INSTITUTO
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Exploring Social Media Travel Influencers' Role in Shaping Gen Z's Travel Intentions in Portugal

Diva Fonseca e Mestre

Master in Marketing

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September, 2025

BUSINESS
SCHOOL

Department of Marketing, Operations & General Management

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the dedicated support and guidance of Professor Ana Brochado and Professor Maria da Conceição Torres Figueiredo, who accompanied me with patience and encouragement throughout this journey.

I would also like to thank Professor Daniela Langaro for her valuable guidance and for the opportunities that enriched my experience during my Marketing Master's at ISCTE Business School.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my family for their unconditional love, patience, and support, always standing by me in both the most challenging and the happiest moments

Resumo

Este estudo investiga como os influenciadores portugueses de viagens nas redes sociais moldam as relações parasociais (*PSRs*), que, por sua vez, influenciam as intenções de viagem da Geração Z. Com base no modelo *Travel Influencer Construct* (Manthiou et al., 2024), foram analisadas cinco características dos influenciadores — autenticidade, inspiração, atratividade, competência e confiança — em relação às *PSRs* e à intenção de visitar, considerando micro, macro e mega influenciadores. O estudo combinou abordagem de métodos mistos com três *focus groups* e um inquérito com 203 respostas válidas de jovens portugueses da Geração Z (18–28 anos).

Os resultados demonstram que inspiração e confiança são os preditores mais fortes das *PSRs* e também aumentam diretamente a intenção de visitar. A atratividade influenciou a intenção de visitar, mas não fortaleceu as relações, enquanto autenticidade e especialização não se revelaram preditores significativos das *PSRs* nem da intenção. Ao comparar as categorias de influenciadores, os macro-influenciadores destacaram-se de forma consistente face aos micro e mega, revelando-se como um "ponto ideal" entre proximidade e alcance. Já os mega-influenciadores, apesar do seu apelo aspiracional, foram percecionados como menos autênticos, confiáveis e relacionáveis, enfraquecendo a sua influência global.

Este estudo contribui para a literatura em turismo e marketing de influenciadores ao clarificar como as perceções da Geração Z portuguesa sobre as características dos influenciadores moldam as *PSRs* e as intenções de viagem num contexto cultural ainda pouco explorado. Destaca o papel central da inspiração, da confiança e da eficácia estratégica dos macro-influenciadores.

Palavras-chave: Influenciadores digitais, Intenção de viagem, Geração Z, Relações parassociais, Marketing turístico

Códigos JEL: M31 (Marketing), Z32 (*Tourism and Development*)

Abstract

This study investigates how Portuguese social media travel influencers shape parasocial relationships (PSRs), which in turn influence Generation Z's travel intentions. Drawing on the Travel Influencer Construct framework (Manthiou et al., 2024), five influencer characteristics—authenticity, inspiration, attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness—were analyzed in relation to PSRs and intention to visit, across micro, macro, and mega influencers. A mixed-methods design combined three focus groups with 17 participants and a survey with 203 valid responses from Portuguese Generation Z (18–28 years old).

Findings show that inspiration and trustworthiness are the strongest predictors of PSRs and also directly increase intention to visit. Attractiveness influenced intention to visit but did not strengthen relationships, while authenticity and expertise did not significantly predict PSRs or intention. When comparing influencer categories, macro-influencers consistently outperformed both micro and mega-influencers in shaping PSRs and intention to visit, emerging as a "sweet spot" between relatability and reach. Mega-influencers, despite their aspirational appeal, were perceived as less authentic, trustworthy, and relatable, which weakened their overall influence.

This study contributes to tourism and influencer marketing literature by clarifying how Portuguese Gen Z's perceptions of influencer traits shape parasocial relationships and travel intentions in an underexplored cultural context. It challenges assumptions about authenticity, expertise, and follower count, highlighting instead the central role of inspiration, trust, and the strategic effectiveness of macro-influencers. For destination marketing organizations and brands, the findings emphasize the value of partnering with influencers who balance reach with relatability, foster trust, and inspire meaningful connections with Generation Z travelers.

Keywords: Social media influencers, Travel intention, Generation Z, Parasocial relationships, Tourism marketing

JEL Codes: M31 (Marketing), Z32 (Tourism and Development)

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Glossary

PSR – Parasocial Relationships

PSI – Parasocial Interaction

DMO – Destination Marketing Organizations

SMI – Social Media Influencer

TI – Tourism Influencers

TIC – Travel Influencer Construct

1. Introduction

Social media has changed the world in many ways, and tourism was no exception. It transformed how people discover, plan, and share their travel experiences through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, which have become part of travel inspiration and decision-making (Lama, 2024). In fact, according to Statista (2024), 77% of today's global travelers use social media for trip planning.

So it's inevitable to deny the impact of social media in the tourism context. As it evolved, influencer marketing emerged as an incredible tool for brands, offering them a more relatable and engaging alternative to traditional advertising. This influencer marketing shift has redefined destination marketing strategies, allowing for more direct and authentic communication between brands and potential tourists (Todua & Urotadze, 2023).

Therefore, travel influencers play a critical role nowadays. They share their experiences, tips, and recommendations, and provide followers with relatable content that combines entertainment and information. This effectiveness is changing the way companies view influencer marketing, with 60% of marketers planning to increase their investments in influencer campaigns in 2024 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). However, while influencer marketing has gained its due attention in the tourism industry, academic research on its effectiveness in Tourism, especially among Generation Z, remains limited (Manthiou et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023).

Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Britannica, 2025), is the new group of travelers and a very important segment for businesses to take into account (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). This digitally native generation spends significant time on social platforms and shows a strong affinity for influencer content. (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). 43% of Gen Z users discover new products through influencers, compared to 31% of the general population (Santora, 2024). They also prioritize authenticity, social responsibility, and personalized experiences, all traits that align with influencer-generated content (Kimilli, 2023).

In Portugal, tourism serves as a crucial economic pillar and is deeply embedded in the nation's identity. With a temperate climate, rich and diverse historical, cultural, and natural heritage, and high levels of safety and hospitality, Portugal has a very high tourist appeal. (Turismo de Portugal,

2017). In fact, Portugal welcomed 26.5 million tourist arrivals in 2023, ranking 9th in Europe and generating €25.1 billion in tourism revenue (TravelBI, 2024). According to the 2024 Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, Portugal ranks 12th globally and 7th in Europe, showcasing its position as a highly competitive destination (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Additionally, recent record-breaking growth in both visitor numbers and tourism revenue (Turismo de Portugal, 2024) highlights the tourism crucial role in the country. These developments highlight the importance of adopting a long-term vision focused on sustainable investment and development, which will allow Portugal to strengthen its position as one of the world's most competitive and sustainable tourist destinations (Turismo de Portugal, 2017). This continuous growth, along with Portugal's strong digital infrastructure and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, makes the country an ideal case for studying influencer marketing in the tourism sector.

Portuguese Generation Z is particularly engaged in travel-related content, with 63% of Gen Z in Portugal expressing interest in travel, and 47% identifying it as one of their main leisure activities (Statista, 2023a). Therefore, influencer marketing plays a significant role in their consumption behavior, with 22% reporting purchases based on influencer or celebrity promotions (Statista, 2023a; 2023b). Despite this, limited academic attention has been given to how Portuguese Gen Z perceives travel influencers or how these influencers impact their travel decisions, especially with different influencer ranking categories, such as micro, macro and mega influencers.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring how Portuguese travel influencers affect the travel intentions of Portuguese Generation Z, focusing on the development of parasocial relationships and how these are determined by influencer characteristics and ranking categories.

Based on the framework by Manthiou et al. (2024), this study examines five key influencer traits - authenticity, inspiration, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise – and it investigates how these characteristics contribute to building parasocial relationships and how these, in turn, influence the intention to visit destinations promoted by influencers.

Accordingly, the study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the characteristics of Portuguese social media influencers (authenticity, inspiration, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and credibility) affect Gen Z's parasocial relationships?

RQ2: How do parasocial relationships with Portuguese social media influencers influence Portuguese Generation Z's intention to visit the destinations they promote?

RQ3: How do the characteristics of Portuguese social media influencers, parasocial relationships and intention to visit vary across different influencer ranking categories (micro, macro, and mega)?

Additionally, a qualitative phase with three focus groups will explore deeper insights into Gen Z's perceptions and attitudes. This is guided by the following qualitative research question:

QRQ: How do Generation Z travelers perceive and engage with social media travel influencers, and what characteristics contribute to building trust, parasocial relationships, and influencing their travel decisions?

By focusing on the Portuguese context, this research aims to contribute to new insights into tourism and digital marketing fields. While global literature has explored how Gen Z and influencer marketing across various regions, there are still limitations on the Portuguese influencers and Gen Z consumers' context. This research not only responds to calls for further investigation into parasocial dynamics and influencer impact (Manthiou et al., 2024) but also offers practical implications for marketers and tourism organizations when using influencer marketing and targeting Generation Z, a generation that is reshaping tourism.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter presents the introduction, including the background, objectives, and relevance of the study. The second chapter comprises the literature review, which explores key theoretical concepts such as influencer marketing, parasocial relationships, influencer characteristics, influencer ranking categories, and Generation Z's relationship with social media travel influencers. The third chapter outlines the methodological approach, including the research design, data collection, and analysis procedures. The fourth chapter presents and analyzes the study's findings, addressing the research questions. Finally, the fifth chapter discusses the results, highlights theoretical and managerial implications, outlines the limitations of the study, and offers suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to Influencer Marketing in Tourism

Social media has transformed Destination Marketing by enabling destinations to engage consumers through social media influencers. (Todua Nugzar & Urotadze, 2023; Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2022). In the tourism context, social media influencers have become key intermediaries between service providers and consumers, using persuasive strategies like tagging travel brands, sharing live streams, and posting visually appealing content and, in exchange, receive financial or in-kind compensation from travel companies and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022).

Todua and Urotadze (2023) highlight the growing impact of SMIs in shaping travel decisions by providing authentic and relatable content that connects brands and consumers. Additionally, Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2022) add that influencer marketing enables DMOs to strategically regain brand control while leveraging social media-based electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The authors also mention the importance of selecting influencers whose values align with the destination and target audience. (Femenia-Serra and Gretzel, 2022)

Generation Z, as digital natives, is highly receptive to social media influencers and has their consumption habits shaped by technology, entertainment, trendiness, interactivity, and word-of-mouth (Liu et al., 2023). However, Manthiou et al. (2024) highlight that research on social media influencers (SMIs) in the travel and tourism sector remains limited. The authors claim that "limited evidence-based research has neither examined the impact of SMI components on followers in the tourism destination context in depth, nor identified what exactly contributes to a travel audience's perception of travel content creators as influential" (Manthiou et al., 2024, p. 3). Since much of the existing literature centers on influencers in fashion or consumer goods, it leaves the role of SMIs in tourism marketing underexplored and fragmented (Manthiou et al., 2024).

Additionally, while global studies have addressed Gen Z and influencer marketing across various regions, there is still a noticeable gap in the Portuguese context, and the impact of Portuguese influencers on Gen Z consumers. This study aims to deeper investigate how Portuguese social media influencers shape Portuguese Gen Z's travel intentions by exploring parasocial relationships, influencer characteristics, and influencer ranking categories.

2.2. Gen Z and Social Media

Gen Z, born in the early 21st century, has seen it all: terrorism, economic recessions, climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, and war. (Pinho, 2023). All of these experiences resulted in a complex worldview; however, they are driven, ambitious, globally aware, and value independence, self-respect, and authentic relationships (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Environmentally conscious and open-minded, Gen Z also holds high expectations for their travel experiences (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018).

In travel and tourism, Gen Z's social media behaviors are different from other generations, making their study crucial for marketing research (Liu et al., 2023). Technology is completely integrated into their lives, with platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat serving as key venues for social connection and engagement (Childers & Boatwright, 2020). However, their travel motivations are complex and retaining them as tourists is not as easy as it seems. (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018).

When characterizing their travel approach, Gen Z is very hedonistic, focus mainly on enjoyment, social connection, and empowerment (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018), with price being the dominant factor in their decisions, alongside seasonality and attractions (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). When planning trips, this generation primarily uses the internet and social media, travel agencies and personal recommendations. (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). Influencers also play a pivotal role by providing inspiration and guidance across platforms (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023).

As digital natives, Gen Z expects authenticity and transparency from influencers and brands, viewing influencer marketing as genuine content, and any breach of trust can severely damage influencer credibility. (Childers & Boatwright, 2020) . Gen Z engages more deeply with influencer content when it aligns with their personal values (self-congruity), focusing on message relevance and quality rather than influencer traits. (Ong, Sun, and Ito, 2024) This alignment boosts their positive perception and intention to visit promoted destinations, fostering a sense of influencers as part of their curated online communities (Childers & Boatwright, 2020).

Moreover, Gen Z prefers influencers whose opinions match their own, favoring authentic, immersive experiences like glamping or tiny homes over traditional hotels, while prioritizing sustainability, affordability, personalization, and social responsibility (Kimili, 2023). These traits make them especially responsive to influencer marketing in tourism.

As the travel industry evolves, understanding and adapting to Gen Z's preferences is vital for relevance and improved customer experience. (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). However, research on Gen Z in tourism and influencer marketing remains limited, representing both a challenge and opportunity for this study.

2.3. Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSRs), first conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956), refer to the one-sided, asymmetrical interactions between audiences and media figures. In these interactions, audiences experience a sense of face-to-face connection with the persona, despite the persona merely performing and the audience remaining passive. This dynamic is characterized by the illusion of reciprocity, where the media figure appears to engage mutually with the audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

In simpler terms, parasocial interaction is a psychological bond between media influencers and their audiences, almost connecting them. The closeness felt by audiences is often associated as real-life friendships (Choi et al., 2019). These "virtual friendships," are maintained through ongoing media exposure and emotional attachment (Choi et al., 2019).

With the rise of social media, parasocial interaction has gained renewed importance, and is a key driver of influencer marketing success (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Conde & Casais, 2023). The stronger a parasocial bond is, the more it increases followers' trust in recommendations and their likelihood to be influenced by endorsements (Ki et al., 2020). Therefore, the emotional connection between influencers and their followers plays a crucial role in the influencer's ability to endorse products and brands effectively (Ki et al., 2020).

Influencers who promote self-discovery, broaden perspectives, and embody an "ideal self", the version followers aspire to become, tend to cultivate stronger parasocial relationships (Ki et al., 2020). Moreover, Tyvrainen (2025) identifies that expertise, trustworthiness, social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, and congruence are significant contributors to parasocial engagement. However, the interaction between these characteristics and parasocial bonds remains complex and multidimensional.

Therefore, marketers are advised to collaborate with influencers who foster authentic, meaningful connections rather than focusing solely on audience size. (Ki et al., 2020, Schouten et

al., 2019). Generation Z, in particular, views influencers not just as marketers but as knowledgeable friends who provide education and entertainment, reinforcing the perception of influencers as personal connections (Singer, 2023).

In conclusion, parasocial relationships are crucial to influencer marketing, with strong emotional bonds enhancing followers' receptiveness to endorsements (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Ki et al., 2020). Influencers who are authentic, relatable, and aspirational create deeper PSRs, making them very effective, no matter their follower count (Ki et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2019). Therefore, marketers should prioritize influencers who build genuine connections to drive engagement and influence consumer behavior.

This study aims to explore the extent of parasocial relationships within Portuguese Generation Z, examining how influencer characteristics impact these relationships and, consequently, affect travel intention.

2.4. Influencer Characteristics

As previously discussed, the understanding of Tourism Influencers' (TIs) on social media remains fragmented. To address this, Manthiou et al. (2024) developed the Travel Influencer Construct (TIC) scale, identifying five key dimensions from 81 items: inspiration, authenticity, attractiveness, content expertise, and trustworthiness.

This scale contributes to the understanding of social media influencers (SMIs), serving as a practical tool for both tourism managers and influencers to align content with marketing goals. The authors emphasize that effective influencers must create content that is inspiring, authentic, attractive, knowledgeable, and trustworthy, and that managing these five dimensions is essential for TIs to be perceived as persuasive and competent online. The following chapters will review literature on each of these characteristics and their connection to parasocial relationships.

2.4.1. Inspiration

In marketing, customer inspiration is defined as a temporary state that occurs when consumers shift from passively receiving ideas to actively pursuing consumption goals (Böttger et al., 2017). Two primary streams in the literature—psychological inspiration and marketing inspiration—converge in a marketing-based definition that aligns with broader theories of general inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017).

Travel influencers play a key role in inspiring their followers to visit the destinations showcased in their content, so it's a characteristic for tourism managers to bear in mind, who are advised to choose influencers based on their ability to inspire and authenticate travel-related content (Böttger et al., 2017; Manthiou et al., 2024).

Several studies support this idea and the importance of inspiration as a key influencer characteristic for consumer behavior. For example, Cloe (2022) expanded the understanding of influencer inspiration by showing how consumers are both "inspired by" and "inspired to" adopt influencers' lifestyles, aesthetics, and opinions. The study shows that influencers shape not only purchasing decisions but also model new behaviors and social norms. Cloe (2022) also highlights that an influencer's appeal can significantly enhance their inspirational power.

Similarly, Ki et al. (2022) emphasize that consumers increasingly rely on influencers for inspiration, using their content to guide online purchase decisions. Babu (2024) also adds that inspiration directly influences purchase intention, linking it to increased consumer spending.

While inspiration is still not completely studied in social media marketing, it has strong potential to shape consumer behavior in today's fast-paced digital world, from the first discovery of a brand to building loyalty (Böttger et al., 2017). Most studies so far have connected inspiration with outcomes like purchase or travel intention (Cloe, 2022; Ki et al., 2022), but it's still unknown how it might impact parasocial relationships (PSRs). Since PSRs are emotional bonds between followers and influencers (Ki et al., 2020), inspiration could be an important factor in creating them. For example, when followers feel inspired by an influencer's content or ideas, they may feel closer and more connected to that influencer, which can also increase their intentions to buy or visit. This study looks at this gap and proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: The inspiration of the influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.

2.4.2. Authenticity

Moulard (2015) defined celebrity authenticity as the perception that a celebrity behaves in accordance with their true self, reflecting the growing significance of authenticity in the influencer space. Lehman et al. (2019) further expanded this idea, describing authenticity as what is real, genuine, and true, reenforcing authenticity's central role in influencer studies.

The importance of authenticity among social media influencers (SMIs) has evolved over time and is now widely recognized in academic research. Labrecque (2011) expressed the essential role of authenticity in building trust and fostering strong audience relationships.

Additionally, Moulard (2015) noted that while people can usually recognize their own authenticity, it is much harder to judge the authenticity of others. However, individuals often try to decide whether someone else seems genuine.

In the context of travel influencers, Zhu (2023) found that positive perceptions of authenticity enhance follower attachment, enjoyment, and intention to travel. His study also revealed that follower attachment mediates the relationship between destination authenticity and enjoyment, demonstrating authenticity's pivotal role in tourism influencer dynamics.

Furthermore, Liu & Zheng (2024) identified authenticity as the most powerful predictor of parasocial relationship (PSR) formation, confirming that authenticity significantly strengthens the emotional bond between influencer and follower, leading to the proposed hypothesis:

H2: Authenticity of the influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.

2.4.3. Source Credibility: Attractiveness, Expertise and Trustworthiness

Source credibility refers to the positive traits in a communicator that affect message acceptance, mainly expertise, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). An influencer's perceived credibility strengthens their bond with followers, fostering trust and persuasion that influence consumer behavior (Pick, 2020). Therefore, source credibility is crucial to forming parasocial relationships (PSRs) between influencers and audiences (Yuan et al., 2016; Ashraf et al., 2023). The next sections explore Ohanian's three credibility components—attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness—and research on their role in PSRs.

