

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCERS IN THE PURCHASE INTENTION OF VEGAN FOOD

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Abstract

Veganism has been gaining popularity as a rapidly growing practice, leading to increased interest in conscious consumption and a higher demand for vegan products and food. With this growing trend, digital influencers focused explicitly on the vegan niche have emerged, playing an essential role in disseminating information about this lifestyle. This study analyzed the relationships between Parasocial Interaction, Identification, and Credibility of digital influencers and the Purchase Intention of vegan foods among their followers. For this purpose, a quantitative research approach was conducted through a survey. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire applied through the Google Forms platform, which contained questions about the variables analyzed and socio-demographic questions. The sample of this study consisted of 81 respondents who follow a vegan digital influencer. Spearman correlation tests and Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA were performed. The results of this research allow us to conclude that there is a positive relationship between Parasocial Interaction, Identification, Credibility of the digital influencer, and the Purchase Intention of vegan foods.

Keywords: Credibility; Digital Influencer; Identification; Parasocial Interaction; Veganism.

INTRODUCTION

Veganism is considered a practice that seeks to exclude products made from animals or their derivatives and promote the development and use of alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans, and the environment (Vegan Society, 2020). This practice is applied in food consumption, using animals to produce clothing and accessories, and for cosmetics and beauty products testing (Vegan Society, 2020). This philosophy is becoming increasingly popular, and the search for “vegan” on Google increased by 300% between 2016 and 2021 in Brazil (SEBRAE, 2023). There is currently no research precisely showing the number of vegans in Brazil. However, compared to other countries, this number is approximately 7 million Brazilians (Sociedade Vegetariana Brasileira, 2020).

Additionally, a survey conducted by IPEC reports that 32% of Brazilians prioritize the vegan option in restaurants when this information is highlighted (Vegan Business, 2021). The impacts of this increase in the popularization of veganism can also be seen in the economy. Data collected by the Ministry of Economy shows that by April 2022, 117 companies were opened using the term “vegan,” representing a growth of 500% in 10 years (Sociedade Brasileira de Varejo e Consumo, 2022). In recent years, major names in the food and agricultural industry have increasingly incorporated vegan options (Sexton *et al.*, 2022). According to SEBRAE (2023), the vegan products market in Brazil is growing at a rate of 40% per year.

The motivations that lead a person to adopt veganism or consume vegan products are related to animal welfare, environmental concerns, and health-related issues (D'Souza *et al.*, 2022). Another important factor contributing to the growing popularity of veganism is vegan celebrities and influencers who have become role models for many people (Phua *et al.*, 2019). Their social media posts share their dietary choices and information about the benefits of a plant-based diet and how it can be implemented in daily routines (Sexton *et al.*, 2022).

In recent years, digital influencers have become increasingly popular in marketing (Javed *et al.*, 2022). These influencers have accumulated many followers on social media platforms and use this audience to promote products and services to their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The rise of digital influencers can be attributed to the growing power of social media platforms (Javed *et al.*, 2022). According to data from Statista (2024a), 134.6 million Brazilians on Instagram have around 2 billion active users per month worldwide (Statista, 2024b). In this context, influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for companies looking to promote their products and services (Saima & Khan, 2020).

Considering the power of digital influencers over consumers and their impact on eating habits, the present research aimed to analyze the relationships between Parasocial Interaction, Identification, and Credibility of digital influencers and the Purchase Intention of vegan foods among their followers. Parasocial Interaction refers to the feeling of closeness that the audience feels towards the influencer despite the one-sided nature of the relationship (Brown & Basil, 2010). Identification with the influencer refers to the degree to which the audience sees themselves in the influencer, creating a sense of connection and identification (Brown & Basil, 2010). Credibility refers to the level of trust an influencer has with their audience (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Additionally, an analysis was conducted to identify if there were differences in Purchase Intention in the different sample groups. Understanding these relationships makes it possible to develop more effective strategies for working with digital influencers in the vegan niche.

