



## Building influencers' credibility on Instagram: Effects on followers' attitudes and behavioral responses toward the influencer

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Influencer marketing  
Congruence  
Credibility  
Paid communication  
Behavioral intentions

### ABSTRACT

Collaborations between influencers and brands have become increasingly popular in recent years. Previous research has mainly focused on influencer marketing as a commercial action designed to enhance followers' perceptions and reactions toward promoted brands, ignoring the consequences of these promotional actions on influencers' credibility and their relationships with their followers. This research sheds light on the topic by exploring how influencers' promotional actions affect their credibility, and followers' attitudes and behavioral responses toward the influencer (i.e., to continue following, imitate, and recommend them to other users). A study addressed to the followers of a popular influencer was carried out to test the research model. The results showed that perceived influencer-product congruence positively affects followers' perceptions of the credibility of, and attitude toward, influencers, and negatively affects perceptions of paid communication. Followers' perceptions that influencers have been paid to take part in promotional activities harms their credibility; however, credibility is essential for generating positive attitudes toward the influencer. Finally, both perceived credibility and attitude foster positive behavioral responses toward the influencer; influencers must enhance these factors to retain their influencing capacity. This research provides managerial implications for influencers and brands that can help enhance followers' experiences when exposed to promotions on social media.

### 1. Introduction

It is commonplace today for brands to collaborate with influencers to promote their products to their target audiences (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Social media influencers have become today's opinion leaders, and act as brand ambassadors on social networks (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Yerasani et al., 2019). It has been shown that collaborating with influencers in promotional actions is more effective than collaborating with traditional celebrities (Schouten et al., 2020). Consequently, 93% of marketers currently use influencers in their campaigns (SocialPubli, 2019) and 66% of them are planning to increase their budget for influencer marketing in the next year (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2020). As a result, the influencer sector has reached an annual revenue of almost US\$10 billion (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2020). Influencer marketing is understood as a communication strategy by which influencers help brands to persuade customers (Djafarova and Bowes, 2020; Ki et al., 2020). However, collaborating with influencers would be useless if they had no influencing capacity. Thus, as part of their job, influencers manage their

personal social media images to increase their number of engaged followers (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). As followers tend to value influencers' advice because of their expertise in certain subjects (De Veirman et al., 2017), it would seem vital for influencers to maintain their credibility to strengthen their relationships with their followers.

The growing, but still scarce, literature on influencer marketing has focused on several research streams. Some authors have tried to identify the reasons why some individuals are considered influencers on social media (e.g., Casalo et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). Another research line has examined the development of indexes to analyze the effectiveness of influencer-based promotional actions (e.g., Arora et al., 2019). Recent research has addressed the impact of sponsorship disclosure, that is, influencers admitting (or not) that they have been financially compensated for promoting a particular product/service (e.g., Boerman, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019). Nevertheless, most of the studies that have analyzed the consequences of the promotional actions carried out by influencers have focused on users' perceptions and responses toward the promoted products and brands (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). That is, although

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102585>

Received 29 October 2020; Received in revised form 9 March 2021; Accepted 17 April 2021

Available online 28 April 2021

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every influencer marketing campaign involves three main agents, the influencer, the brand and the followers (Stubb et al., 2019), previous research has focused on the relationship between the brand and the followers (i.e., followers' attitudes toward, and purchase of, promoted products), and ignored the consequences that these campaigns have on followers' perceptions and their responses toward the influencer. This is an important research gap given that the follower-influencer relationship is vital for the success of influencer marketing campaigns (Stubb et al., 2019).

From a relational perspective, influencers aim to develop deeper psychological bonds with their followers to set long-term relationships (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Influencers struggle to draw and retain followers since this is the way to build a successful community, which is the basis of their influence (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Hu et al., 2020). However, similar to the relationships between companies and customers (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), this long-term relationship is in turn formed by the different touchpoints that take place between the influencer and his/her followers. This is important considering that followers are continuously making decisions about the influencer by simple click-based behaviors (follow or unfollow an influencer, imitate him/her, recommend him/her or not). Therefore, every publication matters because, as a whole, it allows the development of a community in which congruent, interesting and relevant content on specific topics is discussed (Casaló et al., 2020). Specifically, commercial collaborations are critical since they usually have short-term objectives that should not harm followers' perceptions toward the brand or the influencer (Kim and Kim, 2020; Phua et al., 2018). Thus, this study focuses on these individual touchpoints (collaborations between an influencer and a brand) that can subsequently affect their ongoing relationship.

Taking these points into account, and on the basis of the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework (e.g., Donovan and Rossiter, 1982), a research model is proposed in which influencer promotional messages are perceived by followers as cues that generate cognitive and emotional states that, in turn, lead to behavioral consequences. More specifically, it is proposed that the influencer's promotion of products that are more, or less, congruent with his/her style affects his/her followers' attitudes toward the influencer and their perceptions of the credibility of the influencer which, in turn, lead to varied behavioral responses (i.e., intention to continue following and/or imitating the influencer and to recommend him/her to other users). The present study focuses on Instagram as it is marketers' preferred social media on which to conduct influencer-based marketing campaigns (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2020). The visual nature of this social network is a determining factor in its success and in its choice by influencers (Jin and Ryu, 2020). However, research into influencer marketing on Instagram is still scarce (Casaló et al., 2020).

