

Who are Portuguese followers of social media influencers (SMIs), and their attitudes towards SMIs? An exploratory study

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Abstract. *Influencers serve as crucial role models, influencing the behavior, aesthetics, and ideologies of their followers. This cross-sectional study aims to explore the perspectives of Portuguese social media users toward influencers. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire from 759 participants obtained through snowball sampling. The majority (75.5%) were female, averaging 26 years in age. Descriptive statistics, mean comparisons, and correlations were utilized for analysis. Portuguese followers of social media influencers, primarily consisting of young women with lower formal education, are active on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube. They spend considerable time on social media, engaging with influencers through actions such as liking or tagging friends. Fashion and beauty influencers are particularly favored. Followers value influencers who interact with them, appreciate personal posts and disclosures, and form parasocial relationships with influencers. While many express a willingness to purchase products promoted by influencers, a noteworthy portion hasn't made such purchases. Participants express uncertainty about the guaranteed quality of products endorsed by influencers, yet 36.5% acknowledge the significance of influencers in discovering new products or trends. This study provides valuable insights for influencers and brands targeting a specific audience. It also underscores potential concerns for followers, emphasizing the link between excessive social media use and problematic behavior.*

Keywords: followers, social media, social media influencers, trust.

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Introduction

In 2023, an astonishing 4.76 billion people globally actively used social media, with the average user participating in 6.6 social media platforms each month (Kemp, 2023). Notably, platforms like Facebook experienced a daily engagement rate of over 65.86%, equivalent to 2.958 billion users (Kemp, 2023). YouTube and Facebook are the primary choices for the majority of Americans, as highlighted by Auxier and Anderson (2021), underscoring the increasing popularity of these platforms and solidifying Facebook's status as one of the most widely utilized online platforms (We Are Social et al., 2023).

Among the various online activities, following influencers has emerged as one of the most widespread practices. Social Media Influencers (SMIs), individuals who create and share content, including product information and opinions, wield significant influence in attracting and shaping the perspectives of large audiences (Cheung et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). While specific studies on Portuguese social media users who follow influencers are lacking, such investigations are vital for brands seeking strategic positioning in the market (Arora et al., 2019). This study aims to fill this gap by examining the characteristics and attitudes of Portuguese followers of social media influencers (SMIs). The methodology used will be detailed following a literature review, and the subsequent presentation and discussion of results will contribute to meaningful conclusions.

Literature review

In alignment with Montag and Elhai (2023, p. 611), individuals engage with social media for social, hedonic, and utilitarian gratifications, finding the platform conducive to building social capital and facilitating communication from one to many. However, the authors caution against addictive-like social media use, emphasizing the correlation with excessive time spent online. The impact of social media use on mental health lacks consensus in the literature. Coyne et al. (2020) report no evidence linking time spent on social media to changes in depression or anxiety over an eight-year period, including the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Conversely, Brunborg and Andreas (2019) associate increased social media usage with a slight rise in depression, conduct problems, and episodic heavy drinking. Liu et al. (2022), on the other hand, identify a 13% increase in the risk of depression for each hour of additional social media use, establishing a linear dose-response relationship. Keles et al. (2020) provide evidence that risk factors for depression, anxiety, and psychological distress include time spent on social media, engaging in activities like repeated message checking, personal investment, and addictive or problematic use, indicating a multifactorial relationship. The hypothesis posits that individuals who follow influencers spend more time on social media than those who do not (H1).

As per Delbaere et al. (2021), Social Media Influencers (SMIs) serve as a conduit for brand engagement across three dimensions: cognitive processing, affection, and activation. This engagement is further heightened by SMIs who actively encourage their followers to participate by posting frequently (Farivar et al., 2022). Lou (2022) has identified psychological mechanisms contributing to followers' overall appreciation of posts sponsored by influencers, including positive bias, cross-validation verification, and inspirational internalization. Drawing from attachment theory in social psychology, Farivar et al. (2022)

demonstrated the development of bond-based attachment (parasocial relationship with influencers) and identity-based attachment (sense of belonging to the influencer community) among followers of influencers. Additionally, Ki et al. (2020) presented evidence highlighting how the personas of SMIs (inspiration, enjoyability, and similarity) and their content curation abilities (informativeness) influence followers to perceive SMIs as human brands fulfilling their needs for ideality, relatedness, and competence, resulting in an intense attachment to SMIs. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of Persuasion by Petty and Cacioppo (2012) suggests a dual-process of persuasion: the central route, involving high elaboration, strong and enduring attitude change, and motivation; and the peripheral route, characterized by low elaboration, temporary attitude change, and lack of motivation. Route selection is influenced by factors such as motivation, ability, relevance, credibility of the source, and peripheral cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012).

Fashion is recognized as a highly successful and widely visible form of digital cultural production (Duffy & Hund, 2015). According to Castillo-Abdul et al. (2021), the fashion sector, driven by technological advancements, has evolved by updating tools and meeting consumer needs, giving rise to what they term "new brand prescribers." In the realm of fashion and beauty, brands strategically employ social media influencers to boost their profits, moving away from larger influencers to micro-influencers due to their ability to forge close, emotionally charged connections with their audience (Britt et al., 2020). People actively seek out fashion influencers as authoritative figures for guidance on the latest products and services (Belanche et al., 2021). Furthermore, these influencers play a crucial role in shaping a positive and reliable brand image for fashion and beauty brands, establishing a connection with followers who identify with their style and personality (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021). Additionally, influencer marketing has the potential to enhance a brand's visibility and expand its reach on social media platforms, resulting in heightened website traffic and increased conversions (Romão et al., 2019). Our hypothesis suggests that followers demonstrate a preference for influencers whose content revolves around fashion and beauty (H2).

