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**Unraveling the emotional influence of social media influencers
on Gen Z consumer behavior in the context of football**

A Data-Driven Analysis
Gabriela Moura de Noronha

Master Thesis

presented as partial requirement for obtaining a Master's Degree in Data-Driven Marketing

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Gabriela Moura de Noronha

Master Thesis presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialization in data science for marketing.

Supervised by
Professor Paulo Rita & Maria Teresa Pinheiro de Melo Borges Tiago, NOVA Information
Management School

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism, any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

[Gabriela Moura de Noronha, Amsterdam, 2025]

ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has reshaped consumer behavior, turning influencer marketing into a highly effective strategy for brands. This research explores the emotional influence of social media personalities on Generation Z's purchasing decision in the football industry, focusing on merchandise, event attendance, and memberships. Influencer marketing has been widely studied; however, limited research has been done in specific influence on Gen Z's purchase decisions in this context. Based on Source Credibility theory, Social Influence Theory, Parasocial Relationship theory, this research adopts a quantitative methodology, utilizing PLS-SEM to examine data collected from a stratified sample of Generation Z football enthusiasts. The results confirm that social media engagement, influencer credibility, and parasocial relationships notably drive Gen Z's purchase behavior. Influencer credibility, defined by attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, plays a significant role in fostering trust and emotional connections that lead to consumer action. Despite offering valuable insights, the research acknowledges some limitations in discriminant validity, indicating the need for future model refinements. The results provide practical implications for brands, highlighting the significance of choosing influencers who align with Gen Z's values of authenticity, relatability, and sustainability. By connecting the gap between social media influence and consumer behavior, this investigation enhanced the understanding of influencer-driven marketing in the football industry, offering strategic guidance for brand looking to engage the next generation of consumers.

KEYWORDS

Social Media Influencers; Consumer Behavior; Gen Z; Parasocial Relationship Theory; Football Industry

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Attractiveness – The appeal on an individual, physically and charismatically, which can include personality, viewpoints, values, and way of life.

Expertise – Refers to how much a communicator is regarded as a credible source of information (Hovland et al., 1989, p.311).

Parasocial Relationships – The impression of a personal and direct connection between an audience member and a public figure, even though the connection is one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.215).

Social Influence Theory – Suggests that influential figures influence and shape people's thoughts, values, and behaviors (Kelman, 1958).

Source Credibility – The essential quality of a communicator that increases the likelihood of the audience accepting their message as viable (Ohanian, 1990, p.41).

Trustworthiness – The extend to which a source is believed to bring accurate and honest information (McCracken, 1989, p.311)

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a leading tool impacting consumer behavior (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Therefore, a consumer's decision-making process has significantly changed since the Internet and social media emerged. People are increasingly spending more time on social media. In 2023, people spent an average of 151 minutes daily on social media (Statista, 2022). A popular strategy for companies is influencer marketing; this allows them to reach a larger audience and gain visibility. With the growing influence of social media (Safko, 2010), in 2020 influencer-driven marketing became a \$10 billion industry, which is why the majority of companies now collaborate with media platforms like Instagram and TikTok when launching campaigns (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen & Welte, 2020).

Influencer marketing is becoming more present in today's environment. Followers trust their influencer, so it is easier for them to advertise different products or services (Lim et al., 2017:20). The largest online customers are, therefore, Generation Z (Gen Z), born after 1994 and characterized as highly influenced by social media (Priporas, Stylos, & Fotiadis, 2017). Gen Z is currently the second-youngest age-group, the firstborn when the internet became widespread and achieved widespread use. Gen Z is experiencing rapid growth worldwide and is expected to account for a quarter of the Asia-Pacific population by 2025. What makes the generation special is that having grown up with social media, also called 'digital natives', they are more likely to turn to trends and a more personalized feed (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

However, numerous businesses have yet to grasp how to harness their potential in influencer-driven marketing. The role of social media marketing became even more prominent when sports fans were involved in stakeholder groups and promotional efforts for sports events. This led to fans connecting through various platforms (Byon & Phua, 2021). Influencer marketing has become a powerful tool due to the trust between followers and their chosen influencers that facilitates the endorsement of a very extensive array of products and services (Lim et al., 2017). In the sports industry, this dynamic is increasingly evident, with the global sports market valued at €2.51 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2021) and the European soccer market reaching approximately €29.5 billion (Statista, 2023). Brands are recognizing the impact that sports influencers with large and loyal followings can have, as they leverage these figures to drive consumer behavior by means of purchase of merchandise, events attendance, and brand loyalty.

Research on influencer marketing and its effect on consumer behavior primarily examines the broader use of social media (Naranjo-Zolotov, Turel, Oliveira, and Lascano, 2021). There is a literature gap in how this generation is affected by influencer marketing (Farivar et al., 2022). Individually these constructs have been studied but how they each have an impact together on the purchase behavior on Gen Z, has not been studied. Given this context, this investigation aims to explore the emotional impact of social media influencers on Gen Z's consumer behavior within the football industry. Specifically, it aims to identify the emotional triggers, engagements patterns, and decision-making processes that drive Gen Z to interact with football-related content and make purchasing decisions.

This research focuses on merchandise, football events, and memberships, highlighting how influencer-driven content shapes brand loyalty and consumer preferences. The research will fill the research gap that exists within current research about the subtle effect of influencer marketing among Gen Z (Farivar et al., 2022). The two guiding research questions are:

- **“ To what level is Gen Z influenced by social media influencers in the football industry?”** This question evaluates how influencer marketing affects Gen Z's engagement and purchasing behavior within the football industry.
- **“What are the key emotional triggers and pathways that drive Gen Z engagement and purchasing decisions?”** This question explores the psychological and emotional factors that connect influencer marketing to Gen Z's consumption habits.

