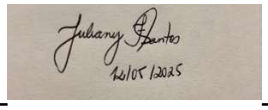
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LEARNER NUMBER	51788349
NAME	Juliany Fabiano dos Santos
COURSE	International Business
REPORT TITLE	The influence of Digital Influencers in the Decision to Buy Beauty Products on Instagram: A Critical Analysis on Authenticity, Transparency and Trust
SUPERVISOR NAME	Raza Butt
WORD COUNT	6957
DUE DATE	12/05/2025
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Evidence of the Primary Research MUST be included in the appendix of the report. That includes a copy of questionnaires, interview schedules, or observation diaries. One interview transcript should be included as a full transcript and a summary of all other interviews must be kept as a backup by the student. See template on Moodle for what should be included in all aspects of the report. **All data must be anonymised.**

The text should be double-spaced throughout and single column format (A4) with 2cm for left and right-hand margins and 2.5cm at head and foot. Text should be justified, standard 12 point, footnotes 10 point, and in Calibri. Page numbers should be at the bottom-right. Do not use line and paragraph spacing. Keep formatting to a minimum and avoid underlining.

Harvard Referencing shall apply.

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The influence of Digital Influencers in the Decision to Buy Beauty Products on Instagram: A Critical Analysis on Authenticity, Transparency and Trust.

Compiled by

Juliany Fabiano dos Santos

This project is submitted in part fulfilment of the Degree of Bachelor of International Business (Honours)

Independent College, Dublin May 2025.

Abstract: This study addresses how Instagram users perceive and react to beauty product promotions by digital influencers. Using mixed methods, the survey combines quantitative data from 54 survey responses and qualitative insights from two semi-structured questionnaires. The results show that purchasing decisions are highly influenced by the perception of authenticity, credibility, ethical transparency and emotional connection. However, a negative post-purchase of disclosures that are not transparent in relation to and sponsored content can compromise consumer confidence. This study contributes to the understanding of consumer behavior in influencer marketing and proposes ethical and strategic guidelines for brands, influencers and digital platforms.

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CHAPTER I

The influence of Digital Influencers in the Decision to Buy Beauty Products on Instagram: A Critical Analysis on Authenticity, Transparency and Trust.

1. Introduction

Based on the site Datarportal (2014) the Instagram is the fourth most accessed social media in the world, being only behind the leaders Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. Within this environment, influencers play a strategic role to build a bond between brands and consumers, particularly in the beauty industry. However, it is import to identify how the promotion of beauty products by digital influencers on Instagram affects consume purchasing behavior and trust. We can find on Instagram a strong appeal for the public to consume beauty products such as a cosmetics and skincare items. These endorsements can shape consumer perception and influence purchase decisions. However, the nature of influencer marketing raises important questions related ethical responsibility and transparency in advertising practices. This research aims to investigate how followers interpret and respond to influencer-promoted content, to the extent that which they critically evaluate this information, and trust is developed in the digital environment. Intends to examine the moral questions raised by this behavior and how the influence of these figures might affect the buying choice of their followers. This research also seeks to demonstrate how customers may be more critical of the content on Instagram, therefore encouraging increased awareness of ethical consumer behavior This topic is relevant because it draws a direct connection with business ethics and digital marketing. It is hoped that this analysis

will help in the development of transparent and reliable strategies in the beauty market, bringing benefits to consumers and brands.

1.1. Justification, Purpose and Research Question

This study is necessary due to the popularization of influencer marketing in the beauty sector, which may have negative experiences. There is a growing debate about the boundary between advertising and manipulation, especially when there is no transparency on sponsorships and when products do not deliver the expected results. The purpose of this study is to analyze how followers interpret and respond to content promoted by influencers, to what extent they critically evaluate this information and how they develop (or lose) confidence in the digital environment. It also aims to understand the ethical implications of this communication model and how it affects future purchasing decisions.

Main Research Question: *How does the promotion of beauty products by digital influencers on Instagram, influence purchasing decisions, and impact consumer trust*?

1.2. Statement of Research Objectives

In order to answer the central question, the research objectives were organized into 5 themes:

1. Analyse how digital influencers affect the buying behavior of followers who purchase beauty products on Instagram;
2. Investigate how the relationship of trust between influencers and their followers is built;
3. Examine consumer reactions after the purchase of products promoted by influencers and how this affects their future behavior;

4. Assess how followers perceive the ethical responsibility of influencers in promoting products, focusing on transparency and honesty;
5. Identify whether followers make a critical assessment of the content before making a purchase.

1.3. Information Gathering & Data Collection Technique Used

This research uses the mixed method, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to obtain a broad view on the content investigated. In the quantitative phase, a structured online questionnaire was applied with 54 active women users of Instagram who have already made the purchase of beauty products promoted by digital influencers. The objective of this tool was to identify buying patterns, levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, perception of credibility and impact on trust. In the qualitative phase, two semi-structured questionaries were conducted with two participants from the previous group to deepen individual experiences, feelings and perceptions about ethics, authenticity and responsibility in the communication of influencers. The combination of these two tools allowed a rich analysis of data and insights.

1.4. Expected Outcomes of the Study

It is expected that this study will reveal how digital influencers exert direct influence on the purchase decision of their audience, and also that the research can show a growth in critical awareness by consumers, that start to demand more transparency, ethics and authenticity in the business relationships established on Instagram. These findings can be important for both brands

and digital marketing professionals, influencers and platforms, who seek to align communication strategies with ethical standards and consumer expectations.

