

## **INVOLVEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: Mimicry and Consumer Social and Non-Social Behavior**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, the Internet has brought about significant changes in marketing on digital platforms, especially with social media influencers (SMIs). In this context, companies have started to hire them to expand their brands and reach a wider audience (Ooi et al., 2023). SMIs, content creators with a large following (de Veirman et al., 2017), shape behavioral decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and exert above-average influence (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). This persuasive power stems from the emotional relationships they build with their audiences (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). By maintaining an open and caring relationship, they convey a genuine narrative that is consistent with their lives (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), which goes beyond product endorsement, influencing aesthetic behaviors and lifestyles (Ki, Parks & Kim, 2022).

Although consumers imitate SMIs because they see them as ideal role models and impact their purchasing decisions, the mimicry of these influencers is still little explored (Dinh & Lee, 2022). Research defines them as brand endorsers, but studies that address interpersonal and holistic aspects are lacking (Ki et al., 2020). While there is evidence on the effectiveness of SMIs in building brand relationships (Dhir et al., 2021), consumer imitation behavior and its link to engagement with these influencers remain under-explored. There is also a lack of a comprehensive framework explaining the underlying mechanisms between influencers and consumers, as imitation may be related to engagement with social media profiles (Dinh & Lee, 2022).

It is important to consider that the SMI phenomenon is based on a social dynamic (Ki, Parks & Kim, 2022), enhanced by the characteristics of social media, which reinforce the perception of intimacy (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). This process culminates in the formation of parasocial relationships with SMIs (Audrezet et al., 2020), which require investigation. These relationships derive from the Social Comparison Theory (SCT - Festinger, 1954), which suggests that people evaluate their abilities and beliefs by comparing themselves with others in their environment (Greenwood, 2017). In addition, there is evidence that involvement with SMIs is associated not only with social comparison, but also with constant digital monitoring (Fox & Moreland, 2015), known as stalking, in which the user follows the SMI's activities to obtain information (Dhir et al., 2021).

Although parasocial interaction has already been studied as an antecedent of consumer attitudes and purchasing behavior (Vrontis et al., 2021), there is still no research on social comparison and stalking associated with SMI engagement and imitation, indicating a gap. Belanche et al. (2021) also argue that the relationship between SMIs and consumers, in the light of SCT, needs further study.

Allied to this, research shows that imitation improves social relationships (Jacob et al., 2011) and affects those involved, both those who imitate and those who are imitated (Chartrand & Dalton, 2009). Mimicry, encompassing both social and non-social behaviors, is highlighted as an effective bond-building and engagement strategy (Lakin et al., 2003; Ki & Kim, 2019). The literature points out that SMI imitation not only generates significant shares on digital media, but also directly impacts purchase intentions (Ki & Kim, 2019). This dynamic reinforces the notion that technology-mediated social interactions are redefining consumer behavior, not just in purchasing, but in other aspects of their lives, which merit investigation.

Another relevant factor is that men and women engage differently in social situations (Kim et al., 2015). Women tend to be more socially involved, while men seek independence, the need for respect and social status (Ooi et al., 2023). It is therefore necessary to investigate

the role of gender in the context of SMI, since the impact of gender and influence marketing is unclear and should be researched (Ooi et al., 2023).

Given this scenario, the question arises: does involvement with SMI lead consumers to mimic SMI? Does SMI comparison mediate both SMI involvement and SMI stalking on consumer SMI mimicry? Can SMI mimicry lead consumers into social and non-social behaviors? Based on these questions, this article aims to analyze how the antecedents (involvement, social comparison and stalking) can lead consumers to SMI mimicry, as well as whether this mimicry influences social and non-social behaviors.

## **2. THEORETICAL BASIS**

### **2.1 SMI Mimicry**

Recent literature on social media influencers has focused on investigating the factors that can contribute to the effectiveness of social media influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). These factors include the effect of influencers on purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019), as well as the effect of the attractiveness of digital influencers and the effect of congruence between the digital influencer and the brand (Torres, Augusto & Matos, 2019); and the characteristics of influencers on behavioral intentions (Breves et al., 2019).

Although studies indicate that the strength of the endorsement of digital influencers has a significant effect on consumer purchasing behavior (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016), more recent research shows that SMI plays an even more comprehensive role by serving as a source of inspiration for consumers (Ki, Parks & Kim, 2022). Thus, in addition to product recommendations, consumers can adopt social standards promoted by SMIs, such as lifestyle and aesthetic standards (Ki, Parks & Kim, 2022), with the social standard being associated with a default option that emerges when the consumer is in doubt about their references. From this they start to observe the choice of an exemplary person adopting them as their default choice (Huh et al., 2014).

In addition to inspiration in only a suggestive sense, the literature points to the concept of consumer mimicry, whose roots go back to human socialization (Lakin et al., 2023), but which, in the context of marketing, refers specifically to the desire to reproduce the behaviour of certain models (in this case, SMIs) to resemble or establish a connection with them (Ruvio et al., 2013). Empirical evidence indicates that this mimetic desire usually emerges from the perception of reliability and good taste attributed to the SMI (Ki & Kim, 2019).

### **2.2 SMI Engagement**

Social media engagement refers to a consumer state of mind that provides greater involvement and results in a personally meaningful benefit (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). In this context, by sharing their content on digital platforms, SMIs begin to shape opinions and influence users' behavioral decisions (Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021), in addition to increasing the credibility and reliability of the products or services they recommend (Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022).

Consumption of this shared content can stimulate engagement with SMI. High user engagement with a piece of content directs the consumer towards a systematic process, as they critically assess the information presented by the SMI and consider the product's attributes before forming their opinion and making a behavioral decision (Konstantoulaki, Kokkinaki & Rizomyliotis, 2021).

When SMIs share their lifestyle, their experiences with products and services and emerging trends, they begin to influence consumers' attitudes and perspectives (Ooi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the more consumers get involved with social media, the greater the impact of SMIs on behavioral decisions, since these influencers come to be perceived as role models

and therefore strive to imitate them (Dinh & Lee, 2022). This effort to imitate stems from both admiration and the perception of similarity with influencers (Shan et al., 2020). In view of this, the following hypothesis was established:

H1- Consumer involvement with SMI directly and positively influences SMI mimicry.

