

### **Dr. Teresa SÁDABA**

University of Navarra. Spain. msadaba@unav.es. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2441-5724>

### **Dr. Patricia SANMIGUEL**

University of Navarra. Spain. patricia.sanmiguel@isem.es. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0438-2830>

### **Dr. Jesús LÓPEZ-FIDALGO**

University of Navarra. Spain. fidalgo@unav.es. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7502-8188>

### **Dr. Simone GUERCINI**

University of Florence. Italy. simone.guercini@unifi.it. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7542-6984>

## **Not solely influencers in the communication plan: a comparative study in the fashion field**

### **No solo influencers en el plan de comunicación: un estudio comparativo en el mundo de la moda**

**Deadlines** | Received: 14/10/2023 - Reviewed: 07/02/2023 - Accepted: 14/02/2023 - Published: 01/07/2024

#### **Abstract**

In recent years, social media and influencers are dominating communication campaigns, due to their power to influence consumers. As a result, some of the traditional communication actors are not being considered in communication plans. However, no study has as yet confirmed their loss of influence over the consumer and their purchasing decisions. Taking the case of fashion into account, this article seeks to compare the power of influence of seven communication actors: media, fashion brands, celebrities, influencers (mega, macro and micro) and influentials. With data from 1176 questionnaires answered through the self-naming method, we can conclude that influencers are surpassed by influentials (close circles) as the opinion-leaders with the greatest impact on the consumer, followed then by fashion brands and the fashion media.

#### **Keywords**

Influencers, influentials, communication plan, consumer, fashion

#### **Resumen**

En los últimos años, las redes sociales e influencers están dominando las campañas de comunicación, debido a su poder de influencia en los consumidores. Como resultado, algunos de los actores tradicionales de la comunicación no están siendo considerados en los planes de comunicación. Sin embargo, no existe ningún estudio que confirme su pérdida de influencia sobre el consumidor y sus decisiones de compra. Tomando el caso de la compra en moda, el objetivo de este artículo es comparar el poder de influencia de siete actores de la comunicación: medios, marcas de moda, celebridades, influencers (mega, macro y micro) e influyentes. Con datos de 1176 cuestionarios respondidos a través del método de autodenominación, podemos concluir que los influencers son superados por los influyentes (círculos cercanos) como los líderes de opinión con mayor impacto en el consumidor, seguidos incluso por las marcas de moda y los medios de moda.

#### **Palabras clave**

Influencers, influentials, plan de comunicación, consumidor, moda

## 1. Introduction

With the massification of users on social media, there has been an increase in profiles of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) (Borchers, 2019; Li, Lai & Chen, 2011), people with large online communities who influence the opinion and behavior of their followers (Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020). In view of this SMI phenomenon, marketers and researchers have focused their attention on online influence, especially on social networks such as Twitter (Wu et al., 2011), Facebook (Wellman, 2021), and Instagram (Cotter, 2019).

Researchers and practitioners often refer to influencer marketing as being the most innovative and cost-effective communication strategy (Martínez-López et al., 2020a), an organic way of contacting and communicating with consumers by collaborating with influential consumers (Lou & Yuan, 2019), through social networks (Enke & Borchers, 2019), in a natural, authentic and credible way (Lee & Kim, 2020; Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Russell & Russell, 2017; Wellman et al., 2020), amongst consumers of the same generation with whom they can identify (Andersen, Weisstein & Song, 2020; SanMiguel, Guercini & Sádaba, 2019) through e-WOM/WOM (Cabosky, 2016; Keller & Fay, 2016), generating trust-relationships (Boerman, 2020; Lou, Ma & Feng, 2020) and awakening admiration (Moraes et al., 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020).

In the case of fashion, influencers become partners with brands. Influencers have stronger voices, reach broader audiences, and can drive consumers' decision-making (Doyle, Su & Kunkel, 2020; Osei-Frimpong, Donkor & Owusu-Frimpong, 2019; SanMiguel, Guercini & Sádaba, 2019).

With this predominance of the digital marketing strategies in the last years, in the field of fashion communication we could think that other traditional sources of influence in fashion, for instance fashion magazines, are not useful anymore. But is this true? To what extent the media, own peers or even brands, as the classical communication players influence fashion consumers nowadays? Research giving positive influence power to traditional media was done before this explosion of SMI (Bailey & Seock, 2010), and even not considering their own evolution to the online world (online versions magazines, for instance). Competition among the different communication actors has also been explored recently from the point of view of journalists, who see some threats with the emerging social media actors (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022).

