

# **Are Social Media Influencers Effective? An Analysis of Information Adoption by Followers**

## **Abstract**

This study explored the adoption of information offered by social media influencers to their followers, and how SMIs affect the intention to purchase, and the ultimate purchase of products or services by their followers. The information acceptance model was applied, which addresses the characteristics of acceptance: attitude, need, quality, credibility, intention, and use of information. This model was validated through structural equation modelling based on a survey of 381 people who use social networking websites. The results indicated that all the variables of the applied model and their characteristics are directly related to the way influencers connect to their audience and the finding that the 'emotional relationship' that influencers create with their followers is key for information acceptance.

**Keywords:** followers, social media influencers, social networks, opinion leaders, brand positioning, digital consumer, digital strategies, predictive model, digital engagement, information acceptance model.

## **1. Introduction**

It is clear that what other consumers say or recommend to their peers affects purchasing behaviour (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2001), and previous research has shown that this generates a more influential, credible, and reliable impression than information generated by the brand itself through advertising or other communication tools (Katz *et al.*, 2020). Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become an efficient and popular channel for sharing consumer-generated content, thus allowing consumers to interact with each other conveniently and instantly (Sánchez Torres and Arroyo-Cañada, 2016).

Information and communication technologies (ICT) and broadband access have changed means of communication (Prado and Frogeri, 2017). The brand–consumer relationship now has a method of mediation that breaks the barriers of space–time, and has created a new digital culture that is characterised by two-way communication and the interruption of the communication process, as the public also becomes a provider of information and not just a receiver (Jenkins, 2006). Activities on social media platforms dominate modern social interactions (Sánchez-Torres *et al.*, 2018), for example, Instagram has around one billion active monthly users from different parts of the world. This makes it an ideal platform for brands to connect with their audience. Indeed, for this reason, Instagram launched Instagram Shopping between 2018–2020. It allows people to tag up to five products in a photo and 20 products in a carousel. This also allows brands to show a product with a caption and price, as well as directing people to an online store (Veissi, 2017). Brands rushed to social media platforms with no plans or clear marketing strategies (Fournier and Avery, 2011, Mangold and Faulds, 2009, Mikalef *et al.*, 2017), but found social appeal in social media influencers (SMIs) based on the sympathy of the influencer. Social media has changed the way we communicate, influence, and connect with each other (Jacobson *et al.*, 2020). Consumers use social media to generate information and share their experiences with friends, businesses, and the online communities in general through posts, tweets, shares, likes, and comments (Bailey *et al.*, 2018). Studies have shown that online recommendations and information review systems can positively affect a consumer’s trust in, and use of, a brand, and will probably increase their intention to make purchases (Constantinides and Geurts, 2005; Lorenzo-Romero *et al.*, 2011). Virtual social networks have a common denominator: they have developed influencers and created their own communities of followers, as a result of the ease of virtual social networks for creating personal connections (Ki *et al.*, 2020).

Essentially, SMIs are individuals who have mastered self-introduction strategies on social media, and have established a unique identity while gathering a substantial number of followers who are drawn to their personal brand image (Khamis *et al.*,

2017, Ryu and Park, 2020). SMIs are also known as micro celebrities (Khamis *et al.*, 2017), and have followers who have significantly increased the adoption and use of brand pages through social media platforms (De Vries and Carlson, 2014). Consumers perceive people with a large number of followers as more attractive and trustworthy, which is in line with the theory of source credibility, and is connected to electronic word of mouth ([eWOM], Jin and Phua, 2014). Source credibility refers to a consumer's perception of information based on the source's attractiveness, reliability, and knowledge on the subject of the endorsed product (Ohanian, 1990). To a large extent, social media users view social media influencers (SMI) as providers of quality information, and cultivate their trust or purchase considerations based on the SMI's valuable informational content, rather than their entertainment role (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Attractive speakers can change audience attitudes (Sharma, 1990). Given messages that use the same arguments, an attractive speaker is more likely to influence their audience than a less attractive speaker (Chaiken, 1979). Perceived social attractiveness can be a strong peripheral signal for decision-making, and thus marketers see SMIs as tools with which to create stronger brand recognition, a favourable attitude towards the brand, and increased awareness of new product lines or upcoming events (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019).

Influencer marketing involves a person with influence on social networks immediately having an impact on a brand's reputation in the minds of a large number of followers (Anzures, 2016). Consumers also give greater credence to the opinions and experiences that other users share on the network about a product or brand, than to communications directly from a brand with a known commercial purpose (Carricajo Blanco, 2015). Brands thus face the challenge of finding new formats, tones, and content to capture the attention of users browsing social networks (Bigné *et al.*, 2013). The idea of developing mutual relationships based on trust between leaders and followers is complex, and the relational transparency of the leader affects leader–follower relationships, as do the attitudes and behaviours of the followers (Gatling *et al.*, 2017). For the leader's decisions to be accepted – and

therefore to be effective – they must be recognised by their followers. Leadership is thus fundamentally an attributive process resulting from social perception (Castro-Solano, 2008). The trust of their followers is what sustains the true authority of a leader. Confidence in leadership is a facet of trust that is limited to the exchange relationship between followers and leaders. It has a clear source (the follower), an objective (the leader), and a clear result—trust as the attitude of the follower (Monzani *et al.*, 2015).

SIMs currently play an important role in marketing, by presenting products to their audiences (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020) in a wide variety of sectors, including health, fitness, fashion, beauty, food, and high technology (Raggatt *et al.*, 2018). SIM posts on Instagram generally take the form of an image or video enriched with content and a textual description that lets platform users see how brands collaborate with the SIM to promote products. (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). As celebrities have become more involved in advocating what people should consume, researchers have documented the significant effects of celebrity messages on many market communication outcomes, including brand evaluation (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Since the emergence of social media as a popular and powerful communication channel, a new breed of celebrities, including SIMs, have achieved fame and influence (Khamis *et al.*, 2017).