Attractiveness

Attractiveness is the degree to which an individual is perceived as visually appealing or aesthetically pleasing (Patzer, 1983). It is generally categorized into two dimensions: physical attractiveness, relating to outward appearance, and social attractiveness, which refers to shared beliefs and values—also known as attitude homophily. Research has shown that social attractiveness tends to have a stronger influence on parasocial interaction (PSI) than physical

attractiveness, as individuals are more drawn to media figures who reflect their own perspectives and values (Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Several studies highlight the relationship between attractiveness and consumer responses within marketing and consumer behavior. For example, Choi (2019) discovered that attractiveness significantly impacts viewers' attitudes toward products, while Yuan et al. (2016) demonstrated a direct link between attractiveness, parasocial relationships, and future consumer intentions. Taillon (2020) also emphasized physical attractiveness as a key predictor of favorable attitudes toward influencers and increased purchase intentions. However, closeness could moderate this relationship, suggesting that even less physically attractive influencers may still be effective if a strong bond exists with followers. (Taillon, 2020)

Additionally, Ki and Kim (2019) showed that attractive influencers are often seen as taste leaders, boosting the credibility of their content. Moreover, Lou and Kim (2019) found a positive relationship between influencer attractiveness and the strength of parasocial relationships (PSRs), which in turn affected materialism and purchase intentions. This underscores that attractiveness contributes not only to the formation of PSRs but also to consumer decision-making. Furthermore, Ashraf et al. (2023) identified that the attractiveness of travel social media influencers strengthens parasocial bonds with followers, which then fosters positive behavioral intentions.

For this study, the approach of Manthiou et al. (2024) will be adopted, who conceptualized attractiveness based on social and content-related attributes rather than physical appearance. While some authors studied the physical attractiveness of the influencers (Lou & Kim, 2019; Taillon, 2020), others focus on the aesthetic and quality dimensions of the influencer's content (Ki & Kim, 2019). Given that, in the context of travel and tourism, visually captivating destination content is essential, this study follows Manthiou et al.'s (2024) framework, excluding physical attractiveness and only focusing on the content attractiveness of the travel influencers. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Attractiveness of the influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.

Content Expertise

Expertise is a fundamental characteristic of social media influencers (SMIs) that significantly shapes their perceived credibility and effectiveness in influencing consumer behavior (Manthiou et al., 2024). When consumers perceive an influencer's content as demonstrating expertise, which involves providing valuable information and fostering interaction, they are more likely to regard that influencer as an opinion leader. (Ki & Kim, 2019). According to Ki & Kim (2019), expertise has the strongest impact on shaping consumer attitudes toward influencers, followed by informativeness and interactivity (Ki & Kim, 2019).

Supporting this, Choi (2019) confirmed the important role of expertise in shaping consumer attitudes, showing that influencers that are perceived as experts positively affect viewers' attitudes toward the endorsed products. Similarly, Lou & Yuan (2019) found that influencer expertise, alongside attractiveness, plays a crucial role in enhancing followers' brand awareness when engaging with influencer-generated branded content. Brands should prioritize collaborations with influencers who are trusted by their followers, rather than focusing solely on follower count or engagement metrics, since trust in influencer-branded content is a key driver of brand awareness and purchase intentions. (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Moreover, Ashraf et al. (2023) suggest that when influencers display expertise, followers are more inclined to establish parasocial ties, leading to greater purchase intentions.

Within the travel sector, Yilmazdoğan et al. (2021) found that an influencer's expertise directly impacts travel intentions and that parasocial interaction fully mediates the relationship between expertise and travel intention, meaning that when an Instagram influencer is perceived as an expert, the parasocial bond formed with their audience plays a critical role in guiding followers' travel decisions. Based on the literature presented, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: The Expertise of the influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the listener's degree of confidence in and acceptance of the speaker and the message, and it's a crucial attribute in evaluating influencers and their ability to shape audience perceptions and behaviors (Ohanian, 1990).

According to Xiao (2018), trustworthiness significantly enhances perceived information credibility, influencing both heuristic and systematic information processing. In a world where information spreads rapidly, internet users are constantly seeking sources that appear genuine and honest, making trustworthiness a crucial factor for marketers to take into consideration when evaluating the effectiveness of influencers. (Xiao, 2018).

Supporting this, Choi (2019) highlighted that there is an emotional bond that moderates the effect of trustworthiness on content-sharing intention, which means that when audiences developed a stronger emotional connection with vloggers, the perceived credibility of these vloggers had a greater influence on their willingness to share content. Additionally, Ashraf et al. (2023) found that trustworthiness significantly contributes to building parasocial relationships, which in turn shape followers' purchase-related intentions.

In the travel and tourism context, Yilmazdoğan et al. (2021) found that trustworthiness directly affected travel intention. Additionally, the study showed that parasocial interaction fully mediated this relationship, meaning that when an Instagram influencer is perceived as honest, the parasocial bond formed with their followers plays a mediating role in influencing travel intentions. This further supports the idea that trustworthiness fosters deeper connections between influencers and audiences, ultimately driving consumer behavior (Yilmazdoğan et al., 2021).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Trustworthiness of the influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.

2.5. Travel Intention

According to Cheng et al. (2020), travel intention is a behavioral intention that results from a cognitive process where individuals evaluate the pros and cons of different travel options, which then leads to a decision to take a trip, transforming motivation into action.

Social media influencers often maintain a sense of social distance but also create a psychological sense of proximity with their audience. This perceived similarity enhances parasocial interactions (PSIs), which, in turn, influence consumer decision-making (Kim, 2022). Research shows that PSIs significantly impact purchase intentions. For example, Lee and Watkins

(2016) found that parasocial interactions within YouTube vlogs foster positive perceptions of luxury brands, and as a result, increasing consumers' likelihood of purchase.

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) become stronger when influencers share personal aspects of their lives alongside branded content (Kim, 2022). The author explains that Instagram fitness influencers build a sense of social presence by posting relatable and personal content, which helps followers feel connected to them, not only strengthening one-sided bonds but also increasing followers' confidence and purchase intentions (Kim, 2022; Nadroo et al., 2024).

Conde and Casais (2023) also confirmed that PSRs have a direct, positive, and significant effect on the intention to adopt influencer recommendations. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: The strength of the parasocial relationship positively influences the intention to visit.

2.6. Micro, Macro and Mega Influencers

Influencers are commonly categorized by their follower count into groups such as Celebrity, Mega, Macro, Micro, and Nano Influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In this study, we will be focusing on three categories: Micro, Macro, and Mega Influencers.

Mega influencers have over one million followers and often attain celebrity status primarily through social media and they can earn up to $50,000 per post through paid brand partnerships. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Mega-influencers stand out for being popular and having a high opinion leadership. Due to their large audiences, there is a perceived popularity among mega-influencers, which boosts attributed opinion leadership. (Conde & Casais, 2023). Der Veirman et al (2017) have shown that mega-influencers can be more persuasive than micro-influencers, however, recent studies prove it otherwise. Because mega-influencers possess a larger number of followers, they end up creating fewer close connections compared to micro and macro-influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023). Although mega-influencers have been portrayed as less effective and authentic (Chan et al., 2023), some brands may still consider using them in specific situations. For example, when the fit between influencer and brand (brand–endorser congruence) is strong, mega-influencers may be more profitable. (Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023) However, when this congruence is not complete, macro-influencers are the better choice because they foster stronger involvement and engagement. (Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023)

Macro influencers, ranging from 100,000 to one million followers, tend to have high engagement rates and focus on specific niches such as travel or food. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Even though they earn less and have fewer followers compared to mega influencers, their substantial followings and niche focus make them valuable for brands, generating higher involvement and engagement with audiences compared to mega influencers. (Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023) Therefore, macro-influencers can be categorized as "less is more" and "more for less", since they can promote high engagement rates for a lower cost compared to mega-influencers. (Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023) This makes macro-influencers more effective than other influencer categories when it comes to driving consumers' digital engagement, due to their broad reach and interaction with followers. (Ndasi & CHEUNG, 2026)

Micro influencers, who have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, typically connect with smaller, more localized or specific audiences. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). They are authentic and approachable, which foster strong and genuine relationships with followers, making them highly effective at driving consumer purchases. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Micro influencers are usually perceived as more trustworthy and credible, which leads to higher engagement metrics such as visits, likes, and comments (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024). By building stronger parasocial relationships with followers, micro-influencers have a bigger persuasive power than mega influencers, who mainly rely on perceived opinion leadership. (Conde & Casais, 2023) In fact, using multiple micro influencers at once can generate as much or even greater impact than partnering with a single mega or macro influencer, especially when targeting specific audiences, allowing brands to reach niche markets more cost-effectively (Van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024; Appel et al., 2020). For niche products, the fit between the product and influencer and content quality is often more important than follower count, because that is what preserves uniqueness and authenticity (De Veirman et al., 2017). In conclusion, micro-influencers are more successful because they are perceived as more authentic, they can build strong personal connections with followers by interacting directly with them, and face low entry barriers when creating content, making them accessible and appealing to both audiences and brands. (Chan et al., 2023)

Although follower count is a common way to classify influencers, marketers should collaborate with influencers who are friendly, interactive, and produce visually appealing, authentic content,

instead of focusing on the follower size of the influencers. (Cloe, 2022). The more followers feel involved with an influencer (parasocial relationships), the stronger their engagement is with the brand, emphasizing the need for brands to consider content quality, engagement levels, and influencer style, rather than focus solely on follower numbers. (Conde & Casais, 2023; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023).

This study therefore focuses on Mega, Macro, and Micro Influencers to analyze how their ranking affects consumer behavior, leading to the following proposition:

P1: Influencer ranking (Micro, Macro, and Mega) serves as a model moderator.

3. Conceptual Model and Research Hypothesis

The theoretical framework presented in Figure 1 provides a detailed overview of the research concept, illustrating the relationships between key constructs. It examines the influence of travel influencer characteristics such as attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, inspiration, and authenticity on the strength of parasocial relationships and the intention to visit or conversion. Therefore, the hypotheses tested in this framework are:

- **H1:** Inspiration of the travel influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- **H2:** Authenticity of the travel influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- **H3:** Attractiveness of the travel influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- **H4:** Expertise of the travel influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- **H5:** Trustworthiness of the travel influencer positively influences the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- **H6:** The strength of the parasocial relationship positively influences the intention to visit a destination.

Additionally, the framework incorporates a preposition that explores the role of influencer ranking categories for micro, macro, and mega influencer and testing their potential moderating effects on all of these relationships:

- **P1**: Influencer ranking (Micro, Macro, and Mega) serves as a model moderator.

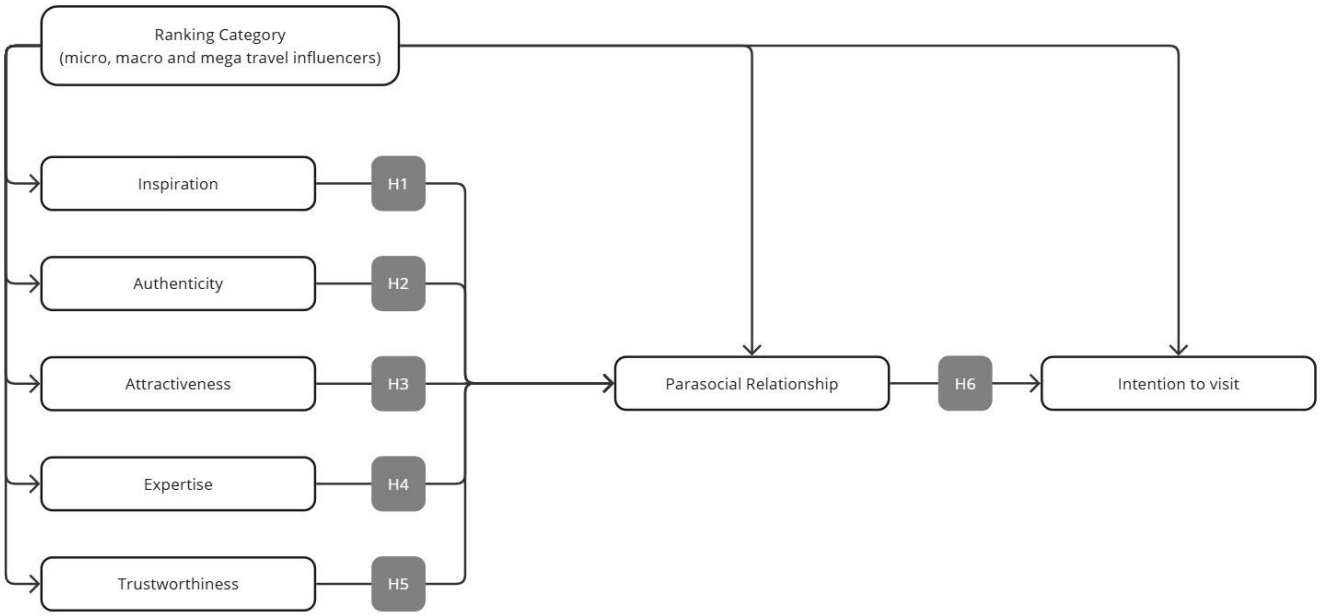


Figure 1 *– Proposed research model*

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopted a sequential mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The research focuses on Generation Z in Portugal, a cohort known for its digital nativeness and strong engagement with social media, making it particularly relevant for studying the influence of travel influencers on tourism-related decision-making.

The primary objective is to examine how travel influencer characteristics shape parasocial relationships and, consequently, how these relationships affect the intention to visit recommended destinations. Additionally, the study explores whether these dynamics differ across the three influencer ranking categories—micro, macro, and mega.

To address these aims, data collection was conducted in two stages. The first phase consisted of a qualitative focus group discussion designed to generate exploratory insights into how Portuguese Gen Z perceives travel influencers. The second phase employed a quantitative survey to validate these insights on a larger scale and test the relationships proposed in the research model. By integrating both exploratory and confirmatory perspectives, this design ensures greater depth and validity in addressing the research questions.

4.2. Focus Group Design

4.2.1. Structure and Procedure

The qualitative stage consisted of three online focus group sessions, with a total of 17 participants: two groups with six participants and one with five. All participants belonged to the target population of Generation Z, from 13-28 years old, born between 1997 and 2012 (see Appendix A).

To guide the focus group discussions, the following qualitative research question (QRQ) was formulated:

QRQ: How do Generation Z travelers perceive and engage with Portuguese micro, macro, and mega travel influencers, and what contributes to the development of parasocial relationships and travel intentions?

Before conducting the sessions, it was essential to validate the influencer ranking categories within the Portuguese context. The classification proposed by Conde and Casais (2023) for the beauty and lifestyle sector—micro-influencers (1,000–20,000 followers), macro-influencers (20,000–100,000), and mega-influencers (over 100,000)—was used as a reference. To confirm its relevance in the travel and tourism sector, a sample of 100 Portuguese travel influencers was compiled using the same method applied by Conde and Casais (2023), namely Instagram searches and recommended accounts (see Appendix B). Each influencer was listed with follower counts and classified according to the proposed thresholds (see Appendix C). The distribution supported the applicability of this classification within the tourism context. Although follower counts on Instagram were used for classification, this was purely a methodological decision to ensure consistency with existing thresholds. The study itself is not limited to Instagram or any single platform but investigates travel influencers in a broader sense.

From this database, one influencer from each category was randomly selected for use in the focus groups. Participants were then contacted via WhatsApp and provided with the selected influencer profiles in advance. This ensured that all participants, even those unfamiliar with the influencers, had sufficient time to review the profiles and contribute meaningfully to the discussions and, at the start of each session, participants confirmed they had reviewed the profiles. Additionally, to preserve privacy, influencers are referred to only by their category (micro, macro, or mega).

During the discussions, participants compared the three influencers across seven dimensions: authenticity, attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, inspiration, parasocial relationships, and intention to visit, as can be seen in the Focus group script in Appendix D. Conversations were open-ended but also included ranking tasks, where participants ordered the influencers from highest to lowest on each dimension using the interactive tool *Mentimeter* (see Appendix E).

4.2.2. Data Analysis

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed using the *Notta* transcription tool. Transcripts were cross-checked against the recordings and thematically analyzed in Excel (see Appendix F). To protect privacy, all participant data were anonymized and coded.

4.3. Survey Design

4.3.1. Survey structure

The second stage of the research involved a survey distributed to a broader sample of the Generation Z population, aiming to quantify the impact of influencer characteristics on their intention to visit travel destinations. The survey gathered both demographic data and responses to constructs derived from the literature review. This quantitative phase was designed not only to statistically support the findings from the qualitative phase but also to test the hypotheses formulated in this study.

The questionnaire was primarily disseminated through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. It was developed and administered using Qualtrics Survey Software and was structured into three main sections. (see Appendix G)

The first section focused on respondents' travel-related behaviors, preferences, and habits. The second section measured the study's core constructs, such as inspiration, authenticity, attractiveness, content expertise, and trustworthiness, and their impact on parasocial relationships and the intention to visit destinations promoted by influencers. All constructs were measured using previously validated scales from the literature. Lastly, the third section collected key demographic information (e.g., age, gender, and education level).

Additionally, by asking participants in the beginning of the survey to identify a travel influencer's name or username they knew or followed, and answer the following questions based on that influencer, it was also possible to categorize each influencer and examine whether the ranking categories (micro, macro, and mega-influencers) impacted the development of parasocial relationships and the intention to visit promoted destinations, as can be seen in Appendix G.

4.3.2. Data measurement and Scales

To ensure consistency across measurements, all variables were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale (Manthiou et al., 2024). Some original scales from prior studies, such as Conde and Casais (2023), were originally developed using 5-point Likert formats. However, these were adapted to a 7-point scale by introducing intermediate response options, preserving the semantic meaning of the

original items while allowing for more nuanced participant responses. This adaptation ensured alignment across all constructs, improving data comparability and measurement precision.

***Table 1**- Constructs and sources*

Construct	Measure	Scales' Author	Rating Scale	No. of Items
Content expertise	This travel influencer's content is unique; I like this travel influencer's personality; The influencer complements destinations well with their stories.	Manthiou et al. (2024), based on Ki & Kim (2019) and Lou & Yuan (2019)	Likert scale (7 point)	4
Inspiration	This travel influencer inspires me to travel; This travel influencer is a source of inspiration for my trips; This travel influencer gives me ideas for my trips; This travel influencer shows original places.	Manthiou et al. (2024)	Likert scale (7 point)	4
Attractiveness	This travel influencer knows a lot about destinations, accommodations, restaurants, and activities; The influencer's videos are beautiful and aesthetically pleasing; The influencer's videos are high quality. I see harmony between the influencer and the places they visit; I like the travel influencer's style.	Manthiou et al. (2024), based on Ki & Kim (2019) and Lou & Yuan (2019)	Likert scale (7 point)	5
Trustworthiness	I trust this travel influencer; This travel influencer is honest.	Manthiou et al. (2024), based on Lou & Yuan, (2019)	Likert scale (7 point) Likert scale (7 point)	2
Authenticity	This travel influencer is authentic; This travel influencer shows reality.	Manthiou et al. (2024), based on Audrezet et al., (2018)	Likert scale (7 point)	2

Parasocial Relationship	This person reminds me of myself; I share the same qualities as this person; I seem to have the same beliefs and attitudes as this person; I have the same problems as this person; I can imagine myself being this person; I can identify with this person.	Adaptation of Conde & Casais (2023) based on Auter and Palmgreen (2000)	Likert scale (5 point)	6
Intention to visit	I would feel comfortable traveling with brands promoted by this travel influencer; I would feel comfortable traveling to the places promoted by this travel influencer; I would not hesitate to consider travel destination suggestions I find on this influencer's Instagram account; I would feel safe following travel destination suggestions I find on this influencer's Instagram account; I would trust the travel recommendations made by this influencer.	Adaptation of Conde & Casais (2023) from Casaló et al. (2020)	Likert scale (5 point)	5

4.3.3. Pre-test

Additionally, before releasing the questionnaire, a pre-test was conducted to ensure its quality and to identify any necessary modifications. The main objective was to verify whether the survey was too long or repetitive, as this could affect response quality and completion rates. The pre-test included 15 Generation Z respondents, who indicated that the parasocial relationship items were overly extensive. Based on this feedback, parasocial relationships were measured using 6 items adapted from the original 22-item Parasocial Interaction Scale developed by Auter and Palmgreen (2000). Specifically, the selected items came from the "Identification" dimension, which reflects the emotional and psychological connection between followers and influencers. This dimension was considered most relevant to the context of this study. The scale was shortened to reduce participant fatigue and improve clarity, while maintaining conceptual validity. Table 1 above presents the measurement scales and the number of items used for each construct.

