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“Followed, bought... but would they buy again?” The role of digital influencers in the purchase decision of follower-buyers

“Seguiu, comprou... mas compraria de novo?” O papel dos influenciadores digitais na decisão de compra de seguidores-compradores

“Siguió, compró... ¿pero volvería a comprar?” El papel de los influenciadores digitales en la decisión de compra de seguidores-compradores

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ABSTRACT

Background: During the Covid-19 pandemic, Instagram became one of the most widely used social media platforms, serving both as a source of entertainment and as a channel of influence in purchase decisions. The Instagrammers played a significant role in shaping consumer habits, especially given the increase in online shopping during periods of social isolation.

Purpose: To investigate how perceived characteristics of digital influencers (*i.e.*, trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship) are associated with followers' purchase and repurchase intentions.

Method: This is a descriptive study with a quantitative approach, conducted through a survey with 400 respondents. The questionnaire, adapted from a previous study and validated for the Brazilian context, assessed three perceived characteristics of influencers: trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), ANOVA, and Tukey's test.

Results: The results confirm that follower-buyers attributed high levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationships to Instagrammers. However, a significant portion of participants were undecided about repurchasing based on the same influencer's recommendation, possibly due to dissatisfaction related to the product, service, or consumption experience. Moreover, respondents intending to repurchase reported significantly higher perceptions of these characteristics compared to both undecided and non-repurchasers.

Conclusions: This study contributes to advancing knowledge in consumer behavior and influencer marketing. Theoretically, it reinforces the role of perceived influencer characteristics in relationship building and purchase decisions. Methodologically, it contributes by adapting and validating an instrument for the Brazilian context within the Instagram environment. From a managerial perspective, it highlights the importance of cultivating authentic and trustworthy relationships to foster engagement and encourage repurchase. Socially, it highlights the influence of social media on consumption habits.

Keywords: digital influencer; trustworthiness; expertise; parasocial relationship; (re)purchase.

RESUMO

Contextualização: Durante a pandemia da Covid-19, o Instagram tornou-se uma das plataformas de mídia social mais utilizadas, tanto como fonte de entretenimento quanto como canal de influência nas decisões de compra. Os instagrammers desempenharam um papel significativo na formação dos hábitos de consumo, especialmente diante do aumento das compras online durante o isolamento social.

Objetivo: Investigar como as características percebidas dos influenciadores digitais (*i.e.*, confiança, expertise e relacionamento parassocial) estão associadas às intenções de compra e recompra dos seguidores.

Método: Estudo descritivo, com abordagem quantitativa, realizado por meio de survey com 400 respondentes. O questionário, adaptado de um estudo prévio e validado para o contexto brasileiro, avaliou três características percebidas dos influenciadores: confiança, expertise e relacionamento parassocial. A análise de dados incluiu estatística descritiva, análise fatorial confirmatória (AFC), ANOVA e teste de Tukey.

Resultados: Os resultados confirmam que os seguidores-compradores atribuíram altos níveis de confiança, expertise e relacionamento parassocial aos instagrammers. Contudo, uma parcela significativa dos participantes mostrou-se indecisa quanto à possibilidade de realizar nova compra com base na recomendação do mesmo influenciador, possivelmente em razão de insatisfações relacionadas ao produto, serviço ou à experiência de consumo.

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Além disso, os respondentes com intenção de recompra relataram percepções significativamente mais elevadas dessas características em comparação tanto aos indecisos quanto aos que não comprariam novamente.

Conclusões: Este estudo contribui para o avanço do conhecimento sobre o comportamento do consumidor e o marketing de influência. Em termos teóricos, reforça o papel das características percebidas dos influenciadores na construção de relacionamentos e nas decisões de compra. Metodologicamente, contribui ao adaptar e validar um instrumento para o contexto brasileiro no ambiente do Instagram. Sob a perspectiva gerencial, destaca a importância de cultivar relacionamentos autênticos e confiáveis para promover engajamento e estimular a recompra. Socialmente, evidencia a influência das mídias sociais sobre os hábitos de consumo.

Palavras-chave: influenciador digital; confiança; expertise; relacionamento parassocial; (re)compra.

RESUMEN

Contextualización: Durante la pandemia de COVID-19, Instagram se consolidó como una plataforma de entretenimiento y un canal de influencia en las decisiones de compra. Los instagramers contribuyeron a configurar hábitos de consumo, especialmente ante el aumento de las compras en línea durante el aislamiento social.

Objetivo: Investigar cómo las características percibidas de los influencers digitales (confianza, experiencia y relación parasocial) se asocian con las intenciones de compra y recompra de sus seguidores.

Método: Estudio descriptivo de enfoque cuantitativo, basado en una encuesta a 400 participantes. El cuestionario, adaptado de un estudio previo y validado para el contexto brasileño, evaluó tres características percibidas de los influencers: confianza, experiencia y relación parasocial. Los datos se analizaron mediante estadística descriptiva, análisis factorial confirmatorio (AFC), ANOVA y prueba de Tukey.

Resultados: Los seguidores que habían comprado productos recomendados por instagramers les atribuyeron niveles elevados de confianza, experiencia y relación parasocial. Sin embargo, una proporción considerable manifestó indecisión respecto de volver a comprar por recomendación del mismo influencer, posiblemente debido a insatisfacción con el producto, el servicio o la experiencia de consumo. Quienes tenían intención de recompra presentaron percepciones significativamente más favorables de esas características que los indecisos y quienes no volverían a comprar.