This paper is organized into five sections: after this introduction, the following section discusses veganism and the vegan consumer, as well as presents the development of the study's hypotheses; the third section presents the research design; in the fourth section, we discuss the findings; Finally, in the fifth section we conclude with the limitations and contributions of this work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the restriction on the consumption of food or the most diverse products that use animals - whether for production or testing - and the exclusion of any acts related to the use or exploitation of animals (Souza, 2015), veganism has been gaining strength as a movement and increasing the number of supporters around the world over the years (Radnitz, Beezhold, & Dimatteo, 2015). This movement emerged from a concern for animal welfare to prevent animal exploitation and cruelty. From some

efforts in 1944, the first organization with this objective was created: The Vegan Society (Trigueiro, 2013).

Choosing what to eat is one of the ways people can express their identities. However, for vegans and vegetarians, such choices go beyond a dietary preference for consuming plant-based foods. They are choices that shape personal life and social identity, influencing and being influenced by values, beliefs, attitudes, and even the well-being of these people (Nezlek & Forestell, 2020). Being vegan goes beyond not eating meat. Veganism is more than a diet; it is an ethical philosophy (Greenebaum, 2012). Veganism is a set of social practices guided by values, beliefs, and representations with a moral basis (Niederle & Schubert, 2020).

Therefore, veganism is based on moral and conscious choices about what is consumed. Consumption is an act common to people, and the act of consumption has a relationship of influence between groups and can influence the culture of a society (Kaminski, 2010; Paiva & Luiz, 2020). Consumption is the interaction between the production (of food or goods) and consumers' social identities – considering the perceptions and desires – molded by a culture (Pinto & Batinga, 2016). Thus, vegan consumer behavior often reflects a culture and society where consumption – of food and goods – is related to social identity (Mintz, 2001).

Considering the increase in the number of vegans around the world in recent years (Radnitz, Beezhold, & Dimatteo, 2015) and understanding that veganism is a consumption behavior (Mintz, 2001), studies that analyze veganism in the context of marketing are important. Veganism and vegetarianism as research phenomena have received attention from researchers from different areas. Recent studies have focused on the motivations for becoming vegan (Judge & Wilson, 2019), the differences between the values of vegans and omnivores (Pfeiler & Egloff, 2018), the differences between vegetarians and vegans (Kessler *et al.*, 2016), and differences in the identity of vegetarians and vegans (Rosenfeld, 2019).

In the marketing field, Santos *et al.* (2023) identified the influence of source credibility and social media on the purchase intention of vegan products endorsed by digital influencers, focusing on the cosmetics industry. This influence movement reaches not only vegan consumers. Opinion leaders' dissemination of vegan products and lifestyles on social media intensifies the demand for such products (Martinelli & De Canio, 2021). Considering that this endorsement by digital influencers influences purchase intention, it is pertinent to analyze the factors that may affect the purchase of vegan products (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

In this sense, several variables influence the effectiveness of product endorsement by digital influencers. For this study, we analyzed the relationships between Parasocial Interactions, Identification with the digital influencer, Credibility, and Vegan Products Purchase Intention. Social media platforms enable a closer connection between digital influencers and their followers. Through this proximity, digital influencers establish relationships with their followers, using intimacy to make them feel familiar and emotionally connected to the influencers (Abidin, 2015). Often, followers consider digital influencers as virtual friends, which can turn the influencer's recommendation into practical purchases (Benazzi & Faria, 2017).

In this context, parasocial interaction consists of this intimate bond developed with digital influencers through the continuous observation of their personality over time (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Influencers foster this intimacy by showcasing details of their lives on social media, presenting them as they (apparently) are lived, thus making this type of content the central theme of their production (Abidin, 2015). Based on this perspective, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Parasocial interaction with a digital influencer positively relates to the intention to purchase vegan foods.

