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Impact of Influencer Marketing on the Purchase Decision Process of Fashion Products

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Abstract: Today, it is common for brands to adopt influencer marketing strategies; whereby digital influencers promote their products or services by sharing their recommendations on on-line social networks. The purpose of this research was to understand the impact of influencer marketing on the purchasing decision process of fashion consumers in Portugal. A literature review was carried out, which allowed research hypotheses to be established, and a survey was conducted with 137 participants. Once the data had been collected and duly organized, a quantitative analysis was carried out to test the hypotheses. Data analysis led to the conclusion that all stages of the fashion consumer's purchasing decision process are positively impacted by influencer marketing, except for the advocacy stage. It was concluded that consumers consider digital influencers to be a credible source of recommendation for fashion items – factors such as expertise, attractiveness, and trust contribute to their credibility.

Keywords: social media; digital influencer; online social networks; purchase decision process; influencer marketing; fashion.

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1 Introduction

The evolution and progress of the World Wide Web (WWW) were fundamental for the integration of the internet and online social networks into consumers' lives (Badiger et al., 2018). This evolution would eventually promote the emergence of blogs, online communities, and new ways of communicating (Ferrão and Alturas, 2018). Therefore, online social networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok or Twitter, have shown great growth over the years and are considered one of the main means of communication today, as they allow and facilitate the sharing of information between users (Zengin Alp and Gündüz Öğüdücü, 2018).

In addition to this facilitation of access and sharing of information, consumers are increasingly less available to assimilate the communication carried out by brands – considering it, in many cases, not very credible and fallacious. Given this new reality, in which the credibility of brand descriptions and promises is increasingly questioned, consumers tend to research online about products they intend to purchase and share their experience with other users, influencing their purchasing decision process.

These phenomena, as well as the fact that consumers spend a large part of their time on online social networks, did not go unnoticed and caught the attention of brands. Therefore, today they see online social networks as a privileged communication channel to reach their audience (Langaro et al., 2018). It is increasingly common for brands to resort to influencer marketing (Zak and Hasprova, 2020), where they select and encourage digital influencers to promote their products or services on their online social networks (Leung et al., 2022). These recommendations shared on online social networks by digital influencers, who usually belong to a specific market niche, and which are in line with their area of expertise, end up influencing the opinion of consumers, as they tend to consider the former to be a source of recommendation and credible information.

Companies today are identifying key opinion leaders (also known as influencers) to promote their products via social media, leveraging the ability of these people to engage target audiences, generate recommendations via electronic word-of-mouth, and influence their followers to purchase the company’s products (Morton, 2020). In recent years, a new type of influencer has emerged in the field of social media marketing: virtual influencers. Though it is spreading fast, the trend is still new and, therefore, limited research has been conducted on the topic (Gerlich, 2023).

Therefore, it is pertinent to assess the real impact of influencer marketing on the consumer's purchasing decision process to assist marketing managers and companies in making decisions regarding future influencer marketing actions, and re-examining the credibility and decision-making dimensions of influencers remains necessary. Considering the variety of existing market sectors in which digital influencers can be recognised as experts, and the fact that their opinion on a given product is a preponderant factor in the consumer's purchasing decision process, it becomes imperative to study the sector where influencers are most active: the fashion industry.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Online Social Networks and Social Media Marketing

Currently, the World Wide Web (WWW) is the largest global source of information through which users can share, read and write information through computers connected to the internet.

Although related, the internet and the web are not synonymous, they are two different things. The Internet is a global network system, where thousands of computers are linked together, forming a network through which they can communicate (Nath et al., 2014). On the other hand, the WWW is a software system designed to support interaction between computers over the internet (Naik and Shivalingaiah, 2008). In other words, the WWW is a way of accessing information over the internet. However, the Web, as it is known today, has been the subject of great evolution and progress since its advent (Nath et al., 2014), so it is possible to highlight 3 different phases – Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0.

