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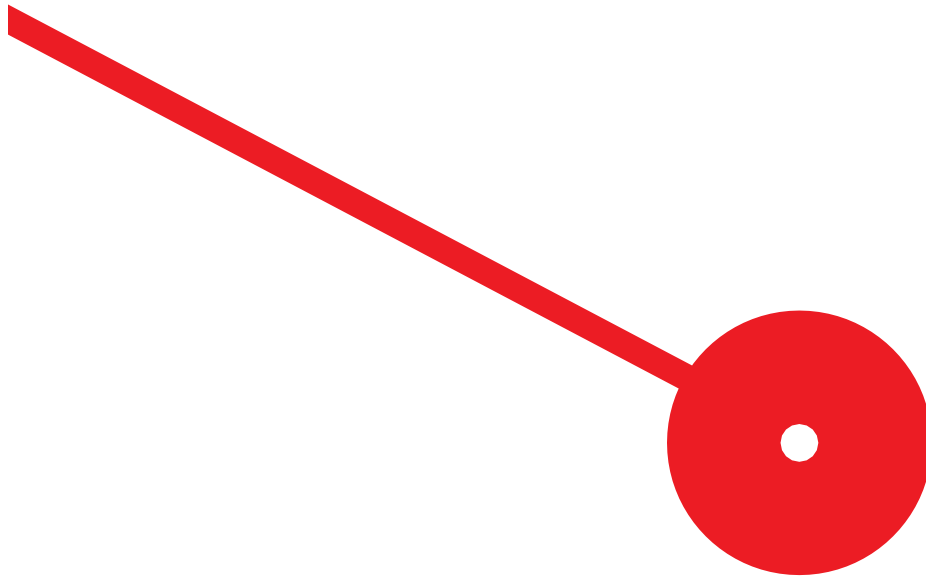
Melissa Fernandes Ferreira

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Impact of social media influencers on consumer behaviour: The role of purchase intention

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Master's dissertation presented to the Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto for the degree of Master in Entrepreneurship and Internationalization, under the supervision of Professor Orlando Lima Rua.

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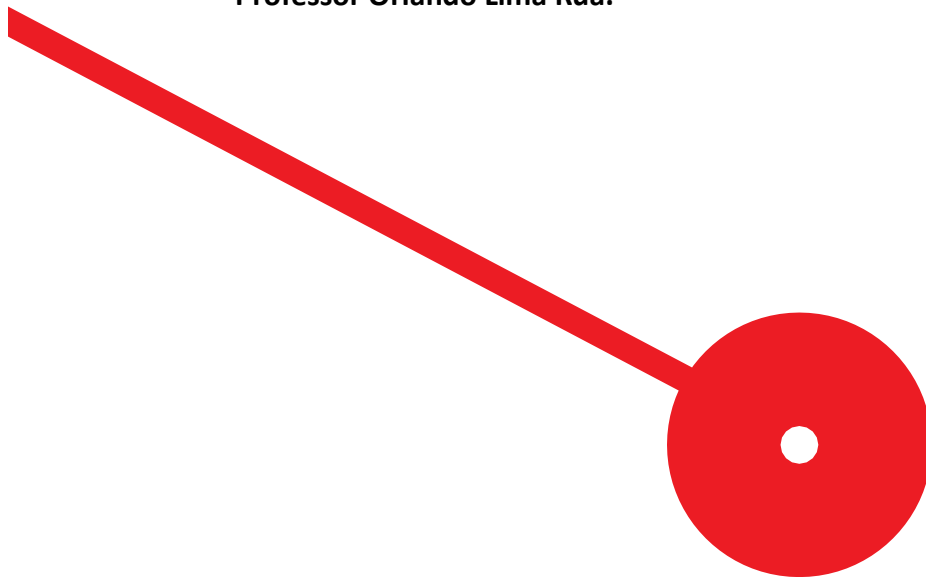
Acknowledgement

The elaboration of this dissertation required significant concentration, persistence, and great commitment. Despite encountering challenges along the way, its conclusion now represents the accomplishment of a significant milestone in my academic journey. I firmly believe this achievement would not have been possible without the support and contributions of several people, to whom I express my sincere gratitude.

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Resumo

Na atual era digital e de rápida evolução, as redes sociais revolucionaram a forma como os consumidores interagem com as empresas, marcas e tomam decisões de compra. No centro desta transformação encontram-se os Influenciadores das Redes Sociais, que pela sua proeminência online e capacidade de persuasão redefiniram a dinâmica do comportamento dos consumidores.

O principal objetivo da presente investigação consiste em analisar o impacto das características dos reais influenciadores das redes sociais na intenção de compra e no comportamento dos consumidores. Salienta-se que este estudo exclui deliberadamente do seu âmbito os influenciadores de inteligência artificial (IA). Adicionalmente, pretende-se estudar o efeito mediador da intenção de compra na relação entre caraterísticas dos influenciadores das redes sociais e comportamento do consumidor.

De forma a conduzir a investigação e atingir os respetivos objetivos, foi adotado um método quantitativo. A recolha de dados primários ocorreu no período de 17 de agosto à 12 de outubro de 2023, através de um inquérito administrado pelo Google Forms. Este estudo empírico incluiu a participação de estudantes do Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto (ISCAP) que acompanham de forma ativa os influenciadores das redes sociais. Os dados foram recolhidos com êxito entre 204 indivíduos, sendo que todos foram qualificados como inquiridos válidos.

Os resultados revelaram que, ao considerar as características do influenciador das redes sociais (SMIC), dimensões como a confiança, a atratividade, interatividade e a perícia do influenciador apresentaram um impacto direto significativo e negativo na intenção de compra e no comportamento do consumidor. No entanto, a correlação mais proeminente e positiva identificada neste estudo diz respeito à relação entre a intenção de compra e o comportamento do consumidor.

De um modo geral, este estudo contribui para a literatura existente através da investigação do impacto das características dos influenciadores das redes sociais nas intenções de compra e nos comportamentos dos consumidores. Este conhecimento relevante fornece às empresas e aos empreendedores informações essenciais para que possam compreender de forma mais profunda os seus consumidores e tomar decisões informadas relativamente aos seus investimentos nas estratégias da empresa ou da marca.

Palavras chave: Influenciadores de redes sociais; redes socias; intenção de compra; comportamento do consumidor.

Abstract

In today's rapidly evolving digital age, social media has revolutionized the way consumers interact with companies, and brands and make purchasing decisions. At the core of this transformation are Social Media Influencers (SMIs), whose online prominence and persuasive power have redefined the dynamics of consumer behaviour.

The main objective of this research is to analyze how the characteristics of real social media influencers impact purchase intention and consumer behaviour. Notably, this study deliberately excludes artificial intelligence (AI) influencers from its scope. In addition, we intend to study the mediating effect of purchase intention on the relationship between the characteristics of social media influencers and consumer behaviour.

To conduct the research and achieve its objectives, a quantitative approach was adopted. The primary data collection occurred from August 17th and October 12th, 2023, using a survey administered through Google Forms. This empirical study included the participation of students from the Porto School of Accounting and Business (ISCAP) who actively follow social media influencers. The data was successfully collected from 204 individuals, and all of them qualified as valid respondents.

The results indicated that when considering the dimensions of social media influencer characteristics (SMIC), dimensions such as source trustworthiness, attractiveness, engagement, and expertise had a significant and adverse direct impact on both purchase intention and consumer behaviour. However, the most prominent and positive correlation identified in this study pertains to the relationship between purchase intention andconsumer behaviour.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by investigating the impact of social media influencer characteristics on consumer purchase intentions and behaviours. This valuable insight equips businesses and entrepreneurs with essential information to seek a deeper understanding of their consumers and make informed decisions regarding their investments in company or brand strategies

Keywords: Social media influencers; social media; purchase intention; consumer behaviour.

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List of Abbreviations

CB   Consumer Behaviour

IM   Influencer Marketing

PI   Purchase Intention

SMI   Social Media Influencer

SMIC   Social Media Influencer Characteristics

Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed a transformation in the technology industry resulting in the emergence of indispensable tools and resources that have been seamlessly integrated into our daily lives (Verhoef et al., 2021). Concurrently, the proliferation of social networks has significantly redefined the concept of contemporary communication within our society (Tille, 2020).

According to Castro (2018), over the years, social media has metamorphosed into a pivotal conduit for communication and a source of information for consumers. These platforms are used daily, causing a significant increase in not only Social Media Influencers (SMIs) but also the prominence of influencer marketing (IM) which has become a crucial and indispensable component of companies' strategic business plans (Melo, 2023).

It is essential to emphasize that digital media influencers can be regarded as individuals on social media who have nurtured a substantial online following, conferring upon them the advantage of access to a broad audience and the potential to influence the perspectives and choices of others (Tille, 2020). The author proceeds to explain that through the use of these platforms, social media influencers can establish strong relationships with their community, thereby having the potential to inform and impact the behaviours and outlooks of their followers. Additionally, it is vital to highlight that as consumers increasingly rely on these influencers for product recommendations and insights, it is imperative to attain a thorough understanding of how these online figures shape the choices and decisions of their audience. Rodrigues (2021) argues that this phenomenon holds substantial implications for marketing strategies, necessitating businesses to skillfully adapt their approaches to maintain their competitive advantage.

Considering Melo's (2023) research, we have chosen to tailor the investigation to the cultural context of Portugal, with a specific emphasis on higher education students in Porto. The distinct cultural aspects of Portugal, the nuances of consumer behaviour, and the increasing impact of social media figures all emphasize the importance of conducting a thorough investigation of this relationship. The primary goal is to provide a deeper understanding of whether consumer perceptions have evolved due to the thoughts, opinions, and recommendations of social media influencers. While existing research is

scarce on the present topic, an evident gap exists concerning studies centred on the Portuguese market.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that not all consumers perceive social media influencers in the same manner. Therefore, this research will concentrate its analysis on students pursuing higher education in Porto, as a significant portion of this demographic belongs to the Digital Era and is exceptionally tech-savvy (Calçada, 2019).

Tille (2020) acknowledges that prior research has thoroughly investigated how the perceived credibility of social media influencers affects consumer behaviour. The impetus behind this dissertation emerges from the conspicuous research void regarding the impact of social media influencers on purchase intention and consumer behaviour. Therefore, this gap represents an opportunity for researchers to explore new and uncharted territory, providing valuable insights into a localized context.

Consequently, the main objective of this research is to address the following question:

- *How do the characteristics of social media influencers impact consumers' purchase intentions and behaviour*?

Research problem

In light of all the technological breakthroughs in recent years, the most successful has been the mass media, particularly social networks due to their rapid form of dissemination (Morales et al., 2018). Within the realm of social media, which includes platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, and others, it is essential to recognize that many individuals have gained significant recognition for their online presence and interactions. However, only a limited number hold genuine influence over their followers (András &Vanda, 2022). According to Duffy (2020), the referenced individuals are content creators who generate captivating content for the entertainment and benefit of social media users, albeit their primary recognition lies in their role as influencers.

Sánchez et al. (2021) state that it is common for influencers to establish partnerships with brands when embarking on projects, in turn, keeping their followers informed about new products and services. Taking this into consideration, it becomes imperative to investigate to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of how social media influencers impact consumer behaviour and purchase intentions. This is of particular significance as followers frequently place their trust in these influencers.

Unfortunately, due to the relatively recent emergence of content creators, there is a scarcity of in-depth research on this topic. Furthermore, the impact of SMICs on consumer behaviour and purchase intentions within the Portuguese context has been relatively neglected, particularly in comparison to research conducted in other countries.