SIMs thus have a dynamic relationship with consumers because they are technically accessible on a variety of social media platforms, thus facilitating a high level of parasocial interaction (Abidin, 2016) between the source and followers (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). The fame of an SIM is largely based on their own efforts and engagement on the social media platforms where they have created their personal brands (Abidin, 2016). Users connect to social media websites as a way to meet their information, entertainment, and mood management needs (Shao, 2009). Information acquired through social media affects consumer preferences, behaviour, and purchase decisions (Bilal *et al.*, 2014). SIMs have become a critical element of marketing strategy for luxury brands, as fashion companies increase their budgets of influencer campaigns (Mugaddam and Aziz, 2016). Companies need to understand the SIM phenomenon to make appropriate investments in influencer

marketing. SMIs also need ideas in order to be more persuasive while working with brands and promoting products to their followers (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). To maximise the significant benefits that influencer marketing can deliver, it is important for retailers and marketers to identify the SMI most suitable for partnership (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

Studies of SMI marketing have been conducted very recently, and the best contributions analysing this context have been developed in the last three years. They focus on the way influencers can affect a brand, either as influencers or through direct marketing tactics. Most of these studies have focussed on analysing three fundamental aspects: the source, the message, and the audience, making great contributions regarding their value, use and effectiveness (Hudders *et al.*, 2020).

There are few studies analysing the real effect of follower behaviour with respect to the SMI (Belanche *et al.*, 2020). Studies in electronic commerce have developed an extensive line based on the Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1993). The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003) and (UTAUT 2) (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2012) are the most reliable and have been applied to the context of social networks, to explain the intentions and behaviour of people interacting on social networks (Casaló *et al.*, 2017a, 2018). The theory of social identity (Shi *et al.*, 2013) predicts that people tend to identify more with members of a group to which they belong, through sharing their opinions and behaving more favourably towards them, compared to members of an external group. Using social media means that anyone – whether a celebrity or average person – can share their thoughts and feelings by creating and posting any type of content (e.g. Feed, Stories, Live, and IGTV). It is thus possible for individuals to develop the appearance of a unique personality on social media (Labrecque, 2014). People who have built a considerable network of followers on social media and, with that network, the potential to influence those followers, are commonly described as SMIs (Ki and Kim, 2019). The recent phenomenon of SMIs has attracted the attention of retailers, and created a new trend for influencer marketing, which is a form of social media marketing through which retail brands collaborate with an SMI and collaboratively create branded content that includes product endorsements or

those that increase consumer brand awareness and product acquisition (Lou and Yuan, 2019)

This study is based on the relevance and power that SMIs have over the purchase decisions of their audiences (Ki *et al.*, 2020), and on the need to understand how social networks affect brands through SMIs, who are able to establish effective marketing dissemination strategies with the help of communication professionals (Goodman *et al.*, 2011).

Specifically, this study explores the effectiveness of SMI brand-related actions on social networks by analysing the effect of this information on the purchase decisions of followers, and is supported by recent findings on the importance of information transmitted by an influencer in their messages, which has effects on the behaviour of their followers (Belanche *et al.*, 2020, Zhou *et al.*, 2020).

Although studies have verified that SMI requires the implementation of professional narrative strategies to achieve intention and the desired behaviour in followers (Ki *et al.*, 2020), no research has been developed that analyses the elements leading to this behaviour through a behavioural theory based on behavioural models.

The choice of behavioural model and focus on exploring influencer messages was prompted by previous studies carried out by Erkan and Evans (2016), and Sánchez Torres *et al.* (2018) on the information acceptance model (IACM) as the most appropriate for studying information acceptance because it allows analysis of how external information can affect the behaviour of an individual.

The information acceptance model (IACM) was proposed and developed by Davis (1989), based on the TAM. The IACM offers an explanation of how people are affected by information from online mediated-communication platforms (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres *et al.*, 2018). Two more theories, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB, Ajzen, 1991) and the TAM (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1992), both involve the relationship between attitude and behavioural intention.

This model predicts the influence of external information on an individual that includes four components: quality of argument, credibility of the source, usefulness of the information, and acceptance of the information. This model was adapted to

analyse the eWOM generated by virtual communities and social networks (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres *et al.*, 2018).

Erkan and Evans (2016) postulate that effective influence requires the sum of two variables: the characteristics of the information and the attitude of consumers who adopt that information. This can be difficult to measure, as eWOM data appears in different formats and informal virtual channels (blogs, social media sites, forums, or virtual communities), and is shared in different ways (comments on brands, comments, messages between users, or simple thoughts) as consumers provide information to other consumers through online product reviews that may affect purchase decisions (Casaló *et al.*, 2018). Consumers evaluate this information to determine its usefulness in purchase or repurchase decision-making, or to strengthen loyalty ties with a brand (Erkan and Evans, 2016). There may be differences between men and women regarding the adoption of eWOM information (Sánchez Torres *et al.*, 2018).

## **2. Literature review and hypothesis development**

### *2.1 Customer reactions to influencers*

A new type of celebrity has also emerged since the appearance of social networks as communication channels; and influencers on social networks have achieved fame through their content, generating a personal brand image (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Studies have suggested that originality and uniqueness are crucial factors for a user to be perceived as an opinion leader on Instagram (Casaló *et al.*, 2018). According to the latest studies, new generations defer to opinion leaders who have emerged as influential members of online communities, and have proven to be a source of advice for other consumers (Casaló *et al.*, 2009, Thakur *et al.*, 2016). Instagram is the platform most used by opinion leaders (SMI), due to the sense of immediacy it generates, and its creation of communities. It looks like this trend will continue, at least in the near future (Ki *et al.*, 2020).