As per Lou and Yuan (2018), an influencer's informative value plays a pivotal role in generating content that contributes to the informative value, trust, and brand awareness among followers. These factors, in turn, influence followers' intentions to make a purchase. Subsequently, Lou and Yuan (2019) expanded on this by introducing attractiveness and similarity as additional elements affecting trust in an influencer's branded posts. Wellman et al. (2020, p. 68) demonstrated that influencers often employ the concept of authenticity as an ethical framework when creating sponsored content. This authenticity is grounded in two principles: staying true to oneself and the brand, and being honest with the audience. It's worth noting that influencers lack a standardized set of ethical principles to govern their work. Consequently, influencers establish trust and reliability with their followers by embodying qualities of openness, truthfulness, and straightforwardness (Hassan et al., 2021). The source credibility model by Hovland and Weiss (1951) incorporates two dimensions – expertise (enhancing persuasiveness) and trustworthiness (boosting persuasiveness). Source credibility is often associated with the peripheral route to persuasion, where individuals rely on credibility as a heuristic or mental shortcut for decision-making (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Credibility contributes to cognitive consistency

and is context-dependent, with the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of a source varying based on the specific domain or topic of the message. Factors influencing source credibility include perceived similarity, physical attractiveness, and consistency (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Our hypothesis suggests that influencers funded by a brand are perceived as more reliable (H3).

Individuals with a substantial number of followers can transform into a sort of personal brand, as explained by Ki et al. (2020). According to the theory of human branding, a human brand refers to any widely recognized persona that is the focus of marketing efforts (Thomson, 2006). Human brands have the potential to build strong connections with consumers, enhancing their loyalty and commitment (Thomson, 2006). This connection with human brands is viewed as a psychological aspect related to followers' perceived values of these human brands (Lam et al., 2010). However, Pradhan et al. (2021) discovered that Generation Z views brands exerting control over influencers as morally irresponsible, aligning with anti-consumption literature. Furthermore, when there is a weak alignment between the consumer and the product, it leads to less favorable attitudes toward the product, resulting in lower intentions to purchase and recommend (Belanche et al., 2021). In a related study, Ki et al. (2022) explored followers' conflicting attitudes of trust and distrust in the social media influencer (SMI) landscape. They found that perceived advertising clutter triggers followers' distrust of SMIs' branded content. This ambivalence in attitudes toward trust and distrust influences followers' behavior, particularly their purchase intentions. The Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980) suggests two paths to persuasion: a central path involving detailed information processing, leading to stable attitudes, and a peripheral path relying on mental shortcuts, such as the source's attractiveness and emotional appeal. The choice between these paths depends on motivation, information processing ability, and relevance. We predicted that even though followers generally trust influencers, their trust is not likely to translate into a significant willingness to purchase their products (H4).

Influencers often share personal information, opinions, and experiences with their audience (Gerrath & Usrey, 2021). Personal posts revolve around consumers' relationships, preferences, and experiences (Jones & Lee, 2022). Influencers typically use storytelling and informal content, where storytelling involves describing personal events and consumer experiences with a product, while informational content focuses on the product's attributes and features (Fu & Chen, 2012). Social media influencers commonly use storytelling to convey information and enhance follower engagement (Van Laer et al., 2019). Our hypothesis is that followers prefer more personal communication over social communication (H5). The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) is frequently used to explain how followers are influenced by social media influencers (Magrizos et al., 2021). According to this theory, followers are more likely to adopt influencers' brands or recommendations (behavioral intentions) if they have a positive attitude toward the influencers, if they perceive social approval from others, and if they feel capable of adopting those behaviors. We hypothesize that followers trust influencers who actively communicate with their audience more than those who do not (H6).

Regarding the dynamic between social media influencers and their followers, Lou (2022, p. 4) proposes the concept of a "trans-parasocial relation" to describe a mutually reciprocal, interactive, and co-created connection between influencers and their dedicated

followers. Additionally, Bhattacharya (2023) has introduced the idea of parasocial interaction, discovering associations between physical attractiveness and trustworthiness in this interaction. Yuan and Lou (2020, p. 133) have identified factors such as followers' perceived attractiveness of influencers, similarity to influencers, procedural fairness, and interpersonal fairness in interactions positively contributing to the strength of this parasocial relationship. This interaction encompasses various social media engagements like likes, comments, tags, and other interactions around the content influencers share with their followers (Caruelle, 2023). Furthermore, Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1969) suggests that individuals learn by observing and imitating others, especially those perceived as attractive, credible, or similar. Therefore, followers are more likely to emulate influencers' behaviors or preferences if they find them appealing and trustworthy (Chopra et al., 2021).

Women tend to be more active on social media compared to men, as indicated by Khan (2017). Bergkvist et al. (2016) note that social media consumption behaviors and evaluative judgments vary based on gender, with Bush et al. (2004) finding that celebrity models have a stronger impact on females than males. Aw and Chuah (2021) and Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) suggest that men and women use media differently to fulfill emotional needs, with women forming stronger parasocial relationships. Women tend to share their feelings more openly in social contexts, while men are often more task-oriented (An & Weber, 2016; Ye et al., 2018). Additionally, women spend more time on social media than men (Thompson & Lougheed, 2012). For young women, motivations for following influencers on social media are particularly driven by relaxation, entertainment, and habitual pass time, according to Croes and Bartels (2021). Our hypothesis is that followers of social media influencers are predominantly women, and they engage more with social networks than men (H7).

