

Theoretical-empirical article

# Instagram in the Modest Fashion Market: Analysis by the Perspective of Sociotechnical Structures



## Instagram no Mercado da Moda Modesta: Análise pela Ótica das Estruturas Sociotécnicas

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** we aim to understand Instagram's sociotechnical role in the modest fashion market in Brazil, proposing a theoretical-empirical model to analyze this social media as a market-thinking infrastructure. **Theoretical framework:** the research is based on market-thinking infrastructure studies recently incorporated into the marketing area. **Method:** in this research, two techniques were used for data collection: (a) semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 27 agents of the modest fashion market and (b) non-participant observation on Instagram. **Results:** the results demonstrate that Instagram offers an infrastructure that mediates and standardizes interactions between market actors, allowing the construction of the modest fashion market, once seen as stigmatized. Instagram's infrastructure establishes rules that will dictate users' (market actors) success (or exercised power) in the network and, consequently, in the market. Although it is impossible to carry out monetary transactions through Instagram in Brazil, it offers various material devices that encourage economic exchanges. **Conclusions:** this study contributes to the market-thinking infrastructures literature by showing how the standardization designed to "neutralize the network's power of agency" in users' actions ends up having the opposite effect, (re)affirming its political and symbolic elements. Instagram can be considered a democratic space if its users understand and apply its neoliberal rules.

**Keywords:** market-thinking infrastructures; market devices; market construction; social media.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** objetivou-se compreender o papel sociotécnico do Instagram no mercado da moda modesta no Brasil, propondo um modelo teórico-empírico para análise dessa mídia social enquanto infraestrutura pensante de mercado. **Marco teórico:** a pesquisa baseia-se nos estudos das infraestruturas pensantes de mercado, incorporadas recentemente ao campo de marketing. **Método:** utilizaram-se duas técnicas para coleta de dados: (a) entrevistas semiestruturadas e em profundidade com 27 agentes do mercado da moda modesta e (b) observação não participante no Instagram. **Resultados:** o Instagram oferece uma infraestrutura que medeia e padroniza as interações entre os atores do mercado, permitindo a construção e a popularização do mercado da moda modesta, outrora estigmatizado. A infraestrutura do Instagram estabelece regras que ditarão o sucesso (ou poder exercido) das usuárias (agentes de mercado) na rede e, conseqüentemente, no mercado. Embora não seja possível efetuar as transações monetárias no Brasil pelo Instagram, ele oferece variados dispositivos materiais que incentivam a realização das trocas econômicas. **Conclusões:** este estudo contribui com a literatura de infraestruturas pensantes de mercado, na medida em que apresenta como a padronização arquitetada para 'neutralizar o poder de agência da rede' nas ações dos usuários pode ter efeito contrário, (re)afirmando os elementos políticos e simbólicos que a cercam. O Instagram pode ser considerado um espaço democrático, desde que seus usuários entendam e apliquem suas regras neoliberais.

**Palavras-chave:** infraestruturas pensantes de mercado; dispositivos de mercado; construção de mercado; mídias sociais.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest dominate the social context worldwide. Today, many individuals prefer to connect through their social media profiles instead of exchanging phone numbers. As soon as this medium of interaction became popular, companies also started to compose it, aiming to get closer to their customers, understand their demands, and communicate their product value. Specifically, with digital marketing, social media are dominant, shaping trends and marketing strategies (Strategic Direction, 2020). In addition, companies use social media to engage users (consumers) in dialogue, relationships, and co-creation (Dix, 2012). It is expected that connections created with consumers on social media positively impact purchase intentions and brand evaluation (Naylor et al., 2012), as well as influencers' ability to shape their followers' behaviors and attitudes (Magno & Cassia, 2018).