Influencers are ordinary people on social networks, unlike the celebrities who appear in traditional media. SMIs are ‘online celebrities’ who have knowledge of a specific topic that they feel confident talking and giving advice about to their followers: this is termed ‘stickiness’ (Hu *et al.*, 2020). SMI themselves often consume products or engage in various activities connected with subjects such as health and music, among other things (Lou and Yuan, 2019). One line of research has demonstrated that followers focus on the personal qualities of an SMI (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018), and SMIs have been demonstrated to be opinion leaders with the ability to influence the tendencies of their followers who will accept their advice (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017, Shareef *et al.*, 2019). An SMI’s personal traits and ability to select social media content are equally important for attracting and retaining followers (Gannon and Prothero, 2016). A recent Twitter study indicated that people place the same confidence in social media influencers that they do in a friend (Hu *et al.*, 2020, Lou and Yuan, 2019), and followers develop an attachment based on satisfaction, loyalty, and a favourable attitude. This allows SMI to become, essentially, human brands (Thomson, 2006). The price of influencer marketing – that is, paying Instagram personalities to endorse a product – has also risen significantly, with Instagram celebrities now having relationship contracts that look and feel very similar to a brand’s traditional celebrity face (Pike, 2016).

Within the influencer marketing process, the personality of the SMI is an important element in how brands and consumers are attracted because it is through this personality and the characteristics of the influencer that it is possible to know which specialised group of people can be reached (Hu *et al.*, 2020), ensuring the effectiveness of the message, and thus being a more economical advertising investment than using celebrities on traditional media (Jacobson *et al.*, 2020). A recent report found that 94% of marketing specialists who have used SMI found the campaigns to be effective. The same article mentioned that the return on investment (ROI) was 11 times that of traditional advertising (Barrio Carrasco, 2017). SMIs are ‘new independent external sponsors’ who use blogs and tweets (Casaló *et al.*, 2018). It is therefore important to analyse the perceived informational and entertainment



value of the content that each influencer generates in the model. Each SMI provides a personal touch in their publications, aesthetically speaking, regardless of whether the publication is sponsored by a brand or not. This gives their followers alternative products or informative content (Straley, 2010) in addition to brand-sponsored content.

Few studies have analysed whether attitudes towards influencers are related to long-term positive relationship behaviours (loyalty and purchases). It has been found, however, that social networks, for example, are used for their utility in finding information of interest, and that in turn, the intention generated by these positive attitudes is associated with interaction and long-term relationships with profiles on social networks (Belanche *et al.*, 2020, Casaló *et al.*, 2017b, 2018). Specifically, it has been shown that the attitudes of followers towards the information they find on social networks have an effect on the perception of utility, adoption, purchase intention, and the purchase of products (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres *et al.*, 2018).

This leads to the following four hypotheses:

- H1.* Follower attitudes towards an influencer's information are positively related to the perception of information usefulness.
- H2.* Follower attitudes towards an influencer's information are positively related to acceptance of that information.
- H3.* Follower attitudes towards an influencer's information are positively related to purchase intention.
- H4.* Follower attitudes towards an influencer's information are positively related to purchase activity.

## *2.2 Quality of the influencer's information*

Each company tries to position its brand using different signs, symbols, and attributes to differentiate it from others in a competitive market (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008). Every business needs to understand its target customers, and select the right marketing communication tools for products and services (Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol, 2013). When brands create a message that consumers consider unsuitable for the platforms on which they are broadcast, consumers attribute financial reasons to the sponsors of that content (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Some studies of native advertising have also shown that when consumers perceived messages were sponsored, their attitude towards those messages was unfavourable (Hwang and Jeong, 2015, Jin and Muqaddam, 2019), This process can be explained through the warranty law, according to which the receiver attributes an intention of manipulation to the sender based on the message (Liu *et al.*, 2015). For example, for photos to look natural on Instagram, it is necessary for them to conform to the natural essence of the profile, which implies that the influencer appears in different poses and locations with the product that the advertiser wants to promote (Carricajo Blanco, 2015).

It is a significant challenge for brands to identify and select SMIs who could have a strong effect on their target audience, and to convince those influencers to incorporate products in their publications (Wong, 2014), Having a presence on social media has become a crucial part of marketing strategy, as promoting products online through business accounts and advertising on social media platforms have proven to be efficient (De Vries *et al.*, 2012). As brands seek to position themselves through influencers, they must do so through messages that do not appear to be sponsored, so that consumers perceive messages to be more credible, thus rendering the communication more effective (Ki *et al.*, 2020). The perception of the quality of the information transmitted by influencers is thus increasingly valued by followers, and the recent studies suggest that quality translated into offering superior value is a key factor in the success of an influencer (Casaló *et al.*, 2017a, Oraedu *et al.*, 2020), For example, the prestige that an influencer gains by specialising in a particular area enables them to be a high-quality 'thought leader' (Hu *et al.*, 2020). The quality of

the information is evaluated by followers as regards type of content, its novelty, periodicity, and affinity, and other aspects that generate high interactions among their followers (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

*H5:* Follower perception of the quality of an influencer's information is positively related to the perception of its usefulness.

### *2.3 Credibility of the influencer*

SIMs must take control of their own brand identity to stand out in commercial work, and they must project a dynamic, memorable image, and constantly deliver value to consumers, employers, and markets (Khamis *et al.*, 2017). Studies have found that celebrity endorsement (SME) as a brand strategy has significantly helped and positively affected consumer attitudes towards brands, brand credibility and advertising credibility (Kamins and Gupta, 1994, Khamis *et al.*, 2017, Veissi, 2017). This suggests that celebrity endorsements materially improve financial returns for companies that employ them in advertising campaigns (Mishra, 2015). When a consumer identifies with a celebrity, it means they are willing to accept the influence of another person (Kelman, 2006) and purchase a recommended product in the hope of claiming its transferred meaning for their own lives. The effectiveness of a celebrity's message depends on their perceived level of experience and reliability (Amos *et al.*, 2008).

