

Digital Fashion Cultures.

Clothing, Influence, and Social Meaning

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Abstract

Fashion, a potent agent of socialization, imprints an enduring mark on the dynamics of society. The clothing we select not only mirrors personal style but also situates individuals within distinct social echelons. As social systems undergo increased complexity, so does the intricate fabric of fashion. In the digital age, the inseparable connection between fashion and mass media becomes evident. The rise of new media platforms, especially Instagram, has birthed a distinctive social enclave for opinion-shapers, commonly recognized as influencers. This article delves into the findings of an extensive ethnographic study, employing through interviews, contextual analysis, and participant observation. Leveraging a compelling case study rooted in the personal experiences of one of the authors, we present three years of ethnographic exploration aimed at unraveling the influencer phenomenon on Instagram. Our research aims to shed light on the interdependence of fashion, social media, and the influential role individuals play in shaping contemporary opinions.

Keywords: clothing, Instagram, mass media, social class.

Approach to the subject of study

Fashion has long played a pivotal role in society, functioning not only as a means of personal expression but also as a mirror of cultural values, social hierarchies, and economic realities. Historically, fashion has shaped perceptions of self and others, reinforcing social identities and belonging. In the digital era, however, its influence has expanded beyond traditional boundaries. The rise of social media—particularly Instagram—has accelerated the dissemination of trends, democratized access to style, and blurred the lines between creators, consumers, and marketers. Fashion today operates as both a social language and a global communication system.

Within this transformed media ecosystem, individuals seek reliable points of reference to interpret the overwhelming flow of visual information. In this context, fashion influencers have emerged as cultural intermediaries who bridge personal aesthetics with market logics. Typically self-made figures who transform

their personal style into digital capital, influencers build trust-based relationships that shape not only followers' fashion choices but also their broader patterns of consumption and self-presentation. Their perceived authenticity and accessibility endow them with a persuasive authority that challenges traditional advertising models.

This article presents a qualitative exploration of how influencers shape taste, credibility, and purchasing decisions within fashion communities. Drawing on case studies, interviews, and participant observation, the research investigates the mechanisms through which influencers construct authenticity, manage visibility, and negotiate their dual role as both individuals and brands (Audrezet & de Kerviler, 2024). By examining these dynamics, we aim to contribute to current debates in digital ethnography, consumer culture, and social influence, while reflecting on the ethical and methodological challenges inherent to researching from within the digital environment (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Methodology

This study explores how fashion influencers generate public opinion and shape the consumption patterns of their followers, with particular attention to their role in constructing trends and behaviors through social media platforms—most notably Instagram. To address these questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining case study analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The integration of these techniques allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how influencers communicate with their audiences and how such interactions translate into tangible behavioral and attitudinal changes among followers.

Case Study and Research Context

The research adopts a case study design, focusing on one of the authors, who maintains an active and sustained presence as a fashion influencer on Instagram. This autoethnographic approach aligns with recent discussions on digital self-observation and the researcher's positionality within platformed environments (Are, 2023). . This decision was based on her extensive experience and her well-established follower base, which provided a natural setting and an abundant source of empirical data. The influencer regularly shares fashion-related content—such as outfit proposals, product recommendations, and lifestyle insights—and engages directly with her audience through comments, private messages, and interactive stories.

Instagram was selected as the central platform due to its dominance in the fashion industry and its capacity to facilitate visual storytelling and community building. The author's profile, followed by more than 10,000 users, represents a clearly defined digital micro-community that allows the observation of influencer-follower interactions in real time.

To mitigate potential researcher bias stemming from the dual role of the author as both subject and investigator, systematic field notes, self-reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing were implemented during the data collection and interpretation processes. Such reflexive and procedural strategies are consistent with broader qualitative standards for bias mitigation in social research (Zahle, 2025).Data were coded

thematically, emphasizing recurring patterns of interaction, expressions of trust, and consumer responses to influencer content.

Participant Observation

A key component of this research was the use of participant observation, in which one of the authors simultaneously assumed the roles of researcher and influencer within the studied digital environment. This approach enabled an immersive understanding of the everyday practices, strategies, and forms of interaction that occur between influencers and their followers. The author's dual position granted privileged access to private exchanges—such as direct messages and ephemeral story interactions—that are typically inaccessible to external observers but play a decisive role in shaping perceptions, trust, and consumer behavior.

