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How the number of followers influences brand attitude: A study on purchase intention,
perceived quality, brand trust and net promoter score

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Abstract

Presence of brands online has intensified over the past decade with Instagram being one of the main platforms. Previous research has found that following a brand's Facebook page updates online enhances brand evaluations. With the help from Portuguese-speaking participants, we extended previous research by simulating the experience of navigating Instagram on a smartphone. The objective was to understand if brands with a large number of followers versus brands with a small number of followers are perceived differently by customers. The findings suggest that purchase intention and brand trust are positively influenced by a large number of followers in a brand page. The perceived quality and likeliness to refer the brand to a friend did not show meaningful differences. There were also no significant behavioral gender differences.

Keywords: Followers, Instagram, Purchase Intention, Perceived Quality, Net Promoter Score, Brand Trust

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Introduction

The past decade was heavily influenced by social media. It is now a common standard to have an account on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or other social networks like Pinterest or Google+, for example. Our presence online allows for interactions in real time with our family, friends and people we do not know. Not only that, but as human beings we want to be heard, collaborate and connect – experiences social media can provide while eliminating social barriers or constraints present in face to face interactions. Companies are aware of this and use it to their own benefit. Social media is in the end a technology whose name and interactive design led it to be perceived as a “lightweight” and social form of communication (Zhao & Rosson, 2009), rather than commercial. Characteristics that allow brands to have a more approachable status through direct interaction with loyal and potential customers, who in turn are increasingly using social media platforms to discover more about companies and their related products (Lipsman et al., 2012). On top of that, brand’s presence in social media increases its customer base (Xie & Lee, 2015) while the participation in social media brand communities augments consumer’s purchase expenditures (Goh et al., 2013). The importance of Instagram for company’s communication strategy can be understood by the heavy presence of brands that have an active profile there. In the first quarter of 2016, all brands (100%) related to the Automobile industry were already present in this network. In other categories, Fashion, Beauty, Watches & Jewelry, Travel, Retail and Sportswear had an Instagram presence of 98%, 96%, 96%, 95%, 92, 92%, respectively (Statista, 2016). Social media is a required tool for a business to prosper and these percentages will only tend to raise in the future as more brands transition to the platform.

As a matter of fact, the most important measure for a brand in Instagram is its number of followers which works as a proxy for the brand’s audience size. Every follower is a

potential customer that is exposed to the content created by the brand, so expanding the number of followers is crucial for a wider reach.

Through this study, we want to bring Instagram to the limelight and obtain theoretical understanding about how Instagram brand pages' exposure can impact its clients. Specifically, we will be exploring how Instagram is able to influence the subconscious of consumers through the number of followers in brand's pages. We will contribute knowledge to this area by putting participants in an environment where the real Instagram platform is emulated in a smartphone. As social media is increasingly used for its ample reach and cheap costs when compared to other advertisement techniques, studies into which variables affect results and how do they affect them are imperative to run these tools effectively. Across two studies, the aftermath of many followers versus few followers on Instagram brand pages will be analyzed in terms of purchase intention, brand trust, likeliness of referral and perceived quality. We hope to expand the knowledge base of social media marketing by outlining our most important findings and providing suggestions for marketers and managers on how to apply them effectively.

Literature Review

A vast amount of research has been made about how likes, tweets and shares affect our opinion about products. Facebook and Twitter for being older than Instagram and having accompanied the social media boom since it started, naturally had greater attention about this topic. In previous research, no studies on the effect that followers on Instagram brand pages can have in consumers' purchase intention, perceptions of quality, likeliness to refer nor brand trust have been made. Nevertheless, there is still important documentation for benchmarking this study with, that involves similar variables such as likes and shares, which are related to the number of followers. A larger number of followers is related to a bigger number of likes and shares of a post, and vice versa.

Launched in October of 2010, primarily as an iPhone application and later for the Android platform, Instagram was originally created for people who wanted to share their personal life moments through pictures. Seven years after inception, it is the third most popular social network with Facebook and YouTube filling the rest of the podium. As of September 2017, it had more than 700 million active users (Constine, 2017) per day which translates in 700 million potential customers to target by brands. “The adoption of Instagram among professional organizations is significant in that it signals a mobile, visually predominant, ostensibly organic mode of sharing organizational image which differs qualitatively from professional photography in the support of branded communication” (McNelly, 2012, p. 1). There are important numbers to show how social media acts as a consumerism driver. A white paper (Samuel et al., 2013) about Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest found these networks to drive a similar amount of online and in-store purchases. Every “4 in 10 Social Media users report having purchased an item online or in-store after sharing or favoriting it” (p. 2) and each purchase occurred within a week.

Sherman et. Al (2016) conducted a study on adolescents using a functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) that simulated Instagram. Around 150 unique photos, divided in 3 different categories – risky, neutral and their own submitted images - were seen by participants, who in turn were divided in two different versions of the questionnaire. “In version 1, half of the photos in each category were displayed with a high number of likes and half were displayed with a low number of likes; in version 2, the displayed popularity was opposite that in version 1” (p. 1029). The results showed that when participants viewed neutral, risky or their own images with many likes (when compared with few likes), greater activity in different parts of the brain was exhibited. “The popularity of a photo had a significant effect on the way that photo was perceived” and the authors concluded that

“adolescents were more likely to like a photo if that picture had received more likes from peers” (p. 1031).

Spetz and Angelsted (2017, p.33) wrote a thesis about the Instagram fashion world. In one of their hypothesis, and related to the topic of this paper, it was hypothesized that “there is a positive relationship between number of followers on Instagram fashion brands and purchase intention”. They found this statement to be true but inconclusive at the same time, giving space for future studies to develop on the theme. Also, people were aware of the intent of the study and it was conducted through a questionnaire. Examples of questions used to measure purchase intention were *“You find a piece of apparel you like from a fashion brand you don’t recognize. You decide to seek information about the brand on Instagram. The brand has 30,000 followers on Instagram”*. Although this research is important for us to build upon, in our first study we pretend to emulate the Instagram environment through an app and not make respondents aware of its purpose. A second study will inform participants about the possible effect of the number of followers and consider purchase intention as a variable, but only if it reveals significant results. Gender differences will be evaluated in both studies.

Hypotheses Development

Online advertisement is rising, with expends from the current year surpassing the previous one by \$40bn and forecasts of similar growth at least until 2020 (Liu, 2016). Apart from people who follow by choice (without direct online advertisement influence) a brand profile on Instagram, there are the other internet users (non-registered on the platform) who can be brought to it through an online ad to the Instagram brand page. Influencers - users who have established credibility in a specific industry, have access to a large audience (in this case of followers) and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach (Pixlee, 2017) – can redirect people to a brand’s profile. This is a practice that is now widely used by brands to effectively advertise their products. A quick research online reveals statistics about the most

popular influencers by number of followers, the categories they work in (food, travel, fashion...) and the audiences they target by language. The importance of promoting an Instagram profile resulted in the inception of specialized paid services that allow marketers to find an influencer according to established criteria. “Digital media have increased the complexity of determining credible sources and assessing a source in a digital context is more difficult than in traditional face-to-face interaction decisions. Therefore, consumers are more dependent on cues and heuristics to evaluate information sources” (Veirman et al., 2017, p. 803). Given the easy-perceived brand pages on social media, cues like the number of followers might help people to make a quick assessment about the brand and its products as well as influence their purchase intention. “Many Facebook users agree that their willingness to buy brands has increased as a result of seeing the most like’s and shares”, suggesting that the brand is reputable (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015, p. 600). Gathering this findings with the fMRI research of Sherman et al. (2016) that indicated the popularity of a picture increased the probability of it being liked and changed its perception, we formulate the first hypothesis of our study:

H1: An Instagram brand page with a large number of followers increases consumers’ purchase intention, when compared to a brand with a small number of followers.