The present study aims to shed light on these research gaps by clarifying how Instagram-based influencers' might strengthen their relationships with their followers. Differently from previous research mostly focused on followers' reactions toward the promoted product or brand, this study focuses on followers' reactions toward the influencer. More precisely, followers intentions closely linked to their subsequent behaviors related to the influencer (intention to follow, intention to imitate and intention to recommend the influencer to other users). As managing their image is essential for increasing their audience base, influencers should satisfy their followers' needs in terms of what they demand (e.g. relevant and up-to-date information, entertainment, useful advice within the shared topic of interest) (Ki et al., 2020). In addition, these perceptions and positive responses can subsequently be communicated to their followers through the content they post in the course of their collaboration with brands (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). In this sense, our research focuses on the factors that impact on influencers' credibility from the followers' perspective as a key aspect of the influencer marketing phenomenon.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The role of influencers on social media

The modern-day widespread use of social media has increased the influence of experts' and non-experts' opinions, as they can reach many more individuals than before (Hu et al., 2020; Jacobson et al., 2020). This has motivated some individuals to devote themselves professionally, semi-professionally or altruistically to offer their opinions through social media (Audrezet et al., 2020). These people are known as influencers, third party and independent individuals characterized by their ability to reshape the attitudes of their social media audience (Freberg et al., 2011).

Influencers have been described as being somewhere between friends and distant celebrities (Chae, 2017). Like friends that share the same interests, values and lifestyles (Casaló et al., 2020; Sokolova and Perez, 2021), through their Instagram accounts, using a common language, influencers share information and advice with their followers about specific topics of mutual interest, trying to establish close relationships that will be maintained over time (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin and Ryu, 2020; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). In similar ways to celebrities that need the support of their fans, influencers, for commercial purposes, develop a marketing-oriented personal image. However, conceptually influencers and celebrities are different in nature (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). While traditional celebrities are primarily known for their non-social media related activities (e.g., cinema, sports, music), influencers are known for their social media activity (Hu et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Thus, influencers are "born" on social media, where they build and maintain direct relationships with multiple users with the aim of informing, entertaining and potentially influencing their thoughts, attitudes and behaviors (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

An essential issue for influencers is the credibility they convey (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019). Due to their expertise and proximity to their followers' interests, influencers are perceived as more credible than celebrities, which results in their opinions having greater impact on their followers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Stubb et al., 2019). Thus, due to influencers' ability to shape their followers' reactions toward endorsed products (Casaló et al., 2020), brands collaborate with influencers as an effective way of communicating their offerings (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

### 2.2. The relevance (spillover effects) of influencers' posts

Building strong and lasting relationships with their followers is the main objective of influencers to create successful communities (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). By covering certain topics of mutual interest and generating greater affinity throughout their interactions, influencers can achieve this goal (Casaló et al., 2020). This way, the interactions between the influencers and their followers help strengthen their bonds. Similar to regular relationships, which are established through different touchpoints between the agents, influencers try to make their followers see them as "friends" with whom they share certain interests throughout their regular interactions (Sokolova and Perez, 2021).

However, the collaborative actions between influencers and brands are usually occasional. This kind of posts have a critical nature as they may not be as linked to the content usually generated by the influencers (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Therefore, influencers should take special care with these types of collaborations, weaving them into their personal story (Casaló et al., 2020). Otherwise, certain negative spillover effects from his/her message can be generated (Ahluwalia et al., 2001), both for the influencer and the brand. Specifically, followers can judge these publications due to the lack of coherence between the collaboration and the influencer's usual content (Kim and Kim, 2020). Considering their (positive or negative) perceptions, followers can decide to follow or unfollow the influencer at any time.

Thus, our research analyzes how these promotional touchpoints should be designed to generate positive followers' reactions toward the influencer that allow for the continuance of the long-lasting relationships with his/her followers.

The example of the influencer Chriselle Lim and the car brand Volvo proves this point (Statusphere, 2019). This influencer usually covers certain topics in her account as fashion, beauty and motherhood. When she published a post promoting a component of a recently launched Volvo car, their followers were surprised due to her lack of fit with this product. Consequently, they react negatively both toward the brand and the influencer. Conversely, the brand Fiji Water bet on the influencer Danielle Bernstein (whose account addresses topics such as fashion or healthy lifestyle) for the promotion of its product (HubSpot, 2019). In the campaign, the influencer posted some workout videos. Fiji wanted to prove its commitment to hydrating those who want to be fit. The reactions of her followers to the match of the promotional campaign were extremely positive. Thus, every post is important and should be carefully designed since as a whole it is what makes it possible to generate certain attitudes.

2.3. Stimulus-organism-response theory

As previously noted, to establish long-term relationships with their followers, influencers should consider the different touchpoints with their followers (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Specifically, every publication matters, and even more so in the case of commercial communications, which may differ from the influence's usual content (Kim and Kim, 2020; Phua et al., 2018). Thus, every publication can shape the subsequent attitudes, perceptions and behavioral responses toward the influencer in their ongoing relationship. Considering this, our proposal is based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework, which has been previously used in influencer marketing research (e.g., Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). This framework posits that individuals, after being exposed to specific stimuli, generate cognitive and emotional states which, in turn, lead them to perform (or not) certain behaviors (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Stimuli have been defined as the specific elements that cause organismic reactions in the individual (Eroglu et al., 2001). On social media platforms online stimuli are the audiovisual content posted by a person on his/her profile. When the stimuli are processed by another person (an organism), certain perceptions and evaluations (cognitive and affective) are generated (Loureiro and Ribeiro, 2011). Cognitive states have been

defined as the users' mental reactions in relation to the acquisition, processing, retention and retrieval of stimuli (Eroglu et al., 2001). Affective states have been defined as the emotions aroused after exposure to stimuli (Loureiro and Ribeiro, 2011). Finally, responses have been defined as the outcomes induced by organismic reactions to the stimuli, that is, the individual's approach or avoidance behaviors (Eroglu et al., 2001). Approach behavior refers to positive actions taken as a result of being exposed to certain stimuli, whereas avoidance behavior is associated with inaction/evasive action (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974).

3. Hypothesis development

Taking the S-O-R framework as the baseline, we consider; that influencers' posts endorsing a product are the stimuli; that the organismic reactions are their followers' perceptions and evaluations of influencer-product congruence, the influencer's credibility, the perceptions of the post as paid communication, and attitude toward the influencer; that the responses are the followers' behaviors in terms of continuance intention to follow influencers' accounts, recommend them, and take their advice. Fig. 1 depicts the research model.