4.3.4. Ethics Committee Approval

The survey was approved by the ISCTE Business School Ethics Committee (Project IBS_EC 024/2025). In order to follow the committee's guidelines, participation was limited to people aged between 18 and 28 years old, since minors could not be included in the study. Therefore, the first

question of the survey worked as a filter: “Do you have between 18–28 years old?”, and if the answer was “no,” the survey ended automatically (see Appendix G). The committee also confirmed that the study respected the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and the anonymity and confidentiality of all data collected.

4.4. Data Collection and Sample

From the 400 responses initially collected, data cleaning left a final valid sample of 203 participants, all members of Generation Z. The sample was entirely Portuguese and fell within the targeted age range of 18–28 years (see Tables H.1 and H.2, Appendix H).

In terms of gender, the sample was largely female (61,58%), and men accounted for just over one-third (35,96%) and only a small fraction identified as non-binary or preferred not to say (2,46%) (see Table H.3, Appendix H). Consistent with their age group, almost all respondents reported being single (94,58%) and without children (98,52%), with only a handful indicating marriage or parenthood (see Tables H.4 and H.5, Appendix H).

Travel frequency revealed a relatively active pattern of domestic mobility: almost half reported traveling within Portugal two to three times per year (47,29%), and a quarter traveled at least four times annually (26,11%). International travel was less frequent, with most respondents traveling abroad once per year (53,69%), and a smaller segment traveling multiple times annually (see Tables H.6 and H.7, Appendix H).

Social dimensions of travel were also evident, where friends (33,56%) and parents (32,87%), were the most common travel companions, followed by significant others, as can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2- *Travel Companions Reported by Respondents*

Travel companions	***n***	**% of responses**	**% of cases**
Parents	143,00	32,87	70,44
Friends	146,00	33,56	71,92
Significant other	98,00	22,53	48,28

Note. Respondents could select more than one option.

When asked about influences on destination choice, participants most often emphasized personal networks and self-directed research. Friends (20,83%), Family (16,86%), and personal searches on the Internet (20,00%) stood out as the strongest influences. Traditional sources such as blogs, travel websites, and television had comparatively little influence, as can be seen in Table 3 below.

***Table 3**- Factors Influencing Destination Choice*

Factor	***n***	**% of responses**	**% of cases**
Travel influencers	68,00	11,24	33,83
Family	102,00	16,86	50,75
Friends	126,00	20,83	62,69
Blogs and travel websites	29,00	4,79	14,43
TV programs and travel documentaries	24,00	3,97	11,94
Acquaintances	88,00	14,55	43,78
Personal search on the Internet	121,00	20,00	60,20

Note. Respondents could select more than one option.

Finally, more than half of respondents reported following Portuguese travel influencers (58,13%) Among those who did, the vast majority associated them with the mega-influencer category (74,88%), while only a minority identified macro- or micro-influencers (see Tables H.8 and H.9, Appendix H).

4.5. Data analysis

The data analysis followed a structured process using SPSS and complemented by SmartPLS for model validation.

First, the dataset was examined in SPSS to detect missing values, outliers, and assess distribution normality. Once the data was cleaned, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents.

To test the research hypotheses, means comparisons and simple and multiple linear regressions were performed. These analyses provided direct insights into the influence of travel influencer characteristics on parasocial relationships and, subsequently, on the intention to visit. The regressions also allowed the evaluation of the explanatory power of the independent variables, as well as the identification of the most relevant predictors within the model.

In addition, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was conducted using SmartPLS to complement the regression analysis and provide a more detailed examination of the proposed conceptual model. The PLS-SEM procedure consisted of two steps: 1)Assessment of the measurement model, through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), Fornell–Larcker criterion and heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT); 2) Assessment of the structural model, by analyzing path coefficients, effect sizes (f^2), and the coefficient of determination (R^2). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to determine the statistical significance of the relationships. (Hair et al., 2017).

By combining traditional regression techniques with PLS-SEM, the analysis ensured both a straightforward statistical test of the hypotheses and a more comprehensive validation of the conceptual model.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Results

In line with the exploratory sequential mixed-methods design of this study, the results are presented in two stages. First, the qualitative findings from the focus groups are reported, providing initial insights into how Portuguese Generation Z travelers perceive and engage with travel influencers across ranking categories. These themes form the basis for the subsequent quantitative analysis. Second, the survey results are presented, offering statistical evidence to test the proposed hypotheses and further examine the relationships identified in the qualitative phase. Together, these complementary approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of influencer characteristics and ranking categories in shaping parasocial relationships and travel intentions.

5.1.1. Qualitative results

Three focus groups were conducted in which participants compared micro, macro, and mega influencers across the dimensions of authenticity, attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, inspiration, parasocial relationships, and intention to visit. Additionally, they were asked to rank the influencers accordingly, and the responses were registered through the app *Mentimeter* (see Appendix E). The following sections present the thematic analysis, supported by illustrative quotes and the final rankings. For reference, F1, F2, and F3 denote the focus groups, and P1, P2, etc., the participants (Appendix A).

Inspiration

Participants perceived the mega-influencer as the most inspiring, mainly due to the aspirational nature of his content. His lifestyle, which is significantly different from the norm, was described as utopian and almost impossible to achieve. This created a sense of wonder and desire among participants, characterized as a parallel reality: *"I also choose the mega influencer, but maybe because his lifestyle is the most different from mine. It's almost like a dream or a parallel reality, and it makes me want to experience a bit of it."* (F1, P5)

However, not all participants agreed. Some found the mega-influencer's content too far-fetched and unrealistic, which made it harder for them to feel inspired. Instead, they found the macro and micro influencers more relatable and therefore more inspirational: *"The mega influencer's content is wow (...) but exactly because of that, for me, it feels so unattainable or far*

from my reality that I don't feel inspired in that sense. (...) The macro and micro influencer's content feels closer to my reality, and I feel like I could actually do it or get there someday." (F1, P3)

While some found daily inspiration in the micro influencer's realistic content, others turned to the mega influencer when dreaming about their ideal lifestyle.

"In day-to-day life, the micro-influencer would inspire me more. It fits more with my world—not to say that if I want to dream, I don't go to the mega influencer's profile—but if I want something closer to my own style and a more realistic, reachable vision, I go to the micro-influencer's profile." (F3, P15)

The macro influencer was often described as a hybrid, not too distant but not too ordinary either. This balance made her inspirational to some participants who appreciated both realism and aspiration in travel content: *"I'd choose the macro influencer. Just because it's more diverse. (...) She's kind of a hybrid of the two, so maybe she inspires me more to visit those kinds of places."* (F3, P15)

The ranking of most to least inspiring was: mega-influencer, micro-influencer, macro-influencer (see Figure E.1 in Appendix E).

Authenticity

The mega-influencer was largely perceived as the least authentic by participants, with a few exceptions. Those who viewed him as authentic justified it by the consistency between his content and the lifestyle he portrays: *"The mega influencer feels more authentic to me because he shows the lifestyle he's living. He really shows his way of life. I don't think he focuses that much on the trips or destinations—it's more about the lifestyle."* (F1, P4)

However, the majority disagreed, suggesting that the mega influencer's content felt extremely polished, aiming to sell a luxurious and perfect lifestyle. This perception was linked to the high production quality, professional editing, and constant focus on glamorous aspects of traveling: *"I feel that the mega influencer and the content he publishes are more about selling an idea than an experience... It's all very high tech, very HD, and only shows the fun parts of the trip."* (F2, P3)

In contrast, both the macro and micro influencers were described as more authentic. Participants appreciated that they shared useful and transparent information such as prices, itineraries, and local experiences. The macro influencer's authenticity was tied to her practical travel tips and spontaneous posting style: *"The macro-influencer actually seemed quite authentic to me because she shares a lot of tips and includes prices for things like trips, attractions, and experiences. I think that's really interesting."* (F1, P3)

The micro influencer was perceived as the most authentic by some participants, particularly due to her focus on domestic travel within Portugal and her less polished, down-to-earth content: *"I actually think the micro-influencer seems more authentic to me, maybe because of the type of trips she takes—she travels a lot within Portugal, so everything feels much more doable.*" (F1, P5)

Participants consistently emphasized relatability as crucial to authenticity. The micro influencer's accessible content and personal touch made her feel especially authentic: *"When I follow a travel influencer, I like to follow someone I can relate to. In this case, the planning and the prices help a lot.*" (F1, P3)

The ranking of most to least authentic was: micro-influencer, macro-influencer, mega-influencer (see Figure E.2 in Appendix E).

Attractiveness

The mega influencer was widely perceived as having the most visually appealing content, with participants describing his profile as "perfect," featuring high-quality visuals, paradisiac destinations, and professional editing: *"The most visually appealing content is the mega influencer—everything is perfect. And I think that's also what sometimes makes it feel less authentic."* (F1, P1)

However, several noted that the content, while attractive, felt too generic, likely due to his need to appeal to a broader audience: *"I have to agree that the mega influencer also has the most visually appealing content. (...) But the problem is, since he has a big following, to please so many people, the content also has to be more generic than if he had just a specific niche following.*" (F2, P9)

The macro influencer was appreciated for presenting a more balanced feed, visually attractive but with a focus on cultural experiences and storytelling: *"I prefer the macro influencer's profile because she combines landscapes with the culture of these countries. She shows both sides. I feel*

the mega influencer shows a lot of just the landscape, while the macro and micro influencers combine culture and scenery. Personally, I find that much more appealing." (F2, P11)

Interestingly, some expressed a preference for the micro influencer's aesthetic, which felt warmer, more relatable, and similar to content shared by close friends: *"I think the micro-influencer has that more "dump" aesthetic you'd see a friend do, which I also really liked to see.".* (F2, P3)

The ranking of most to least attractive was: mega-influencer, macro-influencer, micro-influencer (see Figure E.3 in Appendix E).

Expertise

Despite having the most visually appealing content, the mega influencer was not seen as the most expert. Participants described his posts as overly aesthetic and lacking practical details: *"The mega influencer's content is visually the most beautiful, but then when you open it, for example, there's no detailed tutorial on how things are done.*" (F1, P1)

The macro influencer was most frequently identified as the true expert, due to her detailed travel budgets, tips, and cultural context: *"For me, it would also definitely be the macro influencer because she recommends much more affordable trips and details many aspects of those trips, so we can have a complete view of them and roughly estimate how much we would spend."* (F2, P11)

The micro influencer was also considered knowledgeable, especially for domestic travel within Portugal, with detailed captions including historical facts, expenses, and recommendations: *"I'd say the micro-influencer, because she gives plenty of tips on what to do, she seems to know what she's talking about and what to recommend.*" (F1, P4)

The ranking of most to least expert was: macro-influencer, micro-influencer, mega-influencer (see Figure E.4 in Appendix E).

Trustworthiness

Most participants agreed that the mega influencer appeared to be the least trustworthy, primarily due to the overly polished lifestyle he presented: *"I don't trust the mega influencer; I think it's all fake. It's like that saying, "things aren't quite like that on social media," and I think he's a good example of that. The quality is excellent, everything is excellent, but he sells a perfect life.*" (F3, P17)

In contrast, the macro influencer's transparency, especially regarding budgets, contributed to greater trust: *"The macro-influencer would be kind of in between because she (...) shares the full budget and details of what I can do."* (F1, P4)

The micro influencer was also seen as highly trustworthy due to her relatable, accessible content: *"I think the micro influencer, because she visits a lot of European countries and also Portugal, and I really like to know Portugal thoroughly, so I also trust her."* (F3, P17)

The ranking of most to least trustworthy was: macro-influencer, micro-influencer, mega-influencer (see Figure E.5 in Appendix E).

Parasocial Relationship

Participants reported feeling the least connection with the mega influencer, often due to his luxurious lifestyle and polished content: *"The mega-influencer's content feels like it's for selling. It's like a storefront.*" (F2, P11)

The macro influencer was frequently described as a balanced middle ground, appreciated for her personal and transparent style: *"The macro-influencer's trips have a personal touch—she shares family moments, friends, her boyfriend—and I like her Instagram's presentation from the start, so I'm naturally drawn to it. Also, her tips make it easier to connect. So, I think the macro-influencer creates a connection with me."* (F1, P1)

The micro influencer was seen as the most relatable and connected, particularly due to her focus on Portugal and realistic travel experiences: *"The micro-influencer would be first because of her content, I'd like to see her photos every day. Her destinations are places I like, like Portugal, something I can do on a weekend or quickly. And when she goes abroad, those places attract me too.*" (F1, P5)

The ranking of most to least connection was: macro-influencer, micro-influencer, mega-influencer (see Figure E.6 in Appendix E).

Intention to Visit

Participants generally agreed that influencers are not the sole decisive factor in their intention to visit a destination. Instead, influencers acted as sources of inspiration or "teasers" for trips: *"I follow these people mainly to get the most out of my trips. I want to go somewhere and then*

research or get inspired by what appears in my feed. It helps me choose a destination and plan the trip. It also creates that FOMO—the fear of missing some special place I want to visit." (F1, P5)

Influencers were perceived to shape *what to do at a destination* more than the choice of destination itself, with practical considerations such as price and budget playing a larger role: *"I think they don't make me choose the destination, but rather what to do once I'm there.*" (F1, P2)

The authenticity and transparency of the influencer were crucial in shaping desire to visit: *"The micro-influencer recommends a lot of places to go, landscapes to see, and so on. The mega influencer sells just the place itself. The macro influencer is different—I think the macro influencer really shows the culture. (…) And that's why the macro influencer makes me want to visit the places she recommends.*" (F2, P3)

Long-term engagement with an influencer also increased the likelihood of visiting a recommended destination:*"If it's an influencer you have a relationship with or someone you've followed for a long time, and you know the content, and you know the person is authentic and speaks with criteria, there's more desire to visit the destinations.*" (F3, P15)

Finally, participants emphasized that family and friends remained highly influential in shaping travel intentions:*"I feel more like going to places, not so much because of influencers, but because my friends say it's a good place."* (F3, P16)

5.1.2. Quantitative results

5.1.2.1. Exploratory Factor Analysis and Reliability

Before conducting the main statistical analyses, the adequacy of the data for factor analysis was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. As shown in Table 4, the KMO values ranged from 0.500 (Authenticity and Trustworthiness) to 0.890 (Parasocial Relationship), so these values are considered acceptable. Although Authenticity and Trustworthiness obtained the lowest KMO values (0.500), this can be explained by the fact that both constructs were measured with only two items, which naturally limits shared variance. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant for all constructs ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlation matrices were not identity matrices and that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

Table 4 *- KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for Each Construct*

Construct	KMO	χ^2 (df)	Sig.
Expertise	0.706	212.265 (3)	< 0.001
Inspiration	0.751	411.552 (6)	< 0.001
Attractiveness	0.761	458.750 (10)	< 0.001
Trustworthiness	0.500	203.786 (1)	< 0.001
Authenticity	0.500	192.206 (1)	< 0.001
Parasocial relationship	0.890	851.296 (15)	< 0.001
Intention to visit	0.879	911.364 (10)	< 0.001

In order to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each construct included in the study, presented in Table 5. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming satisfactory levels of reliability across the scales. The influencer characteristics showed Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.813 for Expertise to 0.886 for Trustworthiness, indicating good internal consistency. Inspiration ($\alpha = 0.855$), Authenticity ($\alpha = 0.878$), and Attractiveness ($\alpha = 0.830$) also demonstrated robust reliability, suggesting that the items for each dimension were consistently measuring the intended characteristic. The Parasocial Relationship construct reported a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.913, while Intention to Visit reached 0.937. Both values are well above the 0.90 threshold, which is commonly interpreted as evidence of excellent internal consistency.

Together, these results confirm that the constructs included in this study are both adequate for factor analysis and reliable, supporting their use in subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 5 *- Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha) for Each Construct*

Construct	Nº of items	Cronbach's α

Expertise	3	0.813
Inspiration	4	0.855
Attractiveness	5	0.830
Trustworthiness	2	0.886
Authenticity	2	0.878
Parasocial relationship	6	0.913
Intention to visit	5	0.937

5.1.2.2. Regression Analysis

To test hypotheses H1–H5, a multiple linear regression was conducted with parasocial relationships as the dependent variable and inspiration, expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and authenticity as predictors. The assumptions of regression were checked and met (see Appendix I).

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(5, 197) = 26.584$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 40.3% of the variance in parasocial relationships ($R^2 = 0.403$). Among the predictors, inspiration ($\beta = 0.282$, $p < 0.001$) and trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.293$, $p = 0.005$) were significant positive determinants of parasocial relationships. Expertise ($\beta = 0.098$, $p = 0.274$), Attractiveness ($\beta = -0.074$, $p = 0.343$), and authenticity ($\beta = 0.101$, $p = 0.303$) were not significant (see Table 6). Thus, H1 and H4 were supported, whereas H2, H3, and H5 were not.

Table 6 *- Multiple Regression Predicting Parasocial Relationship*

Predictor	**β**	**t**	**p**
Inspiration	0.282	3.480	**< 0.001**
Expertise	0.098	1.096	0.274
Attractiveness	-0.074	-0.951	0.343
Trustworthiness	0.293	2.838	**0.005**

Authenticity	0.101	1.032	0.303

Model summary: $F(5, 197) = 26.584$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .403$

To test H6, a simple linear regression was conducted with intention to visit as the dependent variable and parasocial relationships as the predictor. The assumptions of regression were checked and met, as can be seen in Appendix J.

Table 7 shows that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 201) = 83.052$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 29.2% of the variance in intention to visit ($R^2 = 0.292$). Parasocial relationships were a significant positive predictor of intention to visit ($\beta = 0.541$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide strong support for H6.

Table 7 - *Simple Regression Predicting Intention to Visit from Parasocial Relationship*

Predictor	**β**	**t**	**p**
Parasocial relationship	0.541	9.113	**< 0.001**

Model summary: $F(1, 201) = 83.052$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .292$

An additional multiple linear regression was conducted to test whether influencer characteristics directly predict intention to visit. Appendix K shows that the assumptions of regression were checked and met.

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(5, 197) = 60.84$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 60.7% of the variance in intention to visit ($R^2 = 0.607$). Inspiration ($\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.004$), Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.003$), and Trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.506$, $p < 0.001$) were significant positive predictors. Expertise ($\beta = –0.079$, $p = 0.281$) and Authenticity ($\beta = 0.063$, $p = 0.431$) were not significant (see Table 8).