There is an important interaction between two variables: the necessity of touching a product is negatively correlated with a product perceived quality, especially for online purchases (San-Martín et al., 2017). This means that selling in Instagram, where customers cannot feel the product before buying, can play in sellers’ favor. This knowledge enriches the role played by the number of followers, who can also provide a new heuristic cue, in this case, increasing perceived product quality. Therefore, our second hypothesis is brought:

H2: Consumers’ perceived product quality is higher among a brand with a large number of followers, as compared to a brand with a small number of followers.

Beukeboom et al. (2015) used Facebook to conduct a study where brand evaluations (brand attitude, brand equity, net promoter score (NPS), purchase intention and conversational human voice) from current followers of a brand's Facebook page were compared with new followers and non-followers. New followers were instructed to like the brand's Facebook page and were monitored for a month, along with current and non-followers. Results showed that after being exposed to the brand's content, "new followers showed a significant positive increase over the one-month period on all brand evaluation measures, whereas non-followers showed no change" (p. 33). Kim & Ko (2011) tested the presence of luxury brands on social media and concluded it increased likeliness to recommend a product and purchase intention. In another study, becoming a fan on Facebook of a local bakery has increased its average NPS by 22 points (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). NPS benefits for brands have been proven through social media studies, so we want to comprehend if followers on Instagram are able to influence customers' recommendation to peers. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: A brand present on an Instagram page with a large number of followers has a higher probability of being referred to a friend or acquaintance, when compared to a brand with a small number of followers.

Trust is usually related to positive attitudes. In the B2C (Business to Commerce) e-commerce context, Pavlou (2003, p.106) defines trust as "the belief that allows consumers to willingly become vulnerable to Web retailers after having taken the retailers' characteristics into consideration". "Moreover, trust reduces behavioral uncertainty related to the actions of the Web retailer, giving the consumer a perception of some control over a potentially uncertain transaction". Pavlou (2003) also proved that consumers' intentions to transact online are positively related to trust in e-commerce. Portugal exhibits high Uncertainty Avoidance, which means their inhabitants invest heavily in information search to bring certainty to their decision-making process (Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). By combining this

knowledge, it is understandable that building trust will probably unchain positive buying behaviors and ease the decision-making process in an online environment. Since we are studying the influence of the number of followers, it will be important to understand the role they play when it comes to change consumers' brand trust. Hence, we formulate the hypothesis number four:

H4: Consumers' trust more on a brand that has an Instagram page with a large number of followers, when compared to a page with a small number of followers.

In different social environments, different people behave in different ways according to their mood, personality and how they are socially programmed. Eagly (1983) found females to be more susceptible to social influence than males, which given Instagram being a social network platform, leads us to ask if this finding is valid when transposed to an online environment. Most importantly, Ilie et al. (2005) studied differences between men and women in perceptions and use of communication technologies. Explicitly, their results suggested strong gender differences in perceptions of relative advantage (if an innovation is perceived as being superior to the idea it replaces), ease of use, visibility, result demonstrability and use intentions. Such information leads us to hypothesize our fifth and last hypothesis of this study:

H5: Women, when compared to men, are more positively influenced by an Instagram brand page regarding their purchase intention, perceived product quality, brand trust and likeliness of referring a brand to a friend or acquaintance.

Study 1 – Followers Influence on Brand Attitude

Participants

One-hundred and thirteen participants were part of this study. Data from three participants had to be removed from the final analyses because of misinterpretations of the instructions. Thus, one hundred and ten participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.81$ years, $SD = 2.57$ years)

from which fifty-two were women aged between seventeen and twenty-nine and fifty-eight were men aged between seventeen and twenty-eight years old remained in the analyses. All participants were required to complete all the questions and reported to be familiar with Instagram, i.e. they had a personal account and accessed it at least once per week. This ensured that respondents were familiar with the social media interface and would take into account the number of followers instinctively. The purpose of the study was not revealed and participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Materials, Methods and Measures

The study was conducted during the day, in different public places around Lisbon area where participants were randomly approached and asked to answer a survey.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how consumers' attitudes vary in relation to a brand when it presents a profile page with a large vs small number of followers. Although surveys are a stable way of collecting data from a big amount of people, the traditional questionnaire is not suitable for our goal. Because we wanted the participants to feel like they are using the real platform, it was decided to emulate the social media.

We programmed a native Android application that fuses a custom-made version of Instagram with different questions related to this study and manipulated the number of followers, between subjects. Basically, in the study there were 2 questionnaires, A and B, where one person responds to only one of them. In these questionnaires, the number of followers in the brand page was changed – for example, in questionnaire A, the brand Loz had 35k followers, while in questionnaire B it had only 4237; the next Instagram profile of Mojo Swimsuits had 1200 followers in questionnaire A and 421k in questionnaire B and so on (see Appendix A). The process consists as follow: the application requests the respondent age and sex and after, instructions about how to use the application and answer the questions are shown. The first brand profile is displayed and people can navigate through it in the same way

as the real Instagram experience – they can observe the profile page and open each of the brand’s posts in order to see the pictures in full size. This process does not have a limited duration; people are free to spend as much time as they want in each page. When they are comfortable about what they have seen, four questions about the brand are prompted (see Table 1 and Appendix B, figure 7). The process of seeing an Instagram profile and evaluating it proceeds similarly until all the brands have been evaluated. In the end, a message showing gratitude is displayed and optionally participants can introduce their name and email to be informed later about the results of this study (see Appendix B for the application usage instructions and other details). The decision of using a quantitative research allows to analyze and standardize the collected data.

Table 1 *Questions and Personal Information*

Brand’s Instagram Page Related Questions	
Q1	If you had the intention of purchasing a <i>product*</i> , would you buy one from the brand you just visualized?
Q2	Would you refer the products from <i>brand**</i> to a friend or acquaintance?
Q3	The <i>brand**</i> seems to have good quality products.
Q4	The <i>brand**</i> conveys confidence to me.
Personal Information	
P1	Gender: Male/Female
P2	Age: Open question
P3	Name: Optional
P4	Email: Optional
*product as construction toy/bikini/skateboard/nautical ornament/cake/furniture	
**brand as Loz/Mojo Swim/Skinii/CordiCastro/Bolo d’Hoje/MovIdeia	

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire the scales used are all based on previous studies.

Q1 Purchase intention. The first question in our study aimed to understand purchase intention behaviors when the number of followers was changed from large to small. A seven-point Likert scale, ranging from one being equal to “very unlikely” to seven being equal to “very likely”, was used as measure. It was adapted from a ten-point Likert scale from

Beukeboom et al. (2015) who also studied purchase intention and net promoter score on Facebook.