Marketing and advertising researchers support the study of celebrities, who have become more involved in what people should consume. It has been possible to document the results of such marketing communications over time, taking into account the evaluation of the brand, brand attitude, (Amos *et al.*, 2008, Kamins and Gupta, 1994) purchase intention (Jin and Phua, 2014, Till and Busler, 2000), and corporate credibility (Spry *et al.*, 2011). Influencers can add value by making brand advertisements eye-catching. In this way they can increase brand awareness (Macinnis *et al.*, 2016), improve perception of brand trustworthiness, credibility,

persuasion, and friendliness (Till and Shimp, 1998), and positively reinforce brand associations (Till and Busler, 2000, Tripp *et al.*, 1994), which favours an increase in purchase intention because of the connection of the product to the influencer (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 2004). There are several conditions that must be met if the desired effects are to be achieved. These conditions are mainly focussed on credibility and social identification (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019, Jin and Phua, 2014). The most essential condition for product marketing and brand positioning by SMIs is credibility (Amos *et al.*, 2008, Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Sponsors must be attractive, trustworthy, and informed about everything they promote (Ki *et al.*, 2020, Ohanian, 1990).

The most recent studies on the credibility of the information transmitted by influencers show that when followers perceive that it is not 'authentic' (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020), or that a brand has paid for the influencer to promote a product, the influencer's credibility is reduced, and this negatively affects their interactions and positive effects (Belanche *et al.*, 2020). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H6:* The credibility of an influencer's information is positively related to the perception of its usefulness.

#### *2.4 The need for influencer information*

Several studies have treated SMI brand content as online advertisements, and investigated their influence on followers' decisions. The level of intrusion can be minimal or maximal. In the case of minimal intrusion, brands simply send free products in the hope that SMIs will communicate about the product (for example, in an Instagram post), whereas maximal invasion involves brands that offer payment in exchange for the publication of a post or posts, the content of which has been completely determined contractually by the company. In the latter case, the brand can dictate specific requirements regarding content, such as the minimum number of posts that mention the product, the number of quotes and images of the brand around the influencer, or a required redirect to the brand's online store (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018).

Such promotions, and the messages produced, play an important role in consumer acceptance (Gan *et al.*, 2019). If the advertisement is credible, then it is a strong mechanism for obtaining positive marketing results, which helps the effectiveness of celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017, Jin and Muqaddam, 2019, Ki *et al.*, 2020). Advertising messages that tend to present the realistic qualities of the brand tend to have greater effectiveness when they make the message clear and concise, and maintain congruence in communication (Ki *et al.*, 2020).

People like to follow those on social media who are similar to them, as this provides a greater sense of connection and relationship (Kywe, 2012). An SMI whose personality is similar to that of their followers will convince them to see the subjects of promoted posts as a human brand that satisfies their need for a relationship (Ki *et al.*, 2020). When consumers choose a brand and stick with it, this choice and sentiment are often based on aspirations for who they would like to be in the future (Japutra *et al.*, 2014).

The greater the number of followers an individual has on social networks, the greater their perceived social influence (Jin and Phua, 2014) because the images being broadcast to each follower could potentially be republished on their own pages, thus expanding visibility to an even larger audience (Scott, 2011). It is important for an individual to have a significant interest in the life of a celebrity, as well as a certain level of attraction and respect for the SMI, in order to be influenced by endorsements (Bearden *et al.*, 1989, Ohanian, 1990). The positive perception that an individual creates on Instagram is likely to generate comments from their followers about SMI profiles (Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol, 2013).

It has been demonstrated that followers tend to search for useful content on social media profiles, as this allows them to obtain information quickly and for free (Casaló *et al.*, 2017b). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H7:* A follower's need for an influencer's information is positively related to the perception of its usefulness.

### *2.5 Usefulness of an influencer's information*

The latest findings on the perception of purchasing decision utility in the information transmitted by influencers demonstrates its high degree of effectiveness (Belanche *et al.*, 2020, Casaló *et al.*, 2017a, 2018). For example, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) suggests that social networks and influencers are sought for the profits they generate. These can be pleasurable – fun – or profitable in terms of the information they contain (Casaló *et al.*, 2018). An individual is likely to imitate the success of their favourite celebrities, and will often receive a similar degree of positive feedback. Women tend to be more susceptible to social influence than men (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Celebrities appeal to a common reference group, which serves as a reference for the formation of values and attitudes and, ultimately, purchase decisions (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2015). Influencers can transform an unfamiliar product into a known product through various persuasion techniques, and by generating positive associations through advertisements (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

SMI content serves as an important source of information for other social media users in terms of product choices or purchasing decisions (Ki and Kim, 2019). Compliance with follower needs affects attachment to an SMI: the more that followers form a strong emotional bond with an SMI, the more effective the emotional transfer of SMI to their product/brand recommendations will be, thus increasing the propensity of followers to adopt the recommended product or brand (Ki *et al.*, 2020). The celebrity incentive for financial gain does not appear to negatively affect the purchase desire of social media users (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). If an influencer is considered to be trustworthy, attractive and an expert, they can influence the attitude, behaviour, and purchase intentions of their audience (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). This leads to the final hypotheses:

*H8:* Follower perceptions of the usefulness of an influencer's information are positively related to the acceptance of that information.

*H9:* Follower acceptance of an influencer's information is positively related to purchase intention.

*H10:* Follower purchase intentions generated by an influencer's information is positively related to purchase behaviour.