### **2.3 Social comparison and SMI mimicry**

With the growth of social media, the personal interactions derived from the involvement between followers and influencers come to constitute parasocial relationships (Kim & Ko, 2010; Ko et al., 2009). These parasocial relationships established with SMI are based on feelings of identification and friendship (Kim & Kim, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021).

According to the theory of parasocial interaction (TCS), these relationships stem from the perceived connection between the public and the celebrity (Lou & Kim, 2019). Within the scope of this theory, the literature highlights that social comparisons can arise from different motivations (Song et al., 2019), and that the effect resulting from this comparison can vary depending on the individual's personality or even the context in which the comparison takes place (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019).

In the specific context of the use of social media platforms, studies indicate that, when perceiving that another user occupies a relatively more advantageous position, the individual tends to engage in social comparisons (Latif et al., 2021). Given that consumers often see SMIs as idealized versions of themselves, they express a desire to emulate them, whether in terms of physical appearance, lifestyle or attitudes (Dinh & Lee, 2021). Given this, the following hypotheses were established:

H2- Consumer involvement with the SMI directly and positively influences social comparison with the SMI.

H3- Social comparison with the SMI directly and positively influences SMI mimicry.

H4- Social comparison with the SMI mediates consumer involvement with the SMI over the influence of SMI mimicry.

### **2.4 Stalking and SMI mimicry**

The term stalking still lacks consensus in the literature. Some authors define it as the search for interpersonal information (Tokunaga & Gustafson, 2014), social surveillance (Marwick, 2012) or stalking on Facebook (Lyndon et al., 2011). For this study, the nomenclature "stalking" was adopted in social media, as defined by (Dhir et al., 2021). This concept refers to the tendency of users of social media platforms to check other people's profiles in order to know what they are doing. So much so that most of the time they spend on social media, they are monitoring the profiles of others to gather information about them by observing their activities (Dhir et al., 2021). The literature also indicates that the more users engage with these platforms, the greater the likelihood that they will want to know and continuously monitor the profiles on these social media platforms (Fox & Moreland, 2015). In addition, there is an association between social comparison and this monitoring (Tandon et al., 2021).

Although certain forms of stalking can be harmful, the search for information can also be driven by curiosity and the desire for connection (Dhir et al., 2021; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). This practice can increase consumers' engagement with SMIs, which, in turn, can increase comparison and the propensity to imitate them. This relationship suggests that stalking, when motivated by benign intentions, can be a facilitator of greater connection between the SMI and their followers (Dhir et al., 2021). Given this, the following hypotheses were established:

- H5- Consumer involvement with the SMI directly and positively influences SMI stalking.
- H6- SMI stalking directly and positively influences SMI mimicry.
- H7- SMI stalking directly and positively influences comparison with the SMI.
- H8- Social comparison with the SMI mediates SMI stalking over the influence of SMI mimicry.

## **2.5 Social and non-social behaviors and SMI mimicry**

Within the social media universe, the role of the influencer is becoming increasingly complex (Ashraf, Hameed & Saeed, 2023). To deal with this complexity, in addition to understanding the rate of growth, sales and profit, it is also necessary to delve into the dynamics of the relationships established (Masuda, Han & Lee, 2022). One of the strategies for fostering harmonious relationships is through mimicry, since it creates a “social glue” that connects individuals (Lakin et al., 2003). This mimicry can manifest itself in both social and non-social behaviors (Ki & Kim, 2019; Siqi & Yee, 2021).

In the context of social behavior, the literature shows that mimicry, whether conscious or unconscious, plays an important role in interpersonal interactions between the imitator and the imitated, including deriving sharing (Guéguen, Jacob, & Martin, 2009). In the context of social media, one study pointed out that the target consumer's desire to imitate an SMI has an influence on the manifestation of sWOM (social media word-of-mouth) on social media (Ki & Kim, 2019).

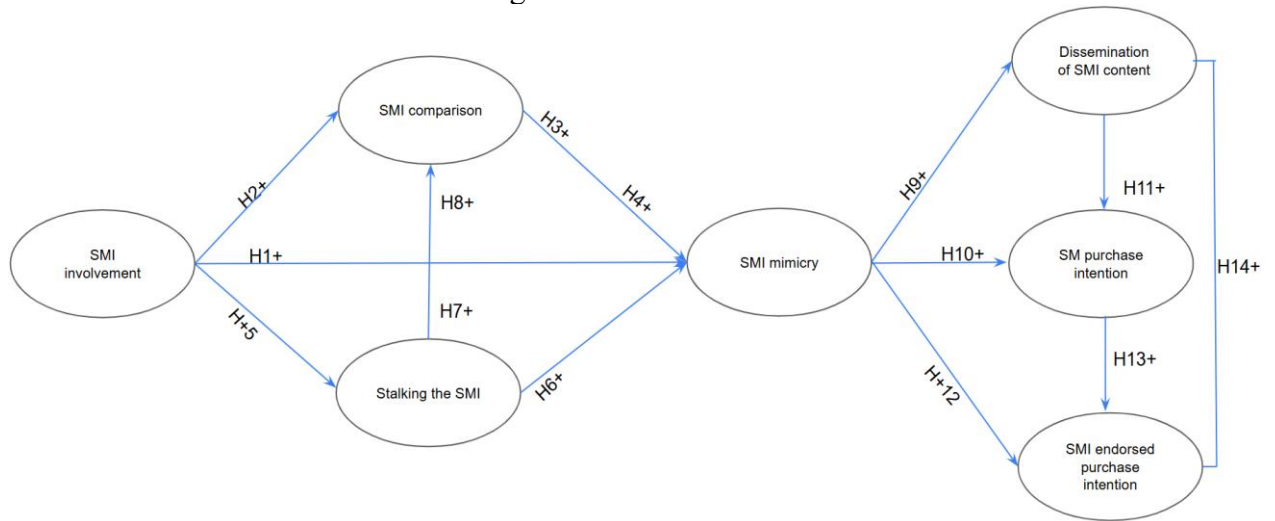
In relation to non-social behavior, empirical evidence shows that salespeople who consciously imitate customers' verbal and/or non-verbal expressions obtain an increase in sales compared to those who do not adopt this practice (Jacob et al., 2011). In the context of social media, it is observed that the target consumer's desire to imitate an SMI has an influence on the purchase intention endorsed by the SMI (Ki & Kim, 2019). In view of this, the following hypotheses were established:

- H9- SMI mimicry directly and positively influences the diffusion of SMI content.
- H10- SMI mimicry directly and positively influences purchase intention in SM.
- H11- the diffusion of SMI content directly and positively influences purchase intention in SM.
- H12- SMI mimicry directly and positively influences the purchase intention endorsed by SMI.
- H13- the intention to buy in SM directly and positively influences the intention to buy endorsed by the SMI.
- H14- the diffusion of SMI content directly and positively influences the purchase intention endorsed by the SMI.