Considering that identification is a vital process for individuals to establish social bonds (Davel & Machado, 2001), it is presumed that the follower's identification with the digital influencer is fundamental for influence to occur. For this identification to occur, two factors are essential: first, that the individual has a sense of belonging to a group; second, that the perception of belonging occurs through sharing personal values. A third factor, although its presence is not obligatory, is often

associated with an individual's identification with the group - the emotional value they share with the group (Tajfel, 2003).

In the identification process, individuals recognize themselves, demonstrate affinity and attraction, and incorporate beliefs, values, and attitudes through constant interactions (Davel & Machado, 2001). Identification with the digital influencer is, therefore, the follower's commitment level to a group that determines how the group's characteristics, norms, or outcomes will influence their perceptual, affective, and behavioral responses (Ellermes *et al.*, 2002). If followers and vegan digital influencers share the same values and there is this identification, the following hypothesis was reached:

H2: Identification with the digital influencer positively relates to the intention to purchase vegan foods.

Several studies have investigated the influence of digital influencers' credibility on purchase intention (Torres *et al.*, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Weismueller *et al.*, 2020; Leite & Baptista, 2021; Santos *et al.*, 2023). The credibility of the source, in the case of this study, the digital influencer, consists of the consumer's perception of the information source based on attractiveness, reliability, and knowledge of the endorsed product area (Ohanian, 1990). It is assumed that the likelihood of people being persuaded is higher when the message source is credible (Silalahi *et al.*, 2021).

In social media, source credibility refers to the degree to which digital influencers are considered reliable, credible, and well-informed by their followers (Zha *et al.*, 2018). These followers share values and attitudes similar to those of the digital influencers (Solokova & Kefi, 2020). Specifically for vegan consumers, credibility is essential since the digital influencer must have expertise in the subject, indicating that they possess sufficient knowledge and skills about veganism (Yilmazdoğan *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, advertising on social media is seen as more reliable than traditional ads, indicating that the credibility of the digital influencer also influences the acceptance of this advertising (Shareef *et al.*, 2019). Given this context, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H3: The credibility of a digital influencer is positively related to the intention to purchase vegan foods.

Finally, considering that the purchase intention of vegan products refers to the possibility and probability that a consumer is willing to buy (Dodds *et al.*, 1991) vegan products, we chose to examine whether there are differences in the purchase intention of vegan products when consumers are separated into groups. In this way, it was possible to analyze consumers segmented by gender, age, level of education, and income, which led us to the following hypotheses:

H4a: There are significant differences in the purchase intention of vegan foods when consumers are segmented by gender.

H4b: There are significant differences in the purchase intention of vegan foods when consumers are segmented by age group.

H4c: There are significant differences in the purchase intention of vegan foods when consumers are segmented by level of education.

H4d: There are significant differences in the purchase intention of vegan foods when consumers are segmented by income bracket.

In summary, this research aimed to identify possible relationships between previously validated and tested theoretical constructs within the context of digital influencers and vegan consumers. In this study, we drew inspiration from the research of Solokova and Kefi (2020) and Santos *et al.* (2023) to contribute to the development of the theoretical field, applying theories to recent contexts. Next, we present the research design and the methodological procedures adopted to achieve the research objective.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, a quantitative approach was adopted. This method involves data collection and statistical analysis to establish patterns and test hypotheses (Sampiere *et al.*, 2013). This technique was chosen because it is considered more objective and allows for the statistical analysis of the collected data. The survey method, a quantitative research technique that employs standardized questionnaires applied to a specific group of people, was used to collect data (Freitas *et al.*, 2000). The data collection instrument was a questionnaire administered through the Google Forms platform. A five-point Likert scale was employed, where respondents were required to indicate their level of agreement with the statement. The scale ranges from 1 to 5; one shows complete disagreement, and five indicates agreement.

Three types of questions were included in the questionnaire. Sociodemographic questions address the gender, age, education, and income bracket of the participants. Behavioral questions are related to the participants' dietary habits, aiming to determine if they adhere to veganism. Lastly, questions about the phenomenon related to the variables discussed in this research were included: parasocial interaction, identification, credibility of the digital influencer, and intention to purchase vegan products.