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to compare all the possible communication actors or sources of influence in the same study, from the most long-established ones to the new digital content providers, and to go deeper in the kind of influence they do in the key moments of the purchase process. We identify 7 main sources of influence, and we compare their power of influence in fashion consumers, according with the consumer's self-designation.

Results are significant in the theoretical developments of new media studies, as they contribute to understand the role of social media and other communication actors, but also are very relevant from a practical perspective, as they give some criteria for communication budgets in any action trying to influence consumers. The research questions in this paper are:

RQ1: Are consumers aware of the influence of different actors or sources of influence in their purchase process?

RQ2: What source of influence impacts more in the consumer's behavior?

RQ3: Are new influencer players such as SMIs getting more influence power than traditional influencers such as Celebrities or Fashion Magazines?

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Sources of influence in fashion

From the existing literature and considering the digital and non-digital context of fashion consumers, we can establish different sources of influence in fashion. Some of them had been more explored than others.

For instance, van Staden and van Aardt (2011) compare media, stores, and family and friends in the decision-making process of a fashion consumer, concluding stores to be the most important one. Not considering SMIs in her analysis and talking about influence in self perceptions, Apeageyi (2011) looks for gender differences and explains that women are more influenced in their body image by the media than men. She also finds similarities in the influence from relatives or sales associates. Celebrities' endorsement is the key player in this case. Cao, Meister and Klante (2014) compare social media influence talking about friends, bloggers, and fashion brands, concluding that social media are sources of inspiration and information with an impact on all stages of the purchase process.

In this study we take a more complete representation of sources of influence in fashion, as shown in Figure 1 “Fashion Sources of Influence”.

Figure 1. Fashion Sources of Influence



Source: by the authors

### 2.1.1. Social Media Influencers

When the digital revolution affected fashion, first fashion bloggers (Halvorsen et al., 2013; Okonkwo, 2010; SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017) and then, social media influencers or SMIs (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021; Britt et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Tang & Marinova, 2020) became digital influencers. Some studies analyze the functions of SMIs as: content producers, content distributors, public relations, and with ability to influence (audience attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors) (Curiel & Alarcón, 2022; Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The literature highlights how SMIs are authentic and credible sources of information for consumers (Lee & Kim, 2020; Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Russell & Russell, 2017; Wellman et al., 2020), becoming sources of social security to which, their followers and consumers turn to for advice (Boerman, 2020; Lou, Ma & Feng, 2020).

Recent studies have confirmed the ability of SMIs to change opinions of their community (Borchers, 2019), as their lives and their profiles awaken admiration (Morales et al., 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020), thus, becoming role models. The importance of SMIs lies in the influence they exert on key consumer groups, such as adolescents and young people, who no longer use traditional media (Jin & Phua, 2014; Solis, 2010).

Not all SMIs are the same. We can differentiate between them according to: the field in which they are experts and content creators (Enke & Borchers, 2019); the main social media platform (Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc.) (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020); and the size of their communities (Britt et al., 2020; Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Actually, academics and communication agencies usually use the size of the community (reach) in order to analyze the power of influencers (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021; Britt et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2020). Among SMIs we find: Mega-Influencers (SMIs with more than 1 million followers), Macro-Influencers (between 1 million and 10K followers) and Micro-Influencers (between 10K and 1K followers) (Tang & Marinova, 2020). Some authors explain how those influencers have become famous via social media and they call them microcelebrities or they use the term instafamous (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Several studies have affirmed that Micro-influencers influence consumers more than Macro (Gupta & Mahajan, 2019; Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020). Specifically, they point out that are more persuasive (Park et al., 2021), have a greater influence on the moment of purchase (Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020) and help to have a favorable attitude towards the product (Chopra, Avhad & Jaju, 2021). It should be noted that these studies have focused on qualitative methodologies with samples between 150-300 respondents.

### 2.1.2. The Media

Conventionally, and before the digital era, fashion consumers were said to be influenced strongly by the mass media, as it happened in other consumption fields (Morley, 2005).

Considering that "Media is a significant form of communication that affect fashion shopping behavior together with socialization" (Phuong & Thao, 2017: 4), some authors explore media influence on fashion consciousness, and shown the power of the media having the greatest impact on fashion consciousness, more than technology advancements and self-identity issues (Lam & Yee, 2014).