## **3. THEORETICAL MODEL PROPOSED**

The conceptual model proposed in figure 1 presents the constructs used in the theoretical framework and their central concepts. Thus, a framework that integrates the constructs: SMI mimicry, SMI involvement, SMI comparison and SMI stalking and the relationships between them are investigated. In addition to the relationship between SMI mimicry influencing the diffusion of SMI content, representing social behavior, and purchase intention, representing non-social behavior.

Figure 1: Theoretical model



#### 4. METHODS

This study is quantitative and descriptive in nature, seeking to expose the characteristics of the occurrence and the relationships between the variables mentioned (Malhotra, 2006; Sampieri, Collado & Lucio, 2013). A field study was conducted, with data collection using a structured questionnaire of the online survey type via the Google Forms platform (Malhotra, 2019), with closed and mandatory questions (Hair et al., 2013). Dissemination took place via Instagram, email and WhatsApp.

For the population, respondents were individuals over the age of 18 who use social media such as Instagram, X, TikTok, Facebook and/or YouTube. The population of this study will comprise the population living in Brazil, which is a country with great representativeness in data related to the digital world. According to the Digital 2023: Global Overview Report, Brazil is one of the countries where people spend the most time on the internet, around 9 hours and 32 minutes a day, second only to South Africa (9 hours and 38 minutes).

To this end, we used the non-probability sampling technique (Cochran, 1977), with convenience sampling combined with the snowball technique (Malhotra, 2019). The sample size followed the recommendation of Hair et al. (2013), with five to ten respondents per variable. Ten cases were used per variable, requiring at least 260 questionnaires. Seven scales were used to measure the constructs, as shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1 - Composition of the collection instrument

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Code</b>
Dissemination of SMI content (Ki & Kim, 2019)	I share some of the posts of the social media influencers I admire I would repost some of the posts of the social media influencers I admire using other forms of social media	DIF1 DIF2
Purchase intention on social medias (Wang & Chang, 2013)	When I need to shop, I prefer to shop on social media sites I would recommend that other people shop on social media sites I would like to continue shopping on social media sites in the future Overall, I am very willing to shop on social media	INT1 INT2 INT3 INT4
Purchase intention with SMI endorsement (Ki & Kim, 2019)	I am willing in the future to buy one of the same products that SMI endorsed on its social media I intend in the future to try one of the same services that SMI endorsed on its social media I am willing to use one of the same brands that SMI has endorsed on its social media in the future	INTE1 INTE2 INTE3
SMI mimicry (Ki & Kim, 2019)	I want to be as smart as the social media influencers I admire I want to have a lifestyle similar to the social media influencers I admire I want to be as modern as the social media influencers I admire I've sometimes tried to change aspects of my personality to be more like the social media influencers I admire	MM 1 MM 2 MM 3 MM4
SMI social comparison (Tandon et. al., 2021)	When I'm on social media, I tend to compare myself to this social media influencer. When I'm on social media, I always pay attention to how I do things compared to this social media influencer. When I'm on social media, I often check how I'm doing socially in comparison to this social media influencer. When I'm on social media, I often compare my own achievements with those of this social media influencer. When I'm on social media, I compare my life situation with that of this social media influencer.	CMS1 CMS2 CMS3 CMS4 CMS5
SMI stalking (Smoker & March, 2017)	I often check the social media influencer's profiles to see what they're up to. I try to monitor the influencer through their social media profiles. I spend most of my time on social media looking at influencers' profiles. I get a lot of information about influencers by observing their activities on social media.	VSMI1  VSMI2 VSMI3 VSMI4
Involvement with SMI (Ghali, Rather & Khan (2024).	I became interested in following the social media influencer's profile Following the social media influencer's profile was rewarding It was worth following the social media influencer's profile The time I spent following the social media influencer's profile just flew by	ENV1 ENV2 ENV3 ENV4

All the constructs were measured according to a Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) (Hair et al., 2017), ending with some questions to collect the respondents' sociodemographic profile. A pre-test was applied in order to assess possible flaws that could cause difficulties in the execution of the questionnaire. It should be noted that this research is exempt from the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) via the Brazil platform in accordance with CNS Resolution 510/16 of the National Health Council (Brazil, 2016).

The data was analyzed using the software RStudio and SmartPLS4. Initially, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics: frequency, mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation (Hair et al., 2013). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to check the reliability of the scales, considering the level of reliability to be acceptable at 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then used to test the hypotheses (Gefen et al., 2000). A multi-group analysis was also carried out to verify the influence of gender on the phenomenon studied).

## **5. DATA ANALYSIS**

### **5.1 Treatment**

The survey was completed by 329 respondents. The first 14 answers were collected as a pre-test, with the aim of checking for possible problems related to the clarity of the statements and grammatical correctness. For this reason, they were not included in the final sample. The remaining data was subjected to a data screening process in order to identify participants outside the target audience, outliers and missing values.

In this process, it was found that 32 respondents did not follow any digital influencers through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X or YouTube, which disqualified them from the sample. In addition, 12 participants failed the attention test, which consisted of answering the sum of 3 + 2; answers other than 5 indicated a lack of attention when answering the questionnaire. After these refinement stages, the final sample consisted of 271 valid participants.

This was followed by an analysis of possible anomalies and missing values. In the case of the age variable, which is quantitative in nature, one answer was identified in categorical format (“32 and 28 years old”). As it was not in line with the requested standard, it was decided to replace this entry with the average age of the sample. With regard to the variable indicating the number of people living in the same house, used to calculate monthly per capita income, there were responses in the format “6 or more”, again configuring categorical data. It was therefore decided to replace these cases with the average number of residents. Finally, the income variable had 11 missing values and one extreme case, in which the participant answered “10”. As this was an outlier, it was decided to replace this value, as well as the missing cases, with the average reported income. Once these corrections had been made, it was possible to move on to analyzing the sample's profile.