Table 8 *- Multiple Regression Predicting Intention to Visit*

Predictor	β	t	p
Inspiration	0.191	2.909	**0.004**
Expertise	-0.079	-1.080	0.281
Attractiveness	0.191	3.030	**0.003**
Trustworthiness	0.506	6.048	**< 0 .001**
Authenticity	0.063	0.790	0.431

Model summary: $F(5, 197) = 60.84$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .607$

These results highlight that inspiration, attractiveness, and trustworthiness play a direct role in shaping intention to visit. Interestingly, attractiveness did not significantly influence parasocial relationships in the previous analysis but emerged as a direct predictor of intention to visit. This suggests that some influencer traits may bypass parasocial relationships and exert a more immediate effect on travel intentions.

5.1.2.3. PLS-SEM Analysis

To test the conceptual model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed, using partial least squares (PLS) with SmartPLS 3 (Ringle et al., 2015). Following the two-step approach recommended by Hair et al. (2017), the measurement model was first evaluated, and then the structural model was assessed.

Measurement model evaluation

The measurement model was assessed for indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. (Appendix L) All standardized factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.705 to 0.952, and all loadings were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, confirming indicator reliability. (Table L.1, Appendix L)

Table L.2 (Appendix L) shows that internal consistency was supported, as Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.816 to 0.938, and composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.886 to 0.953, all above the recommended level of 0.70. Convergent validity was also established, with average variance extracted (AVE) values between 0.661 and 0.892, exceeding the 0.50 benchmark.

These results demonstrate that each construct explained more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Discriminant validity was confirmed using two approaches. First, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was satisfied, as the square root of each construct's AVE was greater than its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Second, the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2017), providing further support for discriminant validity, as can be seen in Table 9 below.

Table 9 *- Composite reliability, AVE, correlations, and discriminant validity checks*

Latent Variables	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Attractiveness	.847	.886	.661	**.813**	.538	.726	.655	.577	.473	.614
(2) Authenticity	.880	.943	.892	.535	**.945**	.830	.734	.704	.620	.913
(3) Expertise	.816	.890	.730	.644	.712	**.854**	.779	.657	.620	.840
(4) Inspiration	.853	.902	.698	.608	.633	.646	**.836**	.709	.654	.759
(5) Intention_visit	.938	.953	.802	.556	.640	.583	.633	**.896**	.601	.815
(6) Parasocial	.919	.939	.756	.483	.564	.549	.581	.561	**.870**	.664
(7) Trustworthiness	.888	.947	.899	.595	.809	.725	.659	.745	.604	**.948**

Note: a = Cronbach's Alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. The bold values represent the square roots of the AVE. The numbers displayed below the diagonal are the correlations among the constructs, while the numbers above the diagonal indicate the HTMT ratios.

Structural model evaluation

Collinearity was first examined through the variance inflation factor (VIF). All VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 3.568, well below the conservative threshold of 5, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

The explanatory power of the model was evaluated using R^2 (Table L.3, Appendix L). Parasocial relationships were explained by influencer characteristics with an R^2 of 0.437 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.423$), while intention to visit was explained by parasocial relationships with an R^2 of 0.315

(adjusted $R^2 = 0.311$). According to Hair et al. (2017), these values indicate moderate explanatory power.

Effect sizes (f^2) were further analyzed to assess the relative contribution of each predictor (Table L.4, Appendix L) Parasocial relationships had a large effect on intention to visit ($f^2 = 0.460$). Inspiration ($f^2 = 0.052$) and trustworthiness ($f^2 = 0.031$) had small-to-moderate effects on parasocial relationships, while attractiveness ($f^2 = 0.005$), authenticity ($f^2 = 0.006$), and expertise ($f^2 = 0.004$) had negligible effects.

Regarding path significance, as can be seen below in Table 10, inspiration ($\beta = 0.253$; $t = 2.545$; $p = 0.011$) and trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.249$; $t = 2.375$; $p = 0.018$) were found to positively influence parasocial relationships. Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.071$; $t = 0.891$; $p = 0.373$), authenticity ($\beta = 0.105$; $t = 0.968$; $p = 0.333$), and expertise ($\beta = 0.084$; $t = 0.725$; $p = 0.468$) were not significant predictors. In turn, parasocial relationships had a strong positive effect on intention to visit ($\beta = 0.561$; $t = 10.601$; p 0.000).

Table 10 *- Structural model assessment*

Path	**Coefficient**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
Attractiveness → Parasocial	0.071	0.080	0.891	0.373
Authenticity → Parasocial	0.105	0.108	0.968	0.333
Expertise → Parasocial	0.084	0.115	0.725	0.468
Inspiration → Parasocial	0.253	0.099	2.545	**0.011**
Trustworthiness → Parasocial	0.249	0.105	2.375	**0.018**
Parasocial → Intention to visit	0.561	0.053	10.601	**0.000**

The mediation analysis, described below in Table 11, further revealed significant indirect effects of inspiration ($\beta = 0.142$; $t = 2.288$; $p = 0.022$) and trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.140$; $t = 2.154$; $p = 0.031$) on intention to visit through parasocial relationships. Other influencer characteristics did not exhibit significant indirect effects.

Table 11 *- Bootstrapping results for indirect effects*

Path	Estimate	SD	t	p
Expertise → Parasocial → Intention to visit	0.047	0.065	0.721	0.471
Inspiration → Parasocial → Intention to visit	0.142	0.062	2.288	**0.022**
Trustworthiness → Parasocial → Intention to visit	0.140	0.065	2.154	**0.031**
Attractiveness → Parasocial → Intention to visit	0.040	0.044	0.900	0.368
Authenticity → Parasocial → Intention to visit	0.059	0.061	0.968	0.333

Taken together, these results confirm that inspiration and trustworthiness are key drivers of parasocial relationships, which in turn significantly shape intention to visit.

For Proposition 1, which predicted that influencer ranking category (micro, macro, and mega) would moderate the relationships between influencer characteristics, parasocial relationships, and intention to visit, it could not be tested within the PLS-SEM framework due to the limited sample size. Instead, moderation effects were explored through means comparisons, presented in the next section.

5.1.2.4. Mean Comparisons Across Influencers' Characteristics

Although moderation could not be tested within PLS-SEM, mean comparisons were conducted to further explore Proposition 1. These examined whether perceptions of the five influencer characteristics, parasocial relationships, and intention to visit varied across micro, macro, and mega-influencers. Results showed a consistent pattern: micro- and macro-influencers were generally evaluated more positively than mega-influencers.

Table 12 shows that Inspiration was rated positively across all influencer categories, but macro-influencers received the highest overall evaluations (M = 5.62, SD = 1.33). Micro-influencers followed closely (M = 5.56, SD = 1.23), while mega-influencers scored slightly lower (M = 5.29, SD = 1.64). Macro-influencers stood out particularly in “showing original places” (M = 5.77, SD = 1.21) and “giving travel ideas” (M = 5.58, SD = 1.42), whereas mega-influencers obtained the lowest rating for originality (M = 5.25, SD = 1.41).

Table 12 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Inspiration Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Inspires me to travel (M, SD)	Source of inspiration for my trips (M, SD)	Gives me travel ideas (M, SD)	Shows original places (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	5.56 (1.23)	4.40 (1.55)	5.40 (1.38)	5.68 (1.55)
Macro-influencer	**5.62 (1.33)**	**4.62 (1.68)**	**5.58 (1.42)**	**5.77 (1.21)**
Mega-influencer	5.29 (1.64)	4.43 (1.80)	5.05 (1.65)	5.25 (1.41)

A similar pattern emerged for authenticity, observed in Table 13 below. Macro-influencers were rated as the most authentic ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.06$), especially in "showing reality" ($M = 6.15$, $SD = 0.92$). Micro-influencers were also positively evaluated ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.59$), while mega-influencers scored considerably lower ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.51$), with the weakest score on "showing reality" ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.61$).

Table 13 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Authenticity Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Authentic (M, SD)	Shows reality (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	5.88 (1.59)	5.56 (1.69)
Macro-influencer	**6.08 (1.06)**	**6.15 (0.92)**
Mega-influencer	5.11 (1.51)	4.81 (1.61)

In terms of attractiveness, described in Table 14, which captured style, content quality, and visual appeal, macro-influencers again scored highest on most items, including "harmony with destinations" ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.98$) and "personal style" ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.18$). Mega-influencers, however, achieved the strongest ratings for aesthetics ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 1.20$) and high-quality posts ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 1.08$). Micro-influencers generally fell between the two groups but were also recognized for creating visually appealing content.

Table 14 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Attractiveness Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Knowledgeable (M, SD)	Aesthetic (M, SD)	High-quality (M, SD)	Harmony (M, SD)	Style (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	5.28 (1.59)	6.00 (1.08)	5.64 (1.44)	5.68 (1.31)	5.88 (1.20)
Macro-influencer	**5.73 (1.19)**	5.73 (0.87)	5.65 (1.02)	**6.00 (0.98)**	**5.96 (1.18)**
Mega-influencer	5.14 (1.52)	**6.05 (1.20)**	**6.11 (1.08)**	5.63 (1.37)	5.53 (1.42)

Scores for expertise were relatively balanced across categories, though differences were observed, as can be seen in Table 15 below. Mega-influencers obtained the highest mean for "unique content" ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.54$), slightly ahead of macro ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.79$). In contrast, macro-influencers were evaluated more positively for likability of personality ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.06$) and for "complementing destinations with stories" ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.47$). Micro-influencers followed closely, while mega-influencers were rated lower on these traits. Overall, macro-influencers were perceived as stronger storytellers, whereas mega-influencers were credited with slightly more uniqueness.

Table 15 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Expertise Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Unique content (M, SD)	Personality (M, SD)	Complements destinations (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	4.44 (1.73)	5.52 (1.26)	5.48 (1.23)
Macro-influencer	4.54 (1.79)	**6.00 (1.06)**	**5.65 (1.47)**
Mega-influencer	**4.58 (1.54)**	5.13 (1.45)	5.09 (1.50)

Trustworthiness revealed the clearest distinctions between categories, detailed in Table 16. Macro-influencers were rated highest for both trust ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.12$) and honesty ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.09$). Micro-influencers followed closely ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.41$; $M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.54$), while

mega-influencers scored noticeably lower. These findings suggest that Portuguese Generation Z perceived smaller-scale influencers as more credible and transparent.

Table 16 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Trustworthiness Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Trust (M, SD)	Honest (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	5.64 (1.41)	5.88 (1.54)
Macro-influencer	**5.69 (1.12)**	**6.08 (1.09)**
Mega-influencer	5.01 (1.54)	5.26 (1.33)

Micro and macro-influencers also fostered stronger parasocial relationships than mega-influencers, as seen in Table 17. For example, micro-influencers scored highest on relatability, such as "This person reminds me of myself" (M = 4.04, SD = 1.90). For identification, macro-influencers stood out (M = 5.23, SD = 1.21), followed by micro-influencers (M = 4.72, SD = 1.51), while mega-influencers were rated substantially lower (M = 3.82, SD = 1.84). Overall, these results indicated that smaller-scale influencers built stronger identification and connection with their followers, while mega-influencers struggle to generate the same sense of personal connection.

Table 17 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Parasocial Relationship Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Reminds of me M, SD)	Same qualities (M, SD)	Same beliefs (M, SD)	Same problems (M, SD)	Imagine myself (M, SD)	Identify (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	**4.04 (1.90)**	**3.96 (1.72)**	3.96 (1.70)	3.28 (2.11)	4.48 (2.122)	4.72 (1.51)
Macro-influencer	3.69 (1.57)	3.81 (1.30)	**4.15 (1.54)**	**3.35 (1.57)**	**4.54 (1.88)**	**5.23 (1.21)**
Mega-influencer	3.05 (1.69)	3.22 (1.59)	3.69 (1.69)	2.59 (1.66)	3.74 (1.88)	3.82 (1.84)

Finally, Table 18 shows that the intention to visit was shaped more strongly by micro and macro-influencers than by mega-influencers. For example, participants expressed higher comfort traveling with brands promoted by macro-influencers (M = 5.42, SD = 1.19) and micro-influencers (M = 5.36, SD = 1.70), compared to mega-influencers. Similarly, participants reported greater trust

in recommendations from macro-influencers (M = 6.00, SD = 1.10) and micro-influencers (M = 5.72, SD = 1.56) than from mega-influencers (M = 5.20, SD = 1.56). These findings suggested that, despite their larger reach, mega-influencers were perceived as less persuasive in shaping actual travel intentions, while macro influencers were seen to influence more the intention to visit.

Table 18 *- Means and Standard Deviations of Intention to Visit Items by Influencer Category*

Ranking Category	Comfortable w/ brands (M, SD)	Comfortable w/ places (M, SD)	No hesitation (M, SD)	Feel safe (M, SD)	Trust recommendations (M, SD)
Micro-influencer	5.36 (1.70)	5.52 (1.29)	**5.64 (1.64)**	5.16 (1.50)	5.72 (1.56)
Macro-influencer	**5.42 (1.19)**	**5.54 (1.06)**	5.50 (1.29)	**5.73 (1.20)**	**6.00 (1.10)**
Mega-influencer	5.12 (1.45)	5.24 (1.49)	5.05 (1.49)	5.23 (1.56)	5.20 (1.56)

These findings suggest that the influencer ranking category influenced how participants evaluated influencer characteristics, parasocial relationships, and intention to visit. Macro- and micro-influencers were generally viewed more positively than mega-influencers, indicating that Portuguese Generation Z values relatability, authenticity, and trustworthiness over large-scale visibility. Table 19 summarizes the hypotheses, expected relationships, and statistical results

Table 19 *- Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results*

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Inspiration → Parasocial	Supported
H2	Authenticity → Parasocial	Not supported
H3	Attractiveness → Parasocial	Not supported

H4	Expertise → Parasocial	Not supported
H5	Trustworthiness → Parasocial	Supported
H6	Parasocial → Intention to Visit	Supported
Preposition	Ranking categories (micro, macro and mega influencers)	Partially supported

5.2. Discussion

This study examined how Portuguese Generation Z perceives travel influencer characteristics and how these shape parasocial relationships (PSRs) and intention to visit. By combining quantitative and qualitative insights, the findings reveal how influencer traits resonate differently across micro, macro, and mega categories, offering a nuanced understanding of how Gen Z interprets influence in the travel context.

Results showed that H1 was supported, as inspiration significantly predicted PSRs. Influencers who sparked travel ideas fostered stronger psychological bonds with their audiences, confirming prior research that positions inspiration as a key driver in travel decision-making (Böttger et al., 2017; Manthiou et al., 2024). This study extends those findings by showing that inspiration strengthens emotional attachment, not only behavioral intention (Ki et al., 2022). Among the ranking categories, macro-influencers emerged as the strongest source of inspiration, followed by micro-influencers, while mega-influencers' utopian lifestyles reduced relatability. These results align with Ong, Sun, and Ito (2024), suggesting that inspiration is most valued when combined with realistic guidance and actionable travel tips.

In contrast, H2 was not supported, as authenticity did not significantly predict PSRs. This finding diverges from earlier research that identifies authenticity as a key driver of influencer effectiveness (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Zhu, 2023). For Portuguese Gen Z, authenticity appears to be an expected norm rather than a differentiating trait. Participants emphasized that relatability and content usefulness—such as transparency, budget advice, and itineraries—mattered more than the

perception of “realness.” Macro and micro-influencers were viewed as authentic due to their openness and everyday approach, while mega-influencers’ highly polished and commercialized content diminished their credibility.

H3 was also not supported, as attractiveness did not predict PSRs. This contrasts with earlier findings by Lou & Kim (2019) and Ashraf et al. (2023). Portuguese Gen Z found that mega-influencers excelled in professional visuals but lacked emotional connection. So it can be suggested that even though they admired visually stunning content, they remained critical of aesthetics that appeared “too perfect” and detached from reality, possibility pushing away PSRs. Instead, Portuguese Gen Z values attractiveness combined with storytelling and cultural immersion, traits that are typically associated with micro and macro-influencers (Kimili, 2023).

Similarly, H4 was not supported, as Expertise did not predict PSRs, which doesn’t align with prior studies by Ashraf et al. (2023) and Yilmazdoğan et al. (2021). Expertise was defined more by relatability and actionable advice and not status or follower counts, where macro and micro-influencers were seen as more expert due to useful storytelling and budget-conscious tips than mega-influencers. Even though they recognized the mega-influencers’ social media presence and power, they questioned their practical knowledge. It may be contended that expertise did not translate into parasocial relationships because expertise is more of a cognitive evaluation (knowledge and skills) than an emotional bond. Since Portuguese Gen Z redefined expertise as practical, relatable advice (budget tips, itineraries, hidden spots) rather than status or fame, it makes expertise more about content usefulness rather than a characteristic for relationship-building. This could explain why trustworthiness mattered more, since it provided the honesty and transparency necessary for Gen Z to feel safe forming PSR attachments.

Conversely, H5 was supported, as trustworthiness proved to be a significant predictor of PSRs. This reinforces its central role in influencer marketing and parasocial dynamics (Childers & Boatwright, 2020; Ashraf et al., 2023). Portuguese Gen Z valued honesty, transparency, and consistency—qualities that encouraged familiarity and emotional attachment. Macro and micro-influencers were considered more trustworthy due to their relatable and transparent communication, whereas mega-influencers were met with skepticism due to perceived commercial motives.

As expected, H6 was supported, with PSRs strongly predicting intention to visit, consistent with foundational PSI research (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Ki et al., 2020; Tyvrainen, 2025; Conde &

Casais, 2023). Macro-influencers and micro-influencers were seen as fostering stronger connections than mega-influencers, aligning with literature that emphasizes involvement and engagement over follower count (Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Ndasi & Cheung, 2026). Through the results it's reasonable to say that relatability, cultural proximity, and transparency reinforce PSRs with Portuguese Gen Z. This aligns with the findings of De Veirman et al. (2017) and Conde & Casais (2023), that audience size does not determine influence but the quality of parasocial bonds does.

Exploratory analysis revealed that attractiveness was the only trait that directly predicted intention to visit without strengthening PSRs. This indicates that while visual appeal can spark destination desire, it functions as a superficial cue rather than a relational one. In contrast, inspiration and trustworthiness operated on both relational and behavioral levels, serving as more sustainable drivers of influence. Moreover, participants emphasized that influencers were not the sole determinants of travel decisions. Family, friends, and budget continued to play dominant roles (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023; Kimili, 2023), with influencers serving primarily as sources of ideas and tips, shaping what to do within destinations rather than determining where to go.

Finally, the influence of ranking categories was partially supported, as macro and micro-influencers consistently outperformed mega-influencers, confirming that follower count does not equate to influence (Conde & Casais, 2023; Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). Notably, macro-influencers often outperformed micro-influencers, emerging as a "sweet spot" between relatability and reach. This challenges the assumption that micro-influencers are always the most authentic and effective (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024) and highlights the strong persuasive potential of macro-influencers among Portuguese Gen Z.

Overall, the study demonstrates that inspiration (H1) and trustworthiness (H5) are the main drivers of PSRs and intention to visit, while attractiveness (H3) operates independently as a visual trigger. Macro-influencers showed the strongest overall impact, suggesting that for Portuguese Gen Z, effective influence stems from a balance between authenticity, guidance, and aspirational yet relatable content.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how Portuguese Generation Z perceives travel influencer characteristics and how these shape parasocial relationships (PSRs) and intention to visit. The findings show that inspiration and trustworthiness are the strongest drivers of PSRs, and they also directly predict intention to visit. Attractiveness influenced intention to visit directly, but without strengthening PSRs, while authenticity and expertise did not significantly predict either PSRs or intention, suggesting they may function as baseline expectations rather than differentiating factors for this generation.