The level of formal education also plays a role in influencing follower motivations. University students, according to Croes and Bartels (2021), find motivations related to boredom/habitual pass time and information-seeking more critical than community college students. Malinen and Koivula (2020) found that respondents with higher education felt they were more targeted by influencers' influencing behavior. However, Breves et al. (2021) found no significant impact of education on motivations to follow an influencer. We propose that individuals with lower levels of formal education are more likely to follow influencers (H8).

According to Budree et al. (2019, p. 238), Facebook and YouTube are the most popular platforms across all age groups, with a decline in adoption rates as age increases. For the youngest age group (18 to 35-year-olds), LinkedIn and Instagram follow as the next preferred platforms, with Google and Twitter trailing. Younger generations, considered digital natives, are more inclined to use social media due to growing up with digital options readily available for communication and interaction (Budree et al., 2019). These younger individuals use social media and follow influencers more for entertainment than informational purposes (Kircaburun et al., 2020). Our hypothesis is that Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are the most commonly used social networks among these followers (H9).

Methods

Procedures

This study adheres to all the guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which delineates the fundamental principles governing research involving human subjects. Additionally, the study received approval from the Scientific Council of Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Braga. The research survey included an informed consent process, wherein participants were apprised of the study's objectives and their rights in participating. This encompassed the option to withdraw from the research at any point without consequences, as well as a guarantee of the anonymity and confidentiality of their data. Upon reading and understanding the informed consent, participants expressed their agreement by submitting their responses through the online questionnaire.

The research survey was distributed on various social media platforms through a snowball sampling approach. Inclusion criteria mandated participants to be over 18 years old, possess Portuguese nationality, and be active social media users. The data collection occurred online during the period from January to March 2023.

Instrument

The research questionnaire, custom-designed for this study, incorporated, as previously noted, not only the informed consent but also sociodemographic inquiries covering gender, age, education, and employment status. Drawing insights from existing literature (Brunborg et al., 2022; Croes & Bartels, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021; Ki et al., 2022; Yuan & Lou, 2020), the researchers formulated questions relating to individuals' attitudes and behaviors regarding social media and influencers, their perceptions of authenticity, levels of trust, and intentions to make purchases (Table 1). Behaviour towards social media was assessed through four questions (*What social media do you use?; How often do you use social media?; Do you follow influencers on social media?; What business do the influencers you follow belong to?*). Perceived authenticity was evaluated by four questions (*A credible influencer has at least...N followers; I trust influencers who are sponsored by a brand; I think that advertising messages do not affect the credibility of the influencer; I prefer to follow...*). Trust was assessed by two items (*I prefer to follow influencers that post...; Influencers who communicate with their followers are more reliable than those who do not*). Purchase intention was evaluated by four items (*I have interacted with an influencer through...; It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer; My favourite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends; I already bought a product that was promoted by an influencer on social media*) (Table 1).

Data analyses

Various descriptive statistical methods were applied in this study, including the calculation of frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation, and crosstabs (utilized to explore relationships between two or more qualitative variables). Moreover, specific inferential statistical analyses were employed, such as the One-way ANOVA analysis of variance (applied to assess significant differences among the means of two or more groups) and t-Test (used for comparing means between two groups and determining the likelihood that observed differences are due to chance).

Additionally, Pearson correlation (which gauges the strength of a linear relationship between two quantitative variables) and Spearman correlation (assessing the strength of a monotonic relationship between two quantitative or ordinal variables) were conducted. The chosen significance level was set at $p < .05$. The statistical analysis was carried out using the SPSS program, version 28.

Sample

The sample comprises 759 participants, with 573 individuals (75.5%) identifying as female. The average age of the participants is 26.46 years [SD = 12.20 (Min-16 Max - 69)]. Among the participants, a majority (51.3%) have attained secondary formal education or its equivalent (secondary professional education), and the most prevalent occupation is student (51.6%), followed by workers (38.2%), and others, such as retirees or unemployed individuals (10.1%). Secondary formal education or its equivalent, which represents 12 years of formal education, is the minimum mandatory educational level in Portugal.

The skewness and kurtosis values associated with sociodemographic variables fall within the normative ranges ($|Skw| < 3$ for skewness and $|Krt| < 10$ for kurtosis) as outlined by Maroco (2010). This ensures the normal distribution of the sample in terms of sociodemographic characteristics.

Results

Preliminary analysis

The reliability of the measures was evaluated by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. For the different constructs, the obtained values were as follows: Behavior towards social media showed an alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.77$, Perceived authenticity $\alpha = 0.69$, Trust $\alpha = 0.60$, and Purchase intention $\alpha = 0.65$. While a benchmark of 0.70 is often considered acceptable in social sciences (Hair et al., 2021), Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) caution that if the test length is too short, the alpha value may decrease. This was observed in the Trust dimension, which, having only two items, resulted in a lower alpha value.

