



Influencers who most engage on Instagram. The effect of their expertise, taste leadership and opinion leadership on their followers' behavioural intentions

Los influencers que más enganchan en Instagram. El efecto de su experiencia, su liderazgo estético y de opinión en el comportamiento de sus seguidores

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at explaining the impact of Instagram social media influencers on behavioural intentions (i.e., intentions to interact with them and recommend them, and also purchase the products they endorse or post). It focuses on influencers' expertise and their role as opinion and taste leaders. Based on opinion leadership theory, a survey was conducted on 210 Instagram users. Main findings reveal that post originality, uniqueness, and quality impact on influencers' opinion leadership which, in turn, impacts on behavioural intentions. Influencers' expertise impacts on the intention to recommend the influencers and purchase the products posted, while influencers' taste leadership only influences the intention to interact with them. Few papers analyse the direct effects of influencers' expertise and opinion and taste leadership on followers' behavioural intentions. Consequently, when designing a social media marketing campaign influencers' selection should be made according to those traits which stimulate specific behaviours such as fostering interaction, increase electronic word of mouth or persuade to purchase the products posted. In case of product endorsements, selecting influencers with acknowledged expertise is recommended as they will cause an impact on the intention to purchase endorsed products. Influencers perceived as opinion leaders have an overall influence on their followers' behavioural intentions.

Keywords: Social Media, Influencers, Expertise, Opinion Leadership, Taste Leadership, Behavioural Intentions.

R E S U M E N

Este estudio tiene como objetivo explicar el impacto de los influencers de Instagram en las intenciones de comportamiento de sus seguidores (es decir, intenciones de interactuar con ellos y recomendarlos, y también de comprar los productos sobre los que publican). El estudio se centra en la experiencia de los influencers y su papel como líderes de opinión y de estética. Con base en la teoría del liderazgo de opinión, se realizó una encuesta a 210 usuarios de Instagram. Los principales hallazgos revelan que la originalidad, la singularidad y la calidad de las publicaciones impactan en el liderazgo de opinión de los influencers, lo que a su vez impacta en las intenciones de comportamiento de sus seguidores. La experiencia de los influencers impacta en la intención de recomendarlos y comprar los productos sobre los que publican o promocionan, mientras que el liderazgo estético de los influencers solo influye en la intención de interactuar con ellos. Pocos artículos analizan los efectos directos de la experiencia y el liderazgo de opinión y estético de los influencers sobre las intenciones de comportamiento de los seguidores. Consecuentemente, a la hora de diseñar una campaña de marketing en redes sociales, la selección de los influencers debe hacerse de acuerdo con aquellos rasgos que estimulan comportamientos específicos, como fomentar la interacción con los propios influencers, aumentar la comunicación boca-oreja en Internet o persuadir para la compra. En caso de promocionar productos, se recomienda seleccionar influencers con experiencia reconocida, ya que impactarán en la intención de compra de los productos promocionados. Los influencers percibidos como líderes de opinión tienen una influencia general en las intenciones de comportamiento de sus seguidores.

Palabras clave: Redes Sociales, Influencers, Experiencia, Líder de Opinión, Líder en Estética, Comportamiento.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers (SMIs) are becoming increasingly important for marketing and branding strategies. SMIs are people who create content and share it through social media networks, gaining a significant influence on their target audience. Their content is based on their personal lives, opinions, and purchases. SMIs' influence is increasing in large social media audiences as their messages are considered relevant, authentic, and trustworthy (Willemssen *et al.*, 2011). Data from 2022 indicate that 58.4% of the world's total population are social media users, though these "users" may not represent unique individuals. Global social media users have grown by more than 10 percent over the past 12 months (Kemp, 2022). SMIs' role as product endorsement generates a growing market asking for further research into how SMIs influence online peers (Belanche *et al.*, 2020; Nafees *et al.*, 2021; Schouten *et al.*, 2020; Torres *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, knowledge on SMIs' leadership effects is still limited in the context of more visual networks such as Instagram (Casaló *et al.*, 2020; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021; Ki & Kim, 2019). Scholars have mainly focused on the verbal effect of opinion leadership and neglected the visual effect of taste leadership (Ki & Kim, 2019). Further research is also claimed on the alluring traits of SMIs and the features of the content they publish in social media networks which enables them to attract a large number of followers (Ki & Kim, 2019).

SMIs exert influence on their audience by exhibiting a particular aesthetic appearance while sharing their opinion, thus building taste and opinion leadership (Ki & Kim, 2019). Current research aims at a deeper understanding of how SMIs exert their influence on behavioural intentions considering the opinion leadership theory (Solomon, 2018) and the megaphone effect (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). The latter refers to the fact that SMIs' taste can be a resource which enables them to grab the megaphone and improve their position of prominence and expand their audience.

This article contributes to the literature by jointly examining how the SMI's expertise, opinion leadership and taste leadership impact SMIs' target audience's behavioural intentions. First, this research is among a few papers considering the effects of opinion leadership on the SMI's account (i.e., intention to interact with SMIs and intention to recommend SMIs). Second, it examines the direct effects of SMIs' expertise on behavioural intentions. Particularly, three behavioural intentions are analysed as favourable outcomes of SMIs' expertise: intention to interact with SMIs, intention to recommend SMIs, and intention to purchase the products endorsed or posted by SMIs. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous study has empirically analysed the direct effects of expertise on the SMI's account in the context of Instagram. Third, the current study is among the first to explore the direct impact of the SMI's taste leadership on the target audience's behavioural intentions. Some SMIs display their taste to claim a status above others by means of performing their individual portrayal of style (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). Despite being a salient feature of SMIs, little is known about the direct impact of this authority of taste on their audience.

