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ARTIGOS

TIKTOK VS. INSTAGRAM: ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT ON ENGAGEMENT AND PURCHASE DECISION

TIKTOK VS. INSTAGRAM: ANALISE DO IMPACTO NO ENVOLVIMENTO E NA DECISÃO DE COMPRA

ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media, specifically TikTok and Instagram, influences digital engagement and purchase decision-making among Generation Z and Millennials in Portugal. Its central objective is to understand how these platforms shape cognitive and emotional responses and, in turn, modify consumption patterns and decision-making dynamics. The study adopted a qualitative design with ethnographic elements. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Portuguese participants aged 22 to 35, and the data were analysed using IRaMuTeQ (R Interface for Multidimensional Analysis of Texts and Questionnaires), allowing a multidimensional exploration of participants' perceptions, meanings, and behavioural tendencies. The findings show that TikTok is perceived as a dynamic, spontaneous, and highly stimulating environment that drives more impulsive purchase intentions through algorithmic personalisation and short-form, emotionally engaging content. In contrast, Instagram is viewed as a socially curated and aesthetically oriented space that supports more intentional, reflective, and rational decision-making processes. While the study's limited sample and geographic concentration (Coimbra and Porto) restrict the generalisability of results, the ethnographic approach provides rich and contextualised insights into the nuanced ways social media platforms shape young adults' consumer behaviour. By offering a comparative analysis of TikTok and Instagram, this research advances the emerging discussion on digital and influencer marketing and highlights how platform-specific characteristics interact with engagement, emotional responses, and purchase-related decisions in contemporary social media environments.

Keywords: TikTok; Instagram; digital engagement; purchase decision-making; social media; content creators.

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RESUMO

Este estudo examina como as redes sociais, especificamente o TikTok e o Instagram, influenciam o engajamento digital e a tomada de decisão de compra entre a Geração Z e a Geração Y em Portugal. Seu objetivo central é compreender como essas plataformas moldam as respostas cognitivas e emocionais e, por sua vez, modificam os padrões de consumo e a dinâmica da tomada de decisão. O estudo adotou um desenho qualitativo com elementos etnográficos. Foram realizadas quinze entrevistas semiestruturadas com participantes portugueses com idades entre 22 e 35 anos, e os dados foram analisados utilizando o IRaMuTeQ (Interface R para Análise Multidimensional de Textos e Questionários), permitindo uma exploração multidimensional das percepções, dos significados e das tendências comportamentais dos participantes. Os resultados mostram que o TikTok é percebido como um ambiente dinâmico, espontâneo e altamente estimulante, que impulsiona intenções de compra mais impulsivas por meio da personalização algorítmica e de conteúdos curtos e emocionalmente envolventes. Em contrapartida, o Instagram é visto como um espaço socialmente curado e orientado para a estética, o qual favorece processos de tomada de decisão mais intencionais, reflexivos e racionais. Embora a amostra limitada do estudo e sua concentração geográfica (Coimbra e Porto) restrinjam a generalização dos resultados, a abordagem etnográfica oferece insights ricos e contextualizados sobre as maneiras sutis pelas quais as plataformas de mídia social moldam o comportamento de consumo dos jovens adultos. Ao oferecer uma análise comparativa do TikTok e do Instagram, esta pesquisa contribui para a discussão emergente sobre marketing digital e de influenciadores e destaca como as características específicas de cada plataforma interagem com o engajamento, as respostas emocionais e as decisões relacionadas à compra nos ambientes contemporâneos de mídia social.

Palavras-chave: TikTok; Instagram; engajamento digital; tomada de decisão de compra; redes sociais; criadores de conteúdo.

1 INTRODUCTION

As social media platforms become central touchpoints throughout the consumer journey, integrating effective, results-oriented methodologies has become essential (Szalkowski; Mikalef, 2023). No longer confined to entertainment, these platforms structure the entire consumer experience: product discovery, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase interaction (Asan; Zwiendelaar, 2025). In 2024 alone, social media users increased by 5.6% (266 million new users), with an average of 9.4 new users every second (Luo *et al.*, 2025). This exponential growth has consolidated social media as the primary channel for digital interaction. As Li (2025) notes, a strategic presence on these platforms heightens brand visibility and strengthens emotional ties that support loyalty and long-term relationships. Consumer behaviour is thus simultaneously rational and emotional, shaped by cognitive interpretations and affective responses to brands (Ruiz Mónica *et al.*, 2025). Social media presence enhances both sales and brand awareness by reinforcing relational and symbolic bonds between users and brands (Nidal; Albaity, 2024; K S; Massand, 2025).

The high fluidity of content on TikTok and Instagram, combined with their intuitive interfaces, accelerates consumption patterns (Zhang; Zhang; Daim, 2023). Social media has evolved from a channel for personal sharing into a core marketing environment (Luo *et al.*, 2025), transforming traditional commercial practices and enabling new forms of targeted and persuasive communication (Keller, 2010). Within this landscape, engagement — defined as “positively valenced cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity related to a brand” (Hollebeek; Glynn; Brodie, 2014) — is a central stage of the digital marketing funnel. It materializes through interactions such as comments, shares, clicks, and views (Salonen *et al.*, 2024), which signal attention, interest, and emotional resonance.

Interactions with branded or creator-

generated content foster trust, credibility, community, and emotional attachment (Zhou *et al.*, 2022), often translating into purchase intention. Consequently, social media has reshaped how brands position themselves and communicate, redefining their reach and influence (Wu; Botella-Carrubí; González-Tejero, 2024). Content creators hold particular persuasive power, while even ordinary users who share organic content contribute to shaping desires and aspirations. Their proximity and perceived authenticity influence how consumers evaluate promoted products (Balaban *et al.*, 2025). Generation Z's high exposure, checking Instagram at least five times per day (K S; Massand, 2025), intensifies contact with sponsored and organic content alike. This environment supports impulsive buying, with 41% of Generation Z and 34% of Millennials classified as impulsive consumers, driven by a desire for novelty and immediacy (Djafarova; Bowes, 2021). These demographic segments do not, however, interact with social media through a monolithic lens. While Millennials often seek a balance between utility and community, Generation Z prioritizes hyper-authenticity and entertainment-first content. This divergence creates a complex challenge for brands: the need to adapt persuasive strategies to different cognitive frameworks and digital fluencies across generations (Mathew; Spinelli, 2025). Consequently, a critical problem emerges: as platforms diversify their algorithmic logics, the mechanisms that trigger engagement in one environment may be ineffective or even counterproductive in another. The central research problem lies in the tension between perceived authenticity and commercial persuasion, exacerbated by the distinct expectations of different age cohorts. It remains unclear how the transition from "viewer" to "consumer" is moderated by the specific cultural norms of TikTok's raw spontaneity versus Instagram's curated aesthetic (Hartmann; Exner; Domdey, 2024).