The Web was invented by Tim-Berners Lee in 1989, giving rise to Web 1.0, which is characterised by the fact that the Internet can only be used as a source of information and cannot be modified. In other words, at this stage, the Web would be a type of traditional library – being, metaphorically, described as "Read Only Internet" (Badiger et al., 2018).

Web 2.0 is the second phase of the Web's evolution process and stood out for having taken advantage of the Web in a more interactive and collaborative way, emphasizing social interaction between users and collective intelligence (Badiger et al., 2018), which ended up leveraging the Web, engaging its users more effectively (Murugesan, 2007) and also promoting the emergence of blogs, online communities and new ways of communicating (Ferrão and Alturas, 2018).

After the Web became social, where all users could be readers or creators of content, Web 3.0 emerged, whose objective is to develop technology that can read and write content (McEneaney, 2011).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), online social networks can be defined as a web-based service, which allows its users to create a public or semi-public profile within a limited system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and, finally, see your list of connections (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

Online social networks have attracted millions of users since their introduction – since then they have become part of their lives (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). They are even considered one of the main means of communication today, which allows the sharing of personal information, news, photos and videos with other users. Therefore, they are considered essential communication platforms that facilitate interaction between users, which, in a way, ends up having a very large influence on their opinions (Zengin Alp and Gündüz Öğüdücü, 2018).

This phenomenon would attract the attention of brands, who see these platforms as a privileged communication channel to reach their audience (Langaro et al., 2018) – this is how social media marketing emerged. This is the area of marketing aimed at connecting with customers through social media platforms (Gouveia, 2022), and which can be defined as a set of content creation practices with the purpose of promoting a brand and its products and/or services on various social media platforms, according to the particularities of each one (Gouveia, 2022).

2.2 Consumer Purchase Decision Process

Marketing is an area in constant change, which adapts to the evolution of the business world and society (Fuciu and Dumitrescu, 2018), which is why, in recent years, due to the emergence of the Internet and online social networks, it has undergone a great transformation.

The traditional marketing model has thus adapted to the digital environment, to be closer to consumers, responding to their needs, and ensuring its relevance. In this way, it is possible to denote an evident evolution in the marketing strategy, as an increasingly personalized approach is adopted, tailored to each consumer (Erragcha and Romdhane, 2014).

It is important to define that anyone involved in the consumption process is a consumer (Jisana, 2014), and the term "consumer behaviour" can be defined as a series of behaviours carried out by consumers throughout the various stages of the decision process to purchase a product or service – with the main objective of suppressing a need (Schiffman et al., 2013).

To assess the impact of digital, it is important to understand how consumer behaviour, at different stages of the purchasing decision process, is changing depending on new digital environments and devices (Kannan and Li, 2017).

In the past, the purchasing decision process was based on a model known in marketing as the four Aces model, which was divided into four main phases – attention (consumers know the brand), attitude (consumers like the brand or not), action (consumers decide whether to buy) and, finally, new action (consumers decide whether to repurchase). These phases identified the main moments in the buying process where the brand could influence the consumer's decision (Kotler et al., 2017).

However, the increase in the supply of products and services on the market and, above all, the rise of digital, with the proliferation of the number of digital channels, would determine the inclusion of more phases in the purchasing decision process - making it more complex (Court et al., 2009). According to Kotler, the process is based on five main phases, namely: attention, attraction, advice, action, and advocacy (Kotler et al., 2017).

"In the attention phase, consumers are passively exposed to a long list of brands from experience, marketing communications, and / or advocacy of others. (…) A consumer who has had previous experience with a brand can remember and recognise the brand. Advertising by companies and word of mouth from other consumers are also important sources of brand recognition" (Kotler et al., 2017).

By paying attention to multiple brands, consumers then process all the messages they are exposed to – creating a short-term memory or amplifying long-term memory – and become attracted to a concise list of brands. This is the attraction phase (Kotler et al., 2017). Also driven by their curiosity, consumers actively research brands that attract them in search of more information from friends and family, in the media and/or directly from brands. This is the counselling phase (Kotler et al., 2017).

