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The role of digital influencers in brand recommendation: Examining their impact on engagement, expected value and purchase intention[1]

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Abstract

Despite the growing interest in digital influencers as a brand communication tool in recent years, much remains to be explored to understand how they can build a bond with their followers that shapes their perceptions and behaviors towards the endorsed brands. This study aims to determine how effective digital influencers are in recommending brands via electronic word-of-mouth by examining whether the potential influence they have on their followers may affect brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value and intention to purchase recommended brands. The results from a sample of 280 followers show that the perceived influential power of digital influencers not only helps to generate engagement but also increases expected value and behavioral intention regarding the recommended brands. Moreover, brand engagement in self-concept raises brand expected value and both variables also affect the intention to purchase recommended brands. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the persuasive power of digital influencers, which is still limited. It can be also useful for companies when developing their own social media communication strategy.

Keywords: Digital influencers, electronic word-of-mouth, brand engagement, brand expected value, purchase intention.

1. Introduction

The active and regular use of social media and social networking sites has made these indispensable sources of information and content (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Shiau, Dwivedi, & Lai, 2018) and, thus, attractive platforms for firms on which to conduct promotional activities (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; Dwivedi, Kapoor, & Chen, 2015). Among the social media marketing activities available, firms are increasingly turning to digital influencers to endorse their brands because influencers connect the intended target audience with brands while maintaining a direct communication with their following (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2018). Furthermore, they are usually viewed as sources of valuable and believable information for people who follow them, which is a favorable condition to increase the diffusion and impact of their messages (De Veirman, Gauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). This is particularly desirable for companies which incorporate influencers in their electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

strategy as authentic online opinion leaders to recommend their brands and improve their image and value (e.g., Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), based on their belief that influencers have the power to persuade consumers to buy the endorsed brands (Childers *et al.*, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Yet, despite firms investing heavily in influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019), they still question the return of their investment and rely more on intuition and trial and error when taking decisions on social media marketing activities (Ananda, Hernández-García, & Lamberti, 2016). Thus, although there has been some recent research on brand communication through digital influencers (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), more research regarding their impact on followers is required.

Currently, the concept of digital influencer encompasses multi-platform high-profile Internet microcelebrities who accumulate a following on social media and/or blogs through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles and monetize their following by endorsing brands for a fee (i.e., paid eWOM) (Abidin, 2015, 2016; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). These non-traditional celebrities, only famous to a niche group of people (Abidin, 2016), are increasingly regarded as being more powerful than more traditional celebrities in the online context, since they are perceived as being more credible and accessible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). To date, few works have documented how this power to influence contributes to explaining the formation and development of individual attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Casaló *et al.*, 2018; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Magno, 2017). There are even doubts in the literature about the actual influence of digital influencers, in light of some evidence that greater popularity does not necessarily imply higher influence on followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Romero, Galuba, Asur, & Huberman, 2011) and also that the observable metrics of the influencers' activities tend to be imperfect proxies for influence in the online environment (e.g., Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Tufekci, 2014). Coupled with this line of questioning, practitioners recognize the difficulty of directly measuring the effectiveness of influencers on brand perception and behavioral changes (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). To address these issues, it seems interesting to examine influence using self-reported measurements rather than observable indicators and, accordingly, to determine whether the influence perceived by followers affects their perceptions and behaviors towards the endorsed brands. This is critical for firms seeking to ensure that the use of influencers as an eWOM instrument leads to a successful presence in the social media. An important research topic is precisely to determine how to make effective use of social media platforms, since it is a challenge for firms to enhance competitiveness through the influence of social media (Shiau *et al.*, 2018).

Given the academic and practical need to expand the research and the debate on the potential influence of digital influencers in their role as online opinion leaders, this study develops a model regarding the persuasive power of digital influencers on their followers. The model examines whether the influence perceived by followers can generate responses to the brands endorsed by the influencers; specifically, brand engagement in self-concept, expected brand value and the intention to purchase recommended brands. In doing so, the study aims to provide a better understanding of influencer effectiveness as a tool for brand-related eWOM as well as generally providing evidence of their perceived influential power in shaping followers' perception and behavior towards the endorsed brands, which is as yet limited. Apart from discussing the concept of digital influencers from an opinion leadership perspective, this research draws on the media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, 1989) to examine the process by which influencers and

followers can develop a dependency relationship that can affect followers' perceptions and behavior regarding the endorsed brands.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Digital influencers as digital opinion leaders

Firms increasingly recognize social media as a strategic resource to advertise their brands and products and to build strong relationships with users (Shiau *et al*., 2018). This fact has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners concerned with brand issues and social media platforms (see Alalwan *et al*., 2017, for a review). But, despite the existence of numerous studies on this topic, few of these have examined how firms can take advantage of social media for developing branding and marketing strategies (Ananda *et al*., 2016; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). As an integral part of the firm's promotional mix, social media facilitates brand-related eWOM through a variety of interactive practices and mechanisms, such as online brand communities, influencer marketing, blogging and microblogging, and company-sponsored discussion boards (e.g., Childers *et al*., 2018; Kapoor, Tamilmani, Rana, Patil, Dwivedi, & Nerur, 2018). These practices allow companies to engage in collaborative processes of product-related information sharing with potential customers and also in collaborative processes with influencers to promote their products to their following (Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, & Richard, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). As a social media marketing activity, it is expected that engaging key influencers to influence potential customers may enhance interaction with customers, add value for them, increase the impact of marketing actions on them, and generate benefits for the firm (Ananda *et al*., 2016).