### **5.2 Sample profile**

Of the total number of participants, females accounted for the highest percentage (63.84%), followed by males (35.06%) and others (1.10%). The majority were single (64.21%), followed by married/stable union (31.73%) and divorced/separated (4.06). In terms of education, the largest number of people had completed a postgraduate course (specialization/MBA, master's and/or doctorate) (40.22%), higher education (undergraduate/graduate and/or technologist) (35.06%), secondary/technical education (23.25%) and primary education (1.47%). The average age is 30 years (SD = 8.51 years). The average monthly family income is R\$8,665.92 (SD = R\$12,772.27) and the average monthly per capita income is R\$3,352.82 (SD = R\$4,440.10).

### **5.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis**

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to check whether the items were manifestations of an assumed underlying factor (Table 1). The results of the Kayser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and the results of Bartlett's test of sphericity were preliminarily checked to see if the correlation matrices were suitable for conducting the EFA. As the KMO results were above 0.5 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity resulted in significant statistics, the correlations are adequate and sufficient to conduct the EFA (Hair et al., 2013). A unidimensional structure was expected for the constructs. When conducting the EFA, it was found that all the constructs met this expectation and, as recommended by Hair et al. (2013), the factor loadings and explained variances were above 0.5. Therefore, we can move on to the other analyses.

**Table 1**  
*Exploratory factor analysis*

Item	H <sup>p</sup>	Factor Loadings	KMO	Bartlett			V.Exp.
				$\chi^2$	df	Sig.	
DIF1	0.45	0.67	0.50	61.99	1	0.000	0.45
DIF2	0.45	0.67					
INT1	0.75	0.86	0.84	823.34	6	0.000	0.75
INT2	0.65	0.80					
INT3	0.79	0.89					
INT4	0.82	0.91					
INTE1	0.83	0.91	0.75	588.88	3	0.000	0.79
INTE2	0.83	0.91					
INTE3	0.71	0.84					
MM1	0.41	0.64	0.74	446.16	6	0.000	0.55
MM2	0.74	0.86					
MM3	0.79	0.89					
MM4	0.27	0.52					
CMS1	0.69	0.83	0.85	875.98	10	0.000	0.66
CMS2	0.70	0.84					
CMS3	0.61	0.78					
CMS4	0.73	0.86					
CMS5	0.54	0.74					
VSMI1	0.67	0.82	0.77	372.10	6	0.000	0.53
VSMI2	0.69	0.83					
VSMI3	0.33	0.57					
VSMI4	0.43	0.65					
ENV1	0.69	0.83	0.81	459.63	6	0.000	0.59
ENV2	0.64	0.80					
ENV3	0.66	0.81					
ENV4	0.36	0.60					

#### 5.4 Analysis of the measurement model

Discriminant validity was assessed at the item level and at the latent variable level. To analyze the item level, the cross-loadings were checked (Table 2). The results show that the factor loadings of the items are higher in the corresponding construct and do not have high loadings in different constructs; therefore, it is concluded that there is discriminant validity at the item level (Chin, 1998).

**Table 2**  
*Cross loads*

	Comparison	Diffusion	Involvement	Intention	Mimicry	Intention Endorsement	Stalking
CMS1	<b>0.861</b>	0.229	0.244	0.130	0.499	0.286	0.310
CMS2	<b>0.868</b>	0.161	0.277	0.106	0.519	0.263	0.331
CMS3	<b>0.842</b>	0.215	0.280	0.139	0.529	0.260	0.387
CMS4	<b>0.879</b>	0.160	0.277	0.102	0.501	0.246	0.327
CMS5	<b>0.803</b>	0.105	0.253	0.091	0.478	0.194	0.339
DIF1	0.169	<b>0.814</b>	0.153	-0.046	0.155	0.222	0.200
DIF2	0.181	<b>0.887</b>	0.183	0.044	0.247	0.231	0.123
ENV1	0.222	0.144	<b>0.853</b>	0.178	0.309	0.290	0.492
ENV2	0.242	0.160	<b>0.851</b>	0.099	0.373	0.325	0.522
ENV3	0.216	0.178	<b>0.839</b>	0.129	0.292	0.315	0.475
ENV4	0.344	0.174	<b>0.760</b>	0.231	0.341	0.289	0.506
INT1	0.072	-0.039	0.139	<b>0.893</b>	0.140	0.356	0.110
INT2	0.174	-0.025	0.198	<b>0.866</b>	0.227	0.340	0.144
INT3	0.133	0.044	0.161	<b>0.917</b>	0.246	0.384	0.090
INT4	0.102	0.027	0.201	<b>0.924</b>	0.221	0.394	0.090
MM1	0.318	0.269	0.301	0.164	<b>0.744</b>	0.287	0.208
MM2	0.503	0.166	0.398	0.241	<b>0.879</b>	0.303	0.371
MM3	0.479	0.185	0.336	0.261	<b>0.883</b>	0.376	0.325
MM4	0.598	0.176	0.244	0.068	<b>0.695</b>	0.172	0.288
INTE1	0.265	0.255	0.338	0.399	0.277	<b>0.932</b>	0.321
INTE2	0.240	0.290	0.358	0.374	0.323	<b>0.936</b>	0.324
INTE3	0.312	0.192	0.332	0.368	0.390	<b>0.912</b>	0.338
VSMI1	0.255	0.157	0.494	0.115	0.304	0.267	<b>0.840</b>
VSMI2	0.357	0.178	0.484	0.082	0.324	0.330	<b>0.851</b>
VSMI3	0.303	0.106	0.343	0.023	0.273	0.203	<b>0.694</b>
VSMI4	0.353	0.140	0.580	0.143	0.301	0.313	<b>0.797</b>

Discriminant validity at the latent variable level was checked using the Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981), in which the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) must be higher than the correlations between the latent variables. As can be seen in Table 3, the results show that this criterion was also met.