Therefore, this study offers insights into the social media literature on how SMIs exert direct influence on their target audience and provides managerial recommendations for both companies and SMIs to improve their communication effectiveness.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

SMIs' influence comes from traits such as credibility, attractiveness, similarity, motivation, and symbolic meaning (Nafees *et al.*, 2021; Shan *et al.*, 2020). SMIs' leadership can be enhanced by the argument (a text component) and attractiveness (a visual component) of SMIs-generated content (Cheng *et al.*, 2021), thus leading to the analysis of two related concepts: opinion leadership and taste leadership.

In marketing, the concept of opinion leadership gained attention with the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 1995). An opinion leader is someone who can change followers' attitudes, opinions or behaviours due to his/her competence (knowledge), personal traits, personal appeal, expertise, and connection with consumers (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Iyengar *et al.*, 2011). Opinion leaders contribute to distributing information and making recommendations about consumption choices (Moldovan *et al.*, 2011; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). Opinion leaders' influence is moderated by parasocial relationships established with SMIs based on perceptions of friendship, interest similarity and credibility, among other aspects (Conde & Casais, 2023; Leite & Baptista, 2022; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). In contemporary markets, opinion leaders often operate online using social media forums to influence followers (Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Tsang & Zhou, 2005).

Taste leadership refers to the apprehension of an aesthetic style attracting a mass audience (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). In the fashion industry, some SMIs and bloggers receive promotional resources and gifts from the fashion system. This may reinforce the audience's perception of the blogger being a taste leader (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). Ki and Kim (2019) studied SMIs' taste leadership, as shown in the visual content of their posts and attractive stylistic features.

SMIs' expertise effects are also analysed here. Expertise is described as the source's high level of knowledge, experience, and problem-solving skills in a given domain (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). SMIs should hold expertise as a key feature if they are to be considered a credible source of information by their fans (Daneshvary & Schwer, 2000).

2.1. Opinion and taste leadership antecedents

We posit that certain SMIs' content features may be considered as antecedents for opinion leadership (i.e., perceived originality, uniqueness, quality, and quantity) and taste leadership (i.e., perceived prestige and attractiveness).

Originality refers to the level of newness and innovative elements in SMIs' content perceived by individuals, as compared with other options (Moldovan *et al.*, 2011). For instance, SMIs' posts can be perceived as creative, innovative, unusual, or sophisticated (Acar *et al.*, 2017). Original content generates greater

word-of-mouth as individuals are more willing to exchange unusual information (Moldovan *et al.*, 2011). Thus, SMIs who share original content increase the number of followers and the perception of being an opinion leader (Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022). Park and Kaye (2017) suggest that original posting is a significant indicator of perceived opinion leadership. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Perceived originality influences perceived opinion leadership positively.

Uniqueness refers to a condition on which an individual expresses himself distinctively from others (Maslach *et al.*, 1985). SMIs pursue uniqueness by creating a distinctive personal style and avoiding similarity to peers in order to enhance their social image (Tian *et al.*, 2001). So, uniqueness is a factor that distinguishes opinion leaders (Gentina *et al.*, 2014; Tsang & Zhou, 2005). Simonson and Nowlis (2000) propose that individuals are aware of the fact that unconventional choices draw more attention from others. Consequently, opinion leaders share information about unconventional preferences to receive more attention. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Perceived uniqueness influences perceived opinion leadership positively.

Quantity of posts refers to the number of SMIs' posts published in social media networks. SMIs usually share a great number of postings, replies, and opinion messages (Tsang & Zhou, 2005). Sharing lots of activity and content in social networks can influence others (Huffaker, 2010). Hence, the number of messages published indicates the level of an SMIs' opinion leader to a certain extent. In addition, an opinion leader is more frequently willing to share opinions in social networks (Park, 2013). Previous studies show that the number of posts on Instagram is positively related to the opinion leader's perception of an SMI (Casaló *et al.*, 2020; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021). Thus, the hypothesis is the following:

H3: Perceived quantity influences perceived opinion leadership positively.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) suggest that users follow SMIs based on the perceived quality of their posts related to attractiveness, post composition, quality of images and professional-looking contents. SMIs' perceived quality of posts helps building a reputation and contributes to users' perception that they follow opinion leaders (Leal *et al.*, 2014). Thus, shared content quality is a significant feature of opinion leaders (Mangold & Bachl, 2018). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived quality influences perceived opinion leadership positively.

Regarding taste leadership, two main antecedents are examined: prestige and attractiveness. Here, perceived prestige refers to SMIs' upscale content perceived as conveying high status (Ki & Kim, 2019). A necessary element to be an SMI is online admiration, which is developed through prestige (Ouvrein *et al.*, 2021). Prestige inspires followers' online expressions of respect for SMIs' skills and expertise (Cheng *et al.*, 2013). Aesthetic taste is related to the aesthetic preferences of a social group, which can function as a status claim (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, some high-status individuals manage to distinguish themselves from others through taste (Gronow,

2002). Prestige can affect individuals' aesthetic appreciation and judgment, and thus taste leadership perception (Chapman & Williams, 1976). Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Perceived prestige influences perceived taste leadership positively.