The emergence of digital influencers has meant a change in the way companies and their target audiences are related through social media platforms and online social networks. As web-based technologies make it possible to approach the audience directly, the media field has opened to these outsiders who are characterized by a professional or hobbyist approach to social media production (e.g., blogging, creative activities) and promotion processes, by a structured relationship with advertisers and an interconnectedness with their audience, and also by a desire to gain social visibility and prestige (Abidin, 2015, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Pedroni, 2016; Rocamora, 2018). Digital influencers become brand ambassadors to their followers when enacting brand devotion for companies that normally compensate them through free products, the promise of 'exposure', a small sum of money (Duffy, 2016; Scott, 2015) or even attempt to capitalize on the activities of influencers by expecting them to promote their products working for free (Rocamora, 2018). Thus, digital influencers are presented as an opportunity to extend the scope of brand-related information via eWOM. Due to their authenticity, knowledge, expertise and potential power of influence, influencers are recognized as online opinion leaders (Childers *et al*., 2018; Li & Du, 2011; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), but paradoxically very few studies have been undertaken on digital influencers from an opinion leader perspective (e.g., Casaló *et al*., 2018; De Veirman *et al*., 2017; Li & Du, 2011; Magno, 2017). Even recent studies based on experimental and qualitative data challenge the assumption that greater popularity may lead to perceptions of opinion leadership and, thus, affect followers' brand attitudes and purchase behavior (De Veirman *et al*., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and observational learning theory (Bandura, 1977) clearly link to explain actual personal influence or

opinion leadership within social networks. Consistent with the two-step flow theory, opinion leaders such as digital influencers act as intermediaries of the information they seek or receive and, once they have developed and filtered it, distribute it in the form of a message to other people via WOM, thus increasing the potential influence on them (Bao & Chang, 2014; Magno, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). This process of influence occurs because opinion leaders serve as models through whom people (i.e., observers) learn and develop beliefs, attitudes and behaviors from the observed information and actions (Bandura, 1977). In accordance with this rationale, the followers would gain decisive knowledge when they use the influencers' brand recommendations as key information to make their personal judgments and/or when carrying out purchasing-decision processes.

2.2. Explaining the influential power of digital influencers through media dependency theory

The role of digital influencers as a reference to guide followers' perceptions and actions is not the only factor that explains the process of influence. The underlying pattern of need perception a follower experiences with the influencer can also generate or reinforce a connection between both actors. This connection can be described in terms of a dependency relationship. Followers' dependency on influencers arises from the need to find online sources that provide them with useful and reliable information that helps decision-making and guides personal actions (e.g., Bao & Chang, 2014; Hsu, Chuan-Chuan Lin, & Chiang, 2013). This is consistent with the premise of observational learning theory which holds that people in their role as observers use the information learned to simplify their decision-making processes (Bandura, 1977). However, besides meeting information objectives, the interaction with digital influencers also helps followers to satisfy other needs and goals such as entertainment needs (e.g., Hsiao, Lu, & Lan, 2013; Hsu, Huang, Ko, & Wang, 2014). Through stimulating and inspiring content, including opinions that arouse the follower's interest and that fit with their needs and interests (i.e., the content-user fit), influencers may increase their followers' susceptibility to being influenced (Zhang, Moe, & Schweidel, 2017).

These arguments around the dependency relationship between followers and influencers are reflected in the media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, 1989). At a micro-level of analysis, this theory suggests that the dependency will be greater when the medium or source of information provides resources that are relevant to the achievement of personal and social goals and the satisfaction of the individual's needs (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984). The intensity of the relationship between individuals and the source can predict the likelihood of a message impacting on their attitudes and behaviors (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Transferred to the area of digital influencers, the need for individuals to meet personal and social objectives or interests (e.g., to be informed about a brand in order to facilitate purchase decisions, to achieve social orientation, to be entertained and/or to have a sense of community belonging) may explain the power that influencers can exert on the follower's impressions and behaviors regarding the brands they endorse, reinforcing their role as brand-related eWOM opinion leaders. Similarly, in the case of brand communities, the more people use social media for information, social connection and entertainment, the stronger their participation in brand communities on social media platforms is, which in turn generates brand trust and loyalty (Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, & Dwivedi, 2018). In general, the studies that apply media dependency theory to the digital context show that the greater the consumer's connection with social media, the greater the likelihood that they will be involved in purchase-related activities (e.g., Hahn & Kim, 2013; Ruiz-Mafé & Sanz-Blas, 2006) and

also that distributed messages affect their behavior (e.g., Bacile, 2010; Kim, Ma, Park, & Are, 2009).

3. Model and hypotheses

Based on these theoretical foundations, a conceptual model is proposed that postulates, first, that perceived influence, which refers to the tendency to accept information from an individual, in this case, the influencer, and consider it to be true (Shen, Huang, Chu, & Liao, 2010), can predict brand engagement. In this work, brand engagement is defined as the propensity of individuals to incorporate brands as part of their self-concept (i.e., how they see themselves) (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). One would expect that users with a mental predisposition towards strong influencer dependence would tend to integrate information regarding the recommended brands to a greater extent and develop greater brand engagement, incorporating these brands into their self-concept. It is also hypothesized that the perceived influence could explain both the value expected of the recommended brands by the followers and their intent to purchase these brands. Finally, the model also examines whether there are relationships between the proposed outcomes of perceived influence (see Figure 1).
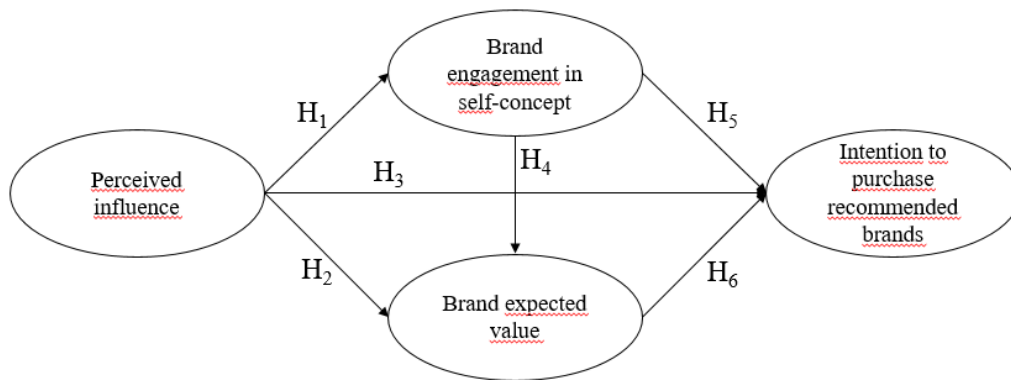