CHAPTER II

2. Introduction

This literature review was organized in five main themes, with the objective of exploring different dimensions of the central question of the research: How does the promotion of beauty products by digital influencers on Instagram influence purchasing decisions and impact consumer confidence? The choice of themes reflects recurring aspects in academic publications on influencer marketing and digital consumption, and each section examines the findings of at least 5 authors, with comparisons, contradictions and gaps that justify the conduct of this study.

2.1. Themes

2.1.1. Theme 1: The Influence of Digital Influencers on the Buying Behavior of Followers

The increase in the use of social networks has profoundly reshaped consumption practices, especially in the beauty sector, where the image of influencers and the perception of their credibility exert a direct influence on purchasing decisions. Garg and Bakshi (2024) understand that "beauty vloggers' credibility traits help in influencing consumer behavior", evidencing that conditions such as reliability, attractiveness and expertise contribute to the formation of bonds of trust between consumers and content creators. The study also shows that these factors positively impact purchase intent, especially when a sense of familiarity in digital interactions is developed. Complementing this thought, literature shows that the parasocial interaction (PSI), the feeling of being intimately the influencer, plays a relevant role in this process. Sokolova and Kefi (2019) state that "both credibility of the influencers and PSI exhibit significant and positive

relationship to purchase intention", evidencing that not only credibility but also emotional appeal shape buying behavior. This notion refers to the need to critically analyze the psychological effects of the constant presence of influencers in the digital daily life of consumers. Thus, authenticity works as a key element for influencer marketing effectiveness. Lou and Yuan (2019) suggest that the Social Media Influencer Value Model, highlights that "the informative value of influencer-generated content, influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness and similarity to the followers positively affect followers' trust in influencers' branded posts". This information suggests that trust in partnered posts is strengthened when followers recognize themselves in influencers, contributing to increased engagement and conversion. However, even if influencer marketing is effective in attracting attention and generating initial traffic, there are limits to how it can sustain deeper levels of viewer engagement. Gu and Duan (2024), using the theory of self-determination to analyze consumer behavior in social networks, conclude that "social media influencers are effective at generating initial online traffic but have limited influence on deeper levels of consumer engagement, cautioning advertisers against overestimating their impact". This analysis reveals a tipping point: the immediate visibility generated by influencers does not necessarily guarantee loyalty or significant engagement with the brand. Thus, even if the digital influencers demonstrate an expressive impact on consumer behavior, especially in the beauty sector, this influence is related on symbolic, subjective and emotional bases, as identification, perceived authenticity and relational capital. Even so, the absence of objective criteria to validate the promoted products, as well as the risks of dissatisfaction and possible ethical distortions involved in sponsorships, indicate the urgency of deeper investigations. Therefore, this research

proposes to problematize the implications of this communication model for the construction of trust and critical sense of the contemporary consumer.

2.1.2. Theme 2 - Relationship of trust between followers and digital influencers

The bond of trust between digital influencers and their followers is a central element for the effectiveness of influencer marketing, especially on visual platforms like Instagram. Lou and Yuan (2019) recommended the social media influencer value model, highlighting that "the informative value of influencer-generated content positively influencers their fans' trust in influencers' branded posts and purchase intention". This shows that the credibility and quality of the information shared by influencers are decisive elements for the construction of confidence and purchase intention by the follower. Moreover, the identification of authenticity and the broad understanding of influencers play an important role in forming this trust. Ilieva et al. (2024) found that "the main characteristics of digital influencers' behavior that affect consumer perceptions have been systematized and categorized through a combination of both traditional and advanced data analysis methods", inferring that trust is enhanced when followers recognize consistent patterns of behavior and communication from influencers. This analysis allows us to understand how symbolic authority is built in the digital environment and how it has an impact on consumers' purchasing decision, by niches, such as in the beauty sector, where credibility is a valuable point. When comparing online sources with traditional media, Johnson and Kaye (2004) found that "weblog users judged blogs as highly credible - more credible than traditional sources". This increase in trust in online sources, including digital influencers, shows the importance of deeply understanding the factors that favor perceived credibility in this environment. In addition, Liu

and Zheng (2024) address the persuasive power of digital influencers on social media, noting that " the informative value of influencers' content, authenticity, and homophily positively affect their parasocial relationships, which in turn, affects followers' purchase intention and evaluation of brand credibility". These relationships create a sense of intimacy and connection, strengthening trust in the influencer as a point of reference. Finally, the relationship of trust between followers and digital influencers is developed based on the credibility, authenticity and attractiveness of influencers. These factors are important for consumers' purchasing decisions, especially on Instagram. Understanding these elements is essential to developing effective influencer marketing strategies that foster lasting relationships of trust between brands, influencers and consumers.

2.1.3. Theme 3 - Consumer reactions to influencer-promoted beauty products

Due to understand the reactions of consumers of beauty products on Instagram, promoted by digital influencers, one must understand the multiple dimensions involved - emotional, cognitive and behavioral. The purchase experience through the promotion of these people may have resulted from positive identification with the brand, trust passed by the influencer and, on the other hand, frustration or lack of expectations when the delivery of the product does not correspond to its digital presentation. Wang and Lee (2021, p. 15), observe that "the social media posts that made consumers most likely to accept a new product were created by a general public influencer and did not include a display of any sponsorship affiliation with the product". This evidence shows that the lack of explicit advertising links and perceived familiarity with the influencer favors spontaneous acceptance of the recommendation, demonstrating the strategic