Congruence has been defined as the degree of similarity between two entities or activities (Olson and Thjomøe, 2011). Its importance has been shown in research areas such as communications (e.g., Kuo and Rice, 2015), distribution channels (e.g., Wang and Zhang, 2017) and tourism (e.g., Xu and Pratt, 2018). The congruity theory (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955) explains that individuals favor elements that are cognitively consistent with each other. In our context, when influencers (source) give a message about a product (object), the audience of this message can maintain or modify their attitudes toward both the source and the object to keep or restore the congruity (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). Thus, after viewing the stimulus (influencer's post about a product), followers develop an organismic perception about the fit of the influencer and the advertised product (source and object), which subsequently affects their reactions. Previous research has noted that the perceived fit between the endorser and the promoted product is essential for achieving successful results in the context of celebrity advertising (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Knoll and Matthes, 2017; Zhu et al., 2019). This relationship is also grounded in the match-up hypothesis (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Till and Busler, 2000), which suggests that when there is a high fit between an endorser and an advertised product, a promotional campaign is more persuasive (Kamins, 1990; Ohanian, 1990; Till et al., 2008).

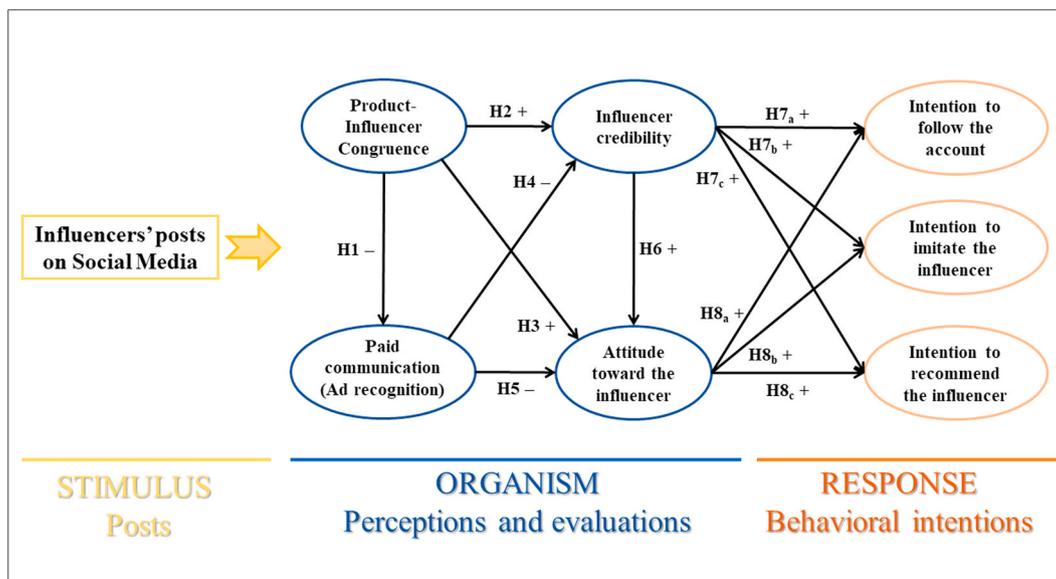


Fig. 1. Research model.

On social networks the success of influencers is based on their close relationships with their followers (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). Influencers and their followers share a common interest in certain subjects, and influencers usually provide advice on products related to those topics, about which they are considered to be experts (Zhang et al., 2020). Followers know which topics influencers normally cover (Casaló et al., 2020). The fit between the influencer and the products (s)he promotes is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of influencer-based marketing campaigns (Kim and Kim, 2020; Phua et al., 2018). Conversely, when influencers stray from the topics they usually deal with on their accounts, and showcase products that do not fit with their regular content, it is likely their followers will be surprised to find material they do not expect which, in turn, may generate feelings of confusion (Stubb et al., 2019). Classical research on persuasion explains how the lack of coherence in a commercial message reduces its effectiveness (Wright, 1979; Jacks and Cameron, 2003). Individuals tend to compare the incoming information to the existing belief system. Thus, when exposed to incongruent information, such discrepancy is noted by the individual resulting in a higher confusion, irritation, and perceptions of intrusiveness that leads to the activation of counterarguments (cognitive thoughts focused on the negative aspects of the product or brand) (Wright, 1979; Belanche et al., 2017). If the incongruity of the scenario remains unexplained, followers are likely to continue having doubts about the influencers' message. This may lead them to think that the influencer has been incentivized to sponsor the product by a commercial rather than a personal interest (De Veirman et al., 2017). In short, followers may be viewing promotional campaigns in which the influencers are endorsing products because they are being financially compensated by the sponsoring brand (De Veirman et al., 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019). Therefore:

**H1.** Perceived influencer-product congruence negatively affects followers' perceptions of paid communications.

Perceived credibility is the extent to which a source is considered to have important expertise in, and is trusted to be objective about, the themes (s)he addresses (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Ohanian, 1990). The source credibility model proposes that the efficacy of a message is determined by the degree of expertise and trustworthiness of the communicator (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990, 1991). In this sense, expertise is the extent to which an individual is considered to have great knowledge about a particular topic (Erdogan, 1999). Trustworthiness has been defined as encapsulating the levels of honesty, believability and integrity transmitted by an individual (Erdogan, 1999). Influencers need high levels of both expertise and trustworthiness to build strong perceptions of their credibility in their social media audience (Schouten et al., 2020).