**Table 3**  
*Matrix Fornell-Larcker*

	Comparison	Diffusion	Involvement	Intention	Mimicry	Intention Endorsement	Stalking
Comparison	<b>0.851</b>						
Diffusion	0,206	<b>0.851</b>					
Involvement	0,314	0,199	<b>0.827</b>				
Intention	0,134	0,005	0,195	<b>0.901</b>			
Mimicry	0,595	0,241	0,401	0,234	<b>0.805</b>		
Intention Endorsement	0,294	0,265	0,370	0,410	0,357	<b>0.927</b>	
Stalking	0,399	0,184	0,606	0,119	0,377	0,354	<b>0.798</b>

Note: Values on the diagonal (in bold) are the square roots of the AVEs and below the diagonal are the correlations.

The next step was to check for convergent validity using the AVEs (Table 4). Given that the AVE values are greater than 0.5, it can be concluded that there is convergent validity (Hair et al., 2013).

**Table 4**  
*Alfa de Cronbach, Confiabilidade Composta e AVE*

	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	<b>Composite reliability</b>	<b>Average variance extracted (AVE)</b>
Comparison	0.904	0.929	0.724
Diffusion	0.625	0.840	0.725
Involvement	0.845	0.896	0.683
Intention	0.922	0.945	0.811
Mimicry	0.815	0.879	0.647
Intention	0.918	0.948	0.859
Endorsement	0.918	0.948	0.859
Stalking	0.808	0.874	0.637

The internal consistency of the measures was also checked using composite reliability. Although the values of Cronbach's alpha (1951) are reported, the focus here is on composite reliability because it considers the importance of the items for the factor in its calculation, while the modeling of Cronbach's alpha assumes that all items have the same importance for the factor (Green & Yang, 2009; Sijtsma, 2009). It can then be seen that all the latent variables have satisfactory reliability (Table 4), since the composite reliabilities are greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013).

### **5.5 Analysis of the structural model**

Before analyzing the hypothesized relationships, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were checked for multicollinearity. The VIFs were less than 5 (Table 5), so we could proceed to the next steps (Hair et al., 2013). The structural paths were calculated using bootstrapping with 5000 resamples, bias-corrected confidence level, significance at 5% and two-tailed tests (Kock, 2015) for greater index precision.

Of the direct effect relationships, the results show that hypotheses H2 ( $\beta = 0.113$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), H6 ( $\beta = 0.043$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) and H11 ( $\beta = -0.055$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) were not supported because the influences are not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The other hypotheses of the direct relationships, however, were supported, as can be seen in Table 5. The explanatory power of the variables was verified by the adjusted  $R^2$ , which indicates that involvement and comparison explain 39.9% of the variation in mimicry and 36.5% of the variation in stalking. Mimicry and social media purchase intention explain 27.3% of the variation in SMI-endorsed purchase intention, while mimicry explains 5.1% of social media purchase intention. Stalking explains 16.1% of the variation in SMI comparison. Finally, mimicry explains 5.5% of the variation in SMI content diffusion. Coefficients of determination greater than 25% are considered large, while the others are considered small (Cohen, 1992).

**Table 5***Hypothesis test for direct effects*

Hypothesis	VIF	$f^2$	$\beta$	DP	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	R <sup>2</sup> adjusted
H1: Involvement → Mimicry	1.596	0.049	0.215	0.061	3.499	0.000	
H3: Comparison → Mimicry	1.201	0.364	0.509	0.055	9.309	0.000	39.9%
H6: Stalking → Mimicry	1.712	0.002	0.043	0.069	0.616	0.538	
H2: Involvement → Comparison	1.581	0.010	0.113	0.080	1.415	0.157	16.1%
H7: Stalking → Comparison	1.581	0.083	0.331	0.080	4.117	0.000	
H5: Involvement → Stalking	1.000	0.581	0.606	0.040	15.300	0.000	36.5%
H9: Mimicry → Diffusion	1.000	0.062	0.242	0.060	4.009	0.000	5.5%
H10: Mimicry → Intention	1.062	0.061	0.247	0.060	4.150	0.000	
H11: Diffusion → Intention	1.062	0.003	-0.055	0.069	0.798	0.425	5.1%
H12: Mimicry → Intention Endorsement	1.127	0.061	0.222	0.062	3.560	0.000	
H13: Intention → Intention Endorsement	1.061	0.167	0.357	0.055	6.479	0.000	27.3%
H14: Diffusion → Intention Endorsement	1.065	0.058	0.210	0.061	3.476	0.001	

With regard to effect size, this was analyzed using the  $f^2$  index, which makes it possible to check whether the removal of an explanatory variable has an effect on those explained (Hair et al., 2013). As can be seen in Table 5, the effect of removing comparison on mimicry ( $f^2 = 0.364$ ), involvement in stalking ( $f^2 = 0.581$ ) and purchase intention on social media on SMI endorsed purchase intention ( $f^2 = 0.167$ ) are large because they are greater than 0.35 (Cohen, 1988). According to this author, the other effects are small.

Evaluating the indirect effect relationships (Table 6), it can be concluded that there is no mediating effect of social SMI comparison on the relationship between SMI involvement and the influence of SMI mimicry. However, there is a mediating effect of comparison on the relationship between stalking and mimicry.

**Table 6***Hypothesis test for indirect effects*

	B	DP	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
H4: Involvement → Comparison → Mimicry	0.057	0.040	1.420	0.156
H8: Stalking → Comparison → Mimicry	0.169	0.046	3.689	0.000

### 5.5.1 Multi-group analysis

A multi-group analysis was carried out for the gender variable. As the gender variable is already categorical, no adjustments were necessary. Therefore, the groups with a sufficient sample for analysis were female ( $n = 173$ ) and male ( $n = 95$ ). The results show that the effect of social media purchase intention on SMI-endorsed purchase intention is greater for men than for women ( $\beta_{\text{female}} = 0,291$ ;  $\beta_{\text{male}} = 0.534$ ;  $\Delta\beta = -0.243$ ;  $p\text{-value} = 0.041$ ). The other direct relationships showed no significant differences (Table 7).