The observation period spanned six months, during which the author systematically recorded field notes and catalogued recurrent interaction patterns, including likes, comments, and responses to polls or question prompts. Special attention was given to moments involving product recommendations or fashion advice, tracking subsequent behavioral responses such as follower purchases, adoption of new styles, or shifts in engagement intensity..

To ensure methodological transparency and ethical integrity, all observations respected privacy norms and were conducted under explicit informed consent from participants. The reflexive nature of the participant observation also allowed for continuous awareness of positionality and potential bias, strengthening the interpretive validity of the findings (Cera, 2023; Huang, 2023).

Data Collection: Interviews with Followers

To complement the participant observation, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a selected group of the influencer's followers. These interviews sought to obtain qualitative insights into how followers interpret the influencer's content and whether such content influences their consumption decisions. A total of 15 followers were interviewed. Participants were selected according to two criteria: (1) their observable level of engagement with the influencer's posts—based on the frequency of likes, comments, and direct messages—and (2) their explicit willingness to participate in the study. This purposive sampling strategy made it possible to document a range of follower perspectives while ensuring that all participants had sustained interaction with the influencer's content (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The interviews were conducted via video call and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview protocol explored participants' motivations for following the influencer, the types of content they found most engaging, and the extent to which the influencer's fashion recommendations shaped their purchasing habits. Additional questions addressed followers' general attitudes toward fashion influencers, their perceptions of credibility and authenticity, and their reflections on the role of social media in shaping taste and consumption. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, fully transcribed, and examined through thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns, divergent cases, and shared interpretative frames (Haan et al., 2025).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two phases: first, through an examination of Instagram engagement metrics, and second, through thematic coding of the interview transcripts and observational notes (Vázquez-Atochero & Ledo-Díaz, 2024). This two-step analytical strategy allowed us to connect observable patterns of engagement with participants' subjective interpretations and self-reported behaviors, strengthening internal validity through data triangulation.

1. **Instagram Metrics Analysis:** The first phase consisted of examining the influencer's Instagram engagement metrics, including likes, comments, shares, story views, and responses to interactive features such as polls and questions. Particular attention was paid to posts featuring product endorsements, fashion recommendations, or sponsored brand content. By comparing engagement rates across different types of posts, we identified which content categories elicited stronger reactions from the audience and were more likely to prompt behavioral change, such as purchasing a recommended item or adopting a new trend. This descriptive metric analysis offered an initial framework for interpreting how followers respond to distinct modes of influencer communication (Haan et al., 2025).

2. **Qualitative Content Analysis:** The second phase involved thematic coding of the interview transcripts. Codes were generated inductively to identify recurring themes related to follower motivations, perceptions of authenticity, trust in the influencer, and self-reported changes in fashion consumption practices. This process made it possible to categorize responses into analytically coherent clusters, such as credibility assessment, relational closeness, and perceived usefulness of fashion recommendations. These qualitative findings were then cross-referenced with the Instagram engagement metrics to identify convergences between what followers said they valued and what their actual engagement patterns revealed. This comparative approach enhanced interpretive depth by linking discourse with observable behavior (Palinkas et al., 2015).

3. **Participant Observation Notes:** The field notes derived from participant observation were also subjected to thematic analysis. Special attention was given to private messages, which often provided richer and more nuanced insights than public interactions. These private exchanges illuminated how followers articulate preferences, express doubts, or seek direct advice, offering a deeper understanding of how the influencer–follower relationship develops in everyday practice. By integrating these observational data with the interview themes and engagement metrics, we were able to contextualize individual responses within broader patterns of interaction and evaluate how personal connections contribute to the influencer's perceived credibility and persuasive power.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several strategies were implemented. First, triangulation of data from multiple sources—Instagram engagement metrics, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation—enabled a comprehensive and multi-layered understanding of the influencer–follower relationship. The combination of quantitative indicators with qualitative insights made it possible to cross-validate emerging patterns and reinforce the robustness of the interpretations. This integrative approach minimized the risk of drawing conclusions from a single type of data (Haan et al., 2025).

Second, particular attention was paid to reducing researcher bias, especially given that one of the authors simultaneously occupied the roles of researcher and subject. To address this issue, data analysis was conducted collaboratively by all authors, allowing for multiple interpretative perspectives and enhancing analytical rigor. Reflexive field notes and systematic documentation also supported the transparency of the process, while interviews with followers provided an external point of reference that balanced the subjectivity inherent in participant observation (Zahle, 2025).