Previous research has found a significant connection between the match-up hypothesis and the source credibility model in the context of celebrity endorsements (Mishra et al., 2015; Park and Lin, 2020; Yoo and Jim, 2015). A high fit between an endorser and a promoted product leads the source to be perceived as more credible (Schouten et al., 2020; Yoo and Jim, 2015). Alternatively, the lack of coherence results in a reduction of the credibility of the source, what is conceptualized as source derogation. When the source is easily viewed as biased, the individual spontaneously derogates the specific spokesperson due to the negative emotions developed (e.g., disappointment, annoyance), dismissing his or her expertise, considering that shows little respect for the viewer intelligence or performs a kind of "brainwashing job" (Wright, 1979; Jacks and Cameron, 2003). Thus, it can be expected that followers will perceive congruent influencer-product contents to be natural, and in accordance with the content regularly published on the influencer's account. This will result in the followers developing higher perceptions of credibility toward the influencer. Hence:

**H2.** Perceived influencer-product congruence positively affects followers' perceptions of the influencer's credibility.

Attitudes have been defined as the individual's affective-evaluative

predispositions to respond favorably or unfavorably toward a target or an object (Shaver, 1977). The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) proposes that attitude represents the main antecedent of behavioral intentions. In this study we analyze the effect on attitude toward influencers resulting from viewing them sponsoring a product in an influencer-based marketing campaign. Social media users tend to follow the content uploaded by influencers because the topics covered and the style and the image they portray on their accounts are particularly attractive to them (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Followers, then, have a deep understanding of the type of content usually published by influencers (Belanche et al., 2020). Thus, if influencers start offering advice in their posts about products that do not fit their usual themes, it is probable that followers' evaluations of the influencers will worsen (Stubb et al., 2019). As one of the main fundamentals of the influencer-follower relationship is the existence of shared interests, values and lifestyles (Sokolova and Perez, 2021), when influencers collaborate with brands it is important that they maintain the consistency of their usual content (Breves et al., 2019; Casaló et al., 2020). By doing so they can avoid their followers developing negative evaluations. Therefore, we propose that, in a marketing campaign, high influencer-image and promoted-product congruence will result in followers developing positive attitudes toward the influencers involved.

**H3.** Perceived influencer-product congruence positively affects followers' attitudes toward the influencer.

When collaborating with brands, influencers create and post messages recommending their products, and receive financial compensation in exchange (Stubb et al., 2019). Sometimes, influencers acknowledge that they have been paid by posting hashtags that warn their followers (e.g., "Sponsored"; Evans et al., 2017). However, they do not always explicitly indicate that their posts are part of a brand's promotional activities (Stubb and Colliander, 2019; van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). In this case, if influencers particularly highlight the positive aspects of a product, without being sufficiently objective in their evaluations, their followers may react by assuming they are being faced with a paid communication (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). If the followers believe that the posted information is biased, because the influencer has been financially compensated for sponsoring the product, the influencer's credibility may be diminished (Djafarova and Bowes, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019). Followers may then begin to believe that the information regularly provided by the influencer is not as genuine as they initially thought. As a consequence of viewing these type of messages, followers may generate negative perceptions of the influencer's credibility (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). Thus:

**H4.** The perception that an influencer's post is in reality a paid communication negatively affects followers' perceptions of the influencer's credibility.

In addition, if followers realize that influencers' posts are actually ads, this can worsen their attitude toward them (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Evans et al., 2017). When consumers become aware that they are receiving advertising, they may activate defensive coping mechanisms (Boerman et al., 2012; Friestad and Wright, 1994). Consequently, followers may be triggered into experiencing feelings of confusion, skepticism and annoyance, which can have a detrimental effect on their attitudes toward the source (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019). As followers realize that influencers are being compensated for promoting a product, they become increasingly critical of them, which weakens their preexisting attitudinal evaluations (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). Therefore, we propose that if followers perceive that an influencer has been paid for uploading a commercial post, their attitudes toward him/her will worsen:

**H5.** The perception that an influencer's post is in reality a paid communication negatively affects followers' attitudes toward the influencer.

To maintain successful communities on social media influencers

must build their followers' perceptions of their credibility (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020M; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Thus, when influencers collaborate with brands to promote their products, it is essential that they maintain their followers' perceptions of their credibility, as this positively affects the followers' subsequent attitudes toward the message and the promoted brand (e.g., Breves et al., 2019; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Schouten et al., 2020). In addition, where followers assign greater credibility to an influencer, this also improves their attitudes toward him/her because (s)he has come to be regarded as a valuable source of information. The underlying reason for this is that when followers perceive that an influencer is credible, they feel closer to, and develop a more favorable opinion about, the influencer (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Hence:

**H6.** The perceived credibility of an influencer positively affects followers' attitudes toward him/her.

Finally, behavioral intentions have been described as indicators of individuals' willingness to perform particular behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). On Instagram behavioral intentions are closely linked to actual behaviors (Casaló et al., 2017a). The present study examines followers' responses toward influencers after they have viewed the influencers promoting a product as part of a marketing campaign; we analyze three crucial behavioral intentions toward the influencer that can arise after promotional activity. First, followers' intention to continue following the account of the influencer; this involves keeping themselves up-to-date with relevant information and advice posted by the influencer by following his/her account. Following accounts and their publications is essential for the maintenance of online communities (Casaló et al., 2017b). Second, intention to imitate the influencer; this involves followers taking into account and putting into practice the advice published by influencers (Casaló et al., 2020). Influencers can be decisive in the decision-making processes of their followers who can, indeed, be encouraged to adopt influencers' suggestions (Ki and Kim, 2019; Thakur et al., 2016). Third, intention to recommend; this is the extent to which followers intend to recommend the influencer's account to others (Casaló et al., 2020). When users are interested in the themes and content published on an account, they might share it with others who may also start following it (Casaló et al., 2017b). Influencers are naturally interested in promoting these behaviors on their personal profiles to increase the diffusion and popularity of their accounts.

