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INFLUENCING CONSUMER DECISIONS ON INSTAGRAM: THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF POSTS AND STORIES ACROSS THE EKB MODEL

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the differential impact of Instagram influencers' posts and stories on consumer decision-making across the five stages of the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model. Using a survey of 987 Instagram users, we examine how these two content formats influence need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour. Our findings reveal that influencers primarily impact the early stages of the decision-making process, with stories being more effective than posts in triggering need recognition and facilitating information search. However, the influence diminishes in later stages, suggesting that other factors play a more significant role in the actual purchase and post-purchase evaluation. This study contributes to the literature on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour by extending the EKB model to the digital age and highlighting the unique ways in which different content formats can shape consumer journeys. The findings offer valuable insights for marketers and influencers seeking to optimise their Instagram strategies.

KEY WORDS:

consumer behaviour, decision-making process, EKB model, influencer marketing, Instagram marketing, social media content, social media marketing

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1 Introduction

The rapid evolution of marketing communications, driven by technological advancements and changing consumer behaviour (Constantinides, 2006; Felix et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2021), has led to an increased focus on digital and social media platforms (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2015). Within this landscape, influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017) has emerged as a powerful tool, harnessing the influence of social media users with large followings to impact consumer behaviour. The rising relevance of influencer marketing for businesses can be seen in the fact that the influencers' marketing global relevance market, which was a mere 1.7 billion USD in 2016 (Žák & Hasprová, 2020), is estimated to exceed 24.1 billion USD by 2025 (Jhavar et al., 2024). In this context, electronic word-of-mouth, social media content types, and the role of digital influencers (from now on called 'influencers') still pose several research avenues to be explored (Kozinets et al., 2010; Kannan & Li, 2017; Alalwan et al., 2017; Borchers, 2019; Chawla et al., 2020; Wang & Huang, 2023).

Instagram, in particular, offers significant opportunities for influencer marketing (Arora et al., 2019; Dhir et al., 2021), but research on the specific impact of different types of influencer-generated content remains limited. While prior studies have explored the general effects of electronic word-of-mouth and social media content (Kozinets et al., 2010; Kannan & Li, 2017; Alalwan et al., 2017; Borchers, 2019; Chawla et al., 2020; Mahmud et al., 2024), there remains a need to understand how specific content formats, such as Instagram posts and stories, influence consumers along their decision-making journey.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the differential impact of Instagram influencers' posts and stories on each stage of the consumer decision-making process, as outlined in the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model (Engel et al., 1995). By examining how influencers' content interacts with each stage, we aim to shed light on the nuanced ways in which influencers shape consumers' journeys.

This research makes several key contributions. First, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first to comprehensively assess the impact of both Instagram posts and stories on each stage of the consumer decision-making process rather than focusing on a single stage or industry. Second, by employing a large-scale survey of Instagram users, this study provides robust empirical evidence to support its findings. Third, the insights generated from this research have direct implications for marketers and influencers seeking to optimise their Instagram strategies. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. quantify the impact of Instagram posts and stories on consumer behaviour at each stage of the EKB model;
2. examine the differences in the impact of posts and stories across these stages.

Insights from this research will provide marketers and influencers with actionable guidance on how to tailor their Instagram content to effectively engage consumers at different stages of their decision-making process, thus contributing to the growing body of knowledge in advertising research and informing evidence-based marketing strategies.

The next section of the study presents the theoretical background and development of hypotheses. Next, the methodology, procedures, and variables used in the empirical study are summarised. The results obtained and their discussion follow the methods, and the last section is devoted to summarising the research and identifying the limitations and implications for practitioners and researchers.

2 Theoretical Background

Consumer Decision-Making Process and the Digital Influence

Several consumer buying decision models have been proposed in the last decades to analyse the orientations and perspectives with which consumers approach the marketplace and how/why they behave as they do (Prasad & Jha, 2014). The most common model is the one proposed by Engel et al. (1995), known as the Engel-Kollat-

Blackwell (EKB) model of consumer decision, lately renamed EBK. This model is comprehensive and includes five sequential steps: (1) need or problem recognition; (2) search for alternative solutions, which involves obtaining relevant information from various sources; (3) evaluation of alternatives; (4) purchasing of the selected alternative; and (5) post-purchase evaluation. Depending on the situation, individuals may skip some of those stages (Osei & Abenyin, 2016). Different inputs (e.g., brands' marketing stimulus) may impact the various steps of the consumer decision process. Traditionally applied to long-established marketing contexts, the model's adaptability to the digital age has been recognised (Ashman et al., 2015; Osei & Abenyin, 2016; Chang & Chen, 2021).

Regarding the digital context, individuals increasingly use the Internet and social media to gather information on which they base their consumption decisions, including online communities' opinion leaders as sources of advice (Chawla et al., 2020; Casaló et al., 2020). Research on the impact of social media content on purchasing decisions reveals that content creation and community building have a positive influence (Anggara et al., 2024). Under this rationale, it can be expected that social media and information sharing by influencers might influence each phase of the EBK model. In general terms, in the EBK model's first stage (need/problem recognition), there are internal stimuli (e.g., hunger) or external stimuli (e.g., advertisements or store displays) that make individuals realise that there is a difference between their current state and their desired state. Adapting it to the digital context, Ashman et al. (2015) point out that individuals undergo multiple experiences and ongoing incidents of problem recognition throughout daily online interactions. These include but are not limited to, exposure to new products or "must-haves" initiated by friends, especially on Instagram, observation of editorial content, and collective online community participation. So, it is likely that other online shoppers or personalities might trigger this phase than traditional marketing communications.