This methodological design—combining case study analysis, participant observation, and interviews—offered a holistic approach to examining the influence of fashion influencers on Instagram. By analyzing both public interactions and private exchanges, the study generated nuanced insights into how influencers shape consumption patterns, establish credibility, and produce opinion within their digital communities. The mixed-methods framework ultimately allowed us to investigate the complex dynamics of social media influence from complementary angles, contributing to the growing body of scholarship on digital marketing, mediated authenticity, and influencer culture.

Ethical Considerations

Given the personal nature of social media interactions, ethical considerations constituted a central component of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, who were fully briefed on the aims of the research and assured of both their anonymity and the confidentiality of their contributions. Followers were also informed that their interactions with the influencer were being examined for academic purposes, and private messages were only included in the analysis with the explicit, voluntary consent of the individuals involved.

All identifying details were removed during transcription and analysis to protect participant privacy, and pseudonyms were used when quoting or describing follower interactions. The collection, storage, and interpretation of data adhered strictly to established ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, ensuring compliance with principles of transparency, voluntary participation, and respect for digital privacy. This ethical framework was essential given the intimate, informal, and often private nature of influencer–follower communication on social media (Cera 2023; Huang 2023).

Fashion: Historical and Sociological Approach

Fashion and dress have long served as analytical lenses through which broader social structures can be understood. In the late nineteenth century, Georg Simmel theorized the relationship between fashion and the notion of “good taste,” highlighting its dual function as a force for both imitation and differentiation. In the twentieth century, Quinaya Ocampo (2018) further examined the evolution of fashion in relation to economic conditions, social stratification, and purchasing power. Building on these perspectives, Bourdieu conceptualized taste as a social strategy intrinsically linked to distinction and, crucially, to the mechanisms of social reproduction. As Mary Douglas lamented, the social sciences long lacked a theory of consumption capable of systematically connecting tastes with consumer practices—an analytical gap that Bourdieu’s work began to fill.

Baudrillard expanded this debate by introducing the idea of the system of objects, proposing that consumers are embedded within the very structures that organize material culture. His reflections on the emergence of the strategy of desire illuminate the centrality of consumption in capitalist societies, while his critique of advertising as a force that homogenizes thought remains strikingly relevant.

From a contemporary perspective, Saulquin (2009; 2014) offers a comprehensive sociological reading of fashion and appearance. In *Políticas de las Apariencias*, she analyses the strategic role of image and the shifting significance of dress within a context in which digital technologies intensify interpersonal connections. Saulquin underscores how the expansion of social networks reshapes imaginaries and everyday practices, fragmenting fashion into multiple logics and codes rather than reinforcing a single dominant paradigm. She also argues that the Bourdieusian model of vertical imposition gives way, in the twenty-first century, to a more horizontal structure aligned with the dynamics of digital society—a shift that resonates with Baudrillard's critique of homogenization.

In this rapidly evolving landscape, the question arises: how can fashion be marketed in an increasingly competitive environment, especially following the flourishing 1990s, when the industry reached unprecedented heights? Traditional marketing strategies, once effective, began to lose traction as digital environments reconfigured communicative and commercial practices. Zyman (1999) signaled the decline of conventional marketing and the need for new approaches suited to emerging conditions.

Within this new paradigm, innovative strategies, actors, and professions emerge (Nosrati et al., 2013). Alonso González (2015) analyses how major Spanish textile groups strategically entered the digital sphere, colonizing platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest, each with distinct priorities aligned with their target publics. In the luxury sector, Pérez-Curiel and Sanz-Marcos (2019) illustrate how brands like Gucci adopt bidirectional communication strategies on Instagram aimed at millennial consumers, revitalizing corporate identity to match the expectations and consumption patterns of younger audiences. Revisiting Baudrillard's reflections on virtuality alongside these contemporary contributions helps explain the rise of the influencer as a key intermediary between subject and object—a figure capable of translating fashion into culturally meaningful narratives within the digital ecosystem.