Objectives

This study aims to analyse the impact of SMIC on purchase intention and consumer behaviour. Additionally, it intends to investigate the mediating effect of purchase intention in the relationship between SMIC and consumer behaviour.

Linked to the above main objectives are the following specific ones:

a) Understand whether the level of trust the consumer has in the SMIs impacts their purchase intention and behaviour.
b) Determine whether SMI attractiveness has an impact on purchase intention and consumer behaviour.
c) Explore the impact that the engagement between SMIs and consumers has on their behaviour and purchase intention.
d) Verify whether the SMI's knowledge and expertise in a predefined field has an impact on consumers' purchase intention and behaviour.
e) Identify whether there is a proportional relationship between purchase intention and consumer behaviour.

1 Literature Review

1.1 From traditional to digital entrepreneurship

Due to the technological advances that have occurred within the past decade, the modern digital Era has evolved into a platform that empowers individuals to participate in entrepreneurial activities (Izaguirre, 2023). Moreover, from this scholar's perspective, (1) digital entrepreneurship emerged in the wake of the digital revolution, and (2) upon the implications of the new digital era, it is evident that, despite its demanding and competitive nature, digital entrepreneurship will likely become a more accessible method of employment in the upcoming years.

Entrepreneurship, like many abstract concepts, has no particular definition. However, Hizrich conceptualizes it as an innovative process that creates value, this course frequently entails the assumption of risks, particularly of a financial nature, with the expectation of earning profits in the future (Minaev, 2016).

Diandra and Azmy (2020) contend that the essence and process of entrepreneurship involve generating employment opportunities and stimulating economic growth. Furthermore, according to Elia et al. (2020), entrepreneurship can be portrayed as a dynamic process that gradually generates value and profits through the identification of business opportunities and launching new ventures, which frequently involves taking risks with no guarantee of success. Put succinctly, entrepreneurship is commonly perceived as the competence and ability to develop and establish a business from its inception.

In addition to exploring entrepreneurship, it is essential to take into consideration entrepreneurial intention, which according to Van Gelderen et al. (2008) is a research domain characterized by a substantial body of comparable studies. The authors further assert that entrepreneurial intention encompasses an individual's conscious decision and inclination to engage in entrepreneurial activities, with the goal of establishing new ventures or businesses. Mallios et al. (2023) emphasize that entrepreneurial intention can be viewed as precursor to actual behaviour, depicting a trait that can be acquired through education and guidance. Additionally, public awareness initiatives can contribute towards enhancing the perception of entrepreneurship as a viable career option.

Rakib et al. (2020) defend that an individual's entrepreneurial aspirations balanced with creativity in entrepreneurship and self-efficacy plays a positive role in the emergence of new entrepreneurs and prompting new job opportunities. Furthermore, the authors affirm that entrepreneurial intention includes the desire, motivation, and encouragement to engage in activities that promote the learning of bias from failure, therefore, enabling the ability to work without the fear of risks. As indicated by Lee et al. (2022), entrepreneurial intention entails developing a practical and detailed plan for starting a business. The authors further emphasize that this psychological construct is demonstrated through an entrepreneur's endeavours to implement start-up activities, applying personal interest and actions to initiate a business.

Building upon the previous definition of entrepreneurship, we can now delve into the characterization of an entrepreneur. Subramaniam and Shankar (2020) define an entrepreneur as an individual who not only exhibits the ability to identify business opportunities by introducing innovative products, services or the establishment of new markets but also displays resilience in the face of failure and openly identifies as a risk-taker.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that not all entrepreneurs are known for their radical innovative mindsets, some individuals are recognized for their ability to engage in incremental innovativeness (Wallace, 2019). The author further asserts that entrepreneurs can enhance existing products or services through a gradual innovation process, which includes implementing alterations, refinements, and improvements.

Krnić (2021) states that entrepreneurs are commonly described as individuals who not only establish new businesses but also take on the responsibilities of planning, overseeing, and managing the entire trajectory of a given venture. For Subramaniam and Shankar (2020), entrepreneurs (1) embody a sense of adventure and a willingness to confront risks, even in the face of uncertainties, and (2) despite these inherent risks, they actively strive to establish new business prospects and expand their enterprises, all to generate profits and promoting corporate growth.

CPA Ireland (2022) emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the ambition and risk-taking propensity exhibited by entrepreneurs as they play a pivotal role in society, influencing the growing economy and the global market. The Committee also elucidates

that through product and service innovation, it is possible to stimulate the generation of numerous job opportunities and expedite a country's economic development.

Özker (2019) emphasizes that entrepreneurs belong to a diverse spectrum, characterized by two distinct business strategies. Within the first category, we encounter non-profit entrepreneurs, commonly referred to as social entrepreneurs, who are primarily committed to addressing significant issues and fulfilling their predefined mission. In the second category, entrepreneurs primarily concentrate on profit generation, profit management, and business expansion (Hilal, 2018).

Technological advancements have transformed our lives, and the rapid development of digital technologies has surpassed other innovations. This emerging digital era hasalready begun to substantially impact businesses, enhancing their effectiveness, and reshaping traditional business models to optimize their full potential (Uygun & Gujrati, 2020)

It is relevant to highlight that the contemporary digital age has paved the way for emerging entrepreneurs, granting them access to an extensive range of resources and unlimited access to information. The European Commission (2005, p. 1) asserts that "Digital entrepreneurship embraces all new ventures and the transformation of existing businesses that drive economic and/or social value by creating and using novel digital technologies. Digital enterprises are characterized by a high intensity of utilization of novel digital technologies (particularly social, big data, mobile and cloud solutions) to improve business operations, invent new business models, sharpen business intelligence, and engage with customers and stakeholders. They create the jobs and growth opportunities of the future".

Upadhyay et al. (2021) proceed by stating that in light of the digital age, digital entrepreneurship is regarded as an innovative form of entrepreneurial activity, with its primary focus on the fusion of two domains: traditional business and Information Technology (IT). The authors also suggest that expertise in both business and technical fields is essential for entrepreneurs in this business sector, allowing established businesses to migrate key aspects of their operations from offline to online, thereby facilitating the transition to digital entrepreneurial activities.

Bejjani et al. (2023) argue that the concept of digital entrepreneurship is characterized by its ambiguity, as it is not confined to a precise or uniform definition. Given the intricate nature of entrepreneurship and its adaptation to the digital age, scholars have deemed it suitable to adopt more encompassing interpretations. Vineela (2018) advocates that digital entrepreneurship entails identifying and capitalizing on new business opportunities facilitated by the emergence of media and internet technologies. Tan and Li (2022) further substantiate this argument by stating that the internet assumes a central role in digital entrepreneurship, granting entrepreneurs access to an abundance of information, thereby simplifying the process of identifying business opportunities. Additionally, Shi and Wang (2017) disclose that using the Internet provides entrepreneurs with more accurate, thorough, and valuable market insights, enabling companies to tailor their business models to meet their specific requirements.

Considering all the factors, Hansen (2019) claims that virtual embeddedness is rapidly evolving into a competitive requirement. Consequently, businesses must integrate some form of technology or transition toward a semi-digital business model.

1.2 Social media

Wolf et al. (2018) defend that social media can be delineated as digital technologies, particularly communication platforms that enable individuals to share information within social network communities, thereby fostering interactions and networking. Moreover, the author asserts that this form of communication enables users to create and share content customized for specific audiences through social media networks, which can be categorized into six distinct groupings: Blogs, Social Networking Sites, Collaboration Projects, Content Communities, Virtual Social Worlds, and Virtual Game Worlds.

For a more profound understanding of the discussed concept, it is advisable to deconstruct each word individually. As highlighted by Rhee et al. (2021), "sociality" functions as the core element of social media representing the relationships between individuals and their desire to seek and nurture social interactions, driven by the fundamental human instinct to foster connections. Couldry et al. (2017) sustain that media essentially consists of technologies that facilitate the production, distribution, and reception of communications, encompassing any instrument used for communication that enables interactions between individuals. Additionally, it is important to recognize the diverse range of media channels

used to convey messages, including written formats such as messages and blogs, as well as visual platforms like photographs, videos, television, and websites.

Overall, social media can be characterized as a collection of internet-based platforms that enable interactions among individuals and communities, it acts as a fundamental instrument for generating and distributing user-generated content tailored to specific target audiences (Davis, 2016).

1.2.1 Social media platforms

For Kapoor et al. (2017), contemporary social media platforms have become integral to our daily lives, individuals rely on these platforms for a multitude of purposes, including staying updated on events accessing information and news, finding entertainment, connecting with family and friends, seeking recommendations on products and services, and more. Social media platforms have revolutionized the way people choose to engage in communication.

Currently, social media presents an extensive user base, with over four billion individuals actively participating. WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram are just a few examples of influential communication platforms that have firmly established themselves in history, collectively accumulating a user count exceeding 8.2 billion (SignHouse, 2023). It is essential to highlight that social media and social networking represent distinct concepts. András and Papp (2022) emphasize, that although these two share many similarities, social media platforms extend their focus beyond merely connecting individuals and include the creation and distribution of user-generated content. Ahmad et al. (2015) contend that these platforms serve several purposes: (1) keeping individuals informed about global events, (2) providing the means to share thoughts, ideas, recommendations, images, videos, and various activities with audiences ranging from close friends to the general public. The authors further explain how these platforms promote convenient communication, regardless of one's geographical location.

- *Facebook*, currently rebranded as Meta, was established in 2004 as an American social media and networking website by Mark Zuckerberg and his colleagues from Harvard College (Panakaje & Madhura, 2022). It has since evolved into one of the world's largest and most widely used social networking platforms,

recording over 2.98 billion active users according to Statista's 2023 data. Individuals on this platform can create their profiles, establish connections with family and friends post updates, photos, and videos, and engage with content provided by other users and organizations (Panakaje & Madhura, 2022).

- According to Amaral (2015), *Instagram*, now under Meta's ownership originated as a social media platform founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in the year 2010. Lim and Yazdanifard (2014) state that Instagram operates as a mobile application primarily used as a means of communication enabling users to share photos and videos with their follower base. Based on information provided by the software as a service company Hypeauditor, the referenced app currently has an active user base exceeding 1.4 billion. As indicated by Fonseca et al. (2023), in the world of advertising and marketing, Instagram is among the most in-demand and ventured platforms, undisputedly regarded as the vanguard of the industry.

- Hansen et al. (2012) assert that *Pinterest* has evolved into a significant player in the world of social media. Initially, it was launched as a beta site in March of 2010, and today it registers more than 465 million unique visitors per month, as indicated by Pinterest's official statistics. Kasakowskij et al. (2020) propose that Pinterest functions as a virtual pinboard enabling users to pin images and videos from the internet, furthermore, individuals can incorporate their photos and videos, this process is collectively known as "pinning". According to Pinterest (2023), the platform has implemented strategies to allow content creators to simplify the process of pinning their content or sharing their boards with any individuals navigating their websites.

- Zeng et al. (2021) assert that TikTok is a video-sharing platform that is under the ownership of ByteDance and operates within the online industry of social media. The previous authors also indicated that the app made its official market debut in 2016 and initiated its global expansion in the year 2018. Fan et al. (2023) claim that the application can be accessed via mobile phones and enables users to create brief videos with durations ranging from three to fifteen seconds or three to sixty seconds. According to Bizel et al. (2022), TikTok maintains its high level of popularity, achieving a download count of 693 million in 2019 and 850 million in 2020. The preceding author further contends that the platform is used to gather

insights and advice on an array of topics, encompassing fashion trends, clothing styling, beauty, and organization among other areas of interest.