**Table 7**  
*Multi-group direct effects analysis for gender*

	$\beta$ (Female)	$\beta$ (Male)	Difference	p-value
H1: Involvement → Mimicry	0.231	0.204	0.027	0.829
H3: Comparison → Mimicry	0.465	0.585	-0.120	0.291
H6: Stalking → Mimicry	0.065	-0.017	0.081	0.574
H2: Involvement → Comparison	0.115	0.130	-0.015	0.921
H7: Stalking → Comparison	0.280	0.401	-0.121	0.503
H5: Involvement → Stalking	0.600	0.629	-0.030	0.712
H9: Mimicry → Diffusion	0.292	0.218	0.074	0.550
H10: Mimicry → Intention	0.272	0.233	0.039	0.749
H11: Diffusion → Intention	-0.093	-0.032	-0.061	0.658
H12: Mimicry → Intention Endorsement	0.326	0.288	0.038	0.775
H13: Intention → Intention Endorsement	0.291	0.534	-0.243	0.041
H14: Diffusion → Intention Endorsement	0.159	0.259	-0.100	0.469

Similarly, the indirect effects also showed no statistically significant difference (Table 8).

**Table 8**  
*Analysis of multi-group indirect effects for gender*

	$\beta$ (Female)	$\beta$ (Male)	Difference	p-value
H4: Involvement → Comparison → Mimicry	0.038	-0.012	0.050	0.569
H8: Stalking → Comparison → Mimicry	0.130	0.234	-0.104	0.300

## 6. DISCUSSION

The general results confirm that the antecedents of consumer involvement, comparison and stalking influence the dynamics of SMI mimicry. In addition, the research shows that consumers who adopt imitation behaviors in relation to SMIs tend to be more susceptible to the manifestation of social and non-social behaviors.

From this perspective, regarding the proposed hypotheses, the confirmation of H1 reinforces the understanding that involvement not only brings consumers closer to influencers but also acts as a behavioral trigger that increases the propensity for mimicry, corroborating the literature which indicates that involvement shapes consumers' behavioral decisions (Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021; Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022). More than an affective bond, this involvement creates a dynamic where admiration and aspiration intertwine, i.e. consumers not only appreciate SMIs, but come to see them as a possible and desirable model of identity. This movement towards closeness explains why, as consumers become involved with influencers, they tend to adopt similar behaviors and lifestyles, showing a deeper emotional and social connection (Dinh & Lee, 2022; Shan et al., 2020). Furthermore, this confirmation also suggests that SMI mimicry operates in a hybrid zone between consumption and identity construction, highlighting the strategic role that these agents play in the behavior of other users.

Regarding the rejection of H2, this result may be justified by the emotional bond and the sense of friendship that consumers develop when engaging with SMIs, which fosters the construction of a relationship that does not trigger significant social comparisons. This interpretation is supported by Shen et al. (2019), who state that the attachment resulting from involvement favors the formation of a relationship with significant benefits. However, this

result runs counter to Kim and Kim (2021), who point out that when consumers get involved in social media, they foster the establishment of parasocial relationships, such as comparison.

With regard to H3, its confirmation, in line with the findings Kim & Kim (2021). This confirmation can be explained by the fact that consumers often perceive SMIs as idealized versions of themselves, which leads them to establish social comparisons and, based on them, to adopt behaviors similar to those of the influencers. This result shows that the concept of social comparison plays a decisive role in this dynamic, since by engaging in these comparisons, individuals assess whether they are in a superior or inferior situation to the target being compared. This interpretation is in line with the literature, which points out that interactions on social media often stimulate the formation of parasocial relationships (Kim & Ko, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2021).

With regard to H4, which was rejected, it is suggested that when respondents compare themselves to SMIs, they appear to construct a barrier that weakens the relationship between involvement and mimicry. One possible explanation for this dynamic is that involvement with the SMI, in itself, already mobilizes positive affections, such as admiration and trust, which are enough to encourage imitation. However, when the consumer activates the social comparison mechanism, this process can evoke ambivalent feelings. Although comparison can generate aspiration, it can also bring up feelings of inadequacy, envy or social distance, especially when the perceived disparity between the consumer and the SMI is great. In these situations, instead of bringing them closer together, comparison tends to reinforce the difference, decreasing the consumer's willingness to adopt behaviors similar to those of the influencer (Shen et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021).

With regard to H5, its confirmation is consistent with the literature, which indicates that the more users engage with the use of these media, the greater the likelihood that they will want to continuously follow and monitor social media profiles (Fox & Moreland, 2015). This result can be justified by the fact that consumer involvement with SMI not only strengthens trust and affinity with the influencer, but also awakens a more intense interest in their life and activities, thus giving rise to the behavior of continuously monitoring the content posted on social media.

With regard to H6, its rejection suggests that mere prolonged and vigilant exposure to SMI content does not guarantee that consumers will actively adopt their behavioral patterns or lifestyle. In fact, the literature has pointed to factors that drive stalking other than the desire to resemble the SMI, such as simply seeking information or harassment (Dhir et al., 2021). Although consumers perceive SMIs as an ideal version of themselves (Dinh & Lee, 2021), and even though stalking strengthens the feeling of familiarity and symbolic connection with the influencer, it does not necessarily translate into mimetic behavior.

The result of H7, in turn, contradicts Tandon et al. (2021) by indicating the reverse relationship, namely that it is comparison that influences stalking. The result of this hypothesis can be justified by the fact that stalking promotes the monitoring and collection of information about SMIs (Dhir et al., 2021), and the more this search occurs, the greater the amount of SMIS behaviors and attitudes to which the user has access, becoming fertile ground for the desire for connection, and also comparisons.

With regard to hypothesis H8, its confirmation can be justified by the fact that comparisons can be both motivating and harmful, depending on a range of factors, including the context in which they occur and the personality of the individual making the comparison. (Dinh & Lee, 2021; Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019). This dynamic suggests that social comparisons are not merely reactive, but act as mediators in stalking and imitation relationships, influencing the underlying intentions that guide these actions. As evidenced in hypothesis 6, directly stalking is not enough to lead consumers to imitate SMI, however, when this surveillance behavior is filtered by the social comparison process, an additional

motivating force emerges. Social comparison allows consumers to evaluate distances or even perceived similarities between themselves and the SMI and, from this evaluation, the desire for mimicry arises as a strategy to reduce this distance and get closer to the idealized model.

With regard to hypothesis H9, its confirmation is justified by the fact that mimicry impacts interpersonal relationships, as it fosters affective bonds in a way that encourages sharing. (Lakin et al., 2003). When consumers imitate SMIs, they not only reproduce their behaviors or styles, but also reinforce the social validation of this content within their own networks. This movement of diffusion functions as an extension of the act of imitation itself, since by sharing, consumers not only demonstrate their adherence to the influencer, but also seek to reinforce their identity in the eyes of their peers. Thus, the greater the imitation of the SMI, the greater the influence to spread the SMI's content (Ki & Kim, 2019).