role of implicit authenticity. Whether the audience perceives the content as genuine and informative is therefore a central element for initial engagement. Adebaya and Omamode (2023) state that “the rise of social media and social media influencers has revolutionized how brands are promoting their products and services and how consumers make purchasing decisions”. This transformation is particularly visible in the cosmetics sector, where the appeal of visuals and first impressions shape almost immediate decisions. However, when the expectations raised by influencers are frustrated post-purchase, the effect can be the opposite: the negative perception of the product compromises the image of the brand and the credibility of the influencer. In this sense, emotions play a decisive role in the consumption cycle. According to Sankala et al. (2024), “social media influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful tool in contemporary marketing strategies, significantly influencing consumer behavior and fostering brand loyalty”. Even though it has potential, this link is very sensitive: differences between the symbolic promise and the reality of the product generate intense emotional responses - such as regret, anger or disappointment - which directly impact repurchase behavior and public engagement, for example, through negative comments or low ratings. Another important point for a positive response is the congruence between the influencer, the product and the target audience. Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) show that “influencer endorsements led to higher perceived similarity than celebrity endorsements” (p.275), and that perceived similarity positively influences attitude towards the product, the credibility of the endorser and purchase intention. The authors go on to explain that “people feel more similar to influencers than celebrities and as a result like their endorsements more and are more inclined to purchase the endorsed product” (p. 276), highlighting the important role of identification as a mediator in this

process. This identification becomes accessible due to elements such as authenticity, accessible language and a lifestyle close to that of the audience. So the perceived authenticity, coupled with the consistency of the influencer's image, enhances the symbolic congruence between the brand and the consumer. Belanche et al. (2021 p., 188) explain that “the greater congruence between potential customers and the sponsored product [...] should evolve positive consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions towards the product”. In other words, the greater the coherence between the influencer's styles, values and content and the ad, the more effective the content creator's message will be received. This harmony verified by the public helps to establish trust in the recommendation and strengthens the bond between consumer, brand and influencer. In summary, consumer reactions to beauty products promoted by a digital influencer on Instagram are complex. Points such as congruence, authenticity and emotional experience shape the impact of the campaign not only in the short term, but also on the credibility of the influencer and the sustainable relationship with the brand. These factors reinforce the importance of ethical practices and carefully planned strategies in digital influencer selection and content production.

2.1.4. Theme 4 – Ethical responsibility and transparency in influencer marketing

As the number of digital influencers on Instagram grows, so do ethical concerns about transparency in advertising communications and consumer protection. The lack of clarity in sponsored posts represents one of the main issues in this debate. Gui et al. (2024 p.1) note that “influencer marketing remains largely undisclosed or inappropriately disclosed on social media”, which can compromise consumers' ability to identify promotional content. This lack of clarity can create an illusion of spontaneity, leaving the real nature of the message opaque. This obscurity

directly impacts public trust. Mathur et al. (2018) state that “ambiguous or absent disclosures may lead users to believe that content is independent, potentially misleading them about the nature of the endorsement”. In environments like Instagram, this ambiguity between personal opinion and sponsored advertising is leveraged by editing strategies and aesthetic narrative, making it even more difficult to distinguish commercial interests. What' more, the lack of standardization in the way an ad is made affects the evaluation of the content and the partnership itself between influencers and brands. Libai et al. (2025) point out that “measuring the value of influencer campaigns, and even more so of influencer lifetime value, is a challenge. Yet these metrics must be at the core of a firm's strategy for evaluating the success of influencer partnerships”. The lack of uniformity in sponsored ads makes it difficult to measure authenticity and can weaken consumer confidence in the long term, especially in sensitive niches such as beauty. On the other hand, there is evidence that transparency strengthens the relationship with followers. Stubb, Nyström and Colliander (2019, p. 117) show that “emphasizing sponsorship compensation justification could induce greater source credibility and message credibility, as well as a more positive attitude among subjects toward SMIs receiving monetary compensation for sponsored content.” Honesty in communication not only drives acceptance of the compensation received, but also contributes to building an image of an ethical and trustworthy influencer. Finally, messages that are considered ethical can directly influence the audience's purchasing behavior. Setyawanatra, Fitriyah and Sriyono (2025) concluded that “influencer marketing is shown to have a strong positive impact on purchase intention and purchase decision, indicating the effectiveness of this strategy influencing consumer behavior”. In other words, the way in which content is disseminated - transparently or manipulatively - can define whether a campaign

will be a success or a failure. In short, transparency and ethical responsibility are extremely important pillars for effective marketing on Instagram. On networks where trust is the most valuable symbolic currency, distortions or omissions in communication not only affect immediate conversion, but also jeopardize long-term relationships between brands, content creators, and consumers.

2.1.5. Theme 5 – Consumer awareness and critical evaluation of influencer content

As consumers become more familiar with digital marketing strategies, their critical awareness of content promoted by influencers is increasing. Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021, p.11) observe that “followers are becoming active processors of influencer content, often assessing the underlying motives before trusting the message”, which demonstrates a more reflexive engagement rather than a passive consumer attitude. This shift shows that consumers are applying interpretative filters before trusting sponsored messages. The audience's critical assessment is related to the way the content is presented. Młodkowsja (2019, p. 4) states that “Instabloggers and Youtubers are seen as a credible source of information and consumers find them trustworthy. [...] Pictures posted on Instagram affect consumers' buying decisions”. This visual influence, aligned with perceived credibility, shows that consumer judgment goes beyond the product and incorporates aesthetic and symbolic aspects of the post. Adding to this point of view, Atiq et al. (2022, p.8) demonstrates that “storytelling content is more relatable and develops trust between the influencer and the follower, resulting in more audience engagement”. This shows that well-structured narratives not only generate emotional connection, but also strengthen the perception of authenticity, which positively influences

audience engagement and their willingness to trust the message. In addition, Wang and Lee (2021) found that “the social media posts that made consumers most likely to accept a new product were created by a general public influencer and did not include a display of any sponsorship affiliation with the product”. This study reinforces that even if they are aware of the dynamics of advertising, consumers react more favorably when they perceive authenticity and the absence of explicit commercial imposition. In short, consumer behavior towards influencers' content on Instagram has become more analytical, discerning and visually oriented. This evolution requires digital influencers and brands to be more aligned between form, message and ethics, at the risk of audience rejection. For digital marketing to be effective, therefore, perceived integrity, aesthetic coherence and transparency in communication are increasingly necessary.

