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REVIEW ARTICLE

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PURCHASE DECISION: *RELATIONSHIPS AMONG BRAND CONTENT, DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND ONLINE REVIEWS IN AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW WITH AN EVIDENCE MAP*

Izabela Neves de Melo[1], **Mariana de Azevedo Magerski**[1], **Eder Moreira de Freitas**[2*]

[1]Undergraduate Business Administration students, Universidade Paulista (UNIP), Brazil.
[2]Master in Business Administration, Universidade da Amazônia (UNAMA), Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7048-0175
***Corresponding author:** Prof. Me. Eder Moreira de Freitas (eder.freitas3@docente.unip.br), UNIP, Campinas, Brazil.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: social media expose consumers to brand content, influencer recommendations and online reviews, distinct sources whose relationship with purchase decisions depends on context. **Objective:** to analyze and compare the relationships reported in the literature between these three factors and purchase decision. **Methods:** protocol-driven integrative review (2020–2026) of 12 studies graded by design (A, B and C), with an extraction matrix and an evidence map by factor and outcome. **Results:** influencers dominate the meta-analyses and are associated with engagement and purchase intention; brand content had a larger effect on sales than on engagement; recent evidence on online reviews is scarce; observed purchase is rare. **Conclusion:** intention outcomes and qualitative Brazilian studies predominate, and findings are associative, not causal.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media have become part of the journey of information and interaction between consumers and brands. On them, the same person encounters institutional posts, influencer recommendations and reviews written by other consumers, three sources with different origins, interests and degrees of trust. In qualitative research with Instagram users, Anjos et al. (2024) found that disclosures and recommendations by third parties and advertising motivate purchase, and that feedback from other buyers, social impact, personalized strategies, price and personality make up the platform's influence.

The environment also blurs categories that were once separate. Alves and Domingues (2024) argue that participatory culture and digital prosumerism have made the boundary between advertising and everyday life diffuse, so that ordinary people who share fragments of their routine can act as communicators. Fonseca and

Lacerda (2022) show, in fashion and beauty profiles on Instagram, that influencer advertising focuses on the experience of using the product, and not on the product itself. For their part, online reviews are explained by electronic word of mouth, eWOM, that is, the sharing of opinions and consumption experiences over the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Although studies associate digital content, social recommendations and reviews with consumer responses, the magnitude and nature of these relationships vary according to the platform, the product category, the sample profile and the form of measurement. Anjos et al. (2024), for example, interviewed eight users, whereas Fonseca and Lacerda (2022) followed five influencers for 60 days. Results so different cannot be treated as equivalent, and this is the reason for a review that confronts them explicitly.

The general objective is to analyze the relationships reported in the literature among brand content, recommendations by digital influencers, online reviews and purchase decision. The specific objectives are: (1) to analyze how the literature relates content published by brands to purchase decision; (2) to discuss how influencer recommendations are associated with purchase decision in the selected studies; (3) to analyze the reported relationships between online reviews and purchase decision; and (4) to critically compare convergences, divergences and contextual conditions in the evidence for the three factors. The research problem is: how does the scientific literature describe these relationships, and which outcomes and study designs support each claim?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 social media and purchase decision

Kietzmann et al. (2011) describe social media through functional building blocks (identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups), which helps explain why different platforms favor different interactions between brands and consumers. From a journey perspective, social networks act as touchpoints in the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The presence of information in the digital environment, however, is not equivalent to an effect on purchase, a distinction that guides the entire analysis.

2.2 Brand content

Brand content is communication created and controlled by the organization on its own accounts, through images, videos and advertisements. Fernandes and Pawlow (2025), analyzing Bis's Instagram posts in 2023, describe the recurrent use of deliberately absurd posts, with humor and irony, as a way of expressing the brand's identity and stimulating interaction. The study illustrates the strategy but does not measure consumer response, and interaction with a post does not, in itself, mean purchase.