Yet, despite the growing influence of digital creators, research shows that consumer

trust declines when users become aware of the monetary incentives behind endorsements (Audrezet; Kerviler; Moulard, 2020; Kim; Wang, 2024; Zhou *et al.*, 2021). The disclosure of sponsorships often triggers perceptions of bias and decreases the persuasive power of the message (Djafarova; Bowes, 2021; Shamim; Azam; Islam, 2024). Nevertheless, social media's value extends well beyond commerce: it serves as a primary source of information, entertainment, and social connection. Higher perceived value and trust in platforms increase willingness to consider and purchase recommended products (Luo *et al.*, 2025). Reflecting this evolution, the global digital marketing industry is projected to reach USD 1.5 trillion by 2030 (Wells, 2024). This sustained growth underscores the importance of understanding which platforms and content types drive engagement and influence purchase decisions (Djafarova; Bowes, 2021).

This study examines how TikTok and Instagram shape consumer engagement and purchasing behaviour. It investigates how platform-specific features, algorithmic logics, content formats, and cultural norms affect users' interactions, the symbolic value attributed to content, and the consumption decisions that follow. Central to this analysis is the relationship between consumer trust, perceived value, content authenticity, and willingness to purchase. To address these complexities, the research is guided by three primary objectives: (1) to identify the divergences between TikTok and Instagram from the user's perspective, evaluating how these platforms shape emotional engagement; (2) to compare how Generation Z and Millennials perceive trust and authenticity across these environments; and (3) to evaluate the impact of algorithmic personalisation on impulsive consumption patterns.

This paper advances current knowledge by addressing several gaps in the literature on social media-driven consumer behaviour. Specifically, while existing research acknowledges the influence of digital platforms, there is a lack of comparative evidence on how

the “algorithmic atmosphere” of TikTok versus Instagram specifically modulates the transition from emotional engagement to purchase action. Furthermore, the literature has yet to fully explain how the perception of sponsorship disclosure varies between the entertainment-heavy environment of TikTok and the lifestyle-centric nature of Instagram (Casaló; Flavián; Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020).

By addressing these gaps, this study provides an integrative, user-centred analysis of how each platform constructs symbolic meaning, generates emotional and behavioural engagement, and ultimately drives consumption choices. By examining the differentiated roles of content creators, the impact of personalised content streams, and the formation of platform-specific consumption attitudes, the study offers a nuanced contribution to understanding the dynamics of digital influence and the strategic implications for brands operating across TikTok and Instagram (Boerman; Van Reijmersdal; Neijens, 2014).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

The evolution of digital platforms has been shaped primarily by two technological shifts: the widespread adoption of smartphones and the increasing sophistication of data-processing and algorithmic systems (Eg; Tønnesen; Tennfjord, 2023). Millennials (1981–1996) and Generation Z (1997–2012) have been central to this trajectory, not only as early adopters but as generational cohorts whose expectations contributed to the consolidation and transformation of social media ecosystems (Venus *et al.*, 2025). Millennials integrated platforms such as Facebook and Instagram into everyday routines, constructing digital identities

and embedding personal relationships in these environments (Sánchez Jiménez; Gómez Carmona; Moral Moral, 2024). By contrast, Generation Z grew up immersed in digital ecosystems that privilege constant connectivity and highly personalised media flows, a context that favoured the emergence of more dynamic, short-form and visually driven platforms such as TikTok (Ruiz Mónica *et al.*, 2025). Together, these developments have positioned digital platforms as intermediaries that structure and channel information, goods and services across contemporary society (Szalkowski; Mikalef, 2023).

A core driver of platform expansion is the network effect: platforms gain value as the number of users and interactions increases, reinforcing market concentration and making it difficult for smaller competitors to reach critical mass (Aamir *et al.*, 2024). Because users tend to cluster where their social networks already reside, only a limited number of platforms achieve stable dominance (Qiu; Tang; Whinston, 2015). To maintain this dominance, platforms must continually innovate and adapt to evolving user expectations, a dynamic that has driven the migration from Facebook to more visually engaging and personalised networks such as Instagram and TikTok (Zutshi; Grilo, 2019; Dekker; Baumgartner; Sumter, 2025). Through algorithmic curation, these platforms deliver increasingly refined content recommendations aligned with users’ interests, enhancing engagement while also intensifying prolonged and sometimes excessive screen time (Liu *et al.*, 2024; Dekker; Baumgartner; Sumter, 2025).

Despite these advances, differences in algorithmic logic remain central to the distinctiveness of each platform.

Instagram's personalisation relies heavily on user-driven signals—interaction patterns, viewing behaviour, and sharing tendencies—while still incorporating non-transparent data-processing mechanisms that shape feed composition even when personalisation is deactivated (Ying *et al.*, 2025). TikTok represents a more radical algorithmic architecture: its For You page serves as the primary entry point to the platform, delivering content through a highly optimised recommendation system that integrates engagement metrics, video features and device settings to anticipate user preferences (Sun *et al.*, 2024; Zhang; Wang; Ariffin, 2024; TikTok, 2020). As a result, social functions such as following or commenting play a secondary role compared to algorithmic personalisation.

Ultimately, social media usage is not driven solely by conscious individual choices but emerges from continuous interactions among users, communities, and opaque algorithmic systems. Although these processes raise concerns about autonomy, transparency, and informed choice, users generally perceive personalisation as relevant and convenient, reinforcing the legitimacy of segmentation and recommendation practices (Eg; Tønnesen; Tennfjord, 2023). In this evolving landscape, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become dominant cultural and economic infrastructures, shaping how individuals access information, construct identities, and engage with digital content.