Across influencer categories, macro-influencers consistently outperformed both micro and mega-influencers, positioning them as a "sweet spot" between relatability and reach. This finding challenges assumptions about ranking categories and underscores the distinctive effectiveness of macro-influencers among Portuguese Gen Z.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that inspiration and trustworthiness are central to both PSR and Intention to Visit, and by highlighting the strategic value of macro-influencers in tourism marketing. These insights not only enrich parasocial relationship theory in the travel context but also offer practical implications for brands and destinations aiming to connect with Generation Z travelers.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to both academic research and industry practice by clarifying how influencer characteristics shape parasocial relationships (PSRs) and travel intentions among Portuguese Generation Z.

Theoretically, the findings highlight inspiration and trustworthiness as the strongest predictors of PSRs. Unlike prior studies that emphasized authenticity and expertise, this research reveals a generational shift: Gen Z values relatability, transparency, and actionable tips.

Attractiveness was shown to directly drive intention to visit, but not PSR formation, suggesting that visual appeal alone may create destination awareness and spark travel intention, but lacks the depth to sustain long-term influence through the travel influencer. In contrast, inspiration and

trustworthiness proved to be more robust, as they operated both by strengthening PSRs and directly impacting intention to visit a destination.

Moreover, the study challenges the assumption that ranking category perceptions, demonstrating that macro-influencers work as a "sweet spot" by balancing relatability with reach, while mega-influencers underperform due to perceptions of detachment and commercialization. This finding adds nuance to influencer ranking research, showing that effectiveness cannot be explained solely by follower count, and that macro-influencers can be as effective as micro-influencers.

Finally, by focusing on Portuguese Generation Z, the study contributes both cultural and generational diversity to Parasocial Relationships and influencer marketing literature, addressing calls for research in underexplored cultural contexts and age cohorts.

6.2. Managerial Implications

This study highlights key takeaways for tourism marketers and destination management organizations (DMOs) seeking to engage Portuguese Generation Z travelers. First, partnerships should prioritize influencers who inspire and build trust, as these traits foster stronger parasocial ties and ultimately increase travel intention. Campaigns should therefore emphasize storytelling, transparency, and practical advice rather than overly polished promotion.

Second, the findings position macro-influencers as particularly persuasive for Gen Z, offering a balance between relatability and reach. Tourism marketers should view this category as a strategic investment when designing campaigns that require both engagement and visibility.

Third, while visual appeal remains relevant for sparking travel desire, it should be complemented by relatability, cultural depth, and utility. Influencers who combine attractive visuals with practical guidance and actionable tips are more likely to resonate with Gen Z.

Finally, since friends, family, and budget continue to play central roles in Gen Z's travel choices, influencers should position themselves as trusted digital peers rather than distant promoters. By sharing relatable and inspiring experiences, recommendations, tips and accessible travel options, influencers can strengthen parasocial relationships and provide guidance that aligns with Gen Z's everyday realities.

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that provide avenues for future research.

First, the study focused exclusively on Portuguese Generation Z and Portuguese travel influencers. While this cultural lens offers valuable insights, the findings may not be generalizable to other generational cohorts or national contexts. Future research could conduct comparative studies across countries or examine whether the observed dynamics hold true for Millennials or Generation Alpha.

Second, the study relied on self-reported surveys and focus groups, which may reflect what participants think they should say rather than their true behavior. Future studies could use experiments or track participants over time to better understand how influencer traits and parasocial relationships shape real booking behavior.

Third, the study focused on five influencer characteristics (authenticity, inspiration, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise). While these are well-grounded in the literature, other emerging attributes may also shape parasocial relationships and deserve future attention.

Fourth, the operationalization of influencer ranking categories was limited to micro, macro, and mega classifications. With the rise of nano-influencers and new hybrid categories, future research could investigate how smaller-scale or platform-specific influencers affect trust and travel decisions.

Fifth, this study did not focus on any specific social media platform. Given that parasocial relationships and influencer effectiveness may vary between platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, future research could explore whether platform dynamics moderate the relationship between influencer characteristics, PSRs, and travel intention.

Lastly, while this study measured intention to visit, it did not assess actual travel behavior. Future research could integrate booking data, digital tracking, or experimental field studies with tourism organizations to bridge the gap between intention and conversion.

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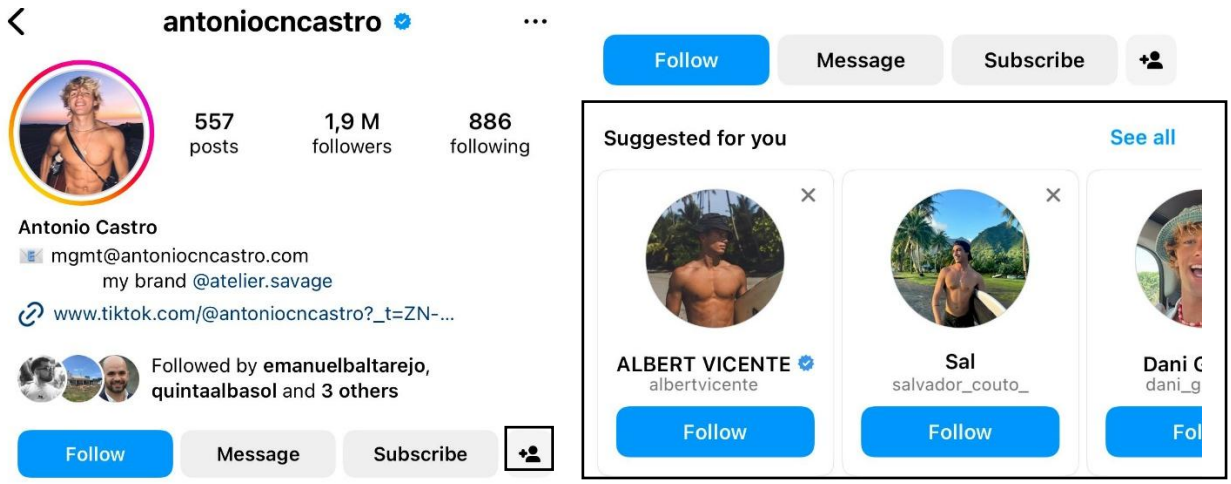
Appendices

Appendix A – Focus Group Participants

Participant ID	Focus Group	Gender	Age
P1	FG1	Female	24
P2	FG1	Female	25
P3	FG1	Female	26
P4	FG1	Female	23
P5	FG1	Female	28
P6	FG2	Female	23
P7	FG2	Female	24
P8	FG2	Female	22
P9	FG2	Male	21
P10	FG2	Female	22
P11	FG2	Male	23
P12	FG3	Female	27
P13	FG3	Male	22
P14	FG3	Male	24
P15	FG3	Male	22
P16	FG3	Female	20
P17	FG3	Female	27

Appendix B- Collection of Portuguese Social Media Travel Influencers in Portugal – Instagram

This method, adopted by Conde & Casais (2023), involves the direct collection of social media influencers on Instagram through the platform's "recommended profiles" feature. The process began by identifying a renowned travel influencer in Portugal, in this case António Castro (@antoniocncastro). By clicking the icon located in the bottom right corner (highlighted in the black box), Instagram displays a list of similar accounts under the "Suggested for You" section. This method was applied iteratively across several influencers from different ranking categories.



Appendix C – Portuguese Travel Influencers Collection

Influencer Name	Instagram Handle	Ranking category (portuguese setting)	Follower Count	Content Focus
João Cajuda	@joaocajuda	Mega-influencer	461K	Travel
Rui Barbosa Batista	@_bornfreee_	Micro-influencer	11.2K	Travel
João Amorim	@followthesuntravel	Mega-influencer	223K	Travel
Raquel & Miguel	@explorerssaurus_	Mega-influencer	1.4M	Lifestyle,Travel
Mariana	@passaporte_portugues	Macro-influencer	51.8K	Travel
Catarina Almeida e Filipe	@allabordfamily	Mega-influencer	176K	Travel, Familiy
Ana Pereira	@viajarmaiscommenos	Mega-influencer	124K	Travel
João & Lara	@blog.viveromundo	Macro-influencer	35.4K	Travel
Rita & Diogo	@dreamers.pt	Macro-influencer	52.4K	Lifestyle, Travel
Carla Pereira & Dinis	@happyevertravel.pt	Mega-influencer	110K	Travel
Patrícia	@girlfromnowhere	Macro-influencer	27.7K	Travel
Ana Mano	@maisprala	Micro-influencer	7 418	Travel
Ricardo & Ana	@gatoadiotravelblog	Macro-influencer	42.8K	Travel, Adventures
Fabiana & Sandro	@nextstopwithlove	Macro-influencer	42.4K	Travel
Sofia Ferreirinho	@sofiaferreirinho	Macro-influencer	44.3 K	Travel
Daniela Berrincha	@blog100fronteiras	Micro-influencer	16K	Travel
Tiago & Joana	@partirparaficar	Micro-influencer	14.7K	Travel
Zé & Sofia & Hugo	@alma.de.aventureiros	Micro-influencer	6 367	Travel
Ana & Marco	@omundoemduasmochilas	Micro-influencer	11.2K	Travel
Raquel Rosa	@raquelrosaphoto	Micro-influencer	9 715	Travel
Raquel & Pedro	@umdiavamostravel	Micro-influencer	10.9K	Travel
Diana	@dianatraveltips	Micro-influencer	8 800	Travel
Pedro & Filipa Machado	@eating_miles	Macro-influencer	32.2K	travel
Andre & Rita	@camineteaventura	Macro-influencer	78.9K	Travel
Diana & Filipe	@dianaefilipe	Micro-influencer	3 295	Travel, Love, Lifestyle
Maggie & Ramiro	@maggieandramiro	Macro-influencer	22.7K	Travel tips and blog

Marta	@getawayswithmarta	Micro-influencer	12.1K	Travel, luxury travel and enotourism
André Chaíça	@andrechaica	Mega-influencer	410K	Travel, Food, Lifestyle
Mariana Roque	@where_to_lx	Macro-influencer	37.2K	Food & Travel
Patrícia Ribeiro	@_patriciaribeiro_	Macro-influencer	73.6K	Tourism
Adriana Maria	@adriana_maria	Mega-influencer	315K	Mindful Travels
Sara Veiga	@saraveigaa	Macro-influencer	65K	Travel & Photography
Catarina e Miguel	@catarinaandmiguel	Macro-influencer	22.9K	Travel
Cris & Nuno	@drivingouradventures	Micro-influencer	4 541	Love, Travel
Daniela e Miguel	@minitraveling	Micro-influencer	16 K	Travel
Andreia Neves	@andreianevess	Micro-influencer	16K	Travel, maternity and lifestyle
Marta	@opassaportedamarta	Micro-influencer	11.6K	Travel
Mariana Completo	@dajaneladomundo	Micro-influencer	13.1K	Travel
Ana	@aportugueseontour	Micro-influencer	11.2K	Travel, food
Ana Fernandes	@anna.s.fernandes	Macro-influencer	37.2K	Travel, Lifestyle
Sofia Rebanda	@flytwoescape	Macro-influencer	69.2K	Travel
Filipa, Manuel, Leonor e Lucas	@four_aroundtheworld	Macro-influencer	24,4K	Travel Family
Tânia e Fernando	@afamilianeves	Mega-influencer	123K	Travel Family
Gabriela	@gabriela.everywhere	Macro-influencer	25.7K	Travel & food
Maria J	@travelblogdamaria	Micro-influencer	10.5K	Travel
Joana Ribiro & Hugo	@sapona_sapona	Macro-influencer	27.6K	Travel
Sofia Mesquita & Mário Ribeiro	@descomplicados.pt	Macro-influencer	43.1K	Travel, Family
Mariana	@atickettotakeoff	Micro-influencer	16K	Travel
Margarida	@maggieemviagem	Micro-influencer	16.1K	Travel
Matilde & Rúben	@passportinhand_	Micro-influencer	11.4K	Travel
Sara Lopes	@saraa_theexplorer	Micro-influencer	5 748	Travel
Sandra	@sandra_camil0	Micro-influencer	12,7K	Travel
Raquel	@rachel_ontour	Micro-influencer	7 849	Travel
Miguel & Inês	@mileswithmi	Macro-influencer	60.6K	Travel
Rafaela & Franck	@rafaelandfranck	Mega-influencer	466K	Travel, Lifestyle
Valéria & Bernardo	@takeapostcard	Micro-influencer	18.3K	Travel, Photography
Carlos & Natacha	@packinglife2travel	Micro-influencer	3 503	Travel, Lifestyle
Inês & Jorge	@viver.a.viajar.pt	Micro-influencer	1 613	Travel, Lifestyle

Rita & André	@odiariode2tesos	Micro-influencer	1 543	Food, Travel
Zé & Margarida	@passportuga	Micro-influencer	1 350	Travel
Mafalda & Francisco Esteves	@bookmeaflight	Micro-influencer	15.7K	Travel, Lifestyle
Mafalda Teixeira	@bymafalda	Macro-influencer	47,8K	Travel
Ana	@anaexploring	Micro-influencer	1 573	Travel
Carolina Vieira e Pedro	@mochileiros_vc	Macro-influencer	84,7K	Travel
Maria & Rui	@twofindaway	Micro-influencer	9 031	Travel
Transmontanes	@transmontanes	Macro-influencer	20.1K	Travel
Bruno, Daniela & Oliver	@circum_mundum_blog	Micro-influencer	2 826	Travel
Leonor	@leonorventures	Micro-influencer	3 548	Travel
Gustavo Gonçalves	@ggustavogonçalves	Macro-influencer	26,2K	Travel
Patrícia Silva	@patriciadamasilva	Macro-influencer	22.8K	travel
Inês & Marcos	@lost.together_	Macro-influencer	30K	travel
Margarida & Daniel	@allaboutwanderlust_	Mega-influencer	402K	Travel
Cátia Silva	@catiaa15	Micro-influencer	12K	Travel
Kathy & Miguel	@kathyandmiguel	Macro-influencer	29.9K	Travel
Rita & Ruca	@travelifejournal	Mega-influencer	104K	Travel
Laura	@onevacayaway	Micro-influencer	4 936	Travel
Sofia Pêga	@sofiapega	Micro-influencer	13,3K	Travel, Lifestyle
Mariana	@marianaporahi	Macro-influencer	73.8K	Travel
Marta	@boleiasdamarta	Macro-influencer	78.6K	Travel, Photgraphy
Cláudia Castro Ferreira	@claudiacastroferreira	Micro-influencer	12,3K	Travel
Cláudia, Fábio & Mel	@diary.love.travel	Micro-influencer	14.8K	Travel, Family and Food
Inês Simão	@inesdsimao	Micro-influencer	17.3K	Travel, Food
Maria J	@travelblogdamaria	Micro-influencer	10.5K	Travel
Nós no mundo	@nos.no_mundo	Macro-influencer	41.2K	Travel
Carolina Franco	@caroliiinafranco	Micro-influencer	5 514	Travel
António Castro	@antoniocncastro	Mega-influencer	1.7M	Travel
Priscilla Santander	@priscilla Santander	Mega-influencer	195K	Travel
Raquel Cardoso	@kellyysofiaa	Micro-influencer	19.5K	Travel
Emilia	@emilianacesar	Micro-influencer	10.8K	Travel
Cláudia & Ricardo	@thenortherntravelers	Macro-influencer	31.6K	travel

Silvia & André	@saudadeseekers	Micro-influencer	1900	travel
Patrícia & João	@sobretilhas	Micro-influencer	1 969	Travel
Carolina & Gonçalo	@lostatlastx	Micro-influencer	1 302	Travel
Maria	@voamosjuntos	Micro-influencer	7 940	Travel
Juliana Maria	@judejumaria	Macro-influencer	91.1K	Travel
Anabela e Alexandre Narciso	@vagamundos_pt	Mega-influencer	116K	travel
Márcio Poças	@marciopocas25	Macro-influencer	62.1K	Travel
Mariana Wengorovius	@marianawengrovius	Mega-influencer	353K	Travel
Lourenço Copeto	@lourenco.copeto	Mega-influencer	169K	Travel
Joana Fialho	@joanafiialho	Macro-influencer	57,4K	Travel, Lifestyle

Appendix D – Focus group script in Portuguese

1. Introduction and Rules (5 minutes)

Welcome: Hello everyone! Thank you for being here and for participating in this study.

Study Objective: Today we are going to explore how different types of Portuguese travel influencers impact Generation Z's travel choices. Your contribution will help us better understand the role of influencers in tourism marketing. We will focus on three types of influencers: micro, macro, and mega. During the session, I will introduce you to three influencers, ask some questions, and record your opinions.

Focus Group Rules:

- There are no right or wrong answers—every opinion is valid.
- This is an open discussion space, so it is normal to have different points of view. Let's respect each other's opinions.

Consent for Recording: Before we begin, I'd like to inform you that this session will be recorded for research purposes. The recordings will help capture the discussion accurately and ensure no relevant information is lost. These recordings will remain confidential, with no personal identification, and will be used solely for academic purposes, stored securely.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time, and if you are uncomfortable with the recording or with any question, please let me know.

With that said, may I have your consent to record the session and proceed with the focus group? (Wait for verbal consent)

Thank you! At any point, if you'd like to pause the recording or if you have any questions, just let me know.

Let's get started!

2. Discussion

I will now introduce the three travel influencers we will analyze today:

- Mega Influencer
- Macro Influencer
- Micro Influencer

Before we start with the questions, I'd like to ask: do you all recognize these influencers? If not, I can give you 5 minutes to explore their profiles. Throughout the discussion, you may also check the influencers' profiles and refer to posts or images to illustrate your opinions.

1. Authenticity (8 minutes)

- Which of the three influencers seems the most authentic to you? Why?
- If you had to rank them from most to least authentic, how would you classify them?

2. Attractiveness (8 minutes)

- Which influencer has the most visually appealing content? Does that influence your interest in the destinations they present?
- How would you rank the three influencers from most to least attractive?

3. Expertise (8 minutes)

- Which influencer seems the most knowledgeable about the destinations they visit? What makes you think so?
- Rank the three influencers from most to least expert.

4. Trustworthiness (8 minutes)

- Which influencer do you trust the most for travel recommendations? Why?
- How would you rank them from most to least credible?

5. Inspiration (8 minutes)

- Which influencer inspires you the most to travel? What is it about their content that gives you that inspiration?
- Rank them from most to least inspiring.

6. Parasocial Relationship and Engagement (8 minutes)

- With which influencer do you feel the strongest connection? Why?
- Does that connection influence your willingness to visit the destinations they recommend?

3. Conclusion (5 minutes)

- Thank you for your participation and valuable opinions!
- Does anyone have any final thoughts or comments they'd like to share?
- Let me remind you that all your answers are confidential and will be used only for this academic study.
- If you have any questions or would like to know more about the study, feel free to contact me.

End of the Focus Group Session.

Appendix E – Focus group ranking results

Rank the three influencers (most to least) in terms of: authenticity, attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, inspiration, and connection.