2.2. Conclusion

The literature review reveals that the actions of digital influencers have a significant impact on the buying behavior of the audience, in the beauty sector, where image, credibility and personal testimony play a central role in building trust. The influence is shown in several aspects, from emotional and aesthetic appeal to the perception of expertise and proximity. It is observed that the credibility of the influencer, is conditioned by elements such as authenticity, coherence between product and persona, and ability to engage, as we have seen in literature. Thus, the relationship of trust between influencer and follower is considered an important element for the effectiveness of these campaigns. However, this relationship can be compromised by negative experiences, lack of transparency or the perception of opportunism. The modern consumer is increasingly informed and demonstrates a critical attitude towards disguised advertising content,

demanding ethics and alignment between practice and discourse. Influence marketing, in turn, faces the challenge of staying authentic amid so many promotions publicized on social media, where advertising and spontaneous recommendations are not always identifiable. Ethical practices are essential to preserve the credibility of the influencer and protect consumers from deception. In addition, it became clear that the consumer's posture was no longer passive but more active. The audience critically evaluates influencer speech and product potential, quality of visual and textual content, and perceived honesty in posts. Therefore, this literature review supports the importance of this research, which seeks to understand how women Instagram users react to the promotion of beauty products by digital influencers on Instagram. With this, it is hoped to contribute to a deeper debate about ethical consumption and responsible practices in digital marketing.

CHAPTER III

3. Methodology

This research is based on the constructivist method, with an ontological approach that understands the existence of multiple socially constructed realities. This can be seen in the central objective of the study: to understand how female consumers understand and react to digital influencing strategies on Instagram, especially in the context of promoting beauty products. This understanding cannot be limited to a single view, but must be related to the individual experiences of the participants. Through the interpretative epistemological method, the aim is to understand the meanings attributed by users of the digital platform to interactions with digital influencers. The use of mixed methods (questionnaires with closed questions and semi-structured interviews) reinforces this philosophical choice, as a qualitative understanding allows access to perceptions, feelings and reflections that would not be found in isolated statistical data. With an inductive approach, it is possible to identify patterns, build analytical themes and propose interpretations through the participants' responses. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the constructivist paradigm emphasizes contextual understanding and the construction of meanings between researcher and participants. In this case, the validity of the results does not derive from the number of responses, but from the depth and authenticity of the qualitatively collected data.

3.1. Justification for Adopting the Method

The mixed method was chosen in this research because it captures both the breadth and depth of the phenomenon being investigated. The subject - the influence of digital influencers on the decision to buy beauty products on Instagram - involves both objective and subjective aspects. For this reason, a single method would not be sufficient to understand the complexity of this phenomenon. The quantitative tool used a structured questionnaire with closed questions, applied to 54 female Instagram users who had already bought beauty products promoted by influencers. This stage made it possible to identify patterns of behavior, such as frequency of purchase, levels of satisfaction, perception of trust and critical sense. Quantitative data allows trends to be mapped and statistical data to be generated. The qualitative tool was a questionnaire with semi-structured questions, sent to two participants selected from the initial sample. This tool aimed to access emotional nuances, personal interpretations and ethical dilemmas perceived by consumers. This qualitative stage is in line with the constructivist paradigm and was indispensable for interpreting variables that could not be explored by numbers alone.

3.2. Sampling Technique and Sample Description

This research used a non-probability study for convenience, a common strategy in surveys that seek access to participants who meet specific criteria and are available to collaborate. This approach was appropriate considering: the limited time and the investigation: female Instagram users who have already bought beauty products promoted by digital influencers. Quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire, distributed mainly via private messages on Instagram. A total of 54 people took part in this stage. The participants identified themselves as

frequent users of the social network and reported having purchased beauty products (cosmetics, skincare, make-up) at least once, influenced by influencer campaigns. This sample provides a relevant basis for mapping behavioral trends; levels of trust and ethical perceptions related to the digital shopping experience. In the qualitative stage, an intentional cut was made from the initial sample. Two participants who were particularly reflective in their open-ended responses to the questionnaire were invited to answer the semi-structured questionnaire. This selection made it possible to delve deeper into topics such as trust in the influencer, reactions after unsatisfactory shopping experiences and the critical assessment of transparency in sponsored posts. Despite the number of interviews, the richness of the data collected was sufficient to achieve a good interpretative density, allowing the quantitative findings to be validated and expanded. According to Saunders et al. (2016), in qualitative studies, the data is more important than the number of participants.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

