The Influence of Instagram Promotions on Young People's Purchasing Decisions: A Study on Persuasion, Credibility, and Influencer Impact

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Abstract: The study investigates the role of Instagram as a promotional tool and its influence on young consumers' purchasing decisions. Utilizing an exploratory, mixed-method approach, the research reveals that Instagram is perceived as a highly persuasive platform for product promotions, particularly due to its visual quality. Surprisingly, the study also highlights significant skepticism among young users (N=65) towards influencer endorsements, with low scores in trust and influence on purchasing decisions. These findings suggest that while Instagram effectively raises awareness, its ability to drive actual purchases is limited, underscoring the need for more authentic and engaging marketing strategies. Although Instagram is praised for its convenience and ease of shopping, concerns about fraud, the inability to inspect products physically, excessive ads, and the need for greater security make young people trust traditional purchases more. Low engagement scores indicate young users' reluctance to actively interact with ads, suggesting they may be noticed but fail to inspire direct engagement.

Keywords: *Instagram, promotion, corporate communication, public relations (PR), influencers.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate communication refers to the strategic dissemination of information by organizations to internal and external stakeholders, aiming to build and maintain relationships, manage reputation, and achieve organizational goals [1]. It encompasses a range of activities designed to promote the organization's objectives, values, and image. This includes internal communications, public relations, investor relations, crisis communication, corporate branding, and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, play a significant role in modern corporate communication strategies [2]. Instagram enables companies to engage with their target audience, share visual content, and communicate brand messages effectively. The platform's visual nature allows businesses to showcase products, services, and brand values creatively, enhancing engagement with followers. Instagram serves as a powerful tool for brand promotion, customer engagement, and reputation management. With 25 billion business account, Instagram is still the best platform to promote brand awareness [3], and companies frequently leverage Instagram to communicate promotional messages and interact with customers. The platform's interactive features, such as stories, live videos, and polls, facilitate two-way communication between businesses and their audience, fostering engagement and building customer relationships. Moreover, the use of influencers on Instagram has become a popular strategy for companies to reach a wider audience and enhance brand credibility.

However, despite the widespread adoption of Instagram in corporate communication, recent statistics reveal that the number of active Instagram users dropped. According to data recorded in 2023 and January 2024, Instagram's monthly active users declined by 4 million [4]. Much additional research is needed to help us understand the reasons that drive people to become Instagram users and the values they find in it. Additionally, there is a critical need to explore consumers' attitudes and behaviors in response to Instagram marketing efforts. Understanding these behavioral responses will provide valuable insights for organizations seeking to optimize their social media strategies and achieve enduring success in the digital age. This research aims to investigate how Instagram communicates promotional messages to young people and assess the extent to which these messages influence their purchasing decisions.

2. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Corporate communication and Public Relations (PR) are closely intertwined within organizational structures. In the contemporary digital era, the landscape of Public Relations (PR) and corporate communications is undergoing transformation due to rapid advancements in digital technologies and communication channels. The advent of digital technologies has significantly altered organizational communication practices, blurring the traditional boundaries between PR and corporate communications [5].

The accelerated tech advances have had a dramatic impact on modern corporate communication [6], as social media have now become an inevitable element in companies' internal and external communication approaches [7]. Social media is extensively used to promote products, services, and corporate initiatives, and nowadays many companies integrate their Instagram account with their corporate website.

In a comprehensive sense, corporate communication encompasses marketing communications, organizational communications, and management communications, all aimed at establishing positive relationships with stakeholders crucial to the company's success [8]. This term also signifies a cohesive organizational approach directed at various target groups, emphasizing corporate identity. Particularly in the aftermath of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the corporate communication landscape has evolved into a multidisciplinary ecosystem. This transformation has seen corporate communication strategies adapt to a more integrated and diverse approach, incorporating elements from various disciplines to effectively engage stakeholders and manage organizational reputation.

The role of social media has been confirmed in numerous studies; for example, Tsai & Men [9] conducted a study on the effects of CEOs' communication styles on social networking sites, highlighting the impact of social media interactions on organization-public relationships and public advocacy. Also, Floreddu & Cabiddu [10] explored social media communication strategies and their impact on corporate reputation, emphasizing the importance of managing corporate reputation through effective social media communication. Finally, it is argued that social media has allowed the firms to develop a timely and direct communication with stakeholders, further arguing that social media helps in achieving the efficiency level that simply cannot be achieved from the traditional medium of corporate communication [11].