Behaviour towards social media and influencers

The participants' engagement with social media was evaluated through four questions. In response to the first query, "Which social media platforms do you use?", the majority of participants indicated usage of Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. When it comes to the second question, "How frequently do you use social media?", a substantial number of participants reported using it multiple times daily. The third question, "Do you follow influencers on social media?", elicited predominantly affirmative responses. As for the fourth question, "In which industry do the influencers you follow operate?", the most frequently mentioned business sector was fashion, followed by beauty, music, TV and cinema, and lifestyle (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies

Question	Options	N	%
<i>Behaviour towards social media $\alpha = 0.77$</i>			
What social media do you use?	Facebook	599	22.1

	Instagram	690	25.4
	Spnachat	133	4.9
	TikTok	228	8.4
	Twitter	356	13.1
	Youtube	626	23.1
	Other	82	3.0
How often do you use social media?	Several times a day	539	71.0
	Daily	201	26.5
	Sometimes a week	9	1.2
	Not often	10	1.3
Do you follow influencers on social media?	No, just my friends	162	21.3
	Yes	597	78.7
What business do the influencers you follow belong to?	Fashion	415	54.7
	Beauty	375	49.4
	Music. TV and Cinema	346	45.6
	Lifestyle	307	40.4
	Travels	249	32.8
	Fitness	245	32.3
	Sports	240	31.6
	Gastronomy	129	17.0
	Games	82	10.8
	Others	119	15.7
Perceived authenticity $\alpha= 0.69$			
A credible influencer has at least...	Less than 10,000 followers	43	5.7
	Between 10,000 and 30,000 followers	126	16.6
	Between 30,000 and 50,000 followers	75	9.9
	Between 50,000 and 100,000 followers	85	11.2
	More than 100,000 followers	90	11.9
	I don't feel able to answer	340	44.8
I trust influencers who are sponsored by a brand	I strongly disagree	89	11.7
	I partly disagree	167	22.0
	I do not agree or disagree	233	30.7
	I partly agree	223	29.4
	I strongly agree	47	6.2
I think that advertising messages do not affect the credibility of the influencer	I strongly disagree	121	15.9
	I partly disagree	221	29.1
	I do not agree or disagree	182	24.0
	I partly agree	170	22.4
	I strongly agree	65	8.6
I prefer to follow...	Social posts	228	30.0
	Personal posts	377	49.7
	Commercial/promotional posts	28	3.7
	Assessment/revision posts	126	16.6
Trust $\alpha= 0.60$			
I prefer to follow influencers that post...	Social posts	272	35.8
	Personal posts	333	43.9
	Commercial/promotional posts	40	5.3
	Assessment/revision posts	114	15.0
Influencers who communicate with their followers are more reliable than those who do not	I strongly disagree	34	4.5
	I partly disagree	79	10.4
	I do not agree or disagree	180	23.7

	I partly agree	286	37.7
	I strongly agree	180	23.7
Purchase intention $\alpha = 0.65$			
I have interacted with an influencer through...	Putting a like in the influencer' post	522	68.8
	Commenting the post	38	5.0
	Commenting on the post with Tag for friends	180	23.7
	Commenting on the post, making questions	96	12.6
	I have never interacted with an influencer	166	21.9
It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer	I strongly disagree	123	16.2
	I partly disagree	156	20.6
	I do not agree or disagree	189	24.9
	I partly agree	225	29.6
	I strongly agree	66	8.7
My favourite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends	I strongly disagree	175	23.1
	I partly disagree	111	14.6
	I do not agree or disagree	196	25.8
	I partly agree	207	27.3
	I strongly agree	70	9.2
I already bought a product that was promoted by an influencer on social media	No	392	51.6
	Yes	367	48.4

N = Frequencies; % = Percentage;

Source: Authors' own research.

No gender-based differences were observed in the utilization of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, and other social networks. Similarly, there were no distinctions between genders concerning the themes of influencers they follow, including music, TV, cinema, technology, and other topics. However, statistically significant differences emerged in terms of gender regarding the frequency of social network usage [$\chi^2(3) = 11.374$; $p = .010$; $\phi = .122$]. Specifically, women exhibited a higher frequency of social media usage compared to men. Women reported using social networks more frequently both per day and on a daily basis. Gender-related variations were also evident in the use of Instagram [$\chi^2(1) = 7.122$; $p = .008$; $\phi = -.097$] and TikTok [$\chi^2(1) = 12.071$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.126$]. In both instances, a higher proportion of women compared to men utilized these platforms. Concerning Instagram, 96.5% of women versus 86.0% of men reported usage, and for TikTok, the figures were 33.3% of women versus 19.9% of men.

A higher percentage of women (82.9%) follow influencers on social media compared to men (65.6%) [$\chi^2(1) = 25.049$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.182$]. Moreover, women surpass men in following influencers across various themes: fashion [$\chi^2(1) = 143.643$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.435$] (women 67.0% versus men 16.7%), beauty [$\chi^2(1) = 186.450$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.496$] (women 63.5% versus men 5.9%), fitness [$\chi^2(1) = 35.563$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.216$] (women 38.0% versus men 14.5%), gastronomy [$\chi^2(1) = 12.305$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.127$] (women 19.7% versus men 8.6%), lifestyle [$\chi^2(1) = 25.266$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.182$] (women 45.5% versus men 24.7%), and travel [$\chi^2(1) = 31.086$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.202$] (women 38.2% versus men 16.1%). Conversely, more men (45.7%) follow influencers in the themes of sport [$\chi^2(1) = 22.584$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .172$] and games [$\chi^2(1) = 95.273$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .354$], with men at 30.1% and women at 4.5%.