1.2.2 Social media influencer

In the wake of social media, social media influencers (SMI) rapidly emerged as a novel category of content creators. Duffy (2020) defends that these influencers constitute a prominent group of digital content creators, highly recognized for their active online presence and substantial following.

Influencers can be described as individuals who have established themselves as experts in a particular niche, leveraging their knowledge and expertise to establish a reputation while simultaneously drawing in and broadening their social presence (Kay et al., 2020). The authors provide further clarification that these SMIs are individuals who have established a considerable and loyal following base, such as YouTubers, bloggers, gamers, and other content creators.

Social Media Influencers are frequently linked with third-party endorsements, as researchers have recognized their consistent endeavours to influence consumer perspectives, opinions and behaviour. (Freberg et al., 2011). As stated by Marketing Hubs, Social Media Influencers can shape consumer perspectives and impact purchasing decisions through social media using their knowledge, expertise, and strong connections with the public.

Conde and Casais (2023) have emphasized that the categorization of Social Media Influencers is determined by the size of their follower base, resulting in the classification of SMIs into the following categories: Mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023).

1) Mega influencers are the most prominent among SMIs, characterized by a substantial number of followers and a diverse fan base, with a benchmark of exceeding 1 million followers distinguishing them from those with comparatively smaller followings (Ovrein et al., 2021). For Gómez (2019), these individuals hold the highest position in the hierarchy and are often referred to as the "elite A-listers of social media". Ovrein et al. (2021) defend that these influencers typically

comprise renowned celebrities like singers and actors, whereas Conde and Casais (2023), state that this category of SMIs may encompass any individual acknowledged as an expert within their specific niche, such as, bloggers, gamers among others. Given the substantial following that individuals in this category command, a partnership with an SMI of this calibre would prove advantageous for any business, as it allows them to reach a broader audience, proving to be an effective marketing approach (Kuo & Tien, 2021). As a result, mega influencers play a pivotal role in increasing brand visibility and promoting sales.

2) Similar to mega influencers, macro influencers uphold a significant following, commonly ranging from 100,000 to 1 million followers (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). To Ovrein et al. (2021), these are individuals who have achieved recognition on social media platforms, and notability through the content they share via these channels. According to Gómez (2019), it is crucial to emphasize that contemporary influencers possess a robust digital presence across multiple platforms. Marques et al. (2020) asserts that macro Social Media Influencers are perceived as appealing and prominent individuals who captivate consumers' attention and influence their purchasing behaviour, ultimately resulting in behavioural modifications. Giuffredi-Kähr et al. (2022) argue that these individuals are (1) experts in a particular domain or niche, characterized by substantial engagement rates resulting from their active online presence and creating refreshing engaging content, (2) their influence is derived from their interactions with the public and the size of their follower base, having a wide-reaching audience translates to an extended reach, the content they post on their social media platforms becomes accessible to a larger audience, resulting in elevated awareness and visibility.

3) Within the influencer hierarchy, micro influencers are situated below macro influencers. Kuo and Tien (2021) refer that micro-influencers are the most prevalent category, typically featuring follower counts ranging from 10,000 to 100,000. Micro-influencers are ordinary people who possess a modest but significant impact within smaller communities (Conde & Casais, 2023). Moreover, these scholars contend that micro-influencers are often perceived as highly credible, primarily due to their specialization in particular niches and their

transparent and authentic personas. According to Marques et al. (2020), micro-influencers tend to excel at nurturing intimate connections with their followers, largely because of their consistent presence and activity on social networks. Due to the strong connection they share with their followers and the trust they've built, these SMIs typically endorse products or services that are in line with their interests and areas of expertise (Conde & Casais, 2023). It has been known by Marque et al. (2020), that micro influencers are prone to having a larger impact on consumers due to their strong resemblance to the general public and their frequent perception as authentic and genuine individuals. Micro-influencers are linked to a higher degree of trust by the public, who recognize that these influencers would never promote a product in which they have no genuine interest or if the price is deemed unreasonable, as emphasized by Conde and Casais (2023).

4) Wibawa et al. (2022) argue that nano influencers represent the initial stage of influencer categories, distinguished by their considerably smaller follower count in comparison to all other SMI categories. They can be labelled as the most recent addition to the influencer arena, individuals who are just embarking on their influencer journey. The company Hypeauditor reports that nano influencers are commonly perceived as regular social media users and typically have follower counts of up to 10,000. According to Maheshwari (2018), it is proposed that nano influencers experience elevated engagement rates due to the trust and credibility invested in them. Additionally, the same source emphasizes that the influencers in question typically achieve the highest engagement rates due to their smaller follower count. However, it is a well-established fact that nano influencers excel in the art of effectively and influentially conveying messages via social platforms to the public (Wibawa et al. 2020). The author further states that nano influencers frequently have a more significant impact than their counterparts primarily due to their in-depth understanding of their audience. These individuals can establish connections with their followers and discern the kind of content that truly resonates with them.

1.3 Purchase intention

According to Carlsson et al. (2018), consumers place significant value on their purchase decisions and hold a high level of trust in influencers and the guidance they provide. Baig and Shahzad (2022) sustain that purchase intention refers to the probability or likelihood of a consumer acquiring a specific product or service within a designated timeframe.

Purchase intention is highlighted as a critical factor in predicting actual purchase behaviour (Legeay, 2023). Yaacob and Baroto (2019) emphasize the relationship between purchase intention and consumers' focus on acquiring a product and their inclination to purchase at a later time. Legeay (2023) explores a second connection between purchase intention and socially responsible consumer behaviour, emphasizing the influence of cognitive factors such as beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions on purchase intention. The author further notes that positive beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions increase purchase intention, consequently promoting socially responsible consumption behaviour.

When consumers are in the process of making a purchase, they frequently take into account a multitude of factors, including previous experiences, personal preferences opinions, and recommendations from others (Liguori, 2022). As a result, consumers determine whether or not to buy a product based on their assessment of the situation, making purchase intention regarded as a precursor to consumer buying behaviour (Tille, 2020).

As previously mentioned, purchase intention is associated with an individual's cognitive processes and seeks to understand the motivations behind consumers' purchasing decisions (Legeay, 2023). In that regard, it is vital to understand that the process of making purchasing decisions is intricate, often relying on consumer behaviour and perception. Typically, individuals seek information that aligns with their intended purchases, thereby enabling them to assess the quality of products and services (Botelho, 2019).

Borges (2023) provides an overview stating that (1) purchase intention is influenced by several factors, including product or service pricing, brand recognition, advertising, and endorsements from experts in the field (2) among these factors, user feedback stands as a conspicuously influential element capable of profoundly affecting an individual's purchase intentions, potentially occupying the role of the most significant determinant.

All things considered, it is imperative to highlight the significant role that Social Media Influencers (SMIs) play in shaping consumers' purchase intentions, as their followers regularly turn to them for guidance and validation on product recommendations (Tille, 2020). This scholr further clarifies by describing how influencers depend on social media platforms to share content and information about specific products and services. As a result, SMIs' capability to capture consumers' attention and enhance brand awareness, can potentially exert a significant impact on individuals' purchase intentions

1.4   Consumer behaviour

Nassé (2021) delves into the concept of consumer behaviour, defining it as the study of the motives and mechanisms guiding individuals' choices when acquiring products and services. Subsequent authors, including Legeay (2023), extend the discussion by elucidating that purchasing behaviour reflects consumers' decisions, which can be subject to a multitude of internal and external influences. Raita & Gavrie (2021) argue that understanding consumer behaviour involves more than just scrutinizing the products individuals buy; it is crucial to understand the process by which individuals reach their final decisions and how it influences their future purchasing decisions. Legeay (2023) provides insights into the process of acquiring a product or service, emphasizing that it encompasses the entire spectrum of consumer behaviour, including not only the pre-purchase considerations but also the post-purchase assessment.

For Raita and Gavrielatou (2021), each individual has a distinct characteristic which makes them unique, and these can be significantly influenced by the environment in which they reside, this influence extends to a person's attitudes, purchasing habits, cultural inclinations, and lifestyle choices. The authors further emphasize that it is central to recognize that an individual's perspectives can evolve, subsequently shaping their consumer behaviour as a result of influences stemming from their social and cultural environment.

Assessing and understanding consumer behaviour is a critical aspect, as it directly impacts consumers' purchase intentions and decisions, ultimately contributing to the success of businesses. This insight, as highlighted by The University of Queensland, enables businesses to adapt and enhance their products or services in alignment with consumer demands and preferences. Nassé (2021) further expresses that an understanding

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of consumer behaviour can assist companies in refining their business strategies for more effective consumer engagement.

Ramya and Ali (2016) outline that consumer behaviour is influenced by a range of factors that encompass psychological, social, cultural, economic, and personal aspects, all of which play a role in shaping their choices regarding a particular product or service. In pursuit of a more profound understanding of these factors, researchers harness insights from various fields of study, including sociology, economics, psychology, and marketing, to delve into the consumer's mindset.

1.4.1 Psychological factors

Emotional psychology stands as one of the principal determinants of consumer behaviour, however, its practical measurement can be quite challenging, and it significantly affects consumers' decision-making processes.

According to Durmaz (2014), psychological elements, such as motivation, perception and learning possess the potential to exert a persuasive influence on consumers.

1) Motivation is a fundamental catalyst for consumer behaviour and purchase intentions, described as an unconscious impulse that drives individuals to act in a particular manner (Ramya & Ali, 2016). Typically, consumers act on this impulse to satisfy distinct needs.

2) Durmaz (2014) elaborates on the concept that "perception" is how consumers interpret the world around them, relying on sensory information they receive". In this context, "perception" pertains to the process by which an individual acquires information about a particular product or service and subsequently interprets the data to form a relevant mental representation of it. Scholutz et al. (2022) sustain that consumers' perception encompasses a cognitive process which includes organizing, interpreting, and selecting information. Nonetheless, it is vital to stress that perception varies among individuals, each of whom forms their distinct mental image of a particular product or service.

3) Learning involves alterations in an individual's behaviour, which stems from experiences accumulated over the years, and the author further emphasizes that it is an ongoing process subject to change (Durmaz, 2014). Sharma (2021) highlights that learning plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' purchase

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intentions and behaviour, functioning as both a key determinant and a catalyst that impacts the said behaviour.

1.4.2 Social factors

Consumer behaviour can be influenced by the prevailing factors in the society in which an individual resides, and it is within these communities that one can encounter individuals with distinct behaviours, ideas, and interests (Durmaz & Gündüz, 2021). Socialization is an inherent aspect of human development and constitutes a pivotal element in our lives, individuals frequently mimic others to achieve social acceptance, often seeking validation from those in their immediate social circles (Ramya & Ali, 2016).

Etuk et al. (2022) conclude that individuals' interactions with family, peer groups, reference groups, culture, and other factors can influence purchase behaviours. The following are some of the elements that impact consumer behaviour:

a) The family exerts a significant influence on shaping the preferences and interests of each individual, and it comprises a group of individuals who are related by blood, marriage and adoption who live together (Chandrasekar & Raj, 2013). A multitude of attitudes, beliefs, preferences, and values are acquired through the buying behaviour of one's family, rendering it one of the most pivotal and influential components of consumer behaviour due to the early development of individuals' preferences (Ramya & Ali, 2016).

b) Scholutz et al. (2022) define reference groups as a set of individuals with whom a person identifies and with whom they seek a psychological connection, typically, its group members exhibit similar purchasing behaviours and can have both direct and indirect impact on attitudes and interests.

c) In alignment with the aforementioned elements, social roles and status play a substantial role in influencing consumer behaviour. For Nelson (2021), a social role constitutes a set of attitudes and activities that an individual is anticipated to possess and engage in, contingent upon their occupation, family position, and affiliations with various groups. Ramya and Ali (2016) claim that the individual's position within various groups is defined by their role and social status. As a result, the roles and social status an individual occupies have a substantial impact on the type of products and services that the individual may decide to purchase.