3. INSTAGRAM AS A PROMOTIONAL TOOL

Since its inception in 2010, Instagram has served as an influential marketing instrument for businesses aiming to enhance their visibility and product recognition. Owing to its highly visual nature, Instagram proves to be an outstanding social media marketing platform for displaying stylish, innovative, captivating, and aesthetically pleasing products and services. The platform's architecture is centered around photo and video sharing, with distinct features such as tagging, filters, and the recognizable Instamatic-inspired shape of posts [12].

Instagram's visual focus, where users express themselves through images and captions, is a key aspect that sets it apart [13]. Sectors such as fashion, food, travel, beauty, home decor, gardening, and event planning have achieved significant success by incorporating Instagram engagement into their marketing strategies. Currently, Instagram has 362.9 billion users more than half of which (62.4%) are between 18 and 34 years old [4], and it is argued that Instagram ranks 4th among the most popular social media networks globally as of 2024, after Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp [4]. Regarding Instagram users, the highest number of users is coming from India, USA and Brazil [4]. As Instagram's reach has been so powerful, the platform's features have been leveraged for various purposes, including advertising, influencer marketing, and educational activities [14, 15, 16]. With such a vast population of users, companies recognized the potential of Instagram for promotions, so they pay influencers collaborate with brands educators utilize its features for virtual instruction [14, 15, 16].

As a media-sharing platform, Instagram is a prominent participant in the influencer economy, where people partly receive money based on their follower count. According to Instagram [4], 87% of individuals report that influencers have influenced their purchasing decisions. Even if users do not directly shop from influencers, their impact solidifies Instagram's role as both a shopping destination and social media platform. Picture posts (78%) and stories (73%) are considered the most effective content types for those shopping through influencers. Instagram serves as a vital platform for building brand networks and enhancing engagement with both existing and potential consumers, regularly introducing new business features. Notably, 44% of individuals use Instagram for weekly purchases. 62% of people are more interested in a brand after viewing it on Instagram Stories. According to [3], Instagram hosts 25 billion business accounts, making it the premier platform for promoting brand awareness. It remains the most popular platform for influencer marketing.

Instagram's influence on consumer behavior, particularly among young customers, is profound and multifaceted. It is argued that Instagram social media marketing has a significant influence on young customers' purchasing intentions, with user-generated content (UGC) and influencer marketing playing a crucial role in shaping their propensity to make purchases [17, 18]. Customer engagement on Instagram positively affects emotions, purchase intention, and the dissemination of positive user-generated content (UGC), underscoring the importance of engagement in influencing customer behavior on the platform [19]. Additionally, Instagram serves as an effective promotional tool for attracting consumers, particularly the youth market, demonstrating the platform's efficacy in reaching specific target audiences.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research study deployed an exploratory, mix-method design. The objective of the research is to investigate how Instagram communicates promotional messages to young people and assess the extent to which these messages influence their purchasing decisions. The data collection was conducted in May 2024.

The research questions and hypotheses were as follows;

RQ1: To what extent do young people perceive Instagram as persuasive for product promotions?

RQ2: How do the visual and interactive features of Instagram influence the perceived credibility and attractiveness of advertised products?

RQ3: What is the extent of influencers' impact on the purchasing decisions of young people on Instagram?

RQ4: How do young people perceive the trustworthiness of traditional advertising methods compared to Instagram advertisements endorsed by influencers?

H1: Young people find Instagram a persuasive platform for product promotions.

H2: The visual and interactive elements of Instagram increase the perceived credibility and attractiveness of advertised products.

H3: Influencers on Instagram significantly impact the purchasing decisions of young people.

H4: Traditional methods of promotion are perceived as more trustworthy by young people compared to Instagram advertisements endorsed by influencers.