The study sample was non-probabilistic, meaning that the study population's exact representativeness cannot be guaranteed. Non-probabilistic sampling does not utilize random selection. The researcher made the selection for convenience (Malhotra, 2019). This sampling was chosen due to its practicality and low cost compared to probabilistic sampling, which requires more significant effort in participant selection, as it would be difficult to define the population for this study (followers of vegan digital influencers). Thus, 83 respondents were obtained, of which 81 were eligible to complete the form as they fit the main criterion of following a vegan digital influencer.

Data collection was conducted through Facebook groups dedicated to veganism and the Instagram profiles of highly relevant vegan influencers. The approach for data collection involved reaching out to individuals who interacted in the comments of these profiles and inviting them to participate in the survey. This strategy was adopted to ensure that participants were genuinely interested in the topic and represented the research's target audience. Respecting the study's location, the research covered the national territory. Data collection occurred from July 11, 2023, to September 13, 2023.

The collected data were processed and analyzed using the statistical software SPSS v. 29. Initially, database cleaning was performed, checking for typing errors and missing values. Two incomplete cases were excluded, totaling a sample of 81 participants. Subsequently, univariate and multivariate outliers were checked. The analysis found no univariate outliers (all Z scores were less than 3) or multivariate outliers (Mahalanobis distance less than 3).

Moving on to verify the normality of the sample, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were performed, with significant results ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the sample is not normally distributed. Skewness and kurtosis statistics were also analyzed, confirming that the sample is not normally distributed. Based on this analysis, non-parametric tests were chosen since they do not rely on the normality of the sample to be executed. The statistical tests performed were Spearman correlation and Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The sample consists of 81 respondents, of which 86.4% ($n = 70$) are women, 11.1% ($n = 9$) are men, 1.2% ($n = 1$) identified as gender-fluid, and 1.2% ($n = 1$) preferred not to disclose their gender. Regarding age, respondents range from 18 to 55, with a mean age of 36.5. When divided by age group, 38.3% are aged 18 to 26, 45.7% are aged 27 to 35, 13.6% are aged 36 to 45, and 2.5% are aged 46 to 55. Regarding educational level, 2.5% ($n = 2$) completed high school, 19.8% ($n = 16$) have incomplete higher education, 37% ($n = 30$) have completed higher education, 13.6% ($n = 11$) have incomplete post-graduation, and 27.2% ($n = 22$) have completed post-graduation.

In terms of monthly family income, 18.5% ($n = 15$) earn up to 2 minimum wages, 38.3% ($n = 31$) earn between 3 and 5 minimum wages, 27.2% ($n = 22$) earn between 6 and 10 minimum wages, and 16% ($n = 13$) earn above ten minimum wages. Additionally, questions about dietary habits, frequency of consuming vegan products, and motivation for following a vegan influencer were included to assess the

audience's relationship with veganism. Among the results, 43.2% (n = 35) follow a vegetarian diet, 29.6% (n = 24) follow a vegan diet, and 27.2% (n = 22) are neither vegan nor vegetarian.

Regarding the consumption of vegan products, 50.6% (n = 41) consume very frequently, 25.9% (n = 21) consume occasionally, 21% (n = 17) consume frequently, and 2.5% (n = 2) consume rarely. A multiple-choice question was included in the questionnaire to understand the motivations for following a vegan influencer, where respondents could select more than one response option. The results show that 85.2% (n = 69) follow a vegan influencer to see vegan recipes, 63% (n = 51) to receive tips on vegan products, 63% (n = 51) to receive tips on restaurants, and 44.4% (n = 36) to follow the influencer's routine.

To test hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, Spearman correlation was conducted to identify relationships between variables. Values with $p < 0.05$ were considered significant. From this test, it was possible to observe that Identification (IDE) with the digital influencer showed a relationship with Parasocial Interaction (PAR), which is a moderate relationship ($\rho = 0.592$; $p < 0.001$). The digital influencer's Credibility (CRE) exhibited a positive and reasonable relationship with Parasocial Interaction ($\rho = 0.624$; $p < 0.001$) and with Identification ($\rho = 0.618$; $p < 0.001$).