With regard to hypothesis H10, its confirmation can be justified by the fact that imitation is a central aspect in consumers' purchase decision-making (Jacob et al., 2011), so by adopting the purchasing patterns of influencers, consumers begin to direct their intentions towards the same channels and environments used by them, in this case, social media itself. As Ki and Kim (2019) point out, SMI mimicry influences consumers to repeat the same behaviors as them.

Thus, the rejection of hypothesis H11 is justified by the fact that merely sharing SMI content does not necessarily mean that the consumer will have the intention to purchase on social media, even though the SMI may influence the consumption decisions of other users (Ki & Kim, 2019). This finding indicates that although the interest in spreading SMI content, which is a social behavior, expresses a positive action in their relationship with SMI, it is not enough to impact on non-social behavior (intention to buy).

With regard to the confirmation of hypothesis H12, this result can be justified by the fact that social interaction mirrored through imitation can influence consumers' purchasing decisions (Jacob et al., 2011). Therefore, the greater the SMI's mimicry, the greater the influence to want to imitate their consumption choices and thus demonstrate the intention to want to buy the products, brands and services they have endorsed (Ki & Kim, 2019). This finding is complemented by the result of H10, which indicates that not only purchasing behavior is influenced by SMI, but also the purchasing modality itself, specifically the preference for purchasing on social media (H10), is a result of SMI mimicry.

The confirmation of hypothesis H13 can be explained by the fact that consumer behavior on social media transcends the boundaries of the digital environment, extending its influence to other forms of consumption, including those carried out in offline spaces. Although previous literature has already pointed to the existence of a positive association between SMI endorsement and consumer purchase intention (Siqi & Yee, 2021), the results presented here deepen this understanding by showing that consumers' preference for virtual environments as places of purchase not only strengthens consumption itself through social media, but also has an amplifying effect on purchase intention in offline contexts. This digital context, where SMIs maintain their profiles and act as credible validators of products, services and brands, favors the consolidation of this dual influence.

With regard to hypothesis H14, its confirmation can be justified by the fact that SMIs, in addition to shaping opinions, also influence consumers' behavioral decisions through the interactions they establish. This influence is manifested in the increased credibility of the recommendations made by influencers, reinforcing the trust that followers place in them (Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021; Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022). Through this dynamic, consumers feel comfortable spreading SMI content, so this interaction has a significant impact on behavioral intentions. In this way, content dissemination interactions are reflected in the purchase intentions endorsed by SMIs.

Finally, in this sample, the results of the multi-group analysis indicate that the effect of the intention to buy on social media on the purchase intention endorsed by the SMI is greater for men than for women. This result corroborates Ooi et al. (2023) and can be justified by the specific ways in which gender guides consumption, such as the fact that women's purchasing decisions are often anchored in multiple evaluations, opinion networks and relational construction. Men, on the other hand, may respond more directly to signs of authority and endorsement, especially when mediated by figures perceived as aspirational or expert.

In order to provide a better visualization of the hypothetical-deductive model, after the analysis and discussion of the results presented above, we present Chart 2, which summarizes the results of the ten hypotheses tested, accompanied by their respective justifications.

Chart 2 – Results of the hypothetical-deductive model

Hypothesis	Preliminary theoretical assumptions and possible justifications	Results
H1	Consumer involvement with SMI has a direct and positive influence on SMI mimicry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Emotional feelings generate the adoption of similar behaviors</li> <li>✓ The perception of similarity and admiration promote imitation</li> <li>✓ Imitation is the result of emotional and social connection</li> </ul>	Accept
H2	Consumer involvement with the MIS directly and positively influences social comparison with the MIS. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Involvement encompasses emotional attachment</li> <li>✓ Relationship building that expects positive benefits</li> <li>✓ Relationships with attachment and friendship do not generate significant comparisons</li> </ul>	Rejected
H3	Social comparison with SMI directly and positively influences SMI mimicry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Corroborates the findings (Kim &amp; Kim, 2021).</li> <li>✓ Perception that SMIs are ideal versions of themselves</li> <li>✓ Comparisons decide whether they are better or worse than the target of the comparison</li> <li>✓ Parasocial relationships impact on imitation</li> </ul>	Accept
H4	Social comparison with the SMI mediates consumer involvement with the SMI on the influence of SMI mimicry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Perception that SMIs are ideal versions of themselves</li> <li>✓ Comparisons decide whether they are better or worse than the target of the comparison</li> <li>✓ Parasocial relationships impact imitation</li> </ul>	Rejected
H5	Consumer engagement with the SMI directly and positively influences SMI stalking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Engagement promotes trust in the profile</li> <li>✓ Credibility increases monitoring</li> </ul>	Accept
H6	SMI stalking directly and positively influences SMI mimicry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Constant monitoring enhances connection</li> <li>✓ Prolonged stalking does not necessarily promote SMI mimicry</li> </ul>	Rejected
H7	SMI stalking directly and positively influences comparison with SMI. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refutes the findings of (Tandon et al., 2021)</li> <li>✓ Monitoring and search for information</li> <li>✓ Desire for connection generates comparison</li> </ul>	Accept
H8	Social comparison with SMI mediates SMI stalking on the influence of SMI mimicry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Comparison can act as a motivating force</li> <li>✓ Comparison overcomes the existing barrier in the stalking/mimicry relationship</li> </ul>	Accept
H9	SMI mimicry directly and positively influences the diffusion of SMI content. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Development of interpersonal relationships</li> <li>✓ Creation of affectionate relationships</li> <li>✓ Affectionate relationships promote the dissemination of content</li> </ul>	Accept
H10	SMI mimicry directly and positively influences purchase intention in SM. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Mimicry influences consumer buying environments</li> <li>✓ Mimicry promotes the intention to buy in the format in which SMI buys</li> </ul>	Accept
H11	The diffusion of SMI content directly and positively influences the intention to buy in SM. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Content diffusion expresses a positive relationship with SMI</li> <li>✓ Content interactions are not sufficient to impact the purchase format</li> </ul>	Rejected
H12	SMI mimicry directly and positively influences purchase intention endorsed by SMI. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Corroborate (Ki &amp; Kim, 2019)</li> <li>✓ Interactions mirrored by imitation impact consumer behavior</li> <li>✓ Imitation promotes the intention to buy what the SMI endorses</li> </ul>	Accept
H13	The intention to buy on social media directly and positively influences the intention to buy endorsed by the SMI. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Social media impact consumption</li> <li>✓ The format of the place of purchase impacts on the intention to buy what the SMI endorses</li> </ul>	Accept
H14	The dissemination of SMI content directly and positively influences the intention to buy endorsed by the SMI <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Content interactions are backed up by trust in the SMI</li> <li>✓ Dissemination interactions impact on purchase intentions endorsed by the SMI</li> </ul>	Accept