The second stage (information search for alternative solutions) involves procuring alternative solutions, including a "search" into memory and eventually external examinations with friends, family, traditional marketing messages, the internet, etc. However, the Internet has shifted the information search from conventional sources to digital and social sources, such as online peer consumer reviews, search engines, blogs, and social media platforms (Park & Cho, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019).

The third stage (evaluation of alternatives) is closely linked with the previous stage, involves the selection of choice alternatives and evaluative criteria, and eventually will lead to the fourth stage (purchasing of the selected alternative). Digital culture might also influence this phase, with online peers' reviews, photos of other individuals consuming/using, online scoring, live chats (including sales assistants and bots), and comparison tools all help to create and narrow choice sets, either passively or actively (Ashman et al., 2015).

In the fourth stage, consumers decide to purchase (or postpone or not buy), what to buy, where to buy, and how to pay. According to Donthu & Gustafsson (2020), the Internet has changed the purchasing dynamics (even more with the COVID-19 pandemic), bringing several new possibilities to consumers (sometimes even hyper-choice), namely, to be able to purchase at any time, through new and various channels (including social media), and the effect of place as a container of product choice may become diluted (Findlay & Sparks, 2012).

The last stage (post-purchase evaluation) includes consumer satisfaction with the overall experience of buying and using the product. Moreover, with the digital world's growth, this stage consists of a whole new dimension of sharing the experience with others, either for social validation or reassurance, to help other consumers in the same process. At this stage, social media platforms play a decisive role. So, the post-purchase phase is more transparent, networked, and participated (Ward & Ostrom, 2003; Butkouskaya et al., 2021).

In broad terms, it is possible to conclude that with the growth of the digital culture and tools, consumers undertake each decision-making stage across channels/media/devices, and each decision-making phase may be repeated, skipped, enhanced, or deconstructed (Ashman et al., 2015). So, establishing effective communication is becoming increasingly complex as more consumers have easier access to different sources of information through new technologies, especially the Internet. Furthermore, a growing number of consumers ignore digital advertising, and the adblocking phenomenon leads to the collapse of many contemporary online business models, mainly when dealing with Generation Z, which spends a lot of time on social media and the Internet (Wielki, 2020). So, with

social media usage, brands started using social media platforms to enhance customer engagement and reach a larger audience (Arora et al., 2019).

Influencers and Their Impact on Marketing and Consumers

The study of consumer behaviour on social media is on the research agenda, having several strands to be addressed (Hajli, 2014; Stephen, 2016; Vrontis et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2023), including influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is related to social media and is defined as the process of identifying and activating individuals who influence a specific digital target audience to be part of a brand's goal or campaign towards increased reach, sales, or engagement, either in a paid or earned manner (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

Not exclusive to the digital culture, a minority of individuals who might influence a significant number of peers to form their opinions are called "influentials" (Watts & Dodds, 2007). Influencers are a part of them, being prominent social media users (or even avatars – Leung et al., 2022) who have accumulated a dedicated following by crafting an authentic online persona. They aim to develop deep bonds with their followers via sharing content, usually around their lifestyle and interests (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Social media influencers are individuals who have perceived expertise in a specific area, amass a large following on one or more social media networks, and produce engaging content that is valuable to both their audience and brand partners (Myers et al., 2024; Lou & Yuan, 2019). So, influencers are respected people in their communities who have a significant number of engaged followers on social networks, consolidate their reputation over time with relevant digital content, and are considered experts in their fields (Kartajaya et al., 2017). Companies are increasingly abandoning traditional celebrity endorsers in their marketing efforts in favour of influencers, such as vloggers and Instafamous personalities (Schouten & Verspaget, 2020; Jin et al., 2019).

There are several categories of influencers, many of whom are just ordinary people closely identified with the products they review or recommend. According to Wielki (2020), influencers can be distinguished by the number of followers, ranging from nano-influencers (one thousand to ten thousand followers) to celebrities (over five million followers). The same author also mentions that influencers can be divided according to their motivation to take action – idols, experts, lifestylers, activists, and artists – or according to the communication platforms they use – Bloggers, YouTubers, Facebookers, Instagrammers, Twitterers, Snapchatters, TikTokers –, or according to the type of digital activity – active and passive influencers, depending on if they are directly targeted by companies to promote their products and services.

The impact of the influencers' activities on the performance of brands might be substantial, depending on the confidence of consumers acquired by opinion leaders (Žák & Hasprová, 2020) and on the fit between the brand/product, the audience, and the influencer (Breves et al., 2019; Wielki, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). The influencer activity may increase consumers' confidence in those brands, aligned with their sales objectives, word-of-mouth, trust, recommendations, and brand humanisation, amongst others. As the #Hashoff study reported (Watkins, 2021), amongst several existing digital social networking sites, Instagram is the most used by influencers, mainly because of the sense of immediacy and community it creates, and it has higher engagement rates in comparison with other social media platforms. Social media peer recommendations, where influencers fit into, are perceived by consumers as more trustable sources of information when compared to marketer-generated information (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019), constituting a reason why there should exist several research to explore the impact of influencers on consumers' decision-making. Alves et al. (2016) conducted a study that reviewed previous literature and studies on social media marketing, having reported conclusions about influencers' impact on consumers' decision process. They found empirical evidence to conclude that opinion leaders search for and share more information on social media; messages on social media contribute to increased consumption of targeted products. Besides the studies reported by Alves et al. (2016), we identified several more actual relevant studies about the impact of influencers on consumers' decision-making, summarised in Appendix Table A1.