The perceived credibility of an individual is key in the persuasion process (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Consequently, the credibility that endorsers' hold in the eyes of their followers is determinant of their followers' subsequent behavioral intentions (Argyris et al., 2021; Cosenza et al., 2015; Schouten et al., 2020). Sokolova and Kefi (2020) showed that influencers' credibility significantly affects their followers' behavioral intentions to purchase the products they promote. The perceived credibility of endorsers has also been shown to be an antecedent of their followers' behavioral intentions to follow their updates and to act upon the information they post on their blogs (Cosenza et al., 2015). In addition, followers are prone to recommend a source (such as an influencer's account) because (s)he is deemed to have a great understanding of a particular topic and provides them with trustworthy opinions (Thakur et al., 2016). The theory of planned behavior proposed that attitudes are antecedents of behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). If followers perceive that an influencer is interesting and pleasant they tend to continue following the updates on his/her account (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). In addition, when followers develop favorable opinions toward an influencer they are more prone to follow his/her suggestions, and to perform specific behaviors, such as recommending the account to others who might be interested (Ki and Kim, 2019). Hence, we propose that followers' perceptions of the credibility of, and attitude toward, the influencer positively affects their behavioral responses toward him/her.

**H7.** The perceived credibility of the influencer positively affects his/her followers' intentions to: (a) continue following; (b) imitate; and (c) recommend the influencer.

**H8.** The attitude that his/her followers have toward the influencer positively affects their intentions to: (a) continue following; (b) imitate; and (c) recommend the influencer.

#### 4. Methodology

To test the hypotheses a survey with questions on the research model's variables was designed. Specifically, data were collected using an online questionnaire hosted on SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was targeted at followers of a well-known influencer. This influencer has several million followers worldwide. She habitually posts several photos each week on fashion and beauty targeted at an international English-speaking audience. She was selected because she is a top-ranked influencer not initially considered a celebrity (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2019). Due to the international nature of her follower base the survey was distributed in English. A market research company helped to distribute the questionnaire. In line with previous fashion-based marketing research (Michon et al., 2008), the sample used was entirely female; the influencer promotes products exclusively targeted toward female consumers. To increase the variability in the responses about the level of influencer-product congruence, the participants were not exposed to the same promotional post; they were randomly exposed to photographs showing the influencer wearing different outfits. Next, the participants completed the survey, addressing the scales measuring the variables and questions about demographics. We checked that the respondents were, indeed, followers of the influencer on Instagram through several control questions (e.g., about the influencer's age, access to her profile), to ensure they were able to evaluate the level of congruency between the promotional posts and the influencer's normal style.

To measure the study variables the questionnaire used seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree" (see appendix). The scales were adapted from previous literature: influencer-product congruence (Xu and Pratt, 2018), paid communication (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020), perceived credibility of the influencer (Müller et al., 2018; Ohanian 1990), attitude toward the influencer (Silvera and Austad, 2004), intention to follow the influencer's account (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Belanche et al., 2014), intention to imitate the influencer (Casaló et al., 2011), and intention to recommend the influencer (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2017b). The questionnaire ended by asking participants about their Instagram experience and demographics.

Our sample consists of 341 participants after eliminating incomplete questionnaires and those who answered very quickly (without employing enough time to correctly read the questions and answers). The sample has the following characteristics regarding: age (18–24 [33.4%], 25–34 [39.0%], 35–44 [16.7%], 45–54 [7.3%], 55 and above [3.5%]); education levels (elementary school [0.6%], high school [22.6%], college degree [49.3%], postgraduate studies [27.6%]); Instagram experience (less than one year [13.8%], 1–3 years [30.8%], more than three years [55.4%]); and number of influencers followed by each participant (1–5 influencers [29.0%], 6–10 [20.5%], 11–20 [17.0%], more than 20 influencers [33.4%]).

##### 4.1. Measurement validation

First, we took steps to guarantee the content validity of the scales. The initial set of items was adapted, as aforementioned, from an in-depth review of the relevant literature on social networking sites, information systems communications and influencer marketing. Next, a panel of social media marketing and communications experts provided advice as to whether, or not, the proposed items were appropriate to the targeted construct. The items were judged by the experts to be "clearly representative", "somewhat representative" or "not representative" of the constructs under study (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Items were retained when the experts reached a high level of consensus (Lichtenstein et al.,

1990).

Second, we used confirmatory factor analysis to confirm the dimensional structure of the scales. Specifically, we employed statistical software EQS 6.1 and the robust maximum likelihood method as the estimation procedure. Then, following previous recommendations (Steenkamp and Van Trijp, 1991; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1993), we checked whether the factor loadings of the confirmatory model were statistically significant (at 0.01) and higher than 0.5. All items meet these requirements, acceptable levels of convergence, R-square values and model fit were obtained ( $\chi^2 = 743.277$ , 278 d.f.,  $p < 0.000$ ; Satorra-Bentler scaled  $\chi^2 = 577.005$ , 278 d.f.,  $p < 0.000$ ; NFI = 0.949; NNFI = 0.968; CFI = 0.973; IFI = 0.973; RMSEA = 0.056; 90% confidence interval [0.050, 0.063]), so no item was eliminated. Then, to assess construct reliability, we checked that the values of the composite reliability (CR) indicators (Jöreskog, 1971) were greater than the suggested minimum of 0.65 (Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006) (Table 1). In addition, to further ensure convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), we checked that the average variance extracted (AVE) values were significantly above 0.5 (see Table 1). Finally, to ensure discriminant validity, we verified that, for each construct, the square roots of the AVEs were greater than the inter-construct correlations (as can be seen in Table 1). In this way we ensured that each construct shared more variance with its own measures than with the other model constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

### 5. Results

A structural equation model was developed to test the framework's proposed hypotheses; statistical software EQS 6.1 and robust maximum likelihood were used as the estimation method. The results of the model, which showed acceptable model fit values ( $\chi^2 = 897.758$ , 287 d.f.,  $p < 0.000$ ; Satorra-Bentler scaled  $\chi^2 = 708.691$ , 287 d.f.,  $p < 0.000$ ; NFI = 0.938; NNFI = 0.957; CFI = 0.962; IFI = 0.962; RMSEA = 0.066; 90% confidence interval [0.060, 0.072]), are summarized in Fig. 2.