By addressing these questions, the research sheds light on the emotional triggers, engagement patterns, and underlying dynamics that shape Gen Z's consumer behavior. Specifically, examining how emotional connections with social media influencers impact their preferences, purchasing decisions, and brand loyalty within the football industry, particularly in relation to merchandise, events, and memberships. Further, the methodology is described, with the results from a quantitative study conducted on 370 individuals that fit the target group. Second, to conduct the results a two-step method was used (PLS method and the SEM technique). This research concludes with strategic and practical recommendations for brands aiming to build meaningful connections with Gen Z. In today's fast-paced and dynamics landscape of influencer marketing, these insights will help brands navigate the complexities of engaging Gen Z audiences more effectively and authentically.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of social media has significantly reshaped consumer purchasing patterns, prompting a major shift in marketing strategies. Businesses have significantly increased their investment in influencer marketing, recognizing that Gen Z (individuals born after 1994) is highly influenced through social media personalities (Safko, 2010; Haenlein et al., 2020). The sports industry is no exception, as athletes and other key figures contribute to the growing importance of social networking platforms (Tiago et al., 2016) as well as the expanding influence of digital marketing strategies (McCarthy et al., 2022).

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

A Social media influencer (SMI) is an individual who has gained popularity, therefore, holds sway over their audience on digital platforms (Marwick, 2015). Social media influencers have become significant, especially among Gen Z. They are instrumental in influencing the perspectives and actions of their followers (Thomala, 2023). Research has highlighted that as a social media influencer's audience expands, maintaining self-perceived authenticity becomes increasingly difficult. Additionally, sponsorships may further compromise their perceived genuineness. According to Zend and Gerritsen (2014), SMI's are individuals who have built a community of subscribers who trust them. Through this influence, they can shape audience behavior and stimulate purchase behavior. Some say influencer marketing could eventually come to an end. With the growth of new industry trends, there are growing doubts about whether influencer marketing has reached its peak or is beginning to lose its impact (Wansi, 2020). Others like Patel (2020), argue that it has come costly, lacks guaranteed results, and is challenging to measure the effectiveness of. Despite the challenges, a recent survey of 4000 professionals across marketing agencies, brands, and the industry reveals that 80% plan to allocate funds specifically for influencer-driven marketing initiatives (The State of Influencer Marketing, 2020). On the other hand, research by Tom Walker, in his comprehensive influencer marketing guide, indicates that influencer marketing is not ending any time soon. However, it will need to evolve to align with changing market needs (Tom Walker, n.d.). Additionally, researcher Brooke Donalds discovered that students are more receptive to endorsed content than initially thought (Standford, 2016). Furthermore, people will suffer from Social Media Fatigue, as people may experience negative health effects caused by excessive use. While challenges will arise, so will opportunities. Individuals have always been influenced, and this will continue to be so, making influencer marketing a key tool in the years to come (Brag, 2019).

2.2 BRAND INFLUENCER IMPACT

Social Influence Theory explores how an individual's opinions, values, and behaviors are molded by their social surroundings. Shifts in perspectives or actions often result from external influences and social interactions (Ifinedo, 2016). In the digital age, the rapid exchange of information amplifies the effect of peer influence on buyer behavior (Peltier et al., 2020). The research by Huang and Chen (2006) found that individuals tend to trust consumer recommendations more than expert advice, also that consumers' purchase decisions are heavily influenced by recommendations from others. The research describes "herding behavior" as when individuals rely on others' online feedback to guide their own decisions. A separate study showed that the influence of friends, play a crucial role in how individuals rate products online (Sunder, Kim, Yorkston, 2019).

2.3 EXPERTISE, ATTRACTIVENESS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF INFLUENCERS

According to Castillo and Fernández (2019), research is lacking on how social influencers shape the views and attitudes of their audience. The brand's credibility is essential when the recipient lacks sufficient information aside from what is advertised (Jain and Posavac, 2001). The effectiveness of advertising can be increased when companies focus on source credibility. Consumers tend to look at influencers as more credible

that sellers (Rebelo, 2017). Lou and Yuan (2019), recognize four key elements of credibility: trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity. Nevertheless, trustworthiness serves as a key factor in shaping effectiveness and brand perception (Munnukka et al., 2016), which in turn impacts the customers purchase intentions (Belch and Belch, 2013). Saima and Khan (2020) established that the SMI's trustworthiness directly and positively affects customers' purchase intentions.

H1: The growth of the SMI's audience negatively influences the SMI's authenticity.

H2: Sponsorships weaken influencer authenticity.

2.4 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) offers a foundation for analyzing the effectiveness of influencer-driven marketing within digital platforms. Marketing researchers alongside consumer behavior experts utilize PRT to explore a range of topics, including consumer-brand interactions on digital platforms (Labrecque, 2014), parasocial marketing strategies (Lueck, 2015), the intensity of parasocial connections on social media (Bond, 2016), along with identifying which social media platforms (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011) and influencer characteristics (Chung and Cho, 2017; Giles, 2002) are more likely to encourage strong parasocial connections. Several research have highlighted how parasocial relationships influence consumer purchasing decisions in online environments (Chung & Cho, 2017; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Because of social media's interactive and accessible nature, it provides increased opportunities to build parasocial connections (Labrecque, 2014). Social media influencer encourages consumer interaction, even though their involvement in the conversation is limited, it caused a sense of friendship (Lueck, 2015). Parasocial relationships are defined by perceived trust, credibility, and appeal (Chung & Cho, 2017; McCracken, 1988). Escalas and Bettman (2017) investigated parasocial relationships and discovered that adolescents with a strong desire for social bonds tend to establish these connections as a way to project the influencer's image onto themselves. PRT has been widely studied, however, the exact ways in which consumers experience it remain unclear (Narvanen, n.d.).

H3: Gen Z spends more on football-related events due to the parasocial relationship.

2.5 PURCHASE INTENTIONS

Gen Z has been immersed in constant internet connectivity and diverse social media platforms. For Gen Z, technology is a fundamental aspect of their everyday routine and social interactions. The most popular device is the smartphone (Khadar, 2020). Gen Z has a shorter attention span than millennials, estimated to be 8 seconds (Rachel, 2016). Gen Z uses social media to obtain insights regarding the products they intend to buy. Conventional marketing is ineffective for this generation. To connect with this audience, digital marketers must adopt cutting-edge technology and creative narrative strategies (Khadar, 2020). Gen Z consumers are more conscious of their purchasing habits compared to previous generations. They are more mindful of their purchases and their impact on the environment. Gen Z members support sustainable brands and are vocal about their efforts to go plastic-free (Fromm, 2022). Gen Z wants to pay 10% more for sustainable products, and 53% of the generation wants personalized or customized products. As mentioned, social media is a massive source of inspiration; 60% of Gen Zer's go to Instagram to discover new brands, products-, and services.