Hypothesis Development

The studies reviewed (including those in Appendix Table A1) lead us to agree with Schouten et al. (2020) on the way that scientific knowledge regarding the role and impact of influencers in marketing is growing but still understudied, in contrast to traditional celebrity endorsement. Furthermore, the studies found have several limitations – e.g., Voramontri & Klieb (2019) focused on the information search stage of the consumer decision. In fact, only the study of Sudha & Sheena (2017) addressed the impact of influencers in each phase of the EBK model. Such a low number of studies is coherent with Voramontri & Klieb’s (2019, p. 216) affirmation that “several authors have recently studied the influence of social media on consumer behaviour, although generally not from the point of view of the decision process”. Therefore, based on the theoretical grounding in the EKB model and the current research landscape, we hypothesise:

H1: Influencers can impact each stage of the consumer’s decision-making process.

Even assuming that Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms and that there is already scientific research to address its impact on marketing, no study has been found to understand to what extent its tools might differently impact the influencers’ activity on consumers. However, different sources of attraction might influence the consumers (Lim et al. 2017; Belanche et al., 2019). Moreover, Pop et al. (2022) studied the impact of trust but did not consider the content type in their study. However, there are different tactics for influencing the consumer purchase decision process using Instagram, like stories and posts (Yüksel & Akar, 2021). Therefore, besides H1, we propose that:

H2: Different types of content (posts vs. stories) will have different impacts at each stage of the consumer’s decision-making process.

We further refine this hypothesis by positing that:

H2a: due to their ephemeral and engaging nature, Instagram stories will have a greater impact on the earlier stages of need recognition and information search.

H2b: Instagram posts, with their potential for detailed information and product comparisons, will have a greater impact on the later stages of alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour.

These hypotheses are grounded in the understanding that posts and stories offer distinct affordances. Stories, with their fleeting nature and focus on authenticity, may be more effective in capturing attention and sparking initial interest. In contrast, posts (which are more permanent and can contain more detailed information than stories) may be better suited for influencing deeper levels of engagement and decision-making.

3 Methods

A quantitative empirical exploratory study was conducted via an online questionnaire directed to 1,500 Instagram users, obtaining a 66% response rate (987 Instagram users with valid responses). Those individuals were selected using convenience sampling and reached through online invitations disseminated via Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and e-mail. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups (independent samples): one group was asked about their experiences with influencers’ stories, and the other group was asked about their experiences with influencers’ posts. This approach allowed for a direct comparison of the impact of these two content types (325 in the posts group and 662 in the stories group).

In each group, the variables considered to assess the influence of stories/posts in the buying process were analysed using four-point frequency response options (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often). These response options were chosen because they provide a balanced range of responses and maintain simplicity for participants. They are also appropriate in the context of vague quantifiers (Pohl, 1981), like the variables in this study. The variables used were designed to provide information relative to each of the five stages of the EBK consumer decision-making: problem/need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice/purchase, and outcome evaluation, since the EBK model might be used to study the online consumer behaviour and decision-making process (Darley et al., 2010). Due to that, the variables considered in the questionnaire queried the respondents about each of those stages, being operationalised as follows:

- Awareness about new products or brands (CDM1), operationalised with the question “How frequently have you heard about new products, services or brands via the influencer p/s?” (p/s was filled with the word posts or stories, depending on the sample).
- General curiosity/interest raised about products (CDM2), analysed with the question, “How frequently have you been interested in the products/services the influencer mentions in the p/s?”.
- Knowledge about products (CDM3), studied with the question “How frequently have you learned new things about products/services due to the influencer p/s?”.
- Active search for information about products (CDM4), operationalised with the question, “How frequently have you searched for more information about the products/services the influencer mentioned in the p/s?”.
- Experimentation of products (CDM5), studied with the question, “How frequently have you analysed the products the influencers talked about on Instagram?”.
- Confidence in buying (CDM6), analysed with the question, “How frequently have you felt safer buying those products?”.
- Purchases made (CDM7), studied with the question, “How frequently have you effectively purchased the products the influencers talked about (either purchased online or offline)?”.
- Encouraging purchases with sales promotions (CDM8), studied with the question, “How frequently have you used promotional codes/coupons the influencer shared on Instagram?”.
- Encouraging purchases (CDM9), studied with the question, “How frequently have you made purchases using the hyperlinks the influencer shared on Instagram?”
- Recommendation (CDM10), operationalised with the question”, How frequently have you shared the influencer’s opinion about the products with other people (either online or offline)?”

4 Results

Before examining the specific research objectives, a glance at the sample within the study showed that 32% of respondents were male and 68% female. The mean age of respondents was 24.8 years (Standard Deviation (SD): 10.85). Specifying it by group, in the posts sample, 32% were male, 68% female, and the mean age was 23.6 years (SD: 9.80). In the stories sample group, 29% were male and 71% female, with 25.3 years as the mean age (SD: 11.17). The frequency of Instagram use by both samples was high, as presented in Table 1, since in each group, more than 80% of respondents used Instagram at least once per day.