2.2 TRENDS IN DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Digital platforms have become central to e-commerce, communication, and social interaction, functioning as multilateral systems where personal data, content, and user engagement drive both social influence and

economic outcomes (Ha *et al.*, 2023; Feld, 2019; Zhao; Zhang; Lee, 2021). Instagram remains one of the most active and rapidly evolving platforms, with 42% of users checking their feeds multiple times per day, particularly adolescents and young adults under 50 (Kelm; Ibrahim, 2023). The platform supports a variety of content formats, including Stories, photos, and videos, catering to both social communication and content consumption. TikTok, by contrast, emphasises short-form video delivered through algorithmically personalised feeds that prioritise engagement metrics over traditional social networking features (Sun *et al.*, 2024; Zhang; Wang; Ariffin, 2024).

Content on these platforms can be broadly categorised as either consumption, involving the viewing and interpretation of information, or creation, encompassing original visual or textual outputs (Lu; Xie; Chen, 2022; Hylland *et al.*, 2024). Content creators, defined as individuals who gather large followings and influence audience behaviour through authentic and engaging material (Engel *et al.*, 2023), play a key role in shaping trends, perceptions, and digital interactions. While user-generated content (UGC) is often motivated by social recognition, self-expression, or learning (Dekker; Baumgartner; Sumter, 2025), sponsored content integrates commercial messages into these interactions, requiring careful management of trust to maintain credibility (Boerman; Van Reijmersdal; Neijens, 2014; Stubb; Colliander, 2019).

Short-form video formats, ranging from 15 to 60 seconds, have emerged as particularly effective, offering immediate gratification while requiring minimal cognitive effort. These formats serve both hedonic purposes—providing entertainment, relaxation, and emotional regulation—and utilitarian functions, such as facilitating decision-making through recommendations and product discovery (Nam; Jung, 2021; Grover; Kar, 2018). The combination of personalised recommendation systems and visually rich content contributes to

immersive user experiences, which can enhance engagement, loyalty, and affective connection to brands, but also reinforce excessive usage and dependence (Dekker; Baumgartner; Sumter, 2025; Xu *et al.*, 2024; Çimke; Gürkan, 2023).

Social dynamics, including peer influence and e-WOM, remain central to platform trends. Users rely on reviews, ratings, and feedback from both friends and content creators to assess credibility and make decisions (Ho; Dempsey, 2010; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Highly visible, balanced, and authentic feedback is more persuasive, while overtly sponsored content can trigger skepticism and resistance (Hung; Chang; Chen, 2023; Boerman; Van Reijmersdal; Neijens, 2012). Viral marketing strategies leverage these dynamics, enabling brands to expand reach without direct cost while reinforcing user engagement and trust (Shao; Jing, 2022).

Overall, contemporary digital platforms operate at the intersection of algorithmic optimisation, user behaviour, and social influence. Understanding how these elements interact is crucial for analysing trends, engagement patterns, and the shaping of consumption behaviours, providing the foundation for examining more platform-specific dynamics in the following sections.

2.3 CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR, ENGAGEMENT, AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Social media platforms have transformed the consumer from a passive recipient of information into an active participant in a dynamic, interactive environment (Xu *et al.*, 2024; Miah *et al.*, 2022). Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram mediate not only product discovery but also evaluation, social validation, and post-purchase interaction, shaping the entire consumer journey (Li, 2025; Aziz; Othman; Murad, 2023). Consumer behaviour in this context integrates cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions, influenced by social norms, peer interactions, and platform-specific cues (Melnyk; Carrillat; Melnyk, 2021; Hanaysha, 2022).

Impulse buying, for instance, is reinforced by emotional states, perceived self-control, and the immediacy enabled by digital interfaces (Parmar; Mann; Ghuman, 2020; Sofi; Najar, 2018).

Engagement has emerged as a central concept linking platform use and consumer outcomes. Defined as “a consumer’s positively valenced cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity toward a brand” (Hollebeek; Glynn; Brodie, 2014; Obilo; Chefor; Saleh, 2020), engagement manifests in attention, emotional investment, and behavioural actions such as commenting, sharing, or advocating. High engagement not only strengthens the consumer–brand relationship but also amplifies loyalty, word-of-mouth, and long-term commitment (Santos *et al.*, 2022; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). Platform algorithms often prioritise highly engaging content, which both reflects and reinforces users’ involvement, further intensifying relational and emotional bonds (Santos *et al.*, 2022; Pathak; Kaushik, 2024).

User-generated content (UGC) and influencer-led sponsored content are key drivers of this engagement. UGC, including reviews, ratings, and personal narratives, shapes perceptions of credibility, trust, and product value, particularly when perceived as authentic and balanced (Müller; Christandl, 2019). Content creators exert significant influence through personalised, interactive, and relatable content, enhancing trust and loyalty toward both the creator and the brand (Engel *et al.*, 2023; Stubb; Colliander, 2019; Evans *et al.*, 2017). Sponsored content can further guide behaviour, but its effectiveness depends on careful transparency: overt sponsorship disclosures may trigger skepticism and resistance, while undisclosed promotions risk undermining credibility (Boerman; Van Reijmersdal; Neijens, 2012, 2014; Kang; Kim, 2023).

The interplay of engagement, trust, and perceived value is central to understanding purchase intention in social media contexts. Consumers weigh cognitive and emotional inputs alongside social influences, with trust acting as a mediator between brand affinity

and actual purchase behaviour (Nidal; Albaity, 2024; Zhou *et al.*, 2022; Aziz; Othman; Murad, 2023). Emotional experiences, aesthetic content quality, and algorithmically personalised feeds contribute to immersive consumption experiences, triggering flow states that can enhance attention, pleasure, and impulsive buying tendencies (Bazi; Filieri; Gorton, 2023; Obadã, 2013; Huang *et al.*, 2024).