4.1. Instrument and sample

For the purposes of this research, an electronic survey was designed and administered through Google Forms Questionnaire to a number of people via e-mail, with a request to forward it to other people who use Instagram or know someone who uses it, applying the principles of person-to-person recommendations. The survey was administered anonymously to ensure respondents answer with openness and honesty. It comprised three sections: (1) demographic inquiries, (2) assessments of general attitudes toward Instagram, and (3) evaluations of attitudes specifically toward Instagram promotions. Part 1 focused on demographic information, while Part 2 explored responses to 14 statements about Instagram in general. Part 3 consisted of 10 statements regarding perceptions of Instagram promotions. Each statement in Part 2 and Part 3 utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 indicating "totally disagree", and 5 meaning "completely agree"). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.94 for the whole instrument indicates that the survey reliable and that the items included are consistently measuring the same construct. The data are analyzed using SPSS software for descriptive statistics. The results are interpreted with means categorized as follows: 1.00-1.79 (very low); 1.80-2.59 (low); 2.60-3.39 (moderate); 3.40-4.19 (high); 4.20-5.00 (very high). The research included N=65 respondents of different genders and age groups, which allowed us to get a broader picture of the attitudes and preferences of Instagram users.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
5.1. Demographic Questions

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the age, gender, occupation, social media usage, and Instagram follower base of the survey participants, offering valuable context for the subsequent analysis.

Age and gender Distribution: The results indicate that the majority of respondents fall within the 22-25 age range, with 37 respondents in this category. Additionally, there are 8 respondents aged 18-21, 8 respondents aged 26-30, and 5 respondents over 30 years old. Among our respondents, 24 identified as male, 4 as female, and 1 respondent chose not to disclose their gender.

Current Occupation: A significant portion, 46.2%, reported being students. Full-time employees constituted 33.2% of the sample, while the remaining respondents included part-time employees, self-employed individuals, unemployed individuals, and others.

Social Media Usage: We also examined the amount of time respondents spend on social media, daily. The data reveals that most respondents spend between 3-4 hours on social media, while the smallest group spends less than an hour daily. This information is critical in understanding the extent of social media engagement among the participants. Regarding the frequency of Instagram use on a daily basis, a significant 90.8% of respondents reported using Instagram every day (Figure 1).
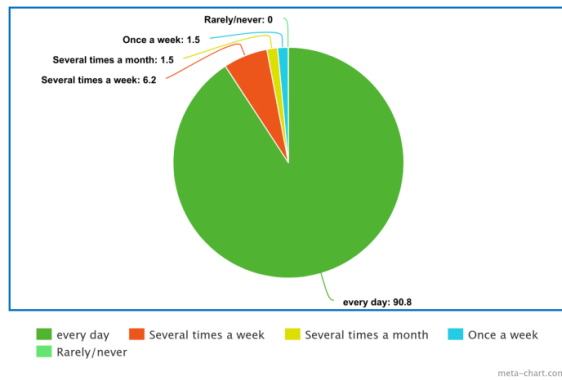
Figure 1. Frequency *of daily Instagram use*

Instagram Followers: As many as 70.8% of respondents follow an influencer on Instagram (Figure 2). Finally, we explored the number of Instagram followers our respondents have. The findings show that the majority have between 100-500 and 500-1000 followers. Fewer respondents have 1,001-5,000 followers, more than 5,000 followers, or less than 100 followers.
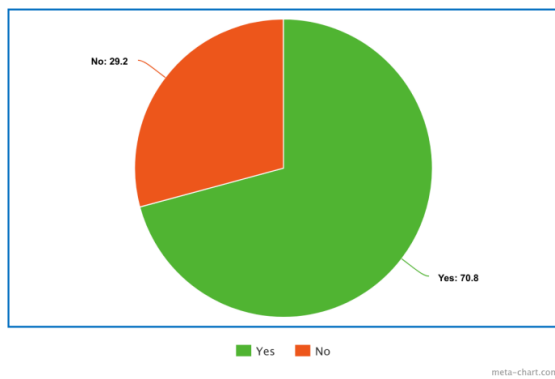

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who follow influencers on Instagram

5.2. Attitudes towards promotional aspect of Instagram

To address the research questions and confirm or refute the hypotheses, we asked the respondents to rate 15 statements about Instagram, ranging from 1 to 5. The findings, given in Table 1, reveal several key insights where respondents' perceptions align most positively with Instagram's promotional aspects. The high means are observed in two categories Instagram's persuasiveness and visual appeal. The respondents reported that Instagram is a persuasive platform for product promotions (M=4.11). The high mean score indicates that respondents generally view Instagram as highly effective for promoting products, emphasizing its strong persuasive influence. The visual quality of advertisements on Instagram makes them more convincing (M=3.34). This statement highlights that the majority of respondents find visually appealing ads on Instagram significantly enhance their persuasiveness, indicating the importance of aesthetics in marketing on this platform.