Table 1. Instagram frequency of use by respondents

	Total	Posts Group	Stories Group
Less than once per month	8.4%	0%	13%
About once per month	2.5%	1%	3%
About once per week	3.5%	4%	4%
About once per day	11.99%	13%	11%
Several times per day	73.6%	82%	69%
n	986	325	659

Source: own processing, 2024

Regarding H1, which proposed that influencers impact each stage of the consumer decision-making process, the results in Table 2 show statistically significant positive influences for two variables: "Have heard about new products, services, or brands via the influencer posts/stories" (CDM1) and "Have learned new things about products/services because of the influencer posts/stories" (CDM3). This suggests that Instagram influencers play a crucial role in the earlier stages of consumer decisions, namely by presenting, explaining, and demonstrating new products and brands. However, the later stages of the process, related to purchasing and post-purchasing, were not recognised by participants as having such a prominent impact. Therefore, H1 is not fully supported, as influencers' impact appears to be concentrated in the initial stages.

Table 2. Perceived impact of influencers in the decision-making process, total sample

How frequently... ^a		t	df	Sig. 1-tailed	Mean Difference to Threshold ^b
CDM1: Have heard about new products, services, or brands via the influencer posts/stories	\bar{x} =2.84 s =.853 N=978	12.299	977	.000*	.335
CDM2: Have been interested in the products/services the influencer mentions in the posts/stories	\bar{x} =2.48 s =.793 N=981	-.865	980	.194	-.022
CDM3: Have learned new things about products/services because of the influencer posts/stories	\bar{x} =2.58 s =.862 N=980	2.854	979	.002*	.079
CDM4: Have searched for more information about the products/services the influencer mentioned	\bar{x} =2.42 s =.886 N=983	-2.861	982	.002*	-.081
CDM5: Have analysed the products the influencers talked about on Instagram	\bar{x} =2.28 s =.849 N=979	-8.191	978	.000*	-.222
CDM6: Felt safer to buy those products	\bar{x} =2.31 s =.890 N=971	-6.505	970	.000*	-.186

CDM7: Have purchased the products the influencers talked about (online or offline)	$\bar{x}=1.78$ $s=.828$ N=980	-7.403	979	.000*	-.724
CDM8: Have used promotional codes the influencers shared on Instagram	$\bar{x}=1.60$ $s=.891$ N=978	-1.433	977	.000*	-.896
CDM9: Made purchases using the hyperlinks the influencer shared on Instagram	$\bar{x}=1.51$ $s=.762$ N=983	-40.808	982	.000*	-.991
CDM10: Have shared the influencer's opinion about the products with other people (online or offline)	$\bar{x}=2.00$ $s=.870$ N=980	-17.881	979	.000*	-.497

^a Variables measured from 1 to 4 (“1 – Never”, “2 – Rarely”, “3 – Sometimes”, “4 – Very Often”)

^b Relative to the “neutral” middle point of the response options (2.5)

Source: own processing, 2024

To examine H2, which proposed that different types of content have different impacts on each stage of the consumer decision-making process, we compared the effects of influencers' stories and posts. Non-parametric tests (Table 3) revealed that stories had higher median scores than posts on all variables except for using promotional codes (CDM8). This suggests that stories may be more effective overall in influencing consumer decisions. However, many of these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 3. Perceived impact of influencers in the decision-making process, by the sample group

How frequently... ^a	Total	Posts Sample Group	Stories Sample Group	Test ^c	
				χ^2 b	Sig.
CDM1: Have heard about new products, services, or brands via the influencer posts/stories	$\bar{x}=2.84$ $s=0.853$ N=978	$\bar{x}=2.75$ $s=0.867$ N=324	$\bar{x}=2.88$ $s=0.843$ N=654	3.546	0.060**
CDM2: Have been interested in the products/services the influencer mentions in the posts/stories	$\bar{x}=2.48$ $s=0.793$ N=981	$\bar{x}=2.45$ $s=0.810$ N=325	$\bar{x}=2.49$ $s=0.785$ N=656	0.325	0.568
CDM3: Have learned new things about products/services because of the influencer posts/stories	$\bar{x}=2.58$ $s=0.862$ N=980	$\bar{x}=2.50$ $s=0.865$ N=323	$\bar{x}=2.62$ $s=0.858$ N=657	1.823	0.177
CDM4: Have searched for more information about the products/services the influencer mentioned	$\bar{x}=2.42$ $s=0.886$ N=983	$\bar{x}=2.35$ $s=0.889$ N=323	$\bar{x}=2.45$ $s=0.884$ N=658	0.715	0.398
CDM5: Have analysed the products the influencers talked about on Instagram	$\bar{x}=2.28$ $s=0.849$ N=979	$\bar{x}=2.20$ $s=0.815$ N=323	$\bar{x}=2.32$ $s=0.863$ N=656	0.919	0.338