Q2 Likeliness of referral. The second construct measures the likeliness of referral (Net Promoter Score). To develop it, we also adapted a ten-point Likert scale from Beukeboom et al. (2015) into a seven-point Likert. This scale amplitude goes from one as “very unlikely” to seven as “very likely”.

Q3 Perceived quality. In this variable, we thought about using SERVQUAL but it did not fit our needs. Nevertheless, the most commonly used Likert scale in this service quality questionnaire has seven points. Hence, perceived quality was assessed using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to “strongly disagree” to seven being equal to “strongly agree”.

Q4 Brand trustworthiness. In light with the studies of Chu & Choi (2011) who have evaluated peoples’ perceived trust in their social network contacts, the last construct was measured using a seven-point Likert scale that ranges from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, from one to seven respectively.

In the end, the one hundred and ten participants, by experiencing six different Instagram brand pages and answering to four questions on each one, produced a total of six hundred and sixty answers (110×6) for each of the first four constraints ($110 \times 6 \times 4 = 2640$ answers in total). These answers were posteriorly analyzed through a series of t-tests and two-way between subjects ANOVAs.

It is important to understand that followers are the main driver of engagement for both likes and comments on Instagram pages (Bakshi et al., 2014). To interpret the rationale behind what we did to separate the concept of large and small number of followers, different studies and our own assessments were used as a benchmark. After analyzing popular brands pages, it was found that they usually follow a small amount of people. This happens because

they are used for promotion of products and not for receiving updates about other users. In order to erase or reduce the possibility of influencing the participant's perceptions through the "Following" value present in each profile, we restricted the number of followees for every brand in the study between 20 and 99. It was not made constant just to give it a genuine Instagram appearance. People with more than 30.000 followers are seen as celebrities, regardless of what they do for a living (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Using this number as a benchmark, it was decided to represent brands with a large number of followers with numbers between 35.000 to 500.000, and brands with a small number of followers with values ranging from 500 to 9500. Because likes are proportional to the quantity of followers, calculations were made in order to make the Instagram emulation look legitimate. An engagement rate between 0%-1.64% is considered low; 1.65%-3.48% is medium; 3.49%-6.67% is high and above that, very high (Georgia, 2017). For both unpopular and popular brands, we used a percentage between 1.5% to 9%, varying the percentage among posts since in the real social media, photography posted at different times have different engagement rates and we also wanted to emulate that. The arbitrary values used for the number of followers on each brand page and the percentages used to calculate the respective amount of likes on each picture can be found in Appendix C.

Restrictions

"Brand attitudes consist of a cognitive and affective component. The cognitive component refers to the brand knowledge of consumers and implies product-related (functional and experiential) and non-product-related (symbolic and self-expressive) associations. The affective component refers to emotional associations with a brand" (Zablocki et al., 2016, p. 15). So, in order to remove the affective component from our study, we made the decision of only using brands that are probably not known between the people who were asked to participate in this study. Ha & Perks (2005) also support this view after

finding that consumers' evaluations vary according to consumers' preceding experiences or existence of familiarity with the brand. In accordance to these statements, three small Portuguese brands that show few sales in the market (Mojo Swimwear, Skinii Skateboards, CordiCastro), two made-up brands (Bolo d'Hoje, MovIdeia) and a Chinese brand that is not present in the Portuguese market (Loz Blocks) were used. The rationale was to adopt brands that would appeal on average more to men or women in the same ratio and also brands that would appeal equally to both genders.

Although each questionnaire in the study (A and B) contains the same pictures and hence this matter might not change the results, it was decided to not use photos with faces given the findings of Bakhshi et al. (2014). In the study they conducted, it was found that independently from people's gender and age, "photos with faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments, even after controlling for social network reach and activity" (p. 965).

Results

The proposed hypotheses were tested through independent samples t-tests and between subjects ANOVAs. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 was used as a statistical tool to obtain the t-tests and ANOVAs results.

Hypotheses Testing

Purchase Intention (H1).

An independent samples t-test was used to test the hypothesized relationship between the number of followers and the purchase intention as the dependent variable. There was a significant difference in the consumers' purchase intention when presented with a small number of followers brand page ($M=4.55$, $SD=1.46$) or a big number of followers brand page ($M=4.82$, $SD=1.51$) conditions; $t(658)=-2.31$, $p=0.021$. These results suggest that the number of followers really does have an effect on consumers' purchase intention. Specifically, the

hypothesis H1 was accepted and our results indicate that when consumers are presented with products on an Instagram page that has a big number of followers, they are more inclined to purchase them.

Perceived Product Quality (H2).

Regarding our second hypothesis, The results of the independent samples t-test have shown that there is not a significant difference in the consumers' perceived product quality when presented with a small number of followers brand page ($M=5.06$, $SD=1.24$) or a large number of followers brand page ($M=5.22$, $SD=1.24$) conditions; $t(658)=-1.57$, $p=0.117$. Contrarily to what was hypothesized, these results suggest that the number of followers does not have an effect on consumers' perceived product quality. Hence, the second hypothesis was rejected.

Likelihood of Referral (H3).

The t-test for independent samples analyzed hypothesis number three and concluded that there was not a significant difference in the likelihood of referring a brand to a friend or acquaintance when presented with a small number of followers brand page ($M=4.75$, $SD=1.47$) or a large number of followers brand page ($M=4.84$, $SD=1.51$) conditions; $t(658)=-0.76$, $p=0.449$. These results advocate that the number of followers does not have an effect on the likelihood of consumers' referring a brand to a friend or acquaintance, which goes against our initially hypothesized prediction. Consequently, hypothesis number three was rejected.

Brand Trustworthiness (H4).

A last independent samples t-test was used to test the hypothesized relationship between the number of followers and the consumers' brand trust as the dependent variable. There was a significant difference in consumers' brand trust when presented with a small amount of followers brand page ($M=4.70$, $SD=1.29$) or a large amount of followers brand

page ($M=4.93$, $SD=1.34$) conditions; $t(658)=-2.26$, $p=0.024$. These results indicate that the number of followers really does have an effect on consumers' brand/product trust. Accordingly, we accept hypothesis number four. As a conclusion, our results suggest that when consumers are presented with products on an Instagram page that has a large number of followers, they are more inclined to trust the brand than if the same brand has a small number of followers on its page. Table 2 provides an overview of the results obtained in each independent samples t-test.

Table 2 *Independent Samples T-Test Results*

	Small Number of Followers		Large Number of Followers		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Purchase Intention	4.55	1.46	4.82	1.51	-2.31	658
Perceived Quality	5.06	1.24	5.22	1.24	-1.57	658
Likelihood of Referral	4.75	1.47	4.84	1.51	-0.76	658
Brand Trust	4.70	1.29	4.93	1.34	-2.26	658

Control at $p < .05$

Gender Differences (H5).