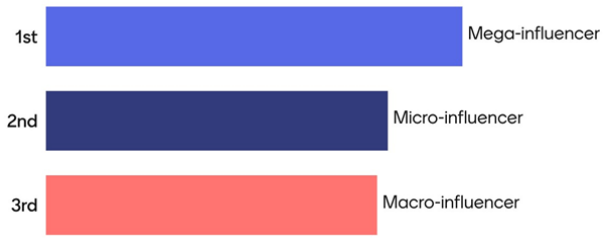


Figure E.1 *- Inspiration ranking*

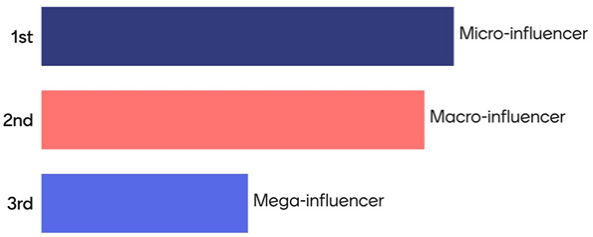


Figure E.2 *– Authenticity ranking*

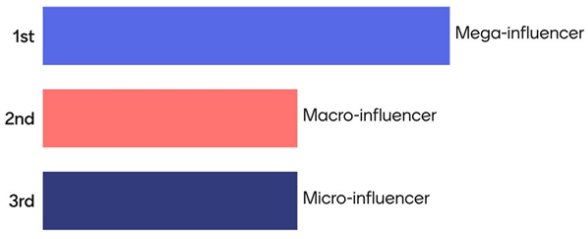


Figure E.3 *- Attractiveness ranking*

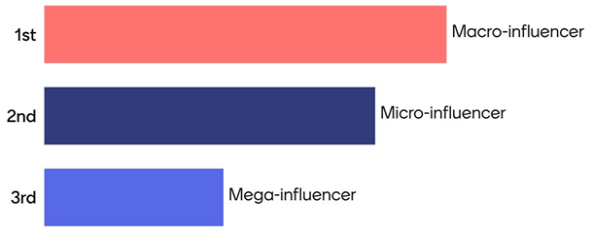


Figure E.4 *– Expertise ranking*

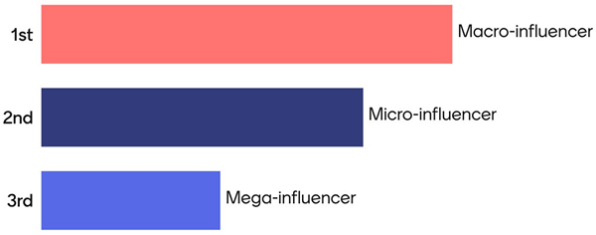


Figure E.5 *– Trustworthiness ranking*

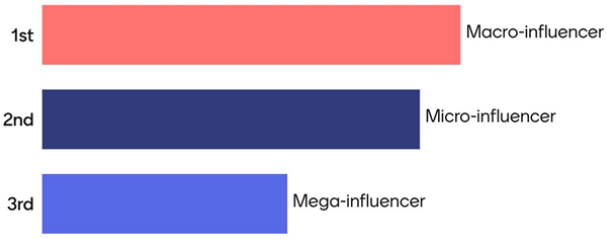


Figure E.6 *– Parasocial relationship ranking*

Appendix F – Coded focus groups quotes

Quote	Theme (Variable)	Influencer	Focus Group	Participant
"I think he seems more authentic, probably because of the type of content. I mean, it's those videos where he shows his day-to-day, even while traveling, whereas the others are sometimes just photos "	authenticity	Mega-influencer	F1	P2
"If I had to constantly stop to film or get the perfect shot or whatever. His Instagram and TikTok just feel too perfect. And I sometimes notice that and think, seriously? You managed to get that shot on the first try? Then I start wondering: are their holidays really always that fun? Or did they actually try doing this 100 times, getting on each other's nerves because they couldn't get the lines right and were just annoyed? "	authenticity	Mega-influencer	F1	P1
"the micro-influencer 's content seems more about travel tips. And in terms of authenticity, maybe that's just genuinely the type of tips she likes to give. So maybe that makes her a bit more authentic"	authenticity	Micro-influencer	F1	P1
"It all just seems too perfect, and everyone knows that's not reality.	authenticity	Mega-influencer	F1	P5
I actually think the micro-influencer seems more authentic to me, maybe because of the type of trips she takes—she travels a lot within Portugal, so everything feels much more doable. "	authenticity	Micro-influencer	F1	P5
"the fact that it's achievable makes it feel more authentic and genuine."	authenticity	Micro-influencer	F1	P5
"The macro-influencer actually seemed quite authentic to me because she shares a lot of tips and includes prices for things like trips, attractions, and experiences. I think that's really interesting. "	authenticity	Macro-influencer	F1	P3
"when I follow a travel influencer, I like to follow someone I can somewhat relate to in terms of what I do while traveling. And in this case, the planning part and the prices are important, so that helps a bit"	authenticity	Macro-influencer	F1	P3
"the most visually appealing content is the mega influencer, the one I was talking about earlier — everything is perfect. And I think that's also what sometimes makes it feel less authentic. "	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F1	P1

"since the micro-influencer and the macro-influencer tend to visit more accessible places than the mega influencer, whose trips are more extravagant, their trips might influence me a bit more because they feel more doable."	-	Micro-influencer; Macro-Influencer	F1	P1
"I much prefer the micro-influencer's content, it feels more homey. It's the kind of content that, if I saw it on my feed or as an ad, I'd stop and take a look, even though it's mostly within Portugal. I find it much more visually appealing."	Attractiveness	Micro-influencer	F1	P2
"the micro-influencer's is the most visually appealing because I prefer those colors. I think the color palette is much more interesting — if I open her feed, I get much more engaged"	Attractiveness	Micro-Influencer	F1	P4
"The more visually appealing the content, the greater the interest in the destinations."	Attractiveness	-	F1	All
"even though I don't like the mega influencer that much, I think his Instagram is amazing"	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F1	P5
"I'd say the micro-influencer, because she gives plenty of tips on what to do, she seems to know what she's talking about and what to recommend. For example, the mega influencer is much more focused on showing us the lifestyle he's living. the mega influencer isn't really promoting or providing tips"	Expertise	Micro-influencer	F1	P4
"I think the micro-influencer, besides having very appealing content, also manages to pull us into the destination through her captions, because she includes what to visit, some fun activities, sometimes the distances — which is amazing for planning an entire trip. So, she ends up providing much more value than other profiles with just appealing and basic content that you can see anywhere, like the mega influencer's."	Expertise	Micro-influencer	F1	P2
"The mega influencer's content is visually the most beautiful, but then when you open it, for example, there's no detailed tutorial on how things are done."	Expertise	Mega-influencer	F1	P1
"the micro-influencer (…) for someone from abroad who wants to visit Portugal, she ends up being more useful. Even though her profile has fewer followers and is less visually appealing to me, she gives more detailed tips."	Expertise	Micro-Influencer	F1	P1
"but I also think the micro-influencer is the most expert, at least in how she sells the destination and specifies everything like a travel planner.	Expertise	Micro-influencer	F1	P5

" the macro-influencer also makes it possible for people to travel with her and her group. That gives me the impression that she knows what she's doing and makes it possible to trust her advice."	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F1	P5
"I want to know upfront what I'm signing up for and not just see what looks pretty on Instagram"	-	-	F1	P5
"the mega influencer, on the other hand, seems to follow trends more — the destinations are amazing and more captivating — but I don't think the mega influencer is the most expert."	Expertise	Mega-influencer	F1	P5
"the mega influencer feels more authentic to me because he shows the lifestyle he's living. He really shows his way of life. I don't think the mega influencer focuses that much on the trips or destinations, it's more on the lifestyle. "	authenticity	Mega-influencer	F1	P4
"And the micro-influencer, even though to me she's not the most authentic, she is more of a specialist because she provides a lot of helpful information."	Expertise	Micro-influencer	F1	P4
" I think is the micro-influencer because of (…) the way she really shows what the places are like and what she recommends in detail (…) gives me a homey feeling, like I'm there with her. That's why I trust her more."	Trustworthiness	Micro-influencer	F1	P2
"If I see the micro-influencer as more of an expert, I'll definitely trust her more. "	Trustworthiness	Micro-influencer	F1	P4
"the macro-influencer would be kind of in between because she (….) shares the full budget and details of what I can do"	Trustworthiness	Macro-influencer	F1	P4
"it's about who provides more details and makes the trip more accessible to us. "	Trustworthiness	-	F1	P1
"I think I would pick the macro-influencer, because she includes the prices"	Trustworthiness	Macro-influencer	F1	P3
"For me, it's the mega influencer, because he's very focused on lifestyle, and it makes me want to go to Asia and spend a month just on the beach. So yes, it's the kind of content he shares and the places he goes."	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F1	P4
"I also choose the mega influencer, but maybe because his lifestyle is the most different from mine. It's almost like a dream or a parallel reality, and it makes me want to experience a bit of it"	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F1	P5

"the mega influencer's content is "wow"(…) but exactly because of that, for me, it feels so unattainable or far from my reality that I don't feel inspired in that sense. (…) The macro-influencer 's and the micro-influencer's content feel a bit closer to my reality, and I feel like I could actually do it or get there someday. "	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F1	P3
"the micro-influencer. For some reason, I always want to keep looking at her photos. I don't know, I think she's the one I connect with the most. I think this connection is linked to the content and the fact that she gives tips "	Connection	Micro-influencer	F1	P2
". the mega influencer has a lifestyle that's super different from mine, so I can't connect much"	Connection	Mega-influencer	F1	P4
"I'd say the micro-influencer, because she shows more content about Portugal. And not just that — she also has videos in Italy, for example, which are places I want to visit. So I feel she does things I'd also like to do (…) It's more realistic."	Connection	Micro-influencer	F1	P4
"the person I feel the most connection with is The macro-influencer. I think she's a balance between the mega influencer and the micro-influencer"	Connection	Macro-influencer	F1	P1
"The macro-influencer's trips have a personal touch — she shares family moments, friends, her boyfriend — and I like her Instagram's presentation from the start, so I'm naturally drawn to it. Also, her tips make it easier to connect. So, I think The macro-influencer creates a connection with me!	Connection	Macro-influencer	F1	P1
"Connection changes a lot depending on how long I follow someone because the way they talk can annoy me or not, and how often they post stories, or if the stories don't fit my vibe, it can bore me. "	Connection	-	F1	P5
"the micro-influencer would be first because of her content — I'd like to see her photos every day. Her destinations are places I like, like Portugal — something I can do on a weekend or quickly. And when she goes abroad, those places attract me too"	Connection	Micro-influencer	F1	P5
"The mega influencer is too perfect, and that annoys me."	Connection	Mega-influencer	F1	P5

"The macro-influencer's content appeals to me more and I relate to it much more. She's a balance between the mega influencer and the micro-influencer — not too much lifestyle, not just tips, but somewhere in the middle. Sometimes she gives lots of details about trips, other times it's more visually appealing with fewer details, but yes, for me, the strongest connection is with the macro-influencer."	Connection	Macro-influencer	F1	P3
"I actually want to visit those places whether or not I see the influencers. But the cool thing about influencers is that they're like a teaser — like a movie trailer. (….) Whether I actually take the trip depends on budget, country restrictions, all that. (....) I wouldn't be influenced by just one influencer alone, but if I see a country appearing a lot and many people doing things there, that's more likely to get me interested"	Intention to visit		F1	P1
"I follow these people mainly to get the most out of my trips. I want to go somewhere and then research or get inspired by what appears in my feed. It helps me choose a destination and plan the trip. It also creates that FOMO — the fear of missing some special place I want to visit. So I'd probably watch more than one influencer and do my own research, but they help me pick and see which destinations have the most interesting things to do."	Intention to visit		F1	P5
"I think they don't make me choose the destination, but rather what to do once I'm there."	Intention to visit		F1	P2
"I feel that the mega influencer and the content he publishes are more about selling an idea than an experience. It's an idea of his lifestyle, which I think is all very high tech cameras, very HD, and only shows the fun parts of the trip"	authenticity	Mega-influencer	F2	P9
"the macro-influencer (….), when she went to Colombia, she had quite a few photos of the local people there, even the workers, the ladies with baskets. And I thought that was a much more authentic experience of a country than what the mega influencer published."	authenticity	Macro-influencer	F2	P9
"I think the macro influencer is much more authentic, and the posts are much more real. It seems like they are made on the spot, she took photos, didn't think much and posted"	authenticity	Macro-influencer	F2	P11
"say the micro-influencer, especially because she has a much smaller audience (…) and because she focuses more on Portugal. Therefore, that ends up making her more patriotic, showing her daily life, her culture, and for that reason makes her more authentic."	authenticity	Micro-influencer	F2	P10

". As a consumer, I like to be relatable with the people who are advising me. And if I find the micro-influencer's profile I will want to do the things she is doing. But if I see what the mega influencer is doing, it gets a bit difficult to reach that level. It's a bit more unrealistic."	authenticity	micro-influencer	F2	P8
"the mega influencer is that he is very focused on luxury travel, and that is very difficult for everyone to be able to access that kind of life."	authenticity	Mega-influencer	F2	P9
"it's the mega influencer. I think his content is super focused on the sea and all that. It's something people will be really interested in."	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F2	P8
" I have to agree that the mega influencer also has the most visually appealing content. (…) But the problem is, since he has a big following, to please so many people, the content also has to be more generic than if he had just a specific niche following."	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F2	P9
"I think the micro-influencer has that more "dump" aesthetic you'd see a friend do, which I also really liked to see"	Attractiveness	Micro-influencer	F2	P9
"I prefer the macro influencer´s profile because she combines landscapes with the culture of these countries. She shows us both sides. I feel the mega influencer shows a lot of just the landscape and takes beautiful, aesthetically well-constructed photos, while the macro influencer or the micro-influencer both combine the two, combining the culture and landscapes of the country. Personally, I find that much more appealing because it shows the whole destination and not just one part of it, but clearly the mega influencer has the most appealing content."	Attractiveness	Macro-influencer	F2	P11
"For me, it's the mega influencer. I personally also like trips related to beaches more, and looking at his profile makes me want to travel even more and especially to his destinations. So I identify more with his profile and think it's much more appealing."	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F2	P7
"for me, it's automatically the mega influencer because I think the fact that he has more followers makes non-followers believe that he must know what he's doing. So, I base it a bit on the fact that many people follow him. "	Expertise	Mega-influencer	F2	P8
" I feel that people who have more followers and well-organized profiles are always a bit more expert regarding their content, so the mega influencer wins."	Expertise	Mega-influencer	F2	P8

"I think the macro influencer is the most specialist and expert because, even though the mega influencer has many more followers and goes to all those aesthetic and clean places, the macro influencer, for example, has posts like “how much I spent to make this trip,” where she went, and you can see she prepares and organizes things very well. (...) And I think that’s what a travel influencer really is — an influencer who helps you travel"	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F2	P6
"the mega influencer’s content tries to sell is visual and aesthetic, while the macro influencer and the micro-influencer, especially the macro influencer, try to sell an experience. "	Expertise	Mega-influencer	F2	P9
"the macro influencer and the micro-influencer wrote full descriptions of the trips they made (…) I feel that makes a person seem more specialist in the destination they’re promoting."	Expertise	Macro-influencer; Micro-Influencer	F2	P9
"It could be the macro influencer or the micro-influencer — they don’t just present the destination itself, but also the culture of that destination. (…) they talk about the history of a monument, their experiences in that country, they talk about expenses, how much it cost or not"	Expertise	Macro-influencer, Micro-influencer	F2	P11
"it seems the mega influencer publishes his brand with ultra-minimalism, and not with the same detail that the macro influencer and the micro-influencer seem to present."	Expertise	Mega-influencer	F2	P11
"he macro influencer, because I feel like she recommends trips that I am much more likely to afford and that I am also much more likely to get to know the culture of the place I’m going to. "	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F2	P6
"For me, it would also definitely be the macro influencer because she recommends much more affordable trips and details many aspects of those trips, so we can have a complete view of them and roughly estimate how much we would spend."	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F2	P11
" if I were interested in a trip within Portugal, I would trust the micro-influencer more because she details very well the trips she takes within the country, whether they are affordable or not."	Expertise	Micro-influencer	F2	P11
"looking at the macro influencer’s profile, she really details the places she visits, almost like she makes an itinerary that we can follow, and she also describes the prices. I think in this respect, I would trust her more because she provides real evidence of the places she visits."	Expertise	Macro-Influencer	F2	P9

", I think the macro influencer has the most versatile profile because she presents both exotic trips and trips to Nordic countries. That makes me feel like, okay, she knows what she's talking about because she's visited several countries, both in Northern Europe and South America. "	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F2	P11
"it would be either the micro-influencer or the macro influencer, because their content is something I see and think, "I would like to take a trip like this." "	Inspiration	Micro-influencer; Macro-Influencer	F2	P11
"The influencer who inspires me the most is actually the mega influencer. Simply because, psychologically, it's something a bit unreachable for us, and that inspires me the most. The huge difference in lifestyles is what motivates me to try to get there, even though it's not my favorite type of trip. "	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F2	P9
"I think the macro influencer's realism and authenticity don't inspire as much because it's not so far from our reality."	Inspiration	Macro-Influencer	F2	P9
"That's the thing about feeling inspired — it also has a bit to do with the power of social media, because we always want to achieve what is very difficult, and we're like, "I want to one day reach that kind of travel." (…) because it´s something so unreal. it may inspire more"	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F2	P11
"because it's something unattainable, it awakens more of our desires than the actual need to travel — it's more about desires."	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F2	P6
"the macro influencer's posts feel more welcoming, more familiar, and since her trips are more affordable, it's closer to our reality"	Connection	Macro-influencer	F2	P6
"I feel like her posts will help me a lot more with travel, and there's a much higher chance I can do the trips she shows than the ones by the other two."	Connection	Macro-influencer	F2	P6
"the macro influencer. I feel her profile is much more welcoming. "	Connection	Macro-influencer	F2	P11
"there's something much more humble and cozy about it. She enjoyed the trip, the skiing experience, filmed it, published it, and people identified with it. Whereas the mega influencer's content feels like it's for selling. It's like a storefront. It's for selling. "	Connection	Macro-influencer	F2	P11
"the macro influencer's and the micro-influencer's posts seem much more natural (…) it makes me feel much more drawn to that type of content. It doesn't feel like a storefront; it feels more like an album, a photo album of memories."	Connection	Macro-influencer, Micro-influencer	F2	P9

"I think we can summarize these three people as representing three different phases of life in my mind. For example, I think the micro-influencer is more relatable, more “now,” like Lisbon, Porto, maybe a slightly extravagant trip, and restaurants in our own city — that’s who we are now. the macro influencer is who we see ourselves becoming, doing the trips she does, planning more authentic things, really visiting the city and getting to know it. And the mega influencer is the one whose lifestyle is the most comfortable. I won’t say it’s who we want to be, but it’s who the more superficial part of us would like to be. I think this represents three pretty different life phases."	Connection	Micro-influencer; macro-influencer, Mega Influencer	F2	P9
"the micro-influencer recommends a lot of places to go, landscapes to see, and so on. the mega influencer sells just the place itself. the macro influencer is different — I think the macro influencer really shows the culture. (..) And that’s why the macro influencer makes me want to visit the places she recommends, and that’s why I feel a connection with her. I don’t think it’s the other way around. But yes, the fact that connection exists can greatly influence the desire to go on those trips "	Intention to visit	-	F2	P9
"I think in this case the micro-influencer, who has the fewest followers, is the one I would say is the most authentic, especially because she’s the only one who actively doesn’t have any kind of business linked to her page. "	authenticity	Micro-influencer	F3	P15
"I think the micro-influencer, especially because she doesn’t have a business, and also the video editing of both isn’t as high quality as the mega influencer’s, maybe he has agency help since he already has his own brand, so his content is more professionalized."	authenticity	Micro-influencer	F3	P13
"What caught my attention the most was the mega influencer’s, the colors he uses in his posts, which are quite light colors, at least in the first posts that appear in the feed. I think it captures the viewer’s attention more. However, I wouldn’t necessarily base my travel choices on him because his trips and destinations are more expensive and flashy. If I were to base my trips on someone, it would be the micro-influencer, because her destinations are more affordable."	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F3	P14
"the mega influencer is definitely the one. He has tons of content, even underwater shots, all very high quality, so he’s the one who grabs attention the most because of the colors.	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F3	P17
But if I had to choose someone to plan a trip with, it would have to be someone who doesn’t show just the paradise side. So, to sell and grab attention (...) I’d want to know more, what’s behind all that beauty.(...)I’d go to someone who shares the same places in a more real way, even if it’s the same places, and in that case I’d lean more toward the macro-influencer or the micro-influencer"	Intention to visit	-	F3	P17