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1.4.3 Economic factors

Ajayi (2022) emphasizes that consumer behaviour is significantly impacted by various economic factors, including an individual's financial stability, which inherently shapes their purchasing decisions.

Evidently, economic factors are a pivotal determinant in shaping consumer preferences and behaviours, encompassing the following factors:

a) Ramaya (2016) states that an individual's purchasing behaviour is heavily influenced by their income, which encompasses both disposable and discretionary income. The author elaborates on this perspective, by stating that disposable income refers to the actual money balance available to an individual after the deduction of taxes and compulsory expenses from their gross income, while discretionary personal income pertains to the surplus remaining after essential living expenses have been covered. Kumar (2022) enhances this concept by stating that an elevated disposable income directly correlates with an increased purchasing capability.

b) Qazzafi (2020) argues, that family income is characterized as the cumulative earnings of all members within the family. Ramya (2016) extends this perspective by emphasizing that family income significantly influences a household's purchasing patterns. Additionally, the author elaborates that once essential living expenses are covered, the remaining income can be allocated to purchasing items for shopping, luxury goods, durables, and other expenditures.

c) Ramya (2016) contends that income expectations are a central determinant in moulding an individual's purchasing habits. Qazzafi (2020) asserts that when individuals anticipate a forthcoming increase in income, they are more prone to allocate financial resources towards acquiring luxury items, durable goods, and shopping items. Conversely, according to Ramya (2016), if an individual foresees a future decline in income, their expenditure on the referred items also diminishes.

d) The preceding scholar also suggests that an individual's savings play a role in influencing their purchasing behaviour. Qazzafi (2020) proposes that savings represent the money that remains after all monthly expenditures have been met. Ramaya (2016) emphasizes that alterations in savings levels directly impact consumers' purchasing behaviour. Should the individual decide to increase their

savings over a defined period, this would result in a corresponding reduction in their expenditures on other items. However, when savings decline, expenditures on other items tend to increase.

e) Ramya (2016) highlights the substantial influence of a consumer's liquid assets on their purchasing behaviour. As previously explained by Ramya, liquid assets, which include cash on hand, bank balances, marketable securities, and similar holdings that can be rapidly converted into cash without substantial loss, play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour. When an individual possesses a greater quantity of liquid assets, they tend to be more inclined to engage in purchasing comfort and luxury items.

f) Per Qazafi (2020), consumer credit pertains to the credit opportunity provided to consumers seeking to acquire enduring comforts and luxuries, which significantly impacts their purchasing behaviour. The author proceeds to explain that this form of credit is extended to consumers by the seller, either directly or indirectly often facilitated through banks and other financial institutions. Ramya (2016) further elaborates that when consumer credit becomes more accessible and lenient with terms, it results in increased expenditures on items that provide comfort and luxury.

1.4.4 Cultural factors

It is crucial to acknowledge that when settling on a purchase decision, consumers are significantly influenced by their family, the community they live in, group affiliations, cultural and subcultural influences, as well as their social class (Akdoğan et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the concept of culture to comprehend an individual's needs and behaviours.

Ramya and Ali (2016) defend that culture is the result of a learning process, instilling in individuals a distinct set of values, perspectives, preferences, and behavioural patterns as they engage in socialization within their families and other social groups.

a) Ramya and Ali (2016) outline the concept of culture as follows: (1) Culture entails shared beliefs, customs, values, and traditions within a community (2) It is passed on from one member to another, typically from one generation to the next, encompassing the manner in which people in a particular group think, act, and interact with each other.

b) According to Nelson (2021), it is noted that society is comprised of multiple subcultures that provide distinctive identities and socialization experiences within their respective members. Subcultures are characterized by their relatively smaller size; they represent distinct cultural groups within a larger culture, where members share their own unique set of beliefs, values, and customs (Nelson 2021). It is fundamental to emphasize that subcultures represent significant market segments, resulting in marketers designing products and services customized to meet their specific needs (Ramya & Ali, 2016).

c) Ramya and Ali (2016) disclose that an individual's social class often plays a decisive role in shaping consumer behaviour. Social classes are defined as groups that are homogenous and are occasionally compared to each other to establish their position within the social hierarchy (Nelson, 2021). It is worth mentioning that social classes emerge through the categorization of individuals with similar characteristics within a society, based on a set of regulations (Akdoğan et al., 2021). Ramya and Ali (2016) emphasize that social class cannot be determined by a single factor; rather, it is assessed by considering a combination of elements, including occupation, income, education, lifestyle, and more. These authors proceed by stating that businesses must conduct in-depth studies of each social class, particularly their purchasing behaviour, to implement appropriate strategies that cater to distinct social classes.

1.4.5 Personal factors

The experiences throughout one's life play a substantial role in shaping an individual's behaviour and attitudes, and various factors, including age, financial standing, lifestyle, and profession, contribute to consumer behaviour (Rehman et al. 2017). Each individual presents, in their way, unique features and these characteristics collectively influence consumer purchase intentions and purchase behaviour (Nawawi, 2016).

a) Age plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's purchasing behaviour and intentions. As people progress from their 20s to their 60s, their preferences for commodities and products evolve, resulting in diverse acquisition patterns throughout their lives (Kumar, 2022).

b) Individuals from distinct professions often exhibit unique behaviours towards distinct products and services, as they tend to purchase items associated with their careers (Ramaya & Ali, 2016). As per Rehman et al. (2017), an individual's

occupation can impact their purchasing preferences, making it essential for companies to develop effective marketing strategies tailored to influence the purchasing intentions and decisions of diverse demographic segments.

c) Lifestyle, encompasses how individuals present themselves in society, encapsulating their interests, choices, opinions, and values, and providing an illustration of how they live within a community (Rehman et al., 2017). Zahra & Anoraga (2021) argue that a person's lifestyle has a significant influence on their needs, desires, and purchasing behaviour. They further highlighted that peer pressure from one's community or friends can act as a motivating factor for such behaviour as individuals may feel compelled to purchase certain items when they see others in their social circles owning them.

d) An individual's financial situation is a decisive component in consumer behaviour and purchase intention as it impacts the choices they make regarding products and services (Rehman et al., 2017). The decision to make a purchase is directly proportionate to the individual's income, as the ability to acquire a product or service depends on an individual's earnings (Ramaya & Ali, 2016). Kumar (2019) suggests that an individual's financial status plays a substantial role in shaping their purchasing behaviour, with higher-income individuals tending to acquire expensive products, while those with lower incomes prefer more budget-friendly options.

1.5 Research model and hypotheses

The following section presents the hypotheses formulated according to the research problem, along with a concise overview of pertinent literature for each. The significance of this investigation centres on the relationship between specific characteristics of a Social Media Influencer, the decision-making process (purchase intention) and consumer behaviour.

1.5.1 Research model

The proposed model intends to demonstrate that characteristics such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, engagement and expertise have the potential to influence the purchasing intentions and behaviours of consumers. This research incorporates a distinct independent variable consisting of several dimensions, trustworthiness, attractiveness, engagement,

and expertise, all associated with the characteristics of social media influencers. The study explores these characteristics concerning two other variables: purchase intention and consumer behaviour.

With the assistance of the following figure, this study seeks to investigate the causal relationships between the characteristics of a Social Media Influencer (SMI) and their impact on consumer behaviour. By the proposed hypotheses, a conceptual model has been constructed to examine these hypotheses and address the research question
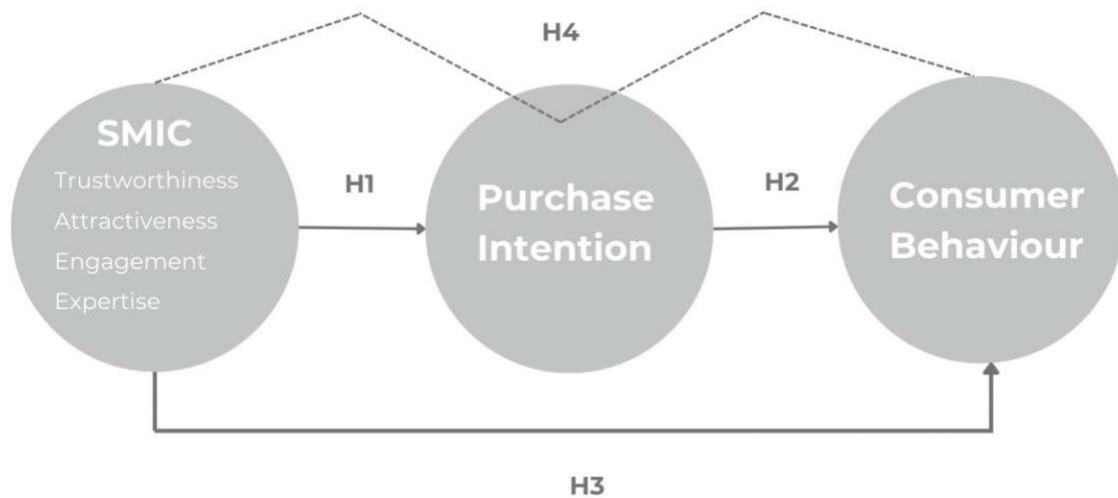
Figure 1 Research Model

Source: Own elaboration.

1.5.2 Research hypotheses

According to Es-Safi and Mehmet (2021), social media influencers exhibit a range of distinct characteristics that set them apart from traditional marketing methods. These dimensions encompass traits like trustworthiness, attractiveness, engagement, and expertise. In the following sections, we will delve deeper into the specifics of these characteristics and how they impact consumer purchase intention.

Firstly, Liguori (2022) claims that both credibility and trustworthiness are the foundations of a good influencer, these are some of the most important traits that persuade individuals into buying a product or service. Abdullah et al. (2020) state that, in the present context, trustworthiness can be defined as the believability, honesty and transparency possessed by a Social Media Influencer. Additionally, the previous author expresses how crucial this attribute is towards successfully influencing SMI's followers. According to Tille

(2020), there is research that supports this hypothesis, stating that consumers are likely to be persuaded and influenced if the source, in this case the influencer, is perceived as honest and communicates genuinely without bias. Social Media Influencers are often recognized as sincere and reliable sources of information as a result of their communication approach within different communities (Duffy, 2020).

Lou and Yuan (2019) investigated the role of consumers' trust in influencer marketing, among their findings the authors concluded that influencer's trustworthiness positively affects consumers' trust in branded content, consequently influencing their purchase intention and behaviour. The influencer's trustworthiness can be recognized by their sincerity, honesty, and reliability, resulting in them being deemed reputable (Abdullah et al., 2020). Additionally, the aforementioned claims the referred characteristics to be persuasive and decisive allowing customers to consider and accept products and services recommended by SMIs who they believe to be sincere.

Conversely, as asserted by Breves et al. (2021), the physical attractiveness of Social Media Influencers and their alignment with a brand are substantial factors influencing consumer purchase intentions and behaviours. It is essential to emphasize there is no concrete definition for the term attractiveness, nonetheless, researchers deduce that the characteristic in question refers not only to the physical appearance of an individual but also to their personality traits (Carlsson et al., 2018). Furthermore, Tille (2020) references prior studies and claims that if an advocate is viewed as attractive, they have the potential to not only shape consumers' perceptions of information credibility but also amplify its persuasive effect.