We conducted four separate two-way between subjects ANOVAs, one for each of the four cases. Purchase intention, perceived product quality, likelihood of referring a brand and brand trust were used as dependent variables while the within-subjects' factors were gender (male versus female) and followers number (small versus large). There was no significant difference between genders when the number of followers varied. This difference did not manifest itself in none of the four ANOVAs that were conducted (see Table 3). We conclude that men and women are not differently influenced by Instagram brand pages with a large or small number of followers. This applies to all the variables tested - purchase intention, likelihood of referral, perceived product quality and brand trust. Still, the interaction between each of the four variables with the number of followers produced interesting results.

Contrarily to what we predicted, men had a higher answer average when compared to woman in respect to all four variables (see Table 4). These results although not significant to propose a solid conclusion, show that men were more influenced when facing an Instagram brand page with a large number of followers in respect to women. Finally, these four ANOVAs were also useful to reinforce the acceptance of hypothesis one and four, and the rejection of hypothesis two and three.

Table 3 *Two-way ANOVA Between Subjects*

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Purchase Intention	1	2.34	2.34	1.06	.304	.002
Likeliness of Referral	1	6.11	6.11	2.76	.097	.004
Perceived Quality	1	.56	.56	.37	.543	.001
Brand Trust	1	4.09	4.09	2.38	0.124	.004

Control at $p < .05$; Independent Variables: Number of Followers(Large/Small); Gender(M/F)

Table 4 – *Participants answers average and standard deviation comparison*

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Followers Qt.</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Purchase Intention	Small	F	4.60	1.46
		M	4.51	1.46
	Large	F	4.74	1.56
		M	4.89	1.47
Likeliness of Referral	Small	F	4.88	1.44
		M	4.63	1.50
	Large	F	4.76	1.57
		M	4.90	1.45
Perceived Quality	Small	F	4.97	1.23
		M	5.15	1.24
	Large	F	5.09	1.25
		M	5.36	1.22
Brand Trust	Small	F	4.76	1.29
		M	4.65	1.29
	Large	F	4.83	1.43
		M	5.03	1.24

Study 2 – Followers' Awareness

Our results from the previous study provided new insights to the Marketing discipline, concluding that Instagram pages with a large number of followers can achieve a bigger trust in their potential customers' minds and increase the purchase intention for their products,

when compared to pages with a small number of followers. As stated before, our first study was focused on providing participants an experience as close as possible to the real social media platform. This involved not making people aware about the purpose of our it. To find out if people’s reaction to the number of followers changes according to their awareness on the subject, a second and shorter test was made.

Participants

Two hundred and three participants who were not part of the first study responded to an online questionnaire. One hundred and two of them were women and the other one hundred and one men. For minimalistic purposes, age was not asked this time.

Materials, Methods and Measures

In this new questionnaire, the previously disposed brand Mojo Swimwear was used with the same attributes as before – pictures, number of followers and number of followees. It was made clear that we were evaluating the participants’ reaction to the number of followers the Instagram brand page had. We made this by stating “The following brand pages have the same characteristics and represent the same brand as you can see. Only the number of followers changes between both. Bearing these in mind, please answer the following questions” (see Table 5).

Table 5 – Study 2 Questions and Personal Information

Mojo Swimwear Instagram Page Related Questions

Q1 Which one of the two brand pages gives you a bigger willingness to purchase a product from this brand (for you or as a gift)?

Q2 Which one of the two brand pages conveys a bigger trust in the brand you are seeing?

Personal Information

P1 Gender: Male/Female

As this study was used to reinforce the previous one, specific scales were not used. For both questions, the possible answers were three: “The brand page with the largest number of followers”, “The brand page with the smallest number of followers” and “Both brand pages give me the same willingness to purchase/convey me the same trust” (see Appendix D).

Results

The data obtained from study 2 was exported to a .csv file through Google Forms API. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 was used again as a statistical tool to obtain the following t-tests results.

As what concerns **purchase intention (H1)**, 56.7% of the two hundred and three respondents said it was the page with the big number of followers that gave them the biggest willingness to purchase a product. This number was followed by 39.9% who answered “both pages give me the same willingness to purchase” and lastly, 3.4% felt that the page with the smallest number of followers gave them a bigger purchase intention.

For **brand trustworthiness (H4)** results were even stronger on reinforcing our previous study outcome, with 82.8% of the respondents declaring that the page with the largest number of followers provided them more trust than the others. 3.0% claimed to feel the same trust in both pages, while 14.2% affirmed the smallest number of followers to provide them the biggest trust in the brand.

In respect to **gender differences (H5)**, we decided to conduct two independent samples t-tests to see if there was a relationship between gender and purchase intention/brand trust, respectively. In the first one, there was no significant difference in the consumers' purchase intention when the respondents were female ($M=1.40$, $SD=0.57$) or male ($M=1.33$, $SD=0.53$); conditions $t(201)=0.98$, $p=0.331$. The second test also did not reveal any significant difference in the consumers' brand trust when respondents were female ($M=1.14$, $SD=0.45$) or male ($M=1.09$, $SD=0.35$); conditions $t(201)=0.86$, $p=0.393$. Bear in mind that these means are representative of the values attributed to the participants' answers: 0 for the page with a small number of followers, 1 for a large number of followers and 2 when they were indifferent between the number of followers in the two pages.

This last hypothesis reinforcement study let us affirm that an Instagram brand profile with a big number of followers, when compared to one with a small number of followers, is able to influence purchase intention and brand trust, even when the consumer is aware of the fact that the number of followers might determine his perception. We also fortify that the followers number does not affect differently men and women.

General Discussion

The present research adds value to companies' marketing strategy by proving that numbers on Instagram are enough to change people's perceptions and opinions on a brand. The second biggest challenge marketers face involves proving return on investment for marketing activities and the fourth passes by identifying the right technologies to fit their needs (HubSpot, 2017). Our results might ease marketers job when deciding for a strategy to pursue, by highlighting the importance of Instagram in creating brand trust and increasing purchase intention. We provide some suggestions in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Participants of the first study were placed in a scenario where the Instagram mobile platform was emulated and answered several questions about their experience on it. The major focus was to analyze how influent can be the number of followers on an Instagram brand page. Categorically, how the purchase intention, likeliness of referring a brand to a friend or acquaintance, perceived quality and brand trust are affected when pages present on the platform show a large or small number of followers. Furthermore, an analysis on how different genders behave in the same situation comparatively to each other was also executed. In terms of purchase intention and brand trust, our findings revealed that there is a significant difference when brand's profile pages have a large number of followers when compared to a small one. It is now clear that building an extensive network of followers in an Instagram page can bring positive results about how clients and potential clients recognize it. On a different note, it was also studied the effect of followers in the likeliness of referring a brand

to a friend or acquaintance and the brand's perceived quality. Here, a significant difference between pages with a high versus small number of followers was not found and we concluded that the number of followers is not able to influence people in these two matters. Hence, if companies seek to increase their net promoter score or perceived quality, other tools than a strong social media presence online need to be used. NPS as being related to brand loyalty might stand in a category that requires a stronger interaction with the brand in order to increase, i.e. purchasing experience and after sales service. These two are intangible only through affecting a visual component such as the number of followers. Also, assuming the main objective of companies is to maximize revenues/profit, the focus on NPS should be considered carefully. Literature is not consistent on whether net promoter score is indeed important to predict an increase on firm's business performance (Marsden et al., 2006) or little or not valuable at all (Morgan & Rego, 2006). Other metrics such as Top 2 Box customer satisfaction scores or proportion of customers complaining can be taken into consideration as an alternative. As for ways of achieving higher perceived quality by customers and since a high number of followers was not enough to influence it, companies can invest in the design department to make products' pictures more appealing. With today's current technology, bigger impacts can be made through investments in Virtual Reality (VR) or Augmented Reality (AR) to showcase products. Facebook already has a full working demo of Virtual Reality running, and considering Instagram is owned by the same company, we can expect it to arrive soon. If well designed, VR and AR can place the product in customer's hands and make it as appealing as the real one or even more. Nevertheless for brands, being present and having followers on Facebook leads to an increase in NPS (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2011; Beukeboom et al., 2015). Further research shall be conducted for the case of Instagram in order to acquire conclusive knowledge. Despite results not being

significant, it is important to underline that the average NPS and perceived quality increased when a high number of followers was shown to the participants.