Overall, this integrated perspective highlights the centrality of social media as a hybrid environment, blending hedonic and utilitarian functions, where engagement, content authenticity, and social influence converge to shape consumer attitudes and behaviours. By combining insights on platform-specific mechanisms, UGC, sponsored content, and engagement dynamics, the framework provides a foundation for examining how TikTok and Instagram uniquely influence consumer decision-making and the strategic implications for brands operating in these digital ecosystems.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, abductive, and ethnographically oriented approach, well-suited for exploring participants' behaviours and underlying motivations in depth. Ethnography enables the understanding of cultural phenomena from participants' perspectives through observation, immersion, and interpretation of lived experiences (Jayathilaka, 2021; Chapeau; Join-Lambert, 2023). Specifically, an "ethnography of the digital everyday" was adopted, focusing on the ritualistic use of TikTok and Instagram. This approach was chosen to move beyond self-reported data and capture the nuanced, often subconscious, interactions that define social media engagement. The research unfolded over six months, with interviews and recordings conducted in natural, comfortable settings and subsequently transcribed and analysed. To ensure the robustness of the qualitative findings despite a small sample size, a purposive and

criterion-based sampling strategy was employed. Participants were selected based on three specific criteria: (1) high frequency of social media use (minimum 3 hours daily); (2) active interaction with content creators; and (3) a history of social media-influenced purchases within the last six months. This targeted selection ensures that the sample represents "information-rich cases", allowing for a deep exploration of the research problem rather than statistical generalization. The sampling process reached theoretical saturation when additional interviews no longer yielded new insights into the engagement mechanisms of TikTok and Instagram.

The researcher's active engagement in the field facilitated an authentic understanding of social reality, allowing the interpretation of behavioural patterns and meanings. This approach aligns with Grounded Theory principles, connecting empirical data directly to theoretical development (Wagner; Lukassen; Mahlendorf, 2010). Abductive reasoning guided the study, moving iteratively between observations and theoretical insights to generate new interpretations and uncover emerging concepts relevant to social media, engagement, and consumer behaviour (Jayathilaka, 2021). To safeguard the study against potential bias and address the reviewer's concern regarding "opinion-based analysis," a rigorous reflexive protocol was maintained. The study considered the "ethnographic self," as the researcher, professionally embedded in digital and influencer marketing, occupied multiple roles within participants' social circles. This positioning provided privileged access to practices and dynamics while maintaining ethical awareness throughout observation and interaction. This "insider status" was utilized as an analytical tool, enabling the decoding of platform-specific jargon and subtle behavioral cues that an external observer might overlook. Furthermore, the analysis was triangulated through the use of Iramuteq software, providing a systematic lexical and similarity analysis that grounds the qualitative interpretations in empirical textual evidence (Simon; Cambefort, 2025).

4 DATA COLLECTION

4.1 POPULATION

The study focused on Millennials (born 1980–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012), cohorts characterised by high technological literacy and intensive social media use (Ong *et al.*, 2024). In Portugal, Millennials and Generation Z represent roughly 25% and 15% of the population, respectively. Social media plays a critical role in product discovery, with 89% of Gen Z using Instagram, 84% using YouTube, and 82% using TikTok globally (Schaefer, 2025). In Portugal, active social media users total 7.49 million, with Instagram accounting for 6 million users and TikTok 3.68 million (Ribeiro, 2025).

4.2 SAMPLE CHARACTERISATION

Fifteen participants were observed and interviewed over six months, combining participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. The sample was relatively balanced in gender (8 women, 7 men) and age, primarily young adults (53% aged 25–29, 26% aged 22–24, 20% aged 30–35). Occupationally, 46% were employed, with students and self-employed participants representing 26% each. Educational attainment was high, with 46% holding bachelor’s degrees and 33% holding master’s degrees or higher. Platform usage was predominantly multi-platform, with 73% using both Instagram and TikTok.

Table 1 - Sample gender

Category	Variable	Absolute Frequency
Gender	Female	8
Gender	Male	7
Age	22–24	4
Age	25–29	8
Age	30–35	3
Occupation	Student	4
Occupation	Employee	7
Occupation	Self-employed	4
Education Level	Secondary education (12th grade)	3
Education Level	Bachelor’s degree	7
Education Level	Master’s degree or higher	5
Social Media Use	Instagram and TikTok	11
Social Media Use	Instagram only (no TikTok)	4

Source: the authors.

4.3 INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, combining flexibility with a structured guide to explore participants’ perspectives in depth (Junnier, 2024). Fifteen interviews were conducted in private settings, each lasting between 15 and 30 minutes and recorded with consent. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to articulate their views

freely, with probing questions uncovering motivations behind behaviours. Data saturation was achieved when no new insights emerged (Ahmed, 2025).

Interview data were transcribed and analysed using IRaMuTeQ, identifying recurrent lexical patterns and keywords. A complementary Visual Analysis captured participants' perceptions of social media usage and its influence on consumption behaviours. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and text analysis enhanced the robustness and reliability of findings. Ethical standards were strictly maintained, with informed consent, anonymity, and secure data handling.

4.4 VISUAL ANALYSIS

Visual methods complemented interviews and observations, documenting behaviours and contextual elements that support interpretation. Mobile ethnography enabled the capture of images or videos of everyday situations, offering a richer understanding of participants' actions (Muskat; Muskat; Zehrer, 2017). Knowledge in this process is socially constructed, emerging collaboratively through interactions between researcher and participants (Kulmala *et al.*, 2024; Lemmetty; Vanhanen, 2025).

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 EXPLORATORY QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The IRaMuTeQ analysis comprised 15 Textual Content Units (TCUs) across 269 Text Segments (TS), of which 203 (75.46%) were successfully classified, indicating a sufficiently balanced corpus for robust analysis. The corpus contained 10,091 lexical occurrences, including 1,625 distinct words and 865 hapax, demonstrating a rich and diverse vocabulary among participants, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 - Description of the interview corpus