Conclusiones: El estudio amplía el conocimiento sobre comportamiento del consumidor y marketing de influencia. En el plano teórico, refuerza la importancia de las características percibidas de los influencers para establecer relaciones y orientar decisiones de compra. En el metodológico, aporta un instrumento adaptado y validado para el contexto brasileño de Instagram. En el gerencial, destaca la necesidad de cultivar relaciones auténticas y confiables para promover una mayor interacción, fortalecer vínculos con los seguidores y estimular la recompra. En el social, muestra la influencia de las redes sociales en los hábitos de consumo.

Palabras clave: influencer digital; confianza; experiencia; relación parasocial; (re)compra.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As with traditional media, source credibility plays a central role in influencer marketing carried out by digital influencers on social media. The term digital influencer refers to opinion leaders who operate on digital social networks and, through online platforms, maintain closer proximity to their audiences, often shaping attitudes, preferences, and the consumption of products and services (Backes, 2019; Karhawi, 2017). Over the last few years, influencer marketing has become one of the fastest-growing digital marketing strategies, attracting increasing academic attention due to its ability to shape consumer attitudes, engagement, purchase intentions, and brand-related outcomes (Añaña & Barbosa, 2023; Pereira et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024).

The Covid-19 pandemic required influencers to adapt their content while remaining at home, with an emphasis on portraying how daily life could remain enjoyable through the use of partner brands (Ghosh, 2022). Such influencers came to be known as homefluencers (Kolsquare, 2020). Instagrammers, YouTubers, and TikTokers, terms designating influencers from Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, may be contracted and compensated by firms to produce and post photos or videos of products and brands, either on their own social media accounts or on those of the hiring company.

This context accelerated both the expansion of influencer marketing and scholarly interest in understanding the mechanisms through which influencers affect consumer decision-making. Recent studies have demonstrated that characteristics such as trustworthiness, expertise, content quality, attractiveness, credibility, and parasocial relationships positively influence consumers' purchase intentions across different markets and product categories (Gomes et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024).

Influencers' expertise in a given subject, made explicit in their social media content, fosters followers' trust in their messages and opinions. According to Masuda et al. (2022), trust is associated with the perception of the speaker's honesty. Likewise, perceived expertise strengthens followers' trust, which in turn nurtures parasocial relationships, defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), as enduring connections between individuals and media figures. Collectively, trust, expertise, and parasocial relationships constitute key characteristics of influencers in explaining followers' purchase intentions within social media influencer marketing (Masuda et al., 2022). More recent research has expanded this discussion by incorporating mechanisms such as electronic word of mouth (eWOM), customer brand engagement, social satisfaction, and product knowledge, demonstrating that influencer effects emerge through increasingly complex relational processes (Medina & Lodeiros-Zubiria, 2025; Adaba et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2025).

Despite these advances, the literature remains largely concentrated on explaining consumers' purchase intentions, with particular emphasis on the antecedents of purchase decisions and the mechanisms through which digital influencers shape consumers' behavioral intentions (Sardar & Vijay, 2025; George et al., 2025). Comparatively less attention has been devoted to consumers who have already purchased products recommended by digital influencers and, more specifically, to whether the perceived characteristics that motivated the initial purchase remain associated with consumers' willingness to repurchase after experiencing the recommended product or service.

This distinction is particularly relevant because post-purchase evaluations may reinforce or weaken the influence previously exerted by digital influencers. Furthermore, recent reviews have highlighted the need for studies that expand the theoretical, contextual, and methodological boundaries of influencer marketing research by investigating new consumer outcomes and underexplored stages of the consumption process (Sardar & Vijay, 2025; George et al., 2025).

In light of this research gap, this study addresses the following research question: Which characteristics of digital influencers are associated with the purchase decisions and repurchase intentions of followers who have bought products based on their recommendations? Building on this question, the objective of this study is to investigate how perceived characteristics of digital influencers (*i.e.*, trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship) are associated with followers' purchase and repurchase intentions.

Brazil is the third-largest country in terms of Instagram users, surpassed only by India and the United States (Bingol & Karakaya, 2025). Instagram is also the third most used social network in Brazil, behind WhatsApp, a messaging platform, and YouTube, a video-based platform (Kemp, 2023). Beyond providing evidence from one of the world's largest Instagram markets, this study contributes to the influencer marketing literature by shifting the analytical focus from purchase intention alone to the persistence of influencer effects after consumers have already experienced the recommended product or service.

By examining whether trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationships remain associated with repurchase intentions following an actual purchase experience, this research extends current knowledge on post-purchase consumer behavior in influencer marketing. Thus, given the increasing allocation of marketing budgets to digital influencers and the strong penetration of Instagram in the Brazilian market, understanding these dynamics becomes essential both for academia and for organizations that seek to build effective digital communication strategies.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several seminal theories underpin Communication Theory. The first was the Hypodermic Needle Theory, also known as the Magic Bullet Theory, which regarded the audience as a homogeneous and manipulable mass (Carvalho, 2012). Subsequently, Lasswell's Model highlighted five crucial questions for the correct understanding of a media message: “*Who? Says what? Through which channel? To whom? With what effect?*” (Lasswell, 1948; Baptista, 2017). This was followed by Persuasion Theory, which argued that media do not seek to manipulate but rather to persuade individuals by considering their personal characteristics, through attitude formation that leads to behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The Two-Step Flow Theory, in turn, posits that the transmission of media and information to the public does not occur directly but is often mediated by opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2017; Cheung et al., 2022).