Fig. 1. Conceptual model

3.1. Effects of perceived influence

As noted above, observational learning theory indicates that individuals develop their attitudinal and behavioral consumer patterns partly as a result of their interactions and learning from external socialization agents (Keaveney & Parthasarathy, 2003; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008), such as friends, peers or mass media. This interaction, as a key aspect of the communication process, is usually associated with a social function to establish connectedness with the interlocutor (Shen & Sengupta, 2018), and can ultimately lead to greater engagement towards the message content (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Mohd-Ramly & Omar, 2017; Mollen & Wilson, 2010). Moreover, in the field of consumption, when the message comes from a reference group, the individual uses the brand associated with that message as a contribution to forming their self-concept, establishing a connection or link with it (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The relationship between the influence of external agents and the engagement that individuals develop towards a brand is of special interest in the online environment, where there is generally no bi-directional interaction as such; however, a psychological connection is established

between the follower and the digital influencer (Abidin, 2015) that allows, through a process of attribution, an identification to be generated with the message source and an internalization of the message content (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Based on these arguments, it is reasonable to think that followers who are influenced by digital opinion leaders demonstrate greater engagement towards the recommended brands, by integrating them into their self-concept and thus contributing to the construction of their personal identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Sprott *et al.*, 2009). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Followers who perceive higher influential power from digital influencers will form more brand engagement in their self-concept.

The literature indicates that the opinions, decisions and behaviors of other individuals can help in the formation of expectations (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993) and the generation of perceived value by the consumer (Al-Debei & Al-Lozi, 2014; Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Weiss, Lurie, & MacInnis, 2008), understood as a tradeoff between benefits and costs in product or brand (Zeithaml, 1988). In particular, previous evidence suggests that the influence exerted on individuals by the different sources of information has a positive and significant effect on the formation of the perceived value for a product or service (Al-Debei & Al-Lozi, 2014; Kim & Han, 2009). In a digital environment, eWOM may have an impact on the customer's overall perceived value of the product (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Therefore, one can extrapolate that the influence exerted by the digital influencers contributes to the formation of the followers' value expectations regarding the brands that they recommend. Formally stated:

H2. Followers who perceive higher influential power from digital influencers will form higher expected brand value.

Lastly, previous works show that the influence of members in social networks and from other external sources has a significant impact on consumer behavior (e.g., Bao & Chang, 2014; Kim & Han, 2009). In accordance with the principles of observational learning, the purchasing decision-making processes benefit from those opinions of influential individuals spread through eWOM, which are perceived as quality content and enjoy greater credibility, even generating purchase intention (Cosenza, Solomon, & Kwon, 2014; Magno, 2017; Wang & Lin, 2011; Wang & Yu, 2017). In fact, several studies have corroborated the influence of opinion leaders regarding use or purchase intention (e.g., Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014; Wu & Lee, 2012). Consistent with these arguments, it can be said that the greater the persuasive power of the digital influencer (i.e., being perceived as a source of consistent information), the greater the individual's intention of buying the recommended brands. Formally stated:

H3. Followers who perceive higher influential power from digital influencers will have a greater intention to purchase the recommended brands.

3.2. Consequences of brand engagement in self-concept

In the digital environment, the interaction and dependency relationship established with the opinion leaders online triggers a process of value co-creation (del Águila-Obra, Padilla-Meléndez, & Serarols-Tarres, 2017) through which the consumer will develop brand engagement, which will, in turn, contribute to the development of their perception of potential brand value (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; France, Merrilees, & Miller, 2016; So, King, & Sparks, 2014). Therefore, when the consumer develops the psychological state of passion and immersion in a brand that characterizes engagement,

even developing a tendency to include important brands as part of their self-concept, it is expected that they will perceive greater brand value (Sprott *et al.*, 2009). Several studies have empirically confirmed the engagement-value relationship (e.g., Youssef, Johnston, AbdelHamid, Dakrory, & Seddick, 2018; France *et al.*, 2016; Hollebeek, 2013), while others postulate a contrary relationship (e.g., Gutiérrez-Cillán, Camarero-Izquierdo, & San José-Cabezudo, 2017; Leckie, Nyadzayo, & Johnson, 2018). In any case, the lack of consensus in the literature is explained by the dynamic and iterative nature of both concepts (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilic, 2011; Hobrook, 1999), and the difficult separation between customer engagement antecedents and their moderators and consequences (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). The most accepted conceptual framework in the literature postulates that if an individual is highly engaged, he/she will derive value from the focus of engagement (France *et al.*, 2016; Marbach, Lages, & Nunan, 2016; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012; Youssef *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, it is reasonable to think that, in an online environment, the followers who develop a greater engagement towards the brand, identifying with it in terms of self-concept, will increase their expectations of value towards that brand. In response to these arguments, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4. Follower brand engagement in self-concept will positively predict expected brand value.