Regarding gender, we tested every of the four variables to comprehend if there were differences among sexes when facing the same scenario. Our first study did not find any statistically significant difference between males and females, concluding that when it comes to influencing the consumer through the number of followers, both genders behave similarly. Logically, gender differentiation has an important role according to the product that is being sold and marketers must still target their groups according to different factors such as brand vision, audience, market and strategic planning. Still, our findings simplify online gender segmentation. More followers lead to a better brand perception and the focus should always be on increasing their number in favor of acquiring influence, independently from the market segment we are trying to target.

The second study had the objective of understanding if our significant results, purchase intention and brand trustworthiness, are altered when people are aware of the difference in the number of followers, i.e. we showed the same Instagram brand page twice but with a different number of followers and asked for an opinion on it. The outcome was equal to the first study and we concluded that even when the consumer knows the number of followers might impact his purchase intention and brand trustworthiness, he is still attracted to brand pages with more followers. Gender differences were also found to be the same as in the first study – males and females are similarly affected.

Through the study of influencers' number of followers on Instagram, Veirman et al. (2017) found that a person with a high number of followers who advertises a product (influencer), might lower the attitude towards the brand when compared to one with a small number of followers. Although the aim of our study and Veirman et al. differ (influencers versus Instagram brand pages), this is the only study available that somewhat focuses on a

similar subject. Curiously, the study of influencers had results that go against our findings in every construct we evaluated. Despite influencers and brand profiles having the same goal of promoting a brand and producing sales, maybe they really differ on the way online customers perceive them. It is noteworthy to say that participants in their study were exposed to screenshots instead of being submitted to an emulated experience of the platform. Still, both papers are important in a social network that has not received as much attention as its counterparts and show that there is still a long way to go in the field.

Limitations

As any study on a subject, this one is not perfect and has some limitations. To start with, the study was only conducted with Portuguese speaking participants and, considering the age range of them, was totally made up of Millennials. Given that Instagram is a global platform where users come from every region in the world, our conclusions cannot by nature be representative of consumers' behavior on a worldwide scale. Nevertheless, Millennials have grown up socializing and making purchases online, using social networks and digital media on a daily basis, making them the most demanding and avid technology segment of people (Mangold & Smith, 2012). Thus they provide useful information on how the biggest technology consumers act and how similar cultures might behave when facing the same situations online. Secondly, in order to avoid pre-made judgments, we have used only brands that are unlikely to be known by the respondents. There is nonetheless, a small probability that few participants were already familiar with one or more brands which might have influenced a portion of the results.

Suggestions for future research

Our study has a wide majority of points from where researchers can build upon. There is a vast amount of literature of articles online that divides opinion makers, namely bloggers and journalists, if a company should engage in the activity of buying followers and likes. Both

factions provide different arguments. The skeptical ones argue that these followers won't engage with posted content and hence they will be only a number, providing a bad reputation to the brand. The supportive part believes in the fact that it provides a good starting point for beginners and helps to boost online worth of already established profiles. Given the results we had, it would be interesting to see further research on the topic. Future studies could experiment to build two similar Instagram brands from inception, one where followers and likes would be bought and one that would grow organically. The final analysis of the results would provide us with a solid conclusion on whether small brands or startups can benefit from a faster growth by influencing consumers' purchase intention and brand trust.

Also, our study focused exactly on Portuguese speaking people so forthcoming research can get new insights on how people from different cultures react when faced with similar scenarios as our study: large versus small quantity of followers.

More suggestions fall in the revenues and profit area. An interesting study could be made on how having an Instagram brand page with a large number of followers can impact the company's sales. Familiar brands (instead of unknown brands, used in this study) can also be examined closely in order to find out if the number of followers impacts them as much as strange ones.

Conclusion

Our study is the first to examine consumers' behavior in an emulated experience of the social network Instagram, providing results that might be consistent with the behavior of each user. The results achieved have indicated that having an Instagram brand page with a large number of followers when compared to one with a small number of follower's influences consumers' purchase intention and brand trust. In contrast, a large number of followers is not able to influence the likeliness of referring brand's products to a friend nor to increase the brand's perceived quality. Our studies also revealed that men and women are not differently

affected by the number of followers in the Instagram brand profile. This is not only surprising for the ways different genders are socially influenced, but also important for expenditures contention since no gender targeting strategy will be required by firms on Instagram. The practical implications from our applied research allow us to conclude that it is possible to positively influence the subconscious by increasing the number of followers of an Instagram brand's page, and benefit of a higher purchase intention and brand trust. Brands from six different market sectors were used, which gives the findings in this paper a wide applicability. Our results provide new empirical insights in the way marketers should pursue their brand's online position and strategy while at the same time giving suggestions on how to tackle the factors that the number of followers fails to influence. Being aware of these implications will help the achievement of organizations objectives and increase revenues at a lower cost.

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Appendix

Appendix A Study 1 - Number of followers according to each questionnaire (A or B)