In terms of age, positive and significant correlations were found with Facebook usage ($\rho = .361$; $p < .001$), while negative and significant correlations were observed with the usage of YouTube ($\rho = -.261$; $p < .001$), Instagram ($\rho = -.323$; $p < .001$), Twitter ($\rho = -.583$; $p < .001$), TikTok ($\rho = -.209$; $p < .001$), and Snapchat ($\rho = -.299$; $p < .001$). Age also negatively correlated with the frequency of social media use ($\rho = -.212$; $p < .001$) and with following influencers on social media ($\rho = -.348$; $p < .001$). Additionally, age exhibited negative and significant correlations with influencers' themes, including fashion ($\rho = -.227$; $p < .001$), beauty ($\rho = -.310$; $p < .001$), fitness ($\rho = -.180$; $p < .001$), music, TV, and cinema ($\rho = -.240$; $p < .001$), sport ($\rho = -.208$; $p < .001$), lifestyle ($\rho = -.175$; $p < .001$), travel ($\rho = -.104$; $p < .001$), and games ($\rho = -.184$; $p < .001$).

The number of years of formal education is positively and significantly correlated with Facebook usage ($\rho = .245$; $p < .001$). Conversely, education exhibits negative and significant correlations with the usage of YouTube ($\rho = -.124$; $p < .001$), Twitter ($\rho = -.319$; $p < .001$), and Snapchat ($\rho = -.175$; $p < .001$). Years of formal education also show negative and significant correlations with influencers' themes, specifically music, TV, and cinema ($\rho = -.111$; $p < .001$), sport ($\rho = -.100$; $p < .001$), gastronomy ($\rho = -.106$; $p < .001$), and games ($\rho = -.193$; $p < .001$).

Regarding employment status, workers (86.2%) and individuals with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) (83.1%) use Facebook significantly more than students (72.7%) [$\chi^2(2) = 19.175$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .159$]. Conversely, students (90.1%) use YouTube more than workers (73.1%) and those with other employment status (79.2%) [$\chi^2(2) = 33.755$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .211$], as well as Instagram [$\chi^2(2) = 30.309$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .200$] (students 96.4%, workers 85.5%, other employment status 83.1%); Twitter [$\chi^2(2) = 116.416$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .392$] (students 64.8%, workers 23.1%, other employment status 45.5%); TikTok [$\chi^2(2) = 26.133$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .186$] (students 38.3%, workers 21.0%, other employment status 22.1%); and Snapchat [$\chi^2(2) = 26.310$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .186$] (students 24.2%, workers 9.3%, other employment status 8.3%).

Significant differences in time spent on social media were observed between different employment statuses [$F(2, 756) = 15.039$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .038$] (students 4.77 ± 0.49 , workers 4.51 ± 0.79 , other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) 4.65 ± 0.53). Post hoc Tukey testing revealed significant differences between the student and worker groups at $p < .05$, while the group with other employment status was not significantly different from the other two groups.

A higher proportion of students (90.3%) follow influencers on social media compared to workers (66.6%) or individuals with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) (64.9%) [$\chi^2(2) = 65.635$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .294$]. Examining influencers' themes, more students (64.3%) than workers (44.8%) or individuals with other employment status (42.9%) follow influencers in the fashion domain [$\chi^2(2) = 30.298$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .200$], as well as in beauty [$\chi^2(2) = 49.367$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .255$] (students 61.7%, workers 35.9%, other employment status 37.7%), fitness [$\chi^2(2) = 29.189$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .196$] (students 41.1%, workers 23.8%, other employment status 19.5%), music, TV, and cinema [$\chi^2(2) = 19.866$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .162$] (students 53.3%, workers 36.6%, other employment status 40.3%), sport [$\chi^2(2) = 12.424$; $p = .002$; $\phi = .128$] (students 37.2%, workers 26.6%, other employment status 22.1%), lifestyle [$\chi^2(2) = 29.926$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .199$] (students 49.7%, workers 31.7%, other employment status 26.0%), travel [$\chi^2(2) = 6.886$; $p = .032$; $\phi = .095$] (students 36.7%,

workers 30.0%, other employment status 23.4%), and games [$\chi^2(2) = 9.064$; $p = .011$; $\phi = .109$] (students 14.0%, workers 6.9%, other employment status 9.1%). No significant differences were observed concerning the topics of gastronomy and technology.

Perceived authenticity

Participants were asked four questions to assess perceived authenticity. Nearly half of the respondents indicated uncertainty about specifying the minimum number of followers a credible influencer should have (first question: "A credible influencer has at least..."). For the second and third questions, the majority selected intermediate options (I partly disagree; I do not agree nor disagree; I partly agree) regarding the statements "I trust influencers who are sponsored by a brand" and "I think that advertising messages do not affect the credibility of the influencer." Concerning the fourth question ("I prefer to follow..."), half of the participants expressed a preference for personal posts (Table 1).

No statistically significant differences were found between genders regarding the minimum number of followers considered credible for an influencer. Similar findings emerged for the items "I trust influencers who are sponsored by a brand" and "I think that advertising messages do not affect the credibility of the influencer." However, statistically significant differences were observed between genders in the distribution of response modalities for the item "I prefer to follow..." [$\chi^2(3) = 9.842$; $p = .020$; $\phi = .114$], with women exhibiting a stronger preference for personal publications compared to men, while men showed a greater preference for social publications compared to women.

Age displayed positive and significant correlations with the minimum number of followers deemed credible for an influencer ($\rho = .162$; $p < .001$). Additionally, age correlated negatively and significantly with trust in influencers sponsored by a brand ($\rho = -.187$; $p < .001$) and with the belief that advertising messages do not impact the credibility of the influencer ($\rho = -.110$; $p < .001$). Years of formal education exhibited negative and significant correlations with trust in influencers sponsored by a brand ($\rho = -.093$; $p < .010$) and the item "I prefer to follow influencers that..." ($\rho = -.100$; $p < .001$).