2.3 Digital influencers

Hudders et al. (2021) treat influencers as actors who commercialize their own audience, which changes the perception of the message. The recommendation is thus at once a source of information and a communication recognizable as sponsored, which conditions consumer trust. Fonseca and Lacerda (2022) add that the recommendation tends to be anchored in the experience of use, and Alves and Domingues (2024) show that the boundary between genuine recommendation and advertising is increasingly subtle.

2.4 Online reviews and eWOM

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) analyzed consumers' motivations for posting opinions on review platforms, which explains the existence and composition of evaluative content. On the side of those who read it, the question is how this content is used in evaluating alternatives, a topic addressed in the meta-analysis by Ismagilova et al. (2020) and in the accounts of Brazilian consumers gathered in Section 4.

3 METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Research design

This is an **integrative review** of a descriptive and analytical nature, which gathers and analyzes knowledge from different studies on a topic (Souza et al., 2010; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) and approximates, in the typology of Grant and Booth (2009), a critical review with narrative synthesis (Torraco, 2005). **It is not a systematic review**: PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021) was consulted as a transparency guide, and not applied as a protocol. What distinguishes this study is the combination of an explicit protocol, a comparable extraction matrix and an **evidence map** that crosses factors and outcomes, to show what the literature covers and where there are gaps.

3.2 Protocol

The protocol defined by the authors provides for searching SciELO, Google Scholar and the University of São Paulo Journals Portal, with combinations of descriptors relating to social media, brand content, digital influencers, online reviews and purchase decision, in Portuguese and English, joined by the operators AND and OR. The search was exploratory in nature, typical of integrative reviews: the query dates and the exact combinations of descriptors used in each database were not systematically recorded, which is acknowledged as a limitation in Section 5.4. The search was complemented by citation chaining from the meta-analyses located, a step added in the final version, and the metadata of each reference (authorship, journal, volume, pages and DOI) were checked in October 2026 against the journals' records and Crossref. Table 1 summarizes the protocol.

Table 1 — Protocol of the integrative review

Element	Specification
Guiding question	How does the scientific literature describe the relationships among brand content, digital influencer recommendations, online reviews and purchase decision?
Databases and sources	SciELO, Google Scholar and the University of São Paulo Journals Portal; citation chaining from meta-analyses. Scopus and Web of Science were not consulted.
Period and languages	2020 to 2026; Portuguese and English.
Inclusion	Journal articles, with full text, that present results on at least one of the three factors and its relationship with purchase decision or intention, of any method, with objectives, procedures and results described.
Exclusion	Duplicates, publications outside the topic, studies with insufficient information; commercial reports, blogs and advertising materials were not used as a source of results.
Extraction	Authorship, year, country or context, platform, sample, constructs, method and main results.
Evidence assessment	Classification by design: A (meta-analysis or systematic review), B (empirical study with primary data), C (conceptual framework or narrative review). No formal risk-of-bias tool.
Synthesis	Descriptive and critical, with an evidence map by factor and outcome; quantitative indicators reproduced individually, without averages or rankings across non-comparable measures; no general causal inference.

Source: prepared by the authors (2026).

3.3 Selection and synthesis

The final corpus comprises 12 studies published between 2020 and 2026. The numbers of records identified, screened and excluded at each stage were not recorded during the exploratory search. For this reason, no selection flowchart is presented, and the limitation is declared in Section 5.4. Each study was classified by factor (brand content, influencers, reviews) and by outcome (engagement, attitude and perception, purchase intention or reported interest, and observed purchase or sales). Four studies describe strategies or concepts without measuring consumer response and were kept in the matrix but left out of the map. Works prior to 2020 were used only as a theoretical framework or to situate gaps, and not as corpus.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Extraction matrix

The corpus comprises five level A studies, five level B studies and two level C studies (Table 2). The five level A studies are meta-analyses: three address influencers, one brand content and one eWOM. Among the five level B studies, four are Brazilian, qualitative or descriptive studies, and one is an experiment. The results are presented individually and preserve the methodological context of each source.