H4: Gen Z's sustainability preferences are influenced by social media.

H5: The perceived credibility of SMIs increases Gen Z's likelihood of purchasing products endorsed by them.

The literature review is further presented in Table 1, which contextualizes the constructs influencing Gen Z's purchasing behavior in relation to football. The constructs include social media engagement, parasocial relationships, and trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness of influencers. It is further explained how these constructs shape the brand influencer impact and the purchase intentions of Gen Z. The credibility framework presented by Lou and Yuan (2019) highlights how influencers' perceived trustworthiness and expertise directly affect consumer behavior, emphasizing the relevance of social media engagement as a key component. Further, the Parasocial Relationship Theory suggests that perceived emotional connections and trust between consumers and influencers can create a sense of familiarity that strongly influences purchasing decision (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014). The constructs show in Table 1 have been studied individually in previous studies, nonetheless, there is a gap in research in understanding their combined effects on Gen Z within the football industry. So, this research seeks to bridge that gap by examining the connections between these constructs, contributing to both theoretical understanding and actionable insights for brands in the influencer marketing world.

Table 1: Literature review.

Construct	Definition	Focus
Social Media Engagement	The level of interaction and participation users have with social media and multimedia content	Marwick (2015); Thomala (2023)
Parasocial Relationships	The illusionary, non-reciprocal relationship between user and social media influencer, creating a sense of connection.	Horton and Wohl (1956); Labrecque (2024)
Trustworthiness of Influencers	How much an influencer is perceived to be credible and reliable among their audience.	Mannukka et al. (2016); Saima and Khan (2020)
Brand Influencer Impact	The impact of perceived trustworthiness in shaping audience purchasing choices.	Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova (2022)
Purchase Intentions	The probability of a consumer making a purchase influenced by various factors, including emotional triggers and influencer marketing	Saima & Khan (2020); Fromm (2022)
Attractiveness of Influencers	The physical and charismatic charm of an influencer, which impacts their ability to captivate audiences.	Lou & Yuan (2019); Chung & Cho (2017)
Expertise of Influencers	The level of expertise and competence an influence is believed to possess in their field.	Lou & Yuan (2019); Chung & Cho (2017)

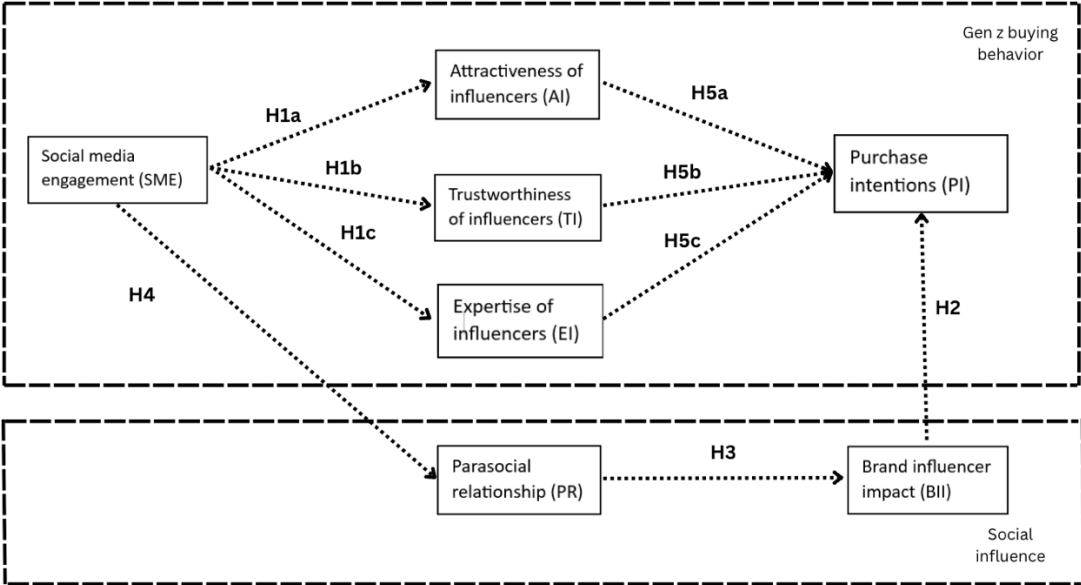
2.6 CONCEPTUAL MODEL

In Figure 1 the research model is presented, which has five constructs influencing Gen Z's purchasing intentions: social media engagement, parasocial relationships, attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness of an influencer, and brand influencer impact. Some constructs are second order including factors like attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness of an influencer. Brand influencer impact represents the combined consequences of parasocial bonds and influencer attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness on purchasing behavior.

Each of these constructs, in turn, interacts to establish how Gen Z displays emotional and behavioral interactions to SMI's. The model suggests that social media engagement fosters stronger parasocial relationships and enhances perceptions of influencer attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, which in turn impacts purchase intentions.

Each hypothesis formulated examines a significant path in the model, offering an understanding of how social media influencers shape Gen Z's behavior.

Figure 1: Conceptual model



3 METHODOLOGY

The table with constructs and measurement items can be found in Appendix A. Research on the purchase behaviors of Gen Z has been done, but the role social media influencers, along with the parasocial relationship play, remains unclear. There is a need to evolve a tool that examines the significant factors influencing Gen Z's purchase behaviors influenced by social media influencers within the realm of football. This research follows a theoretical framework rooted in the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951), parasocial relationship theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), social media engagement, and purchase intentions. Source credibility consists of several elements, including attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and the brand influencer impact which contributed to the overall credibility. The goal is to evolve a valid measurement tool to identify the key emotional triggers social media influencers have on Gen Z's purchasing behavior. Studies have demonstrated that the success of sponsorships is also driven through the age of the target audience (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005)

This study will adopt a quantitative research approach to systematically investigate the impact of social media influencers on Gen Z's buying behavior in the football industry. This method allows for the collection of not only numerical data but also statistical data to spot later patterns, trends, and relationships in the data set.