Significant differences in employment status were identified regarding the minimum number of followers considered credible for an influencer [$F(2, 756) = 6.135$; $p = .002$; $\eta^2 = .016$] (students 4.21 ± 1.72 , workers 4.68 ± 1.71 , other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) 4.44 ± 0.82). Workers indicated a higher number compared to students and individuals with other employment status. Post hoc Tukey testing revealed significant differences between student and worker groups at $p < .05$, with no significant difference between the group with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) and the other two groups.

Regarding the item "I trust influencers who are sponsored by a brand," students (3.18 ± 1.08) expressed higher agreement than workers (2.71 ± 1.11) or individuals with other employment status (2.81 ± 1.06) [$F(2, 756) = 16.944$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .043$]. Post hoc Tukey testing indicated significant differences between all three groups at $p < .05$, except for workers and other employment status. Additionally, students (2.93 ± 1.21) expressed higher agreement than workers (2.59 ± 1.17) or individuals with other employment status (2.78 ± 1.22) with the item "I think that advertising messages do not affect the credibility of the influencer" [$F(2, 756) = 6.559$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .017$]. Post hoc Tukey testing revealed significant

differences between all three groups at $p < .05$, with no significant difference between the group with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) and the other two groups. No statistically significant differences were observed in the employment status variable concerning the type of posts participants prefer to follow.

Trust

Two items were employed to evaluate trust. Regarding the first item ("I prefer to follow influencers that post..."), the option "personal posts" was the most selected, followed by the "social posts" option. In the second item ("Influencers who communicate with their followers are more reliable than those who do not"), the majority of participants chose concordant options (Table 1).

No statistically significant differences were identified between genders regarding the item "I prefer to follow influencers that post...". However, women ($M = 3.72$; $SD = 1.07$) expressed significantly higher agreement compared to men ($M = 3.47$; $SD = 1.10$) with the statement "Influencers who communicate with their followers are more reliable" [$t(757) = 2.677$; $p = .008$; $d = .226$].

Age displayed positive and significant correlations with the item "I prefer to follow influencers that post..." ($\rho = .097$; $p < .010$). Conversely, age exhibited negative and significant correlations with the item "Influencers who communicate with their followers are more reliable" ($\rho = -.080$; $p < .010$).

A higher percentage of students (50.3%) than workers (36.9%) and individuals with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) (37.7%) expressed a preference for following influencers that post personal content [$\chi^2(6) = 25.273$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.182$]. Moreover, students (3.80 ± 1.02) indicated higher agreement than workers (3.54 ± 1.12) and individuals with other employment status (3.39 ± 1.21) with the statement "Influencers who communicate with their followers are more reliable than those who do not" [$F(2, 756) = 7.313$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .019$]. Post hoc Tukey testing revealed significant differences among the three groups at $p < .05$, except for workers and other employment status.

Purchase intention

Four items were utilized to measure purchase intention. In the first item ("I have interacted with an influencer through..."), nearly a quarter of the participants reported never interacting with an influencer, while the majority indicated putting a "like" on influencer posts. Concerning the second question ("It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer"), intermediate options (I partly disagree; I do not agree nor disagree; I partly agree) were the most commonly chosen. For the third question ("My favorite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends"), the most selected responses were "I partly agree," followed by "I do not agree nor disagree," and lastly, "I strongly disagree." Regarding the fourth question ("I already bought a product that was promoted by an influencer on social media"), slightly more than half of the sample had not, while the remaining participants had made such purchases (Table 1).

No gender differences were observed in interactions with influencers by commenting on a post or posing questions in comments. However, a higher percentage of men (33.9%) than women (18.0%) reported no interaction with any influencer [$\chi^2(1) = 20.763$; $p < .001$;

$\phi = .165$]. More women (74.7%) than men (50.5%) had interacted with an influencer by putting a like on influencer posts [$\chi^2(1) = 38.157$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.224$], as well as by commenting on a post with a tag for friends [$\chi^2(1) = 15.921$; $p < .001$; $\phi = -.145$] (women 27.2% versus men 12.9%). Women also expressed higher agreement ($M = 3.02$; $SD = 1.22$) than men ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 1.31$) with the items "It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer" [$t(757) = 2.980$; $p = .003$; $d = .251$] and "My favorite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends" [$t(757) = 1.955$; $p = .048$; $d = .165$] (women $M = 2.90$; $SD = 1.31$ versus men $M = 2.69$; $SD = 1.27$).

Age exhibited negative and significant correlations with the item "I have interacted with an influencer by posting a like" ($\rho = -.172$; $p < .001$) and "...by commenting on the post with a tag for friends" ($\rho = -.134$; $p < .001$). Additionally, age correlated negatively and significantly with the items "It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer" ($\rho = -.135$; $p < .001$), "My favorite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends" ($\rho = -.114$; $p < .001$), and "I already bought a product that was promoted by an influencer on social media" ($\rho = -.170$; $p < .001$). Age correlated positively and significantly with the item "I have never interacted with an influencer" ($\rho = .194$; $p < .001$).

Years of formal education displayed negative and significant correlations with the item "It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer" ($\rho = -.091$; $p < .010$) and the item "My favorite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends" ($\rho = -.078$; $p < .010$).

Students (76.8%) tended to interact with influencers more by posting a "like" than workers (61.7%) and individuals with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) (54.5%) [$\chi^2(2) = 25.687$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .184$], as well as by sending a tag to friends [$\chi^2(2) = 26.392$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .186$] (students 31.4%, workers 15.9%, persons with other employment status 14.3%). Individuals with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) (33.8%) [$\chi^2(2) = 23.279$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .175$] reported less interaction with influencers than students (15.1%) or workers (27.9%).