The analysis of the collected data followed two distinct approaches, according to the mixed nature of the research: descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. In the quantitative survey, the data obtained through the questionnaire were organized and treated with the help of tools such as Google Forms. Were used simple descriptive statistics with presentation of percentages and graphs, allowing to identify behavior patterns among the 54 participants. This investigation provided an interested overview of the frequency of purchases motivated by influencers, the satisfaction levels or dissatisfaction with the products purchased, and the perception of trust in digital recommendations. About the analysis of

qualitative data from semi-structured interviews was conducted through thematic analysis (Thematic Analysis), proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is appropriate for subjective data, because it allows to identify, organize and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within the narratives of participants. The analysis followed the six steps suggested by the authors: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial code generation, (3) topic search, (4) review of topics, (5) definition and naming of topics, and (6) production of the analytical report. The topics identified in the interviews were aligned with the objectives of the research and the revised literature, ensuring consistency between theory and empirical evidence. Among the main emerging topics were: trust and mistrust in recommendations, perception of authenticity, post-purchase experience, and critical evaluation of campaigns. The choice of thematic analysis is justified by the exploratory nature of the research and the focus on understanding the individual experiences of the participants. As Braun et al. (2019) points out, this technique is flexible, accessible and suitable for research conducted by researchers in training, as is the case of this academic work.

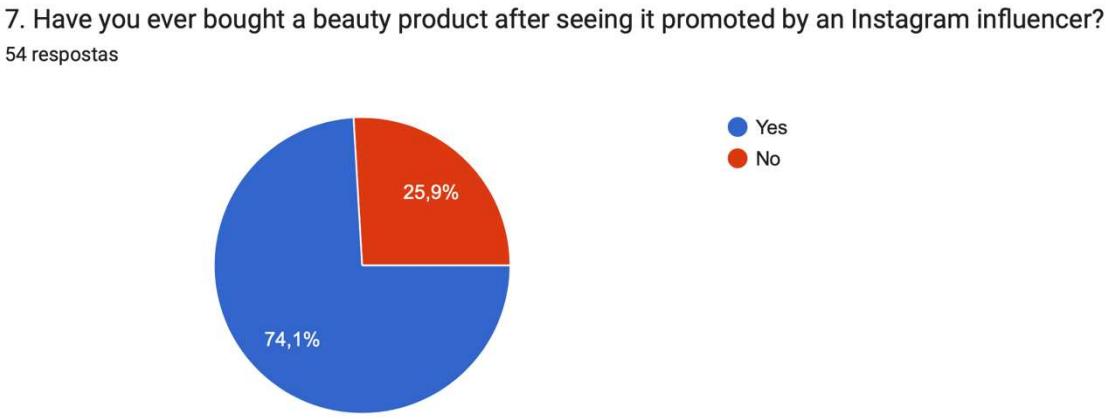
CHAPTER IV

4. Introduction

This chapter presents the results obtained from the analysis of quantitative data (questionnaire with 54 participants) and qualitative data (two interviews), organized into five main themes derived from the research objectives. The triangulation between the data and the literature reviewed supports the interpretations and allows for a critical discussion on the role of digital influencers in the decision to buy beauty products on Instagram.

4.1. Findings and Discussion

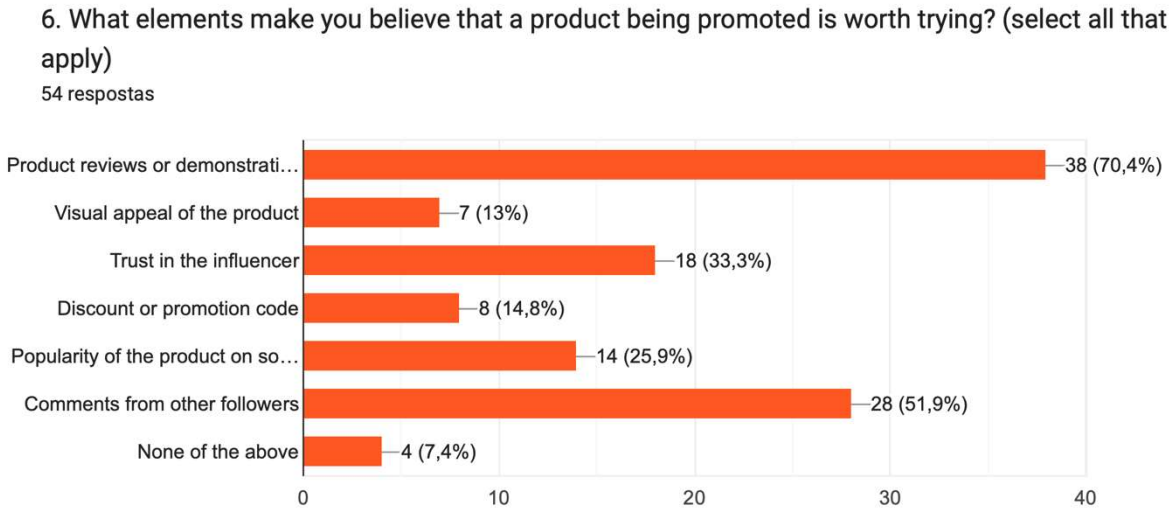
4.1.1. Theme 1 - The Influence of Digital Influencers on Beauty Product Purchase Decisions