Table 2 — Extraction matrix of the included studies

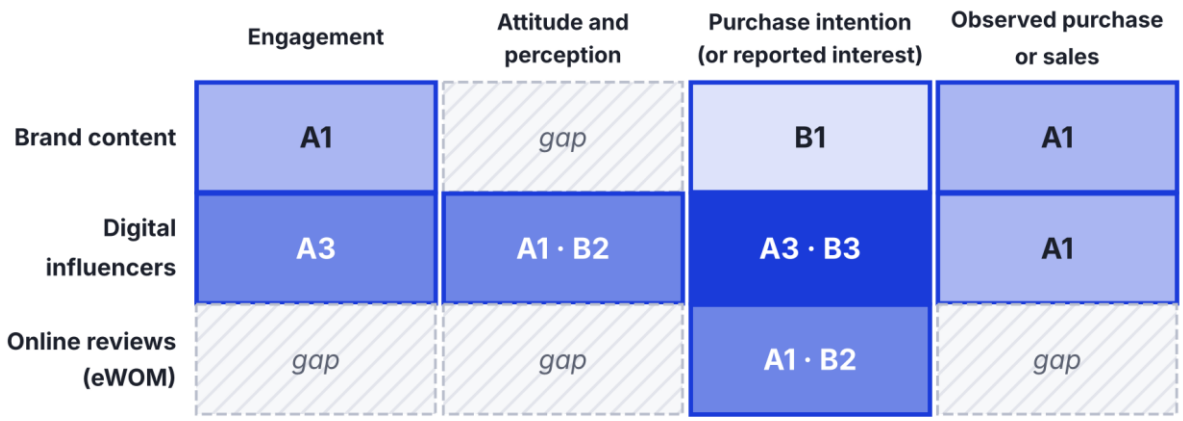
Study	Design and sample	Factor	Level	Main results
Ismagilova et al. (2020)	Meta-analysis of 69 studies on eWOM	Reviews	A	Best predictors of intention: argument quality, valence, usefulness and trust in the message; less effective: volume and source credibility.
Hudders et al. (2021)	Literature review and conceptual framework	Influencers	C	Influencers commercialize the audience, which changes the perception of the message; no consumer outcome.
Wang and Lee (2021)	2×2×2 factorial experiment; Chinese millennial consumers; K-beauty	Influencers	B	Influencer type, sponsorship and product exposure interacted; acceptance and intention were higher in the combination of the three factors.
Fonseca and Lacerda (2022)	Monitoring of five fashion and beauty influencers for 60 days (Brazil)	Influencers	B	Concepts of “product-experience” and “service-experience”; advertising centers on the experience of use; no consumer outcome.
Ao et al. (2023)	Meta-analysis: 176 effect sizes from 62 studies; 22,554 individuals	Influencers	A	Moderate to high correlations with engagement and intention; credibility stronger for intention and entertainment for engagement; high heterogeneity (I^2 of 75% to 100%).
Liadeli et al. (2023)	Meta-analysis: 1,641 elasticities from 86 studies (2011–2021); 14 platforms; 17 countries	Brand content	A	Effect on sales greater than on engagement; emotional content favors engagement and informational content, sales; effect greater in small, trust-based communities; paid advertising weakened the effect on engagement.
Anjos et al. (2024)	Descriptive qualitative; eight Instagram users (Brazil); interviews	Brand, influencers and reviews	B	Motivation: disclosures and recommendations by third parties, advertising; influence: feedback, social impact, personalized strategies, price and personality.
Alves and Domingues (2024)	Qualitative and conceptual research on Instagram and TikTok	Influencers	C	Propose “everyday advertising”; diffuse boundary between advertising and routine; no consumer outcome.
Fernandes and Pawlow (2025)	Quantitative analysis of Bis’s 2023 Instagram posts	Brand content	B	Recurrent use of absurd posts, with humor and irony, as brand expression; no consumer outcome.
Pan et al. (2025)	Meta-analysis: 1,531 effect sizes from 251 articles; about 2 million individuals; 27 countries	Influencers	A	Effect depends on the outcome: social identity stronger for attitude and engagement; post value for intention; influencer communication for purchase behavior.
Bonotto and Castañeda (2025)	Qualitative; 11 women aged 21 to 29 (Rio de Janeiro); interviews	Influencers and reviews	B	Credibility was the most cited category, with transfer of trust from the influencer to the brand; peer opinions come next.
Barari et al. (2026)	Meta-analysis of 71 articles and 135 experiments	Influencers	A	Influencers outperformed brand posts; credibility and attractiveness as mechanisms; influencer size conditions the outcome.