Conversely, other authors have shown that engagement is a driving element of consumer behavior (Dwivedi, 2015; France *et al.*, 2016; Magno, 2017; So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2016), indicating that one of the consequences of brand engagement is behavioral intention (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Accordingly, several studies argue that people who are characterized by being passionate and being highly connected with a brand develop affection and loyalty to it (Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, & Verhoef, 2010; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). Thus, the emotional commitment and connection of a highly engaged individual will influence their behavioral intent towards the brand (France *et al.*, 2016). Previous studies have empirically validated the influence of brand engagement regarding concepts related to behavioral intention, such as brand usage intent (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), behavioral intention to loyalty (Dwivedi, 2015; So *et al.*, 2014), or brand loyalty (Leckie *et al.*, 2018; So *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, Sprott *et al.* (2009) conclude that higher levels of brand engagement in self-concept are associated with purchase intentions. Following this reasoning, it is proposed that the engagement towards the brand that followers develop from the expected persuasive impact of the influencers (i.e., following the recommendations provided by the digital influencers) will have an impact in terms of a greater intent to purchase that brand. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H5. Follower brand engagement in self-concept will positively predict the intention to purchase recommended brands.

3.3. The relationship between expected brand value and purchase intention

There is a broad consensus in the literature indicating that perceived value is one of the main indicators of purchase intention (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Gallarza, Gil-Saura, & Arteaga-Moreno, 2017; Leroi-Werelds, Streukens, Brady, & Swinnen, 2014). Previous research suggests that perceived value is a reliable alternative variable to the measure of consumer satisfaction as an indicator of consumer loyalty (Mencarelli & Lombart, 2017). The value-intention to purchase relationship has also been analyzed in online environments. For example, Bonsón Ponte, Carvajal-Trujillo, and Escobar-Rodríguez

(2015) demonstrated that perceived value is the main antecedent of online purchase intention showing, for the particular case of e-commerce and tourism, that the greater the perceived value to consumers of items on a travel website, the more likely their intention will be to shop on that website. Likewise, Wu, Chen, Chen, and Cheng (2014) empirically validated that when the consumers' perception of value increases, their repurchase intention increases in online environments. By extension, in the digital influencer-follower context, it is logical to think that, if the follower's expectations of value regarding a brand recommended by the influencers are high, so will be their intention to purchase that brand. In fact, when companies select digital influencers, they do so with the expectation that the chosen influencers can offer sufficient value to the brands' target audiences; this can lead them to search for, purchase and use the recommended brand's products (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Therefore, it is postulated that:

H6. Follower brand expected value will positively predict the intention to purchase the recommended brands.

4. Method

4.1. Research context and data collection

The data for this study was collected in Spain by conducting an online survey. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB Spain), the use of influencers is increasingly widespread among digital marketing professionals in Spain −60% use them in the campaigns they manage (IAB Spain, 2017). The industries in which the use of influencers in social media campaigns is more common in that country are fashion, beauty, leisure, tourism and food (BrandManic, 2018). 78% of professionals who have hired influencers declare themselves satisfied with the actions carried out with them (IAB Spain, 2018). Six out of ten users have an affinity with influencers and, most of them positively value the influencers' association with the products/brands (IAB Spain, 2017). With this scenario in mind, it can be said that Spain offers a suitable context for this study's objectives.

For the purpose of this study, the survey's participant requirements were that the respondents had to be at least 18 years of age and be active followers of digital influencers as conceptualized in this paper (i.e., Internet microcelebrities—non-traditional celebrities—who narrate their personal lives and lifestyles and endorse brand products and/or services in their blog or social media posts). Because of the lack of a sampling frame that meets these requirements, a non-probabilistic convenience sampling procedure was deemed to be the most suitable sampling technique for the data collection process (e.g., Alalwan, Dwivedi, Rana, & Simintiras, 2016; Al-Debei, Akroush, & Ashouri, 2015). Furthermore, in view of the large size and widespread nature of the population in this case, accessing the target sample by means of a probability sampling method seemed to be difficult and impractical (Alalwan *et al*., 2016; Bhattacherjee, 2012). Therefore, and consistent with previous research, examining followers' perception and behavior using convenience sampling is useful and acceptable and is also relevant for multivariate data analysis purposes (e.g., Casaló *et al*., 2018; Cosenza *et al*., 2014; Hsiao *et al*., 2013; Hsu *et al*., 2014; Magno, 2017). In fact, this sampling approach is the most popular and frequently applied method in the studies of consumer and follower behavior since testing the entire population, which is normally too large and difficult to access as stated above, or using an independent random sampling that perfectly represents the population, are almost impossible in these fields (Han, 2013; Hsu *et al*., 2013).

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed through social networks. A link was provided to the participants that allowed them to directly access the online questionnaire in a voluntary and anonymous manner, thus reducing the possible emergence of the social desirability bias. There were no incentives for participating. The questionnaire was prefaced with the definition of digital influencers and a note asking respondents to answer the questions based on their most frequently followed influencers. The aforementioned survey's participant requirements were included at the beginning of the survey using filtering questions. Failing to meet the criteria implied not continuing with the remaining parts of the online survey questions. A bias existed because the sample was self-selected and only those participants who meet the requirements answered the questionnaire. Similar to the procedure used by De Bruyn and Lilien (2008), participants were encouraged to share the questionnaire on their social networks and forward it to their contacts to create a snowball effect.