Fashion magazines have obviously a significant role. They not just release information about the latest trends, but also, they are consumption vehicles with the diffusion of products and styles (Kalbaska, Sádaba & Cantoni, 2018). Bailey and Seock (2010) describe the power of fashion magazines in consumer loyalty differentiating magazine's content: information about general trends and products and celebrity news are the most significant ones for consumer's loyalty. But most of the research on fashion magazines' influence is particularly on health issues and female body dissatisfaction (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Shaw, 1995).

Another perspective in the research of influence of fashion magazines is gender issues. Here we find contradictory results, with Apeageyi (2011) giving magazines an important impact in women, versus Shephard et al. (2016) concluding that billboards or television ads are more influencing in women.

We should consider now that fashion magazines are also present in the digital context with their online versions, and they compete in the internet field to attract audiences in a more crowded atmosphere of content creators.

Some studies question whether the new digital celebrities are now the ones with the greatest media appeal (Pedroni, 2016) and at the same time, it has been shown that fashion consumers prefer to visit brand websites and read blogs and online content in social media, before reading fashion magazines (Grau, Kleiser & Bright, 2019).

### 2.1.3. Fashion Brands

In the case of fashion brands, traditional marketing has paid attention to the brand trust, brand community or brand awareness impact on purchasing intention (Hasan & Sohail, 2020).

Branding as a relevant strategy is linked to the status and social prestige, which are part of the fashion consumers behavior (Ahuja, 2015). In a study about brand names and their influence in eco consumption, results explain that brand name did not influence attitudes toward advertisement or attitudes toward the brand (Yan, Hyllegard & Blaesi, 2012).

Business to Consumer actions and its effects in consumers were usually focused on store's employees, who had an impact in the shopping experience and brand perception (Hui & Yee, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2012).

With the rise of Social Media, brands are impacting consumers through social media, interacting with them, giving entertainment, and offering the last news about products and trends (Godey et al., 2016). Research shows how creating relationship with customers in social media is increasing credibility and affinity to the brand (Manthiou, Chiang & Tang, 2013). However little research considers brands as sources of influence. Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2011) explain how brands providing trendy information on social media cover four customer's sub-motivations: surveillance, knowledge, pre-purchase information, and inspiration.

### 2.1.4. Celebrities

In fashion, celebrities have always been important sources of influence (Anspach, 1967). Famous people or stars are in the highest position of the pyramid of imitation, and they activate the diffusion process of trends in the trickle-down model (Atik & Firat, 2013), creating trends, tempting customers, and carrying on with the fashion dynamics.

Jin and Phua (2014) describe celebrities as any well-known person who receives a significant attention by the media, with a public awareness, and they use it for goods' endorsement.

It is often noted that women are more sensitive to social influence than men and, therefore, they are more likely to copy the behavior of celebrities and buy the products they wear (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Now, we can distinguish between traditional celebrities, which would include film actors, musicians, athletes, etc.; and new digital celebrities, including bloggers, vloggers and 'Instafamous' personalities (Pöyry et al., 2019). Those new celebrities are now playing a big role in communication

campaigns (Arnesson, 2022). Brands and media are collaborating with them to promote fashion products with endorsement contracts, because of their positive effect in consumer's behavior: "photos of social media influencers, people who have become famous through social media, increase purchase intentions more than photos of general celebrities" (Pöyry et al., 2019: 337).

### 2.1.5. Influentials - Close Circles

Unofficial fashion opinion leaders, such as those that are influential in close circles (Verette, 2004) were called Influentials, as they first appeared in research during the 40's; true opinion leaders exercised influence through personal relationships (family, friends, colleagues, neighbors) in an informal and unconscious way (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Nowadays, Internet gives exposure and reach to those personal relations; Influentials find spaces where they can share their interest in issues in which they exercise a certain leadership. In the digital age, consumers continue to be influenced by other individuals, whose opinions and selection of products exercise different kinds of power over them. We look for individuals who share similar interests, and we trust the opinions of others (Silva et al., 2020), also in fashion (Wiedmann, Hennings & Langner, 2010). Influentials generate content about the brands they like and share it among their friends, thus becoming brand advocates (Parrott, Danbury & Kanthavanich, 2015; Ryan & Jones, 2009).