Kim and Park (2023), emphasize that previous scholars have suggested that attractive influencers are perceived as being more friendly, leading to increased purchase intention. Additionally, sponsors possessing attractive features may be perceived to be more renowned and sociable. Building upon Kim and Park's insights, a compelling endorser has the potential to influence consumers' perceptions derived from product-related information. Currently, Social Media Influencers are attaining greater visibility, leading their social active presence in marketing on social platforms to significantly impact consumers' behavioural intentions.

Furthermore, Carlsson et al. (2018) argue that the fundamental factor in shaping purchase intentions and the subsequent utilization of branded social media is the level of

engagement exhibited by the influencer, encompassing the interactions and connections they foster with their followers. According to Botelho (2019), social media provides an optimal platform for engagement, enabling users to easily express their opinions and thoughts as well as engage in discussions with others.

For Rodrigues (2021), engagement is the cornerstone of social media, it refers to a unidirectional activity amongst social media influencers and consumers. Encompassing actions like soliciting opinions and feedback from their followers regarding their posts and products they recommend. This author further argues that the use of social media broadens consumers' perception and recognition of the conveyed information, enhancing their capacity to deliberately process information, and resulting in additional knowledge; when influencers engage interactively there is a greater probability of bolstering consumers' trust in contrast to less interactive ones. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the use of social media plays a crucial role in interactivity enabling individuals to share their experiences and perceptions regarding endorsements and the respective products.

The final dimension to be taken into account is the influencer's expertise. According to Abdullah et al. (2020), expertise is defined as a profound depth of knowledge or skill. Moreover, this variable can be defined as the degree to which the endorser is perceived to have adequate knowledge, experience, or skills to promote the products and substantiate the information in an advertisement (Tille, 2020).

According to Liguori (2022), consumers are inclined to act upon the recommendations provided by social media influencers, who are perceived as experts in their respective fields. The referred author further asserts that the variable in question may also be delineated as the degree to which the endorser is perceived to possess the necessary knowledge, expertise, or skills for promoting a product. In light of these statements, it is highly likely that an influencer's proficiency in a particular field makes them qualified to effectively endorse specific products or brands (Tille, 2022).

Carlsson et al. (2018) explored the impact of influencers' expertise and trustworthiness on consumer perception toward sponsored content. The research revealed that the influencers' perceived expertise had a significant effect on consumers' attitudes regarding sponsored content. In this context, expertise pertains to the influencer's perceived competency and proficiency within a particular field or industry.

Tille (2022) concludes that when consumers perceive the communicator as highly skilled, they are more prone to have a favourable perception of the message, ultimately resulting in positive effects on consumer attitudes and behaviours. Rodrigues (2021) determined that when social media influencers are perceived as experts, they tend to be more persuasive. As a result, expertise significantly and positively influences consumer perceptions of products, ultimately driving purchase intention.

In light of the preceding arguments, it can be asserted that the characteristics of a social media influencer exert a significant influence on the purchase intentions of their audience. This assertion prompts the examination of the following hypothesis:

H1. *The characteristics of social media influencers influence purchase intention.*

Cahyanaputra et al. (2021) defend that there is a significant and positive correlation between purchase intention and purchase behaviour. Emphasizing this point, it is essential to acknowledge that purchase intention is shaped by the synergy of trust and consumer attitudes towards products and services. Balau (2018) proposes that intentions are a reflection of an individual's willingness to invest in executing a behaviour and enacting it. As a result, the more robust an individual's intention, the greater the likelihood of implementing that behaviour.

Furthermore, Marilen et al. (2021) contend that purchase intention catalyzes by influencing the action of acquiring a service or product. As previously stated, intention is a fusion of trust derived from consumer attitudes, therefore, when customers have experienced a satisfactory prior purchase, they tend to exhibit favourable behaviour by engaging in repeat purchases.

Chakraborty et al. (2022), defend it is worth emphasizing that environmental factors have the potential to amplify consumers' intentions. When consumers have at their disposal essential resources such as financial capability, time, and diverse opportunities, their purchase intentions are more likely to be fortified, resulting into actual buying behaviour. The intention to engage in a purchase precedes the actual purchase behaviour and is influenced by the mediating role of perceived behavioural controls. Multiple studies have consistently confirmed a positive correlation between purchase intention and consumer behaviour (Chakraborty et al., 2022).

Considering all the preceding information, we will endeavour to test the following hypothesis:

H2. *The consumer's purchase intention influences consumer behaviour.*

The correlation between the traits of Social Media Influencers and Consumer Behaviour is a topic of substantial interest in the digital age. Various authors have explored this direct connection. For instance, Thakur et al. (2016) have emphasized the significant impact of experienced and highly qualified endorsers in shaping consumer perspectives and earning respect. They contend that expertise is a foundational characteristic of social media influencers, aligning with the theory proposed by Winterich et al. (2018). The greater the perceived expertise of an influencer, the more positively they are embraced by their audience, ultimately mediating the connection between perceived expertise and consumer behaviour.

As per Wang et al. (2017), source credibility comprises two pivotal components: trustworthiness and expertise. Information presented by a credible source, such as social media influencers (SMI), can significantly impact consumers' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviours. Furthermore, it has been observed that when an endorser is perceived as highly trustworthy and knowledgeable, consumers tend to be more open to the advertising message, leading to greater acceptance of the conveyed content. In parallel, social media influencers who are perceived to have the referred qualities are thought to exert a more significant influence on the behaviours of their audience.

Botelho (2019) posits that qualities such as attractiveness can influence consumer behavioural intentions. It is further contended that attractiveness is associated with favourable consumer behaviours, and prior studies have established that attractiveness plays a significant role in influencer effectiveness by significantly shaping consumer behaviour.

Mishra and Ashfaq (2023) further contend that the authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers have a significant impact on consumer opinions and purchasing intentions regarding products. Therefore, social media influencers wield substantial influence over consumer behaviour and purchasing choices. These authors stress that research consistently highlights the vital role of social media influencers in stimulating consumer interest in products and services. Social media influencer authenticity and trustworthiness are fundamental factors in shaping consumer interest. Critical influencer characteristics

such as content accuracy, authenticity, and credibility play a key role in influencing consumer behaviour (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023).

Rai (n.d.) argues that both attitude and credibility, as characteristics of social media influencers, have a significant impact on consumer behaviour. Thilina's (2021) findings, there is substantial evidence reinforcing the notion that qualities like the attitudes and credibility of social media influencers are essential to understanding their impact on consumer purchasing decisions and the resulting consumer behaviour. The following hypothesis serves as a foundation for extensive research endeavours dedicated to uncovering the intricate mechanisms at play in the digital age, where it is believed that influencer characteristics play a significant and immediate role in shaping consumer behaviours and actions.

H3. *Social media influencers' characteristics influence consumer behaviour.*

The mediating effect of purchase intention between social media influencer characteristics and consumer behaviour represents a crucial link in the digital era. Wang et al. (2017) defend those social media influencers, often characterized by their authenticity, expertise, and trustworthiness, exert a considerable impact on consumers' perceptions and preferences. Lou and Yuan (2019) argue that these influencer traits are instrumental in shaping consumers' intentions to make a purchase; for instance, informative social media influencers (SMI) content tends to enhance trust in products among followers, leading to increased purchase intentions and fostering positive consumer behaviour. The alignment between influencer characteristics and consumers' purchase intentions serves as a bridge that translates these intentions into concrete actions, signifying a willingness to engage in the buying process (Lim et al., 2015).

Subsequently, purchase intentions act as a channel through which these predispositions transform into visible consumer behaviours. This transition is where the impact of influencer qualities becomes evident, as the purchase intention evolves into actual purchasing decisions (Cahyanaputra et al., 2021). The complex interplay between influencer characteristics, purchase intentions, and consumer behaviours highlights the multifaceted nature of this process. For instance, Novela et al. (2020) identified that hedonic motivation indirectly shapes purchase intentions via the attitudes of social media influencers. This implies that when consumers perceive online content to be entertaining, they tend to regard the presented products as of superior quality. Consequently, this

elevated perception of the product enhances their purchase intentions and results in product acquisition, which represents a concrete embodiment of consumer behaviour.

According to Lim et al. (2015), a strong association has been established between purchase intention and consumer behaviour, solidifying the role of purchase intention as a highly efficient intermediary that acts as a bridge between the independent variables (SMIC) and the dependent variable (consumer behaviour). The amalgamation of research results emphasizes the complexity of this process, emphasizing the significance of understanding the direct impact of social media influencer characteristics on consumer behaviour, facilitated by the mediation of purchase intention. This results in the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H4. *Purchase intention acts as a mediator between social media influencers' characteristics and consumer behaviour.*

2 Methodology

2.1 Methodological approach

According to Phung and Qin (2018), research approaches can be categorized into three fundamental methodologies: inductive, deductive, and abductive. In this dissertation, a deductive descriptive approach was selected due to its robust alignment with the principles of logical reasoning. Its primary objective is to produce a comprehensive representation of individuals using quantitative methods to analyze secondary data (Nascimento, 2019). A quantitative method initiates by establishing a foundational theory and subsequently formulates new hypotheses grounded on that theory (Carlsson et al., 2018). The referred hypotheses are then subjected to testing by comparing them with observed data, potentially resulting in their validation or invalidation.

The following figure provides readers with an outline of the methodology applied to address the research problem.
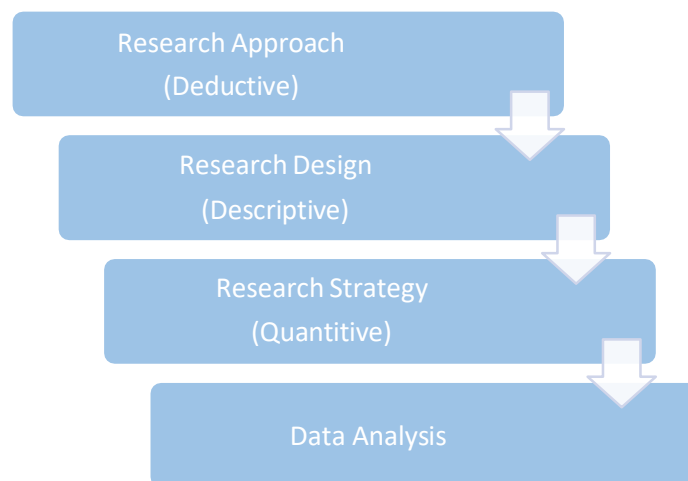
Figure 2 Research Protocol

Source: Adenola (2019).

The present study adopts a quantitative research method, employing a deductive approach to test hypotheses derived from pre-established theories (Zainab et al., 2020). Additionally, the investigation will employ a descriptive approach to provide deeper insights into the behaviour and inclinations of multiple individuals, considering several factors.

The primary reason for selecting this approach is due to its goal of empirically testing objective theories by exploring the relationships among the relevant variables (Creswell

& Creswell, 2018). Typically, these variables are quantified using specialized instruments, allowing the analysis of numerical data through the application of statistical procedures.

A quantitative online survey was chosen over a qualitative method primarily due to its associated benefits. Zainab et al. (2020), highlight the online nature of the survey and its convenience for access, its user-friendly feature for filtering questions based on the respondent's prior answers, as well as its capacity to program and archive responses within a database.