Digital influencers and online mentors

In a digital landscape saturated with fake news and unreliable content, a user profile has gained increasing prominence: the influencer. This role may be embodied by an individual or strategically managed by a marketing team, yet in both cases it becomes central within an environment characterized by growing skepticism (Gómez Nieto, 2018) and exerts a particularly strong impact on millennial purchasing decisions (Romo Álvarez & Ochoa Herrera, 2020). The continuous bombardment of advertising messages often leads to consumer desensitization, prompting companies to develop alternative strategies capable of establishing a more intimate connection with potential customers (Albornoz Del Valle, Núñez Cerda, & Mena Frau, 2020). Once again, technology becomes a valuable ally for the market, offering streamlined mechanisms to reach users and capture their attention even before they consciously register it. Practices such as geomarketing draw on proximity and visual appeal as core principles (Amago Martínez, 2000; Baviera-Puig, Buitrago-Vera, & Escriba-Perez, 2016). In the midst of commercial saturation and overexposure—echoing the reflections of

Nitsche and Galbraith—consumers increasingly privilege proximity over other added values in the decision-making process (Rubio Guerrero, Rodríguez Barrero, & Uribe Macías, 2012). This sense of closeness between influencer and follower is cultivated through shared posts that reflect everyday life and lifestyle aspirations (Herrero Ruiz, 2022), creating an affective bond that traditional advertising struggles to replicate.

Regarding broader consumer trends, especially among younger demographics, the Spanish Consumer Trends Report indicates a clear preference for online shopping through smartphones and the use of new payment systems. Younger consumers demonstrate greater familiarity and comfort with digital environments, telematic shopping, and alternative payment methods. Interestingly, although access to physical stores is easier in large urban areas—particularly in fashion—online purchasing remains more frequent among younger users regardless of geographical location. According to the same report, the most commonly purchased products include clothing, fashion accessories, and consumer electronics, usually through brand websites or major retail platforms (Secretaría de Estado del Comercio, 2018).

Within this context, influencers play a particularly crucial role as intermediaries between brands and customers, fostering trust and offering consumers a relatable point of reference that guides their purchasing decisions (Romo Álvarez & Ochoa Herrera, 2020).

Giant influencers and nano-influencers within the realm of fashion

In our investigation, we draw on the findings of the aforementioned report, which indicates that consumers predominantly purchase clothing, fashion items, and accessories. Our aim is to examine the dynamics that emerge between influencers and followers, considering the corporate practices that shape this sphere. Pérez-Curiel and Sanz-Marcos (2019) characterize influencers as opinion leaders capable of shaping the public image of (luxury) brands. Within this commercial symbiosis, influencers act as active intermediaries, bringing products closer to end users through a communicative register grounded in proximity, complicity, and emotional resonance. They cultivate an appearance of reciprocity with their audience, reinforcing the perception of authenticity and mutual exchange (Romo Álvarez & Ochoa Herrera, 2020).

Companies increasingly recognize influencers as a crucial sales channel (Català, 2019), integrating them into marketing strategies with the objective of converting followers into customers—effectively monetizing likes by translating engagement into consumption. In Spain, the relevance of this alternative channel has been documented within major textile groups, such as Zara, Mango, and El Corte Inglés, with Zara maintaining a substantial lead in digital presence (Alonso González, 2015). The combination of traditional advertising and influencer-generated content, often through corporate sponsorships, results in hybrid messages that blend commercial and personal communication (Aguilera Moyano, Baños González, & Ramírez Perdiguero, 2016). Yet this process is not always transparent or ethical: brands sometimes employ celebrities to produce astroturfing, masking corporate intent as spontaneous public support (Cho et al., 2011; Gómez Nieto, 2018). This strategy seeks to shape and redirect audience opinion across sectors, including—but not limited to—the fashion industry (Rodríguez Salcedo & Gómez Baceiredo, 2011; Arce-García, Said-Hung, & Mottareale-Calvanese, 2022).

Our research, however, focuses exclusively on the positive dimensions and implications of influencers who operate as genuine content creators—figures closer to content curators or regenerators (Guallar Delgado & Leiva Aguilera, 2013)—and therefore distinct from astroturfing practices. Ethical and transparent behavior

positions these influencers as new brand advocates, capable of shaping consumer decisions through the loyalty, trust, and emotional engagement of their followings (Herrero Ruiz, 2022). As this author notes, the number of likes and followers often functions as a key metric of influence; however, such visible indicators are not always reliable, as they may be manipulated to construct an illusion of prominence.