The proposed hypotheses are summarised in Figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1)

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Procedure*

To test the hypotheses, an IACM was empirically examined (Erkan and Evans, 2016) to determine whether consumers consider information from the influencers on social networks in product purchase decisions. This study used a quantitative approach through the application of online surveys with a sample of 381 people located in Colombia and Spain. The sample consisted of women (58.5%) and 158 men (41.5%), 154 were Colombian (40.4%), and 227 were Spanish (59.6%). Ages ranged from 18 to 25 years (n=251, 65.9%), 26 to 35 years (n=77, 20.2%), 36 to 45 years (n=25, 6.6%), and over 45 years (n=27, people 7.1%). No differences were found by country, age, or gender, once the multi-group analysis and the moderating effects test in PLS were applied. The social networks most used to follow an SMI were Instagram (77.2%), YouTube (17.6%), Facebook (4.2%), and TikTok (1%). Regarding the type of content provided by the influencer, 63.25% followed SMIs in the clothing/fashion/beauty category, 4.46% in the humour category, 2.89% in technology, 1.84% in music, 3.67% in food/travels, 3.15% sports, and 0.52% in news.

(Insert Table 1)

### 3.2 Measures

The methodology proposed by Babones (2016) was followed to define the final questionnaire. Before starting the actual survey, we performed a pre-test to determine whether the survey as a whole and the individual questions made sense, and were easy to understand by the users surveyed. We conducted a pilot survey with a small subset of the original population to minimise problems before actual data collection. This pilot test (pre-test) was conducted with 20 people to determine whether they understood the measurement tool. The respondents used a Likert scale ranging from 1 (= 'strongly disagree') to 7 (= 'strongly agree') to record their responses.

The final questionnaire had three sections. The first section contained demographic questions, and the second part was a Spanish adaptation of the IACM proposed by Sánchez Torres *et al.* (2018), in which the variables of information quality, information credibility, need for information, attitude towards the information, usefulness of the information, acceptance of the information, purchase behaviour and purchase intention were examined. The third section contained questions about the type of influencer and product acquired by the recommendation of an influencer (Appendix 1).

### 3.3 Results and data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using structural equation modelling (SEM) to verify the cause–effect relationship between variables using the partial least squares (PLS) estimation method in the Smart program. PLS was used because the exploratory nature of the study required an estimation method that would allow an examination of both the variable measurement and the potential for predicting their relationships (Hair *et al.*, 2014, Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020).

The first analysis consisted of determining the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs and the reliability of each measurement variable (Hair *et al.*, 2014).



The convergent validity of each of the constructs was successful, because they all have load values greater than 0.5 and a level of statistical significance according to Student's t test: ( $t > 1.96$ , see Table 1). This verified the individual reliability of each construct evaluated by analysing the correlations of the loads of against each variable. The Dillon–Goldstein test, known as the composite reliability coefficient, was applied to test the coherence of the internal measurement of all the indicators in relation to their corresponding variables. All of the resulting values were above the minimum acceptable value of 0.7 (Gefen *et al.*, 2000). The Cronbach's alpha test was then applied, and all of the values were higher than 0.7, complying with the minimum requirement to validate effectiveness in measuring the variables (Churchill and Iacobucci, 2004). The convergent validity was checked again, taking the variance into account—that is, confirming that there is a similar variance between the indicators and their construct, which implies that the average variance extracted (AVE) must exceed the cut-off point of 0.5 explained by the indicators (Fornell and Larcker, 1981, see Table 2). Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the AVE of each variable with the squared correlation between the variables, with all the values obtained for the main diagonal (AVE) exceeding the squared correlations. The matrix shows that each variable is more closely related to its own elements than to the elements of the other variables because the values below the diagonal are smaller than the AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981, see Table 3).

(Insert Table 2)

(Insert Table 3)

Continuing with the analysis of the structural model and the verification of the proposed hypotheses, resampling was carried out using the bootstrapping technique, which is used to make multiple estimates to check the predictive level of the model relative to reality (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Using 5,000 subsamples drawn from the same research data, the model parameters were compared. The results verified that the model fulfilled its predictive power (effect of the independent variables on

the dependent ones), because the R-squared values exceeded 0.1 (Hair *et al.*, 2014) (Table 4). The results of the Student's t-test support the proposed relationships, and therefore all hypotheses with an error level  $p < 0.05$  are accepted (see Table 4 and Figure 2). *H1* is supported:  $\beta = 0.224^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), follower attitudes to an influencer's information is positively related to the perception of information usefulness. *H2* is also supported:  $\beta = 0.0775^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), follower attitudes to an influencer's information are positively related to acceptance of that information. The results for *H3*,  $\beta = 0.365^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), demonstrated that follower attitudes to an influencer's information are positively related to purchase intention. One of the most important effects is supported, *H4*:  $\beta = 0.454^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), follower attitudes to an influencer's information are positively related to purchase activity. Hypothesis *H5*,  $\beta = 0.195^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), is validated: follower perceptions of the quality of an influencer's information are positively related to perceptions of its usefulness. *H6*,  $\beta = 0.346^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), is supported; it is that the credibility of an influencer's information is positively related to the perception of its usefulness. Hypothesis *H7*,  $\beta = 0.120^*$  (*\*p-value 0.046*) is supported, namely that follower needs for an influencer's information are positively related to the perception of its usefulness. *H8*,  $\beta = 0.117^*$  (*\*p-value 0.001*): it is supported that follower perceptions of the usefulness of an influencer's information are positively related to the acceptance of that information. *H9* is also supported:  $\beta = 0.431^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), follower acceptance of an influencer's information is positively related to purchase intention. Finally, *H10*,  $\beta = 0.392^*$  (*\*p-value 0.000*), is supported: follower purchase intentions generated by an influencer's information are positively related to purchase behaviour.