A positive and moderate relationship was identified between Parasocial Interaction and Purchase Intention (PUR) ($\rho = 0.447$; $p < 0.001$), confirming H1. Identification also showed a positive and moderate relationship with Purchase Intention ($\rho = 0.508$; $p < 0.001$), ensuring H2. Credibility positively and moderately correlated with Purchase Intention ($\rho = 0.483$; $p < 0.001$), confirming H3. Table 1 presents the correlations and their respective coefficients and p-values.

Table 1.
Spearman correlation

	PAR	IDE	CRE	PUR
PAR	1	$\rho = 0.592^{**}$ $p < 0.001$	$\rho = 0.624^{**}$ $p < 0.001$	$\rho = 0.447^{**}$ $p < 0.001$
IDE	-	1	$\rho = 0.618^{**}$ $p < 0.001$	$\rho = 0.508^{**}$ $p < 0.001$
CRE	-	-	1	$\rho = 0.483^{**}$ $p < 0.001$
PUR	-	-	-	1

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Regarding H1, "Parasocial interaction with a digital influencer is positively related to the intention to purchase vegan foods," the observed results suggest that digital influencers can significantly affect the intention to purchase a product. Users' interaction with influencers on social media can create a sense of friendship, where users feel part of the influencer's social circle and establish a bond with that person (Phua *et al.*, 2020). This finding is also evidenced by the results of the questionnaire applied in this research, where 55.6% of respondents agreed and 12.3% strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe that the way digital influencers I follow share their lives is spontaneous and makes me feel like I'm seeing a friend's content."

In a study by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial interaction with an individual is seen as intimate and reciprocal, even though this closeness is an illusion. This relationship, built with a sense of closeness, influences the individual's perception of a product recommended by the influencer, encouraging the purchase of that product (Purnamaningsih & Rizkalla, 2020). This is reinforced by the research results, where 59.3% of respondents agree, and 24.7% strongly agree with the statement, "I would buy vegan products based on recommendations from digital influencers." Another positive influence on creating a parasocial relationship is that through social media, users can comment and interact with the influencer's posts, strengthening the sense of closeness (Schmidt, 2007).

Regarding H2, "Identification with the digital influencer is positively related to the intention to purchase vegan foods," as seen in Table 1, indicates a relationship between identification with the influencer and purchase intention. When consumers find similarities with the influencer and share

interests, values, and characteristics, this evokes feelings of identification and makes the consumer more likely to adopt the influencer's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Schouten *et al.*, 2020). Studies demonstrate that this identification can lead to a desire to possess similarities with an influencer (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), reinforcing the intention to consume similar products and stimulating purchases. This concept can be evidenced in this research through the questionnaire, where in the statement "I identify with the lifestyle presented by the digital influencers I follow," 51.9% of respondents indicated "agree," and 6.2% "strongly agree."

In Table 1, a significant relationship between identification and parasocial interaction was also indicated. The emotional attachment generated from the parasocial interactions that the individual has with an influencer can be seen as an influence on the identification process (Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021) when the follower begins to feel that they have a real and reciprocal relationship, a desire to be and act like the influencer is also established (Schouten & Verspaget, 2020). Through this relationship, followers develop an emotional attachment and a desire to be like the influencer and adopt similar behaviors to those of the influencer in different aspects, such as lifestyle, consumption preferences, and even personal values, such as veganism.

For H3, "The credibility of a digital influencer is positively related to the intention to purchase vegan foods," the present study confirms the positive and significant relationship between credibility and purchase intention. When consumers recognize an influencer as trustworthy and knowledgeable in a particular subject, they tend to consider their recommendations and opinions more weighty (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Through this study, it was also possible to recognize that these opinion leaders can influence non-vegans, as seen in the survey where 27.2% of respondents do not consider themselves vegan but follow these influencers. This shows the persuasive power of these individuals not only in their field of activity but far beyond, shaping values and principles.