3.1 DATA COLLECTION

This study focuses on Generation Z as the target audience. Born between 1997 and 2012, the research aims to include participants who are legally eligible to make purchases, engage with online content, and take part in football-related events. These are individuals aged between 18 and 26 who are interested in football. Stratified random sampling was selected to be the sampling technique for this study because of its effectiveness in addressing the diversity and heterogeneity within the target population. The population was divided into homogeneous subgroups, this research ensured fair representation across different segments of Gen Z. Stratification was based on factors like age, gender, and social media engagement. A proportional approach was used, ensuring each group was represented accurately, followed by random sampling within each stratum to maintain fairness and reduce bias. While a distinct demographic group, Generation Z comprises individuals with varying interests, backgrounds, and preferences. By stratifying the population into homogeneous subgroups, or strata, we aimed to capture a more accurate representation of the diversity within Generation Z. This approach allowed us to ensure that each subgroup had a fair opportunity to be part of the sample, thereby reducing bias, and increasing the reliability of our findings.

A structured survey questionnaire collected quantitative data from the selected sample. The survey will comprise both closed-ended inquiries and Likert scale items, aiming to gauge multiple constructs such as the extent of influence exerted by social media influencers, favored platforms, factors contributing to trust, and purchase choices. The survey will be distributed through social media channels, email newsletters, and applicable online groups. This will motivate members to exchange the survey with their peers. Also, digital networks like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, will be used. Lastly, football fan forums will also be used to share the link, as they often consist of passionate football fans who could provide valuable insights. The survey questions followed a Likert Scale format, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.2 DATA ANALYSIS

This research employed a two-stage approach to assess the model. Initially, the measurement framework was analyzed, followed by an evaluation of the framework structure. This study applied the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach, a method within Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). This approach analyzes the estimates causal relationships by integrating statistical data with theoretical assumptions. Due to the initial phase of theoretical development, the PLS approach was selected to evaluate and validate exploratory models. Also, it is well-suited for research focused on predictive analysis. It is a highly complex research framework (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). The PLS Smart 2.0 Software was used (C.M. Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For this research, a two-phase approach was employed to validate the research model. First, the assessment began with the measurement model, continuing with an evaluation of the model's framework. The Partial Least Squares (PLS) method, a variant of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), was used. It was selected for its ability to analyze complex causal relationships by leveraging both quantitative data and theoretical assumptions. This approach allows for statistical testing and estimation of causal pathways within the model, this to integrate both data-driven insights and hypothesized relationships. The analysis was done using SmartPLS software, which supports robust testing for models of this nature (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009).

4.1 MEASUREMENT MODEL

The stability and consistency of each construct were assessed with two methods. By looking at the inter-correlations between indicators and calculating composite reliability (CR), which considers that indicators may have different loadings. An indicator is reliable, when the factor loading is statistically significant and above 0.7. In the analysis 12 items were removed (**A5, PR5, BII1, BII3, PR1, PR2, PR4, PR6, SME1, SME3, SME4, SME5**) due to low loadings. Additionally, to confirm that each construct adequately represents the majority of its indicators, the average variance extracted (AVE) is anticipated to exceed 0.5. Further item removal was avoided as it caused CR and AVE values to drop below the threshold, compromising model validity.

Despite these removals, most constructs achieved acceptable reliability with CR values exceeding 0.7. However, **AI (0.328)**, **TI (0.338)**, and **PR (0.454)** had AVE values below 0.5, indicating poor convergent validity. This suggests that although the constructs are theoretically distinct, they might overlap in practice.

While the model generally performs well in terms of predictive power and hypothesis support, some results suggest room for improvement in capturing the constructs' intended variance. In future research, the indicators should be refined or reevaluated to improve convergent validity. Despite this limitation, the analysis provides significant insights into the relationships between the constructs (Table 2).

The discriminant validity was assessed by confirming that the primary loadings are exceeding all cross-loadings (see Appendix B), a requirement for establishing discriminant validity.

- **Fornell-Larcker Criterion:** The AVE square roots for **AI (0.573)** and **TI (0.582)** were lower than their correlations with other constructs, indicating overlap.
- **Cross-Loadings:** Items such as **A2 (AI: 0.580, PI: 0.394)** showed similar loadings across constructs, weakening the discriminant validity.
- **HTMT Criterion:** High correlations, such as **AI-PI (0.969)** and **EI-PI (0.925)**, exceeded the 0.9 threshold, highlighting construct overlap.

To conclude, the measurement model meets several requirements (Tables 2 and 3), like internal consistency, indicator reliability and composite reliability (CR) values are acceptable across most constructs, suggesting that the model achieves adequate internal consistency. Additionally, most factor loadings meet the threshold for indicator reliability, which supports the reliability of individual indicators in measuring their constructs. However, certain constructs do not meet the threshold for AVE and CR, indicating that convergent validity is not fully achieved for all constructs.

Table 2: Factor Loadings, Composite Reliability, Cronbach's Alpha, and AVE (n = 370)

Constructs	Loadings	CR	CA	AVE	Constructs	Loading	CR	CA	AVE
Social Media Engagement		0.833	0.772	0.386	Expertise of Influencers		0.784	0.587	0.548
SME1					E1	0.737			

SME2	0.703				E2	0.735			
SME3					E3	0.749			
SME4					Purchase Intention		0.828	0.718	0.542
SME5					PI1	0.709			
SME6	0.634				PI2	0.720			
SME7	0.762				PI3	0.743			
SME8	0.742				PI4	0.706			
Attractiveness of Influencers		0.801	0.713	0.365	PI5	-			
A1	0.441				Parasocial Relationships		0.833	0.771	0.385
A2	0.580				PR1				
A3	0.610				PR2				
A4	0.614				PR3	0.679			
A5					PR4				
A6	0.623				PR5	0.662			
A7	0.544				PR6				
A8	0.531				PR7	0.651			
A9	0.617				PR8	0.688			
Trustworthiness of Influencers		0.797	0.705	0.361	PR9	0.690			
T1	0.540				Brand Influencer impact		0.791	0.670	0.433
T2	0.571				BII1				
T3	0.530				BII2	0.707			
T4	0.609				BII3				
T5	0.637				BII4	0.790			
T6	0.578				BII5	0.755			
T7	0.660								
T8	0.512								

SME: Social Media Engagement, A: Attractiveness of Influencers, T: Trustworthiness of Influencers, E: Expertise of Influencers, PI: Purchase Intention, PR: Parasocial Relationships, BII: Brand Influencer Impact.

** A5, PR5, BII1, BII3, PI1, PR1, PR2, PR4, PR6, SME1, SME3, SME4, SME5 were deleted from the model due to poor loading affecting the AVE and CR.