Specifically, influencer-product congruence had a positive influence on attitude toward the influencer ( $\gamma = 0.143$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and, to a lesser extent, on perceived credibility ( $\gamma = 0.087$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ), as well as a negative influence on the perception that the post was a paid communication ( $\gamma = -0.202$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results reveal that followers consider influencer-product congruency as an important cue through which to evaluate the influencer, which supports H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub>. The perception that the post is a paid communication significantly damages the perceived credibility of the influencer ( $\beta = -0.587$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but its effect on attitude toward the influencer is non-significant ( $\beta = 0.029$ ,  $p > 0.1$ ). Therefore, while H<sub>4</sub> is confirmed, H<sub>5</sub> is not supported. The perceived credibility of the influencer variable plays a central role in the success of the influencer marketing phenomenon. Credibility had a positive effect on attitude toward the influencer ( $\beta = 0.768$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which supports H<sub>6</sub>. In addition, the perceived credibility of the influencer significantly boosted the consumers' behavioral intentions; it had a positive influence on intention to imitate the influencer ( $\beta = 0.397$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), to recommend the influencer to others ( $\beta = 0.384$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and, to a lesser extent, to continue following the influencer's account ( $\beta$

= 0.142,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, H<sub>7a</sub>, H<sub>7b</sub> and H<sub>7c</sub> are supported. Finally, as proposed, attitude had a positive influence on the three intentions: to continue following the influencer's account ( $\beta = 0.601$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), to imitate the influencer ( $\beta = 0.306$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and to recommend the influencer to others ( $\beta = 0.462$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting H<sub>8a</sub>, H<sub>8b</sub> and H<sub>8c</sub>.

In addition, the proposed framework suggests that consumer perceptions (i.e., influencer-product congruence, paid communication and credibility of the influencer) had several indirect effects on consumer intentions (i.e., to continue following the influencer, to imitate the influencer and to recommend the influencer) through other perceptions (i.e., paid communication and credibility of the influencer) and attitude. Table 2 summarizes these indirect effects and provides information about direct and total effects. To be precise, the results confirmed that these indirect effects were significant and, as a result, the total effects proposed in the research model are highly significant. Of particular interest is the indirect effect of the perception that the influencer was paid to post an opinion on followers' attitude toward the influencer, which was mediated by the influencer's credibility (discussed hereafter).

These relationships allow us to offer convincing explanations of the consumer intentions examined in this research: to continue following the influencer's account ( $R^2 = 0.514$ ), to imitate the influencer ( $R^2 = 0.440$ ) and to recommend the influencer ( $R^2 = 0.637$ ). In addition, the other dependent variables considered in the research are partially explained: the perception that the post is a paid communication ( $R^2 = 0.041$ ), the perceived credibility of the influencer ( $R^2 = 0.373$ ) and attitude toward the influencer ( $R^2 = 0.627$ ).

### 6. Discussion and implications

In the last few years we have witnessed brands increasingly collaborating with influencers to offer their products to potential customers in a more natural way (Casaló et al., 2020; Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Ki et al., 2020). Research in this area has mainly analyzed users' perceptions and behavioral intentions toward brands after they have been exposed to influencer-based marketing campaigns (e.g., De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). However, from the influencers' perspective, they should take care that this promotional collaboration does not damage their image, as part of their role is to continuously reinforce their relationships with their followers (Stubb et al., 2019). As previous research has often focused on the consequences for the brand, and ignored any consequences that influencers might face, our research explores how promotional actions affect followers' perceptions of, and responses toward, their influencers.

Our findings showed that influencer-promoted product congruence is a crucial cue in terms of fostering followers' positive perceptions. Thus, when followers perceive there is a good match, the influencer is perceived as a more credible source. This reinforces the notion that both the match-up hypothesis and the source credibility model are closely connected in the context of opinion leaders' endorsements (Mishra et al., 2015; Yoo and Jim, 2015; Park and Lin, 2020). For followers, it is important to perceive that influencers are promoting products that fit with the topics they usually cover, their lifestyles and their values (Kim

**Table 1**  
Construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

| Construct                                 | (1)          | (2)          | (3)          | (4)          | (5)          | (6)          | (7)          | CR    | AVE   |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------|-------|
| Influencer-product congruence (1)         | <b>0.976</b> |              |              |              |              |              |              | 0.988 | 0.953 |
| Paid Communication (2)                    | -0.202       | <b>0.880</b> |              |              |              |              |              | 0.911 | 0.774 |
| Credibility (3)                           | 0.206        | -0.605       | <b>0.825</b> |              |              |              |              | 0.891 | 0.680 |
| Attitude (4)                              | 0.295        | -0.463       | 0.776        | <b>0.930</b> |              |              |              | 0.962 | 0.864 |
| Intention to follow the account (5)       | 0.223        | -0.339       | 0.601        | 0.697        | <b>0.962</b> |              |              | 0.974 | 0.926 |
| Intention to imitate (6)                  | 0.206        | -0.369       | 0.628        | 0.596        | 0.665        | <b>0.883</b> |              | 0.934 | 0.779 |
| Intention to recommend the influencer (7) | 0.179        | -0.454       | 0.738        | 0.748        | 0.758        | 0.715        | <b>0.893</b> | 0.940 | 0.798 |

Note: Diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root of the AVEs (variance shared between the constructs and their measures). Off-diagonal elements are the inter-construct correlations. All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level.