To optimize the research process and mitigate resource limitations, this thesis will restrict its investigation to exclusively examine higher education students in the Porto region. The survey will solely include participants from Porto Accounting and Business School (Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Adminsitração do Porto).

2.2   Research design

In this investigation, explanatory studies were selected due to their goal of elucidating relationships between variables, researchers turn to these types of studies when they seek to understand and articulate a problem (Phung & Qin, 2018). Typically, these investigations incorporate open-ended questions, enabling researchers to enhance their understanding of the subject matter.

Employing a research design centred on surveys complemented by statistical analysis tools can be an effective strategy for uncovering the correlation between Social Media Influencer characteristics and dependent variables. The survey approach is the most prevalent method for collecting empirical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The acquired data will be used to test the hypotheses previously mentioned and explore the relationships among the primary variables in this study. To enhance the understanding of the research topic, a survey was used as an instrument to expedite data collection from a heterogeneous population in a relatively quick manner (Zainab et al., 2020).

2.3 Sample

Empirical research often requires collecting data from a specific sample using appropriate instruments, which is a common practice. To guarantee the selection of a fitting sample and accurate instruments for the analysis of variables according to established statistical methods, a researcher must define the study's characteristics, scale, and context (Baig & Shahzad, 2022).

A sample, which serves as a subset of the population, can be characterized as a group of individuals from whom data is collected for a study, to represent the entire population. Diverse methods are employed to select a sample, typically categorized into non-probability and probability sampling techniques. This approach allows researchers to draw conclusions that apply to the population in question (Schoultz et al., 2018). In this dissertation, a non-probability sampling approach, specifically convenience sampling, has been implemented due to its pragmatic approach to achieving an adequately substantial sample size for the study.

It is crucial to emphasize that the quantity of responses obtained can significantly impact the quality of research. If the survey collects a limited number of responses, the data may prove to be insufficient. In light of this, to boost the response rate, the survey link was distributed through multiple social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Additionally, the survey link was posted in Porto School Accounting and Business's Facebook group.

Regarding the sample size, the initial goal was to achieve a final sample size falling within the range of 150 to 300 respondents to guarantee a significant sample size that would enable the extraction of meaningful conclusions. Ultimately, the final sample consisted of 204 individuals.

2.4 Data collection

Baig and Shahzad (2022) defend that in empirical research, data collection commonly entails sampling from a specific population using appropriate instruments. The authors further address the significance of researchers taking into account the investigation's nature, scope, and context when attempting to determine the most appropriate sample and accurate instruments for its analysis.

It is essential to recognize that the quality and distinctiveness of the research can be significantly impacted by the quantity of responses acquired (Baig & Shahzad, 2021). Furthermore, the authors propose that the sample size should exceed 30 but remain below 500, and it is recommended for it to be significantly larger than the number of variables used in multivariate analysis.

Throughout the course of this study, a primary data collection method was used entailing the retrieval of data directly from the source. Scholars have a spectrum of options at their disposal for collecting primary data, including methods such as interviews, surveys, and observations (Carlsson et al., 2018). In this case, the selection of a survey as the research approach stems from the primary goal of this methodology: to collect numerical data that can be converted into descriptive information.

This investigation collects data through a survey developed using Google Forms, an online platform designed for constructing questionnaires. The data collection process entailed the distribution of a quantitative survey to 204 participants between August 17th and October 12th, 2023. The self-administered survey was originally developed in English and subsequently translated into Portuguese to better align with the study's target population. Considering the underexplored nature of concepts like attractiveness, expertise, engagement, purchase intention, and consumer behaviour within the domain of social media, particularly among higher education students in Porto, it was imperative to incorporate specific inquiries to confirm their relevance in the current research context.

Akter (2023) defines secondary data as information that has been previously collected and assessed for primary purposes, making it available for effective use. Acquiring existing literature can be valuable in the process of developing, analyzing, and offering new interpretations, as well as additional knowledge, as stated by Phung and Qin (2018). Considering the preceding information, a secondary data source was employed in this study to support the collection of primary data.

2.5 Instrument and Measures

For this research, an online survey was chosen as the designated instrument for data collection and conducting subsequent analysis. As previously noted, Google Forms was

used to develop the survey, with the survey items derived from previously published studies and subsequently adapted to align with the research context.

The construct of social media influencer characteristics incorporates five dimensions: (1) trustworthiness, (2) attractiveness, (3) engagement, and (4) expertise. To assess each dimension, a 9-point Likert scale was employed, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements as outlined by the authors in Table 1.

The 9-point Likert scale was segmented as follows: 1 - Strongly Disagree; 2 - Disagree Moderately; 3 - Disagree Slightly; 4 - Disagree; 5 - Neither Agree nor Disagree; 6 - Agree Slightly; 7 - Agree Moderately; 8 - Agree; 9 - Strongly Agree.

The second variable under consideration, purchase intention, was assessed using questions that were inspired by the research of Dreifaldt et al. (2019), Farivar et al. (2017), Weisberg et al. (2011), Bianchi, and Andrews (2012).

Furthermore, this study considers consumer behaviour as a dependent variable, therefore, to measure this aspect, we have adapted inquiries that were originally inspired by the work of Alalwan (2018).

A regression analysis was conducted to explore the impact of all the pertinent variables, scrutinizing how the characteristics of social media influencers affect consumer behaviour, both directly and indirectly through purchase intention. The complete survey, along with its visual design, can be found in Appendix B, while the operationalization process for this investigation is delineated in Table 1.

Table 1 Survey and Measurments

Variables	Scale		Sources
Demographic variables			
Do you use social media?	I.	Yes	---
	II.	No	
Do you follow Social Media Influencers (SMIs)?	I.	Yes	---
	II.	No	
Gender	I.	Male	---
	II.	Female	
	III.	Other	
	a)	<18	---

Age	b) 18-25 c) 26-33 d) 34-41 e) >41	
Employment Status	a) Student b) Employed c) Unemployed d) Retired e) Other	---
Trustworthiness		
I consider Social Media Influencers (SMIs) who are transparent and honest as credible sources The Social Media Influencer(s) I follow are honest. The Social Media Influencer(s) I follow provide information (positive or negative) and recommendations about the products they feature.	1. Completely Disagree 2. Disagree 3. 4. 5. Neither Agree nor Disagree 6. 7. 8. Agree 9. Completely Agree	Ohanian (1990); Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2020)
Attractiveness		
The Social Media Influencer(s) I follow are attractive. The Social Media Influencer(s) I follow are stylish. The Social Media Influencer(s) I follow are friendly.	1. Completely Disagree 2. Disagree 3. 4. 5. Neither Agree nor Disagree 6. 7. 8. Agree 9. Completely Agree	Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2020); Jansom and Pongsakornrungsilp (2021) and Dimofte et al. (2003)
Engagement		

My favourite Social Media Influencer is consistent and active. My favourite Social Media Influencer often interacts with the audience. It is easy to get in touch with my favourite Social Media Influencer. The Social Media Influencer(s) I follow encourage their followers to give feedback.	1. Completely Disagree 2. Disagree 3. 4. 5. Neither Agree nor Disagree 6. 7. 8. Agree 9. Completely Agree	Alalwan (2018); Xiao (2018); Singh and Banerjee (2018)
Expertise		
Based on the knowledge and experience of the SMI, I consider them a credible source of information. The SMIs I follow offer suggestions based on their experience. The SMIs I follow are well-informed.	1. Completely Disagree 2. Disagree 3. 4. 5. Neither Agree nor Disagree 6. 7. 8. Agree 9. Completely Agree	Ohanian (1990) and Chetioui, et al. (2019)
Purchase Intention		
Have you ever considered buying a product because it was mentioned by an SMI? Would you say that SMIs play an important role in influencing your decisions in online shopping? Do you pay attention to ads on social media?	I. Yes II. No I. Yes II. No I. Yes II. No	Dreifaldt et al, (2019); Farivar et al, (2017); Weisberg et al, (2011); Bianchi, and Andrews, (2012)
Consumer Behaviour		

If you have ever made an online purchase due to the feedback provided by an SMI, what type of purchase was it?	a) Fashion b) Technology c) Beauty d) Sports e) Other	Alalwan (2018)
If you like a recommended product, are you likely to buy it?	I. Yes II. No III. I don't know	
Are you likely to continue purchasing products recommended by your favorite SMIs?	I. Yes II. No III. I don't know	

Source: Own elaboration.

3 Results

3.1 Sample's characterization

The survey incorporated a demographic segment to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the sample's profile for characterization purposes. This section consisted of inquiries related to the participant's gender, age, and occupation. To investigate how the characteristics of social media influencers affect the consumer behaviour of higher education students at Porto Accounting and Business School (Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto), a digital survey was conducted among the student population.

1) Gender

A total of 204 students actively participated in the survey. Among the participants, 132 individuals were female, while 72 were male. Consequently, the survey respondents were comprised of 64.7% females and 35.3% males.

These results can be found in the following table.

Table 2 Gender

Gender	Number of respondents	Percentage
Female	132	64.7%
Male	72	35.3%
Other	0	0%
Total	205	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

2) Age

This research focuses on consumers, and age is one of the control variables included in this study. After a thorough literature analysis, it became evident that age is commonly utilized as a control variable in consumer-oriented research. As a result, age was incorporated as a control variable in our research. In the survey, respondents were categorized into five age groups. Out of the 204 respondents, 7 belong to the age group of <18, constituting 3.4% of the total respondents. The majority of the respondents, 99 individuals, belonged to the 18-25 age group, making up 48.5% of the total respondent ratio. Additionally, 76 respondents fell into the 26-33 age group, contributing approximately 37.3% to the study. The 34-41 age group was the less represented with

only 6 respondents, accounting for around 2.9% of the research study. Among the 204 respondents, 16 individuals were aged over 41, making up approximately 7.8% of the research study.

These results can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Age

Age Group	Number of respondents	Percentage
<18	7	3.43%
18-25	99	48.53%
26-33	76	37.25%
34-41	6	2.95%
>41	16	7.84%
Total	204	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2 Descriptive analysis

The reliability analysis was performed using Cronbach's alpha; the analysis guaranteed the consistency and stability of the answers while taking into account the heterogeneity of the respondents and their opinions (Pestana & Gageiro, 2008). The sample reliability was excellent for all variables (0.869).

3.2.1 Partial least square structural equations modelling (PLS-SEM)

PLS-SEM was used to test the hypotheses with SmartPLS 4.0 software (Hair et al., 2016). PLS-SEM was best suited to estimate the research model as (1) this research focuses on prediction and explanation of the variance of the model's constructs (in this case, three); (2) the research model has a complex structure; (3) the relationship between social media influencers characteristics, purchase intention and consumer behaviour can be measured directly and indirectly; (4) the study uses first and second-order reflective constructs; and (5) the sample (n = 204) is relatively small. Reflective constructs were used to estimate PLS parameters to maximize the variance explained in observed measures (Hair et al., 2016).

3.2.2 Evaluation of the measurement model

The results showed that the measurement model met all general requirements. First, all reflective items have a load higher than 0.707, which means that the reliability of

individual indicators (loadings) was higher than 0.5. Second, all-composite reliability values and Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.7, suggesting acceptable model reliability. Third, the average variance extracted (AVE) values of all constructs were higher than 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity and implying that the indicators represent the same underlying constructs (Hair et al., 2016).

In addition, the composite reliability coefficient was used to test the constructs' validities (Chin, 1998). Gefen and Straub (2005) advocate a minimum of 0.6 when the variables exceed the reference value. Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion was used in this study, proposing that AVEs must have a minimum value of 0.5 to prove convergent validity. All the constructs reached this value (Table 4).