(Insert Table 4)

(Insert Figure 2)

#### **4. Discussion**

In this research we have analysed the effectiveness of information from SMIs and the influence they have on their followers. This demonstrates that the emotional–

rational relationships that SMIs build with their followers through their messages (the information they transmit) is the key to their success as a marketing tool. The results of this research indicate a strong relationship between follower attitudes to an influencer and their positive effect on the entire decision-making process, from the perception of useful information, information acceptance, purchase intention generated by the information, to the purchase finally generated. These results are of great importance because they confirm the findings of previous studies about the emotional affiliation between followers and influencers (Khamis *et al.*, 2017, Schouten *et al.*, 2020, Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). They support previous findings using theories of social analysis to demonstrate that followers allow themselves to be influenced based on the degree of positive attitudes, sympathy, and perceived similarity (Tafesse and Wood, 2021) which means that influencers, due to their specific characteristics, will attract a unique and special community of followers with whom they share common interests. This generates an attitude of voluntary submission towards their information (post, comments, videos, advertisements). For the first time something is very important for the SMIs, and this attitude not only allows the information transmitted by the influencer to be accepted, but also has positive effects on intention and decision-making in purchases, something that had only been demonstrated in previous studies on the general profiles of brands, advertising in social networks, and virtual brand communities, as well as other mechanisms of eWOM (Casaló *et al.*, 2017b, 2017a, 2018, Matute Vallejo *et al.*, 2015, Sánchez Torres *et al.*, 2018).

The results which focus on the content of the information verify the relationship between the quality of an influencer's information and the perception of its usefulness for followers, reinforcing the suggestion of Ki *et al.* (2020) regarding the quality of an SMI's information—that it must be sufficiently credible that consumers want to adopt it. These findings support conclusions by other authors which suggest that it is necessary for an influencer to be professionalised, and that their followers expect the content offered by influencers to be of a specific quality, such as being specialised information of interest, novel, and fresh content, and an SMI's interaction

with followers being effectively managed, among other things (Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

Together, the results indicate that followers consider the relationship between the credibility of an influencer's information and their perception of its usefulness. This is reinforced in the findings of previous studies, which recommend that influencers do not publish commercial information without their stamp of originality, and that the content is not misaligned with the characteristics of the influencer (for example, promoting something that the influencer would never actually use or do), as this would have negative effects on their following (Belanche *et al.*, 2020). This is in line with other studies (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019, Jin & Phua, 2014) which concluded that in order for the desired effects of communication and social identification to be achieved, the most essential condition for product commercialisation and brand positioning is credibility.

The positive relationship between the need for information from the influencer and follower perception of its usefulness was validated in line with Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who found that people use selective exposure to focus on what they are interested in seeing, thus allowing them to borrow some aspects of the personality and lifestyle of the influencers who continue to feel like them. This makes the information they transmit necessary for the consumer, and creates a positive relationship with the intention to adopt that information.

This finding is one of the most important in this study, as it was also discovered that the perception of the usefulness of the information as a positive influence on information acceptance, the acceptance of the influencer's information, and its positive effect on the purchase intention, as well as the purchase intention generated by the information of the influencer that generates the purchase, and reinforce the conclusions of Ki *et al.* (2020), who considered human brands that generate a strong attachment between people and lead them.

It can therefore be said that followers like to imitate SMIs and modify their own attitudes and behaviours to match those they follow. As Ki and Kim (2019) noted, this positive attitude encourages people to accept the information in the SMI's content, and affects their product or purchase decisions.

#### *4.1 Theoretical and managerial implications*

The theoretical contributions of this SMI's research are of great importance, as this is one of the first studies to examine in detail the entire process involving follower adoption of an SMI's information based on the IACM. The study verifies the importance of information's utility value sought by followers from their influencers, and also the effectiveness of the information given by SMIs in influencing the buying behaviour of followers. It also finally verifies the strong relationship between the attitude of a follower and their influencer. This stands out as part of a strong communion between follower and their favoured SMIs that involves both the emotional and the rational. This allows us to conclude that SMIs will be able to influence the purchase decisions of their followers according to the way they manage their relationships with them.

In conclusion, the acceptance of information from influencers is based on the attitudes of the followers to the influencer, the influencer's credibility or image, the quality of the information, and their followers' need for it. If the information (advertising campaign) is useful, then it will generate an intention to buy the product, or follow the brand recommended by the SMIs.

The managerial contributions of this research suggest that companies and brands carry out very precise planning of their SMI campaigns: they need to carefully define the required type of SMI, as well as the message of the campaign and the support that they must integrate into their other marketing actions to achieve their objectives (usually to generate purchases and buyback). The results suggest that influencers need to be professional, and dedicate time and resources to the entire SMI communication process, including planning, creation, and execution and feedback

regarding their actions, in order to offer the level, quality, and credibility of information that followers demand.

## **5. Research limitations and future lines of research**

This work is not without limitations. This study has focussed on analysing the effectiveness of influencers and explored follower adoption of information in a general way. It did not analyse any particular type of information, which may mean that the followers were evaluating unclear information.

Another limitation of this study is that there is a marked tendency for SMIs to have a particular focus—they are particularly likely to be in the clothing/fashion/beauty category, and 63.25% of the respondents in our survey were in this category: our results could thus be biased to this type of influencer.

Future research should verify the relevance of an influencer's message, and differences in the adoption of information depending on more precise contexts, categories, and niches. An analysis of whether traditional social media indicators, such as the number of likes, interactions, or followers, are related to these positive attitudes towards the information issued by the influencer is also suggested.

The wide in research on SMI is wide and requires the support of the scientific community for its development, since it has a prominent future within current communication and advertising strategies.

## **Appendix 1. Questionnaire**

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### **Measurement scales**

**Quality of information** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

The information about products which are shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

IQ1- I think they are understandable.

IQ2- I think they are clear.

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IQ3- In general, I think the quality of them is high.

**Credibility of information** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

The information about products which are shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

IC1- I think they are convincing.