Perceived attractiveness is the extent to which a target consumer perceives SMIs' content to be visually or aesthetically appealing (Ki & Kim, 2019). Attractiveness can be achieved by post vividness, incorporating animations, colours, and pictures (Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011). It causes a significant impact on consumers' engagement in social media (Hamzah *et al.*, 2021). Attractive content published by SMIs makes followers think that SMIs have a good taste (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). A target consumer who perceives attractive content from an SMI is likely to perceive an SMI as a taste leader (Kim & Kim, 2019). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Perceived attractiveness influences perceived taste leadership positively.

Additionally, SMI's expertise is examined as antecedent of opinion and taste leadership. Users expect that expert opinion leaders post pertinent contents very often to establish their superior reputation (Leal *et al.*, 2014). Expert SMIs are meant to provide more plausible information about topics, compared to those who are not (AlFarraj *et al.*, 2021). Expert SMIs are more likely to be perceived as opinion leaders (Ki & Kim, 2019). Indeed, several studies show that expert SMIs are better opinion leaders than those with less expertise (Xiong *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Expertise influences perceived opinion leadership positively.

In the context of influencers' marketing, expertise is a key quality affecting taste leadership because experts in a particular field define good taste (Holbrook, 2005). Expertise is critical because audiences are likely to view their knowledge or experience not just as personal statements, but as sophisticated taste demonstrations (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014).

The literature on expertise and taste leadership shows that individuals with greater expertise and knowledge can better identify what is aesthetically pleasing or visually appealing, thus showing their audience that they have a good taste (Ki & Kim, 2019; McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

H8: Expertise influences perceived taste leadership positively.

2.2. Effects of SMIs' leadership and expertise on behavioural intentions

Past research confirms that opinion leadership is a crucial mechanism through which brands can impact consumers' behavioural intentions (Park, 2013; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Song *et al.*, 2017). Regarding the effects of SMIs' opinion leadership, focus is first put on users' intention to interact. This refers to how strongly someone is willing to interact with an SMI's account in the future (Casaló *et al.*, 2020; Thakur *et al.*, 2016). Users may be interested in interacting with SMIs' opinion leaders due to their knowledge on the topic. Intention to recommend refers to the extent to which individuals recommend an account resulting from opinion

leaders' credibility and other features (Gentina et al., 2014). Intention to follow SMIs' advice refers to the extent to which individuals consider and put opinion leader's suggestions into practice (Casaló et al., 2020). Followers are likely to recommend an SMI's account which provides trustworthy opinions (Belanche et al., 2021). Previous research confirms that opinion leadership has a positive effect on followers' intentions to interact and recommend the account (Casaló et al., 2020). Finally, intention to purchase influenced by opinion leadership is explained as consumers' self-esteem increase when they buy products previously recommended on Instagram by a celebrity (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Other researchers have found a positive link between opinion leadership and purchase intention (Akdevelioglu & Kara, 2020; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021; Farivar et al., 2021). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H9a: Opinion leadership influences the intention to interact with an SMI's account positively.

H9b: Opinion leadership influences the intention to recommend an SMI's account positively.

H9c: Opinion leadership influences purchase intention positively.

SMIs' expertise effect on users' behavioural intentions is also examined here. When the source of information is perceived as expertise, the shared message is considered to have a positive impact on the recipients' attitude and behaviours (Kim et al., 2018; Ohanian, 1991). Receiving information and recommendations from an expert is positively related to the search of additional information (Turcotte et al., 2015) which suggests that users following an expert SMI may interact so as to look for new information. Followers of an expert SMI are likely to recommend this account to peers as they share the same needs and interests

(Casaló et al., 2017). Expert SMIs may be more persuasive and increase engagement with endorsed brands (Erdogan, 1999). SMIs' expertise can shape credibility perceived by their audience, its buying behaviour, and purchase intention (Schouten et al., 2019). Thus, the following set of hypotheses is formulated:

H10a: Expertise influences the intention to interact with SMIs' account positively.

H10b: Expertise influences the intention to recommend an SMIs' account.

H10c: Expertise influences purchase intention positively.

Regarding the effects of SMIs' taste leadership, previous research in the fashion context showed that bloggers consider themselves as better at style than others and create a taste leadership which makes their content valuable for their followers, as perceived by their interactions (McQuarrie et al., 2013). In other words, SMIs' authentic taste displays produce a positive response from a large audience and a favourable audience reaction (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Thus, aesthetic content causes the audience to interact with and recommend an SMI's account to peers. Previous research provides empirical support for the relationship between SMIs' taste leadership and mimicry by other users on the same social media network in both, purchasing the SMIs-promoted brand and recommending it to others (Ki & Kim, 2019). Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H11a: Taste leadership influences the intention to interact with an SMIs' account positively.

H11b: Taste leadership influences the intention to recommend an SMIs' account positively.

H11c: Taste leadership influences purchase intention positively.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model.