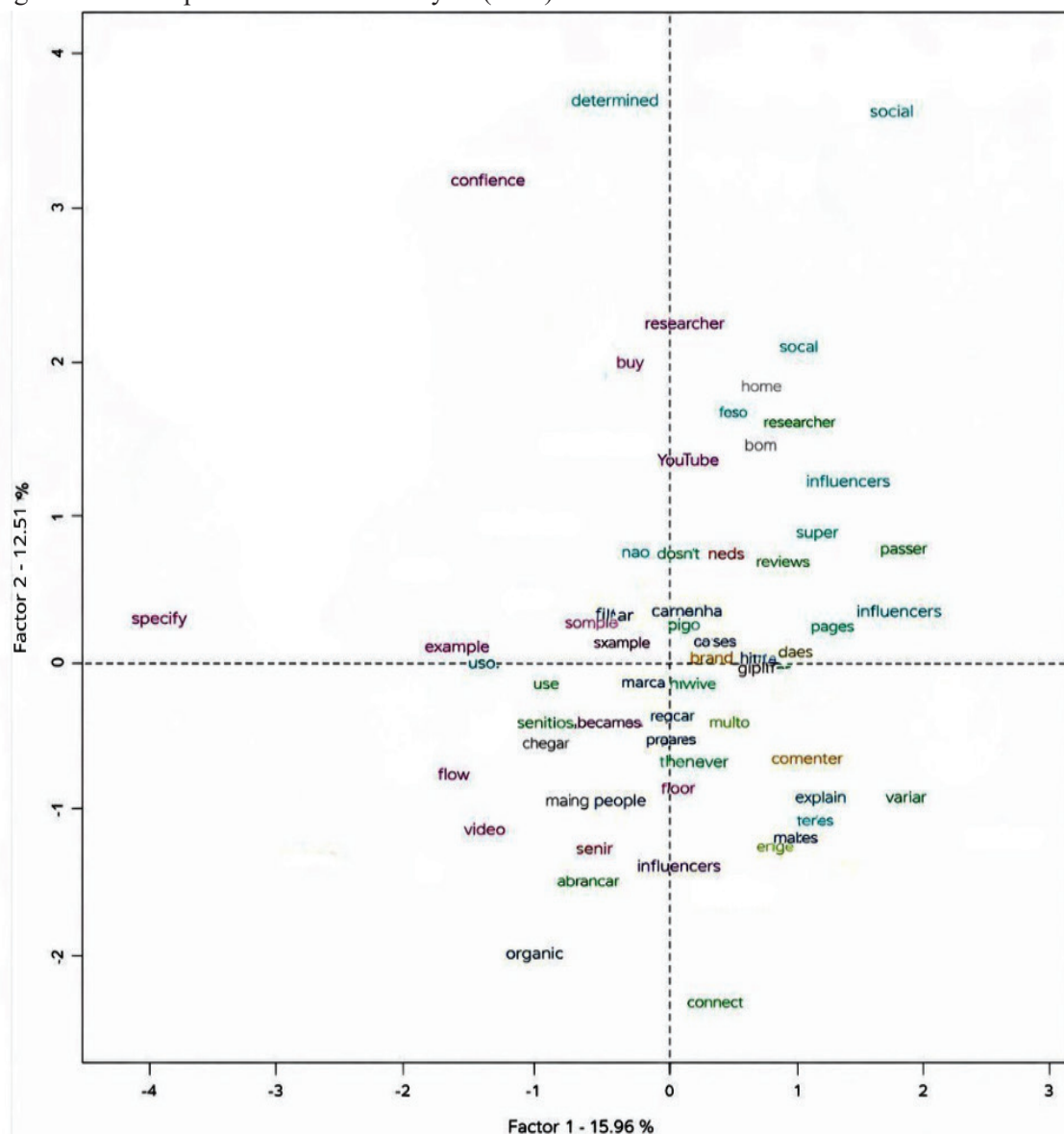
Metric	Value
Number of texts	15
Number of ST	269
Number of forms	1625
Number of occurrences	10091
Number of lemmas	1142
Number of active forms	1028
Number of supplementary forms	106
Active forms with frequency ≥ 3	324
Average forms per segment	37.513011
Number of classes	6
Segments classified	203 out of 269 (75.46%)

Source: the authors.

To uncover underlying associations, a Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed, as presented in *Figure 1*. The horizontal axis (Factor 1) explained 15.96% of the variance, while the vertical axis (Factor 2) accounted for 12.31%. Terms near the centre indicate frequent co-occurrence, reflecting shared semantic patterns, whereas words further from the centre reveal more idiosyncratic or participant-specific discourses.

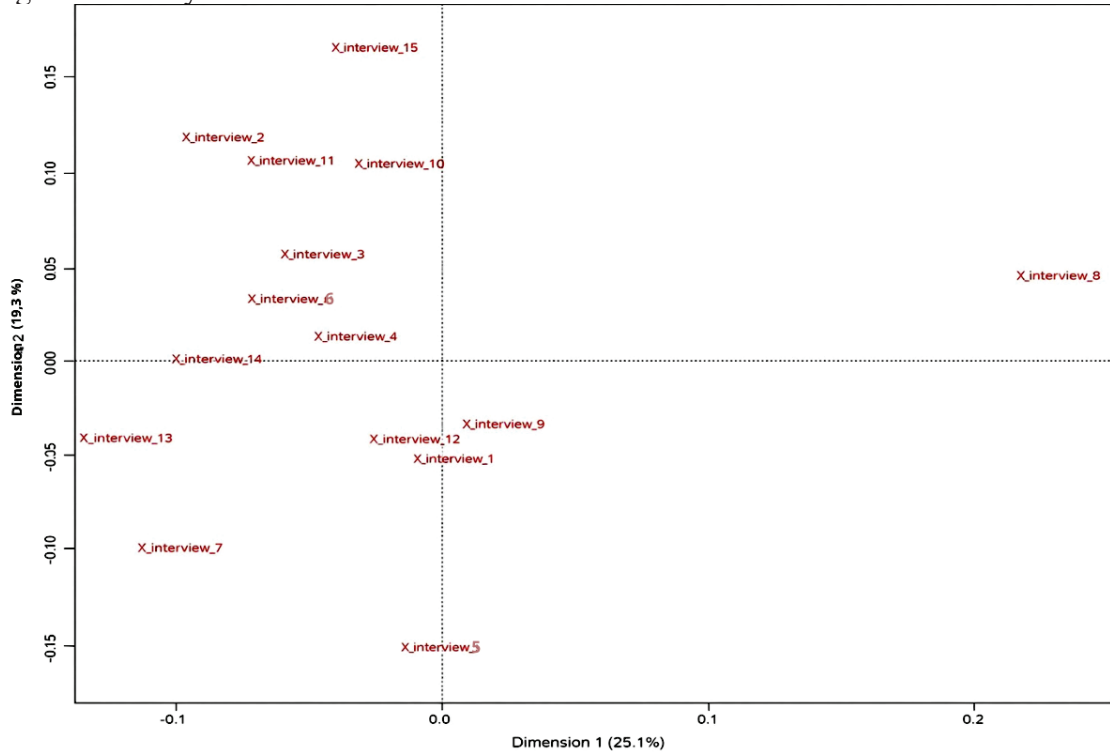
The left-hand side of Factor 1 highlights organic, impulsive consumption behaviours, while the right-hand side emphasises planned actions, social media engagement, trust, and social sharing. Clusters of participants reflect shared perspectives: Participants 1, 9, and 12 cluster centrally, indicating homogeneity in discourse, whereas Participants 8 and 15 occupy more peripheral positions, representing distinct or critical viewpoints. Participant 8, for instance, expressed a preference for Instagram over TikTok, a controlled yet paradoxically "addictive" usage style, and more restrained consumption behaviour. Participant 15 emphasised social media's role in digital identity construction but reported minimal influence on purchasing. These divergent positions enrich the overall understanding of user behaviour and highlight the heterogeneity within the sample, as presented in *Figure 2*.