Moderate attitudes were observed in "Interactive elements in Instagram ads enhance my engagement with the content" (M= 3.18) and "Advertisements on Instagram are more appealing to me compared to those on other social media platforms" (M= 3.17). The score indicates that while these interactive tools are appreciated, they may not universally captivate all users to the highest degree possible. Similarly, the moderate rating here indicates that while Instagram advertisements are generally perceived as appealing, they do not consistently outshine ads on other social media platforms by a significant margin. This suggests that while Instagram excels in certain visual and interactive aspects, other platforms may have unique strengths or reach different audience segments more effectively.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for part 1 attitudes*

PART 1 - Attitudes towards promotional aspect of Instagram	Std. Dev.	Mean
1. Instagram is a persuasive platform for product promotions.	1.25	4.11
2. I often feel influenced by the advertisements I see on Instagram.	1.21	2.88
3. Advertisements on Instagram are more appealing to me compared to those on other social media platforms.	1.23	3.17
4. The visual quality of advertisements on Instagram makes them more convincing.	1.15	3.34
5. Interactive elements (e.g., swipe-up links, polls) in Instagram ads enhance my engagement with the content.	1.23	3.18
6. I am more likely to trust a product that has high-quality visuals on Instagram.	1.38	3.00
7. My frequency of Instagram use affects my awareness of new products and trends.	1.32	3.03
8. I have purchased products as a direct result of seeing them advertised on Instagram.	1.29	2.57
9. The more time I spend on Instagram, the more likely I am to buy products promoted there.	1.25	2.49
10. I find Instagram advertisements more trustworthy when they are endorsed by influencers I follow.	1.29	2.88
11. I am skeptical of product promotions on Instagram that do not involve influencers.	1.22	2.40
12. The credibility of a product is enhanced when it is promoted by multiple influencers on Instagram.	1.27	2.68
13. Products promoted by influencers on Instagram seem more credible to me.	1.08	2.38
14. Instagram influencers significantly influence my purchasing decisions.	1.41	2.22
15. I tend to trust product recommendations from Instagram influencers.	1.20	2.52

The lowest attitudes were scored in the following categories; Influence of Instagram on Purchasing Decisions (M=2.22), Credibility of Influencer-Endorsed Products (M=2.38), Skepticism Towards Non-Influencer Promotions (M=2.40), and Purchase related to the time spent on Instagram (M=49). Interestingly, a low score was also observed in "I tend to trust product recommendations from Instagram influencers" (M=2.52), indicating a notable degree of skepticism among young users towards influencer endorsements on Instagram.

This low score highlights that Instagram's impact on driving actual purchasing decisions is minimal. Despite high engagement levels on the platform, this influence does not necessarily translate into purchase actions. Users may perceive influencer promotions as driven more by financial incentives rather than genuine belief in the product.The notable skepticism towards promotions that do not involve influencers indicates that users rely on influencer credibility to some extent, yet remain wary of traditional advertising methods.The correlation between time spent on Instagram and purchasing behavior is low. This implies that even heavy users of Instagram are not significantly more likely to purchase products promoted on the platform, suggesting a disconnect between engagement and conversion.

In the second part of the questionnaire, surprisingly, no high attitudes were observed, as all categories scored either moderate or low scores. The findings (Table 2) indicate that the moderate scores in this segment were observed for the statements "I prefer Instagram ads that are entertaining or humorous" (M=3.26) and "Instagram ads help me discover products I wouldn't have found otherwise" (M=3.23). This highlights Instagram's potential as a discovery platform, though variability in user experiences suggests that not all ads are equally effective in this regard, and also pinpoints that creative and engaging content is more likely to capture young people's attention. Also, we must emphasize here users tend to trust ads more when they come from verified accounts or official brand pages, emphasizing the importance of perceived authenticity and legitimacy in ad effectiveness (M=3.18).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for part 2 attitudes*