According to Andrade Sánchez, Velasco Donoso, and Gallardo Pérez (2022), influencers tend to align themselves with specific business sectors—such as fashion, gastronomy, gaming, entertainment, or travel—and can be categorized by follower count into micro-influencers, small influencers, medium influencers, influencers, and mega-influencers. In response to the increasing impact of high-profile figures, Abidin (2016) shifts attention to micro-influencers, predominantly women who craft micro-celebrity identities through blogs and social platforms. Their textual and visual narratives of everyday life form the foundation upon which advertorial collaborations are built. Similarly, Villena Alarcón (2018) highlights the rising relevance of micro-influencers in digital public relations, noting their capacity to engage highly segmented audiences and generate deeper forms of participation.

Findings derived from on-site investigations and a detailed case study

Before embarking on our fieldwork, we made a deliberate decision to establish the groundwork by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the context. This step was crucial to lay the methodological and instrumental foundations. Mere exploration of a theoretical framework supporting the variables of fashion and clothing, along with the technological dimension, proved insufficient. Given that the backbone of this research is formed through digital languages, we deemed it necessary to construct a conceptual framework and assess the current state of the field.

This theoretical-methodological foundation provided us with a secure space from which to commence our study, initiating participant observation—a fundamental tool in classical Anthropology. This approach seamlessly paved the way for the application of other methodological and data collection instruments, including discussion groups and interviews. In alignment with classical ethnography and anthropology, we opted to adapt these disciplines to their digital dimensions, as articulated by Hine and Guber in their respective ways. Additionally, we embraced autoethnography, recognizing its potential to offer insights into the internal workings of the influencer phenomenon. This involves reflecting on the dynamics that enable an individual to influence a group through content creation and the reception of comments or the pursuit of communication.

Our goal is to comprehend the entire system: the primary node, the secondary nodes, and the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each node. Our system is encapsulated in our case study—our community, our influencer, and her followers. Social networks provide us with a myriad of ways to respond to the passage of time, with different looks tailored to each season. Instagrammers' adeptness in adapting to the changing seasons and showcasing diverse trends captures the attention of their audience, keeping them engaged with the profile. This versatility in presenting different styles is a key element that establishes them as a reference and, consequently, influencers within the realm of social networks.

Followers deem style, clothing choices, overall looks, combinations, and lifestyle as pivotal factors that captivate and retain their attention. The manner in which content is curated and presented sparks a desire to acquire similar items. Adhering to specific beauty standards and being part of the Instagram community

positions individuals to influence a broader audience. Consequently, followers often inquire about particular garments with the intention of making a purchase. However, what truly compels individuals to actively follow a profile? In the case of @azahararomerosanz, our focal study, followers express that they engage with the profile for various reasons, including spontaneity, distinctive style, being a wellspring of inspiration, and the reciprocal and communicative closeness.

"You provide me with inspiration, particularly in terms of outfit combinations, when you share your daily looks through your photos. Your uploads spark ideas, not just for outfits but also for aesthetically pleasing photos, showcasing your evident taste and style, at least in my view. [...] What resonates with me the most are the looks—simple yet elegant. I also appreciate when you showcase your purchases; it gives me a wealth of ideas [...] I consistently enjoy viewing your looks and photos because they are meticulously curated, offering valuable inspiration for outfit ideas." (Interviewee, 30 years old).

A key challenge for micro-influencers lies in their inability to compete with macro-influencers who, often through astroturfing practices, present extensive and constantly renewed catalogues. More established profiles enjoy access to a wide variety of garments and promotional collaborations—an advantage that modest accounts may lack. Yet the question arises: can authenticity and outfit repetition still generate influence? For many followers, this repetition conveys naturalness and relatability, fostering a sense of proximity that highly polished profiles struggle to emulate. Although it remains important to display some degree of variety depending on timing and seasonality, the reuse of garments can also be perceived positively, helping followers optimize their own purchases. Seeing an influencer rewear or recombine items to create new looks encourages followers to revitalise their wardrobes without exceeding their budgets.

At times, a garment showcased by a reference influencer becomes irresistible. The question then becomes whether followers genuinely need the item or whether its appeal emerges from the influencer's choice. This dynamic echoes Baudrillard's reflections on the symbolic value that an object acquires when selected by a significant "reference subject." The influencer's act of choosing a garment imbues it with desirability, prompting followers to seek it not only for its material qualities but for the connection it symbolically establishes.

Being a major influencer is no longer a prerequisite for shaping taste. The ability to present outfits consistently through an Instagram profile enables individuals to become reference models for audiences that identify with particular styles or aesthetics—an increasingly common phenomenon among micro-influencers. Once a micro-influencer becomes a point of reference, even a simple accessory may be adopted by followers to complete a look inspired by her choices. This figure benefits from the freedom to cultivate a niche audience with specific interests. Followers do not necessarily need to purchase the garments displayed; they may simply draw inspiration from the influencer's wardrobe and emulate her combinations.