Additionally, based on the data presented in Table 1, it can be observed that there is a positive relationship between influencer credibility and consumer identification. When an influencer conveys a sense of credibility, consumers tend to identify more with them and trust their recommendations as genuine (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

The relationship between credibility and parasocial interaction was also found to be positive, according to the results of this study. One study demonstrates that building credibility is intrinsically linked to creating emotional bonds with the influencer (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, emotional attachment plays a fundamental role in explaining the persuasive power that influencers exert on their followers; by establishing this emotional relationship, influencers can establish a deeper connection with their audience, enhancing their influence capacity.

The Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test was conducted to test hypotheses H4a, H4b, H4c, and H4d to identify if there are significant differences in the intention to purchase vegan foods when consumers are segmented by gender, age group, educational level, and income bracket, respectively. This test showed that only the group of consumers segmented by income bracket showed significant differences in purchase intention. Table 2 presents the test results for gender, age group, and educational level. As can be observed, no significant p-values were obtained.

Table 2.

ANOVA Kruskal Wallis (Gender, Age Group, Education Level) x Purchase Intention

	Purchase Intention
Gender	H = 4.419; p = 0.220
Age Group	H = 1.895; p = 0.594
Education Level	H = 4.292; p = 0.368

There were no significant differences regarding hypothesis H4a: "There are significant differences in the intention to purchase vegan foods when consumers are segmented by gender". However, it is important to consider that this result may be influenced by various factors, such as the sample used (mostly composed of women) and the culture of vegan food consumption in each group.

As for hypothesis H4b, “There are significant differences in the intention to purchase vegan foods when consumers are segmented by age group,” contrary to expectations, no significant differences were identified between age groups for Purchase Intention in this sample. Studies demonstrate that age can influence consumers' attitudes toward purchase intention (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2018; Lugioyo, 2022). It was reported in a study that younger consumers are more likely to adopt lifestyles aligned with their values and beliefs, including the adoption of sustainable consumption habits and a preference for products that are aligned with their ethical and environmental concerns (Lee, 2009). However, this result could not be confirmed in the studied sample.

Regarding hypothesis H4c, “There are significant differences in the intention to purchase vegan foods when consumers are segmented by educational level,” the results did not show significant differences in purchase intention among these groups. It is important to note that educational level may be a relevant factor in shaping attitudes and behaviors regarding food. Still, other individual and contextual aspects may also influence the intention to purchase vegan foods.

Regarding the test of hypothesis H4d, “There are significant differences in the intention to purchase vegan foods when consumers are segmented by income bracket,” it was found that there is a difference between the groups when the sample is divided by income bracket. To this end, the 2023 minimum wage in Brazil (R\$ 1,320) was considered. Purchase intention is higher for the population with an income bracket of 6 to 10 minimum wages (mean rank = 51.70), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis Income bracket x Purchase Intention

			Until 2 MW	3 to 5 MW	6 to 10 MW	More than 10 MW
	H	p	Mean Rank			
Purchase Intention	H = 8.190	p = 0.042	31.30	37.55	51.70	41.54

The differences in mean ranks between income brackets are considered statistically significant for purchase intention. Price is vital in consumer purchase intention (Kholis, 2021). The higher the monthly income, the greater the purchase intention (Myres & Mount, 1973). Additionally, vegan diets may be perceived as more expensive than other types, such as omnivorous diets, where individuals consume meat (Pais *et al.*, 2022).