Over a four-week survey period, out of the 302 questionnaires initially received, 22 proved to be invalid. Consequently, we obtained a final sample of 280 respondents, which is similar or higher than that of other recent digital opinion leadership studies (e.g., Cosenza *et al.*, 2014; Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014; Magno, 2017; Wang & Yu, 2017). This sample size can be also considered adequate to address critical issues related to convenience sampling such as generalizability and representativeness (Alalwan *et al.*, 2016). Since it is not less than 200 and not higher than 400, a sample size of 280 is suitable and accurate to be used in testing models comprising several constructs and structural relationships (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998; Kline, 2005). Table 1 summarizes the detailed demographic profile of the respondents. Selection bias was controlled by determining sampling quotas based on gender and age. Our sample comprised users that assiduously follow influencers that recommend brands. Seven out of ten users in Spain (72%) follow an influencer through social networks, especially women (77%) and younger age groups (16-23 years of age: 92%; 24-38 years of age: 80%) (IAB Spain, 2018). As indicated in Table 1, the sample group in this study is primarily composed of women (64.64%) while 256 individuals of the total sample group (91.43%) are aged between 18 and 38 years (an average age of 23.86 years). When compared to the IAB Spain data, the sample is shown to be balanced in terms of gender and age, thus guaranteeing good representativeness of the average follower and also suitability to serve the purpose of the study. We also evaluated non-response bias by comparing early and late respondents on key variables using t-tests, as suggested by Armstrong and Overton (1977). The results indicated no statistically significant differences for any variable, which suggested that non-response bias was not a problem in this study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample

Demographics	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Female	181 (64.64)
Male	99 (35.36)
Age	
18-24	196 (70.0)
25-31	46 (16.43)
32-38	14 (5.0)
39-45	8 (2.86)
>45	16 (5.71)
Education level	
High school or less	66 (23.57)
Technical college	19 (6.79)
University	195 (69.64)

Occupation	
Student	195 (69.64)
Employee	59 (21.07)
Self-employed	15(5.36)
Unemployed/homemaker/retired	11 (3.93)

4.2. Measures

To measure the constructs specified in the proposed model, we selected appropriate multi-item scales from previous studies making some modifications to fit the current research context. Specifically, we developed a scale for measuring the perceived influence of digital influencers on followers based on Bansal and Voyer (2000) and Wang, Hsu, Huang and Chen (2015). Brand engagement in self-concept was measured through the scale adapted from Sprott *et al.* (2009) and brand expected value was assessed based on the scale proposed by Walsh, Shiu, and Hassan (2014). Finally, the scale dealing with the intention to purchase recommended brands was modified from the proposals by Cosenza *et al.* (2014) and Magno (2017). All items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).

A group of experts reviewed the initial questionnaire and provided feedback regarding the instrument's ease of comprehension, consistency and item sequence adequacy, which led to some minor modifications. To reduce the possibility of non-random errors, a preliminary draft questionnaire was administered to a test group of 20 undergraduate students in order to review the questionnaire's design and content for validity and completeness. Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire's wording to improve readability based on student feedback. As the questionnaire was directed at Spanish participants, a back-translation method was followed to ensure correspondence between the original and the translated version of the scales.

5. Results

5.1. Measurement model evaluation

Covariance-based structural equation modelling (CBSEM) technique was used for scale validation and hypotheses testing through LISREL 8.8 software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). First, we examined the reliability and validity of the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). A scale purification process suggested deleting 5 items from an original 19-item pool (see final scales in Table 2). All the model fitness indices were within recommended thresholds (χ^2=177.46, df=71, p=0.00; CFI=0.98; NNFI=0.98; RMSEA=0.073; SRMR=0.054).

Internal consistency of constructs was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) (Table 2). All the four constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 for coefficient alpha, as suggested by Nunnally (1978). Composite reliability for each construct was higher than the suggested cutoff of 0.70 (Churchill, 1979). Convergent validity was assessed by considering the standardized loading of all the constructs as well as the average variance extracted (AVE) (Table 2). All factor loadings of individual indicators on their respective constructs were positive and significant (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) and were greater than 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The AVE for each latent construct was greater than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These results suggested convergence among variables. To assess discriminant validity, we used the criterion that the AVE of each latent variable exceeded its shared variance (squared correlation) with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 3, this condition was satisfied

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for all variables. To sum up, the measurement model demonstrates adequate internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis and scale reliability

Variables and items	Completely standardized loading	t-value	Reliability
Perceived influence			
1. My perceptions often change when I receive information from the influencers that I follow.	0.80	15.09	Cronbach's alpha = 0.81 CR = 0.81 AVE = 0.59
2. I value the opinion of the influencers that I follow as if they were someone close whom I trust.	0.75	13.88	
3. The influencers that I follow suggest helpful products or brands to me.	0.75	13.73	
Brand engagement in self-concept			
1. I often feel a personal connection between the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow and myself.	0.88	18.39	Cronbach's alpha = 0.95 CR = 0.93 AVE = 0.77
2. Part of me is defined by the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow.	0.90	19.12	
3. I feel as if a have a close personal connection with the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow.	0.95	20.95	
4. There are links between the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow and how I view myself.	0.79	15.69	
Brand expected value			
1. I think that the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow have an acceptable standard of quality.	0.93	20.01	Cronbach's alpha = 0.90 CR = 0.91 AVE = 0.71
2. In my opinion, the products of the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow are well made.	0.92	19.99	
3. The brands suggested by the influencers that I follow seem attractive to me.	0.81	16.08	
4. I positively value the brands suggested by the influencers that I follow.	0.74	14.05	
Intention to purchase recommended brands			
1. I would purchase a brand based on the advice I am given by the influencers that I follow.	0.80	20.03	Cronbach's alpha = 0.92 CR = 0.92 AVE = 0.81
2. I would follow brand recommendations from the influencers that I follow.	0.84	17.55	
3. In the future, I will purchase the products of brands recommended by the influencers that I follow.	0.91	19.40	

Note: n=280

Table 3. Average variance extracted and squared correlations among constructs

	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived influence	*0.59*			
2. Brand engagement in self-concept	0.40	*0.77*		
3. Brand expected value	0.40	0.21	*0.71*	
4. Intention to purchase recommended brands	0.56	0.36	0.44	*0.81*

Notes: n=280; Diagonal elements are values of the AVE. Off-diagonal elements are values of the squared correlation coefficients between the constructs.