IC2- I think they are strong.

IC3- I think they are credible.

IC4- I think they are accurate.

**Needs of information** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

The information about products which are shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

NI1- I like to apply them when I consider new products.

NI2- to assess them, if I have little experience with a product, and they have already tried it.

NI3- to consult them when I need to know more about a product they have already used.

**Attitude towards information** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

The information about products which are shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

AT1- I always read them when I buy a product.

AT2- They are helpful for my decision making when I buy a product.

AT3- They make me confident in purchasing product.

**Usefulness of information** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

The information about products which are shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

IU1- I think they are generally useful.

IU2- I think they provide valuable information.

IU3- I can use them for my own benefit.

**Acceptance of information** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

The information about products which are shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

IA1- make it easier for me to make purchase decision.

IA2- enhance my effectiveness in making purchase decision.

IA3- allow me to make more informed decisions about the product purchase.

**Purchase intention** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).

After considering information about a product of interest to me which has been shared by my Influencer in social networking sites...

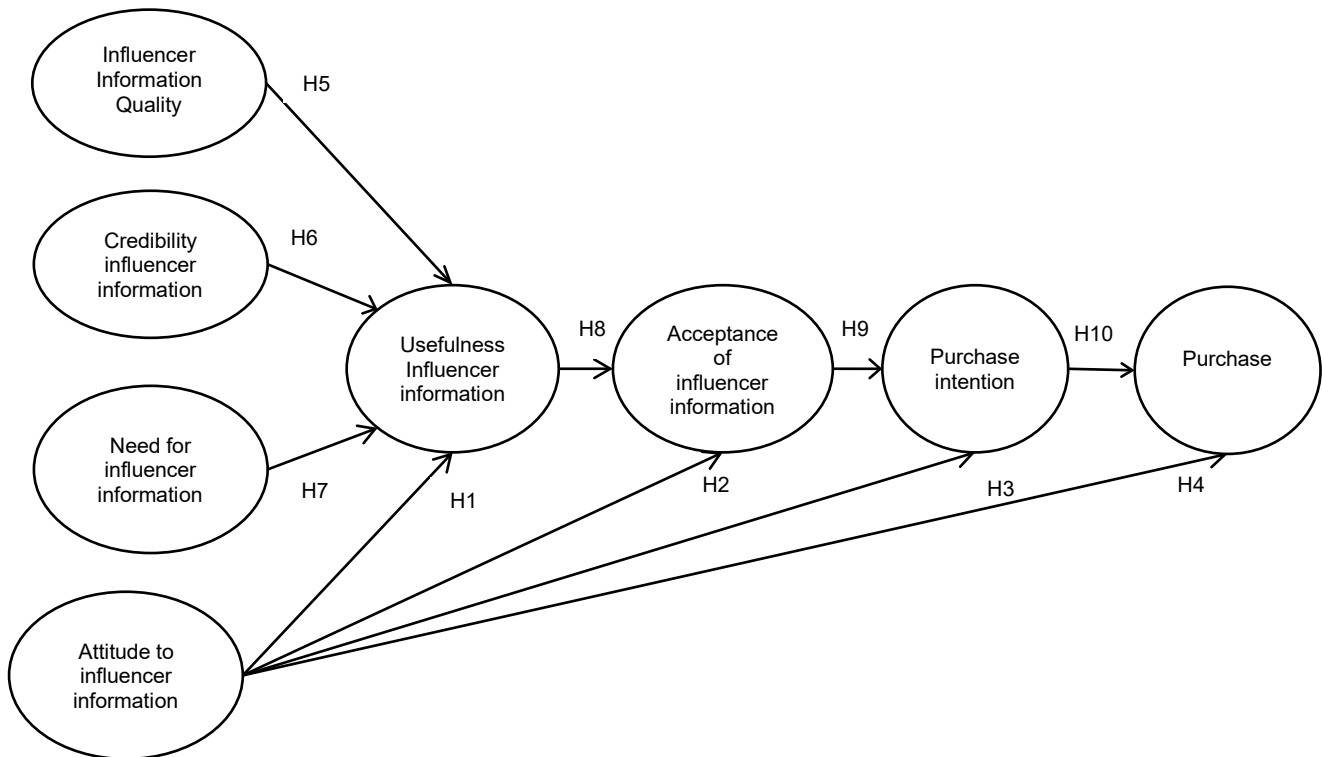
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- PI1- It is very likely that I will buy any of those products.  
 PI2- I will buy any of those products the next time I need a product.  
 PI3- I will recommend those products to my friends in the same way.

**Purchase** (Erkan and Evans, 2016, Sánchez Torres, Cañada, et al., 2018).  
 P1- I have ever bought a product recommended by my Influencer on social networking sites.  
 P2- I take into account the comments made by my Influencer on social networking sites when I make my purchase .