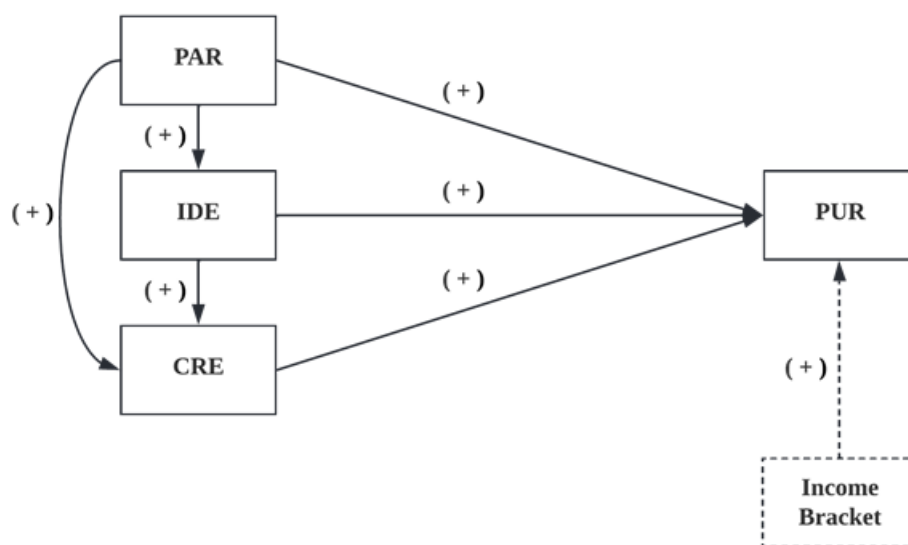


Figure 1. Relationships identified between research variables

This is due to the higher prices attributed to meat substitutes and the high consumption of fruits and vegetables, which can result in higher monthly expenses (Pais *et al.*, 2022). However, some studies have shown that, in reality, there are countries where individuals following a vegan diet spend less than non-vegans (Bryant, 2019; Kabisch *et al.*, 2021). It is essential to disseminate this data and show how a well-structured vegan diet can be more economical to combat the stigma surrounding this type of diet. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the variables tested in this study. The signs indicate whether the relationship between the variables is positive (+) or negative (-).

Finally, it was possible to reinforce the results of previous research that validate the idea that consumers are influenced by the recommendations and opinions of digital influencers (Phua *et al.*, 2020; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020; Javed *et al.*, 2022). The interaction between the variables studied in this research can influence consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards a brand, specific product, or lifestyle.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the study, credibility, parasocial interaction, and identification with a digital influencer have a positive relationship with the intention to purchase vegan foods. Furthermore, these variables are interrelated, giving the digital influencer a high power of persuasion through the transmission of trust, a sense of closeness, and a feeling of identification. This can convey a sense of expertise to their followers, especially when the influencer operates within a specific niche, as with veganism in this research. This combination of factors can lead consumers to consider the influencer's recommendations when purchasing. Other individual and contextual factors can also influence this decision. For example, the age group and income of consumers may play a role in how they perceive the credibility of the influencer and their intention to purchase.

These results highlight the importance of influencer marketing in promoting vegan products and show how digital influencers can influence consumers. Brands interested in promoting vegan products should evaluate and select digital influencers that best fit their marketing strategy, considering their credibility, ability to establish identification with the audience and skill in creating parasocial interactions.

However, it is important to consider the limitations of this study, including the relatively small sample size and the non-probabilistic sampling method, which does not allow for generalizing the conclusions to a broader audience. Another area for improvement was the failure to meet the assumption of normality in the sample, which precluded parametric tests. Additionally, it is important to note that the participants in this study were selected based on specific criteria, i.e., they were individuals who followed vegan digital influencers. This specificity of respondents may have made it difficult to collect comprehensive and representative responses from different perspectives.

Therefore, further research with a larger sample is needed. Another limitation is that the current research predominantly considered influencers from Instagram. Future research may analyze the interaction of vegan digital influencers on other platforms, such as TikTok, to assess whether followers behave differently depending on the social media platform.

Research ethics statement

This article is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.

Author contribution statement

Bruna de Conti wrote the introduction, collected the data, and wrote the discussion of the results and conclusions. Karen Batista supervised the entire research process, from ideation till publication, in addition to writing the literature review, processing, analyzing the data, translating and correcting the text.

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