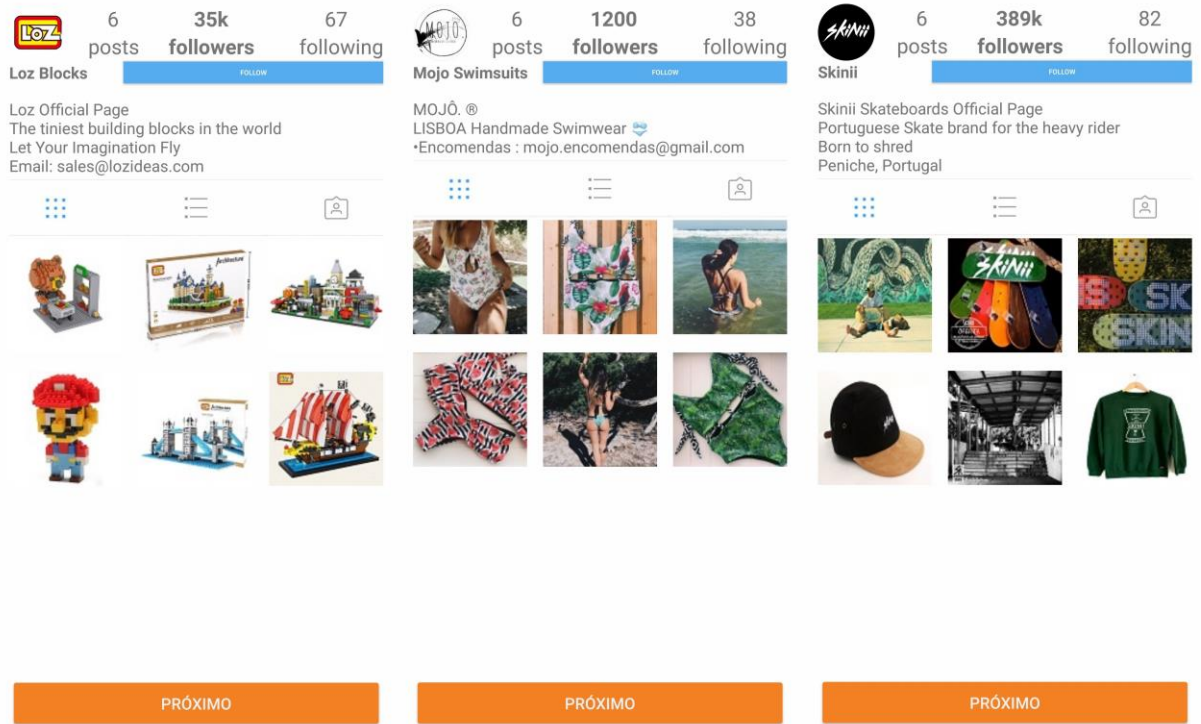


Figure 1 – Questionnaire A first three brands

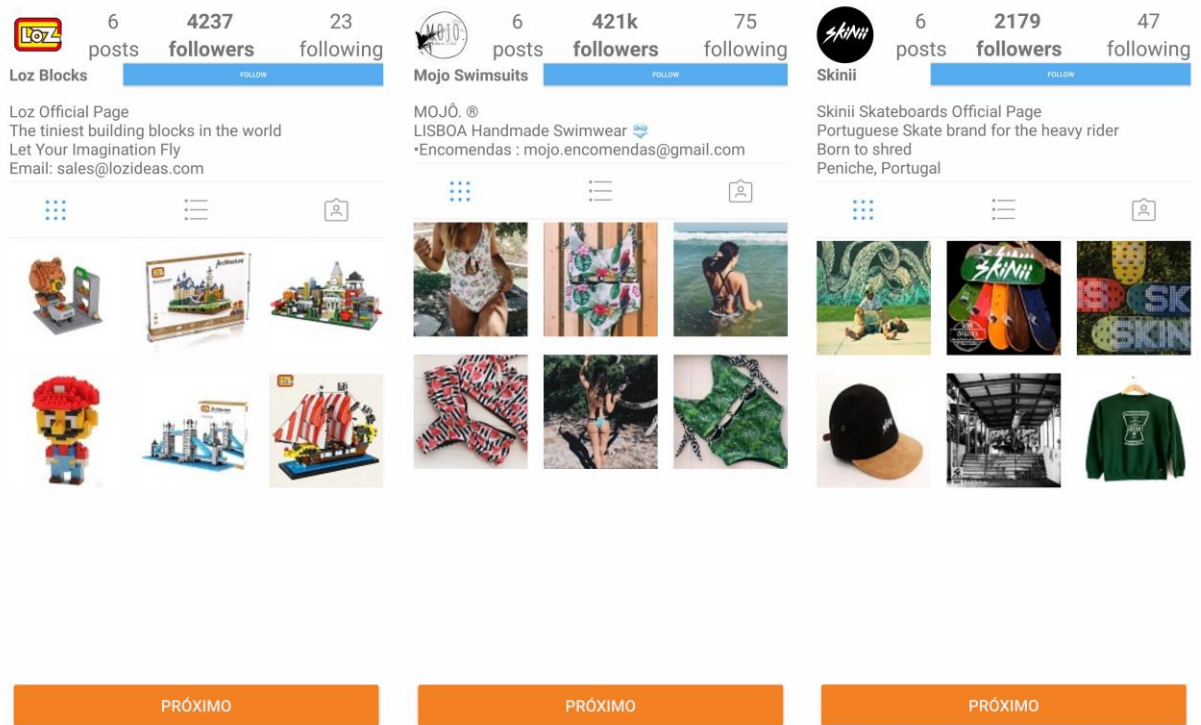


Figure 2 – Questionnaire B first three brands

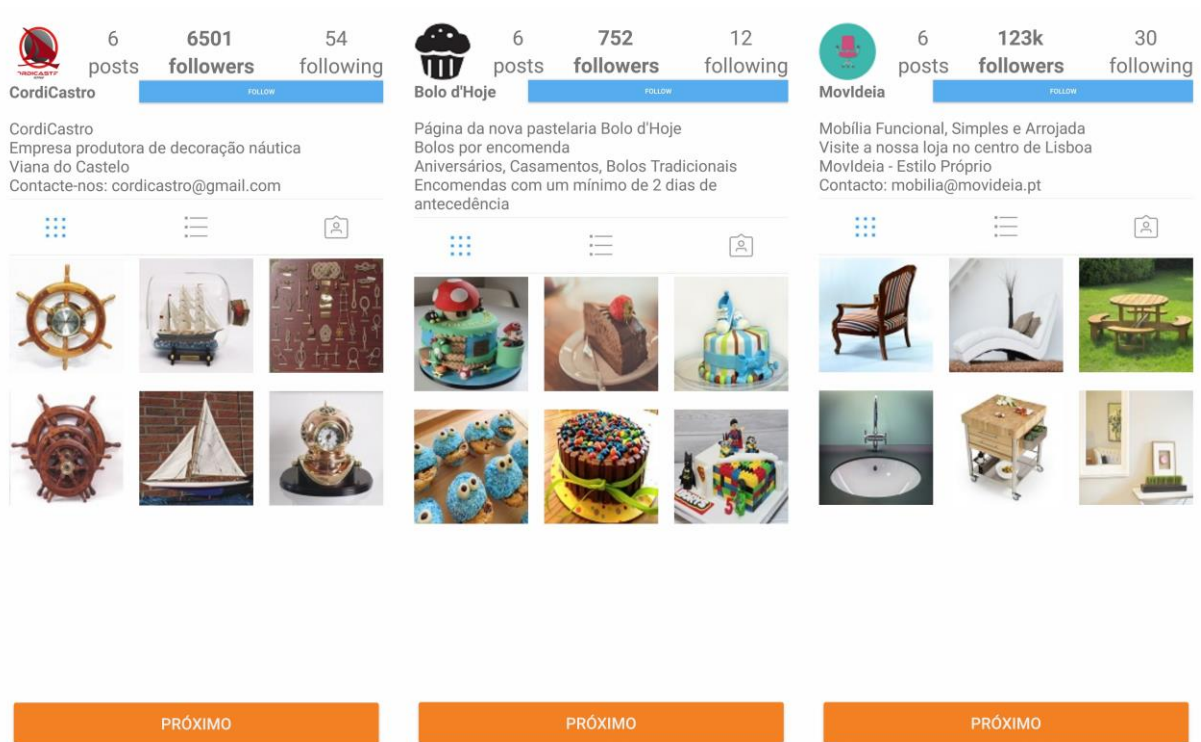


Figure 3 – Questionnaire A last three brands

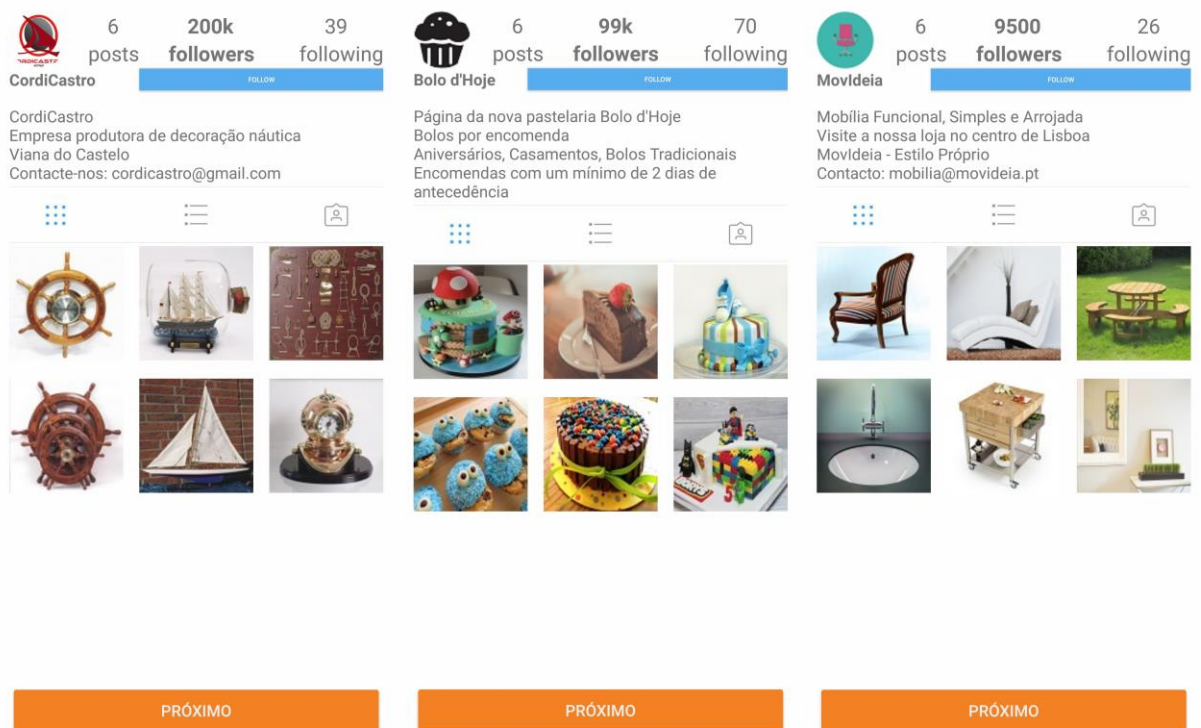


Figure 4 - Questionnaire B last three brands

Appendix B Study 1 - Application Usage

Sexo

M

F

Idade

23

SEGUINTE

Verá uma série de imagens relativas a diversas marcas na rede social Instagram.

O número de seguidores em cada perfil é abreviado para a casa dos milhares com a letra "k". Isto quer dizer