After evaluating all the information, consumers choose a brand and purchase the product or service. At this stage, the consumer, in addition to purchasing the product or service, establishes a deeper relationship with the brand, consuming and evaluating the product or service. This is the action phase. If the consumer's experience with the selected brand is positive, they can develop feelings of loyalty – which could translate

into retention, repurchase, and brand advocacy. The advocacy phase therefore consists of making a positive recommendation and defending the brand to other potential consumers.

According to Kotler (2017), the consumer decision process "is not necessarily a fixed funnel, and consumers do not necessarily go through all Aces". The advocacy phase stands out, since 'faithful advocates may not necessarily be buyers'. In other words, these 'consumers bypass the action and jump directly to the law' – without buying the brand and consequently without testing it. Taking this phenomenon into account, one of the objectives of marketing should be to move consumers from attention to advocacy (Kotler et al., 2017).

After purchase, relationships with brands typically focused on using the product or service. However, with the advent of digital comes a more sophisticated view of how consumers engage with brands (Hudson and Thal, 2013). If a consumer has a positive experience with a particular brand, it is possible that they develop a feeling of loyalty toward it, which could be reflected in consumer retention, repurchase of the product or service, and recommendation to other consumers (Kotler et al., 2017).

The evolution of the internet has not only transformed the way people search for information or interact with each other, but also the way they make purchases (King et al., 2014). Marketing communication thus ceases to be unidirectional, where brands speak to consumers, and becomes bidirectional, where it is assumed that there is a dialogue between both parties (through comments, shares, among others) (Drury, 2008).

Given this evolution, the traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) concept, defined as an informal form of communication between consumers, where information is shared about the purchase, use and characteristics of a particular product or service (Westbrook, 1987), now has an electronic "version" – the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). In turn, eWOM communication can be defined as any statement, whether positive or negative, made by a potential, current or former consumer regarding a brand or product, access to which is available online to many people and institutions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In turn, according to Reimer and Benkenstein (2016), these statements, positive or negative, if reliable and credible, influenced the consumer's purchasing intention in the same direction. In other words, if the statement regarding the product or service is positive, the impact on the consumer's purchase intention will be positive and vice versa (Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016). It was also demonstrated that commercial communication influences the organic electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), purchase intention and purchase associations among young consumers (Duffett, 2022). Another important aspect is trust in influencers, as trust in competent intermediaries has a significant influence on consumer repurchase and e-WOM intention (Rahman et al., 2022).

2.3 Influencer Marketing and Fashion

Marketing has always used celebrity endorsements to generate awareness and improve the perception of a brand, as people tend to trust celebrities they admire and sometimes aspire to become such. Influencer marketing is very similar in concept to this type of marketing; however, this new aspect has introduced a new way of defining celebrities. In other words, in addition to television and film stars, professional athletes and musicians, there are online social media celebrities. These new stars are even capable of reaching large audiences and generating engagement on platforms such as blogs or online social

networks – exerting an influence on their followers like that exerted by “conventional” celebrities (Sammis et al., 2015).

In recent years, influencer marketing has become increasingly popular among marketing managers, representing a specific type of social media marketing (Zak and Hasprova, 2020) that positively influences the consumer's purchasing decision process (Cardoso and Alturas, 2019; Ferrão and Alturas, 2018). In turn, influencer marketing is a marketing strategy, which consists of the selection and encouragement, by a brand, of a digital influencer so that they promote their products or services on their online social networks and, in this way, generate engagement around the brand (Leung et al., 2022).