PART 2 - General attitudes towards Instagram	Std. Dev.	Mean
1. I enjoy seeing product promotions on Instagram.	1.17	2.54
2. Instagram ads provide me with useful information about new products.	1.54	3.12
3. I often save or bookmark Instagram ads for future reference.	1.42	2.83
4. I often engage with advertisements on Instagram by liking, commenting, or sharing.	1.03	2.15
5. I prefer Instagram ads that are entertaining or humorous.	1.32	3.26
6. Instagram ads provide me with useful information about new products.	1.14	3.03
7. Instagram ads help me discover products I wouldn't have found otherwise.	1.63	3.23
8. I have made a purchase because of an Instagram ad.	1.40	2.97
9. I trust Instagram ads more when they come from verified accounts or official brand pages.	1.33	3.18
10. I am likely to purchase products promoted on Instagram in the future.	1.18	2.02

On the low spectrum of attitudes we can observe several categories: Likelihood of Future Purchases (M=2.02), Engagement with Ads (M=2.15), and Enjoyment of Product Promotions (M=2.54). The low score for engagement, such as liking, commenting, or sharing ads, indicates a reluctance among users to interact actively with advertisements. This suggests that while ads might be seen, they do not frequently inspire direct interaction or engagement. The likelihood of purchasing products promoted on Instagram in the future is low, highlighting a significant gap between ad exposure and purchase intent. This suggests that while ads may raise awareness, they do not effectively drive future purchasing behavior.

Overall, while Instagram ads are moderately effective in certain areas such as entertainment and product discovery, significant challenges remain in driving user engagement and converting ad views into purchases. By focusing on creativity, building trust, enhancing discovery, and encouraging interaction, marketers can improve the effectiveness of their Instagram advertising strategies and better align with user attitudes and behaviors. Future research should explore the specific factors that influence these attitudes and identify targeted approaches to address the identified gaps.

5.3. Perceptions of Promoting Products on Instagram versus Traditional In-Store Selling

To address H4, an open-ended question was asked to explore the perceptions of promoting products on Instagram compared to traditional in-store selling methods. The data reveals diverse opinions, categorized into positive, negative, and neutral sentiments, with a total of 127 mentions distributed across various aspects (Table 3).

Positive perceptions: The positive feedback, representing 42.52% of the total mentions, underscores the convenience and efficiency of Instagram as a shopping platform. The highest positive rating was given to the statement

about "availability and ease of shopping, efficiency, and home delivery", with 16 responses. This indicates that young people highly appreciate the convenience offered by Instagram in terms of facilitating easy and efficient shopping experiences. The focus on the visual aspects of products also received a high rating (10 responses), highlighting the importance of visual presentation on this platform. Users appreciate the easy availability and

purchase process, home delivery, and the detailed product images that are crucial for visual assessments. Implications: The positive aspects suggest that businesses can leverage Instagram to reach a broader audience quickly and efficiently, potentially increasing sales and customer satisfaction. The emphasis on visual content and influencer partnerships can be strategically used to build trust and enhance product visibility.

Table 3. *Perceptions of Promoting Products on Instagram versus Traditional In-Store Selling*

Positive	No.	%
Availability and easy purchase, efficiency, home delivery	16	12.60%
Focus on product images where appearance is important	10	7.87%
Possibility of faster sales	9	7.09%
Greater assortment of products, cheaper than in-store	5	3.94%
Accessibility of products due to constant promotion on Instagram	4	3.15%
Accessibility of products due to constant promotion on Instagram	4	3.15%
Faster and more thorough marketing, possibility of faster information	4	3.15%
Influencers bring these products closer to us	4	3.15%
Easier to pay	1	0.79%
No disadvantages	1	0.79%
Negative	**No.**	**%**
Fraud	19	14.96%
Products cannot be tried or seen, tangibility issues	11	8.66%
Too many ads	7	5.51%
Quality issues	6	4.72%
Prices unknown in advance	2	1.57%
Paid influencer ads to promote	2	1.57%
Necessity of asking questions, longer search	2	1.57%
No advantages	2	1.57%
I shop only in stores	1	0.79%
Larger businesses with more money for marketing often overshadow smaller businesses	1	
Neutral	**No.**	**%**
No comment	11	8.66%
I don't know	5	3.94%
Not interested	2	1.57%