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate the relationship between mimicry and the antecedents consumer engagement, comparison and SMI stalking, as well as the social and non-social behaviors resulting from them, in the light of references such as the Theory of Parasocial

Interaction (TCS - Festinger, 1954). Considering that involvement with SMIs is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond simple passive observation and involves active processes of mimicry, comparison and stalking, capable of significantly influencing consumer behavior, some propositions were formulated.

Firstly, the research indicates that involvement with SMIs is strongly associated with mimetic behavior, since consumers tend to see these influencers as ideal models, aspiring to adopt their lifestyles, aesthetic standards and consumption decisions. This practice goes beyond the mere endorsement of products, reaching deeper dimensions of SMIs' spheres. These findings corroborate previous studies which suggest that SMIs exert influence not only on consumption practices, but also on the social norms followed by their audiences.

In addition, the study points out that comparison can act as a barrier when its antecedent is involvement, but, on the other hand, tends to reduce this barrier when preceded by SMI stalking, in both situations exerting an indirect influence on mimicry on the part of consumers. In the context of social media, users often compare themselves to SMIs, which generally intensifies the desire to imitate. However, when the comparison is associated with emotional contagion, the expectation of positive consequences and involvement, it tends to inhibit this mimetic behavior. Stalking, on the other hand, plays an important role by being configured not only as an expression of curiosity, but also as a deeper desire for connection and imitation. This dynamic becomes especially intense on platforms where the lives of SMIs are displayed continuously and accessible, creating an environment conducive to constant comparisons.

Finally, the research shows that mimicry contributes significantly to shaping both the social and non-social behaviors of social media consumers. It is a phenomenon that not only influences choices related to products, services and brands, but also has repercussions on the format in which the intention to buy is structured, i.e. whether it will take place in physical or virtual environments (social media). In this way, mimicry simultaneously impacts the content and form of consumption, covering the categories of product, service or brand to be consumed. In addition, the findings show a statistically significant difference for men and suggest that marketing strategies with SMIs can be calibrated according to these gender dynamics, recognizing that the effectiveness of endorsement is not universal, but crossed by gender nuances.

## **8. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

The findings of this research offer relevant theoretical implications by deepening the understanding of SMI-related mimicry, enriching the literature on influencer marketing and consumer behavior. With its dual structure, the proposed theoretical model provides a clearer view of how SMIs exert influence on social media. On the one hand, the model identifies the elements that directly motivate consumers to seek out mimicry (engagement and social comparison), while also highlighting the indirect factors that can act as drivers or inhibitors of this phenomenon (the interaction between engagement/comparison and stalking/comparison). On the other hand, it points out the behaviors that reflect this mimicry, distinguishing between social and non-social practices, and presenting the idea of multiple dimensions of SMI influence, thus broadening the understanding of this phenomenon. In this way, the research highlights the complexity of understanding SMI mimicry, by showing how it contributes to shaping consumers' worldviews, tastes and behavioral patterns.

In the social field, SMI-related mimicry reveals implications that transcend marketing, by directly affecting consumer behavior and, indirectly, social media itself. The findings suggest that, in seeking to imitate SMIs, consumers adopt as a reference the representations that these influencers construct about ideal or socially accepted lifestyles. In this sense, the phenomenon impacts choices related to products, services and brands, as well as the format (predominantly

virtual) in which these choices are made. This scenario can represent a challenge to more traditional social patterns, based on face-to-face practices, while at the same time being an opportunity for the consolidation of new trends in the digital market. Thus, it is clear that the social changes driven by this process can have repercussions on market trends and society's behavioral norms and preferences. Given this, recognizing the mimicry of SMIs as a structuring reference for social, cultural and marketing standards can help foster more critical reflection in society, encouraging consumers to become aware of their choices.

As far as practical implications are concerned, the findings provide input for understanding consumer behavior and improving marketing strategies. SMIs, in turn, must intentionally manage their content, targeting specific audiences. The results suggest that when the goal is to engage an audience already involved with the influencer, the content should avoid fostering comparisons; on the other hand, when targeting an audience characterized by stalking behavior, the strategy should include elements that favor social comparison. This dual approach can help SMIs, marketers and social media companies to conduct their actions in a more intentional and segmented way. In addition, the findings reinforce the need for marketers to consider the selection of SMIs to endorse products, services and brands since these influencers are targets for mimicry by consumers in search of behaviors deemed ideal. Mimicry, in this context, can trigger relevant behavioral changes, such as spreading content, making purchases on social media, and adhering to products, services and brands endorsed by SMIs. In this way, brands, marketing professionals and digital platforms can benefit from this information both to prospect new consumers and to evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies, measuring, for example, the return obtained through purchases made by influenced followers.

Despite the innovative nature and the theoretical and empirical advances, some limitations must be acknowledged. As this is an online survey, there is a possibility that the respondents may not have provided completely truthful or objective answers, which could lead to bias due to Social Desirable Responding (SDR). Additionally, there are challenges related to the difficulty consumers face in accurately assessing their own consumption behavior, as well as limitations regarding the generalizability of the results due to the sampling technique employed in a specific country.

Concerning future research directions, although the theoretical approach adopted allows for a robust reflection on the subject, it is suggested that empirical investigations focus on the mimicry associated with virtual influencers created by artificial intelligence. Studies of this nature could examine the antecedents that lead consumers to imitate such influencers and verify whether this type of mimicry also manifests itself through both social and non-social behaviors, thus contributing to a further broadening of the scope of research into the phenomenon.

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