Those opinion leaders who have built a sizable social media network of followers and thereby have acquired the potential to exert their influence over their followers are commonly described as social media influencers (Ki and Kim, 2019). Opinion leaders play a vital role in the decision-making phase of the consumer purchasing process. It is thanks to their individual capabilities, specific knowledge, or personality that opinion leaders end up influencing, directly or indirectly, consumers' attitudes and decisions. In digital marketing, particularly in social media marketing, this role is assumed by digital influencers who impact consumers with their thoughts, attitudes and opinions – significantly influencing the consumption trends of certain products (Zak and Hasprova, 2020).

According to Gouveia (2022), we can define digital influencers as “people with a very strong presence on social networks (and other digital channels), having great engagement with their target audience and, therefore, a high power of influence over them (Gouveia, 2022).

Considering that people spend more and more time on online social networks, it is becoming increasingly common for them to consider digital influencers, who they follow on online social networks, as a source of credible information and recommendations (Zietek, 2016). It should be noted that 70% of people who follow influencers declare that after connecting with these influencers, they remain connected, even if they lose interest in the promoted product (Ferreira and Alturas, 2010).

Recently, AI tools like ChatGPT have emerged as perceived neutral intermediaries. A study conducted with users of online platforms aimed to understand whether AI systems can replace human influencers in shaping purchasing decisions and, if so, in which sectors. The results reveal that AI is favoured over human influencers in product categories where objectivity and precision are critical, such as electronics and sporting goods, while human influencers remain influential in emotionally driven sectors like fashion and beauty (Gerlich, 2025).

The term 'source credibility' is normally used when the acceptance of a message by its receiver implies that its communicator (digital influencer) meets a series of positive characteristics (Ohanian, 1990). According to several authors, the credibility of a digital influencer positively influences the consumer's purchasing decision process (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Chekima et al., 2020) and is based on three main dimensions: trust, attractiveness, and expertise (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Chekima et al., 2020; Munnukka et al., 2016). In other words, credibility is not synonymous with trust, since the second is one of the three principles that ensure the credibility of a source (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020).

Therefore, it becomes relevant to define the following concepts:

Trust – The concept of trust can be defined as a perceived willingness of the source to contribute valid statements (Mccracken, 1989). The concept is also associated with

characteristics such as honesty, reliability, and sincerity (Lord and Putrevu, 2009). According to several authors, trust positively influences the credibility of the source (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Lord and Putrevu, 2009; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020).

Attractiveness – According to Erdogan, attractiveness is a stereotype of positive associations that characterize the digital influencer and is not limited to physical appearance alone, covering other aspects such as personality, lifestyle, or athletic and/or intellectual abilities (Erdogan, 1999). The attractiveness of a communicator is considered a value that allows a message to be transmitted more easily, when compared to less attractive sources, and that allows us to positively influence the image of a brand, as it tends to generate greater interest and increase attention. most people (Sari et al., 2021). According to several authors, attractiveness positively influences the credibility of the source (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Lord and Putrevu, 2009; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020).

Expertise – The concept expertise can be defined as an ability perceived by the source and which allows it to contribute with valid statements (Mccracken, 1989), being associated with terms such as: skill, qualification, knowledge, or expertise demonstrated by the digital influencer (Lord and Putrevu, 2009). The expertise of a digital influencer influences its credibility and its ability to persuade the consumer to buy a certain item (Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018). In other words, expertise positively influences the credibility of the source (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Ki et al., 2020; Lord and Putrevu, 2009). According to Ki et al. (2020), expertise is one of the variables that influence attachment, along with inspiration, visual aesthetics, enjoyability, similarity, and informativeness.

According to Ferrão and Alturas (2018), the fashion industry, with a strong presence on the Internet, is not immune to the competitiveness that exists in the online market and is just a click away. This reality makes it essential for brands to look for the best way to boost consumer loyalty compared to other competitors. The development of strategies that encourage the creation of strong bonds is a current and extremely important concern. Consumer loyalty is the heart of a brand, as consumers, when loyal, will make recurring purchases and share their experiences and opinions in a positive way within their social circle, whether online or offline (Ferrão and Alturas, 2018).