The data revealed that 74.1% of the participants had already bought a beauty product after seeing it promoted by an influencer on Instagram (Q7). This response highlights the strength of digital influencers in the beauty sector. Among the main motivations, 42.6% said they "needed the product", but an equally significant number (24.1%) said they were just curious, while 9.3% were directly convinced by the influencer (Q8). However, 64.8% reported that these purchases occur only rarely, suggesting that the impact, although present, is not necessarily frequent (Q9). The interviews reinforce this perception of influence. One of the participants reported: *"I bought it because it looked like the product was worth it"*. Identification with the influencer's experience was also a factor: *"I bought a product for blackheads and pimples because the influencer also struggles with blackheads".* The purchasing decision, in this sense, was more related to the figure of the influencer than to the product itself: *"This influencer in particular has a history of being extremely honest [...] their role in my purchase was vital"*. These results are in line with the literature. Garg and Bakshi (2024) state that "beauty vloggers' credibility traits help in influencing consumer behavior", showing that authenticity and attractiveness are central components to the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Sokolova and Kefi (2019) add that "both credibility of the influencers and PSI exhibit significant and positive relationship to purchase intention", i.e. the combination of trust and emotional connection strengthens the purchase decision. Lou and Yuan (2019) point out that "the informative value of influencer-generated content, influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness and similarity to the followers positively affect followers 'trust in influencers' branded posts". The qualitative data proved this point: one interviewee said she trusted the product because the influencer shared real results and seemed sincere. This also demonstrates the importance of the parasocial relationship. However, Gu and Duan (2024) warn

that “social media influencers are effective at generating initial online traffic but have limited influence on deeper levels of consumer engagement”. This is reflected in the fact that, despite the high rate of purchases motivated by influencers, the frequency of these purchases is still low, which suggests that they are more one-off than continuous. In summary, the influence of digital influencers on purchasing decisions is strongly linked to emotional identification, the perception of authenticity and the reliability built up over time. However, consumer behavior also shows prudence and selectivity, indicating that digital influence needs to be constant, coherent and genuine in order to maintain its effectiveness.

4.1.2. Theme 2 - Trust and Relationship with the Influencer

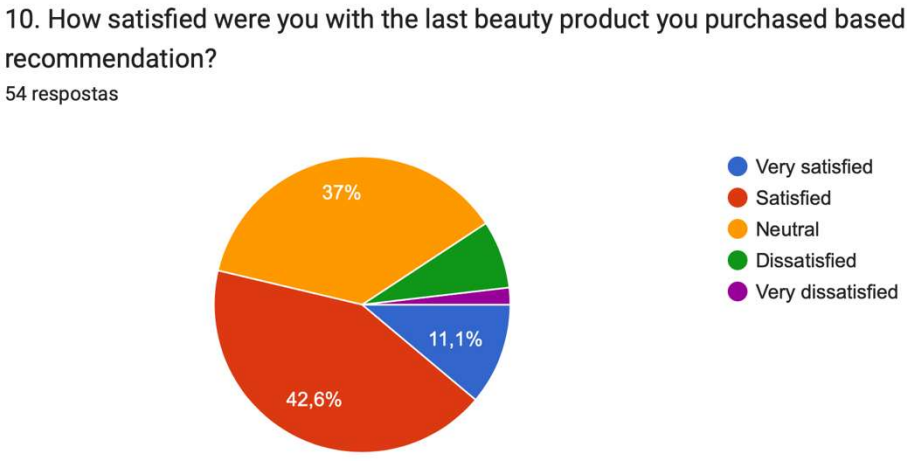


The key element in the digital process is building trust. The quantitative data shows that 33.3% of the participants consider trust in the influencer to be one of the main factors that make them believe that a product is worth trying (Q6). Other relevant elements were comments from other followers (51.9%) and product demonstrations (70.4%), which reinforces the idea that trust is

built through visual evidence and social validation. When asked about changes in perception after the purchase, 22.2% reported trusting influencers less and 11.1% said they trusted them more, while the majority (66.7%) kept the same opinion (Q12). As for perceived honesty, 53.7% of the participants believe that influencers are honest "sometimes", and only 11.1% said that they are honest most of the time (Q14). This shows a certain skepticism about the authenticity of recommendations. The qualitative interviews deepen this view. One of the participants reported: "*The ones that I actually take the opinion in consideration are people that have been in the industry for a long time and are consistent with their behavior"*. Another said: *"Well, so far, I have never seen these people involved in any kind of scandal, which is why I find them trustworthy"*. These reports reveal that trust is strongly associated with the consistency, reputation and transparency of the influencer over time. Liu and Zheng (2024) reinforce this idea by stating that "authenticity and perceived similarity foster stronger parasocial relationships, which in turn enhance persuasive effectiveness". In other words, the emotional bond (PSI) works as a trust enhancer when followers see the influencer as someone authentic and similar to themselves. Ilieva et al. (2024) also point out that "digital influencers [...] create authentic and relatable content", and that this perceived authenticity is what sustains public trust. This is evident in the account of one interviewee who stated: "I never believe when they first introduce the product, I wait to see if they will use it again when they are not being paid". This response indicates that consistency of use and the absence of explicit commercial motivations are signs of trust. On the other hand, trust can quickly become fragile. One participant said: *"My trust has decreased. People are getting better at manipulating others".* This type of comment reveals a critical and more cautious attitude on the part of consumers, especially in the face of the growing saturation

of sponsored content on social networks. According to Johnson and Kaye (2004), the perception of credibility online depends not only on the content itself, but on the perception of impartiality and transparency of the sender. This applies directly to influencers, whose reputation is their main asset. When this trust is broken, even in one specific case, the damage to the relationship with followers can be serious. Therefore, trust and the bond with influencers are only built on coherence between discourse and practice, transparency in communication and the perception of authenticity in recommendations. To maintain this bond, influencers must adopt ethical and consistent attitudes, recognizing the role of responsibility they play in their followers' consumer journey.