Although robust theories already exist regarding radio, television, cinema, journalism, and other mass media, the realm of social media has received relatively little original theorization (Li & Kent, 2021). Digital influencers have expanded consolidated concepts related to the diffusion of innovations and the communicational flow between opinion leaders and followers (Almeida et al., 2018). Based on Berger and Calabrese's (1975) Interpersonal Communication Theory, and focusing specifically on social networks, Li and Kent (2021) identify dialogue, engagement, social presence, conversational human voice, parasocial interaction, and coexistence as defining elements of this new form of communication.

Recent studies indicate that digital influencers have become central actors in contemporary digital marketing by combining opinion leadership with relational and persuasive communication processes capable of shaping consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions across different contexts (Pereira et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024). Recent empirical studies suggest that influencer effectiveness depends on multiple source-related characteristics, including credibility, expertise, content quality, and the ability to establish relationships with followers, which together contribute to persuasion and purchase intentions (Rodrigues et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024).

Digital influencers are virtual opinion leaders who represent an alternative for firms seeking to target the communities gathered around these profiles as audiences for promotional activities (Almeida et al., 2018). The success of a digital influencer depends on the emotions evoked among their followers, which directly reflects on the credibility of their message. Masuda et al. (2022) investigated three perceived characteristics as antecedents of purchase intention (*i.e.*, trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship) which are also the constructs examined in the present study, with a focus on Instagrammers. More recently, these constructs have continued to receive considerable empirical support and remain among the most frequently investigated antecedents of consumer responses in influencer marketing research (Sardar & Vijay, 2025; George et al., 2025).

2.1 Trustworthiness

Recent marketing trends point to the rise of influencers as an extension of word-of-mouth campaigns. As consumers increasingly turn to social media platforms, organizations have begun to recognize the power of influencers in shaping purchasing decisions (Chopra et al., 2021). Digital influencers gain followers' trust by sharing their experiences, lifestyles, and preferences, which establishes them as significant opinion leaders capable of altering followers' mindsets and behaviors (Gasparotto et al., 2019).

In a study conducted by Chopra et al. (2021) to identify antecedents of millennial consumer behavior toward digital influencer marketing, trust emerged as an essential trait. More recent evidence reinforces that trustworthiness remains one of the most influential characteristics of digital influencers. Pereira et al. (2023) identified positive associations between perceived trustworthiness and consumers' purchase intentions, while Rodrigues et al. (2024) demonstrated that trust constitutes a critical determinant of influencers' persuasive power. Similarly, Chen et al. (2024) reported that influencer credibility enhances consumers' purchase intentions by increasing confidence in the information conveyed and reducing uncertainty during the decision-making process.

Trustworthiness also continues to occupy a central position in studies on user-generated content and influencer marketing because consumers tend to perceive influencers as more authentic and credible than traditional advertising sources (Cummins et al., 2014; Añaña & Barbosa, 2023). Grounded in the literature reviewed, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Higher levels of perceived trustworthiness in digital influencers are positively associated with followers' purchase decisions and repurchase intentions.

2.2 Expertise

Expertise is an important element in conferring credibility on an individual, and credibility is one of the main dimensions influencing consumers' purchasing decisions (Masuda et al., 2022). Credibility is directly related to the level of skills, knowledge, or experience perceived by the receiver in the source (Belch & Belch, 2014). It is therefore important that digital influencers possess expertise, understood as specialized knowledge and competence within their area of activity, to enhance their ability to influence followers' purchase decisions regarding the products and brands they endorse.

In Chopra et al.'s (2021) research, influencers were perceived as being in tune with the latest trends, as opinion leaders with deep knowledge of technology, beauty products, and other product categories. They were viewed as experts who conveyed information in a format easily understood by followers. Respondents further noted that the main distinction

between influencers and celebrities lies in the perception that celebrities endorse products they do not actually use, whereas influencers focus on sharing information about products they are passionate about, to the extent that brands themselves often become secondary (Chopra et al., 2021).

Recent studies corroborate the importance of expertise as a source characteristic capable of increasing consumers' confidence in influencer recommendations. Pereira et al. (2023) observed that perceived expertise positively influences purchase intentions, whereas Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that influencers' professionalism contributes significantly to consumers' purchase intentions. Likewise, Gomes et al. (2022) found that expertise strengthens consumers' responses toward sponsored content, particularly when combined with high-quality content and favorable attitudes toward sponsored posts. Drawing from this literature, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Higher levels of perceived expertise in digital influencers are positively associated with followers' purchase decisions and repurchase intentions.

2.3 Parasocial relationship

Based on pioneering studies by Horton and Wohl (1956), the concept of the parasocial relationship was introduced to explain the connections between media personalities and their audiences. Such relationships are characterized as unilateral, with no real exchange or interaction, but rather a lasting connection between an individual and a media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Leite & Baptista, 2022).

According to Leite and Baptista (2022), parasocial relationships provide social media users with the feeling of having a genuine friendship with media personalities, thereby enhancing the influencer's power over followers. Close and human-like interaction through relevant content can be a differentiating factor in building such relationships and in amplifying the influencer's persuasive capacity. As Mardon et al. (2018) argue, consumers can be influenced by social interactions when acquiring products or services as a means of fulfilling their desires and needs.