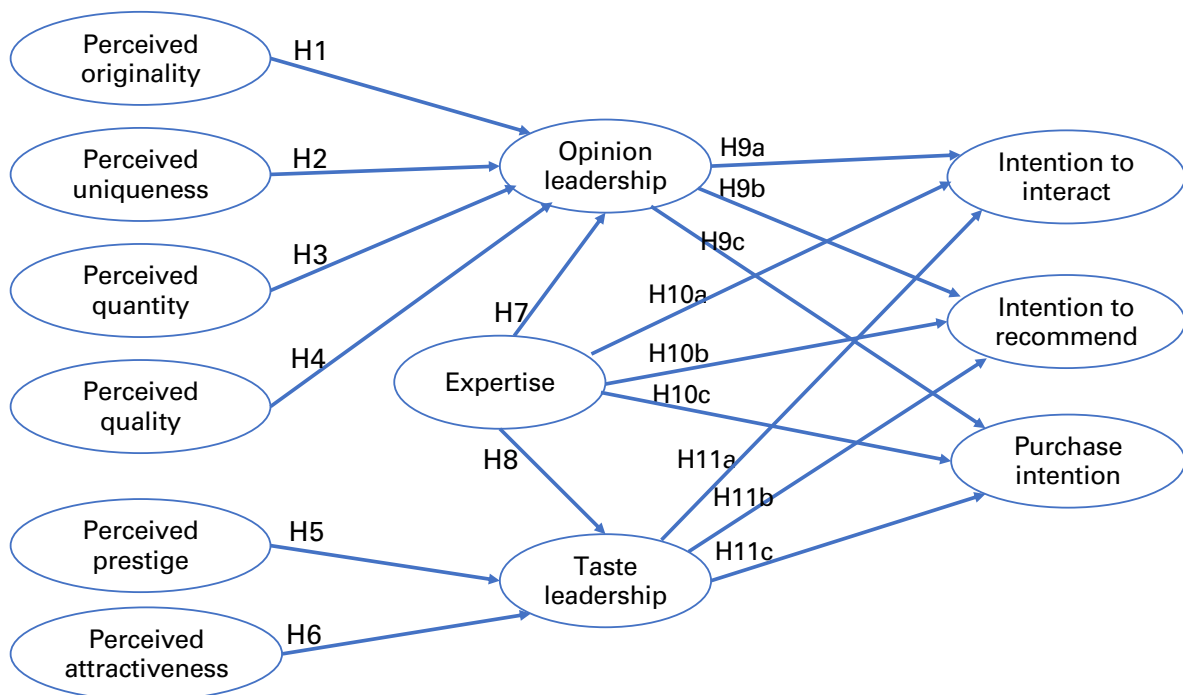


Figure 1
Conceptual model
 Source: Own elaboration.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research context and data collection

To test the hypotheses, a quantitative study based on a structured questionnaire was conducted. Data were collected through Google Forms platform during the second semester 2021. Before starting the data collection process and to define influencers to be included in the study, a preliminary study was conducted on 150 people to choose the 14 Chilean best-known influencers. These SMIs cover several fields such as fashion, beauty, lifestyle, humour and online games. Seven of them are mega-influencers (more than one million followers) and seven of them are macro influencers (>200,000 and less than one million followers). Previous research comparing mega-influencers and macro-influencers found non-significant differences in the customer-brand engagement generated by them (Borges-Tiago *et al.*, 2023). In the current survey, participants had to follow at least one of those 14 influencers and they had to refer to one of them when answering.

To determine sample size, G* Power software was used together with a priori test (Faul *et al.*, 2007). Using G*Power analysis with a power probability = 0.95, effect size = 0.15 (mean), alpha error probability = 0.05, and number of predictors = 5, the minimum sample size required is 138. A total of 210 valid questionnaires were obtained by using convenience sampling. Post hoc analysis—maintaining 0.15 effect size values, 0.05 confidence error, and 5 predictors—achieved a 0.996 power, exceeding the 0.8 minimum required (Faul *et al.*, 2007). Sampling design is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Sampling design summary

Universe	Millennials and Centennials using Instagram
Location	Chile
Sample size	210 subjects
Sampling Design	Convenience sampling
Data collection method	Online questionnaire
Data collection period	Second Semester 2021
Statistical technique	Descriptive analysis; SEM
Statistical software	SPSS 28.0.1; SMARTpls 3.2.2

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 shows the sample distribution, according to respondents' demographic profile, i.e., 58.6% female and 40.5% male. Concerning age range, 70.6% were 18-25 years old, 24.6% were 26-35 years old, and only 4.8% were 36 and over. As to education, 13.2% reported secondary education, 63.3% college studies, and 21.9% graduate studies. Finally, regarding Instagram use frequency, 9.5% reported using it at least one hour a day, 11.4% at least two hours a day, 19.5% at least three hours a day, 28.1% at least four hours a day, and 31.4% five or more hours a day.

Table 2
Demographic characterization of the sample

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	123	58.6%
Male	85	40.5%
Other	2	0.9%
Age		
18 - 25 years	148	70.6%
26 - 35 years	52	24.6%
36 years and over	10	4.8%
Educational level		
Primary	3	1.4%
Secondary	28	13.2%
College	133	63.3%
Graduate	46	21.9%
Instagram use frequency		
1 hour/day	20	9.5%
2 hour/day	24	11.4%
3 hour/day	41	19.5%
4 hour/day	59	28.1%
5 or more hour/day	66	31.4%

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. Measures and procedure

The items in each of the variables were adapted, based on measurement scales used in previous studies. They were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree”). Perceived uniqueness was measured with a three-item scale (Casaló *et al.*, 2020), while perceived originality was measured with five items (Casaló *et al.*, 2020; Moldovan *et al.*, 2011). Expertise was measured with three items proposed by Ki and Kim (2019). Quality and quantity of publications were measured with one item each, adapted from Casaló *et al.* (2020) in a scale ranging from 1 “very low” to 5 “very high”. The items used to measure the influencer's perceived attractiveness and prestige were obtained from Ki and Kim (2019). A six-item adaptation of the opinion leadership measure proposed by Thakur *et al.* (2016) and Casaló *et al.* (2020) was used to measure this variable. Taste leadership was measured with three items proposed by Ki and Kim (2019). Intention to interact with the influencer was measured with two items adapted from Casaló *et al.* (2020). Intention to recommend the influencer's account was measured with three items adapted from Prayag *et al.* (2017) and Casaló *et al.* (2020). Finally, three items were adapted from Ki and Kim scale (2019) to measure consumers' purchase intention.