2.4 Conceptual model and hypotheses

Digital influencers impact consumers with their thoughts, attitudes, and opinions (Zak and Hasprova, 2020), which, combined with the fact that people spend more and more time on online social networks, makes it increasingly common for them to consider digital influencers as credible sources of information and recommendations (Gouveia, 2022; Zak and Hasprova, 2020; Zietek, 2016) – positively influencing the consumer in the purchase decision process (Cardoso and Alturas, 2019; Ferrão and Alturas, 2018; Gouveia, 2022; Zak and Hasprova, 2020).

However, these facts alone do not mean that consumers accept the message transmitted by digital influencers, since acceptance of the message transmitted depends on the credibility of the source, so the digital influencer will have to consider a series of positive characteristics (Ohanian, 1990).

According to several authors, the credibility of a digital influencer positively influences the consumer's purchasing decision process (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Chekima et al., 2020) and is based on three main dimensions: trust, attractiveness, and expertise (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Chekima et al., 2020; Munnukka et al., 2016).

Following this line of reasoning, the following hypothesis was presented:

H1: Credible online recommendations for fashion items, published on online social networks by digital influencers, have a positive effect on consumers' purchasing decision process.

According to several authors, confidence (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Lord and Putrevu, 2009; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020), attractiveness (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Lord and Putrevu, 2009; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020), and expertise (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Lord and Putrevu, 2009), positively influence the credibility of the source, in this case the digital influencer.

Following this line of reasoning, the following hypotheses were presented:

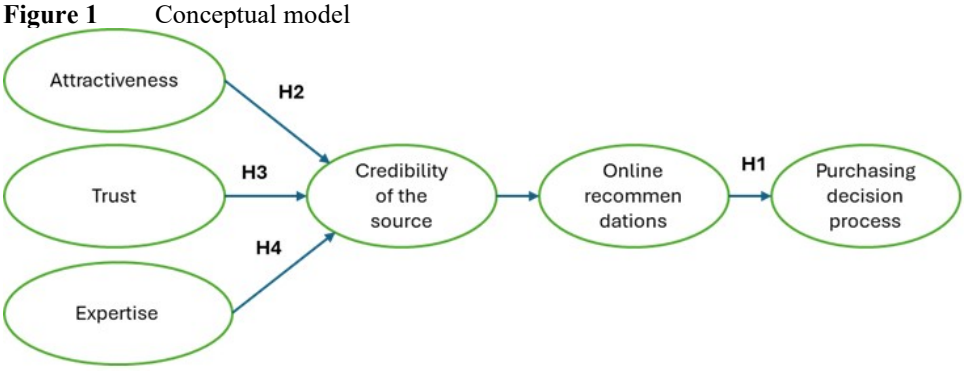
H2: The attractiveness of the digital influencer positively influences their credibility.

H3: Trust in the digital influencer positively influences their credibility.

H4: The expertise of the digital influencer positively influences its credibility.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model and hypotheses of the study.

Figure 1 Conceptual model



3 Methodology

Throughout the investigation, a deductive approach was adopted based on existing studies and theories, so it was possible to substantiate hypotheses.

After establishing research hypotheses, it was considered that a quantitative study would be the most appropriate method to conduct this investigation, as it allows hypotheses to be validated and projected to the universe, enabling conclusions to be obtained.

Therefore, to obtain quantitative data, it was used a convenience sample, with the approach indicated above was used, using a questionnaire. This questionnaire was carried out via the internet, using the Qualtrics tool and disseminated for a month through online social networks (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram) – with several individuals being invited to answer the previously formulated questions.

The questionnaire was divided into four distinct groups. The purpose of the first group of questions was to define the sample, identifying characteristics such as age, gender, level of education, or professional status.

The second group made it possible to assess the relationship between the study sample and social networks on-line, making it possible to determine the frequency of its use.

The third group is dedicated to eWOM and digital influencers, with questions aimed at understanding the relationship established between consumers and digital influencers and the impact of the latter's recommendations on the former's purchasing decision process.