CDM6: Felt safer to buy those products	$\bar{x}=2.31$ $s=0.890$ N=971	$\bar{x}=2.24$ $s=0.912$ N=324	$\bar{x}=2.35$ $s=0.878$ N=647	0.208	0.648
CDM7: Have purchased the products the influencers talked about (online or offline)	$\bar{x}=1.78$ $s=0.828$ N=980	$\bar{x}=1.69$ $s=0.780$ N=324	$\bar{x}=1.82$ $s=0.848$ N=656	1.850	0.174
CDM8: Have used promotional codes the influencers shared on Instagram	$\bar{x}=1.60$ $s=0.891$ N=978	$\bar{x}=1.61$ $s=0.895$ N=324	$\bar{x}=1.60$ $s=0.890$ N=654	0.000	0.991
CDM9: Made purchases using the hyperlinks the influencer shared on Instagram	$\bar{x}=1.51$ $s=0.762$ N=983	$\bar{x}=1.48$ $s=1.48$ N=325	$\bar{x}=1.52$ $s=0.765$ N=658	0.838	0.360
CDM10: Have shared the influencer's opinion about the products with other people (online or offline)	$\bar{x}=2.00$ $s=0.870$ N=980	$\bar{x}=1.96$ $s=0.832$ N=324	$\bar{x}=2.02$ $s=0.888$ N=656	0.047	0.829

^a Variables measured from 1 to 4 (“1 – Never”, “2 – Rarely”, “3 – Sometimes”, “4 – Very Often”)

^b Yates's continuity correction

^c Non-parametric test independent samples median test

** Asymptotic significance 2-sided test 0.10

Source: own processing, 2024

Conducting a comparative analysis of the posts and stories samples with parametric tests is also admissible in this case. Even if the respective K-S tests did not point to normal distributions in each variable (Table 3; all K-S tests $p < .05$). Marôco (2011) stated that the violation of the assumption of normality does not invalidate the use of parametric tests, as long as the sample dimensions are not small and the distributions are not extremely skewed or flat, indicating as reference values of symmetry $sk < 3$ and flatness values $|ku| < 10$. Those conditions are not violated in the present samples. Levene's test of homogeneity of variance (Table 4) indicates that H_0 of variances homogeneity is not rejected in all variables (in all variables, the Levene test $p < .05$), and therefore, parametric tests may as well be used in this analysis.

Table 4. Parametric tests assumptions

CDM Variable	Levene test ^a	Posts Group			Stories Group		
		<i>sk</i>	<i>ku</i>	K-S test	<i>sk</i>	<i>ku</i>	K-S test
CDM1	$F(1,933)=.070$; $p=.792$	-0.307	-0.532	0.000	-0.283	-0.628	0.000
CDM2	$F(1,933)=.004$; $p=.949$	0.051	-0.472	0.000	0.051	-0.422	0.000
CDM3	$F(1,933)=1.538$; $p=.215$	-0.005	-0.644	0.000	-0.085	-0.625	0.000
CDM4	$F(1,933)=.479$; $p=.489$	-0.794	2.45	0.000	-0.024	-0.731	0.000

CDM5	$F(1,933)=.765;$ $p=.382$	0.111	-0.662	0.000	0.208	-0.590	0.000
CDM6	$F(1,933)=.826;$ $p=.364$	0.144	-0.905	0.000	0.14	-0.680	0.000
CDM7	$F(1,933)=.237;$ $p=.626$	0.890	0.053	0.000	0.785	-0.063	0.000
CDM8	$F(1,933)=.012;$ $p=.913$	1.240	0.351	0.000	1.332	0.685	0.000
CDM9	$F(1,933)=1.066;$ $p=.302$	1.612	2.019	0.000	1.363	1.171	0.000
CDM10	$F(1,933)=.440;$ $p=.507$	0.380	-0.769	0.000	0.499	-0.567	0.000

^a Levene test based on the median, since at least one of the groups does not present a normal distribution

Source: own processing, 2024

Therefore, the differences between the stories and posts groups were assessed using the parametric t-student test for independent samples (Table 5). According to that, the observed differences of the mean perception between groups was found statistically significant in several variables: CDM1 ($t(976)=-2,208; p=0.027$); CDM3 ($t(978)=-2,123; p=0.034$); CDM5 ($t(977)=-1.984; p=0.047$); CDM6 ($t(969)=-1,896; p=0.058$); and CDM7 ($t(978)=-2.159; p=0.031$). The stories group had higher means than the posts group in all those variables. So, again, the results point to the overall conclusion that influencers' stories tend to be more effective in influencing consumer decisions than influencers' posts. This seems particularly true in the consumer decisions before purchasing, namely in the need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives. These findings strongly support H2, indicating that stories are particularly influential in the earlier stages of the consumer decision-making process, up to and including the purchase decision, thus supporting H2a. However, the lack of significant differences in the later stages does not support H2b.