4.1.3. Theme 3 - Consumer reactions after purchase and impact on future behavior

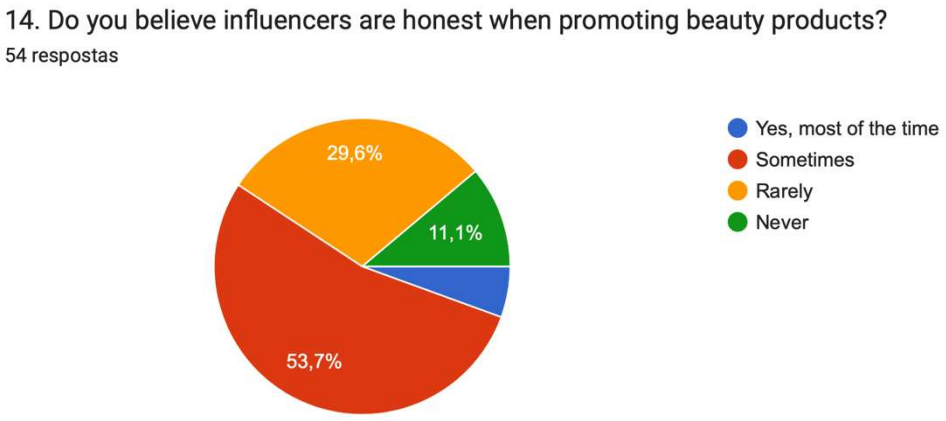


This topic refers to how consumers react after purchasing beauty products promoted by influencers and how these experiences influence behavior and future engagement. The quantitative analysis reveals that most of the participants had positive experiences: 42.6% said they were satisfied and 11.1% very satisfied with the last product purchased on the

recommendation of an influencer (Q10). However, 37% remained neutral, and 9.3% declared dissatisfaction. This ambivalence indicates that while influencer marketing is effective, it does not universally guarantee product satisfaction. When confronted with dissatisfaction, the most common response was "do nothing" (40.7%), followed by "N/A - I was satisfied" (42.6%), which suggests that even in the face of disappointment, most participants do not take any kind of action (Q11). Only a minority claimed to have left negative comments, warned others or stopped following the influencer. This reveals a tendency to passivity, but also a possible tolerance in the face of frustrated expectations. This dynamic becomes even more evident when we look at the perception of influencers after these experiences. According to Q12 data, 66.7% of respondents stated that their perception did not change after the purchase, 22.2% began to trust less and only 11.1% started to trust more (Q12). This indicates that although there is momentary impact, it does not necessarily compromise the relationship established - except in cases of severe frustration. Qualitative interviews reinforce these interpretations. One participant reported: *"When I bought a product for my skin and I experienced a rash [...] I realized that they were lying". After this experience, he said: "I never bought from the brand again and I unfollowed the influencer"*. On the other hand, another interviewee reported a slight effect: *"I bought the product a month ago [...] I believe the advertisement was honest".* These narratives demonstrate how trust can be preserved or broken depending on the degree of emotional and physical impact caused by the experience. According to Adebayo and Omamode (2023), "influencer marketing works when consumers perceive the promoted content as aligned with their expectations and values". When this relationship is broken, the trust also shakes. Belanche et al. (2021) highlight that "congruence between the influencer and the product is a key factor in driving positive

outcomes in influencer marketing", which highlights the need for coherence between the influencer's image and the promoted product. Wang and Lee (2021) also point out that "negative experiences related to sponsored content can significantly diminish consumers' future engagement with both the brand and the influencer". This explains why a portion of the participants reduces confidence or stops following influencers after negative experiences - as seen in the data. Finally, although most respondents do not publicly express their dissatisfaction, the internal and subjective effect can be profound. Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) state that "perceived deception damages the long-term effectiveness of influencer endorsements". This signals the need for more ethical, transparent and authentic practices on the part of influencers. Therefore, the reactions after the purchase act as a thermometer of digital credibility. The real experience with the product can confirm or invalidate the expectation created by the influencer. When there is alignment, the bond strengthens. When there is dissonance, the risk is the breach of trust and the distance from the audience.

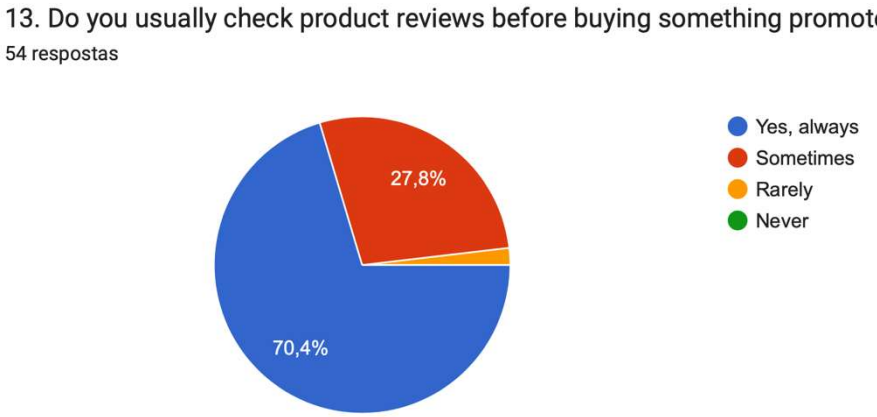
4.1.4. Theme 4 – Perceptions of Ethics and Transparency in Product Promotion



The data shows that influencers' perception of honesty is still limited: 53.7% of respondents believe influencers are "sometimes" honest when promoting beauty products, while only 11.1% believe they are honest "most of the time" (Q14). In addition, 48.1% of participants reported that "sometimes" they can distinguish between genuine content and paid promotion (Q15). The interviews confirm this mistrust. One participant stated: "The videos are completely edited and brands pay a lot of money for their marketing campaigns". Another added: "They just want to make money. That's why they publish any kind of ad without thinking about the impact it can have".Gui et al. (2024) note that "influencer marketing remains largely undisclosed or inappropriately disclosed in social networks", compromising the transparency of relationships. Mathur et al. (2018) highlight that "ambiguous or absent disclosures can lead users to believe that the content is independent", confusing the audience. The ethical behaviour expected by followers was mentioned in the interviews: "I hope they are clear that it is actually an ad" and "Be honest and not just seek money from advertising". These lines reflect a demand for clarity, not the rejection of sponsored posts. Libai et al. (2025) point out that "the lack of standardization

in the disclosure of influencer remuneration undermines consumer confidence", reinforcing that an ethics in digital communication is essential. Stubb, Nyström and Colliander (2019) complete: "justifying sponsorships improves attitudes towards content and the influencer". Thus, transparency is no longer a differential and has become a basic expectation to maintain trust.