Figure 1 - Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA)



Source: the authors.

Figure 2 - Analysis of the distribution of the interviews



Source: the authors.

The CFA identified six thematic clusters, each capturing distinct narratives around social media use, content engagement, and purchase behaviour:

Class 6 – Trust and Credibility (15.8%) reflects the importance of authenticity in influencer content. Participants consistently valued organic posts over sponsored content, yet trust could be maintained when creators’ messaging aligned with their established identity. Participant 1 explained, “Brands gain more when creators communicate in their own way, when the product introduction feels organic.” Authenticity emerged as a key driver of engagement and persuasion, with credibility mediating the effect of sponsorship on purchase decisions.

Class 5 – Deliberate Purchase Process (17.2%) highlights the role of online information in decision-making. Participants actively seek reviews, comments, and product demonstrations before purchase, especially for high-risk or costly items. Participant 6 noted, “I’m impulsive with small purchases. With bigger ones, I search, read comments, and see what others say.” This cluster underscores social media as a decision-support tool, with selective consumption patterns emerging despite increased online exposure.

Class 2 – Digital Consumption Habits and Practices (19.7%) illustrates routines and platform-specific behaviour. TikTok was widely perceived as addictive and a driver of desire, while Instagram was associated with credibility, trust, and familiarity. Daily usage was habitual and often automatic, with content shaping interests and influencing consumption. Participants’ narratives demonstrate that behavioural patterns are shaped by platform features, personal preferences, and external signals.

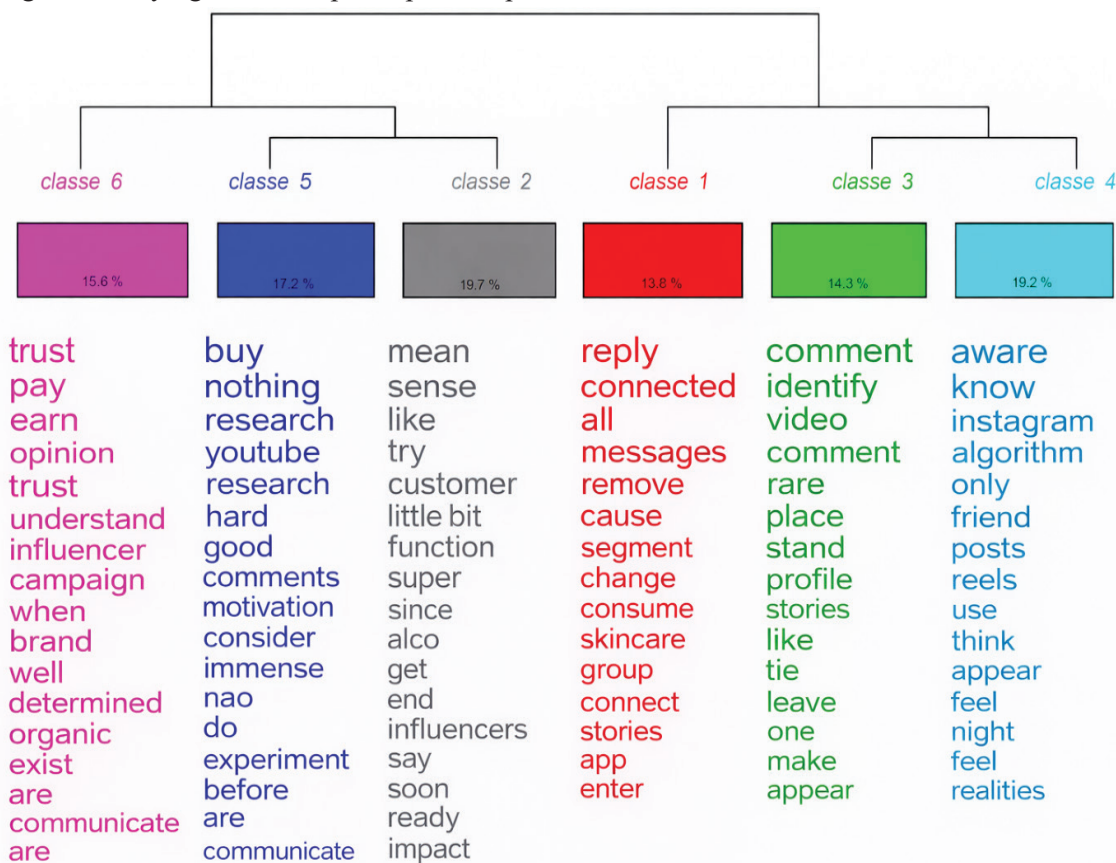
Classes 1 & 3 – Engagement (13.6% & 14.3%) capture interaction with content. Engagement occurs both individually (likes, comments) and collectively (sharing within social

networks), reinforcing social bonds and influencing consumption trends. Platform differences were evident: TikTok promoted instant, low-effort interactions, while Instagram fostered selective and deliberate engagement.

Class 4 – Awareness and Algorithm (19.2%) reflects participants' recognition of their own usage patterns and the role of personalised algorithms. While algorithms enhance convenience and gratification, users reported strategies for self-regulation, such as limiting time spent or selectively engaging with content of genuine interest. Participant 8 described, "Sometimes I just ignore it. I hit 'snooze' on the time limit and give myself five more minutes without thinking." Awareness of algorithmic influence emerges as a key factor in mediating consumption and engagement behaviours.