The fourth and final group of questions is focused on analysing the characteristics of digital influencers that may or may not define them as a credible source of recommendation.

The anonymous response questionnaire consists of 15 questions, most of which are closed, as only two of the questions are open-ended. Regarding closed questions, Likert-type scales were applied, rated 1 to 5, and answers of 'yes' or 'no'.

After completing the questionnaire, the collected data was properly organised in Excel and subsequently processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

4 Results and discussion

After analysing the results of the questionnaire, it was found that the average age of the participants was 31.93 years, and that the majority were female (64.2% of the sample). Most of the sample had a higher education degree (85.4% of the sample) and worked for others (80.3% of the sample).

Regarding online social networks, it appears that all participants in the questionnaire have online social networks, as the questionnaire was shared through them. Also, the most used online social network is Instagram (M=4.34), being used several times a day by most of its users (Mo=5).

When studying the relationship of the sample with digital influencers, it was found that the majority follows at least one digital influencer (78.1% of the sample). Highlighting the fact that most participants who reveal that they follow at least one digital influencer are female (72.0%) and that the majority of participants who do not follow any digital influencer are male (63.3%). It was also found that most participants from all age groups follow at least one digital influencer, except for the age group whose participants are over 55 years old, since 75% do not follow any digital influencer.

Considering that the area of expertise of the digital influencers studied is fashion, the number of digital fashion influencers followed by the sample was analysed. After completing the questionnaire, it was found that 83.2% of the sample follows at least one digital fashion influencer, following an average of 13.51 digital influencers in this specific area. The percentage of women who follow at least one digital fashion influencer was also found to be higher than that of male participants, 92.2% for the first mentioned and 60.0% for the second. Finally, it was found that most participants in all age groups follow at least one digital fashion influencer.

To assess the real impact of influencer marketing on the consumer's purchasing decision process for fashion items, the impact of sharing a recommendation for a fashion

item on online social networks by a digital influencer was analysed on each of the phases of the consumer's purchasing decision process.

Regarding the attention phase, it is concluded that this is positively influenced by influencer marketing. Since, through the sharing of fashion item recommendations on online social networks by digital influencers, fashion item brands are presented to the consumer that they were previously unaware of. In other words, from then on, the consumer can recognise or remember that same brand. This hypothesis was validated by the classifications attributed to the item corresponding to the attention phase present in the questionnaire, where it was found that more than half of the sample (52.9% of the participants) “completely agree” with the statement (Mo=5 and Me=5.00).

Regarding the attraction phase, it appears that this is positively influenced by influencer marketing. Consumers reveal that they have already changed their opinion about a fashion brand after seeing the opinion of a digital influencer about it. The hypothesis was validated through the analysis of the proportions of participants who agreed (43.6%) and who disagreed (34.4%) with the statement referring to the attraction phase, concluding that the majority agreed.

When analysing the counselling phase, it appears that this is positively influenced by influencer marketing. Consumers confirm that they have already consulted a digital influencer's opinion regarding a fashion item that they would be considering purchasing. The hypothesis was validated through the analysis of the proportions of participants who agreed (48.3%) and disagreed (39.0%) with the statement regarding the counselling phase, concluding that the majority agreed. The validation of this hypothesis also ends up corroborating the idea that consumers see digital influencers as a source of credible recommendations.

Regarding the action phase, it was found that this is positively influenced by influencer marketing. Since consumers reveal that after having actively researched a digital influencer's opinion regarding a fashion item, they purchased it. The hypothesis present here was validated through the analysis of the median (Me=4.00) of the classifications attributed to the paragraph referring to the action phase, having concluded that more than half of the sample agrees with the statement (54.0% of the participants).