4.1.5. Theme 5 – Critical Assessment and Consumer Awareness



The last theme analyzed the critical sense and the capacity of discernment of consumers in front of the posts of influencers. Data indicates that 70.4% of participants always say they check product reviews before making a purchase (Q13), and 57.4% say they are more critical now than in the past about content promoted on Instagram (Q16). However, 48.1% still have difficulty differentiating between authentic content and advertising (Q15). In the interviews, one participant reported: *"I check the reviews and the next posted video to see if the influencer continues to use the product"*. Another said: *"Actually, I always distrust advertisements because I think they just want to make money".* This behavior reflects an increase in the interpretation of media information and a growing resistance to advertising manipulation. Casaló, Flavián and

Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) state that "message persuasion knowledge enhances the ability to critically process sponsored content", suggesting that knowledge about persuasion strategies increases critical capacity. Atiq et al. (2022) highlight that "audience engagement is strengthened when influencers demonstrate relatability and long-term consistency". Młodkowska's (2019) research confirms that more experienced and conscious consumers tend to conduct additional investigations before relying on recommendations. This is essential to reduce vulnerability to misleading content. Therefore, the increase in the critical sense of the followers shows a maturation of digital consumption. Authenticity remains important, but it is no longer accepted without questioning - it is validated by the consistency of the influencer's behavior over time.

4.2. Conclusion – General Analysis of Findings

The analysis of the five themes reveals that the influence of digital influencers in the purchase decisions of beauty products is strongly related to the perception of authenticity, ethics, trust and coherence. The research showed that, although the impact of influencers is significant, followers are increasingly aware and critical of the promoted content. The integration between quantitative and qualitative data reinforces the importance of trust as a central point for effective influencer marketing. Transparency, consistency and symbolic identification emerge as pillars for success in digital campaigns, also pointing to the need for more ethical and respectful communication with the audience.

CHAPTER V

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research aimed to investigate how digital influencers affect the purchase decisions of beauty products on Instagram, focusing on experiences, perceptions and reactions of consumers. Through the triangulated analysis of quantitative (54 respondents) and qualitative data (2 interviews), it was identified that influence occurs in a significant way, but is conditioned to elements such as perceived authenticity, confidence built over time and coherence between discourse and practice. Trust in the influencer - especially when they demonstrate consistency, transparency and genuine engagement - is a determining factor. However, negative experiences, lack of clarity about sponsorships and overly advertising content weaken this bond. The data also revealed a more critical and demanding audience, with greater awareness of persuasion strategies and a greater tendency to validate recommendations through external research and continuous observation. To summarize, influencers have a real impact on buying behavior, but this impact is increasingly mediated by an increasing critical sense of consumers and the expectation of ethical, transparent and authentic relationships.

5.1. Answer to the Research Question

How do digital influencers affect the buying decisions of followers who buy beauty products on Instagram?

Digital influencers impact buying decisions by leveraging credibility, authenticity and parasocial interaction. When followers realize that influencers are reliable, relatable and consistent, they are more likely to engage and buy. However, this influence is conditional: perceived dishonesty,

lack of transparency or negative product experiences diminish credibility and discourage future engagement.

5.2. Recommendations

Category	Recommendation
For Influencers	• Test the products before recommending them; • Make it clear when the content is sponsored; • Maintain consistency between recommendations and actual use.
For Brands	• Choose influencers that aligned with brand values; • Track post-campaign feedback; • Invest in long-term partnerships, not just transactional ones.
For Consumers	• Search the product before buy; • Check if the influencer continues to use the product; • Be sceptical with overly perfect content.
For Regulators	• Establish clear rules on disclosure of partnerships; • Invest in media education and digital literacy.

5.3. Limitations of the Research

- Restricted sample: the survey was composed exclusively of women users of Instagram, limiting generalization to other audiences;

- Small number of interviews: only two qualitative interviews were conducted, which reduces the depth of subjective understanding;
- Self-declaration: the data depend on the participants' self-report, which may be subject to memory bias or social desirability.

5.4. Suggestions for Future Research

- Inclusion of other social networks (such as TikTok or YouTube) to compare influence patterns;
- Investigate the impact of small influencers versus famous influencers;
- Carry out quantitative experiments with control groups and exposure to different types of content;
- Explore how factors such as age, education and consumption history affect vulnerability or resistance to digital influence.

5.5. Final Considerations

The influence exerted by content creators on Instagram is not only a marketing practice, but a sociocultural phenomenon that redefines consumer relations. This research reinforces that the public does not seek perfection, but truth. Influencers who act with responsibility, transparency and authenticity have greater potential to generate lasting connections and impact decisions in a positive way. The results presented here can guide both marketers and policy makers and critical consumers, contributing to a more ethical, safe and conscious digital environment.

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