Regarding statistical procedures, a partial least squares (PLS) approach with SmartPLS software version 3.3 was used for the estimation procedure (Ringle *et al.*, 2015). This approach is suitable for modelling latent variables without strict normal distribution requirements.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Measurement model

Firstly, we conducted Harmon's Single Factor Variance test for the examination of common method bias. The results showed common variance of 46% which is less than the threshold value of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, there are no common method bias concerns in the data. Then, the measurement model was assessed. The psychometric properties of the model are shown in Table 3. The scale reliability indicators yielded good results, Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) being above the recommended value ≥ 0.70 (Henseler et al., 2016). Concerning the additional reliability indicator of Dillon-Goldsteins Rho, all Rho values are above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2014). AVE values were examined to assess convergent validity, confirming

that all of them meet the 0.5 minimum accepted level (Chin, 1998). The reliability of each variable was assessed with indicator loadings, as stated by Hair et al. (2014). To consider an indicator as part of a variable, it must have a loading ≥ 0.70 or at least 0.50, when the instrument is used in other contexts (Chin, 1998). All indicators meet this criterion. Therefore, results show good internal construct consistency and adequate convergent validity.

To confirm discriminant validity, Fornell and Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and HTMT ratio method (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2016) were used. As to the former, the AVE square root must be greater than the correlations with the other variables. Table 4 shows that all the square roots represented in the main diagonal are greater than the correlations with the other model variables. HTMT states that maximum appropriate value is 0.90 (Hair et al., 2019). Table 4 shows that all the HTMT ratio values placed above the diagonal are below 0.90.

Table 3
Reliability indicators of the model

Variable	Item	Loadings (t-value)	p-value Bootstrap	Cronbach's Alpha	Rho A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Perceived originality	ORIG1	0.897	(48.859)***	0.905	0.910	0.930	0.728
	ORIG2	0.897	(56.760)***				
	ORIG3	0.895	(54.940)***				
	ORIG4	0.716	(17.174)***				
	ORIG5	0.847	(29.700)***				
Perceived uniqueness	UNIQ1	0.886	(49.863)***	0.868	0.919	0.919	0.790
	UNIQ2	0.868	(35.535)***				
	UNIQ3	0.911	(58.455)***				
Perceived prestige	PRES1	0.856	(30.448)***	0.803	0.803	0.884	0.717
	PRES2	0.859	(34.462)***				
	PRES3	0.825	(26.862)***				
Perceived attractiveness	AT1	0.893	(37.529)***	0.880	0.882	0.926	0.807
	AT2	0.927	(74.072)***				
	AT3	0.874	(35.091)***				
Expertise	EXP1	0.887	(42.947)***	0.888	0.889	0.931	0.817
	EXP2	0.914	(58.496)***				
	EXP3	0.911	(64.760)***				
Opinion Leadership	OP.LEA1	0.809	(32.646)***	0.863	0.871	0.897	0.594
	OP.LEA2	0.817	(31.821)***				
	OP.LEA3	0.833	(38.198)***				
	OP.LEA4	0.690	(13.741)***				
	OP.LEA5	0.731	(15.880)***				
	OP.LEA6	0.735	(20.003)***				
Taste Leadership	TA.LEA1	0.844	(27.052)***	0.830	0.898	0.898	0.746
	TA.LEA2	0.885	(47.708)***				
	TA.LEA3	0.862	(36.941)***				
Intention to interact	INT.INT1	0.973	(144.858)***	0.947	0.949	0.974	0.950
	INT.INT2	0.976	(187.889)***				
Intention to recommend	INT.REC1	0.923	(61.175)***	0.890	0.890	0.931	0.819
	INT.REC2	0.896	(57.149)***				
	INT.REC3	0.895	(53.251)***				
Purchase intention	PUR.INT1	0.955	(111.859)***	0.943	0.944	0.963	0.898
	PUR.INT2	0.941	(67.817)***				
	PUR.INT3	0.947	(103.323)***				

*p<0.05; ** p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4
Discriminant validity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1)	0.898	0.654	0.484	0.687	0.775	0.740	0.761	0.602	0.600	0.163	0.690	0.622
(2)	0.580	0.904	0.372	0.670	0.722	0.688	0.671	0.546	0.489	0.104	0.614	0.516
(3)	0.444	0.342	0.975	0.549	0.513	0.456	0.474	0.500	0.294	0.222	0.471	0.510
(4)	0.609	0.596	0.506	0.905	0.741	0.758	0.662	0.684	0.559	0.199	0.570	0.651
(5)	0.681	0.637	0.463	0.659	0.771	0.780	0.816	0.738	0.648	0.218	0.836	0.658
(6)	0.661	0.617	0.422	0.681	0.695	0.853	0.777	0.577	0.600	0.135	0.674	0.746
(7)	0.641	0.566	0.415	0.560	0.679	0.661	0.847	0.592	0.556	0.077	0.703	0.610
(8)	0.549	0.500	0.471	0.627	0.667	0.532	0.516	0.948	0.557	0.263	0.598	0.526
(9)	0.563	0.460	0.286	0.526	0.609	0.571	0.498	0.541	1.000	0.299	0.564	0.482
(10)	0.152	0.098	0.216	0.188	0.201	0.128	0.069	0.256	0.299	1.000	0.321	0.248
(11)	0.592	0.525	0.424	0.492	0.707	0.578	0.573	0.533	0.512	0.293	0.864	0.553
(12)	0.546	0.457	0.463	0.576	0.578	0.668	0.515	0.480	0.451	0.233	0.473	0.889