Negative perceptions: The negative feedback, accounting for 41.73% of total mentions, highlights significant concerns about Instagram shopping. The primary issue is the risk of fraud, where users fear being deceived by fraudulent sellers. This highlights the need for greater security and trust in ads on this platform. Young people are aware that shopping via Instagram can be risky and often doubt the credibility of products and sellers. The inability to physically inspect or try products before purchasing is another major drawback (11 responses). Young consumers prefer the ability to physically inspect products before making a purchase decision, which Instagram does not offer. The excessive number of ads (7 responses) is another negative aspect. Many respondents feel overwhelmed by the number of ads, which can create frustration and reduce their interest in shopping via this platform. The reliance on paid influencer promotions can be perceived as biased, and the need for additional inquiries and searches for product details is time-consuming. Some users see no advantages in Instagram shopping, prefer

traditional in-store shopping, or are concerned about larger businesses overshadowing smaller ones. Implications: The negative aspects indicate that businesses must address concerns about fraud, quality assurance, and transparency to build consumer trust. Reducing the ad clutter and providing clear, upfront pricing can improve user experience.

Neutral perceptions: Neutral feedback, comprising 14.17% of total mentions, reflects a range of opinions that neither strongly favor nor oppose Instagram shopping. A significant portion of respondents chose not to comment, indicating a lack of strong feelings or sufficient experience with the platform. Implications: The neutral feedback suggests that there is still a segment of the audience that is undecided or indifferent towards Instagram shopping. This presents an opportunity for businesses to target these users with informative and engaging content that could sway their opinion.

6. CONCLUSION

Corporate communication encompasses various strategies that organizations use to interact with stakeholders, build relationships, manage reputation, and achieve their goals. In the digital age, platforms like Instagram have become vital tools for these strategies, offering a visual and interactive medium for brand promotion and customer engagement. Despite its popularity, recent trends show a decline in Instagram's active user base, prompting a need for further research into its effectiveness in influencing consumer behavior and purchasing decisions.

The goal of this study was to explore the role of Instagram as a promotional tool and its influence on young consumers' purchasing decisions. Our findings challenge the claim that 87% of Instagram users report that influencers have influenced their purchasing decisions [4]. Our research shows that although 90.8% of respondents use Instagram daily and 70.8% follow some influencers, there is significant skepticism and distrust towards influencers' promotional activities. Instagram users may perceive these promotions as financially motivated rather than based on genuine belief in the product. While influencers' credibility is somewhat relied upon, traditional advertising methods still evoke wariness.

Our findings also indicate that Instagram's impact on driving actual purchasing decisions is minimal. Despite high engagement levels, this does not necessarily translate into purchase actions. The correlation between time spent on Instagram and purchasing behavior is low, implying that even heavy users are not significantly more likely to purchase promoted products. This suggests a disconnect between engagement and conversion. Ads on Instagram, though visible, do not frequently inspire direct interaction or engagement. Moreover, while Instagram advertisements are generally perceived as appealing, they do not consistently outperform ads on other social media platforms.

Our hypotheses yielded mixed results. The first hypothesis, that young people find Instagram a persuasive platform for product promotions, was confirmed. The second hypothesis, that the visual and interactive elements of Instagram increase the perceived credibility and attractiveness of advertised products, was also confirmed. However, the third hypothesis, that influencers on Instagram significantly impact the purchasing decisions of young people, was not confirmed. The fourth hypothesis, that traditional methods of promotion are perceived as more trustworthy than Instagram advertisements endorsed by influencers, was confirmed. A limitation of this study is that the sample is composed entirely of respondents from Serbia, which might affect the results, allowing us to discuss this context specifically.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that young people consistently track ads and promotions, follow influencers' posts and stories, and remain aware of products and services that businesses promote as part of their corporate communication, possibly due to a "fear of missing out" (FOMO). However, they are generally inactive "lurkers", reserved when it comes to making purchases and trusting brands promoted by influencers. This indicates that while Instagram is effective for brand awareness and engagement, its ability to drive purchasing decisions, at least in our context, remains limited.

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