Finally, the advocacy phase was evaluated, concluding that this is the only phase of the decision-making process that is not positively influenced by influencer marketing. Most consumers say that they do not recommend/suggest a brand of fashion items that they have not yet tested, as they trust the opinion of a digital influencer. This could effectively suggest that, as mentioned in the literature review, the advocacy phase ends up being closely related to the action phase, since it is in the latter that the consumer establishes a deeper relationship with the brand, consuming and evaluating the product (Kotler et al., 2017). So much so that, if the product evaluation is positive, the consumer can effectively develop feelings of loyalty with the brand that can translate into brand advocacy. This hypothesis ended up being refuted through the analysis of the median (Me=2.00) of the classifications attributed to the paragraph relating to the advocacy phase of the questionnaire, having concluded that more than half of the sample did not agree with the statement (50.5 % of participants).

Regarding the frequency of purchasing fashion items, it was found that the sample rarely purchases fashion items that have been recommended by digital influencers (Mo=2). It was also found that, in general, the sample prefers to purchase this type of item in a physical store. However, it should be noted that the proportion of participants

who prefer to buy online is higher when they purchase an item recommended by a digital influencer.

Table 1 shows principal components factor analysis which was computed to reduce data and with which four composites were found: Trust (Cronbach Alpha of 0.91), Expertise (Cronbach Alpha of 0.85), Purchasing decision process (Cronbach Alpha of 0.76) and Attractiveness (Cronbach Alpha of 0.79).

Table 1 Principal components factor analysis

	Components			
	Trust	Expertise	Purchasing decision process	Attractiveness
Honesty	0.894	0.170	0.158	-0.022
Sincerity	0.867	0.192	0.146	0.114
Reliability	0.825	0.328	0.063	0.176
Authenticity	0.752	0.188	0.129	0.319
Qualification	0.187	0.829	0.001	0.068
Expertise	0.198	0.820	0.246	0.024
Skill	0.173	0.668	0.459	0.259
Knowledge	0.361	0.659	0.264	0.181
Action phase	0.113	0.084	0.822	0.062
Advice phase	0.130	0.168	0.698	0.197
Attention phase	-0.086	0.113	0.638	-0.090
Attraction phase	0.207	0.236	0.628	0.022
Advocacy phase	0.308	0.057	0.587	0.286
Physical appearance	0.056	0.053	-0.072	0.898
Lifestyle	0.249	0.191	0.274	0.729
Athletic and/or intellectual abilities	0.123	0.558	0.209	0.531
Personality	0.296	0.526	0.129	0.511
Cronbach alpha	**0.911**	**0.852**	**0.757**	**0.797**

Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

It was possible to identify the factors that lead consumers to see a digital influencer as a reliable source of recommendation for fashion items, it was validated, by analysing the median (Me=4.00) that most of the sample (53.6%) consider digital influencers to be a credible source of recommendation.

Table 2 Correlational analysis (Credibility of the source, Trust, Attractiveness and Expertise)

	Credibility of the source	Trust	Attractiveness	Expertise
Credibility of the source	1			
	82			
Trust	.391**	1		
	0.000			
	82	82		
Attractiveness	.394**	.483**	1	
	0.000	0.000		
	82	82	82	
Expertise	.478**	.540**	.596**	1
	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	82	82	82	82

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

After validating that consumers consider digital influencers to be a credible source of recommendation, through a correlational analysis (Table 2), it was verified that the variable corresponding to the credibility of the source, in this case of a digital influencer, reveals a positive association with the components referring to the factor's expertise (ρ=0.478), attractiveness (ρ=0.394) and trust (ρ=0.391). These results thus corroborate the opinion that the credibility of a digital influencer is based on the dimensions of trust, attractiveness, and expertise (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Chekima et al., 2020; Munnukka et al., 2016). It was also verified, through the descriptive analysis of the data, that the proportion of participants who consider that the trust factor (34.2%), attractiveness (34.2%) and expertise (28.1%) contribute to the credibility of a digital influencer is higher than the proportion of participants who do not consider him/her. In short, the greater the expertise, attractiveness, and trust, the greater the credibility of the source.