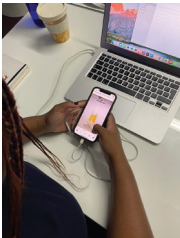
Visual data collected through mobile ethnography complemented textual insights, capturing habitual routines, platform-specific interactions, and the integration of social media into participants' social and consumption practices. These images (*board 1*) provide contextual depth, illustrating both habitual reliance on social media and its role in facilitating social interaction and consumption decisions. Together with interviews, these observations offer a holistic and nuanced view of participants' behaviours and perceptions. In *Figure 3*, it is possible to observe the distribution of the clusters and the words most frequently mentioned in each of them.

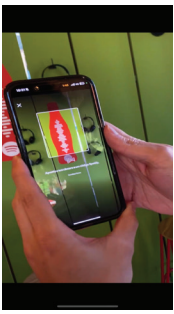
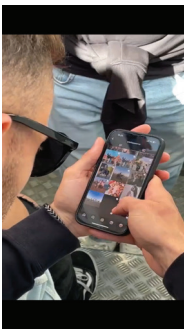
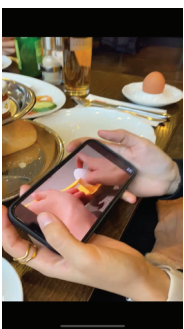
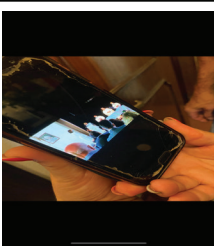
Figure 3 - Phylogram of the participants' representations of the research

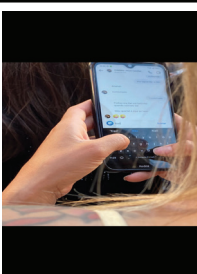


Source: the authors.

Board 1- Phylogram of the participants' representations of the research

Values	Photos associated by participants	Text associated by participants
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Leisure)		<i>"When I open the app, forget it... it's hard to stop. But I feel like I lean more towards using TikTok at night, when I clearly should already be asleep. But it feels like a reward, you know? I've been working all day, doing countless things, and in that moment I'm just switching off my brain and watching videos without having to think. I've even ended up watching entire movies on there!" (Participant_1)</i>
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Trust)		<i>"And actually, that's it... once I already had that almost built-in trust in her, it made me want to look it up and see whether I would buy it or not." (Participant_8)</i>
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Convenience)		<i>"If those positive reviews mention the points I'm still unsure about, it really helps me decide whether I want to buy it or not." (Participant_4)</i>
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Convenience)		<i>"I feel like I would buy even more products if TikTok had an integrated shop feature like Instagram does. There, you don't even need to leave the app — you can do everything right inside that space." (Participant_3)</i>
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Authenticity)		<i>"For me, it's Instagram. There I have followers who have been with me for years, it's different. (...) On TikTok it's great for growing, but I don't think it immediately creates a relationship with credibility. On Instagram, for better or worse, I've already built an identity over the years." (Participant_2)</i>

TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision <i>(Impulsiveness)</i>		<i>"I've been more influenced by TikTok, mainly when it comes to gadgets or random products. I think Instagram works as a more 'credible' shop window, whereas TikTok is much faster, more impulsive. Random little things."</i> (Participant_14)
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision <i>(Social Influence)</i>		<i>"It's not really relevant whether they're famous or not. What matters to me is seeing people close to me using it."</i> (Participant_5)
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision <i>(Social Influence)</i>		<i>"Everything — literally everything — I have for skincare, I discovered there. I know everything about Korean skincare because I watch influencers sharing their routines... I see it and I want the same. I change my habits because of what I see."</i> (Participant_10)
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision <i>(Digital Identity)</i>		<i>"On TikTok I feel like people are more real. They often show flaws, mistakes, routines, and everything feels more 'unfiltered'."</i> (Participant_7)
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision <i>(Digital Identity)</i>		<i>"I genuinely wish I liked TikTok. I see so much content there, but I honestly can't fit it into my daily concerns."</i> (Participant_15)

TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Personalization)		<i>“The algorithm is literally made for me, don't you feel that too? It's incredible and scary how well it works. I avoid thinking about it too much because otherwise I get stuck in the loop of not wanting to close the app. It feels like it reads my thoughts.”</i> (Participant_13)
TikTok vs. Instagram: Analysis of the Impact on Engagement and Purchase Decision (Emotional Connection)		<i>“Yes, because I see several people using the same product and I notice that it actually works in the videos, both on TikTok and Instagram. That pushes me towards physical stores, to buy the products because I want the same results.”</i> (Participant_9)

Source: the authors.

6 CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 DISCUSSION

This paper examined the impact of social media, specifically TikTok and Instagram, on user engagement and purchase decision-making among Portuguese Millennials and Generation Z. Using a qualitative, abductive, and ethnographically informed methodology, the study explored behaviours and meanings in natural contexts, revealing clear patterns in perceptions, routines, and consumption practices (Chapeau; Join-Lambert, 2023).

A prominent theme was participants' heightened awareness of the time they spend online. TikTok, with its immersive and reward-driven design, was consistently described as a platform where users lose track of time, often eliciting feelings of guilt or frustration. Instagram, while algorithmically stimulating, was perceived as more controllable and purposeful, serving primarily as a platform for social connection and daily updates (Nam; Jung, 2021; Miedzobrodzka; Du; Van Koningsbruggen, 2024). Participants frequently employed self-regulation strategies,

such as app timers, screen-time reminders, or temporary uninstallation of TikTok, highlighting a paradoxical relationship: users are simultaneously attracted to personalised, highly engaging content while resisting its potential for digital dependence. This tension reflects the complex interplay between compulsive engagement and conscious moderation.

The study further confirms that TikTok and Instagram exert differentiated influences on consumption. TikTok is associated with impulsive, emotionally driven purchases, particularly of low-cost items, facilitated by short-form, highly stimulating content and the momentum of virality (Dolega; Rowe; Branagan, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2024; Liu *et al.*, 2024). In contrast, Instagram fosters more deliberate and rationalised consumption. Users rely heavily on trust in creators, alignment with personal identity, and aesthetic congruence to guide their decisions (Zhou *et al.*, 2022). Across both platforms, credibility, consistency, and the coherence of the creator's narrative emerged as central to sustaining engagement and converting it into purchase intention (Chan *et al.*, 2018; Stubb; Colliander, 2019).