There is an expressive number of articles and research related to social media; however, regarding sociotechnical issues, there is a significantly open field in marketing research, particularly in market constructions and dynamics (Bowker et al., 2019). From the sociotechnical structure perspective, Instagram is understood as a market-thinking infrastructure as it organizes knowledge, classifies things, configures preferences, and governs markets — mediating social and material spaces (Bowker et al., 2019). This approach is relevant, as most studies focus on the consumers and their agency, ignoring the social role of the objects in consumption (Mello et al., 2021) and market practices (Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2021).

Among the various markets covered by social media, the fashion market has one of the greatest numbers of influencers who can exert significant power over trends in this market (Strategic Direction, 2020). Some studies, such as those by Lewis and Tarlo (2011) and Kavakci and Kraepelin (2017) demonstrate the construction and popularization of the modest fashion market through social media — a market that was once little explored by conventional department stores. As Albuquerque et al. (2017) point out, many women seek tips on how to dress modestly/religiously on social media. However, research involving social media and modest fashion emphasizes the construction of consumer or influencer identity disseminated in this environment (Albuquerque et al., 2017; Kavakci & Kraepelin, 2017). Although Lewis and Tarlo's (2011) work highlights using the internet as an essential resource for popularizing the modest fashion market, it does not emphasize how thinking infrastructures are architected and how devices exercise agency power in the market.

Considering the gap in understanding social media as sociotechnical structures and observing the popularization of modest fashion through social media, we aimed to understand Instagram's sociotechnical role in the modest fashion market in Brazil, proposing a theoretical-empirical model for analyzing this social media as a market-thinking infrastructure. Therefore, our data collection was based on two techniques: (a) 27 semi-structured and in-depth interviews with agents from the modest fashion market, who were also Instagram users — defined into four groups of different actors: consumers, digital influencers, store owners, and Christian singers; and (b) non-participant observation on the interviewees' profiles on Instagram. The results contribute to the literature on market-thinking infrastructures, especially concerning the apparent neutrality of social media since the network favors the growth of those who follow the standards it defines; that is, social media rewards a way of acting.

In addition to this introduction, we divided this paper into six other sections. First, on the theoretical framework, market-thinking infrastructures and the modest fashion market are discussed. Then, the steps taken during data collection and analysis are detailed in the methodological section. Next, in the results analysis section, the main results are described, and then the results are discussed, emphasizing Instagram's role in constructing the modest fashion market. Subsequently, a theoretical-empirical model is proposed for analyzing Instagram as a market infrastructure. Finally, we provide final considerations and references.

## MARKET ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIOTECHNICAL STRUCTURES

In the theoretical lens of economic sociology, markets are understood as sociotechnical arrangements or agencies with three basic characteristics (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). First, arrangements organize the conception, production, and circulation of goods (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). Second, arrangements are heterogeneous components that unfold into rules, devices, systems, infrastructures, texts, narratives, knowledge, and skills (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). And third, the arrangements are a space for confrontation and power disputes (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). Thus, it is understood that the market is constructed and not posited (Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2021), that is, it is constructed based on a process of symmetry (interdependence) between human and non-human actors (Callon, 1998; Dalmoro & Fell, 2020).

Among the non-human actors, the ‘market devices’ stand out. To [Muniesa et al. \(2007\)](#), the ‘market device’ is a simplified way of referring to the material and discursive arrangements that intervene in market construction. Market devices can be technical material (supermarkets, matchmaking algorithms, websites, malls, stores, etc.), textual and audiovisual material (advertising messages and videos), and human material (sellers, after-sales service, etc.) ([Callon, 2016](#)). These can be considered objects with agency since they can influence or drive articulating actions; that is, they act or make others act ([Muniesa et al., 2007](#)).

Regarding the devices and their transitions in the market, [Araujo et al. \(2010\)](#) demonstrate that each actor defends their practices and devices and a preferred market representation. Thus, marketing is essentially a matter of communicating market representations and the structures around existing or new market devices so that the offers are delivered to make sense to buyers. In that sense, marketing is, indirectly, a matter of building trust in certain devices. For example, [Dalmoro and Fell's \(2020\)](#) study highlights that the coexistence of Brazil's mainstream and craft beer market is only possible through the materiality associated with the products, such as taste, noise (‘pop’), and labels.