Recent research reinforces that parasocial relationships represent one of the main relational mechanisms through which digital influencers affect consumer behavior (Cheung et al., 2022; Gomes et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2023). Gomes et al. (2022) demonstrated that parasocial interaction exerts a positive influence on purchase intention, while Pereira et al. (2023) found that stronger parasocial relationships are associated with greater purchase intentions. Furthermore, contemporary studies emphasize that influencer marketing effectiveness depends not only on source credibility but also on the emotional and relational bonds established with followers (Añaña & Barbosa, 2023; Medina & Lodeiros-Zubiria, 2025). The relevance of parasocial relationships became even more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when social isolation reshaped both consumption habits of social media content and the purchase of products, often stimulated by digital influencer recommendations.

A study by Wandoko and Panggati (2022), conducted with 407 online shoppers in Indonesia, revealed that customer trust, digital influencer impact, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and information quality positively affect repurchase intention. More recently, Medina and Lodeiros-Zubiria (2025) showed that influencer-related mechanisms contribute to purchase intention through the development of brand trust and customer engagement, reinforcing the importance of relational processes that extend beyond the initial purchase decision. In line with this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Higher levels of parasocial relationship with digital influencers are positively associated with followers' purchase decisions and repurchase intentions.

3 METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive design with a quantitative approach, conducted through a survey (Gil, 2019). The sampling method was convenience sampling, as the questionnaire was accessible to anyone. However, because it included a screening question that selected only individuals who had made a purchase influenced by an Instagrammer during the pandemic, the sampling method also incorporated judgment criteria. A total of 400 valid responses were obtained. The screening question that defined the study participants was: *“Have you ever purchased a product or service influenced by an Instagrammer during the pandemic?”* Respondents who selected *yes* were directed to the full questionnaire, while those who answered *no* were excluded from the study.

The research instrument was an adaptation of the questionnaire developed by Masuda et al. (2022) in a study conducted in South Korea, which examined the impact of YouTubers' characteristics on followers' purchase decisions. Masuda et al. (2022) investigated three personal attributes of influencers (origin, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness) and three perceived characteristics (trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship) as antecedents of purchase intention. For the purposes of this study, only the three perceived characteristics of Instagrammers (*i.e.*, trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship) were examined, independent of physical, social, or origin-related attributes.

The questionnaire was translated from English into Portuguese using a double-translation procedure to ensure accuracy and conceptual equivalence. The instrument consisted of closed-ended questions measured on a five-point Likert scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. The questionnaire was formatted in Google Forms and distributed via a link on Instagram as well as through WhatsApp, both in groups and as individual messages.

For data analysis, descriptive analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), analysis of variance (ANOVA), and Tukey's post-hoc test were employed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze respondents' profiles and to explore the items related to the constructs under investigation. CFA was applied to assess the validity and reliability of the measurement scale.

To examine whether perceptions of Instagrammers differed according to respondents' willingness to repurchase, participants were classified into three mutually exclusive consumer groups based on their responses to the statement “*I think I will purchase again products or services recommended by this Instagrammer*”, measured on a five-point Likert scale. This classification was designed to compare consumers with different levels of stated repurchase intention. Specifically, respondents selecting options 1 (strongly disagree) or 2 (disagree) were classified as Group 1 (Non-repurchasers); those selecting option 3 (neither agree nor disagree) were classified as Group 2 (Undecided); and respondents selecting options 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree) were classified as Group 3 (Repurchasers):

- Group 1 – Non-repurchasers: individuals who disagreed with the statement (*i.e.*, strongly disagree or disagree).
- Group 2 – Undecided: individuals who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.
- Group 3 – Repurchasers: individuals who agreed with the statement (*i.e.*, agree or strongly agree).

Following this classification, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether mean perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship differed significantly across the three consumer groups. Whenever statistically significant differences were identified, Tukey's post-hoc test was applied to perform pairwise comparisons between group means while controlling for multiple comparisons.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Scale consistency

The validation of the measurement scale was carried out through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). To assess the internal consistency of the items, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were calculated and analyzed. To verify the convergent validity of the scale, standardized factor loadings and the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct were examined. Table 1 presents the standardized factor loadings obtained through CFA, along with Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE values.

Table 1
Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Trustworthiness	Std. Est.	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
TRUST1. I feel this Instagrammer is honest.	0.829***	0.854	0.860	0.672
TRUST2. I consider this Instagrammer trustworthy.	0.763***			
TRUST3. I feel this Instagrammer is truthful.	0.864***			
Expertise				
EXP1. I feel this Instagrammer knows a lot about the subject he/she talks about.	0.798***	0.884	0.885	0.658
EXP2. I feel this Instagrammer is competent to make assertions about things that he/she is good at.	0.853***			
EXP3. I consider this Instagrammer an expert on his/her area.	0.745***			
EXP4. I consider this Instagrammer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.	0.844***			
Parasocial Relationship				
PSR1. During the pandemic, this Instagrammer made me feel comfortable as if I were with a friend.	0.783***	0.936	0.938	0.629
PSR2. I see this Instagrammer as a human being who does not let success go to their head (down-to-earth, just like us).	0.850***			
PSR3. I look forward to this Instagrammer's next posts/stories.	0.791***			
PSR4. If this Instagrammer appeared on another profile, I would still follow his/her content.	0.843***			
PSR5. This Instagrammer seems to understand the kind of things I want to know.	0.815***			
PSR6. If I saw a story about this Instagrammer in the media (e.g., newspaper, magazine), I would read it.	0.862***			
PSR7. I miss seeing this Instagrammer when he/she is ill or on vacation.	0.785***			
PSR8. I want to meet this Instagrammer in person.	0.634***			
PSR9. I feel sorry for this Instagrammer when he/she makes a mistake.	0.752***			

Source: Research data.