5.2. Common method bias

Self-reported data raises concerns about the potential effects of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon, & Podsakoff, 2003). To avoid the potential for this bias a priori, we carefully designed the questionnaire and appropriately ordered the

questions (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). As indicated above, we ensured the anonymity of participants to reduce socially desirable responding.

We tested for common method bias a posteriori by applying the single common method factor approach (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). In this test, all manifest variables are explained through a single-factor model which is compared via a chi-square difference test to the multi-factor measurement model actually used in this study. The single-factor solution indicated a significantly poorer fit with the data (1346.1 $\Delta\chi^2$ increase with additional 6 df, p<0.001; CFI=0.84; NNFI=0.81; RMSEA=0.26). Furthermore, the extent of common method bias was also assessed by showing that extremely high correlations between constructs (r>0.9) do not exist (highest correlation is r=0.75) (Pavlou, Liang, & Xue, 2007). Consequently, it can be concluded that common method bias is not a major concern in this study.

5.3. Hypothesis testing

The hypothesized effects were estimated using structural equation analysis. The goodness-of-fit statistics suggested that the model fit was satisfactory (χ^2=175.44, df=71, p=0.00; CFI=0.98; NNFI=0.98; RMSEA=0.073; SRMR=0.054). Figure 2 gives the results of the hypothesis test, path coefficients, and R^2. Although the model was parsimonious, it explained a substantial portion of the variance of endogenous variables, specifically, 39%, 41%, and 68% of the variance in brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value and intention to purchase recommended brands, respectively. The results showed that path coefficients were statistically significant and in the direction predicted, providing solid support for the proposed model. Accordingly, the relationship between perceived influence and brand engagement in self-concept was positive and highly significant (γ=0.63, p<0.001). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, the results suggested that perceived influence was positively related to brand expected value (γ=0.57, p<0.001). Empirical evidence also validated Hypothesis 3, which concerned the relationship between perceived influence and intention to purchase recommended brands (γ=0.53, p<0.001). The scant difference between these three path coefficients (γ=0.63 vs γ=0.57 vs γ=0.53) indicated that digital influencers exert a similar positive influence on followers' brand perceptions in terms of expected value and brand engagement and on their intentions to purchase recommended brands. Brand engagement was also found to have significant positive association with brand expected value (β=0.11, p<0.1). Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Finally, both brand engagement (β=0.16, p<0.01) and brand expected value (β=0.25, p<0.001) had positive influences on intention to purchase recommended brands, in support of Hypotheses 5 and 6.
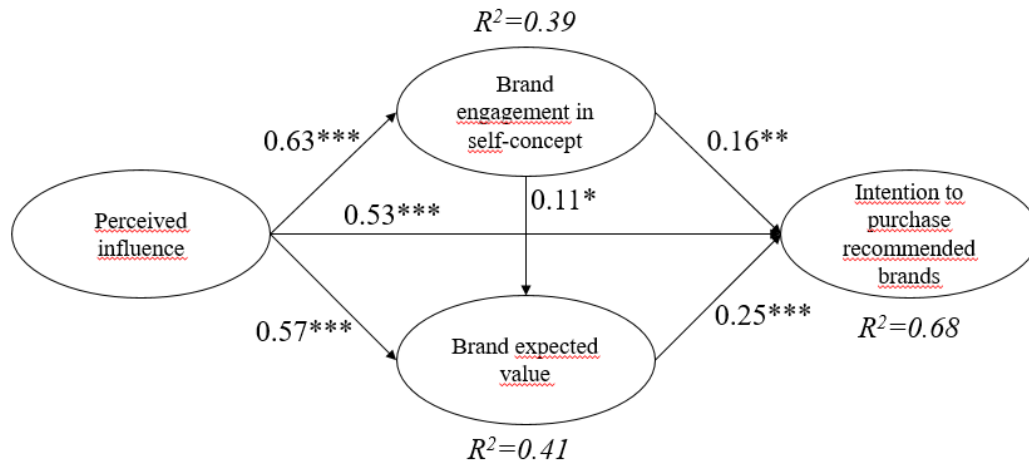
Fig. 2. Hypothesis testing results

6. Discussion and implications

Despite the growing interest in social media for marketing purposes in recent years, social media marketing studies are still in an initial stage of investigation (Ananda *et al.*, 2016; Kapoor *et al.*, 2018). In particular, while existing studies on digital influencers claim that they are a valuable channel of brand-related eWOM communication for companies (Childers *et al.*, 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017), there is a need for research using valid and reliable results related to consumer's perception and behavior toward social media marketing activities (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, the effect of the potential power of influencers on followers' brand behavior has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. This is a critical issue as practitioners still lack a solid understanding of how influencer marketing should be managed and measured, and they basically focus on monitoring if influencer's followers share and amplify brand posts in order to measure success (Childers *et al.*, 2018). The present research develops a model for understanding the impact of digital influencers on followers' brand outcomes. The study shows that the perceived influence on followers of digital influencers, brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value and purchase intention are interrelated, thus supporting the proposed conceptual framework.