Although research involving market devices has contributed to the theoretical lens of economic sociology, especially concerning the implications of devices in market construction ([Cochoy, 2008](#); [Hagberg, 2016](#)), there is a gap regarding the focus on the market phenomenon. Often, studies involving market devices have a limited analysis of the phenomenon ([Kjellberg et al., 2019](#)). Market infrastructures can offer a more macro (general and long-term) look at market functioning compared to studies involving devices ([Kjellberg et al., 2019](#)). In this sense, understanding market infrastructures can further strengthen the conceptualization of market processes and their various outcomes ([Bowker et al., 2019](#)).

## Market-thinking infrastructures

In anthropology, infrastructures are networks built to facilitate the flow of people, goods, or ideas ([Larkin, 2013](#)), with their existence subject to a set of practices ([Star & Ruhleder, 1996](#)). Thus, infrastructures must be understood as displacers ([Larkin, 2013](#)), constantly interdependent on practices and other infrastructures ([Araujo & Mason, 2021](#); [Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022](#)). Various physical and abstract materials can be understood as infrastructures ([Bowker et al., 2019](#)). In the 19th century, investments were allocated to physical circulation infrastructure, such as roads and railways. In contrast, in the 21st century, investments aimed at ‘thinking infrastructures,’ such as platforms that structure attention and shape decision-

making ([Bowker et al., 2019](#)). This connection between infrastructures and different societies indicates that, in addition to technical and functional issues, infrastructure can be associated with symbolic or sentimental meanings used in political discourse ([Larkin, 2013](#)).

In market studies, infrastructures are understood as “a materially heterogeneous arrangement that silently supports and structures the consummation of market exchanges” ([Kjellberg et al., 2019, p. 209](#)). According to [Kjellberg et al. \(2019\)](#), market infrastructures have eight properties: relational, accessible for use, modular, actively maintained, interdependent, commercial, emergent, and political. According to [Mellet and Beauvisage \(2020\)](#), market infrastructures support three operations — knowledge production, capitalization, and coordination — capable of combining market infrastructures with market devices. Given this, general and long-term market development may be better understood through market infrastructure than market device studies ([Kjellberg et al., 2019](#)).

Market-thinking infrastructures are material and social infrastructures that configure entities, organize knowledge, classify things, configure preferences, and govern markets ([Bowker et al., 2019](#)). Market-thinking infrastructures distribute responsibility between objects and subjects, i.e., they exercise agency ([Pujadas & Curto-Millet, 2019](#)). For example, Uber is an infrastructure that seeks to think and define roles for the parties involved; therefore, drivers are entrepreneurs, and passengers are customers/evaluators ([Pujadas & Curto-Millet, 2019](#)). Another example is social media, in which people's participation differs from usual social gatherings, as the way users interact is standardized to the technological environment, such as liking, tagging, and following ([Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019](#)).

Although the neutrality of the thinking infrastructure is defended, it is perceived to affect social relations between actors and even social practice; once the actors' performance limits are established within the infrastructure, a categorizing and political act occurs ([Pujadas & Curto-Millet, 2019](#)). [Dourish and Bell \(2007\)](#) argue that infrastructures embody historical concentrations of power. In this sense, the technical function may be less important than the aesthetic and poetic dimensions ([Larkin, 2013](#)). While aesthetics represents the human experiences caused by infrastructure, such as the sensation of modernity experienced by the body and mind, poetics focuses on the exaltation of the symbol (infrastructure) in front of its function ([Larkin, 2013](#)). Thus, it is clear that “standards and classification are of crucial importance, and they embed social and political arrangements and compromises” ([Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020, p. 113](#)).