Note: N = 400 respondents. *** p-value < 0.01. CFI = 0.935; TLI = 0.923; RMSEA = 0.092; $\chi^2 = 442$; Df = 101; $\chi^2/\text{Df} = 4.376$; p < 0.01.

Initially, Cronbach's alpha and CR values were calculated for the constructs under investigation: trust ($\alpha = 0.854$; CR = 0.860), expertise ($\alpha = 0.884$; CR = 0.885), and parasocial relationship ($\alpha = 0.936$; CR = 0.938). These results indicate strong internal consistency of the items for the constructs analyzed, since the values exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Hair Jr. et al., 2009). With respect to convergent validity, the AVE values were above 0.50, confirming the convergent validity of the constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair Jr. et al., 2009). Moreover, all factor loadings were statistically significant (p -value < 0.01) and presented high values (the lowest being 0.634, with the remaining above 0.70), further reinforcing convergent validity (Cheung et al., 2023).

4.2 Respondents' profile

The 400 survey respondents presented the following demographic characteristics: regarding gender, 51% identified as female, 42.25% as male, and 6.75% as another gender. In terms of age, respondents ranged from 18 to 60 years old, with 77% between 18 and 34 years. Concerning education, the largest proportion of respondents (44%) had higher education, of which 20.5% had completed and 23.5% had incomplete higher education. As for household income, 24.75% reported earning between two and four minimum wages, while 46.25% reported between four and ten minimum wages. With respect to place of residence, 93% of respondents lived in the state of Ceará, which was expected, although there were also respondents from three other states: Rio de Janeiro (3%), São Paulo (3%), and Minas Gerais (1%). Although these were few cases, they were not excluded from the sample, since the criterion for participation was online purchasing behavior during the pandemic, regardless of geographical origin.

4.3 Characterization of Instagrammers

After agreeing to participate and confirming that they had made a purchase influenced by an Instagrammer, respondents were asked when they began following the influencer, in order to determine whether this occurred before or during the pandemic. Most respondents (64%) reported following an Instagrammer prior to the pandemic, while 36% began following during the pandemic.

Ghosh (2022) also examined Instagram influencers, particularly in the beauty, fashion, clothing, yoga, food, and lifestyle sectors, given their strong presence in promoting these products. In this study, the most prominent categories were Beauty (15.75%), Humor (13.25%), Fashion (12.5%), and Knowledge, Science, and Education (10.25%), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Categories of Instagrammers Mentioned by Respondents

Instagrammer Categories	N	%
Arts and Culture	18	4.50
Beauty	63	15.75
Knowledge, Science, and Education	41	10.25
Do it Yourself (DIY), Decoration, Organization	23	5.75
Family	25	6.25
Fitness and Sports	29	7.25
Gaming	14	3.50
Gastronomy	20	5.00
Humor	53	13.25
Lifestyle and Variety	14	3.50
Fashion	50	12.50
Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurship	24	6.00
Opinion and Behavior	10	2.50
Technology	2	0.50
Travel and Tourism	12	3.00
Other category not mentioned	2	0.50
Total	400	100.00

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The results indicate that respondents mentioned Instagrammers from a wide variety of content categories, with Beauty, Humor, Fashion, and Knowledge, Science, and Education being the most frequently cited. These findings illustrate the diversity of influencer profiles capable of affecting consumers' purchasing decisions. Subsequently, respondents were asked to evaluate the perceived characteristics of the Instagrammers that had influenced their purchases during the pandemic.

4.4 Perceived characteristics of Instagrammers: Trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship

When examining the perceived characteristics of Instagrammers, the construct of trust was analyzed first. Thus, table 3 presents the results regarding the level of agreement with statements related to trust.

Table 3

Respondents' Agreement with Statements on trustworthiness

Dimension: Trustworthiness							
Item	Perception					Mean	SD ^(a)
	1	2	3	4	5		
TRUST1. I feel this Instagrammer is honest.	0.00%	0.75%	17.50%	51.00%	30.75%	4.12	0.707
TRUST2. I consider this Instagrammer trustworthy.	0.00%	1.50%	19.50%	48.25%	30.75%	4.08	0.746
TRUST3. I feel this Instagrammer is truthful.	0.00%	1.00%	20.50%	45.75%	32.75%	4.10	0.751

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Note: (a) Standard deviation. N = 400 respondents.

The results indicate that most respondents trust the Instagrammers who influenced their purchases during the pandemic: 81.75% agreed or strongly agreed that the influencer was honest, 79% that they were trustworthy, and 78.5% that they were truthful. Lal and Sharma (2021), in a study conducted in India, found that social media influencers are considered a reliable marketing strategy, as people tend to emulate them voluntarily. In Brazil, Almeida et al. (2018) confirmed that individual opinion leaders who generate higher engagement also elicit significantly more likes, comments, and word-of-mouth than institutional profiles. More recently, Pereira et al. (2023) reaffirmed the relevance of trustworthiness as one of the central characteristics through which consumers perceive digital influencers, while Rodrigues et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of trust in the persuasive communication established between influencers and consumers. Thus, trustworthiness emerges as a perceived characteristic of Instagrammers in this study, corroborating the findings of Masuda et al. (2022).