Although impulsive tendencies were evident, participants consistently sought external validation before purchasing. YouTube and TikTok reviews, alongside comment sections, served as critical sources of information, revealing an interplay between emotional triggers and rational verification. This illustrates how digital impulsivity coexists with a demand for informational reassurance, reflecting a dual-route processing of content (K S; Massand, 2025). Social media is deeply embedded in participants' daily routines, influencing both consumption and broader social and cultural practices. Many reported acting as "silent users" on Instagram due to social visibility, whereas TikTok was perceived as a freer space for interaction. This highlights the dual role of these platforms as arenas for socialisation, identity construction, and behavioural experimentation (Liao; Chen, 2024).

The findings also indicate that users navigate between central and peripheral processing routes: Instagram facilitates rational evaluation and verification, while TikTok primarily triggers emotional engagement and spontaneous action. Instagram emerged as a universally adopted platform, whereas TikTok, though not universally used, was consistently described by its users as highly addictive and influential in shaping consumption patterns, driven by its infinite scroll and hyper-personalised feed (Çimke; Gürkan, 2023).

In sum, this study demonstrates that TikTok and Instagram do more than mediate content consumption; they actively transform behavioural patterns (Li, 2025; Aziz; Othman; Murad, 2023). Beyond entertainment, these platforms function as spaces for identity construction, social interaction, and the constant negotiation between rational deliberation and emotionally driven impulsivity (Obilo; Chefor; Saleh, 2020). This underscores the need for brands and marketers to consider both the affective and cognitive pathways through which social media shapes consumer behaviour, as well as the ethical implications of algorithm-driven engagement (Grover; Kar, 2018).

6.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study advances the understanding of digital consumer behaviour by clarifying how social media platforms differentially shape engagement and purchase decisions among Portuguese Millennials and Generation Z. It demonstrates that TikTok and Instagram exert distinct influences: TikTok fosters impulsive, emotion-driven consumption, whereas Instagram encourages deliberate, trust-based, and identity-aligned purchasing. This distinction refines existing social media and consumer behaviour literature by moving beyond a monolithic perspective of online platforms, highlighting how algorithmic structures, content formats, and user practices mediate consumption (Liu *et al.*, 2024; Dolega; Rowe; Branagan, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2024).

The findings contribute to dual-process models of decision-making by showing the simultaneous operation of central (rational evaluation, external validation through reviews) and peripheral (emotional triggers, content characteristics) processing routes (K S; Massand, 2025). Algorithmic personalisation and platform-specific dynamics shape how users navigate between rational deliberation and affective impulses, integrating emotional and cognitive dimensions of digital consumption.

Authenticity and creator credibility emerge as critical determinants of trust. The study shows that sponsored content does not inherently undermine credibility; rather, trust is preserved when messaging aligns with the creator's established narrative and personal values (Chan *et al.*, 2018; Stubb; Colliander, 2019). This refines theoretical understandings of persuasion in online contexts and highlights the nuanced interplay between content, creator identity, and audience reception.

Additionally, the research situates social media as a space for identity construction, habitual engagement, and social interaction (Liao; Chen, 2024). Participants' routines, selective engagement, and self-regulation strategies illustrate active negotiation between

platform influence and personal agency, contributing to consumer culture theory in digital environments.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of abductive, ethnographically informed approaches combined with semi-structured interviews, visual analysis, and computational text analysis (IRaMuTeQ) in uncovering nuanced behavioural and cognitive patterns (Chapeau; Join-Lambert, 2023; Jayathilaka, 2021). This integrative approach strengthens the theoretical interpretation of social media's influence on consumer behaviour. Therefore, this dissertation offers a platform-specific framework for understanding digital consumption, showing how TikTok and Instagram shape not only purchase decisions but also engagement, self-regulation, and identity practices, providing a comprehensive foundation for future research on digital consumer behaviour.

6.3 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study offers actionable insights for brands, agencies, and content creators on Instagram and TikTok. It demonstrates that social media is not just a communication channel but a key driver of consumer behaviour and engagement (Szalkowski; Mikalef, 2023; Li, 2025). Trust, credibility, and authenticity in content creators, alongside platform-specific algorithms, strongly shape purchase decisions and interaction patterns (Stubb; Colliander, 2019; Agnihotri, 2020; Boerman, 2020). The findings reveal distinct platform effects: TikTok's short-form, algorithm-driven content promotes impulsive, emotionally driven consumption, whereas Instagram fosters deliberate, trust-based decision-making aligned with personal identity (Miedzobrodzka; Du; Van Koningsbruggen, 2024; Dekker *et al.*, 2025). Marketing strategies should therefore be tailored to

each platform, optimising content style, timing, and engagement tactics to match user behaviour and expectations (Li *et al.*, 2024; Agnihotri, 2020).

Careful selection of influencers whose values, narrative, and style align with the brand enhances credibility and campaign impact (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Understanding habitual use and self-regulation also allows marketers to balance engagement with consumer trust. Ultimately, this research highlights how social media shapes consumption, routines, and social interactions, providing a foundation for culturally and digitally informed marketing strategies.

6.4 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study offers valuable insights into the influence of Instagram and TikTok on engagement and consumer behaviour, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size and composition constrain the generalisability of the findings. Although sufficient for identifying patterns, the participants were relatively few in number and socially homogeneous, limiting representativeness across the wider Portuguese population.

Second, the qualitative, ethnographically informed methodology, while enabling in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, introduces potential subjectivity. Interpretations may be shaped by the researcher's proximity to participants, relational dynamics, or contextual nuances of the sample. Participants' descriptions reflect personal experiences and socioeconomic contexts that may not fully capture broader behavioural realities.

Third, the dynamic nature of digital ecosystems, platform updates, algorithm changes, and evolving user habits means consumption patterns are continually shifting, which may reduce the long-term stability of the conclusions.

Future research should replicate this study with larger, more diverse samples, encompassing varied sociodemographic profiles, professions, income levels, and nationalities, and could employ quantitative surveys to measure behaviour intensity and frequency. Further investigation into the emotional mechanisms of social media use, the dynamics of e-WOM, and longitudinal or comparative studies would enhance understanding of how platform-specific features influence consumption, engagement, and identity formation over time.

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