Table 3: Correlation between the construct and the square root of AVE.

	AI	BII	EI	PI	PR	SME	TI
AI	0.573						
BII	0.613	0.752					
EI	0.594	0.540	0.740				
PI	0.679	0.569	0.590	0.720			
PR	0.620	0.538	0.486	0.636	0.674		
SME	0.610	0.533	0.532	0.623	0.537	0.712	
TI	0.642	0.586	0.551	0.615	0.613	0.583	0.582

SME: Social Media Engagement, A: Attractiveness of Influencers, T: Trustworthiness of Influencers, E: Expertise of Influencers, PI: Purchase Intention, PR: Parasocial Relationships, BII: Brand Influencer Impact.

4.2 STRUCTURAL MODEL

The structural model can be found in Appendix C. A bootstrapping technique with 5,000 iterations was applied to evaluate the paths based on t-statistic values. This process was conducted to assess the measuring model; the findings are displayed in Table 4. The model accounts for 37.2% of the variance in influencer attractiveness. The hypotheses concerning social media engagement ($\beta = 0.610$; $p < 0.001$) show statistical validity, confirming H1a.

For influencer trustworthiness, the model explains 34% of the variation. The hypothesis for social media engagement ($\beta = 0.583$; $p < 0.001$) is statistically substantial, confirming H1b in supporting the explaining trustworthiness. For influencers' expertise, the model accounts for 28.3% of the variance. Social media engagement ($\beta = 0.538$; $p < 0.001$) is statistically substantial, providing support or H1c in the expertise.

Table 4: Hypotheses, Beta Coefficients, T-Statistics and R² values

Constructs	Hypotheses	Beta	T-Statistics	R ²
	Attractiveness of Influencers			37.2%
Social Media Engagement	H1a (✓)	0.610	18.555	
	Trustworthiness of Influencers			34%
Social Media Engagement	H1b (✓)	0.583	18.751	
	Expertise of Influencers			28.3%
Social Media Engagement	H1c (✓)	0.532	13.522	
	Parasocial Relationship			28.8%
Social Media Engagement	H4 (✓)	0.537	14.834	
	Purchase Intentions			55.4%
Attractiveness of Influencers	H5a (✓)	0.352	5.757	
Trustworthiness of Influencers	H5b (✓)	0.205	3.551	
Expertise of Influencers	H5c (✓)	0.200	3.709	
Brand Influencer Impact	H2 (✓)	0.125	2.293	
	Brand Influencer Impact			28.9%
Parasocial Relationship	H3 (✓)	0.538	14.834	

Purchase intention is explained by 55.4% of the variation. The hypothesis for attractiveness of influencers ($\beta = 0.352$; $p < 0.001$, H5a), influencer trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.205$; $p < 0.01$, H5b), expertise of influencers ($\beta = 0.200$; $p < 0.01$, H5c), and brand influencer impact ($\beta = 0.125$; $p < 0.022$, H2) are statistically substantial, thus supporting the hypotheses. Also, social media engagement is accounted for by 28.8% of the variance. For parasocial relationships, the model explains 28.8% of the variation, proving statistical significance, supporting H4.

Table 5: Key Findings & Conclusions

Hypotheses	Predictor Variables	Outcome Variables	Key Findings	Conclusion
H1a	Social media engagement	Attractiveness of Influencer	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.610$, $p < 0.001$)	Supported
H1b	Social media engagement	Trustworthiness of Influencers	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.583$, $p < 0.001$)	Supported
H1c	Social media engagement	Expertise of Influencers	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.538$, $p < 0.001$)	Supported
H5a	Attractiveness of Influencer	Purchase Intentions	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$)	Supported

H5b	Trustworthiness of Influencers	Purchase Intentions	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.205, p < 0.01$)	Supported
H5c	Expertise of Influencers	Purchase Intentions	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.200, p < 0.001$)	Supported
H2	Brand Influencer Impact	Purchase Intentions	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.125, p < 0.001$)	Supported
H4	Social media engagement	Parasocial Relationship	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.537, p < 0.001$)	Supported
H3	Parasocial Relationship	Brand Influencer Impact	Statistically significant & positive ($\beta = 0.538, p < 0.001$)	Supported

To conclude, brand influencer impact is explained by 28.9% of the variation. Hypothesis with parasocial relationship ($\beta = 0.538; p < 0.001$) is significant, supporting H3. All 9 hypotheses were presented and 9 were supported, achieving a 100% acceptance rate. However, while the hypotheses are supported, the lack of discriminant validity limits the confidence in the findings. Further refinement of the model is needed to clarify the distinctiveness of each construct.

4.3 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This research presents an understanding of the effect of social media on consumer purchases among Gen Z in the football industry. This research extends existing literature by emphasizing the emotional and social factors that influence Gen Z's purchasing intentions. Studies such as those by Lou & Yuan (2019) and Bon (2016), focused on trustworthiness, expertise, and parasocial relationships in a more general social media context. This research applies these theories to Generation Z football fans, revealing how influencers' perceived credibility, relationships, and generational characteristics drive purchase intentions.

The findings indicate that interaction with social media and generational characteristics predict Gen Z's purchase intentions in the football industry. Hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H1c relate to how social media engagement affects the attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise of influencers. H4 and H5, related to the generational influences on social media engagement and parasocial relationships, were supported. This reveals that social media influencers significantly shape the perception of Gen Z's behaviors. The findings of this research validate that Gen Z's connection to social media influencers, along with their trust in them, fosters a deeper emotional bond and enhances their intent to make purchases. These findings reinforce that parasocial relationships enhance consumer engagement (Labrecque, 2014) and show that Gen Z's digital footprint and influencer trust shape consumer behaviors.

However, the study also identifies theoretical limitations. Overlapping constructs, especially between social media engagement and parasocial relationships, indicate issues with discriminant validity. This overlap may obscure the unique contributions of each construct and propose that upcoming research should refine the model to enhance its clarity and distinctiveness. Despite these challenges, the study offers valuable insights into how Gen Z's digital engagement and trust in influencers drive their consumer behavior, reinforcing the pivotal role of social media in shaping purchasing decisions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This investigation contributes to the expanding knowledge on influencer-driven marketing within the football industry, particularly Gen Z consumer behavior. It enriches the Source Credibility Model, extending its application by examining how influencer credibility-comprising trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness-affects consumer purchasing decision, elaborating on the model originally proposed by Lou and Yuan (2019). This research provides a more nuanced understanding of how influencer characteristics translate into tangible consumer actions.