(1) Perceived attractiveness, (2) Expertise, (3) Intention to interact, (4) Intention to recommend, (5) Opinion Leadership, (6) Perceived originality, (7) Perceived prestige, (8) Purchase intention, (9) Perceived quality, (10) Perceived quantity, (11) Taste Leadership, (12) Perceived uniqueness

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5
Results of the structural equation model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardised beta	T-Statistic (Sig.)	Result
H1	Perceived originality -> Opinion leadership	0.282***	4.779 (0.000)	Accepted
H2	Perceived uniqueness -> Opinion leadership	0.144*	2.586 (0.011)	Accepted
H3	Perceived quantity -> Opinion leadership	0.031 ^{ns}	0.714 (0.475)	Not Accepted
H4	Perceived quality -> Opinion leadership	0.224***	4.430 (0.000)	Accepted
H5	Perceived prestige -> Taste leadership	0.264***	4.056 (0.000)	Accepted
H6	Perceived attractiveness -> Taste leadership	0.308***	4.450 (0.000)	Accepted
H7	Expertise -> Opinion leadership	0.282***	4.636 (0.000)	Accepted
H8	Expertise -> Taste leadership	0.197*	2.428 (0.015)	Accepted
H9a	Opinion leadership -> Intention to interact	0.297***	2.685 (0.000)	Accepted
H9b	Opinion leadership -> Intention to recommend	0.465***	5.561 (0.000)	Accepted
H9c	Opinion leadership -> Purchase intention	0.520***	6.013 (0.000)	Accepted
H10a	Expertise -> Intention to interact	0.056 ^{ns}	0.585 (0.559)	Not Accepted
H10b	Expertise -> Intention to recommend	0.296***	4.918 (0.000)	Accepted
H10c	Expertise -> Purchase intention	0.114***	1.719 (0.000)	Accepted
H11a	Taste leadership -> Intention to interact	0.184*	2.055 (0.040)	Accepted
H11b	Taste leadership -> Intention to recommend	0.007 ^{ns}	0.083 (0.934)	Not Accepted
H11c	Taste leadership -> Purchase intention	0.105 ^{ns}	1.350 (0.177)	Not Accepted

*p<0.05; ** p<0.01; ***p<0.001

R² (Intention to interact) = 0.224; R² (Intention to recommend) = 0.479; R² (Purchase intention) = 0.452; R² (Opinion Leadership) = 0.604; R² (Taste Leadership) = 0.429

Q² (Intention to interact) = 0.210; Q² (Intention to recommend) = 0.389; Q² (Purchase intention) = 0.408; Q² (Opinion Leadership) = 0.352; Q² (Taste Leadership) = 0.315

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2. Structural model

Once the psychometric properties of the instrument were assessed, the structural model was estimated. SmartPLS software (Ringle et al., 2015) was used for the bootstrapping procedure on 5,000 samples to both evaluate the causal relationships and their significance level, and also to obtain the results of the explained

variance of the dependent variables attributed to the explanatory variables (Chin, 1998).

To assess the predictive ability of the structural model, first R² values were assessed, according to Falk and Miller (1992), i.e., R² values should be greater than 0.1. Lower values, even significant, would not be acceptable. In addition, residual standardized root mean square was calculated. Henseler et al. (2016) describe

SRMR as a goodness-of-fit measure for PLS-SEM that can be used to avoid model misspecification. A value below 0.09 is considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The values of the Q² measure illustrate the acceptable predictive ability of the model, as these values are greater than zero in all cases. Table 5 shows the indicators determining the predictive ability of the model.

Hypotheses testing shows that H1, H2, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, H9a, H9b, H9c, H10b, H10c, and H11a are accepted. Meanwhile, H3, H10a, H11b, and H11c are rejected. The acceptance of H1, H2, H4, and H7 shows that perceived originality, uniqueness, quality, and expertise exert a positive and significant influence on opinion leadership, while the rejection of H3 shows that perceived quantity of posts has no significant influence on opinion leadership. The acceptance of H5, H6, and H8 indicates that perceived prestige, perceived attractiveness, and expertise have a positive and significant impact on influencers' taste leadership.

On the other hand, the acceptance of H9a, H9b, H9c shows that influencers' opinion leadership exerts a positive and significant influence on followers' interaction, recommendation, and purchase intention. This influence is particularly high on the intention to buy recommended products, as observed in the absolute value of beta coefficient (Standardised beta H9c = 0.520).

As to expertise, hypotheses H10b and H10c are accepted, showing that it has a positive and significant influence on recommendation and purchase intention. However, H10a is rejected, showing that expertise influence on interaction intention is not significant.