Therefore, we argue that infrastructures can invisibly reinforce social patterns and political forms of governing since the physical nature (symbol) can prevail because of its evolutive and modern character and not only because of its technical functions. Therefore, studying social media as infrastructure is relevant because it influences market and consumption practices and their contradictions.

### *Social media as market-thinking infrastructures*

The data collected, stored, and used by thinking infrastructures have been considered a specific class of assets for organizations since they are used to do business or improve internal operations (Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020). A massive and heterogeneous class of data is collected through social media (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019), which can cooperate to maintain or raise several markets, including those stigmatized, such as modest fashion (Ajala, 2017; Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). Although the value of data obtained from social media is undeniable, this complex infrastructure contains devices, rules, mathematical techniques, and computational statistics that, together, design and produce information and a range of data products in the digital economy (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019).

Social media are a thinking infrastructure architected to support and direct users' activities to gather the data enabling their business operations (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019). Social media extend their infrastructure beyond a specific economic exchange, structuring organized forms of 'digital' sociability, that is, liking and following (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019). In addition to data, users with thousands of followers (media personalities/digital influencers) influence markets significantly (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017).

Alaimo and Kallinikos (2019) argue that social media redefine the primary forms of human relationships since social interaction is standardized. According to Alaimo and Kallinikos (2019), social media are built to establish relationships through a strict logic of functional efficiency, exemplified by metrics such as reputation, engagement, and others. Thus, platforms can only map social interactions by quantitatively deriving user participation (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019). However, Terra (2019) states that strategies can be used to 'bypass' the algorithm through viral content or influencers to disseminate content. Interestingly, the distinction exercised by a user on the platform does not come from coercive power but from acting appropriately as a user within it (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019). In this sense, some markets seen as stigmatized and, therefore, without media space were (re)arranged and (re)publicized from the

'media democratization' provided by social networks, such as the modest fashion market, as will be discussed in the next section.

### *Modest fashion market in media, internet, and social media*

In recent years, the relationship between religion and economics has attracted scholars' attention in many areas, including marketing (Sandikci, 2018). In economic terms, this attention is justified by the current value and expected growth of the modest fashion market worldwide — accounting for US\$ 283 billion in 2018 (The Economist, 2020). However, the modest fashion market sometimes has been stigmatized. This is because some garments, such as the hijab, burqa, or niqab, were (and still are) seen as symbols of the oppression of women's bodies, a sign of Islamic extremism, or as something retrograde (Ajala, 2017). Likewise, some evangelical Christians claim to have been stereotyped and portrayed negatively (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). In this sense, for a long time, religious consumers were forgotten not only by the market but also by academic research (Sandikci, 2018). This inattention is due to these consumers' low purchasing power at the end of the 20th century, their stereotyped images, and the expectations that religion would succumb to modernity (Sandikci, 2018). Even with this unpromising past, today, the literature shows how the market and religion are intertwined (Mittelstaedt, 2002) and can be profitable (The Economist, 2020).

While the label 'modest fashion' seems pretty specific, it is not. The creation of this more generic term (without specifying religion) ensured the inclusion of different women who sought to dress modestly (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011; The Economist, 2020). Although each group has its concept of modesty, there is generally a consensus on using blouses with sleeves and without a neckline, clothes that do not cling to the body, head coverings, and some restrictions on using long pants (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). Thus, the modest fashion market includes the three main Abrahamic religions — Islam, Judaism, and Christianity — and women who know their bodies and those who need to be in some professional role (The Economist, 2020). Although these women have numerous differences, they are united by the desire to dress modestly while following global fashion trends (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011).