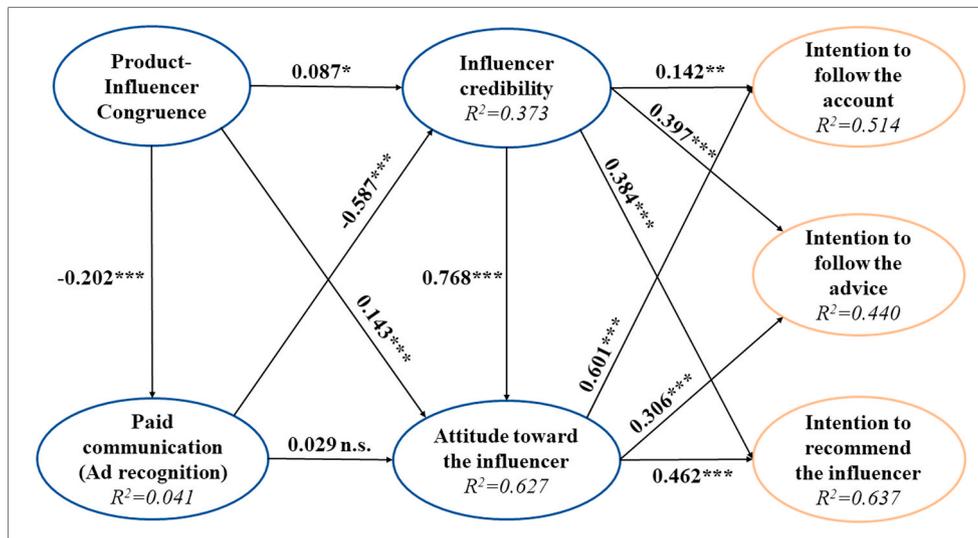


Fig. 2. Structural equation model: Standardized solution.

Notes: \*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level; \*\* significant at the 0.05 level; \* significant at the 0.1 level; n.s. non-significant.

Table 2  
Direct, indirect and total effects.

| Relationship   | Direct Effect | Indirect Effect | Total Effect |
|--|---------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Influencer-product congruence → Paid Communication                           | -0.202***     | -               | -0.202***    |
| Influencer-product congruence → Credibility                                  | 0.087*        | 0.119***        | 0.206***     |
| Influencer-product congruence → Attitude                                     | 0.143***      | 0.152***        | 0.295***     |
| Influencer-product congruence → Intention to follow the influencer's account | -             | 0.206***        | 0.206***     |
| Influencer-product congruence → Intention to imitate the influencer          | -             | 0.172***        | 0.172***     |
| Influencer-product congruence → Intention to recommend the influencer        | -             | 0.215***        | 0.215***     |
| Paid Communication → Credibility   | -0.587***     | -               | -0.587***    |
| Paid Communication → Attitude  | 0.029 n.s.    | -0.451***       | -0.422***    |
| Paid Communication → Intention to follow the influencer's account            | -             | -0.337***       | -0.337***    |
| Paid Communication → Intention to imitate the influencer                     | -             | -0.362***       | -0.362***    |
| Paid Communication → Intention to recommend the influencer                   | -             | -0.420***       | -0.420***    |
| Credibility → Attitude   | 0.768***      | -               | 0.768***     |
| Credibility → Intention to follow the influencer's account                   | 0.142**       | 0.461***        | 0.603***     |
| Credibility → Intention to imitate the influencer                            | 0.397***      | 0.235***        | 0.631***     |
| Credibility → Intention to recommend the influencer                          | 0.384***      | 0.355***        | 0.739***     |
| Attitude → Intention to follow the influencer's account                      | 0.601***      | -               | 0.601***     |
| Attitude → Intention to imitate the influencer                               | 0.306***      | -               | 0.306***     |
| Attitude → Intention to recommend the influencer                             | 0.462***      | -               | 0.462***     |

Notes: \*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level; \*\* significant at the 0.05 level; \* significant at the 0.1 level; n.s. non-significant.

and Kim, 2020; Phua et al., 2018). When followers perceive consistency in campaign content they tend to develop positive assessments of their influencers. Thus, when undertaking promotional actions, influencers must be consistent with their usual content to avoid prejudicing the opinions of their audiences (Breves et al., 2019). This finding is

consistent with previous studies that showed that users react negatively to unexpected incongruent stimuli (Belanche et al., 2017). In addition, perceived influencer-content congruence reduces followers' perceptions that they are viewing an ad. The naturalness and spontaneity of congruent influencer marketing campaigns may decrease followers' perceptions that the influencers are being financially compensated to sponsor products (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, when followers perceive that an influencer is showcasing a product solely for the money, and not because (s)he is inherently interested in its features, etc., they can conclude that the content is not objective (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020), which calls the influencer's credibility into question (Stubb et al., 2019). They may believe that the influencer's opinion is biased for commercial purposes, which reduces his/her credibility as an information source.

Interestingly, the negative direct effect of the perception that a communication has been paid for on attitude toward the influencer is non-significant, but is mediated by the influencer's credibility. Attitude is a holistic concept that involves multiple evaluations made by an individual over time (Kadekova and Holienčinová); however, the results revealed that followers' attitude toward an influencer can be reinforced or damaged depending on the level of credibility of his/her posts. That is, when influencers are perceived as credible sources, followers tend to develop positive attitudes toward them. This finding is in line with the conclusions of previous studies that showed that the influencer's credibility improves attitude toward the promoted brand (Breves et al., 2019; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Schouten et al., 2020). The results of the present study enable this relationship to be extended to attitude toward the influencer.

Finally, the study results showed that influencer credibility and attitude toward the influencer had direct positive effects on followers' responses toward the influencer. Specifically, both perceived credibility and attitude toward the influencer strongly influenced behavioral intentions to imitate and recommend the influencer (Cosenza et al., 2015; Ki and Kim, 2019). However, the direct impact of attitude toward the influencer on intention to continue following his/her account is greater than the impact of perceived credibility. The underlying reason for this may be that followers keep following an influencer's updates because they find them fun and/or relaxing (Kadekova and Holienčinová) and, consequently, in this scenario, they take less account of the influencer's credibility. Nevertheless, in terms of total effects, the perceived credibility of the influencer generates more positive behavioral intentions toward the influencer.