Source: prepared by the authors (2026). Levels: A, meta-analysis or systematic review; B, empirical study with primary data; C, conceptual framework or narrative review. For Liadeli et al. (2023), the results were extracted from the journal’s press release, and the full text was not consulted.

4.2 Evidence map

Figure 1 crosses the factors with the outcomes. The map reveals a clear asymmetry: evidence is concentrated on influencers and on intention outcomes, and there are gaps in attitude for brand content and, for online reviews, in engagement, attitude and observed purchase. Only two studies measure observed purchase or sales: a meta-analysis on influencers, in one of its outcomes (Pan et al., 2025), and one on brand content (Liadeli et al., 2023).

Figure 1 — Evidence map by factor and outcome (corpus from 2020 to 2026)



Source: prepared by the authors based on the corpus (2026). Each cell indicates the number of studies by level of evidence; one study may appear in more than one cell. Purely descriptive or conceptual studies (Table 2) are left out of the map.

4.3 Brand content

The meta-analysis by Liadeli et al. (2023) is the only one in the corpus on content generated by the brands themselves. It reports that its effect is greater on sales than on engagement, which suggests that easy-to-collect metrics, such as likes and shares, may underestimate commercial return. The type of content matters: emotional content favors engagement and informational content, sales. On the qualitative side, Anjos et al. (2024) report that personalized strategies and advertising motivate and influence consumers, and Fernandes and Pawlow (2025) describe a brand-expression strategy without measuring its effect. The evidence on brand content is therefore scarce and heterogeneous.

4.4 Digital influencers

Three meta-analyses converge in associating influencers with engagement and purchase intention (Ao et al., 2023; Barari et al., 2026; Pan et al., 2025), but diverge as to the mechanism and the outcome in which the effect is strongest. Ao et al. (2023) highlight credibility for purchase intention; Pan et al. (2025) show that the effect depends on the outcome, with social identity for attitude and engagement, post value for intention and influencer communication for purchase behavior; Barari et al. (2026) report that influencers outperformed brand posts and that influencer size conditions the result. Among the primary studies, Wang and Lee (2021) show that the effect depends on the combination of influencer type, sponsorship and product exposure, and Bonotto and Castañeda (2025) show, among Brazilian women, that credibility is the most cited category, with transfer of trust from the influencer to the brand.

4.5 Online reviews

For online reviews, the 2020–2026 corpus offers one meta-analysis of eWOM on purchase intention (Ismagilova et al., 2020), according to which argument quality, valence, usefulness and trust in the message predict intention better than volume or source credibility. On the qualitative side, feedback from other buyers appears as a dimension of influence on Instagram (Anjos et al., 2024), and peer opinions rank second among the categories of Bonotto and Castañeda (2025). In the 2020–2026 window, there is no study in the corpus that measures the effect of reviews on sales. The strongest evidence in this regard is earlier, such as the meta-analysis by Babić Rosario et al. (2016), which reports a low mean correlation (0.091) with sales and variation by platform and product, and falls outside the temporal criterion.

5 DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Convergences and divergences

The first point of convergence is that the three factors are associated with favorable consumer responses, but the meta-analyses show that the association is conditional: it depends on the outcome (Pan et al., 2025), on the type of content (Liadeli et al., 2023) and on the type of communication (Ismagilova et al., 2020). The second is the centrality of trust: it appears as influencer credibility (Ao et al., 2023; Bonotto & Castañeda, 2025), as trust in the message in reviews (Ismagilova et al., 2020) and as a characteristic of small communities in brand content (Liadeli et al., 2023).

The divergences are equally informative. Source credibility is decisive for intention in the influencer meta-analyses, but ranks among the least effective predictors in eWOM, which suggests that its weight depends on whether the message comes from a content creator with whom there is a bond or from anonymous users. In addition, brand content had a greater effect on sales than on engagement (Liadeli et al., 2023), whereas, in the influencer studies, the dominant outcome is intention. Different factors were measured with different outcomes, which precludes any ranking of effectiveness among them.