Considering all those sources of influence in fashion consumption, in order to compare how they influence in the fashion purchase process, it is relevant to illustrate this road. Supported by a number of studies (Allen & Collisson, 2020; Cho & Chan, 2021; Good & Hyman, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020), different stages of the fashion purchasing process have been described as 10 possible actions of influence: 1) they inspire my style; 2) I copy their looks (behavior model); 3) their influence helps me discover new brands and trends; 4) their influence generates new needs; 5) when I look for products I look at them; 6) I seek advice; 7) they help me make decisions; 8) they change my opinion; 9) they help me with their advice regarding the purchase; 10) I exchange purchases for their opinion (SanMiguel, Guercini & Sádaba, 2019).

Then, after the literature review, the following hypothesis are proposed:

H1a: Consumers detect the influence of different *influential sources*, being able to differentiate between each of them.

H1b: Consumers detect the influence of different *influential sources among the different key actions*

H2: SMLs influence the purchasing process more than the Media, Brands or Traditional Celebrities

H3: Celebrities are more influential than brands and media, but less than SMLs.

H4: Influentials are sources of security and advise more than media and celebrities

H5: Influentials are less influential than SMLs in "discovering other brands" and "behaviour models".

## 3. Method

The empirical study was based on a sample of 1,176 college students (Bachelor and Master's courses) (77% girls,  $M_{age} = 20.41$ ,  $SD=2.14$ ), who conducted a self-administered questionnaire.

In the questionnaire they were asked how much they were influenced when buying fashion (clothes and accessories) by each of the 7 influential players analyzed (Media; Brands; Celebrities; Mega-influencers; Macro-influencers; Micro-influencer; Influentials). For each influential player, they indicated how much it influenced them for each of the 10 key influence actions (inspire my style; I Copy looks; Discover brands and trends; Generate new needs; When I look for products, I look at them; Seek advice; Help me make decisions, Change my opinion; Help me and advise on purchase; Exchange purchases for their opinion).

These variables were analyzed through the self-designation influence method (Jungnickel, 2018; Nejad, Sherrell & Babakus, 2014; SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017; Sanz-Marcos, Jiménez-Marín & Elías, 2021), based on a five-point Likert-scale response format which respondents rated from 1 ("never influences") to 5 ("always influences"). This method sought to understand the perceived impact of Influencers on the part of the consumer. Each respondent rated the influence of each of the sources analyzed on the ten actions related to the purchase decision process. All questions in the questionnaire were validated through an internal validity analysis with Cronbach's Alpha (overall scale test = .917; min = .90, max = .92).

The analytical strategy applied in this research is double. First, we carried out a descriptive analysis, comparing the means for different sources of influence, both in an aggregate and de-aggregate way for each consumption moment. Second, to explore differences among sources and to group them by intensity of perceived influence, a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted. We also carried out a biplot analysis connecting sources of influence with the different key influence actions.

#### 4. Results

When we look the results in an aggregate way (Table 1), there is a clear difference between the Influential's role and the rest of the sources. In a ranking position, they lead the influence process, followed by Brands, the Media, and Celebrities. Last ones appear to be the SMLs.

**Table 1. Influential players in the whole purchase decision process**

Influential Players	M	SE	95% CI
Media	1.99	.02	[1.952; 2.037]
Brands	2.03	.02	[1.994; 2.084]
Celebrities	1.71	.02	[1.671; 1.760]
Mega-influencers	1.60	.02	[1.558; 1.653]
Macro-influencers	1.62	.02	[1.576; 1.673]
Micro-influencers	1.43	.01	[1.398; 1.471]
Influentials (Close Circles)	2.58	.02	[2.537; 2.636]

Source: by the authors

If we de-aggregate the results in the 10 key influence actions (Table 2), in each of the players, we cannot see any relevant difference according with the action. Again, Influentials are the most important one in every of the actions, but if we look at each source, customers do not remark differences among the key actions. There are some nuances in the inspirational side of the process and in the action of discovering new brands, both for media and brands.