### 6.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

This study offers interesting implications for both researchers and practitioners. First, we consider the theoretical implications for influencer marketing campaigns where influencers and brands jointly collaborate to deliver messages on social media. As proposed by the S-O-R model, followers receive, process and internalize messages, and finally react accordingly. In this sense, our research complements previous studies that have focused on the commercial benefits of influencer marketing for brands (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Specifically, the present study sheds light on the impact that this type of campaign has on the other agents involved in creating and delivering the message, the influencers. Our findings showed that perceived credibility is key for influencers in encouraging followers to develop positive behavioral responses toward them. Therefore, it should be considered that influencer marketing does not only impact brands on social media, but it also affects followers' perceptions toward the own influencer. To keep their active influence from a relational approach, influencers should be congruent with their usual content while performing subtle advertising actions. This way, followers will continue having their needs satisfied while following the influencer (e.g., informativeness, enjoyment, inspiration; Ki et al., 2020). Consequently, to be successful, influencers must maintain a balance between the benefits obtained by the three agents involved in the process (Stubb et al., 2019), that is, by providing their followers with valuable and unbiased advice. Indeed, our findings revealed that influencers should carefully manage their credibility and their relationship with their followers in order to maintain their influence. In addition, our research confirms the connection between the match-up hypothesis (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990) and the source credibility model (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990) by applying them to the novel phenomenon of influencer marketing.

For managers, influencer marketing represents a novel way to address the decreasing effectiveness of traditional media (Fransen et al., 2015). Most influencers create and manage their own content on social networks; our results showed that they should endorse only those products that fit their lifestyles, values and the topics they usually cover on their accounts (Kim and Kim, 2020; Phua et al., 2018). In this way ad recognition can be reduced, and followers' perceptions of influencers' credibility, and their attitudes toward them, can be enhanced. Consequently, they might evoke more positive behavioral responses, which will help them to create successful social media communities (Stubb et al., 2019). In addition, brands might be attracted by the higher performance of these influencers, which could lead to collaborations that generate fruitful results for all the stakeholders involved (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020).

Influencer marketing agencies might also benefit from examining our results by selecting influencers whose followers perceive them as credible sources (Ladhari et al., 2020). Followers tend to act based on the messages published by credible influencers. Specifically, the audience of these influencers seems to be more engaged, that is, they are more prone to keep up with the influencers' updates, take their advice and recommend their accounts. Furthermore, recent research has highlighted that the influencer's credibility can also enhance the

effectiveness of brand campaigns (e.g., Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). Thus, by connecting brands with credible influencers, these agencies can help brands reach a larger and more focused segment of the population.

### 7. Limitations and future research lines

The present study has some limitations that offer interesting opportunities for future research. The study analyzes followers' perceptions and responses toward a particular influencer in the fashion and beauty field. The vast majority of studies focus on a single influencer (e.g., Evans et al., 2017), and this study is in line with this. Although this is the standard on influencer marketing research (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017), the generalization of the results should be taken with caution. Therefore, future studies should analyze more than one influencer that present different characteristics and are followed by an audience with different profiles, in order to analyze the possibilities of extrapolating the results.

Similarly, this research has considered the impact of one single touchpoint on the relationship between the influencer and the follower. Specifically, participants had to evaluate how the publication of a more or less congruent post with the profile may make them to reconsider this relationship. Indeed, influencers are interested in developing long-term relationships with their followers (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Then, future research should analyze how this relationship evolves through various contents published by the influencer along time. Additionally, it would be interesting to analyze the possible differential effect that incongruent content published by an influencer could have on the followers' perceptions depending on the time and intensity with which they have followed the influencer. It would be useful to analyze whether the perceptions of those who have followed the influencer for a longer time or with greater intensity may be less affected by this incongruence or not.

In addition, while the fashion sector is regarded as the most suitable for performing influencer marketing actions (Audrezet et al., 2020), future analyses should include influencers who work in different industries (e.g., entertainment, tourism) and with different scopes (i.e. generalist, specialized) to generalize the results. Finally, we focused on Instagram, given that it is the leading influencer marketing platform (e.g., Breves et al., 2019; Casalo et al., 2020). However, the growth of TikTok as a popular social network among Generation Z suggests that influencer marketing research should soon be extended to this platform.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities under Grant PID2019-105468RB-I00; European Social Fund and the Government of Aragon ("METODO" Research Group S20\_20R, and pre-doctoral grant 2020-2024 BOA CUS/581/2020).

### Appendix

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following sentences (1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree"):

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 Congruence between the influencer and the product (adapted from Xu and Pratt, 2018)
 

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The influencer has a good match with the product

The compatibility between the influencer and the product is high

The alignment between the influencer and the product is high

The congruency between the influencer and the product is high

**Paid communication –ad recognition–** (adapted from De Veirman and Hudders, 2020)

The Instagram post of the influencer is commercial

The Instagram post of the influencer contains advertising

The Instagram post of the influencer is advertising

**Perceived credibility of the influencer** (adapted from Müller et al., 2018; Ohanian 1990)

This influencer is trustworthy

This influencer is honest

This influencer is an expert on the topic

This influencer is experienced

**Attitude toward the influencer** (adapted from Silvera and Austad, 2004)

I think that this influencer is interesting

I think that this influencer is pleasant

I think that this influencer is likeable

I have a favorable opinion about the influencer

**Intention to continue following the influencer's account** (adapted from Algesheimer et al., 2005; Belanche et al., 2014)

I have the intention to continue following this influencer account in the near future

I predict that I will continue following this influencer account

I will probably look for new content published on this influencer account

**Intention to imitate the influencer** (adapted from Casaló et al., 2011; 2018)

I would feel comfortable dressing as shown in the pictures of this influencer

I would not hesitate to take into account the suggestions about clothing I find in the pictures published by this influencer

I would feel secure in following the suggestions about clothing made by this influencer

I would rely on the recommendations about clothing made by this influencer

**Intention to recommend the influencer** (adapted from Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2017)

I would recommend the influencer's account to other people

I would say positive things about the influencer's account to other people

I would be likely to recommend the influencer to friends and relatives interested in fashion

I would seldom miss an opportunity to tell others interested in fashion about this influencer

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