"I'd probably go more for the macro-influencer, who seems the one I trust most, who shows more details of each place and cares about showing the details of each destination. "	Intention to visit	-	F3	P15
"I think what the mega influencer really sells is a lifestyle, not so much the destinations themselves. He sells a way of life, not really the destinations."	Attractiveness	Mega-influencer	F3	P15
"I think it's the macro-influencer, there's really no discussion. Her business is based entirely on selling trips. So, I think just because of that, she seems to have the most knowledge connected to tourist destinations and is the one who at least appears to be the most knowledgeable and expert about these destinations."	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F3	P15
"I also think it's the macro-influencer. She has several videos where she summarizes the trips she's taken, while maybe the mega influencer, for example, just posts a photo of a pretty spot at the destination and that's it. the macro-influencer does a quick summary of the whole trip, and I think that grabs more attention."	Expertise	Macro-influencer	F3	P14
"If we assume that the macro-influencer is more of an expert and the one we trust more — meaning she knows more about travel — then she will also be the one we trust"	Trustworthiness	Macro-influencer	F3	P17
"I think the micro-influencer, because she visits a lot of European countries and also Portugal, and I really like to know Portugal thoroughly, so I also trust her. I like the micro-influencer's content, so she would also be a possible person I would follow to get recommendations about our country."	Trustworthiness	Micro-influencer	F3	P17
"I don't trust the mega influencer; I think it's all fake. It's like that saying, "things aren't quite like that on social media," and I think he's a good example of that. The quality is excellent, everything is excellent, but he sells a perfect life."	Trustworthiness	Mega-influencer	F3	P17
"I trust the mega influencer more. He's the only one of the three that I know personally, and I've been following him since the pandemic. It's a lifestyle that I would like to have right now, not that it's a real lifestyle I aspire to, obviously, but for that reason, I trust the mega influencer more."	Trustworthiness	Mega-influencer	F3	P13
"inspiration also depends a bit on the person's tastes. Like, if someone really likes the sea, paradise-like destinations, caravanning, water sports, diving, and has that adventurous travel spirit, then yes, the mega influencer is the one who inspires most in that regard."	Inspiration	Mega-influencer	F3	P17

"in day-to-day life, the micro-influencer would inspire me more. It fits more with my world — not to say that if I want to dream, I go to the mega influencer'a profile, but if I want something closer to my own style and a more realistic, reachable vision, I go to the micro-influencer's profile."	Inspiration	Micro-influencer	F3	P15
"I'd choose the macro-influencer's. Just because it's more diverse. (…) is kind of a hybrid of the two, so maybe she inspires me more to visit those kinds of places."	Inspiration	Macro-influencer	F3	P15
"I wouldn't base my decision to choose a destination solely on what one person says, even if they're good at posting nice photos, to the point of actually buying a trip because the person is promoting that destination. But yes, it does spark interest. I might save the photo in my favorites for countries or places I might consider. But I wouldn't make a decision just based on an influencer's profile. Maybe if it were an influencer I've followed for a long time, it might make me want to visit, like with restaurants or products"	Intention to visit	-	F3	P17
"I think it has everything to do with the values of the trip. For example, if they share that they went to Vienna, it looks amazing, they show restaurants, a realistic view — I'll want to go. But if the ticket is too expensive, I won't go. (…) . If it's an influencer I've followed for a long time and who has some credibility for me."	Intention to visit	-	F3	P17
"If it's an influencer you have a relationship with or someone you've followed for a long time, and you know the content, and you know the person is authentic and speaks with criteria, there's more desire to visit the destinations."	Intention to visit	-	F3	P15
"I feel more like going to places, not so much because of influencers, but because my friends say it's a good place. "	Intention to visit	-	F3	P16
"not only friends but family, since both say positive and negative things about each experience or trip, and sometimes you need to know the less good side too, to be cautious"	Intention to visit	-	F3	P13
"Usually, with influencers, what I do is save tips, and it sparks a desire to know the place, but it's not decisive. What's decisive are the values at the end of the day, but it leaves a tip, a desire, and the decisive part is deeper."	Intention to visit	-	F3	P12

Appendix G – Online questionnaire in English

Introduction

Dear participant,

My name is Diva Mestre, and I am a Master's student in Marketing at ISCTE Business School. This questionnaire is part of my Master's research, which aims to explore how Portuguese travel influencers on social media influence the travel intentions of Generation Z, aged 18 to 28.

More specifically, the study seeks to analyze how certain characteristics of influencers – such as authenticity, attractiveness, and trust – affect the relationship with their followers and the intention to visit the promoted destinations.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and all responses will be treated anonymously and confidentially. Completing the questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes.

For any questions regarding this study, you may contact me at the following email address: **dfmea@iscte-iul.pt**.

If you agree to participate, please proceed to the next page.
Thank you in advance for your collaboration.

Eligibility Question

1. Are you between 18 and 28 years old?

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No → (If "No," the survey ends and a debriefing message will appear.)

Part 1 – Travel Habits and Influences

1. How often do you travel?

- Never
- Rarely (once a year or less)
- Occasionally (2–3 times a year)
- Frequently (4 or more times a year)

Within Portugal ○ ○ ○ ○
Abroad ○ ○ ○ ○

2. Who do you usually travel with?

- ( ) Parents
- ( ) Friends
- ( ) Partner
- ( ) Work colleagues
- ( ) Alone
- ( ) Others: _____
- ( ) Not applicable

3. What influences your choice/opinion of travel destinations? *(Select all that apply)*

- ( ) Travel influencers
- ( ) Family
- ( ) Friends
- ( ) Advertising/Brand promotions
- ( ) Travel blogs and websites
- ( ) TV shows or travel documentaries
- ( ) Opinions of people you know (colleagues, acquaintances)
- ( ) Personal online research
- ( ) Others: _____

4. Do you follow Portuguese travel influencers?

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

Part 2 – Choice of Travel Influencer

Think of a Portuguese travel influencer you know or follow.

Please indicate the name or @ (username) of the influencer's social media profile:

Part 3 – Influencer Characteristics

Based on the influencer you mentioned above, please answer the following statements according to your perception.
(Scale from 1 to 7: 1 = Strongly disagree | 7 = Strongly agree)

Expertise

1. This travel influencer's content is unique.
2. I like this travel influencer's personality.
3. The influencer complements destinations well with their stories.

Inspiration

1. This travel influencer inspires me to travel.
2. This travel influencer is a source of inspiration for my trips.
3. This travel influencer gives me ideas for my trips.
4. This travel influencer shows original places.

Attractiveness

1. This travel influencer knows a lot about destinations, accommodations, restaurants, and activities.
2. The influencer's videos are beautiful and aesthetically pleasing.
3. The influencer's videos are high quality.
4. I see harmony between the influencer and the places they visit.
5. I like the travel influencer's style.

Trustworthiness

1. I trust this travel influencer.
2. This travel influencer is honest.

Authenticity

1. This travel influencer is authentic.
2. This travel influencer shows reality.

Part 4 – Connection (Parasocial Relationship)

1. This person reminds me of myself.
2. I share the same qualities as this person.
3. I seem to have the same beliefs and attitudes as this person.
4. I have the same problems as this person.
5. I can imagine myself being this person.
6. I can identify with this person.

Part 5 – Intention to Visit

1. I would feel comfortable traveling with brands promoted by this travel influencer.
2. I would feel comfortable traveling to the places promoted by this travel influencer.
3. I would not hesitate to consider travel destination suggestions I find on this influencer's Instagram account.
4. I would feel safe following travel destination suggestions I find on this influencer's Instagram account.
5. I would trust the travel recommendations made by this influencer.

Part 6 – Demographics

1. Gender:

- ( ) Male
- ( ) Female
- ( ) Other
- ( ) Prefer not to answer

2. Nationality: ○ (Dropdown)
3. Marital status:

- ( ) Single
- ( ) Married
- ( ) Cohabiting/Partnership

4. Number of children:

- ( ) None
- ( ) 1
- ( ) 2
- ( ) 3
- ( ) 4 or more

Final Message

Thank you very much for participating in this survey!

Your answers are extremely important and will play a fundamental role in the development of my Master's dissertation at ISCTE Business School. All responses will remain **completely anonymous and confidential**, and will be used exclusively for academic purposes.

If you have any questions, please contact me at: **dfmea@iscte-iul.pt**

Thank you once again for your participation.

Best regards,
Diva Mestre
Master's Student in Marketing
ISCTE Business School

Appendix H – Sample analysis

Table H.1 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Nationality*

Nationality

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Portuguese	203	100,0	100,0	100,0

Table H.2 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Age (18–28 Years)*

Are you between 18-28 years old?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	203	100,0	100,0	100,0

Table H.3 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Gender*

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	125,00	61,58	61,58	61,58
	Male	73,00	35,96	35,96	97,54
	Non-Binary/Prefer not to say	5,00	2,46	2,46	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Table H.4 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Marital Status*

Marital Status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Married	3,00	1,48	1,48	1,48
	Single	192,00	94,58	94,58	96,06
	De facto union	8,00	3,94	3,94	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Table H.5 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Number of Children*

Number of Children

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	200,00	98,52	98,52	98,52
	1	2,00	,99	,99	99,51
	2	1,00	,49	,49	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Table H.6 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Travel in Portugal*

How often do you Travel (Portugal)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1x per year	50,00	24,63	24,63	24,63
	2-3 x per year	96,00	47,29	47,29	71,92
	4x or more per year	53,00	26,11	26,11	98,03
	Never	4,00	1,97	1,97	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Table H.7 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Travel Abroad*

How often do you travel (abroad)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1x per year	109,00	53,69	53,69	53,69
	2-3 x per year	62,00	30,54	30,54	84,24
	4x or more per year	7,00	3,45	3,45	87,68
	Never	25,00	12,32	12,32	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Table H.8 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants Following Portuguese Travel Influencers*

Do you follow Portuguese Travel Influencers?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	85,00	41,87	41,87	41,87
	Yes	118,00	58,13	58,13	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Table H.9 *- Frequency and Percentage of Participants Following Micro, Macro, and Mega-Influencers*

Micro, Macro and Mega Influencers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Micro-influencers	25,00	12,32	12,32	12,32
	Macro-influencers	26,00	12,81	12,81	25,12
	Mega-influencers	152,00	74,88	74,88	100,00
	Total	203,00	100,00	100,00	

Appendix I - Assumption Checks for Regression 1 (Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)

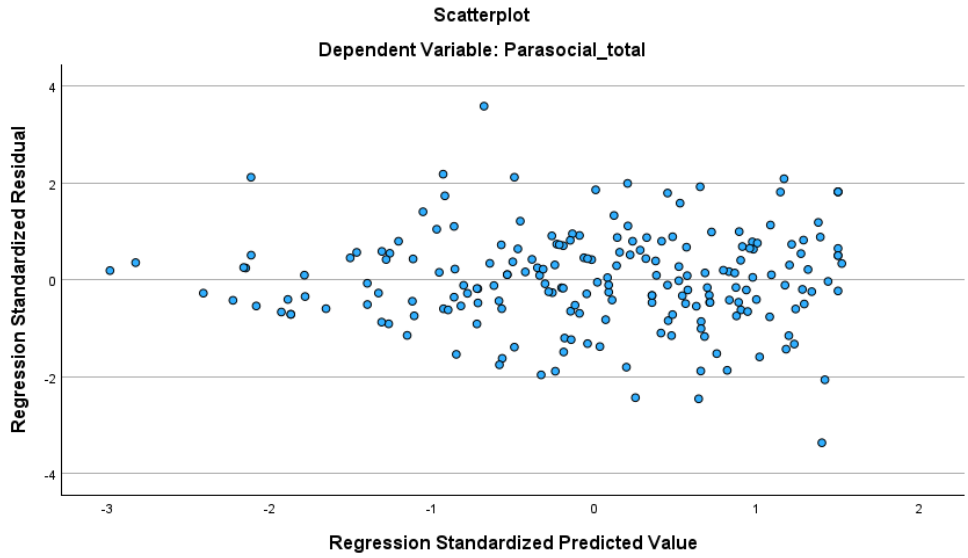


Figure I.2 *- Residuals Statistics for regression 1 (Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)*

Table I.1 *- Durbin-Watson for Regression 1 (Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)*

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	,635[a]	,403	,388	1,13973	2,176

a. Predictors: (Constant), Auth_total, Attract_total, Insp_total, Expert_total, Trust_total

b. Dependent Variable: Parasocial_total

Table I.2 *- Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for Regression 1(Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)*

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Standardized Residual	,053	203	,200*	,988	203	,086

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

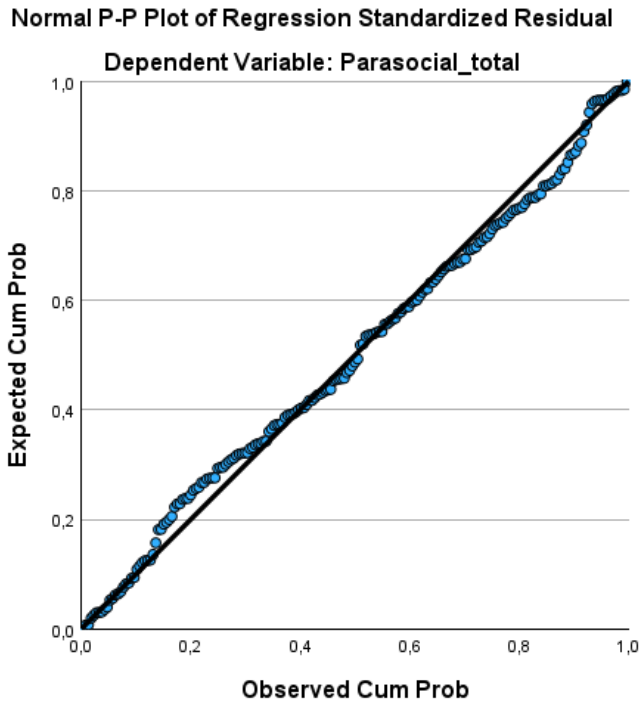


Figure I.3 *- Normal P-P plot for Regression 1(Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)*

Table I.3 *- Residuals statistics table for Regression 1(Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)*

Residuals Statistics[a]

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	,7819	4,9488	3,5386	,92453	203
Std. Predicted Value	-2,982	1,525	,000	1,000	203
Standard Error of Predicted Value	,093	,399	,187	,059	203
Adjusted Predicted Value	,7514	5,0624	3,5375	,92780	203
Residual	-3,83530	4,08835	,00000	1,12554	203
Std. Residual	-3,365	3,587	,000	,988	203
Stud. Residual	-3,463	3,691	,000	1,006	203
Deleted Residual	-4,06239	4,32904	,00108	1,16798	203
Stud. Deleted Residual	-3,565	3,816	,001	1,014	203
Mahal. Distance	,352	23,750	4,975	3,977	203
Cook's Distance	,000	,134	,006	,016	203
Centered Leverage Value	,002	,118	,025	,020	203

a. Dependent Variable: Parasocial_total

Table I.4 *- Coefficients table for Regression 1(Influencer Characteristics and Parasocial Relationships)*

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-,174	,466		-,373	,710		
	Insp_total	,310	,089	,282	3,480	<,001	,463	2,159
	Expert_total	,112	,102	,098	1,096	,274	,377	2,649
	Attract_total	-,107	,113	-,074	-,951	,343	,501	1,996
	Trust_total	,314	,111	,293	2,838	,005	,285	3,514
	Auth_total	,100	,097	,101	1,032	,303	,315	3,173

a. Dependent Variable: Parasocial_total

Appendix J - Assumption Checks for Regression 2 (Parasocial relationships and Intention to Visit)

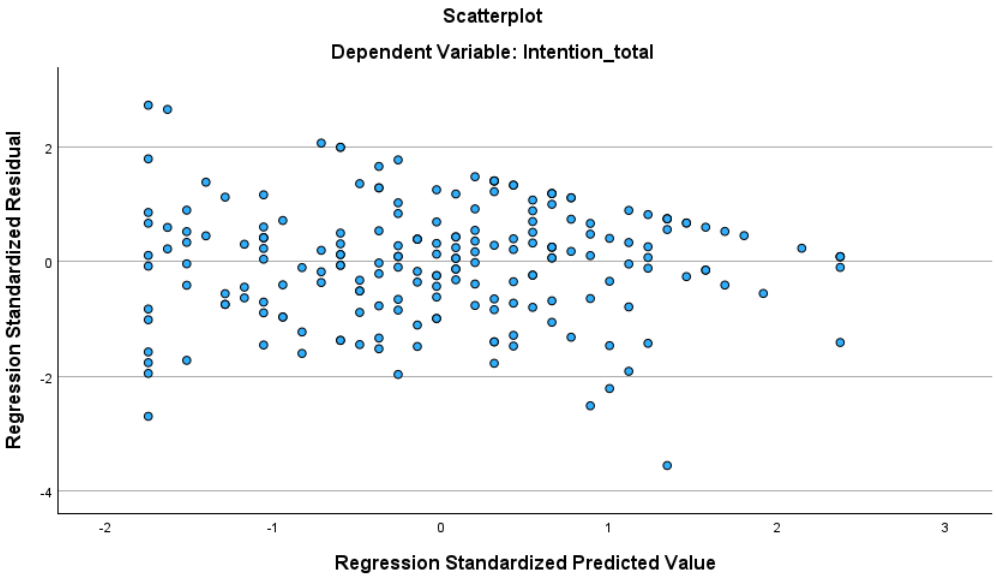


Figure J.1 *- Residuals Statistics for regression 2 (Parasocial relationships and Intention to Visit)*

Table J.1 *- Durbin-Watson for Regression 2 (Parasocial relationships and Intention to Visit)*

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	,541[a]	,292	,289	1,06893	1,786

a. Predictors: (Constant), Parasocial_total

b. Dependent Variable: Intention_total

Table J.2 *- Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for Regression 2 (Parasocial relationships and Intention to Visit)*

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Standardized Residual	,060	203	,068	,990	203	,173

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

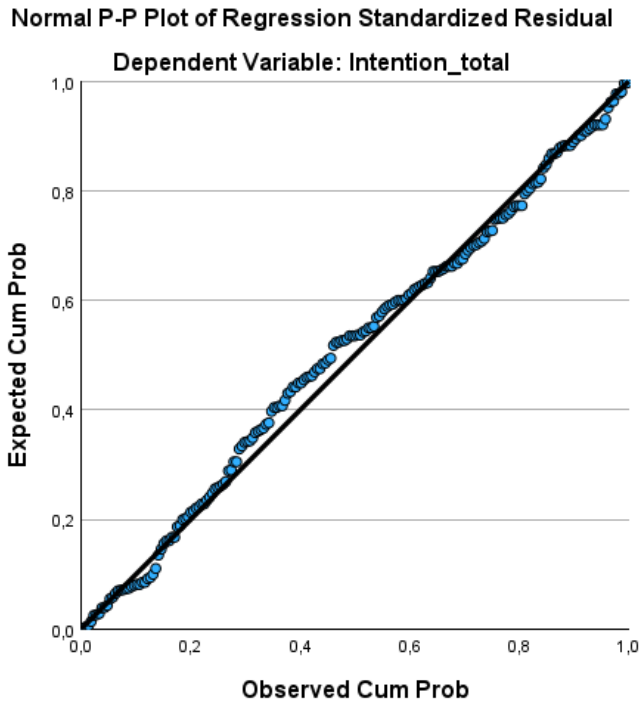


Figure J.2 *- Normal P-P plot for Regression 2 (Parasocial relationships and Intention to Visit)*