Table 5. T-test for equality of means between posts and stories samples

How frequently... ^a	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
CDM1: Have heard about new products, services or brands via the influencer posts/stories	-2.208	976	0.027*	-0.128	0.058
CDM2: Have been interested in the products/services the influencer mentions in the posts/stories	-0.802	979	0.423	-0.043	0.054
CDM3: Have learned new things about products/ services because of the influencer posts/stories	-2.123	978	0.034*	-0.124	0.058
CDM4: Have searched for more information about the products/ services the influencer mentioned	-1.624	981	0.105	-0.098	0.060
CDM5: Have analysed the products the influencers talked about on Instagram	-1.984	977	0.047*	-0.114	0.058

CDM6: Felt safer to buy those products	-1.896	969	0.058**	-0.115	0.061
CDM7: Have purchased the products the influencers talked about (online or offline)	-2.159	978	0.031*	-0.121	0.056
CDM8: Have used promotional codes the influencers shared on Instagram	0.244	976	0.807	0.015	0.061
CDM9: Made purchases using the hyperlinks the influencer shared on Instagram	-0.829	981	0.408	-0.043	0.052
CDM10: Have shared the influencer's opinions about the products with other people (online or offline)	-1.014	978	0.311	-0.060	0.059

^a Variables measured from 1 to 4 (“1 – Never”, “2 – Rarely”, “3 – Sometimes”, “4 – Very Often”)

* Asymptotic significance 2-sided test 0.05

** Asymptotic significance 2-sided test 0.10

Source: own processing, 2024

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In the age of social media, classical decision-making models such as the EKB model (Engel et al., 1995) remain relevant for understanding consumer behaviour (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). This study applied the EKB model to examine the impact of Instagram influencers on consumers, finding that influencers primarily influence the early stages of the consumer decision-making process, namely need recognition and information search (Table 2). This supports the idea that influencers act as information sources and trendsetters, introducing consumers to new products and brands (Alves et al., 2016; Ashman et al., 2015). However, the influence diminishes in later stages such as purchasing and post-purchase evaluation, suggesting other factors play a more significant role in these stages. This finding aligns with previous research (Sudha & Sheena, 2017; Mickevičiūtė & Siudikienė, 2019; Wielki, 2020; Pop et al., 2022) that suggests influencers are most effective in raising awareness rather than directly driving purchases. Another topic that should be considered is that influencers' impact on consumers is not without its challenges, as consumers are increasingly questioning the authenticity of influencers and the potential for standardisation in society (Leparoux et al., 2019).

The study also found that Instagram stories are more influential than posts in the early stages of the consumer journey, likely due to their engaging and immediate nature (Table 3 and Table 4). This aligns with the idea that stories, with their ephemeral format and focus on authenticity, are well-suited for capturing attention and sparking interest (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Interestingly, stories also significantly impacted purchase decisions, contradicting Voramontri & Klieb's (2019) finding that social media do not influence this stage. This discrepancy may be due to their focus on general social media use rather than specific content types like stories.

The difference in impact between posts and stories could be attributed to how consumers encounter each type of content. Posts are subject to Instagram's algorithms, which limit their visibility, while stories are prominently displayed and easily accessible. This increased visibility and engagement with stories may foster greater trust in the influencer (Blöbaum, 2016), which is crucial for influencing purchase intentions and decisions (Muda & Hamzah,

2021; Pick, 2021). This study also adds to the discussion by Chodak et. al. (2019) and Chawla & Chodak (2021) about the effectiveness of the different types of marketing content on social media.

Theoretical Implications

Extension of the EKB model: Even if the EKB model is a well-known framework for understanding consumer decision-making processes, the integration of social media and the EKB model is relatively new, and there are just a few scholarly papers that bridge these concepts. Our findings demonstrate the continued relevance and applicability of the EKB model in the digital age. However, we also extend the model by highlighting the unique role that social media influencers play in shaping consumer decision-making. Specifically, our research shows that influencers are particularly impactful in the early stages of the EKB model, influencing need recognition and information search. This suggests that the model can be refined to incorporate the specific mechanisms through which influencers exert their influence, such as social proof, source credibility, and aspirational appeal.

Dynamic nature of consumer decision-making: Our findings challenge the traditional view of the EKB model as a linear and sequential process. In the context of social media, consumers may not always follow a strict order of stages. For example, exposure to an influencer's story might simultaneously trigger need recognition and initiate information search, blurring the lines between these stages. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how consumers navigate the decision-making process in the digital age.

Differential impact of content types: Our research reveals the differential impact of Instagram posts and stories on consumer behaviour. This suggests that the format of influencer content plays a crucial role in its effectiveness at different stages of the consumer journey. The ephemeral and engaging nature of stories makes them well-suited for capturing attention and sparking interest, while the more permanent and informative nature of posts lends them to influencing deeper levels of engagement and decision-making. This finding underscores the importance of considering content format as a key variable in influencer marketing research and practice.

Role of trust and authenticity: The greater impact of stories on purchase decisions, despite their less informative nature compared to posts, suggests that factors like trust and authenticity play a significant role in influencer marketing. Stories, emphasising real-time and unfiltered content, may foster a stronger sense of connection and trust between influencers and their followers. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of trust in influencer marketing (e.g., Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Pick, 2021).

By addressing these theoretical implications, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how influencer marketing operates within the broader framework of consumer decision-making. It highlights the need for further research to refine existing models and theories to account for the unique dynamics of social media and influencer influence.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer actionable insights for both marketers and influencers seeking to maximise their impact on Instagram. For marketers, the main implications are:

Leveraging influencers for awareness: Recognising the power of influencers, mainly through stories, leads to creating initial awareness and generating interest in new products or services. Collaboration with influencers allows business subjects to craft engaging stories that highlight the unique aspects of the offerings and resonate with their audience.

Utilising posts for deeper engagement: Leveraging posts to provide more detailed information, product comparisons, and reviews allows businesses to influence consumer evaluation and purchase decisions. This can

involve working with influencers to create informative posts that educate consumers about the benefits and features of the products.