Followers allow influencers to shape decisions that may appear insignificant—from how to button a jacket to the number of buttons left undone. In fashion, every detail carries meaning. This underscores the importance for influencers of curating their Instagram profiles as a constant and influential showcase, where small stylistic gestures contribute to sustaining their authority and aesthetic impact.

"Well, I'm a bit tired of accounts that are solely promotions, giveaways, all very straightforward, basic, featuring impractical looks, and the like. So, an account that truly resonates with you is what keeps you engaged. And for me, that's precisely the case with your account. I mean, it's

an account that doesn't overwhelm me with a constant stream of fifty thousand trivial things. When I view it, I always feel like you don't share stories just for the sake of it. Instead, you share insights, tips, and tricks like: 'Ah well, look! I hadn't thought about this.' Primarily, it revolves around fashion because, ultimately, I don't think that 100% of a person is conveyed through a screen. So, I appreciate that; I find it an opportunity to learn and gain insights..." (Interviewee, 23 years old).

However, the influence of these profiles extends far beyond clothing—it shapes an entire lifestyle. Their capacity to inspire encompasses travel, leisure activities, the acquisition of seasonal garments, and the creative combination of clothing and accessories. Followers draw ideas from the looks displayed, using them as sources of inspiration for diverse situations. These qualities help sustain followers' engagement with a profile to which they feel uniquely drawn. Among the most valued elements are the influencer's ability to provide outfit suggestions for different occasions and the constant accessibility afforded by social media, which allows users to seek guidance at any time. Followers also look for points of identification with the influencer's tastes, aspiring to dress in similar ways. Once again, the determining factors are closeness and proximity—a relatable lifestyle embodied by a real person who shares certain preferences while remaining inspirational to a broader community.

Choosing to follow a social media profile is an intentional act driven by the expectation of receiving ideas and inspiration. Users tend to follow those whose lifestyles they perceive as authentic and attainable—what many describe as "naturalness." Elegance, naturalness, and poise are attributes appreciated and valued through the digital screen. The appeal may reside in the aesthetic quality of the content, which is visually pleasing and inviting, encouraging prolonged engagement. Realness, accessibility, warmth, consistent posting, and coherent thematic organization all contribute to this effect. When influencers successfully embody these traits, followers feel capable of reproducing and adapting what they see, finding attractiveness not only in the individual looks but also in the overall lifestyle presented.

For many users, the influencer becomes a model to imitate, a reflective surface through which they seek validation, reassurance, and even an enhancement of self-esteem. In the context of fashion-oriented Instagram profiles, influencers provide practical, everyday solutions—such as resolving the familiar dilemma of "what should I wear tomorrow?", as frequently expressed by female followers. This habitual behavior reflects a tangible, relatable form of existence that aligns with the concept of "naturalness" repeatedly emphasized by the participants in our case study.

"What truly captivates me about your profile is predominantly your style... And your authenticity... [...] Your overall lifestyle, well... Your wardrobe, um... your dietary choices, everything in general... [...] You embody my style to a great extent; I adore the way you dress... You exude elegance while incorporating highly seasonal attire, and that combination resonates with me the most... Individuals who maintain a classic essence yet seamlessly integrate trendy elements, without going overboard—preserving their unique style—that's something I highly appreciate..." (Interviewee, 22 years old).

Regarding the logistical management of the profile, maintaining a sense of order, thematic coherence, and overall visual harmony is essential for sustaining success and cultivating a loyal following. These elements contribute to the creation of a cohesive aesthetic that facilitates emotional connection and encourages users to continue engaging with the profile. As several followers noted, "if there is order," they are more inclined

to stay. Visual appeal plays a decisive role: an aesthetically curated profile captures attention immediately and enhances the overall perception of the influencer.

The image projected by the influencer should be consistent with her visual catalogue and with the organisation of the profile itself. The aesthetics of an online space can significantly shape user experience and influence perceptions of credibility, trustworthiness, differentiation, and ease of navigation. Although many of these components are facilitated by the platform's own structure—in this case, Instagram—visual coherence must still integrate seamlessly with functionality. Achieving a balance between aesthetic refinement and user-friendly accessibility is crucial for delivering a comprehensive and satisfying online experience.