Table 4

Respondents' Agreement with Statements on expertise

Dimension: Expertise							
Item	Perception					Mean	SD ^(a)
	1	2	3	4	5		
EXP1. I feel this Instagrammer knows a lot about the subject he/she talks about.	0.00%	2.00%	22.25%	46.50%	29.25%	4.03	0.772
EXP2. I feel this Instagrammer is competent to make assertions about things that he/she is good at.	0.00%	2.25%	21.75%	44.00%	32.00%	4.06	0.791
EXP3. I consider this Instagrammer an expert on his/her area.	1.00%	2.00%	22.00%	44.75%	30.25%	4.01	0.833
EXP4. I consider this Instagrammer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.	0.00%	1.50%	23.75%	44.25%	30.50%	4.04	0.776

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Note: (a) Standard deviation. N = 400 respondents.

The results indicate that 75.75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Instagrammer was knowledgeable about the subject matter, 76% considered them competent in their field, 75% regarded them as experts in their area of activity, and 74.75% perceived them as sufficiently experienced to make claims within their domain. These findings indicate that respondents consistently perceived the Instagrammers as knowledgeable, competent, and experienced in the subjects about which they produced content. Indeed, perceived expertise is what distinguishes influencers from celebrities. As noted by Chopra et al. (2021), while celebrities are often believed to endorse products they do not actually use, influencers are perceived as genuinely passionate about the products they share.

Recent studies reinforce the relevance of expertise as a defining characteristic of digital influencers. Pereira et al. (2023) also include expertise among the central dimensions used to evaluate consumers' perceptions of digital influencers, while Chen et al. (2024) highlight professionalism and specialized knowledge as important characteristics in consumers' evaluations of influencers in digital environments. Likewise, Gomes et al. (2022) emphasize expertise as an important source characteristic within the communication process established between influencers and followers. In the context of the present study, expertise emerged as a characteristic perceived by respondents in relation to the Instagrammers they follow, corroborating the findings of Masuda et al. (2022). Regarding parasocial relationships, the study yielded the results presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Respondents' Agreement with Statements on Parasocial Relationship

Dimension: Parasocial Relationship							
Item	Perception					Mean	SD ^(a)
	1	2	3	4	5		
PSR1. During the pandemic, this Instagrammer made me feel comfortable as if I were with a friend	1.50%	6.25%	24.00%	40.75%	27.50%	3.87	0.940

PSR2. I see this Instagrammer as a human being who does not let success go to their head (down-to-earth, just like us).	0.25%	3.00%	25.75%	42.75%	28.25%	3.96	0.826
PSR3. I look forward to this Instagrammer's next posts/stories.	1.00%	4.50%	23.75%	41.75%	29.00%	3.93	0.892
PSR4. If this Instagrammer appeared on another profile, I would still follow his/her content.	0.25%	2.25%	25.75%	44.75%	27.00%	3.96	0.800
PSR5. This Instagrammer seems to understand the kind of things I want to know.	0.25%	3.50%	22.25%	45.25%	28.75%	3.99	0.821
PSR6. If I saw a story about this Instagrammer in the media (e.g., newspaper, magazine), I would read it.	0.25%	3.75%	22.75%	41.25%	29.00%	3.95	0.848
PSR7. I miss seeing this Instagrammer when he/she is ill or on vacation.	3.75%	9.75%	26.75%	34.75%	25.00%	3.68	1.069
PSR8. I want to meet this Instagrammer in person.	1.25%	5.75%	26.25%	37.50%	29.25%	3.88	0.941
PSR9. I feel sorry for this Instagrammer when he/she makes a mistake.	3.50%	11.25%	29.00%	34.50%	21.75%	3.60	1.055

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Note: (a) Standard deviation. N = 400 respondents.

The vast majority of respondents (N = 400) agreed or strongly agreed that, during the pandemic, the Instagrammer they mentioned in the questionnaire made them feel as if they were with a friend (68.25%), was perceived as down-to-earth and not letting success go to their head (71%), generated anticipation for upcoming posts/stories (70.75%), would be followed even if appearing on another influencer's profile (71.75%), seemed to understand the type of content followers wanted (74%), and would be considered newsworthy if featured in a newspaper or magazine (70.25%). Additionally, 59.75% reported missing the influencer when they were absent, 66.75% expressed a desire to meet them in person, and 56.25% felt sorry when the influencer made mistakes. Overall, these findings indicate that respondents perceived Instagrammers as socially and emotionally close figures, reflecting relatively high levels of parasocial relationship.

These results corroborate Leite and Baptista (2022), who argue that parasocial relationships foster a sense of real friendship between media personalities and their followers. Already in the 1950s, Horton and Wohl (1956) noted that parasocial relationships resemble real-life interactions, especially when individuals feel isolated or lonely. Considering that this study was conducted during the pandemic, the presence of such relationships was expected. Furthermore, 36% of respondents reported that they began following the influencer during the pandemic, which contributed to purchases made under lockdown conditions.

According to Ghosh (2022), due to social distancing, many homefluencers adjusted their strategies by strengthening their proximity to followers and adapting their content to everyday experiences during periods of social isolation. Unlike in pre-pandemic contexts, the growing relevance of these relational dynamics added a new dimension to product promotion.