Integrating influencer marketing: Combining influencer marketing (earned media) with paid and owned media channels leads towards a holistic marketing strategy. This ensures that consumers are exposed to the brand message throughout their decision-making journey, increasing the likelihood of conversion.

Regarding influencers, the main recommendation would be to:

- prioritise stories for initial impact, focus on creating captivating and authentic stories to capture the audience's attention and build trust, use stories to share personal experiences with products or services, showcasing their value in a relatable way;
- utilise posts for detailed information, leverage posts to provide more in-depth information, reviews, and comparisons to help consumers make informed purchase decisions. This can involve creating high-quality photos and videos, writing detailed captions, and responding to comments and questions from followers;
- maintain authenticity and transparency, be transparent about partnerships with brands and provide honest opinions about products or services. Building a reputation for authenticity is crucial for maintaining trust and influence with the audience.

Limitations and Implications for Research

This study offers valuable insights; however, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations to guide future research. Firstly, the study did not compare the impact of influencer content on different customer segments despite the significance of consumer perceptions in influencer marketing (Žák & Hasprová, 2020). Future research should replicate this study across various consumer segments and examine potential differences.

Second, the study's reliance on self-reported data may be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Future research could triangulate self-reported data with behavioural measures (e.g., click-through rates and purchase data) for a more comprehensive understanding of influencer impact. Additionally, incorporating experimental designs can help control for these biases.

Third, while a four-point Likert scale was used for participant responses, future research could explore using a more comprehensive range of response options or alternative measurement methods (e.g., semantic differential scales) to capture more nuanced variations in consumer behaviour.

Finally, this study focused on Instagram users in Portugal and Brazil, limiting the generalisability of findings. Future research should replicate this study in diverse cultural contexts to assess cross-cultural validity.

Future research could also investigate the role of influencer content history and credibility in shaping consumer perceptions, which could provide valuable insights. Additionally, exploring the impact of different types of influencers (micro-influencers, macro-influencers, celebrities) on consumer behaviour at each stage of the EKB model could shed light on the nuanced dynamics of influencer marketing.

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Appendix

Table A1. Previous studies on the impact of influencers in B2C decision-making

Authors	Research aim	Method	Conclusions/Results
Sudha & Sheena (2017)	Understand the difference between the levels of influence made by brands, bloggers, and celebrities in each phase of the decision-making process and sources of attraction (pictures, videos, text)	Quantitative. Structured questionnaire devoted to each phase of the traditional consumer decision process. Sample of 200 women, using judgmental and snowball sampling. Fashion industry.	Blogs can have a significant impact on how young women behave after reading a positive comment on a purchase. It is the pictures that attract readers to come back and trust the blog reviews.
Lim et al. (2017)	Investigate the effectiveness of social media influencers, focusing on source credibility, source attractiveness, product match-up, and meaning transfer.	Quantitative. Structured questionnaire. Purposive sampling of 200 university students.	Source credibility of influencers was found to have an insignificant relationship with attitude and purchase intention, due to influencers' inadequate expertise and knowledge about the endorsed product. Source attractiveness of influencers did not impact consumers' purchase intention. Influencers' product match-up was found to be significant with purchase intention and consumer attitude.
Mickevičiūtė & Siudikienė (2019)	Analyse and explore the role of fashion bloggers in modern fashion marketing communication.	Mixed method: quantitative (structured questionnaire) carried out amongst the followers of the fashion blog and qualitative interviews carried out amongst fashion bloggers.	The role of fashion blogs is best seen in fashion marketing – blogs are the mediators between fashion companies and consumers. They form a personal bond with consumers and organically disseminate fashion trends to a wide audience.
Cooley & Parks-Yancy (2019)	Analyse how celebrities, influencers, and people whom consumers know personally impact the ways in which Millennials utilise social media information to gain information about consumer products.	Quantitative. Structured questionnaire. Sample: 109 junior and senior college students at a mid-sized university in the southern region of the United States.	Influencers have a positive impact on raising product awareness. However, relying only on influencers to promote products does not substitute for or replace targeted marketing efforts to build consumers' trust.
Voramontri & Klieb (2019)	Research on the role of social media in consumers' decision-making process for complex purchases.	Quantitative survey evaluation in South-East Asia. Purchases that were made by consumers, not including searches that were abandoned.	The classical model of decision-making is valid in describing the decision process in the social media age. The use of social media improved satisfaction for consumers during the initial stages of information search and alternative evaluation but did not help much in improving satisfaction in the purchase decision stage.
Schouten et al. (2020)	Investigate the impact of celebrity vs. influencer endorsements on advertising effectiveness moderated by product-endorsers fit.	Two experiments with a beauty and a fitness product (Study 1), or food and a fashion product (Study 2).	Consumers identify more with influencers than celebrities, feel more similar to influencers than celebrities, and trust influencers more than celebrities.
Žák & Hasprová (2020)	Find out how influencer marketing affects consumer purchasing decisions.	Quantitative. Online structured questionnaire. Sample: 430 respondents from various age groups.	Different consumer segments will respond differently to the types of influencers the company chooses to partner with.
Wielki (2020)	Understand the significance of influencers in the overall	Quantitative. Online structured questionnaire. Sample: 612	There is huge potential for influencers, primarily related to the effective