que 12k correspondem, por exemplo, a 12.000 seguidores e que uma página com mais seguidores é mais popular.

Pode clicar nas imagens para as ampliar.

Por favor responda às perguntas escolhendo qualquer valor numa escala de 1 a 7 consoante a sua opinião.

Obrigado!

SEGUINTE

Figure 5 – The first screen gathers personal information and the second one provides instructions for the questionnaire.

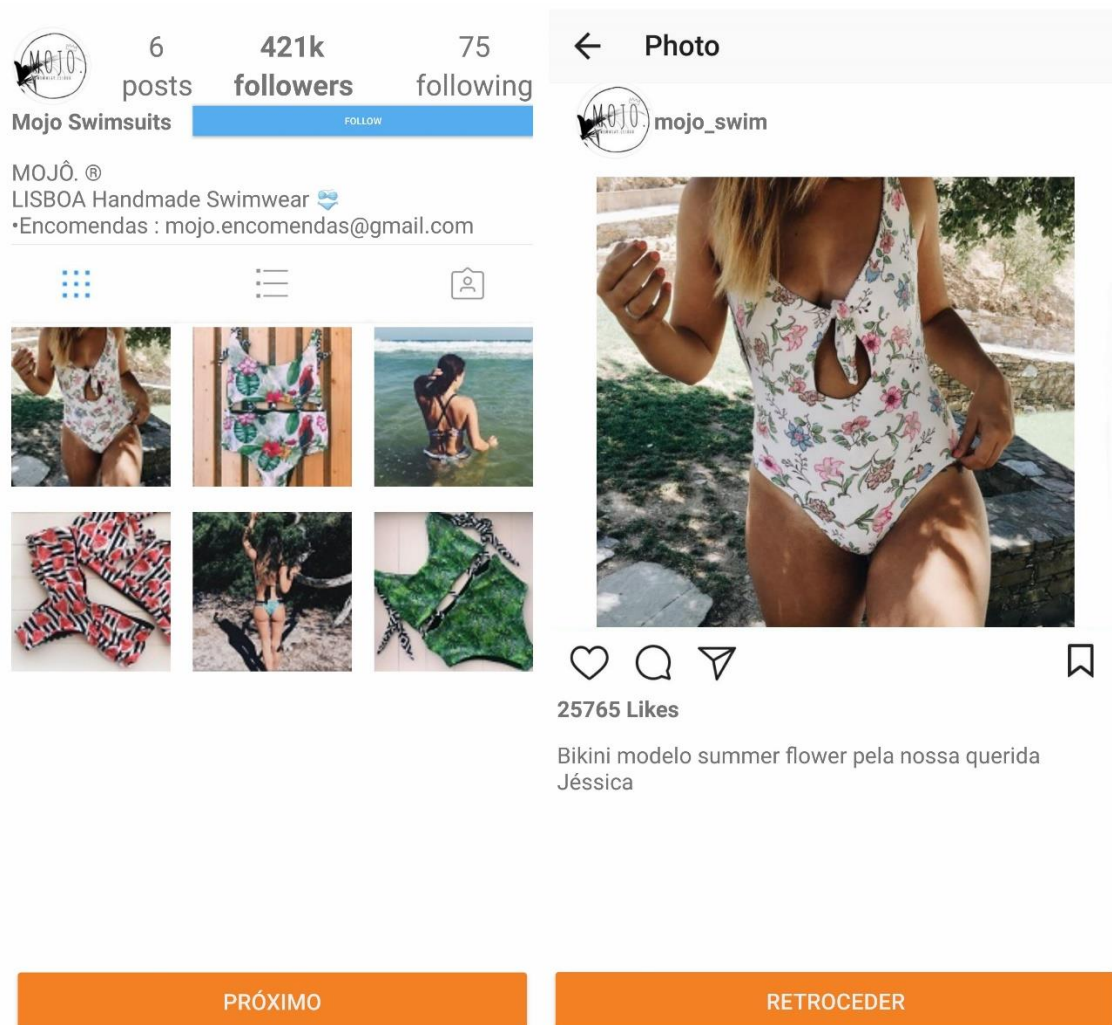


Figure 6 - The next screens display different brands. It is possible to navigate the page and zoom in into each one of the pictures available, just like in the real application.