Finally, in relation to taste leadership, H11a is accepted, indicating that taste leadership has a positive and significant influence on interaction intention. The rejection of H11b and H11c shows that taste leadership does not have a significant influence on the intention to recommend and buy the products endorsed.

5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examines the direct effects of SMIs' expertise and perceived opinion and taste leadership on followers' behavioural intentions, such as the intention to interact with and recommend an SMI's account, and also purchase endorsed products. Results show that SMIs' expertise impacts on opinion and taste leadership, while SMIs' publications contribute to SMIs' perception of opinion and taste leadership.

Regarding the influence of SMIs' posts as antecedents of opinion leadership and taste leadership, findings confirm previous research by Casaló *et al.* (2020) and Ki and Kim (2019), respectively. The perceived characteristics of SMIs' content contribute to SMIs' opinion leadership perception, particularly, post originality, uniqueness, quality, and attractiveness. In contrast, the quantity of posts does not influence SMIs' opinion leadership perception as in Casaló *et al.* (2020). Prestige and attractiveness impact on taste leadership perception is also confirmed. Consequently, high status posts and aesthetically appealing content contribute to the improvement of taste leadership perception (McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, results confirm SMIs' expertise as an SMIs' leadership antecedent, as in Ki and Kim (2019). The expertise variable is analysed as an opinion leader-

ship antecedent in several previous studies, but not so much as antecedent of taste leadership. Opinion leaders are thought to have more knowledge and expertise on a specific topic (Rahman *et al.*, 2014; Thakur *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, cultivating this expertise, i.e., showing knowledge of the topics published by SMIs positively influences their perception as opinion leadership. Findings also suggest that being an expert impacts positively on the perception of taste leadership. Expertise may provide SMIs with the ability to ensemble different brands and products in line with their proclaimed style (Martensen *et al.*, 2018). Many SMIs' acclaimed trends come from an original aesthetic recommendation resulting from their personal expertise. Current results extend the scope of expertise for its direct impact on behavioural intentions. Therefore, expert SMIs can effectively influence followers' behaviour, particularly, to recommend their account and buy the products they recommend. SMIs are likely to persuade followers, particularly in areas where they have a reputation of unique expertise (Taillon *et al.*, 2020). Followers recommend expert SMIs' accounts to peers with similar needs and interests (Casaló *et al.*, 2017). Followers trust SMIs' expert's accounts and therefore recommend them to acquaintances. Previous studies confirm that perceived endorser's expertise positively affects attitudes toward a product and purchase intentions (Ohanian, 1991; Filieri *et al.*, 2018), as in this study. However, the proposed effect of SMIs' expertise on the intention to interact with an SMI's account is not confirmed. Expertise alone does not cause interaction, probably because interaction is motivated by other reasons such as a particular query or specific need to communicate.

Regarding ongoing debates about influencers' actual capacity to convert marketing actions into purchases (Evans *et al.*, 2017), current findings suggest a clear impact of SMIs' leadership on behavioural intentions. The impact of SMIs' opinion leadership on behavioural intentions is evidenced in previous research (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021). Results about opinion leadership's impact on the three behaviours analysed are clear. Followers do appreciate the opinions and recommendations made by SMIs' opinion leaders as a source of information and inspiration. So, they are willing to interact and recommend them, and also purchase the products and services they endorse. The impact of taste leadership on behavioural intentions such as intention to interact is a contribution of this study. SMIs' taste leadership turns them into role models in terms of lifestyle. So, followers want to mimic them and take consistent behavioural actions to interact with SMIs (Ki & Kim, 2019). Followers are more likely to be influenced on purchase decisions when the SMI's image is congruent with their ideal self-image (Shan *et al.*, 2020). According to results here, the followers of SMIs considered as taste leaders have the courage to interact with them but they do not recommend them to peers, and they do not purchase their recommended products. Two reasons may explain these results. First, followers' caution. Taste is a personal trait, and it may be risky to make recommendations on a particular SMI account because your own image could be damaged if the recommendation is not appreciated. Second, followers' secrecy. Followers may want to keep truly SMIs' taste leaders in secret. So, they can adopt their original cool trends while limiting peers' chance to imitate those trends, which would reduce their originality. In this way, followers can also enhance

their own reputation as taste leaders, though they are imitating other SMIs' covered taste leaders.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study extends the application of the opinion leadership theory originally developed for offline interactions (Solomon, 2018) and the megaphone effect (McQuarrie et al., 2013) regarding the effects of taste leadership. First, it contributes to the literature by developing and testing a parsimonious model explaining how several SMIs' content features impact on SMIs' opinion and taste leadership perception. Results show that the perceived quantity of posts made by SMIs does not contribute to their perception as opinion leaders. Thus, perceived originality, quality and uniqueness are the content features contributing to SMIs' reputation as opinion leaders while prestige and attractiveness contribute to their perception as taste leaders. Second, the SMI's expertise impact is positive on the intention to recommend the SMI account and on purchase intentions towards the products endorsed. Therefore, this research suggests that those SMIs willing to increase their mass of followers and their communication effectiveness when endorsing products should exhibit their expertise on their posts. Third, there is a direct effect of the SMI's taste leadership on the audience's intention to interact with the SMI's account. Interacting with followers on social media can be beneficial for SMIs who desire content engagement, feedback and even inspiration to create new posts. Thus, the effect of being a taste leader can derive a more personal connection with SMIs' followers, which in turn may foster trust and loyalty. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study examining the direct effects of taste leadership on behavioural intentions. Overall, findings offer novel insights into how SMIs' expertise and perception as opinion and taste leadership impact on Instagram followers' behavioural intentions.