	functioning of the online promotional system (the scope of their impact on Generation Z)	respondents who were full-time students at Opole University of Technology, Poland.	dissemination of product/service information, increasing brand awareness, and impact on the product/service sales level of a business.
Tobias-Mamina et al. (2020)	Examine the effect of influencer advertising, on advertising cognition, attitude towards a brand, brand beliefs, as well as intention to visit a tourist destination.	Quantitative. Online structured questionnaire. Sample: 404 respondents who were Instagram users who visited a destination of choice Instagram handle.	Consumers' advertisement cognition, attitude towards the brand, brand-linked beliefs, and their intention to visit a tourist destination of choice are influenced by their assessment of the advertisement information by influencers.
Zirena et al. (2020)	Investigate the influence of influencers on the purchase decision of Millennial consumers in Arequipa-Peru, Spain.	Quantitative. Online structured questionnaire. Sample: 404 people in the range of 18 to 35 years (Millennials) from Arequipa-Peru, Spain.	Influencers do have a statistically significant ability to influence and generate a purchase decision amongst the Millennials of this region.
Gajanova et al. (2020)	Study the impact of influencers on the decision-making process regarding the purchase of the brand product.	Quantitative. Structured questionnaire. Sample: 470 respondents from Slovakia. Responses were collected using the CAWI method (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing)	There is distrust amongst Slovak consumers about influencer marketing. The authors elaborate that the results could be due to the singularity amongst the Slovaks and partly due to the limitations of research.
Nurfadila & Riyanto (2020)	To explore influencer marketing techniques used by fashion industries.	Quantitative. Data collection from secondary sources, administering a structured questionnaire to 200 women.	Found a significant impact of social media on young women's behaviour after reading positive comments on purchases and the recognition of the influence that bloggers have in reaching target customers in the fashion industry.
Aljukhadar et al. (2019)	Propose a model and conceptualise social media mavenism to deliberate the specificities of digital media and theorise its liaison with the consumer behaviours regarding social commerce.	Quantitative. Structured questionnaire. Sample: 528 females who were regular users of Pinterest.	Social media platform's utilitarian attitude, role in decision making, and digital virtual consumption generate the maven-like behaviour by fuelling three social commerce-related behaviours (network expansion, social privatisation, and knowledge creation)
Muda & Hamzah (2021)	Examine the effects of consumers' perceived source credibility of influencer-generated content in YouTube videos on their attitudes and behavioural intentions.	Quantitative. Structured questionnaire. Sample: 372 respondents from the Gen-Y population. Face-to-face data collection, snowball sampling, and each respondent were given a souvenir for participation.	Confirmed that perceived source credibility indirectly affects purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth via attitude towards influencer-generated content.
Singh & Munjal (2021)	To shed light on the scenario of the hospitality and tourism industry's response to the dynamic digital era in India.	Discussion based on literature and secondary sources.	There is significant progress in the hospitality and tourism industry in India. However, there is limited research that provides insights and challenges, especially related to influencers and digital media in hospitality and tourism services.
Dutta et al. (2021)	To explore if online or digital advocacy influences customer decision-making related to the purchase of travel and tourism services. Secondly, to identify the influencer categories that stimulate the purchase.	Quantitative. A structured questionnaire, a Sample of 168 respondents.	Unbiased influencers are trending on social media. Reviews with reviewer information such as the number of reviews given, positive/negative comments, price, performance, etc. gains customers' trust.
Pick (2021)	To examine the scarce impact of influencers' evaluation on consumer behaviour.	A between-subjects design, data from an online questionnaire about two influencer advertisements.	Perceived influencer credibility (IC) is a significant factor that determines purchase intention, and attitude towards advertising and product. IC is important

			to transfer convincing messages that increase the perceived connection to the influencer and the psychological ownership feeling for a product.
Koay et al. (2022)	Examine the impact of Social Media Influencers' (SMI) credibility, as manifested by trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, along with the moderating effects of materialism, on followers' purchase intention.	Quantitative. A structured questionnaire, a Sample of 191 Instagram users through the Google survey platform. Analysis through partial least square structural equation modelling.	SMIs' trustworthiness and expertise are significant predictors of followers' purchase intention.
Khan et al. (2023)	Examine the effect of influencers on customers' purchase intentions through the creation of an integrated knowledge-based system (KBS).	Case Study. Fuzzy analytical hierarchy approach.	KBS can be used for evaluating Influencers' performance. Influencers play a vital role in moulding customer purchase intention in the organic skincare industry.
Pop et al. (2022)	Explain the impact of influencer trust on customer travel decision-making, and the role of customer journey constructs in mediating the interrelation between influencer trust and the dimensions of customer journeys.	Quantitative. Structured self-administered online questionnaire. Sample: 162 respondents formed of two groups Gen-Y and Gen-Z tourists. Snowball sampling was used.	Influencers are effective in stimulating the desire to travel, and customers look for information about their next journey through influencers. Influencers' trust is highly significant for successfully influencing consumers.
Mishra & Ashfaq (2023)		Quantitative. Online data collection through surveys with 358 respondents over a five-week period, supplemented by information from published articles	Influencer marketing significantly impacts consumer purchase behaviour, with credibility and authenticity being crucial factors influencing consumer trust.