A higher percentage of students (60.2%) compared to workers (39.7%) or individuals with other employment status (such as retired or unemployed) (40.3%) reported having purchased a product promoted by an influencer on social media [$\chi^2(2) = 23.2720.913$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .166$]. Students also indicated a higher level of agreement ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 1.21$) than workers ($M = 2.79$; $SD = 1.24$) and individuals with other employment status ($M = 2.87$; $SD = 1.19$) with the statements "It is very likely that I buy a product promoted by a social media influencer" [$F(2, 756) = 4.637$; $p = .010$; $\eta^2 = .012$] and "My favorite influencers are important to me when it comes to new products or trends" [$F(2, 756) = 6.265$; $p = .002$; $\eta^2 = .016$] (students $M = 3.01$; $SD = 1.29$, workers $M = 2.68$; $SD = 1.29$, and other employment status $M = 2.66$; $SD = 1.29$). No significant differences were observed between students, workers, and individuals with other employment status regarding posting messages or commenting on posts with questions when interacting with influencers.

Discussion

Women, younger individuals, and students exhibit a higher frequency of social media use on a daily basis compared to their counterparts—men, older participants, and workers—thus

supporting our initial hypothesis (H1). These findings align with the research of Khan (2017), Thompson and Loughheed (2012), and Budree et al. (2019), who respectively observed that women tend to spend more time on social media, and younger generations, being digital natives, are more inclined to engage with social platforms.

Furthermore, our results indicate that women, younger individuals with fewer years of formal education, and students are more likely to follow influencers on social media. This resonates with existing studies that emphasize how consumption behaviors and evaluative judgments in social media are influenced by gender and age factors (Bergkvist et al., 2016).

Preferences for influencer themes also vary across demographics. Women, older individuals, and students show a preference for influencers focusing on fashion, beauty, fitness, gastronomy, lifestyle, and travel, while men lean towards influencers covering sports and games. Participants with lower levels of formal education tend to follow influencers associated with themes like music, TV, and cinema, sport, gastronomy, and games. These results may be explained by the tendency of women to value relaxing entertainment and habitual pastime, making the chosen themes more suitable for relaxation. Additionally, individuals with lower formal education may be drawn to entertainment-related themes (Kircaburun et al., 2020).

Our findings also support the hypothesis (H2) that followers prefer influencers in the realms of fashion and beauty. This preference could be attributed to the significant investment by brands in this form of marketing, with fashion being particularly lucrative in the realm of digital cultural production (Duffy & Hund, 2015). This has led to the emergence of "new brand prescribers" (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021), emphasizing micro-influencers who establish intimate and personal connections (Britt et al., 2020). Fashion influencers, in particular, are powerful endorsers of products and services (Belanche et al., 2021), fostering a sense of identification among followers with their style and personality (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021).

Pradhan et al. (2021) identified a trend of avoiding both brands and influencers, while Belanche et al. (2021) observed that weak congruence between the consumer and the product leads to less favorable attitudes toward the product. Surprisingly, our study found that young individuals, particularly students and those with less formal education, exhibit trust in influencers sponsored by brands, supporting our third hypothesis (H3). Similarly, younger participants and students express confidence that advertising messages do not compromise the credibility of influencers. This aligns with the findings of Malinen and Koivula (2020), who noted that individuals with higher formal education levels perceive themselves as targets of influencer behavior and, consequently, are less inclined to trust compared to those with lower formal education. This phenomenon may be attributed to the motivations of less educated individuals, who often follow influencers for entertainment and as a habitual pastime (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

Understanding the basis of follower trust in influencers involves factors such as attractiveness, similarity, and the informative value of the content produced by influencers, all of which influence trust (Lou & Yuan, 2018, 2019). According to Hassan (2021), influencers establish trust by being open, truthful, and straightforward, while Wellman et al. (2020) assert that influencers leverage authenticity as an ethical framework. However, our results indicate that a majority of participants hold an ambiguous stance regarding the

relationship between influencers and the brands that sponsor them. In most cases, participants neither agree nor disagree with the idea that influencers gain credibility through brand sponsorship or that their credibility remains unaffected when sponsored by a brand. Confirming our fourth hypothesis (H4), these findings resonate with Ki et al. (2022), who suggest that perceived advertising clutter triggers follower distrust of social media influencers' branded content, and the ambivalence in trust and distrust influences follower behavior, particularly in terms of purchase intention.

This lack of decisiveness may offer insights into our findings, which indicate that the purchase of products promoted by social media influencers is not a foregone conclusion. A significant portion of the participants expresses partial agreement regarding the importance of their favorite influencers in shaping opinions about new products or trends. Notably, slightly more than half of the surveyed individuals have refrained from making a purchase based on influencer endorsements. This outcome stands in contrast to the assertions of Ki et al. (2020) and Thomson (2006), who posit that influencers amassing a substantial following can evolve into a human brand (Ki et al., 2020). According to this perspective, human brands have the potential to cultivate robust connections with consumers, fostering attachment and commitment (Thomson, 2006). Conversely, Ki et al. (2022), Pradhan et al. (2021), and Belanche et al. (2021) challenge this notion, underscoring the idea that influencers' extensive follower count does not guarantee their transformation into a formidable human brand. The complexities of trust and skepticism among followers may play a pivotal role in shaping their purchasing behavior, reflecting a nuanced interplay of factors in the realm of influencer marketing.