In particular, perceived influence leads to brand engagement in self-concept (H1); this finding adds evidence to previous research that suggests that followers develop engagement with influencers by co-constructing personal and intimate interactions (e.g., Abidin, 2015). It is shown that the influential power exerted by interacting not only generates engagement with the influencers, but also with the endorsed brands. Likewise, the influential power of digital influencers contributes to increasing followers' expected value of recommended brands (H2). This result is in line with the prior study by Gruen *et al.* (2006) which focused on customer-to-customer online know-how exchange that demonstrated that eWOM may have an impact on the consumer's overall perceived value of the product. Previous studies on online communication environments have analyzed variables related with the concept of perceived value. For example, Lee and Watkins (2016) demonstrated that vloggers that act as brand ambassadors can elicit positive

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outcomes for luxury brands including brand value. Moreover, some studies have delved into the process of value co-creation in brand communities on social media (Kamboj *et al*., 2018; Okazaki, Díaz-Martín, Rozano, & Menéndez-Benito, 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies has examined the formation of value expectations through the influential power of digital influencers. The current study confirms the positive and significant relationship between perceived influence and brand expected value. This finding is an advance in the literature on digital influencers.

This study also contributes to this research area as it demonstrates that perceived influence affects the intention to purchase recommended brands (H3). This result is in line with recent research findings of Casaló *et al*. (2018), Lou and Yuan (2018) and Sokolova and Kefi (2019). Further, this paper found that brand engagement increases brand expected value (H4). This result is consistent with the most accepted conceptual framework in the literature that validates the positive relationship between engagement and perceived value (e.g., France *et al*., 2016; Marbach *et al*., 2016; Youssef *et al*., 2018). Thus, the finding is a contribution to the existing body of literature confirming this relationship in the context of influencers. The results also indicate that both brand engagement and brand expected value lead to purchase intention (H5 & H6). The former result is consistent with prior studies that have identified engagement as a determinant of consumer behavior (e.g., Dwivedi, 2015; France *et al*., 2016). In the context of blogs, Magno (2017) found that engagement with the blog has a positive impact on the intention to consume the products suggested by the blog. Similarly, the present study confirms the effect in the case of brands endorsed by digital influencers. The significant effect of followers' expected value on their intention to purchase endorsed brands contributes to the literature that argues that there is a direct link between value and behavioral intention in online environments (e.g., Bonsón Ponte *et al*., 2015; Wu *et al*., 2014).

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the ongoing debate concerning the role of digital influencers as opinion leaders and their capacity to generate a certain degree of dependency and impact on their followers. The study is particularly helpful in shedding light on the persuasive power of digital influencers through brand-related information. Despite the growing use of influencers by brands, there has been little research on their effectiveness in changing followers' perceptions and behaviors towards the endorsed brands. This research attempts to reduce this gap by providing empirical evidence that explains the relationships between followers' perceived influence and brand-related outcomes. It also contributes to the discussion about the actual influence of influencers taking into account evidence questioning whether the number of followers and other direct indicators of popularity (e.g., profile views) do in fact automatically imply high influence (De Veirman *et al*., 2017; Romero *et al*., 2011; Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010). In particular, the study draws on followers' perceptions of influence to claim that digital influencers as microcelebrities, that is, only popular to a niche group of people, can be considered as really being influential. This assertion is not new (see, e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), however and more importantly it was found that the perception of influence may positively affect followers' brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value and intention to purchase recommended brands. In this regard, and bearing in mind the limited evidence concerning the role of influencers in followers' consumption behavior (e.g., Casaló *et al*., 2018; Magno, 2017), the findings enrich our knowledge by offering new insights into specific effects derived from perceived influence. This enables a better understanding of how the process of influence works and also allows us to assess the effectiveness of using influencers as an online communication tool.

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In essence, the results emphasize the significance of digital influencers on online branding. Specifically, when followers feel influenced by influencers, they develop an engagement with the recommended brands and generate greater expectations of value and intention to purchase. These findings imply that the influence exerted by a digital influencer is critical in developing positive cognitive and affective connections to recommended brands. Evidence for the impact of digital influencers on brand engagement extends our understanding of the ways in which engagement is facilitated through social media, contributing to the line of research which explores the effectiveness of social media communication activities in terms of their ability to create consumer engagement (see Hollebeek, Conduit, Sweeney, Soutar, Karpen, Jarvis, & Chen, 2016; Magno, 2017). Also, this research found that digital influencers have an impact on brand expected value. In other words, influencers contribute to the value-creation process enhancing appreciation of the brand's utility and value – therefore, eWOM opinion leaders do indeed create value. This is consistent with the literature that demonstrates that eWOM disseminators add value to community members through their opinion on products/brands (Bao & Chang, 2014). Our findings also suggest that digital opinion leadership influences follower brand behavioral intentions, which are also intensified by the engagement and value generated. Previous studies on the effects of influencer recommendations suggest that variables such as trust, perceived usefulness of recommendations or credibility lead to follower intention to adopt an eWOM recommendation (e.g., Cosenza *et al.*, 2014; Hsu *et al.*, 2013). Given that perceived influence, brand engagement in self-concept and brand expected value were found to generate the intention to purchase recommended brands, they can also be considered as significant determinants of intention to purchase in the context of influencer marketing and online branding research. These results confirm the importance of considering these variables in future research models in order to develop an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon in the context of the digital influencer-follower relationship.

Finally, the significant relationship between brand engagement and expected value also augments the line of research which argues that greater engagement will be associated with perceptions of greater value (Vivek *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, our findings verify that the more engaged a follower is in approaching a recommended brand, the more value can be received (see Hollebeek, 2013), thus value emerges as a consequence of online engagement (Marbach *et al.*, 2016).