5.2 What the evidence allows us to claim

Table 3 gathers the claims that the corpus supports, with the basis, the degree of confidence and the limit of each one. The degree of confidence is qualitative and reflects the design, volume and consistency of the sources.

Table 3 — Claims supported by the corpus, basis, confidence and limit

	Claim	Basis	Confidence	Limit
E1	Influencers are positively associated with engagement and purchase intention.	Ao et al. (2023), Barari et al. (2026), Pan et al. (2025), level A	Moderate to high	Predominant outcome is intention; high heterogeneity.
E2	The mechanism and the outcome in which the influencer effect is strongest vary across meta-analyses.	Ao et al. (2023), Pan et al. (2025), Barari et al. (2026), level A	Moderate	No consensus on the dominant mechanism.
E3	Brand content had a greater effect on sales than on engagement, and the type of content matters.	Liadeli et al. (2023), level A	Moderate	Single meta-analysis; results read in the journal's press release.
E4	In online reviews, argument quality and trust in the message predict intention better than volume.	Ismagilova et al. (2020), level A; Anjos et al. (2024), Bonotto and Castañeda (2025), level B	Low to moderate	One level A study in the window; none on sales.
E5	Observed purchase is rarely measured; intention is not equivalent to purchase.	Pan et al. (2025), Liadeli et al. (2023), level A	Low	Only two studies measure observed purchase or sales.
E6	Brazilian evidence is qualitative or descriptive and illuminates processes, but does not allow generalization.	Anjos et al. (2024), Fonseca and Lacerda (2022), Fernandes and Pawlow (2025), Bonotto and Castañeda (2025)	Moderate (regarding processes)	Small samples; one brand, one platform or restricted age group.

Source: prepared by the authors (2026).

5.3 Implications

For brand management, the findings suggest three precautions. First, evaluate owned content by commercial outcomes, and not only by engagement, since the evidence indicates that interaction metrics may underestimate the effect on sales. Second, choose influencers with attention to credibility and fit with the brand, and not just reach. Third, treat online reviews as content to be monitored for the quality and usefulness of the arguments. For research, the implication is the need for studies that measure observed purchase, and not only intention, and that compare the three factors in the same design.

5.4 Limitations

The review is integrative, not systematic, and the record of the screening stages, query dates and descriptor combinations by database was not preserved, which prevents reproducing the flow and may have left studies out. The temporal criterion of 2020 to 2026 excludes solid earlier evidence, especially on reviews and sales, and was kept because it is the authors' protocol. The evidence assessment was done by design, without a

formal risk-of-bias tool. The corpus is small, and the Brazilian studies are qualitative, with small samples. The results of Liadeli et al. (2023) were extracted from the journal's press release. Finally, the reported associations do not allow general causal claims.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed, through a protocol-driven integrative review, the reported relationships among brand content, digital influencers, online reviews and purchase decision. The recent literature associates the three factors with favorable consumer responses, but the evidence is asymmetric: it is concentrated on influencers and on intention outcomes, is scarce for brand content and reviews, and rarely measures observed purchase.

As an agenda, the following are suggested: (i) studies with observed purchase or sales, rather than intention; (ii) designs that compare brand content, influencers and reviews in the same context; (iii) quantitative studies with Brazilian consumers, which broaden the qualitative samples currently available; and (iv) systematic reviews with searches in additional databases, a recorded flow and risk-of-bias assessment.

DECLARATIONS

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Conflicts of interest: the authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions (CRediT): Melo and Magerski: conceptualization, literature search, analysis and writing of the original draft; Freitas: supervision, validation and final review.

Data availability: no primary data were generated; the studies analyzed are listed in the References, and the extraction matrix can be made available upon request.

Use of artificial intelligence: Claude (Anthropic) was used to restructure the text, refine the writing and verify the bibliographic references. The authors reviewed the content and take full responsibility for it.

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