n°2	Is Instagram the social media where you find and follow Influencers? If not, which one is it?
Question n°3	Do you consider important the number of followers' an Influencer has? Why? Do you trust more on an Influencer for having more followers?
Question n°4	What is a sustainable lifestyle for you?
Question n°4.1	Do you feel that the fact that an Influencer refers, even sporadically, topics about sustainability, makes you have more awareness about how being sustainable in our daily basis have an impact in our future?
Question n°5	Why did you choose these 3 micro-influencers, and why do you follow them? Did you find them simply by exploring Instagram, or because someone told you about them?
Question n°5.1	Have you already done a purchase, or follow some recommendation, by influence of any micro-influencer that you remember?
Question n°5.1.1	If so, why did you feel confident to make that decision? What does that Influencer have that made you make that decision?

Appendix A (cont.)

Question n°6	Have you ever changed your purchase decision because of a recommendation?
Question n°7	Have you already talked with Friends or family about any micro-influencers? For instance, a place where they went – restaurant, trip, etc -, and/or a product they bought/recommended. If so, what do you say about them?
Question n°8	Have you ever changed any behaviour/bought a product you have on a daily basis because of an Influencer who supports a sustainable lifestyle? If so, what, and why?
Question n°9	Do you use to interact with the Influencers you follow? For instance, put a “like” on the photos, comments stories/posts, answer to questions/surveys they do?
Question n°9.1	Do you use to interact with the 3 Influencers you chose? If so, are they the ones you interact the most with?
Question n°10	Do you use to share content Influencers share with your Friends? And put on “saved” in order not to forget about that content and watch it later?
Question n°11	If you have answered yes in the last questions, do you feel more comfortable doing it for being micro-influencers? Or if you did not answer yes, what do think about it on a hypothetical situation?
Question n°12	Do you think a micro-influencer has more or less credibility in what they are recommending and sharing than an Influencer with more followers? Why?

Appendix A - (cont.)

Question n°12.1 Regarding sustainability, do you think it is easier to trust
and give credibility in what a micro-influencer is saying and
sharing?

Appendix C – Data Protection Declaration



DECLARAÇÃO DA PROTEÇÃO DE DADOS

O presente estudo surge no âmbito da Dissertação do Mestrado em Marketing, a decorrer no **Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa**.

O estudo tem por objetivo analisar a confiança que os consumidores têm em micro-influencers no Instagram. A sua participação no estudo, que será muito valorizada, irá contribuir para o avanço do conhecimento neste domínio da ciência, e consiste em realizar uma entrevista de cerca de 30 minutos, por videochamada ou, se possível presencialmente, que será gravada para, posteriormente, ser transcrita.

O Iscte é responsável pelo tratamento dos seus dados pessoais, recolhidos e tratados exclusivamente para as finalidades do estudo, tendo como base legal o seu consentimento.

O estudo é realizado por **Ana Carolina Simão** (carolina13simao@gmail.com), que poderá contactar caso pretenda esclarecer uma dúvida, partilhar alguma comentário ou exercer os seus direitos relativos ao tratamento dos seus dados pessoais. Poderá utilizar o contacto indicado para solicitar o acesso, a retificação, o apagamento ou a limitação do tratamento dos seus dados pessoais.

A participação neste estudo é **confidencial**. Os seus dados pessoais serão sempre tratados por pessoal autorizado vinculado ao dever de sigilo e confidencialidade. O Iscte garante a utilização das técnicas, medidas organizativas e de segurança adequadas para proteger as informações pessoais. É exigido a todos os investigadores que mantenham os dados pessoais confidenciais.

Além de confidencial, a participação no estudo é estritamente **voluntária**: pode escolher livremente participar ou não participar. Se tiver escolhido participar, pode interromper a participação e retirar o consentimento para o tratamento dos seus dados pessoais em qualquer momento, sem ter de prestar qualquer justificação. A retirada de consentimento não afeta a legalidade dos tratamentos anteriormente efetuados com base no consentimento prestado.

O seus dados pessoais serão conservados até à entrega da Dissertação, que está prevista para junho de 2023, após o qual serão destruídos ou anonimizados, garantindo-se o seu anonimato nos resultados do estudo, apenas divulgados para efeitos estatísticos, de ensino, comunicação em encontros ou artigos científicos.

Não existem riscos significativos expectáveis associados à participação no estudo.

Em alguns casos, a equipa de investigação pode partilhar dados com outras equipas de investigação, ou ainda prestadores de serviços a agir sob nossa orientação e responsabilidade.

Neste estudo, são divulgados dados pessoais à seguintes entidades:

- Professor Orientador - Luís Pedro Miguel
- Júri que irá avaliar a Dissertação

O Iscte tem um Encarregado de Proteção de Dados, contactável através do email dpo@iscte-iul.pt. Caso considere necessário tem ainda o direito de apresentar reclamação à autoridade de controlo competente – Comissão Nacional de Proteção de Dados.

Declaro ter compreendido os objetivos de quanto me foi proposto e explicado pelo/a investigador/a, ter-me sido dada oportunidade de fazer todas as perguntas sobre o presente estudo e para todas elas ter obtido resposta esclarecedora. **Aceito** participar no estudo e consinto que os meus dados pessoais sejam utilizados de acordo com a informações que me foram disponibilizadas

Sim Não

_____ (local), ____/____/____ (data)

Nome: _____

Assinatura: _____