In our case study, this balance becomes a central factor in followers' continued engagement, reinforcing the idea that style is not only communicated through clothing but also through the meticulous curation of the digital environment in which it is displayed.

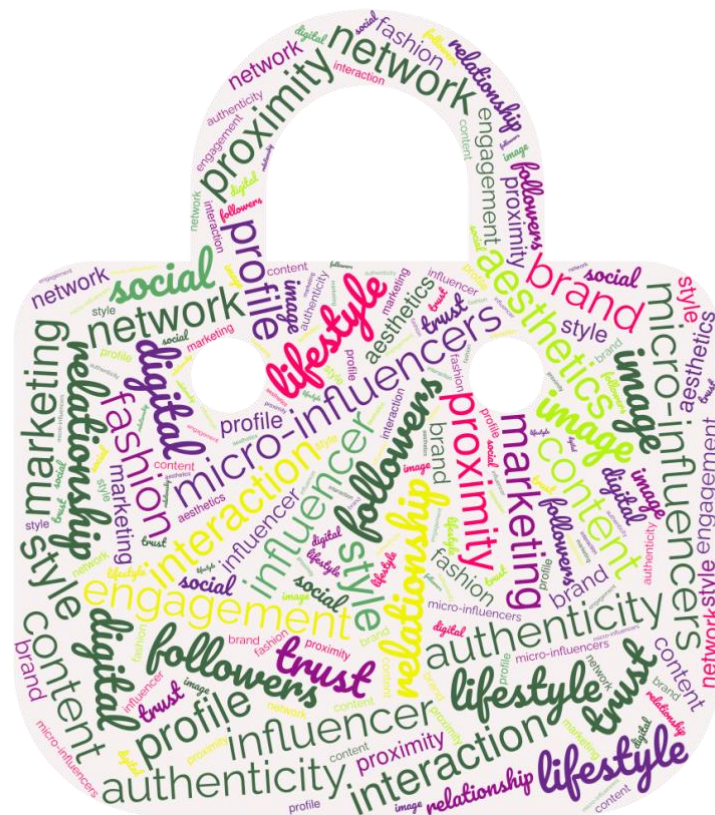
"Well, you exude a sense of organization. When you share photos of a meal, for instance, everything appears meticulously arranged, down to the finest details. The photos or videos taken in the mornings before heading to school showcase impeccable dressing, flawless hair – everything superbly put together. I attempt the same, and it turns into chaos! (Laughter). These are nuances that might not be explicitly present, but you manage to convey them. Ultimately, when you follow Instagram accounts, it's satisfying when they offer inspiration not just in clothing but also in meals and decoration... Alongside numerous ideas about clothing and the organizational details I mentioned earlier. You bring a sense of tranquility." (Interviewee, 26 years old).

A recurrent theme in the interviews concerns the balance between aesthetic quality and relational proximity.

As one participant explained:

"I appreciate profiles that exude a sense of quality. A well-organized profile, an appealing feed, captivating images—all elements that contribute to a quality experience. However, when it comes to those massively, immensely popular profiles, I enjoy glancing at them, but it's akin to watching them from a distance. On a personal level, they don't offer much because these individuals already have such an extensive follower base that it's understandable I can't engage with them or expect responses to everything. [...] Hence, I lean towards the intermediate profiles—profiles that are aesthetically pleasing, showcasing evident dedication, yet not so overwhelmingly large that they lose that touch of naturalness. I prefer profiles that aren't distant and allow for meaningful interaction." (Interviewee, 30 years old).

Image 1: Word cloud showcasing the most frequently mentioned concepts.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Concluding Insights and Discoveries