5.2. Managerial implications

Findings reveal useful implications for Instagram influencers willing to enhance their leadership, as well as firms looking for partners among Instagram influencers.

For SMIs, findings suggest that original unique publications should be designed with quality to enhance their perception of being an opinion leader. Thus, SMIs' posts need to be different from one another, innovative, and sophisticated. Prestigious and attractive publications enhance their perception of being a taste leader. So, SMIs' posts must be exclusive and visually appealing. SMIs' leadership is enhanced by the expertise associated with them because their posts show experience and knowledge about certain topics of interest. Consequently, SMIs can insist on the specific features of their publications to achieve different objectives.

Firms selecting SMIs to endorse their products and services must first study their publications to check what kind of content features are predominant and thus contribute to their image as opinion and taste leaders. Publications need to be revised because they also enhance SMIs' image of being experts in certain fields that should be connected to the firm's interests. Firms should examine the match between SMIs (according to SMIs' publications and leadership) and their own brand personality because

investing on them can influence positively on purchase intention. Taking no notice of this point could result in counterproductive consequences for the firm (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021).

5.3. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study point at several avenues for future research. First, although this is one of the first studies to investigate the direct effects of SMIs' taste leadership on followers' behavioural intentions, current results reveal limited impact on the intention to recommend the influencer's account and the intention to purchase endorsed products. Maybe the variety of influencers of different categories under research is behind this result as not all of them may encourage purchase of endorsed products. Second, the actual sample size is relatively small and represents only a single geographic region. Hence, findings may not be generalized to other contexts. Future research may extend this work to different geographic and cultural contexts.

New research could examine the effects of the specific features of SMIs' posts such as music, irony, physical setting, and the extent of intimacy shared on SMIs' leadership and followers' behavioural intentions. Several authors suggest that SMIs' personality traits are gaining relevance for becoming opinion leaders, while expertise is decreasing (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013). So, further research on SMIs' traits is proposed. There is also a need to study the effects of SMIs' inflated physical appearance vanity (Wong & Malone, 2016) on SMIs' taste leadership and the psychological well-being of followers comparing themselves to the SMI's ideal image posted.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1
Main questionnaire

Perceived originality (Moldovan *et al.*, 2011; Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

Publications of the Instagram account of (chosen influencer) are original.
Publications of the Instagram account of (chosen influencer) are novel.
Publications of the Instagram account of (chosen influencer) are unusual.
Publications of the Instagram account of (chosen influencer) are innovative.
Publications of the Instagram account of (chosen influencer) are sophisticated.
Publications of the Instagram account of (chosen influencer) are creative.

Perceived quality (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

Quality of publications on this Instagram account (chosen influencer)

Perceived quantity (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

Quantity of publications on this Instagram account

Perceived uniqueness (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

This Instagram account (chosen influencer) is highly unique
This Instagram account (chosen influencer) is one of a kind
This Instagram account (chosen influencer) is really special and different to others

Perceived prestige (Ki & Kim, 2019).

I find that (chosen influencer)'s Instagram content is prestigious
I find that (chosen influencer)'s Instagram content is upscale
I find that (chosen influencer)'s Instagram content has high status

Perceived attractiveness (Ki & Kim, 2019).

I find (chosen influencer)'s Instagram content is good-looking
I find (chosen influencer)'s Instagram content is attractive
I find (chosen influencer)'s Instagram content is visually appealing

Expertise (Ki & Kim, 2019).

When looking at the Instagram of (chosen influencer), I find that he/she has experience in his/her area of interest (fashion, sports, humour, video games, etc).
When looking at the Instagram of (chosen influencer), I find that he/she is an expert in his/her area of interest (fashion, sports, humour, video games, etc).
When looking at the Instagram of (chosen influencer), I find that he/she is qualified in his/her area of interest (fashion, sports, humour, video games, etc).

Opinion leadership (Thakur *et al.*, 2016; Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

This Instagram account (chosen influencer) serves as a model for others.
This Instagram account (chosen influencer) is one step ahead of others.
This Instagram account (chosen influencer) offers interesting pictures that suggest new ideas.
This Instagram account persuades people to behave like the account pictures suggest.
This Instagram account influences people's opinions.
I used this Instagram account as a source of information.

Taste leadership (Ki & Kim, 2019).

(Chosen influencer) takes the lead in sharing what looks good with his/her followers through Instagram
(Chosen influencer) is one of the first people to find the newest trends and designs that other people tend to pass over
When worn or used by (chosen influencer), the product becomes a look, a style, an exhibition of taste

Intention to interact (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

I have the intention to interact with this Instagram account (chosen influencer) in the near future.
I predict that I will interact with this Instagram account (chosen influencer).

Intention to recommend (Prayag *et al.*, 2017; Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

I will probably recommend (chosen influencer) Instagram account to other people.
I will say positive things about (chosen influencer) Instagram account to other people.
I will encourage family and friends to follow (chosen influencer) Instagram account.

Purchase Intention (Ki & Kim, 2019).

In the future, I am likely to try one of the same products that (chosen influencer) endorsed or posted on his/her Instagram
In the future, I am likely to try one of the same services that (chosen influencer) endorsed or posted on his/her Instagram
In the future, I am likely to try one of the same brands that (chosen influencer) endorsed or posted on his/her Instagram