Table 4 Standardised factor analysis loadings, CR, AVE, Mean and SD

First-order constructs	Item	Loadings	CR	AVE	Mean	SD
Social Media Influencers			0.953	0.618		
Characteristics (SMIC)	T1	0.715			4.76	1.879
(α = 0.962)	T2	0.871			6.42	2.098
	T3	0.870			6.81	2.012
	EX1	0.872			6.61	2.090
	EX2	0.814			6.41	1.936
	EX3	0.708			7.44	2.353
	ENG1	0.782			7.07	2.268
	ENG2	0.836			3.96	2.690
	ENG3	0.865			6.35	2.345
	ENG3	0.872			7.10	2.130
	A1	0.826			7.12	2.214
	A2	0.734			7.31	2.011
	A3	0.860			4.76	1.879
Purchase intention (PI)			0.725	0.476		
(α = 0.712)	PI1				1.19	0,395
	PI2				1.53	0,500
	PI3				1.43	0,496
Consumer behaviour (CB)			0.760	0.518		
(α = 0.750)	CB1				2.34	1.576
	CB2				1.66	1.090
	CB3				1.96	0.903

Source: Own elaboration.

The discriminant validity of the model was demonstrated as the results showed that the constructs with no theoretical relation were, indeed, not significantly correlated; this can be gauged from the principle that all cross-loadings cannot be higher than the loading of each indicator (Hair et al., 2016). Based on Chin's (1998) classification of explanatory

power as being moderate/substantial, the data in Table 3 show that the discriminant validity results were satisfactory; that is, the measures of the constructs showed they were significantly different.

The Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion (FLC) specifies that the AVE should be greater than the variance between constructs of the same model. Henseler et al. (2015) proposed a new and advanced criterion (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio – HTMT) to assess discriminant validity. They accept that the FLC is still an acceptable method for evaluating discriminant validity. However, the FLC fails to assess the lack of discriminant validity in various research situations. Therefore, the present study used the HTMT to evaluate the constructs' discriminant validity; these values are presented in Table 5. All values were less than 0.9.

Table 5 Discriminant validity and HTMT

FLC	1.	2.	3.
1. Consumer behaviour	0.720		
2. Purchase intention	0.540	0.690	
3. Social media influencers' characteristics	0.423	0.598	0.786
HTMT	**1.**	**2.**	**3.**
1. Consumer behaviour			
2. Purchase intention	1.021		
3. Social media influencers' characteristics	0.544	0.888	

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2.3 Evaluation of the structural model

The significance of the model was assessed based on path coefficients, t-values and standard errors. The hypotheses were tested for main and indirect effects through the bootstrapping procedure (Ringle et al., 2005).

Based on Chin's (1998) criterion that the minimum structural coefficient should be 0.2, the effects proposed in the hypotheses were shown to be significant. Social media influencers' characteristics had a significant and negative relationship with purchase intention (β=-0.598; t=13.135; LL=-0.685, UL=-0.509); H1 was supported as the lower and upper limits included the value zero, indicating that the relationship was significant. The purchase intention had a significant and positive effect on consumer behaviour (β=0.446, t=6.237; LL=0.317, UL=0.597); thus, H2 was supported. Moreover, social media influencers' characteristics had a significant and negative relationship with consumer behaviour (β=-0.157, t=1.964; LL=-0.305, UL=0.007); thus, H3 was supported.

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We used the bootstrap approach to test purchase intention's mediating effect on social media influencers' characteristics and consumer behaviour relationship (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Mediation exists when an indirect effect is significant (Hair et al., 2017a). Therefore, purchase intention significantly mediated the relationship between social media influencers' characteristics and consumer behaviour (β=-0.267, t=5.106; LL=-0.384, UL=-0.182) consequently, H4 was also supported. Table 6 shows the mentioned results.

Table 6 Results of the structural equations modeling: Direct and indirect effects

Hypotheses	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Error (STERR)	T-Statistics (O/ STERR)	L.L.	U.L.	Results
Direct Effect							
H1. SMIC -> PI	-0,598	-0,602	0,046	13,135*	-0,685	-0,509	Supported
H2. PI -> CB	0,446	0,458	0,071	6,237**	0,317	0,597	Supported
H3. SMIC -> CB	-0,157	-0,155	0,080	1,964*	-0,305	0,007	Supported
Indirect Effect							
H4. SMIC -> PI -> CB	-0,267	-0,276	0,052	5,106*	-0,384	-0,182	Supported

Source: Own elaboration.

Notes:
* t-values significant at p<0.001.
** t-values significant at p<0.05.

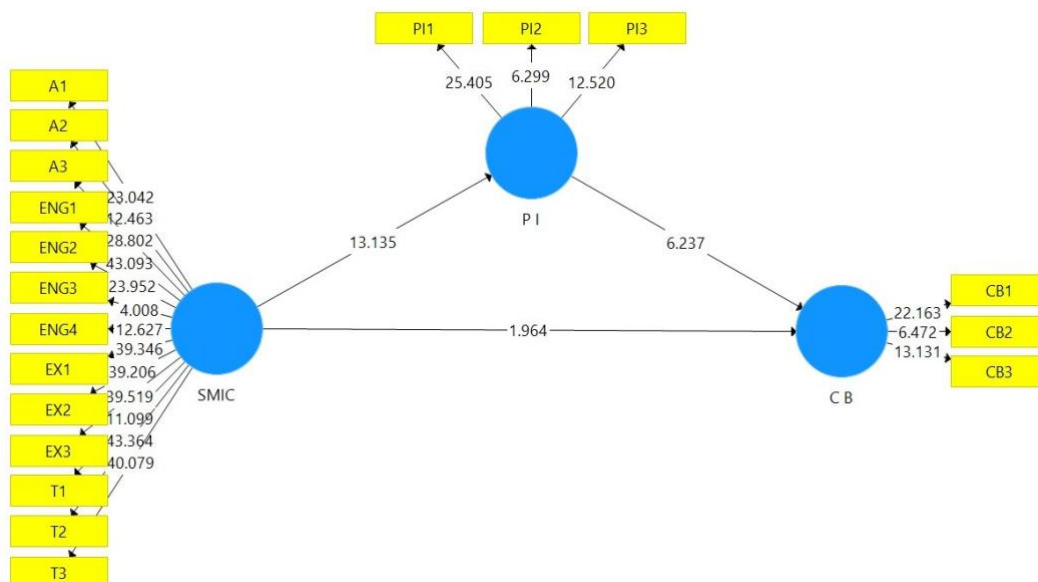Figure 3 shows the structural model assessment, considering both direct and indirect effects.

Figure 3 Structural Model Results

Source: Own elaboration.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Discussion

Numerous research studies on celebrity endorsements have been conducted over the years, with a primary focus on the traditional mass media context (Khan et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it is crucial to emphasize that the rise of social media influencers is a fairly recent phenomenon, and the research in this field is still in its early stages of development.

As influencer marketing continues to evolve, there is an increasing awareness of the necessity to explore how the content shared by Social Media Influencers on social media platforms, influences consumers' opinions, actions, and purchasing decisions ultimately moulding their product perceptions and subsequent purchase intentions (Baig & Shahzad, 2022).

The previous analysis has allowed us to identify a significant positive correlation between one construct, with the most evident relationship established between purchase intention and consumer behaviour. This analysis indicates that individuals exhibiting a strong inclination to purchase products are more prone to act upon those inclinations.

This study sought to investigate how the characteristics of social media influencers, including trustworthiness, attractiveness, engagement, and expertise, impact both consumer purchase intentions and behaviours, focusing on the specific demographic of higher education students in Porto. Additionally, this research intended to explore the role of purchase intentions as a mediating element in the relationship between social media influencer characteristics and consumer behaviour.

The conceptual model was developed based on relevant academic literature within the research field to ensure the credibility and statistical validity of the applied measures. A thorough structural assessment, along with meticulous analyses of validity and reliability, has substantiated the quality of the measures used.

The study focused on four key dimensions associated with the characteristics of social media influencers. The primary research question explored how these characteristics impact consumers' purchase intentions and behaviours. The research findings validated

the presence of both positive and negative influences related to the effectiveness of social media influencers' characteristics on both purchase intention and consumer behaviour.

The previous descriptive analysis also revealed both direct positive and negative correlations among three of the hypotheses, whereas the remaining hypothesis demonstrated an indirect negative impact.

The primary goal of the first hypothesis was to explore how the proposed characteristics of social media influencers, such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, engagement and expertise, impact consumer purchase intention. It was possible to conclude that this hypothesis demonstrates a negative but significant correlation, indicating the substantial impact of social media influencers' characteristics on consumers' purchase intention.

Thakur et al. (2016) emphasized the substantial positive role of influencer traits in shaping consumer perceptions and fostering trust. Chapple and Cownie (2017) argue trustworthiness plays a pivotal role in engendering consumer belief in the information shared and their receptiveness to influencer recommendations. Taking all these aspects into account, it is justifiable to state that the greater the perceived trustworthiness of a social media influencer, the more significant their influence on consumer purchase intent becomes.

Additionally, this study explored the physical attractiveness of social media influencers, which encompassed qualities like attractiveness, approachability, and appearance. Nevertheless, the study's results indicate that the attractiveness of influencers does not exert a significant positive influence on purchase intentions. However, it is worth noting that this dimension deviates from the outcomes of Tille's (2020) research, which suggested that more attractive endorsers possess a stronger persuasive influence and, subsequently, yield a positive impact on sales (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016).

Conversely, the impact of social media influencers' engagement on purchase intentions is of paramount importance in the modern era. For instance, Taillon et al. 2020 found that the level of engagement between influencers and their followers directly influences the likelihood of followers making purchasing decisions based on influencer recommendations. By actively engaging with their audience through content, comments, and interactions, influencers can impact consumer perspectives and decisions. Despite the study confirming that this particular dimension had a relatively modest influence in

comparison to others, it still exerts a significant impact on shaping consumers' purchase intentions.

The fourth dimension explored in this investigation pertains to the expertise of social media influencers. In today's digital era, the impact of social media influencers' expertise on purchase intention cannot be overstated. In this study, expertise in a social media influencer was characterized by attributes like knowledge, experience, and reputation. The findings substantiate the validation of this characteristic, highlighting its significant impact and subsequent effect on consumer purchase intention. This aligns with the research conducted by Martiningsih and Setyawa (2022), which suggests that social media influencers who display their expertise in a genuine and relatable manner tend to have a greater propensity to influence their followers' opinions and preferences, resulting in a substantial effect on purchase intention.

Collectively, although the studies of each trait reinforce the validity of this hypotheses and emphasize the significant impact of social media influencer characteristics on purchase intention, it does not align with the research conducted by multiple scholars.

Purchase intention, characterized by the inclination or predisposition to acquire a product or service, plays a central role in consumer behaviour (Costa, 2022). Purchase intention acts as the crucial link that connects consumers' evaluations of the available options and their final decisions regarding purchases (Marilen et al., 2021). The study provided significant results confirming the second hypothesis, stating that purchase intention directly influences consumer behaviour. For instance, consumers are considerably more inclined to act on their intent to purchase a product or service if it has been endorsed by a trusted influencer (Winterich et al., 2018).

When consumers harbour a strong purchase intention for a particular product, the probability of converting that intention into action increases, consequently impacting their consumer behaviour. This phenomenon serves as both a predictor and a key influencer of the decisions individuals ultimately make.