The present findings also corroborate Masuda et al. (2022), who recognize parasocial relationship as one of the principal characteristics underlying consumers' perceptions of digital influencers. More recent studies reinforce the continued relevance of this construct. Gomes et al. (2022) identify parasocial interaction as an important relational element in the communication established between influencers and followers, while Pereira et al. (2023) likewise include parasocial relationship among the core dimensions used to evaluate consumers' perceptions of digital influencers. Collectively, these studies indicate that parasocial relationship remains a defining characteristic of influencer-follower interactions.

Taken together, the descriptive findings indicate that respondents perceived Instagrammers as approachable, relatable, and emotionally close figures during the pandemic. Respondents were also asked whether they would make another purchase influenced by the same Instagrammer, and the results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Respondents' Agreement with the Statement on Purchase Behavior

Dimension: Purchase Behavior							
Item	Perception					Mean	SD ^(a)
	1	2	3	4	5		
I think I will purchase again products or services recommended by this Instagrammer.	0.75%	14.50%	39.50%	28.75%	16.50%	3.46	0.957

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Note: (a) Standard deviation. N = 400 respondents.

Interestingly, despite the high perceived levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship attributed to digital influencers, 39.5% of respondents expressed uncertainty about making repeat purchases under the influence of the same Instagrammer. This result suggests that, although respondents generally reported positive perceptions of the Instagrammers, their willingness to make another purchase based on subsequent recommendations was more heterogeneous.

This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that consumers' responses to influencer marketing involve multiple factors. Lal and Sharma (2021) argue that social media influencers play an important role in communicating brand messages and fostering consumer engagement through their distinctive communication style. Similarly, Wandoko and Panggati (2022) highlight that repurchase intention is shaped by several factors, including customer trust, information quality, electronic word of mouth, and digital influencer impact. More recently, Medina and Lodeiros-Zubiria (2025) emphasize the importance of customer engagement and brand trust in consumers' evaluations of influencer recommendations, while Adaba et al. (2025) distinguish purchase intention from actual purchase behavior, reinforcing the complexity of post-purchase consumer evaluations.

Taken together, these studies suggest that consumers' willingness to purchase again represents a multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore, although respondents generally reported positive perceptions of Instagrammers, the descriptive results indicate considerable variability in their repurchase intentions. Whether these perceptions differ significantly among consumers with distinct repurchase intentions is examined in the following inferential analyses.

4.5 The role of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship in followers' purchase decisions

Respondents were divided into three consumer groups based on their level of agreement with the statement “I think I will purchase again products or services recommended by this Instagrammer”. The first group consisted of followers who indicated they would not repurchase, as they disagreed with the statement. The second group comprised undecided individuals, that is, those who neither agreed nor disagreed. Finally, the third group was composed of consumers who reported that they would repurchase products or services recommended by Instagrammers.

Once the follower-buyers were allocated into these groups, an ANOVA test was conducted to examine whether significant differences existed among the three groups with respect to the perceived characteristics of Instagrammers: trust, expertise, and parasocial relationship. The ANOVA results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Dimension	Group 1: Non-repurchasers	Group 2: Undecided	Group 3: Repurchasers	ANOVA F	p-value
Trustworthiness	3.76	3.91	4.38	42.4	< 0.001
Expertise	3.57	3.86	4.34	44.6	< 0.001
Parasocial Relationship	3.30	3.63	4.26	68.8	< 0.001
N. of Observations	61	158	181	Total	400

Source: Research data.

Note: N = 400 respondents.

The ANOVA results indicate statistically significant differences among the group means ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that at least two groups have different perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship with Instagrammers. To identify which groups differed from one another, Tukey's post-hoc test was conducted to compare the means across pairs of groups. The results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Tukey's Post-hoc Test – Multiple Mean Comparisons

Consumer Groups		Trustworthiness		Expertise		Parasocial Relationship	
(A)	(B)	(A-B)	p-value	(A-B)	p-value	(A-B)	p-value
Non-repurchasers	Undecided	-0.148	0.225	-0.289	0.006	-0.335	0.002
Non-repurchasers	Repurchasers	-0.625	< 0.001	-0.766	< 0.001	-0.968	< 0.001
Undecided	Repurchasers	-0.478	< 0.001	-0.477	< 0.001	-0.633	< 0.001

Source: Research data.

Note: n = 400.

Based on the results in Table 8, consumers who indicated they would not repurchase showed significantly lower perceptions of expertise and parasocial relationship compared to undecided respondents. Conversely, followers who stated they would repurchase products or services recommended by Instagrammers reported higher perceptions across all three characteristics (*i.e.*, trust, expertise, and parasocial relationship) when compared to both undecided and non-repurchaser groups. These findings indicate that consumers with stronger repurchase intentions consistently perceived Instagrammers as more trustworthy, knowledgeable, and capable of establishing stronger parasocial relationships than consumers in the other two groups. Accordingly, the results provide empirical support for all proposed hypotheses. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 is supported because trustworthiness was perceived at significantly higher levels among repurchasers; Hypothesis 2 is supported because expertise differed significantly across the three groups; and Hypothesis 3 is supported because parasocial relationship also differed significantly among consumer groups.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that identify trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship as central characteristics of digital influencers. Masuda et al. (2022) demonstrated that these three constructs positively influence purchase intention, with parasocial relationship presenting the strongest relative effect. Likewise, Chopra et al. (2021) emphasized that trustworthiness and expertise are among the principal attributes distinguishing digital influencers from traditional celebrities, while Gomes et al. (2022) showed that parasocial interaction, trustworthiness, and content-related characteristics jointly contribute to explaining consumers' purchase intentions. More recent studies reinforce these findings by highlighting the relevance of source credibility and influencer characteristics in shaping consumer responses to sponsored content (Pereira et al., 2023; Añaña & Barbosa, 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

Although these studies primarily examined purchase intention, the present findings extend this body of evidence by demonstrating that these same perceived characteristics also distinguish consumers according to their stated repurchase intentions after an actual purchase experience. In this respect, the study advances previous research by moving beyond the initial purchase decision and examining consumers' willingness to purchase again from recommendations made by the same Instagrammer.