It was also confirmed that the credibility of a digital influencer positively influences the consumer's purchasing decision process (Baig and Shahzad, 2022; Chekima et al., 2020). Since, through a correlational analysis, it was concluded that the component referring to the consumer's purchasing decision process presents a positive association with the components corresponding to the factor's expertise (ρ=0.503), attractiveness (ρ=0.408) and trust (ρ =0.389). In other words, the greater the expertise, attractiveness, and trust of the digital influencer, the greater their credibility and positive influence on the purchasing decision process. Once the discussion of results was finished, it was possible to determine that not all hypotheses were verified, since hypothesis 1 was not verified.

5 Conclusions and implications

According to the literature, influencer marketing positively impacts the consumer's purchasing decision process for fashion items. Therefore, the impact of sharing a recommendation on on-line social networks by an influencer on each of the phases of the purchasing decision process (namely: attention, attraction, advice, action, and advocacy) of the fashion consumer was assessed. It has been established that all phases are positively impacted by influencer marketing, except for the advocacy phase. Since:

Attraction phase - most of the participants in the questionnaire indicate that they have already discovered a fashion brand through a recommendation shared by a digital influencer on online social networks.

Attention phase – the proportion of participants who claim to have already changed their opinion regarding a fashion brand, after having seen a digital influencer's opinion about it, is higher than those who did not.

Advice phase – the proportion of participants who report having already consulted a digital influencer's opinion regarding a fashion item they were considering purchasing is higher than those who did not.

Action phase – Most of the participants in the questionnaire reveal that they have already purchased a fashion item after researching the opinion of a digital influencer on that same item.

Advocacy phase – most questionnaire participants say that they do not recommend/suggest a fashion brand that they have not yet tested, as they trust the opinion of a digital influencer. Therefore, it has not been validated that influencer marketing positively impacts the consumer's purchasing decision process for fashion items and that they skip the action phase and go directly to the advocacy phase when impacted by a recommendation for a shared fashion item. on online social networks by a digital influencer. In other words, according to the study, it can be suggested that consumers only recommend fashion items if they have been purchased and tested.

It was also concluded that consumers consider digital influencers to be a credible source of recommendation for fashion items – factors such as expertise, attractiveness, and trust contribute to their credibility. Therefore, the greater the expertise, attractiveness, and trust, the greater the credibility of the digital influencer.

After completion of the study, it was concluded that one of its main limitations is the sample. In addition to the small number of participants in the questionnaire (N=137), it was shared on social networks online, which dictated self-completion. In other words, the answers to the questionnaire were collected without the researcher monitoring the participants; thus, there was no opportunity to clarify possible doubts related to the topic or even questions of interpretation. It should also be noted that the sample is not probabilistic, making it impossible to generalise the results.

When analysing the study results, interestingly, it was found that women show a greater tendency than men to follow digital influencers on online social networks, whether they are fashion or not. Therefore, as a future research proposal, it would be interesting to study the impact of gender on influencer marketing.

To deepen the theme of this investigation, it may be relevant to conduct interviews with digital influencers, with the main objective of understanding how influencer marketing impacts consumer behaviour, as well as identifying which factors lead the consumer to see a digital influencer. as a reliable source of recommendation for fashion items in the perfective of the digital influencer himself.

Therefore, these results corroborate the view that the credibility of a digital influencer is based on the dimensions of trust, attractiveness, and expertise (Chekima et al., 2020; Baig et al., 2022; Munnukka et al., 2016). It was also confirmed that the credibility of a digital influencer positively influences the consumer's purchase decision process (Rebelo, 2017; Chekima et al., 2020; Baig et al., 2022). The results offer important managerial implications for companies, allowing them to define influencer marketing strategies, considering both human influencers and AI solutions, specifically, how brands can navigate between human-based and AI-based influence strategies, understanding the marketing challenges that arise in AI-enhanced ecosystems (Gerlich, 2023, 2025).

Declarations

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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