Understanding the dynamics of purchase intention and its influence on consumer behaviour is imperative for entrepreneurs and businesses. Furthermore, the validation of this hypothesis aligns with Chetioui's et al. (2019) research, who delves into the psychological aspects of purchase intention and its direct consequences on consumer decisions. These authors collectively reinforce the hypothesis that purchase intention is a

crucial element in molding consumer behaviour, providing insight into its multifaceted influence on the decision-making processes of consumers.

In the modern digital era, social media influencers have evolved into potent forces that shape consumer behaviour (Costa, 2022). Their impact is multifaceted, driven by a combination of factors. The results verified the validation of the third hypothesis, demonstrating the considerable yet negative impact of the combined characteristics of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer behaviour. Unfortunately, this confirmation contradicts the findings of several studies, including Martiningsih and Setyawa (2022), Wong et al. (2017), and Chetioui et al. (2019), all of which emphasize that social media influencers have persuasive capabilities due to their multifaceted traits, allowing them to impact their followers' perspectives and preferences, ultimately shaping consumer behaviour. Despite the scarcity of research findings, it was possible to provide significant evidence supporting the third hypothesis.

Finally, the study confirmed the validity of the fourth hypothesis, which suggests that purchase intention acts as a mediator establishing an indirect relationship between the social media influencers' characteristics and consumer behaviour. This phenomenon is justifiable in the context of social media influencers, as attitude assumes a significant role in mediating the synergy between a product, the influencer, and the resulting purchase intention, subsequently impacting consumer behaviour towards the product (Cahyanaputra et al. 2021). Although this hypothesis has been validated, it is crucial to emphasize its divergence from prior scholars' research such as Lim et al. (2015).

4.2 Theoretical and practical implications

The impact of social media influencers on consumer behaviour carries both theoretical and practical implications of significant importance. From a theoretical perspective, it highlights the evolving dynamics of consumer decision-making processes in the digital era, disrupting conventional models and theories related to consumer behaviour.

Social media influencers represent a rapidly emerging and relatively recent phenomenon within the digital marketing and entrepreneurial field, driven by the innovation of new technologies (Abert, 2019). Numerous studies have investigated the role of social media influencers (Raita, 2021; Baig & Shahzad, 2022; Karaila, 2021), particularly focusing on

their impact on purchase intention. However, it is worth noting that we have not come across studies that explore the mediating role of purchase intention in the relationship between the characteristics of social media influencers and consumer behaviour. The rise of this new profession in the digital era highlights the importance of understanding the fundamental factors that contribute to the success of social media influencers and how they impact consumers (Abert, 2019).

According to Rodrigues (2021), social media influencers (SMIs) are perceived as highly credible and reliable sources of information. This recognition primarily stems from their ability to foster strong connections with consumers which can subsequently influence their purchasing decisions, rendering them among the most influential figures in the digital age. Consequently, this emphasizes the fundamental role played by influencers in moulding preferences and choices, prompting scholars to revise and improve existing theoretical frameworks to integrate this emerging element.

On a practical level, the impact of social media influencers provides valuable guidance for entrepreneurs and businesses. Acknowledging the significant impact that influencers and their qualities have on consumers can contribute to shaping marketing strategies, as noted by De Veirman et al. (2017). Furthermore, the ability to predict purchase intentions provides companies with the tools to formulate potent marketing strategies (Lim et al., 2017). Understanding consumer psychology and the elements that shape their perceptions of a brand or product enables companies to engage with consumers more skillfully, encourage and stimulate positive and impactful decisions regarding their products, and ultimately secure a competitive advantage in the market. Acknowledging this, businesses can enhance their brand's credibility and product attractiveness through strategic partnerships with influencers that align with their target audience.

Additionally, our research holds potential value for aspiring social media influencer entrepreneurs. Through an examination of the fundamental characteristics sought in an influencer and a comprehensive analysis of purchase intent and consumer behaviour, our study provides these emerging entrepreneurs with the necessary resources to potentially increase their chances of success.

Overall, this intricate relationship between theory and practice reflects the dynamic nature of the digital era and the pivotal role of social media influencers' characteristics in shaping purchase intentions and consumer behaviour.

4.3 Limitations

The investigation's conceptual model has been statistically substantiated, confirming the presence of multiple characteristics that impact consumers' purchase intentions and behaviours, with particular emphasis on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of social media influencers.

One of the most evident limitations of this study was the scarcity of existing literature and previous investigations on the specific topic, which presented challenges in locating comparable data for this research.

Throughout the literature review within this dissertation, a notable challenge arose in substantiating the third hypothesis and precisely establishing the relationship between the characteristics of social media influencers and consumer behaviour. Numerous articles and documents provided evidence of the connection between SMIC and purchase intention, whereas the available resources regarding SMIC, and consumer behaviour were notably limited. This constraint posed a challenge in terms of attempting to understand the relationship under investigation. The complexity of this challenge derives from the extensive body of research presented by multiple studies and authors (Thilina, 2021; Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023; Botelho, 2019; Wang et al., 2017), which, although providing abundant insights into the impact of SMIC on purchase intention, there is a conspicuous lack of information about consumer behaviour.

The fourth hypothesis was the primary reason and motivation behind this research. Although it was validated, the analysis of its results, which revealed the mediating effect of purchase intention between SMIC and consumer behaviour, proved to be more challenging than initially anticipated, due to its deviation from the findings of previous scholars.

Other limitations were encountered throughout the research process, such as the need to expand the database. The employment of a non-probability convenience sampling method for data collection might have affected the representation of the target population. Although the sample size was sufficient to establish a valid database, a larger sample would improve the study's reliability by providing a more accurate representation of the higher education students in Porto. Due to the limited inclusion of participants, the findings derived from this research might not be adequate for generalization. To address these limitations, future research endeavours should expand their research base by

incorporating a more diverse representation, including individuals from a broader spectrum of higher education institutions in Porto, rather than exclusively focusing on the students of the Porto School of Accounting and Business. This inclusion would yield valuable insights into consumer similarities and disparities, resulting in a more valuable dissertation for future scholars to draw upon.

Despite the limitations, this investigation successfully reached relevant conclusions, significantly contributing to an advanced understanding of how social media influencers' characteristics impact both consumer's purchase intentions and behaviour.

4.4   Future research lines

A quantitative study alone was insufficient to comprehensively explain the impact of social media influencers' characteristics on consumers. Incorporating an alternative research approach, such as a qualitative study that includes focus groups, could have provided a deeper insight into this complex phenomenon. This method allows researchers to investigate intricate topics, emotions, and experiences that may present challenges when attempting to capture them through surveys that do not consider respondents' emotional states, behaviours, or emotional fluctuations. Integrating both focus groups and surveys would present the opportunity to identify and understand consumer preferences and the effects of influencers on their behaviour.

In future research regarding this topic, it would be beneficial to incorporate additional variables, even though longer surveys could potentially lead to reduced response rates. This approach would provide a more thorough understanding of how various factors impact purchase intention and consumer behaviour. For instance, this study did not account for certain sociodemographic factors, including income levels, social class, group affiliations, and ethnic background among others. Income levels and social class can considerably impact consumers' purchasing power and, as a result, influence purchase intention. Therefore, in future investigations, it would be valuable to explore potential variations based on the referred variables, as they can significantly dictate consumer decisions regarding product purchases.

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Appendix: Survey

O poder dos social media influencers (SMI) na intenção de compra e o comportamento do consumidor.

O presente questionário insere-se no âmbito da dissertação de Mestrado em Empeendedorismo e Internacionalização do Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto (ISCAP), tendo como objetivo compreender o impacto que os social media influencers possuem na presente era digital, nomeadamente na intenção de compra e comportamento do consumidor, sobre a orientação do Professor. Orlando Lima Rua

Após a finalização do questionário a informação recolhida será analisada de forma detalhada e serão utilizadas exclusivamente para fins académicos, garantindo a confidencialidade da informação expressa.

Caso surgirem dúvidas ou se necessitar de algum esclarecimento adicional, não hesite em entrar em contacto através do seguinte email: 2170731@iscap.ipp.pt

* Indicates required question

Dados sociodemográficos

1. Utiliza as redes sociais? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Sim
   ◯ Não

2. Segue algum Social Media Influencer (SMI)? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Sim
   ◯ Não

3. Género *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Feminino
   ◯ Masculino
   ◯ Other: _____

4. Idade *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ <18
   ◯ 18-25
   ◯ 26-33
   ◯ 34-41
   ◯ >41

67

5. Situação profissional *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Estudante

⬭ Empregado

⬭ Desempregado

⬭ Reformado

⬭ Other: _____

Intenção de compra

6. Alguma vez considerou comprar um produto por ter sido mencionado por um SMI?

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Sim

⬭ Não

7. Diria que os SMIs desempenham um papel importante na influência das suas decisões nas compras online?

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Sim

⬭ Não

8. Presta atenção aos anúncios nas redes sociais? *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Sim

⬭ Não

Comportamento do consumidor

9. Se alguma vez fez uma compra online devido ao feedback dado por um SMI, que tipo de compra foi?

Check all that apply.

☐ Moda

☐ Tecnologia

☐ Beleza

☐ Desporto

☐ Other: _____

10. Se gostar de um produto recomendado, é provável que o compre? *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Sim

⬭ Não

⬭ Não sei

68

11. É provável que continue a adquirir produtos recomendado pelos   *
    seus SMI's preferidos?

Mark only one oval.

◯ Sim

◯ Não

◯ Não sei

Características dos SMIs

Indique, por favor,
numa escala entre 1 (discordo completamente) e 9 (concordo completamente), o seu grau
de concordância com as seguintes afirmações:

12. Considero os SMIs transparentes e honestos como fontes   *
    credíveis.

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ◯

2 ◯

3 ◯

4 ◯

5 ◯

6 ◯

7 ◯

8 ◯

9 ◯

Concordo completamente

69

13. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo são honestos. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

6 ⬭

7 ⬭

8 ⬭

9 ⬭

Concordo completamente

14. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo fornecem informações (positivas ou *
negativas) e sugestões sobre os produtos que apresentam.

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

6 ⬭

7 ⬭

8 ⬭

9 ⬭

Concordo completamente

15. Em função dos conhecimentos e da experiência do SMI, considero-o uma fonte de informação credível. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

6 ⬭

7 ⬭

8 ⬭

9 ⬭

Concordo completamente

16. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo apresentam referências com base na sua experiência. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

6 ⬭

7 ⬭

8 ⬭

9 ⬭

Concordo completamente

71

17. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo são bem-informado(s) *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

6 ⬭

7 ⬭

8 ⬭

9 ⬭

Concordo completamente

18. O meu SMI preferido é consistente e ativo *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

6 ⬭

7 ⬭

8 ⬭

9 ⬭

Concordo completamente

72

19. O meu SMI preferido costuma a interagir com o público. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

1 ⬭

2 ⬭

3 ⬭

4 ⬭

5 ⬭

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Concordo completamente

20. É fácil de contactar o meu SMI preferido. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

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Concordo completamente

73

21. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo incentivam os seguidores a dar feedback. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

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Concordo completamente

22. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo são atrativos. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

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Concordo completamente

74

23. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo são estilosos. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

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Concordo completamente

24. O(s) SMI(s) que sigo são amigáveis. *

Mark only one oval.

Discordo completamente

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Concordo completamente

75

25. Considerando as seguintes características, qual é a mais   *
     importante?

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Conhecimento

⬭ Interatividade

⬭ Credibilidade

⬭ Atratividade

Google Forms