These findings reinforce the contemporary relevance of the Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2017; Cheung et al., 2023) by showing that consumers with different stated repurchase intentions systematically differ in their perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship toward Instagrammers. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, digital influencers continue to function as opinion leaders who mediate the relationship between brands and consumers in digital environments. Unlike traditional mass media, social media platforms facilitate more frequent interactions and closer relationships between influencers and followers, thereby expanding opportunities for opinion leadership (Li & Kent, 2021).

This interpretation is also supported by Almeida et al. (2018), who found that digital opinion leaders generate higher levels of engagement and electronic word of mouth than institutional profiles, reinforcing their role as influential intermediaries in digital communication. Likewise, Masuda et al. (2022) demonstrated that trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship are positively associated with consumers' purchase intentions. Rather than focusing exclusively on purchase intention, as in previous studies, the present study extends this evidence by demonstrating that these same perceived characteristics differ systematically among consumers with distinct stated repurchase intentions following an actual purchase experience.

Furthermore, the present findings suggest that influencer marketing should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon in which cognitive evaluations (trustworthiness and expertise) coexist with relational mechanisms (parasocial relationship). This interpretation complements recent studies emphasizing that influencer marketing extends beyond the initial purchase decision by involving relational mechanisms such as brand trust and customer engagement (Medina & Lodeiros-Zubiria, 2025). Moreover, Adaba et al. (2025) argue that consumers' purchase intentions do not necessarily translate directly into purchasing behavior, highlighting the complexity of post-purchase evaluations.

Finally, the present study contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to advance the understanding of influencer marketing beyond consumers' initial purchase intentions. By analysing consumers who had already purchased products recommended by digital influencers and comparing groups with different repurchase intentions, this study provides additional evidence regarding how perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship differ among consumers with distinct repurchase intentions following an actual purchase experience. This contribution is consistent with recent reviews highlighting the need to expand influencer marketing research by investigating new contexts, consumer outcomes, and theoretical perspectives, while also promoting greater methodological diversity in the field (George et al., 2025; Sardar & Vijay, 2025).

5 FINAL REMARKS

The present study aimed to investigate how perceived characteristics of digital influencers (*i.e.*, trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship) are associated with followers' purchase and repurchase intentions. The results showed that follower-buyers attributed high levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationships to Instagrammers. Nevertheless, a significant number of respondents remained undecided about repurchasing products or services recommended by the same influencer. When grouped by repurchase intention, followers who stated they would repurchase reported higher levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationships compared to both undecided followers and non-repurchasers. These findings indicate that, although respondents generally perceived Instagrammers positively across the three constructs investigated, these perceptions were not uniformly accompanied by stronger repurchase intentions. This suggests that additional factors not examined in the present study may also influence consumers' willingness to repurchase. Furthermore, the atypical context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which data were collected, may have influenced both purchasing behavior and subsequent repurchase intentions.

Beyond the descriptive findings, this study offers relevant theoretical contributions by extending current knowledge on influencer marketing from purchase intention to repurchase intention following an actual purchase experience. The

findings reinforce the contemporary relevance of the Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2017), demonstrating that consumers with different stated repurchase intentions systematically differ in their perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship toward Instagrammers. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, digital influencers continue to operate as opinion leaders in digital environments, while social media platforms facilitate closer and more frequent interactions between influencers and followers. Rather than proposing a new communication model, the present study extends previous evidence by showing that these perceived characteristics remain associated with consumers' stated repurchase intentions after an actual purchase experience.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights that brands should prioritize long-term collaborations with influencers who can build authentic emotional connections rather than focusing solely on short-term visibility or reach. Likewise, the results suggest that maintaining high levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship may contribute to more favorable consumer evaluations and stronger repurchase intentions. For influencers, developing authentic relationships with followers and maintaining credibility emerge as important elements for strengthening their relationships with audiences and encouraging continued purchase intentions.

For future research, we suggest exploring diverse geographical contexts, employing longitudinal designs to assess changes in trustworthiness and parasocial relationships over time, and investigating additional factors that may influence repurchase intentions, such as product satisfaction, price, or delivery experience. Comparative analyses across different social media platforms and generational cohorts would also enrich the understanding of how influencer marketing operates in varied digital ecosystems.

In conclusion, this study contributes to advancing the understanding of influencer marketing by demonstrating that trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationship remain important perceived characteristics among consumers who have already purchased products recommended by digital influencers. By shifting the focus from purchase intention to repurchase intention following an actual purchase experience, the study extends current knowledge and responds to recent calls for research examining new consumer outcomes and contexts in influencer marketing. The findings also reinforce the contemporary relevance of the Two-Step Flow Theory by showing that digital influencers continue to play an important role as opinion leaders in digital environments, while highlighting that consumers with different repurchase intentions systematically differ in their perceptions of these influencer characteristics.

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