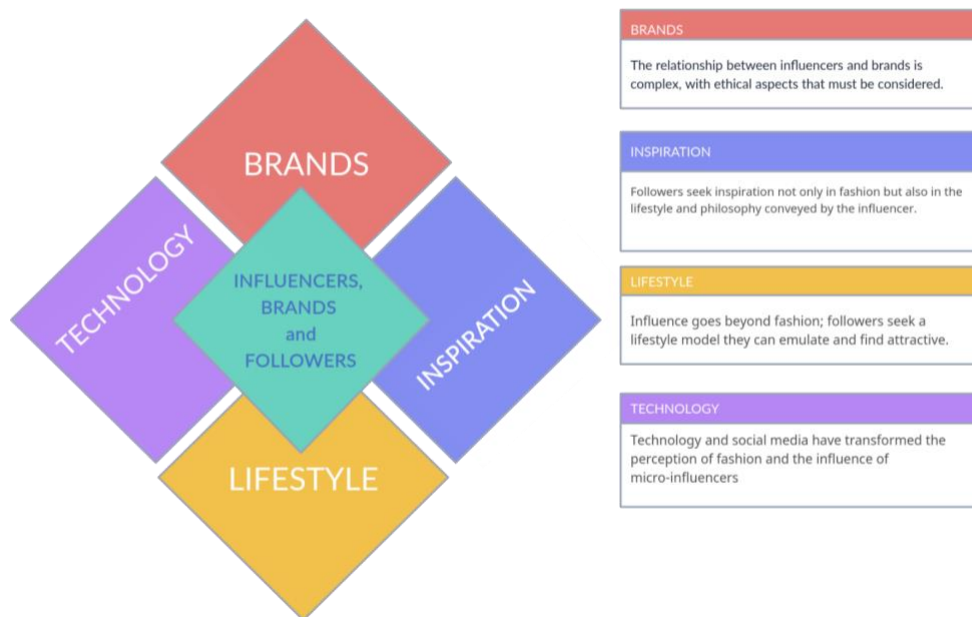
Followers often transition seamlessly into customers, aligning their preferences with the brands promoted by the influencer. In this process, the influencer assumes a dual role: a guide who is simultaneously distant and intimately close, ordinary yet aspirational. New technologies have removed geographical barriers and made it possible for anyone to become an influencer; however, certain aesthetic standards continue to exert a determining influence, with follower count operating as a key indicator of perceived success.

Cultivating proximity, transparency, and glimpses of everyday life is essential in establishing a meaningful bond with followers. Sharing daily routines, achievements, aspirations, opinions, and responding to questions all contribute to constructing a “human” connection that resonates deeply. The much-cited notion of naturalness becomes the thread that keeps followers bound to a profile. Yet behind this impression of spontaneity lies a carefully curated aesthetic designed to captivate, encouraging followers to remain attentive to the influencer’s activities and to trust her fashion-related guidance.

The desire to own what an influencer showcases begins with emulation—a wish to mirror the emotional or aspirational dimension conveyed through the content. This imitation often extends to other areas of life: aspiring to travel to similar destinations, experience comparable leisure activities, or acquire items that gain symbolic value through endorsement. When an influencer selects and displays an object, its perceived desirability increases, reshaping followers’ assessments of its value.

A critical shift occurs when desire transforms into perceived need. Followers articulate this transition through expressions such as “I need it” or “Because I saw it on you,” revealing how the influencer’s choices acquire prescriptive power. In this way, influencers exert significant influence over their audience’s decisions and behaviours, forging a deep connection that conditions not only tastes but also purchasing actions.

Table 2: Interactions between Influencers, Brands, and Followers.



Source: Prepared by the authors

Exploration and Dialogue

In broad terms, the dimensions identified in the literature review align closely with the findings of this study. In agreement with Pérez-Curiel and Sanz-Marcos (2019), we confirm the growing relevance of influencers—particularly among younger audiences—although our research does not focus specifically on the luxury sector. Consistent with the reflections of Gómez Nieto (2018) and Rubio Guerrero, Rodríguez Barrero, and Uribe Macías (2012), our interview transcripts highlight proximity and trust as fundamental components of influencer effectiveness, especially within micro-influencer contexts. These elements underscore the importance of fostering bidirectional, human interactions that prioritize engagement and meaningful responsiveness.

Our observations also converge with Abidin (2016), particularly regarding the value of creating honest, high-quality content that not only attracts followers but strengthens relational ties over time. In line with Villena Alarcón (2018), we find that micro-influencers benefit from greater flexibility to address highly specific audiences, segmented by interests, geography, or age. Moreover, our conversations with followers reveal that they seek more than product recommendations; they respond to the transmission of a coherent lifestyle and personal philosophy—echoing the perspective advanced by Herrero Ruíz (2020).

Finally, our findings confirm that companies increasingly recognize the strategic value of influencers, rewarding their contributions through monetary compensation or in-kind benefits, depending on reach and engagement, as indicated by Romo Álvarez and Ochoa Herrera (2020) and Català (2019)..

Credit author statement

Author1: Methodology, Writing - revision and editing, Supervision.

Author2: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Research, Writing - original draft.

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