Further, this research expands on parasocial relationship theory, showing that the unilateral relationships between social media influencers and their Gen Z audience not only drive engagement, but also significantly impact purchase intention. In the highly interactive football industry, influencers who cultivate parasocial relationships can strengthen brand loyalty and emotional engagement, and in result shaping consumer behavior.

Also, this study presents valuable findings into the evolving nature of influencer marketing. As debates continue regarding its sustainability and effectiveness (Wansi, 2020; Patel, 2020), this research highlights key considerations for brands in selecting influencers whose authenticity aligns with Gen Z's values. It raises critical questions for future research, such as, long-term durability of influencer trust, the best archetypes for Gen Z, and innovative content to maintain relevance in the ever-evolving digital environment.

This study refines existing theories, integrates diverse literature streams, and provides a fresh perspective on social media influencers in sports marketing. Further, it advances the understand of how influencer marketing impacts Gen Z consumers in the football industry.

5.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings show that Gen Z's purchasing behaviors are driven by influencer attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, which foster consumer trust and loyalty. Parasocial relationships seem to further deepen the engagement, especially when influencers share personal and relatable content. Brands should prioritize authentic influencer partnerships, value alignment (e.g., sustainability), and exclusive content to build loyalty. Also, strategies such as live streaming and giveaways can enhance interaction and engagement.

A key insight from this research is the growing preference for sustainability among Gen Z. More than 50% is willing to pay more for eco-friendly options, and influencers play a significant role in promoting this shift (Fromm, 2022). This sets the function of influencers as both trendsetters and advocates of social consciousness. Brand can capitalize on this by aligning their marketing strategies with sustainability narratives that resonate with Gen Z's values.

Further, Gen Z's desire for personal products presents a valuable opportunity for brands. Influencers can leverage exclusive content, customized football merchandise, and limited-edition releases to further drive engagement and boost sales (Khadar, 2020). By adding personalization into influencer marketing campaigns, brands can cultivate a sense of exclusivity, reinforcing parasocial relationships and strengthening consumer connections.

However, H1a and H2 reveal a contradiction in influencer marketing. Sponsorships and audience enlargement can provide influencers with financial opportunities; however, they can simultaneously undermine authenticity and trust. Gen Z followers seek genuine interactions and may become disengaged if they perceive excessive commercialization. Brand must proceed with caution and ensure transparency in sponsorships while maintaining alignment with the influencers image to avoid alienating their audience.

Additionally, Gen Z's social media behavior is an important factor. Hypothesis 4 confirms that having been raised in a digital-first world with constant access to information, Gen Z has unique engagement patterns shaped by fast-paced content consumptions and deep social connections. Therefore, brands must design campaigns that align with these habits, ensuring influencer alignment with Gen Z's distinct cultural and social environments.

Moreover, Gen Z has a shorter attention span compared to millennials (Rachel, 2016). Therefore, content must be engaging, concise, and visually dynamic to gain and hold their attention. Lengthy and overly scripted sponsorships might struggle to maintain audience retention, whereas compelling short-form content can achieve higher engagement rates. Based on these results, brands need innovative content strategies, favoring quick, interactive, and creative formats.

Looking into the future, the growing role of social media and reliance on influencer-driven marketing, suggest a promising future within the football industry. However, brands must address challenges such as social media fatigue to remain effective (Brag, 2019). Focusing on direct engagement, nurturing authentic communities, and implementing creative strategies will be crucial for maintaining Gen Z's loyalty and attention.

By focusing on these themes, this study enhances our understanding of how influencer marketing shapes Gen Z purchase behavior in the football industry. Further, it also offers significant insights into how brands can go beyond selling products, instead building meaningful relationships and maintaining relevance in a fast-evolving landscape.

5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Some restrictions are present. First, these findings are based on the football industry, which may limit generalization to other industries. Also, while the insights into the emotional trigger influencing purchase intentions, it does not explore specific content types or characteristics. Also, low discriminant validity between certain constructs limited clear distinction, indicating potentially constructs overlapping. Despite using different validity tests – including the Fornell-Larcker criterion, HTMT ratios, and cross-loadings – and exploring model adjustments, issues of discriminant validity persisted, some variables could not be combined due to theoretical implication, restricting the scope of the model. Although the AVE for some constructs was slightly below 0.5, the Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed adequate discriminant validity. This highlights its credibility as a widely accepted measure in SEM analysis. This supports the robustness of the constructs, which are grounded in well-established theoretical concepts from the literature. Further, results may be influenced by sample-specific factors, which, while affecting quantitative metrics, do not compromise the theoretical validity of the model. Future research should refine measurement items to address discriminant validity issues and explore additional industries. Testing alternative influencer marketing models may offer more insights.

Moreover, this study does not account for platform-specific factors. This may have influenced influencer engagement differently depending on the social media channel. Each platform has its unique content formats and audience behaviors, which could impact external validity. Additionally, while this research focuses on Gen Z, it does not fully capture the diversity within this demographic, particularly as rapid technological advancements continue to shape their behaviors and preferences. This study highlights emotional triggers affecting Gen Z's purchase behavior; however, it does not go deeply into how specific content types, identify factors, or influencers characteristics drive these emotions. This is another limitation of this study, which in future research should be explored further.

The internal validity of this research was strengthened by targeting Gen Z football fans, but its applicability to a broader audience remains limited. Sample-specific factors may not have undermined the theoretical validity of the model but may have influenced the results. In future studies measurement items

should be refined to address the concerns in discriminant validity, extend research to other industries, and incorporate large, more diverse samples. More insights could be provided by a comparative analysis across different demographics or sectors. Lastly, this study employs a quantitative approach, while qualitative perspectives remain underexplored. Future research could benefit from qualitative methods for more insights into fan behavior and the psychology underlying influencer marketing within the football industry.