**Table 2. Influential players and the 10 key influence actions**

10 Key Influence Actions	Seven Influential Players						
	Media	Brand	Celebrity	Mega*	Macro*	Micro*	Influential
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
They inspire my style	2.35	2.36	1.93	1.79	1.84	1.61	2.73
Copy looks	1.71	1.84	1.66	1.57	1.66	1.45	2.12
Discover brands and trends	2.60	2.57	2.15	2.00	1.99	1.68	2.79
Generate new needs	2.14	2.14	1.77	1.71	1.71	1.48	2.22
When I look for products, I look at them	2.28	2.35	1.89	1.78	1.82	1.52	2.48
Seek advice	2.07	2.02	1.73	1.39	1.40	1.32	2.91
Help me make decisions	2.00	2.09	1.67	1.56	1.57	1.39	2.97
Change my opinion	1.58	1.62	1.45	1.43	1.43	1.30	2.38

10 Key Influence Actions	Seven Influential Players						
	Media	Brand	Celebrity	Mega*	Macro*	Micro*	Influential
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Help me and advise on purchase	1.72	1.85	1.50	1.44	1.43	1.33	2.94
Exchange purchases for their opinion	1.50	1.56	1.41	1.39	1.40	1.29	2.33

\* Mega-influencer; Macro-influencer; Micro-influencer

Source: by the authors

Finally, the PCA for the matrix of seven influence players by key influence actions under research resulted in three principal components with an Eigenvalue > 0.9, which accounted for .62 (PC1), .13 (PC2), and .09 (PC3) of the total variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin criterion (.885) and the Bartlett's test ( $p < .001$ ) proved more than acceptable. As shown in Table 3, sources or influence players were clearly divided according to their influence on the purchase process in three groups: Traditional sources (Media, Brands, Celebrities), SMIs (Mega, Macro and Micro) and Influentials. Those ones again having a stronger position.

**Table 3. Rotated component matrix for perceived influence by source**

	PC1 (Traditional)	PC2 (SMIs)	PC3 (Influentials)
Brand	,856		
Mass_Media	,817		
Celebrities	,779		
Mega_influ		,583	
Macro_influ		,678	
Micro_influ		,900	
Influentials			,967

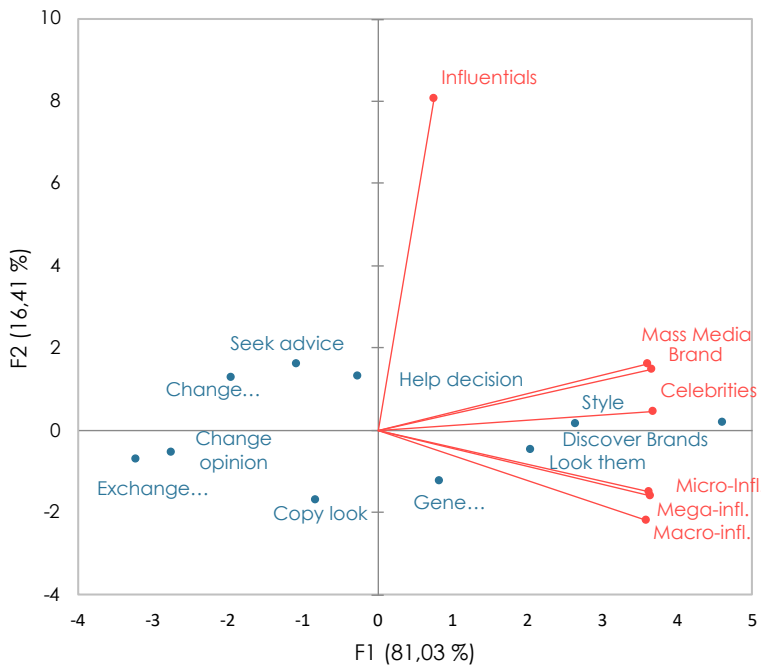
Notes: Principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization.

Coefficients below .5 were suppressed.

Source: by the authors

The special role of the Influentials respect to the rest of influence players is shown clearly in the Figure 2, a biplot analysis representing the relationship between sources of influence and key influences actions after forcing the PCA to converge around two factors accounting for 97,4% of the variance.

**Figure 2. Biplot: sources of influence and key influence actions**



Source: by the authors

## 5. Discussion

The increase in the use of social media has led to the rise of influential individuals, due to a change in the dynamics of personal relationships and the increase in conversations. New technologies mean that face-to-face communication is no longer the only determining factor in interaction and personal influence (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Companies seek to attract crowds in order to generate mass broadcasts with global coverage. Therefore, they seek the collaboration of opinion leaders whose leadership is acknowledged by the digital community and who have a high volume of followers on their social networks (Zhang, Zhao & Xu, 2016).