6.2. Practical implications

Digital opinion leaders can be viewed as brokers that receive information from the media or marketers and subsequently spread this information to other individuals or consumers (Segev, Villar, & Fiske, 2012); this role can result in benefits or damage to brands. Given the difficulty of identifying relevant and appropriate digital influencers, and the risk of investing in advertising strategies linked to using well-known people (Choi & Rifon, 2012), it is essential for companies to know whether using influencers in digital marketing strategies is effective or not in terms of consumer response to brands.

The proposed framework aims to help companies understand the process of changing consumer perceptions and behavior patterns when digital influencers act as information brokers and recommend brands. This makes the current study especially relevant for companies interested in influencer marketing. First, this study supports the investment and incorporation of digital influencers in their brand strategies based on their positive impact on consumer reactions towards brands. Managers should consider the potential that digital influencers have to attract attention of consumers towards their brands and,

consequently, to develop more effective brand communications. By selecting this marketing tool, brands can capitalize on the social influence of digital influencers engaging them in order to increase the impact of their marketing actions on audience (Ananda *et al*., 2016), thus enhancing competitiveness of social media campaigns and the return of their investment (e.g., Shiau *et al*., 2018).

Second, this study's results highlight the ability of digital influencers to influence the behavior of followers in their role as consumers, demonstrating that the influence they exert may affect perceptions, evaluations and purchase intentions regarding the recommended brands. Therefore, this research helps managers understand how the influencers' brand prescribing power works. In this sense, as this power would increase brand engagement in self-concept, brands that pursue consumer-brand identification with a non-traditional marketing communications strategy should invest in digital influencers as an effective online communication tool. Furthermore, brands which are newly emerging or those interested in improving their awareness or reputation may benefit from influencers to increase value expectations in their target audience. Likewise, brands that aim to increase sales and market share may incorporate digital influencers in their social media strategy since its use helps increase consumer's purchase intention.

Third, this research work demonstrates that, beyond choosing influencers based solely on their number of followers, or other observable metrics (see Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, & Dwivedi, 2019), companies should additionally focus on selecting influencers who are able to generate an impact that translates into the creation of brand value and engagement so as to elicit a greater behavioral response. Accordingly, practitioners should use a mix of observable and perceptual indicators that provide a holistic view of the potential power of digital influencers. This can be very useful for companies to identify, evaluate and select particular influencers for promotion purposes. Brands can estimate the perceived influence on followers by evaluating their perceptions of brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value and intention to purchase recommended brands. This study provides measurement tools for managers to monitor the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Direct follower feedback surveys may be useful for companies to evaluate influencer's performance and "brand health". Such insights could help managers implement more effective influencer marketing campaigns or modify existing campaigns to achieve expected brand objectives.

Finally, it should also be pointed out that brands should ensure that messages transmitted through digital influencers are not limited exclusively to exerting a persuasive effect to encourage potential purchase but should also help generate brand value and engagement to reinforce this behavioral intention. Managerial relevance derives from the design of appropriate messages spread through influencers to achieve several communication objectives, that is, to inform and persuade consumers in order to enhance brand engagement and expected value and convince them to buy the endorsed brands.

6.3. Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study suffers from certain limitations that serve to indicate the direction of future research. First, we used cross-sectional data in this study, so followers' reactions over time cannot be measured, nor can we offer any definitive conclusions regarding causality. Consequently, further research using longitudinal data and cross-lagged analysis would help predict followers' behavior over time and enhance our understanding of the interrelationships between variables. Second, despite the sample profile satisfying age and gender quota requirements and that the sample size seems to be adequate for the proposed model and the analysis technique applied in the study, the use

of a convenience sampling via self-selected participation is problematic in terms of representativeness of the population and generalizability of the findings. Thus, the results and implications are limited to the case studied and caution is suggested in their extrapolation. Future studies are needed to generalize our findings, using random sampling procedures, increasing the sample size, and extending this research to other populations and countries. Third, different follower characteristics and personalities may have affected the results. In particular, since the sample in this study primarily comprised participants aged 18 to 31 years, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize these results to draw any conclusions. However, people who fall into this age group are heavy users of social networking sites such as Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Thus, the results can provide a better understanding of the effects being examined. Although not the focus of this study, these issues would be better understood by conducting further research. Fourth, while this study considers that digital influencers can be influential regardless of the digital platform/s they use to engage with their followers on (Abidin, 2015; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016), research is necessary to examine if followers react and behave differently depending on the type of social network (Casaló *et al.*, 2018). Finally, the study focuses exclusively on the effect of followers' perceived influence on certain specific perceptual and behavioral outcomes. Future research should more closely examine other constructs that could affect followers' intention to purchase recommended brands such as perceived influencer's trustworthiness (Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Magno & Cassia, 2018), attitude towards the brand (Choi & Rifon, 2012), influencer reputation (Hsu *et al.*, 2013) or the level of involvement with or interest in the endorsed product category (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Any antecedents to followers' perceived influence such as the perceived quality of the information provided by the influencers (Wang & Lin, 2011), the follower-influencer emotional attachment (Moussa & Touzani, 2017) or online flow elements (Lim, 2014) could also be examined in future studies.

7. Conclusions

The current study examines if and how the influential power of digital influencers can impact followers' behavior. A model that links followers' perceived influence, brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value and intention to purchase recommended brands is proposed based on the opinion leadership and media dependency perspectives. The empirical data supports the hypotheses, showing that followers' perceived influence is positively associated with brand engagement, brand expected value and behavioral intention. Also, brand engagement raises brand expected value and both variables predict the intention to purchase recommended brands. In summary, the study contributes to a better understanding of how followers respond to the brand information disseminated by digital influencers from a perceptual point of view. Additionally, managers are advised to use digital influencers in their social media communication strategy when they aim at generating engagement, value and intention to purchase their brands.

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