Approximately half of the surveyed participants exhibit a preference for following influencers who share personal posts rather than social or other content, aligning with hypothesis 5. The question of followers' preferred content varies significantly across different influencers, platforms, industries, and audiences. Nonetheless, existing literature highlights that influencers commonly divulge personal details, often employing storytelling techniques to enhance follower engagement (Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Fu & Chen, 2012; Van Laer et al., 2019). Notably, women and students lean towards personal publications, while men and workers exhibit a preference for social content, mirroring findings by Aw and Chuah (2021) and An and Weber (2016) regarding gender-specific parasocial relationships and emotional sharing patterns.

A substantial majority of participants engage with influencers, predominantly through actions like "liking" their posts, as characterized by Lou (2022) as a trans-parasocial relation—an interactive and co-created connection. This type of interaction, prevalent in our sample, involves activities such as likes, comments, tags, and other social media engagements around the content shared by influencers (Caruelle, 2023).

Interestingly, nearly half of the respondents express uncertainty about the requisite number of followers for an influencer to be deemed credible. While this metric holds significance for brands and influencers, its impact on followers appears less pronounced. However, research by Tafesse and Wood (2022) suggests a positive and direct correlation between the number of followers and follower engagement behavior. Meanwhile, a majority of participants endorse the credibility of influencers who actively communicate with their followers, supporting hypothesis 6.

Women, younger individuals, and students are more likely to engage with influencers by "liking" posts and commenting with tags for friends. These patterns align with the findings of Bush et al. (2004) and Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011), emphasizing the disproportionate impact of influencers on females, as well as gender-specific approaches to expressing emotional feelings on social media. This heightened engagement, particularly among those spending more time on social media and following influencers, not only increases the likelihood of purchasing products endorsed by influencers but also reinforces the perception that influencers play a crucial role in shaping opinions about new products and trends.

A non-random sample of 759 individuals from Portugal, with a predominant representation of 75.5% women, and an average age of 26, encompassing students, workers, and individuals with other employment statuses such as retired or unemployed, and with an average of 12 years of education, participated in a questionnaire exploring follower attitudes towards social media influencers. These findings support hypothesis 7 regarding gender and 8 concerning years of formal education. The survey revealed a prevalent trend of participants actively following influencers, a phenomenon explained by various authors highlighting social media influencers as pathways to brand engagement (Delbaere et al., 2021) and their ability to enhance follower engagement through frequent posts and active audience participation (Farivar et al., 2022). Psychological mechanisms such as positive bias, verification by cross-validation, and inspirational internalization contribute to followers' overall positive perceptions of influencers (Lou, 2020). Farivar et al. (2022) also outlined how bond-based and identity-based attachments develop among influencer followers, with Ki et al. (2020) demonstrating how social media influencers are perceived as human brands that fulfill followers' needs.

Regarding social media usage, a majority of participants engage with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, validating hypothesis 9. This outcome aligns with Auxier and Anderson's (2021) findings that a significant proportion of Americans use YouTube and Facebook, and with reports from We Are Social et al. (2023) affirming Facebook's status as the largest social media platform globally. Additionally, our results indicate that most participants check social media multiple times daily, echoing Kemp's (2023) discovery that the average social media user spends around two hours and twenty-four minutes on these platforms. Montag and Elhai (2023) argue that individuals are drawn to social media for social, hedonic, and utilitarian gratification, as well as the opportunity to build social capital and engage in one-to-many communication. Notably, older individuals, those with higher levels of formal education, and workers or individuals with other employment statuses prefer Facebook, while students, those with lower educational attainment, and younger participants gravitate towards platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat. This aligns with the mixed results found in the literature, where Facebook and YouTube tend to decrease in popularity with age, while platforms like LinkedIn and Instagram are more favored by the younger demographic (Budree et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Portuguese participants in this study, who follow social media influencers, are predominantly women, young individuals, students, and those with fewer years of formal

education on average. The majority of the sampled population is active on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. They spend more time on social media compared to those who don't follow influencers, engaging with influencers through actions like liking posts or tagging friends. These followers exhibit a preference for influencers in the fashion and beauty niche who actively interact with their audience, considering them more trustworthy than those who don't engage with followers. While these followers express a willingness to purchase products endorsed by influencers, almost half of the participants haven't made any such purchases.

The study highlights that these Portuguese followers value personal posts and disclosures, establishing a parasocial relationship with influencers to fulfill their needs. The findings have implications for influencers and brands, offering insights into a target profile. Additionally, followers should be aware of the potential problematic use associated with excessive time spent on social media. Future research endeavors could delve into the psychological mechanisms underlying parasocial relationships, particularly exploring issues related to emotional dependency.

Despite its valuable contributions, this study is not without its limitations. Sampling bias poses a potential concern, as the participants may not accurately represent the broader population of Portugal. Moreover, a notable gender imbalance in the sample raises questions about the generalizability of the findings, and the lack of diversity in terms of education levels, occupations, and other demographic factors may restrict the study's relevance to a more diverse population in Portugal. The reliance on self-administered questionnaires introduces the possibility of self-reporting bias, where participants might provide socially desirable responses, thereby distorting the true representation of their attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, being an exploratory cross-sectional study, the research lacks the capacity to establish causation or monitor changes over time, prompting the suggestion that a longitudinal design would be more appropriate for comprehending the evolving dynamics of attitudes towards social media influencers. It's crucial to recognize that the study's findings might be context-specific to Portugal, necessitating caution when attempting to extrapolate them to different cultural or national contexts.

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