5.4 CONCLUSION

This study brings significant perspectives on the role that influencer marketing plays in shaping the purchasing behavior of Gen Z, specifically in the football industry. This research highlights significant drivers behind the brand engagement and loyalty of Gen Z, by examining the effects of social media engagement, generational characteristics, and emotional triggers through parasocial relationships. The results found contribute to the understanding of how social media influencers can promote products and build brand loyalty among the Gen Z Audience. The findings confirm that influencer marketing, when aligned with the values and expectations of Gen Z, has the potential to drive engagement and purchase decisions, making this a significant strategy for companies. This research not only enriches the current body of knowledge of influencer marketing but also serves to provide a research-backed guidebook to the companies that want to target the Gen Z consumer base of the football sector. With an understand of the social and emotional drivers of Gen Z purchasing behavior, brands can craft more engaging, personalized, engagement strategies and tailor their influencer relationship to produce meaningful customer interactions. This research reinforces the need for companies to remain adaptable to support fast adjustments to the speed of change regarding technologies, customer needs, and marketing strategies to lead the highly dynamic and ever-evolving market. These results pave the way for further exploration into this relationship.

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APPENDIX A: TABLE WITH CONSTRUCTS

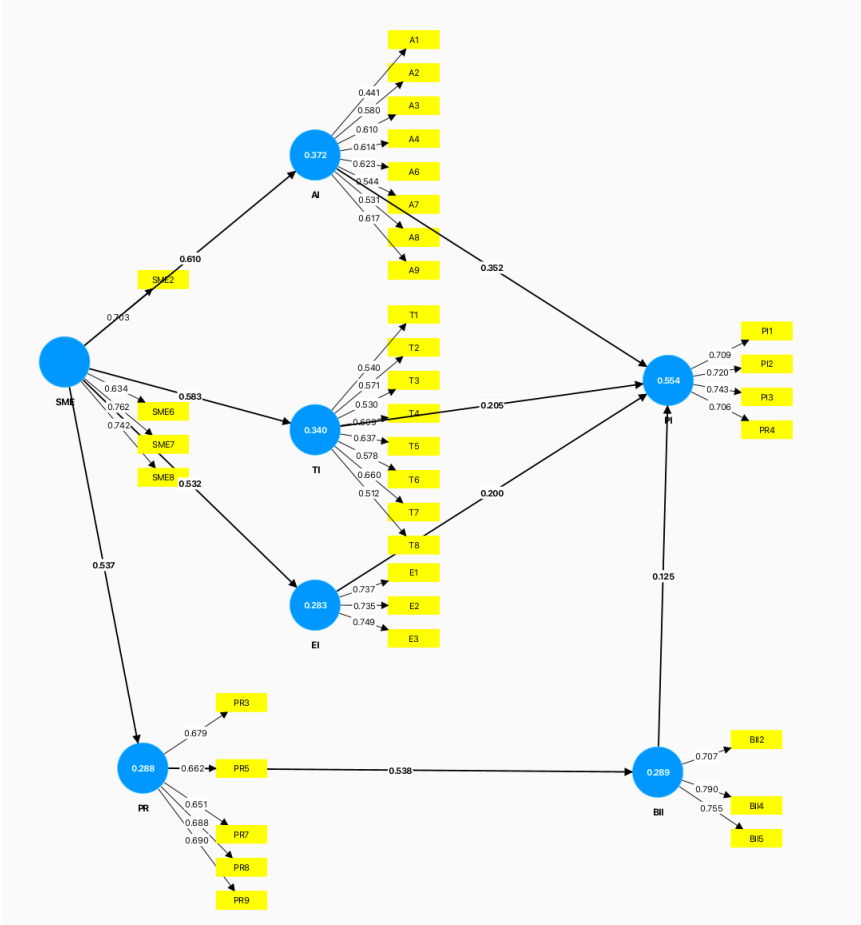
Construct	Original item	Reference	Adapted item:
Attractiveness of Influencers	The SMI I follow on Instagram is good-looking	Mir, I. A., & Salo, J., 2024 (p.16)	A1: The SMI I follow is good-looking
	The SMI I follow on Instagram has similar tastes and preferences as me		A2: The SMI I follow has similar tastes and preferences as me
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is sexy.		A3: The SMI I follow is sexy
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is elegant.		A4: The SMI I follow is elegant
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is stylish.		A5: The SMI I follow is stylish
	the SMI I follow on Instagram has a lot in common with me.		A6: The SMI I follow has a lot in common with me
	the SMI and I have similar values.		A7: The SMI and I have similar values
	the SMI I follow on Instagram has similar tastes and preferences as me.		A8: The SMI I follow has similar tastes and preferences as me
	The SMI and I have similar interests		A9: The SMI and I have similar interests
Trustworthiness of Influencers	The SMI I follow on Instagram is genuine	Mir, I. A., & Salo, J., 2024 (p.16)	T1: The SMI I follow is genuine
	The SMI I follow on Instagram is reliable		T2: The SMI I follow is reliable
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is honorable.		T3: The SMI I follow is honorable
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is experienced at providing content about brands.		T4: The SMI I follow is experienced at providing content about brands
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is knowledgeable about brands.		T5: The SMI I follow is knowledgeable about brands
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is an expert on brands.		T6: The SMI I follow is an expert on brands
	the SMI I follow on Instagram is well informed about brands.		T7: The SMI I follow is well informed about brands
	The SMI I follow on Instagram is honest		T8: The SMI I follow is honest
Expertise of Influencers	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media contents, I find s/he is experienced	Aw, E.C.-X., & Chuah, S. H.-W., 2021 (p.49)	E1: When looking at the SMI's social media contents, I find s/he is experienced
	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media contents, I find s/he is an expert.		E2: When looking at the SMI's social media contents, I find s/he is an expert
	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media contents, I find s/he is qualified.		E3: When looking at the SMI's social media contents, I find s/he is qualified
Brand Influencer Impact	The brand influencers played a role in my desire to learn more about the product	Hazari et al., 2023 (p.11)	BII1: Social media influencers played a role in my desire to learn more about a specific product
	As a result of watching the video, it is likely that I will engage with the content		BII2: As a result of watching the SMI's video, it is likely that I will engage with the content
	As a result of watching the video, I am interested in learning more about this product		BII3: As a result of watching the SMI's video, I am interested in learning more about this product
	As a result of this video content, I am interested in purchasing this product		BII4: As a result of watching the SMI's content, I am interested in purchasing this product