Se pretendesse comprar um bikini, compraria um da marca que acabou de visualizar? (Mojo Swim)

7 - Definitivamente sim

6

5

4 - Não tenho a certeza

3

2

1 - Definitivamente não

Referiria os produtos da marca Mojo Swim a um amigo?

7 - Definitivamente sim

6

5

4 - Não tenho a certeza

3

2

1 - Definitivamente não

A marca Mojo Swim parece ter produtos de boa qualidade

7 - Concordo totalmente

6

5

4 - Não concordo nem discordo

3

2

1 - Discordo totalmente

A marca Mojo Swim transmite-me confiança

7 - Concordo totalmente

6

5

4 - Não concordo nem discordo

3

2

1 - Discordo totalmente

Muito obrigado pela sua participação neste questionário!

Se desejar receber os resultados do teste, por favor introduza o seu nome e e-mail.

Enviar-lhos-emos assim que estiverem prontos!

Ricardo

27408@novasbe.pt

SEGUINTE

SEGUINTE

FIM

Figure 7 – In-between each brand page, four questions, each one related to the first four hypothesis tested are prompted. In the end a last screen gives the participant the chance to introduce or not extra personal data in order to receive this paper results by email.

Appendix C Study 1 - Calculations according to questionnaire

Loz			
Questionnaire A	Nº Followers	%	Nº Likes
Image 1	35000	0,05	1750
Image 2	35000	0,0667	2334,5
Image 3	35000	0,04	1400
Image 4	35000	0,075	2625
Image 5	35000	0,03	1050
Image 6	35000	0,015	525

Mojo Swimwear			
Questionnaire A	Nº Followers	%	Nº Likes
Image 1	1200	0,0612	73
Image 2	1200	0,09	108
Image 3	1200	0,05	60
Image 4	1200	0,068	82
Image 5	1200	0,034	41
Image 6	1200	0,081	97

Loz			
Questionnaire B	Nº Followers	%	Nº Likes
Image 1	4237	0,05	212
Image 2	4237	0,0667	283
Image 3	4237	0,04	169
Image 4	4237	0,075	318
Image 5	4237	0,03	127
Image 6	4237	0,015	64

Mojo Swimwear			
Questionnaire B	Nº Followers	%	Nº Likes
Image 1	421000	0,0612	25765
Image 2	421000	0,09	37890
Image 3	421000	0,05	21050
Image 4	421000	0,068	28628
Image 5	421000	0,034	14314
Image 6	421000	0,081	34101

Skinii			
Questionnaire A	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	389000	0,083	32287
Image 2	389000	0,015	5835
Image 3	389000	0,049	19061
Image 4	389000	0,067	26063
Image 5	389000	0,043	16727
Image 6	389000	0,079	30731

CordiCastro			
Questionnaire A	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	6501	0,077	501
Image 2	6501	0,023	150
Image 3	6501	0,07	455
Image 4	6501	0,035	228
Image 5	6501	0,082	533
Image 6	6501	0,061	397

Skinii			
Questionnaire B	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	2179	0,083	181
Image 2	2179	0,015	33
Image 3	2179	0,049	107
Image 4	2179	0,067	146
Image 5	2179	0,043	94
Image 6	2179	0,079	172

CordiCastro			
Questionnaire B	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	200000	0,077	15400
Image 2	200000	0,023	4600
Image 3	200000	0,07	14000
Image 4	200000	0,035	7000
Image 5	200000	0,082	16400
Image 6	200000	0,061	12200

Bolo d'Hoje			
Questionnaire A	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	752	0,025	19
Image 2	752	0,013	10
Image 3	752	0,04	30
Image 4	752	0,05	38
Image 5	752	0,075	56
Image 6	752	0,09	68

MovIdeia			
Questionnaire A	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	123000	0,032	3936
Image 2	123000	0,089	10947
Image 3	123000	0,073	8979
Image 4	123000	0,05	6150
Image 5	123000	0,019	2337
Image 6	123000	0,082	10086

Bolo d'Hoje			
Questionnaire B	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	99000	0,025	2475
Image 2	99000	0,013	1287
Image 3	99000	0,04	3960
Image 4	99000	0,05	4950
Image 5	99000	0,075	7425
Image 6	99000	0,09	8910

MovIdeia			
Questionnaire B	N° Followers	%	N° Likes
Image 1	9500	0,032	304
Image 2	9500	0,089	846
Image 3	9500	0,073	694
Image 4	9500	0,05	475
Image 5	9500	0,019	181
Image 6	9500	0,082	779

Appendix D Study 2 Questionnaire

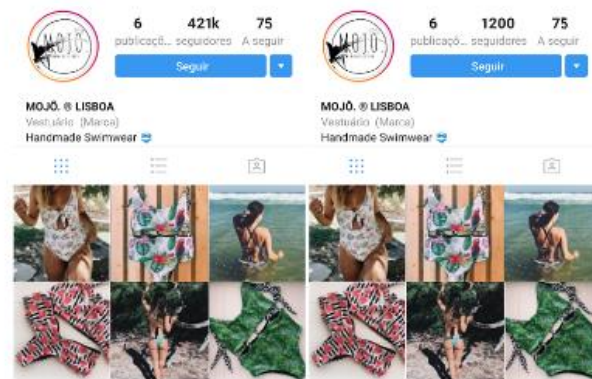
Instagram: Consciência como Consumidor

*Obrigatório

Qual é o seu sexo? *

- Feminino
 Masculino

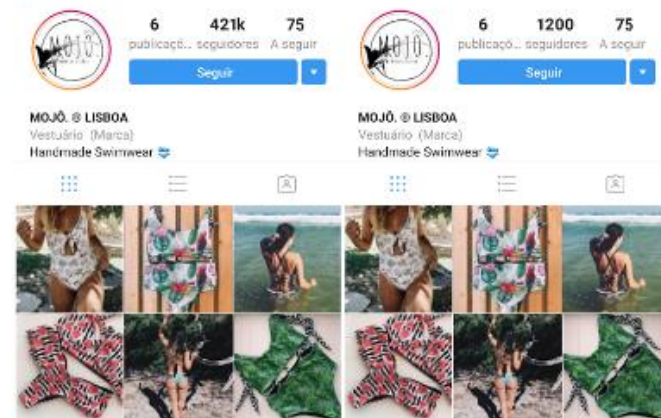
As páginas das duas marcas abaixo têm as mesmas características, apenas o NÚMERO DE SEGUIDORES difere. Qual das duas páginas lhe confere uma maior vontade de comprar um produto desta marca (para si ou como prendas)? *



- A página com o MAIOR número de seguidores
 A página com o MENOR número de seguidores
 Ambas me dão a mesma vontade de comprar

Figure 8 – Gender choice and first question of Study 2 questionnaire

Qual das duas páginas lhe transmite uma maior CONFIANÇA na marca MOJÔ?



- A página com o MAIOR número de seguidores
 A página com o MENOR número de seguidores
 Ambas me transmitem a mesma confiança na marca

Figure 9 – Study 2 second question

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