Table J.3 *- Residuals statistics table for Regression 2 (Parasocial relationships and Intention to Visit)*

Residuals Statistics[a]

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	4,0823	6,9057	5,2768	,68541	203
Std. Predicted Value	-1,743	2,376	,000	1,000	203
Standard Error of Predicted Value	,075	,194	,102	,029	203
Adjusted Predicted Value	4,0228	6,9569	5,2772	,68585	203
Residual	-3,79982	2,91772	,00000	1,06628	203
Std. Residual	-3,555	2,730	,000	,998	203
Stud. Residual	-3,580	2,757	,000	1,003	203
Deleted Residual	-3,85339	2,97716	-,00033	1,07779	203
Stud. Deleted Residual	-3,690	2,804	-,001	1,009	203
Mahal. Distance	,001	5,647	,995	1,234	203
Cook's Distance	,000	,090	,005	,012	203
Centered Leverage Value	,000	,028	,005	,006	203

a. Dependent Variable: Intention_total

Appendix K- Assumption Checks for Regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)

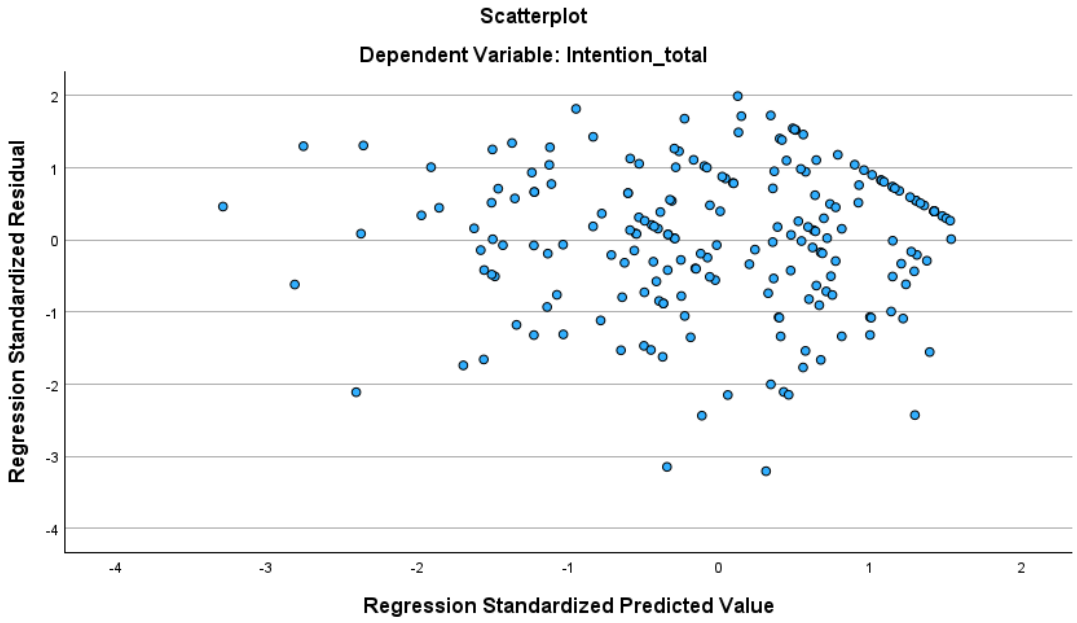


Figure K.1 *- Residuals Statistics for regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)*

Table K.1 *- Durbin-Watson for Regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)*

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	,779[a]	,607	,597	,80472	1,752

a. Predictors: (Constant), Auth_total, Attract_total, Insp_total, Expert_total, Trust_total

b. Dependent Variable: Intention_total

Table K.2 *- Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for Regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)*

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Standardized Residual	,061	203	,065	,975	203	,001

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

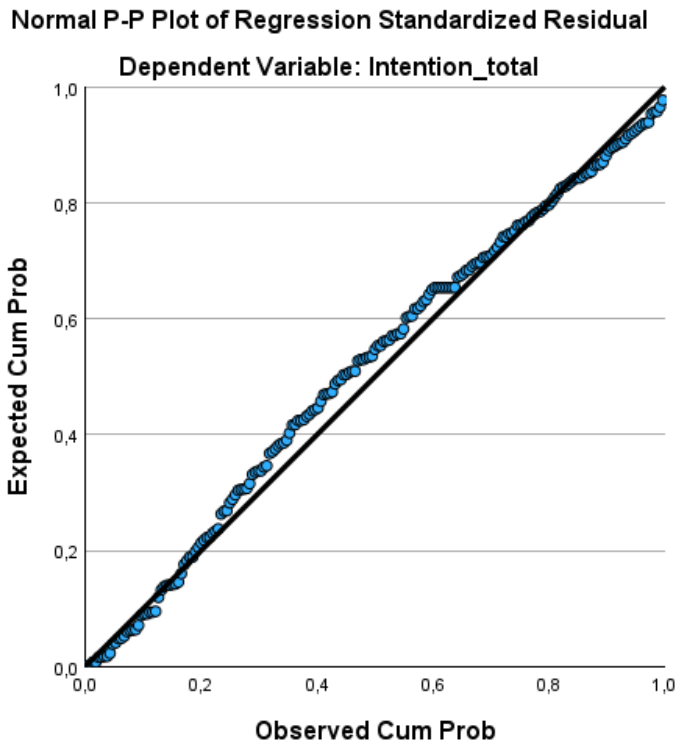


Figure K.2 *- Normal P-P plot for Regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)*

Table K.3 *- Residuals statistics table for Regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)*

Residuals Statistics[a]

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	2,0289	6,7925	5,2768	,98752	203
Std. Predicted Value	-3,289	1,535	,000	1,000	203
Standard Error of Predicted Value	,066	,282	,132	,041	203
Adjusted Predicted Value	1,9995	6,7922	5,2744	,99066	203
Residual	-2,58144	1,60360	,00000	,79470	203
Std. Residual	-3,208	1,993	,000	,988	203
Stud. Residual	-3,243	2,012	,001	1,005	203
Deleted Residual	-2,64032	1,63493	,00242	,82391	203
Stud. Deleted Residual	-3,325	2,028	,000	1,011	203
Mahal. Distance	,352	23,750	4,975	3,977	203
Cook's Distance	,000	,073	,006	,012	203
Centered Leverage Value	,002	,118	,025	,020	203

a. Dependent Variable: Intention_total

Table K.4 *- Coefficients table for Regression 3 (Influencer characteristics and Intention to Visit)*

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	,571	,329		1,735	,084		
	Insp_total	,183	,063	,191	2,909	,004	,463	2,159
	Expert_total	-,078	,072	-,079	-1,080	,281	,377	2,649
	Attract_total	,241	,080	,191	3,030	,003	,501	1,996
	Trust_total	,473	,078	,506	6,048	<,001	,285	3,514
	Auth_total	,054	,068	,063	,790	,431	,315	3,173

a. Dependent Variable: Intention_total

Appendix L – SMART PLS Outputs

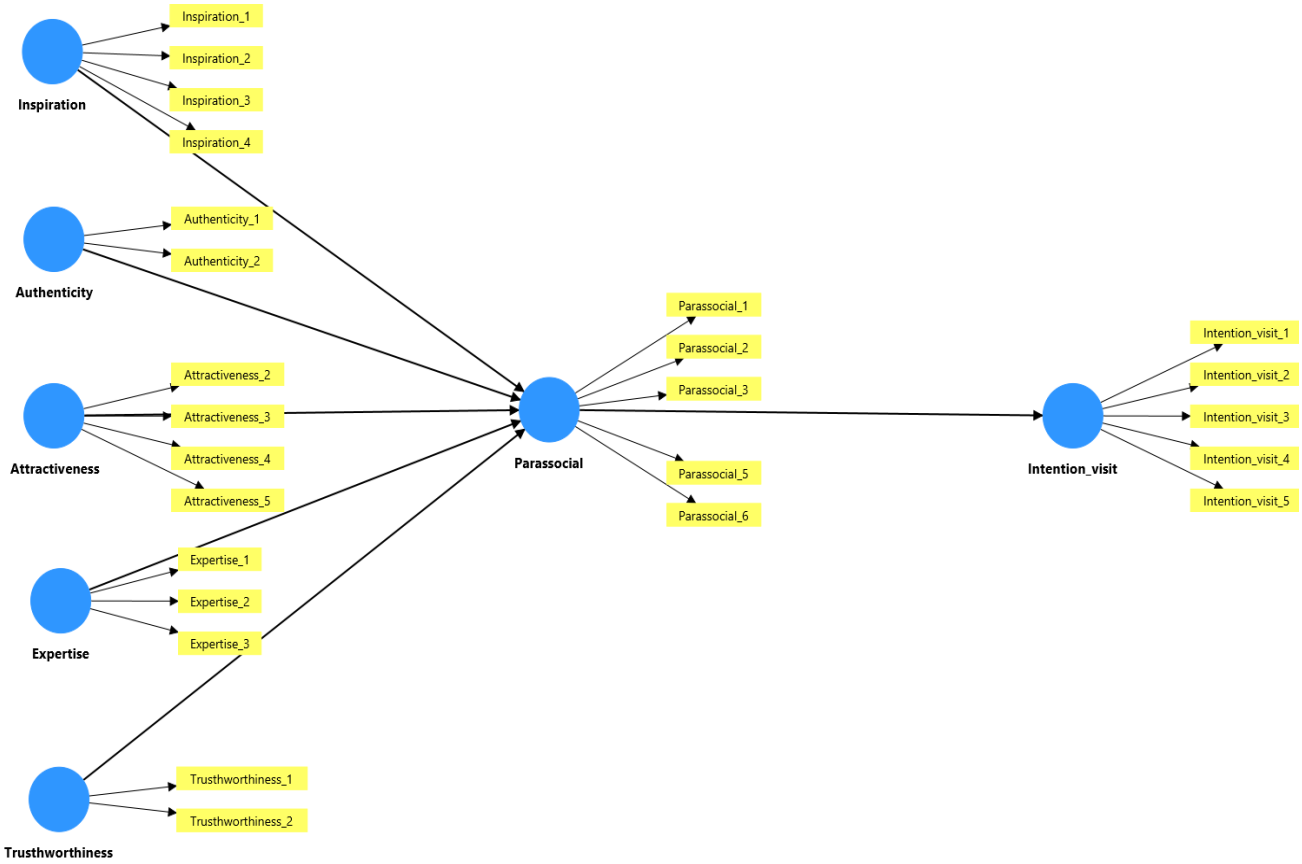


Figure L.1 *- Structural Model Diagram*

Table L.1 *- Outer loadings of the measurement model (SmartPLS)*

Construct	Indicator	Loading
Attractiveness	Attractiveness_2	0.764
	Attractiveness_3	0.705
	Attractiveness_4	0.893
	Attractiveness_5	0.877
Authenticity	Authenticity_1	0.952
	Authenticity_2	0.938
Expertise	Expertise_1	0.799
	Expertise_2	0.888
	Expertise_3	0.863
Inspiration	Inspiration_1	0.850
	Inspiration_2	0.875
	Inspiration_3	0.893
	Inspiration_4	0.712
Intention to Visit	Intention_visit_1	0.853
	Intention_visit_2	0.824

	Intention_visit_3	0.892
	Intention_visit_4	0.927
	Intention_visit_5	0.922
Parasocial	Parasocial_1	0.853
	Parasocial_2	0.895
	Parasocial_3	0.875
	Parasocial_4	0.817
	Parasocial_5	0.894
Trustworthiness	Trustworthiness_1	0.950
	Trustworthiness_2	0.947

Table L.2 *- Construct reliability and validity*

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (ρa)	Composite Reliability (ρc)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Attractiveness	0.847	0.938	0.886	0.661
Authenticity	0.880	0.889	0.943	0.892
Expertise	0.816	0.840	0.890	0.730
Inspiration	0.853	0.858	0.902	0.698
Intention to Visit	0.938	0.939	0.953	0.802
Parasocial	0.919	0.924	0.939	0.756
Trustworthiness	0.888	0.889	0.947	0.899

Table L.3 *- R^2 values table*

Dependent Variable	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Intention to Visit	0.315	0.311
Parasocial	0.437	0.423

Table L.4 *- Effect sizes (f^2) for structural model paths (SmartPLS)*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Attractiveness						0.005	
2. Authenticity						0.006	
3. Expertise						0.004	
4. Inspiration						0.052	
5. Intention to Visit							
6. Parasocial					0.460		
7. Trustworthiness						0.031	

Path	f^2
Attractiveness → Parasocial	0.005
Authenticity → Parasocial	0.006
Expertise → Parasocial	0.004
Inspiration → Parasocial	**0.052**
Parasocial → Intention to Visit	**0.460**
Trustworthiness → Parasocial	**0.031**

Table L.5 *- Discriminant validity: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)*

Construct Pair	HTMT
Authenticity ↔ Attractiveness	0.538
Expertise ↔ Attractiveness	0.726
Expertise ↔ Authenticity	0.830
Inspiration ↔ Attractiveness	0.665
Inspiration ↔ Authenticity	0.754
Inspiration ↔ Expertise	0.779
Intention to Visit ↔ Attractiveness	0.577
Intention to Visit ↔ Authenticity	0.704
Intention to Visit ↔ Expertise	0.657
Intention to Visit ↔ Inspiration	0.709
Parasocial ↔ Attractiveness	0.473
Parasocial ↔ Authenticity	0.620
Parasocial ↔ Expertise	0.620
Parasocial ↔ Inspiration	0.654
Parasocial ↔ Intention to Visit	0.601
Trustworthiness ↔ Attractiveness	0.614
Trustworthiness ↔ Authenticity	0.913
Trustworthiness ↔ Expertise	0.840
Trustworthiness ↔ Inspiration	0.759
Trustworthiness ↔ Intention to Visit	0.815
Trustworthiness ↔ Parasocial	0.664

Table L.6 *- Discriminant validity: Fornell-Larcker criterion*

Construct	Attractiveness	Authenticity	Expertise	Inspiration	Intention to Visit	Parasocial	Trustworthiness
Attractiveness	**0.813**						
Authenticity	0.535	**0.945**					
Expertise	0.644	0.712	**0.854**				
Inspiration	0.608	0.633	0.646	**0.836**			
Intention to Visit	0.556	0.640	0.583	0.633	**0.896**		
Parasocial	0.438	0.564	0.549	0.581	0.561	**0.870**	
Trustworthiness	0.595	0.809	0.725	0.659	0.745	0.694	**0.948**

Table L.7 *- Collinearity statistics (VIF) for the structural model (SmartPLS)*

Indicator	**VIF**
Attractiveness_2	2.710
Attractiveness_3	2.557
Attractiveness_4	2.344
Attractiveness_5	1.966
Authenticity_1	2.608
Authenticity_2	2.608
Expertise_1	1.645
Expertise_2	2.037
Expertise_3	1.877
Inspiration_1	2.107
Inspiration_2	3.154
Inspiration_3	3.130
Inspiration_4	1.477
Intention_visit_1	2.632
Intention_visit_2	3.201
Intention_visit_3	3.492
Intention_visit_4	5.535
Intention_visit_5	4.888
Parasocial_1	3.275
Parasocial_2	3.735
Parasocial_3	2.684
Parasocial_4	2.325
Parasocial_5	3.253
Parasocial_6	3.235
Trustworthiness_1	2.763
Trustworthiness_2	2.763

	Attractiveness	Authenticity	Expertise	Inspiration	Intention to Visit	Parasocial	Trustworthiness
Attractiveness						**1.958**	
Authenticity						**3.266**	
Expertise						**2.781**	
Inspiration						**2.174**	
Intention to Visit					**1.000**		
Parasocial							
Trustworthiness						**3.568**	

Path	**VIF**
Attractiveness → Parasocial	1.958
Authenticity → Parasocial	3.266
Expertise → Parasocial	2.781
Inspiration → Parasocial	2.174
Parasocial → Intention to Visit	1.000
Trustworthiness → Parasocial	3.568

Table L.8 *- Bootstrapping Results for Outer Loadings*

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Attractiveness_2 <- Attractiveness	0,764	0,755	0,064	11,904	0,000
Attractiveness_3 <- Attractiveness	0,705	0,698	0,068	10,414	0,000
Attractiveness_4 <- Attractiveness	0,893	0,891	0,021	42,459	0,000
Attractiveness_5 <- Attractiveness	0,877	0,878	0,022	40,129	0,000
Authenticity_1 <- Authenticity	0,952	0,951	0,008	115,131	0,000
Authenticity_2 <- Authenticity	0,938	0,936	0,014	67,611	0,000
Expertise_1 <- Expertise	0,799	0,797	0,036	22,040	0,000
Expertise_2 <- Expertise	0,898	0,899	0,014	63,050	0,000
Expertise_3 <- Expertise	0,863	0,863	0,030	28,675	0,000
Inspiration_1 <- Inspiration	0,850	0,849	0,026	32,987	0,000
Inspiration_2 <- Inspiration	0,875	0,874	0,023	38,277	0,000

Inspiration_3 <- Inspiration	0,893	0,892	0,019	48,160	0,000
Inspiration_4 <- Inspiration	0,712	0,713	0,044	16,070	0,000
Intention_visit_1 <- Intention_visit	0,853	0,853	0,021	40,468	0,000
Intention_visit_2 <- Intention_visit	0,882	0,882	0,023	38,496	0,000
Intention_visit_3 <- Intention_visit	0,892	0,892	0,025	35,026	0,000
Intention_visit_4 <- Intention_visit	0,927	0,927	0,019	49,997	0,000
Intention_visit_5 <- Intention_visit	0,922	0,922	0,013	70,579	0,000
Parassocial_1 <- Parassocial	0,865	0,864	0,023	38,155	0,000
Parassocial_2 <- Parassocial	0,895	0,894	0,019	46,603	0,000
Parassocial_3 <- Parassocial	0,875	0,875	0,023	37,310	0,000
Parassocial_5 <- Parassocial	0,817	0,817	0,026	31,083	0,000
Parassocial_6 <- Parassocial	0,894	0,894	0,014	61,747	0,000
Trusthworthiness_1 <- Trusthworthiness	0,950	0,949	0,008	116,480	0,000
Trusthworthiness_2 <- Trusthworthiness	0,947	0,947	0,009	103,557	0,000

Table L.9 *- Correlations Among Constructs*

Construct	Attractiveness	Authenticity	Expertise	Inspiration	Intention_visit	Parasocial	Trustworthiness
Attractiveness	**1.000**	0.535	0.644	0.608	0.556	0.483	0.595
Authenticity	0.535	**1.000**	0.712	0.633	0.640	0.564	0.809
Expertise	0.644	0.712	**1.000**	0.646	0.583	0.549	0.725
Inspiration	0.608	0.633	0.646	**1.000**	0.633	0.581	0.659
Intention_visit	0.556	0.640	0.583	0.633	**1.000**	0.561	0.745
Parasocial	0.483	0.564	0.549	0.581	0.561	**1.000**	0.604
Trustworthiness	0.595	0.809	0.725	0.659	0.745	0.604	**1.000**