However, this research shows that those individuals who have more impact are still close circles, more than the SMIs. Even though the Internet has created a wave of SMIs, influence in the circles closest to us, the influence exercised by Influentials, by dyads, continues to be the one that has the greatest impact on the behavior and purchasing process of individuals. Although consumers and users receive hundreds of messages and content through social media, including advertising messages, recommendations, opinions, and advice, they are able to differentiate who is influencing them at all times, distinguishing between the endorsement of Brands, Celebrities or SMIs with different sizes of communities of followers.

With the results of the analysis, H1 is confirmed, as they show that individuals know the difference between the influence and opinion leadership of their friends, family and colleagues and the influence of the other players involved in fashion.

However, H1 b is not confirmed because there is no significative difference between the key actions in each of the players. Consumers do not differentiate them as much as to pointing out significant differences. Therefore, H4 is positive, because Influentials score the most in all the key actions, and H5 is negative again.

Influentials constitute the influential player with the most power, followed by Brands and Media, who have a very similar influence power. Subsequently, the most influential players would be Celebrities, Macro-influencers and Mega-influencers. Finally, Micro-influencers would come last. Therefore, H2, and H3 are not confirmed. Those hypotheses were built under the idea of powerful SMIs (Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Pöyry et al., 2019; SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017). However, those studies do not open the comparison to the traditional sources of influence, as we call them. When doing so, results show that the SMIs power is not absolute.



In the case of Influentials, research has continuing giving them a predominant power, since Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955), Weimann (1994) to Keller & Berry (2003). As stated in the book *Marketing 4.0* (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2016), the “F-Factor” (family, friends, Facebook fans and followers), continues to be key today for our decision-making processes and purchasing processes. This study highlights once again the importance of the influence power of Influentials (M = 2.58).

In fashion, information obtained through interpersonal relationships is more important than in other fields. Amongst young people, the role of the group continues to be essential, and success in an individual's attempt to change opinion or attitude will depend on the resistance or support that the individual finds in the group closest to him or her. Consequently, the influence exercised by an Influential in his or her group is essential in terms of creating a climate that is appropriate, one in which the group effectively accepts the changes proposed by other players such as brands and the media.

One interesting fact is that, in this study, brands are the second more important source of influence. In the influencer marketing age, brands should take into consideration the influence they exert on their followers through social media profiles.

In their campaigns, brands should not underestimate the power of Digital Media such as digital magazines. At the same time, they should not neglect their own social networks either, since consumers also go to their profiles for inspiration, to discover new trends and to search for products or help in decision-making. Advertising campaigns with SMIs should continue to aim to inspire communities of followers and communicate new products and trends. In effect, millennials browse the social profiles of SMIs in order to find new products and imitate them.

About the differentiation of actions during the purchasing process, the study does not give any relevant results. All the actions of every source of influence are perceived in the same way. Inspiration and discovering brands, at the beginning of the purchase process, are the actions with a little more influence from the traditional players. Previous research, although focused on SMIs, also highlights the importance of the first stages of the purchasing process (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

However, due to their metamorphosis from Influentials to SMIs (Pedroni, 2022), they serve as the official opinion leaders that endow brands with greater attributes of authenticity and trust. Influencer professionalization (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020b), presents a world replete with different source of influence who introduce us to a world of aspirations, individuals who have come to need and seek out an “inspirational” world, being drawn to persons who can show them lives similar to their own, but who also manage to inspire others: fashion, proximity, style and security.

### 5.1. Limitations and Future Research

Future studies should analyze this influence on the purchasing process in relation to other generations. It would also be worth analyzing the influence on other products that are not related to fashion and lifestyle, cases in which SMIs appear to exert a strong influence on purchasing intention. The study sample was mostly female, due to the interest that fashion produces among young people.

### 6. Specific contributions

Contribuciones	Authors
Research design	Author 1 and 2
Documentary search	Author 1 and 2
Data collection	Author 2 and 4
Critical data analysis and interpretation	Author 1 and 3
Review and approval of versions	Author 1 and 2

### 7. Acknowledgement

Dr. Juana Schwartz Mota, Data Manager, for the critical review of the Case Study.

### 8. Funding

The research from which this article derives had no sources of funding.

## 9. Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exists.

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