	The brand influencers played a role in my desire to purchase the product		BII5: Social media influencers played a role in my desire to purchase a product
Parasocial Relationship	If (SMI's name) were not a famous person, we would have been good friends.	Aw, E.C.-X., & Chuah, S. H.-W., 2021 (p.49-50)	PR1: If the SMI were not a famous person, we would have been good friends.
	I would like to have a friendly chat with (SMI's name).		PR2: I would like to have a friendly chat with the SMI
	(SMI's name) makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.		PR3: The SMI makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend
	(SMI's name) reminds me of myself.		PR4: The SMI reminds me of myself
	I think I understand (SMI's name) quite well.		PR5: I think I understand the SMI quite well
	When (SMI's name) behaves in a certain way, I know the reasons for his/her behavior.		PR6: When the SMI behaves in a certain way, I know the reasons for their behavior
	I can feel (SMI's name)'s emotions in certain situations.		PR7: I can feel the SMI's emotions in certain situations
	(SMI's name) seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.		PR8: The SMI seems to understand the kinds of things i want to know
	I can identify with (SMI's name).		PR9: I can identify with the SMI
Social Media Engagement	TikTok is very important to me	Hazari et al., 2023 (p.11)	SME1: Football is very important to me
	TikTok is very relevant to my life		SME2: Football is very relevant to my life
	TikTok videos show useful products that I would be interested in purchasing		SME3: Social media influencers promote useful products that I would be interested in purchasing
	I have a strong interest in using TikTok		SME4: I have a strong interest in football
	I am satisfied with the features provided on TikTok		SME5: I am satisfied with the football content provided on social media
	Losing TikTok forever would upset me		SME6: Losing football forever would upset me
	TikTok matters a lot to me		SME7: Football matters a lot to me
	Watching TikTok videos is a good use of my time		SME8: Watching football-related content is a good use of my time
Purchase Intentions	I will buy products that are promoted on social media	Alalwan, A., 2018 (p.11)	PI1: I will buy products that are promoted on social media
	I am likely to buy products that are promoted on social media		PI2: I am likely to buy products that are promoted on social media
	I desire to buy products that are promoted on advertisements on social media.		PI3: I desire to buy products that are promoted on advertisements on social media
	I plan to purchase products that are promoted on social media		PI4: I plan to purchase products that are promoted on social media

APPENDIX B: CROSS-LOADINGS

	AI	BII	EI	PI	PR	SME	TI
A1	0.441	0.307	0.309	0.298	0.238	0.284	0.257
A2	0.580	0.396	0.370	0.394	0.303	0.367	0.354
A3	0.610	0.336	0.363	0.427	0.400	0.364	0.377
A4	0.614	0.338	0.349	0.418	0.393	0.365	0.358
A6	0.623	0.405	0.347	0.428	0.398	0.379	0.383
A7	0.544	0.291	0.353	0.363	0.350	0.325	0.368
A8	0.531	0.320	0.226	0.343	0.343	0.320	0.368
A9	0.617	0.404	0.395	0.421	0.394	0.379	0.460
BII2	0.477	0.707	0.398	0.386	0.342	0.388	0.437
BII4	0.464	0.790	0.360	0.472	0.438	0.431	0.431
BII5	0.448	0.755	0.466	0.419	0.425	0.383	0.456
E1	0.388	0.394	0.737	0.401	0.284	0.421	0.405
E2	0.505	0.427	0.735	0.466	0.410	0.381	0.434
E3	0.424	0.377	0.749	0.442	0.383	0.379	0.383
PI1	0.493	0.399	0.427	0.709	0.453	0.431	0.402
PI2	0.490	0.402	0.445	0.720	0.469	0.445	0.491
PI3	0.458	0.396	0.434	0.743	0.396	0.420	0.409
PR3	0.481	0.398	0.372	0.482	0.679	0.392	0.473
PR4	0.512	0.439	0.391	0.706	0.508	0.493	0.462
PR5	0.392	0.364	0.320	0.434	0.662	0.300	0.437
PR7	0.372	0.306	0.314	0.392	0.651	0.347	0.349
PR8	0.382	0.324	0.248	0.382	0.688	0.322	0.371
PR9	0.446	0.405	0.367	0.443	0.690	0.427	0.423
SME2	0.395	0.350	0.380	0.449	0.399	0.703	0.393
SME6	0.408	0.352	0.344	0.419	0.296	0.634	0.370
SME7	0.477	0.399	0.399	0.417	0.378	0.762	0.435
SME8	0.452	0.414	0.389	0.488	0.446	0.742	0.457
T1	0.334	0.260	0.289	0.345	0.338	0.293	0.540
T2	0.379	0.428	0.353	0.360	0.328	0.327	0.571
T3	0.355	0.343	0.350	0.314	0.319	0.267	0.530
T4	0.365	0.299	0.353	0.338	0.346	0.397	0.609
T5	0.461	0.394	0.365	0.349	0.307	0.390	0.637
T6	0.332	0.361	0.227	0.352	0.399	0.311	0.578
T7	0.431	0.391	0.323	0.463	0.451	0.411	0.660
T8	0.314	0.234	0.313	0.317	0.354	0.287	0.512

APPENDIX C: STRUCTURAL MODEL



APPENDIX D: ETHIC COMMITTEE RESULT



This is to certify that

Project No.: **DDMKT2025-2-271356**

Project Title: **Unravelling the emotional influence of social media influencers on Gen Z consumer behavior in the context of football: A Data-Driven Analysis.**

Principal Researcher: **Gabriela Moura de Noronha**

according to the regulations of the Ethics Committee of NOVA IMS and MagIC Research Center this project was considered to meet the requirements of the NOVA IMS Internal Review Board, being considered **APPROVED** on 2/27/2025.

It is the Principal Researcher's responsibility to ensure that all researchers and stakeholders associated with this project are aware of the conditions of approval and which documents have been approved.

The Principal Researcher is required to notify the Ethics Committee, via amendment or progress report, of

- Any significant change to the project and the reason for that change;
- Any unforeseen events or unexpected developments that merit notification;
- The inability of the Principal Researcher to continue in that role or any other change in research personnel involved in the project.

Lisbon, 2/27/2025

NOVA IMS Ethics Committee
ethicscommittee@novaims.unl.pt



NOVA Information Management School
Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação

Universidade Nova de Lisboa