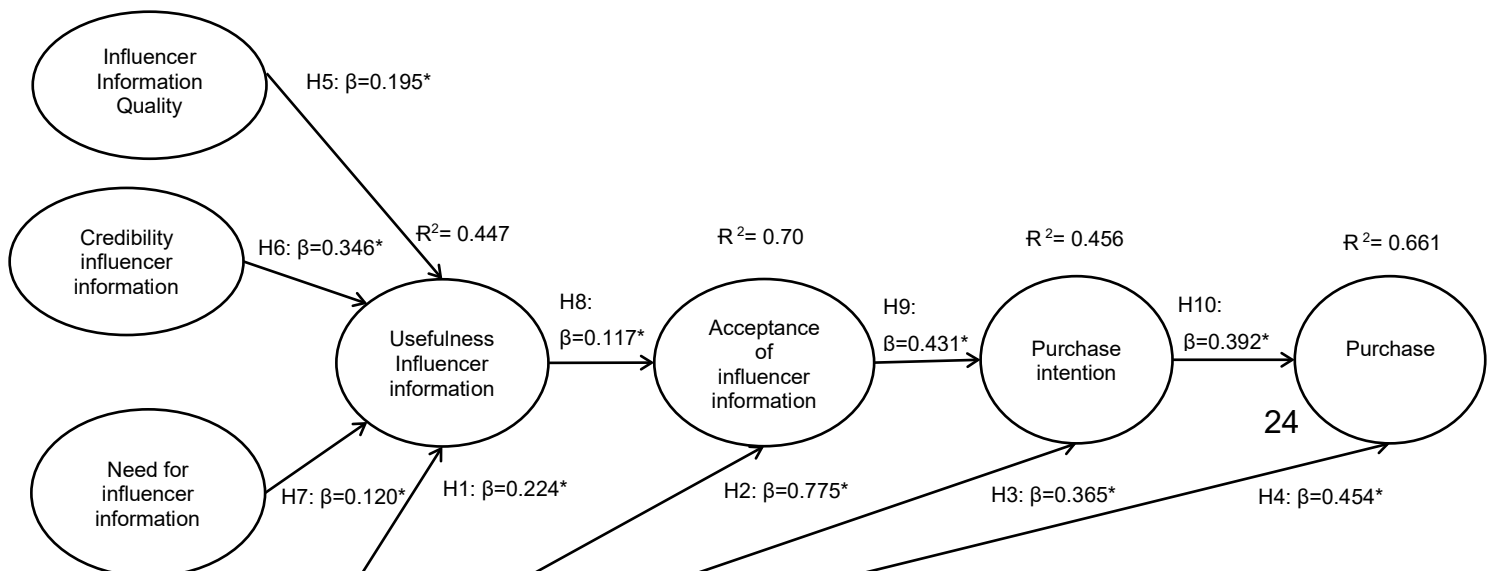
Source: Own production

Figure 1. Proposed empirical model



Adapted from Erkan & Evans (2016) and Sánchez-Torres et al. (2018).

Figure 2. Validated Empirical Model





Notes: \*p<0.05 (error acceptance level)

Table 1  
Loading of items and t-values

Items	Load	t-value	p- value*
AT1	0.871	38.097	0.000
AT2	0.914	46.221	0.000
AT3	0.858	49.039	0.000
IA1	0.921	63.547	0.000
IA2	0.927	58.062	0.000
IA3	0.899	46.848	0.000
IC1	0.841	53.928	0.000
IC2	0.780	50.072	0.000
IC3	0.828	17.149	0.000
IC4	0.817	18.027	0.000
IQ1	0.835	19.956	0.000
IQ2	0.875	19.280	0.000
IQ3	0.808	20.601	0.000
IU1	0.907	20.447	0.000
IU2	0.897	14.738	0.000
IU3	0.880	35.652	0.000
NI1	0.823	34.235	0.000
NI2	0.917	30.460	0.000
NI3	0.876	17.824	0.000
PI1	0.883	24.924	0.000

PI2	0.880	20.308	0.000
PI3	0.905	30.230	0.000
P	0.933	117.960	0.000
P	0.944	160.428	0.000

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$  (error acceptance level) AT: Attitude to information, IA: Acceptance of information, PI: Purchase intention, P: Purchase, IQ: Information Quality, IC: Credibility of the information, NI: Need for information, IU: Usefulness of the information.

Table 2

Convergent validity test of the variables

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
AT	0.869	0.920	0.794
IA	0.904	0.940	0.839
IC	0.834	0.889	0.667
IQ	0.791	0.878	0.705
IU	0.876	0.923	0.801
NI	0.843	0.906	0.762
PI	0.868	0.919	0.792
P	0.864	0.936	0.880

Notes: AT: Attitude to information, IA: Acceptance of information, PI: Purchase intention, P: Purchase, IQ: Information quality, IC: Credibility of the information, NI: Need for information, IU: Usefulness of the information.

Table 3

Discriminant validity test of the variables

	ATI	IA	IC	IQ	IU	NOI	PI	P
AT	0.891							
IA	0.845	0.916						

IC	0.560	0.580	0.817					
IQ	0.479	0.500	0.638	0.840				
IU	0.598	0.580	0.672	0.586	0.895			
NI	0.727	0.731	0.633	0.525	0.604	0.873		
PI	0.729	0.739	0.592	0.397	0.534	0.637	0.890	
P	0.740	0.741	0.545	0.450	0.553	0.624	0.723	0.938

Notes: AT: Attitude to information, IA: Acceptance of information, PI: Purchase intention, P: Purchase, IQ: Information quality, IC: Credibility of the information, NI: Need for information, IU: Usefulness of the information.

Table 4

Summary of the validity analysis of the model and hypotheses

Hypothesis	Effect	test	B	R-square	T Statistics	P-Values
H1	AT -> IU	Supported	0.224*	IU= 0.447	4.740	0.000
H2	AT -> IA	Supported	0.775*	IA= 0.70	25.57	0.000
H3	AT-> PI	Supported	0.365*	PI= 0.456	4.833	0.000
H4	AT -> P	Supported	0.454*	P= 0.661	9.251	0.000
H5	IQ -> IU	Supported	0.195*		4.139	0.000
H6	IC -> IU	Supported	0.346*		6.515	0.000
H7	NI -> IU	Supported	0.120*		1.998	0.046
H8	IU -> IA	Supported	0.117*		3.471	0.001
H9	IA -> PI	Supported	0.431*		5.708	0.000
H10	PI -> P	Supported	0.392*		7.606	0.000

Notes: \*p<0.05 (error acceptance level) AT: Attitude to information, IA: Acceptance of information, PI: Purchase intention, P: Purchase, IQ: Information quality, IC: Credibility of the information, NI: Need for information, IU: Usefulness of the information.