According to Kiliçbay and Binark (2002), the emergence of the media favored the appearance of new consumption patterns that involve, among other things, offering fashion to a specific social group. As it spreads the values of the bourgeoisie, the media is considered a vector of the individualist democratic revolution

(Lipovetsky, 2009). As Erden (2019) portrays in Turkey, cultural-religious consumption was created by the rise of the bourgeois class, which propagated Islamic culture through different media (television, newspapers, magazines, and radio), giving it public visibility and legitimacy. Similarly, in Brazil, the expansion of the religious-cultural market linked to Evangelicals (religious individuals who most consume the modest fashion in the country) took place through the media (Belloti, 2009; Cunha, 2014). Thus, three media resources stand out: the radio, which, in the beginning, was used to spread the gospel and, more recently, contributed to the rise of the gospel music genre; TV programs with evangelical church services and the propagation of the Smilinguido character in several items; and social media (Belloti, 2009; Cunha, 2014).

More recently, the internet has been considered one of the main mediums for popularizing and developing the modest fashion market. According to Lewis and Tarlo (2011), the reach of modest brands grew through electronic commerce, and entrepreneurs' risks were minimized. This is because the online environment expands the target customers and reduces costs linked to sales points (rent, employees, physical infrastructure). In addition, the interaction platforms, such as websites, blogs, and forums, boosted discussions between women of different opinions and creeds about modest fashion — popularizing the term, practices, and products (Lewis & Tarlo, 2011). More individually, the internet offers countless opportunities for constructing identity, including for religious individuals (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). In this sense, European and Brazilian studies began to portray social media as spaces for manifesting religious identity (Ajala, 2017; Albuquerque et al., 2017; Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017).

According to Ajala (2017), the popularization of Islamic fashion is linked to the growth of modest fashion influencers, who are present on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Although such spaces promote this type of fashion, studies portray an identity conflict between religious individuals who use this medium and the configuration of non-binary identities (Ajala, 2017; Albuquerque et al., 2017). Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017), for example, claim that the line between modesty and immodesty is blurred due to the mediatization process. The digital influencers surveyed sometimes demonstrated one religious identity, sometimes a Western identity, and some occasionally combined the two. When studying evangelical women, Albuquerque et al. (2017) observed that consumption practices returned to the fast-fashion model, which inserted women in dichotomous spaces (religious and non-religious). On the other hand, Ajala (2017) states that social media has sought to promote an image of religious consumers with digital knowledge, in tune with fashion, which perfectly combines faith and modernity.

Many women use social media for tips on dressing while respecting religious precepts (Albuquerque et al., 2017), given that such clothes reflect a religious woman's identity in the secular world (Gonçalo, 2016). Such behavior can be reinforced since the main aesthetic discussion that arises for contemporary evangelical women is: "How to be beautiful without ceasing to be identified as a 'woman of God'?" (Alves, 2016, p. 15). Other religious authorities emerge throughout this enlargement of spaces for discussing and exposing religious precepts, for example, media pastors, Christian singers, and digital influencers (Cunha, 2014). These new actors become references for many as they stimulate pedagogical practices associated with religious behavior (Alves, 2016). For this reason, studies have referred to the challenges imposed by the media on religion (e.g., Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017).

Moreover, in recent years, the rise of 'artist capitalism' has imposed markets with individual experiences and symbolism that favor consumerism (Lipovetsky, 2009) — not exclusive to modest fashion but encompassing the entire fashion chain. As Lipovetsky (2009) points out, fashion may be more democratic because it encompasses all social classes but leads to compulsive consumption. To this end, 'artist capitalism' is not about mass production. The 'artist capitalist' is about the attention given to consumer pleasures through immaterial, qualitative, and symbolic approaches (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2015), which can be disseminated through social media. 'Artist capitalism' follows the neoliberal normative system in which prosperity is sought through individual interest only through the market (Mason, 2017).

Neoliberalism prevails in society, entrepreneurship emerges as an ideology (Carmo et al., 2021). For Tavares (2018), the term 'entrepreneur' is an appreciable label for precarious work and free of collective rights. However, the management industry does not disseminate the term in this way, where the entrepreneur is hailed as a hero, a free and creative subject (Wood Jr. & Paula, 2001). Thus, even if the individuals proclaim their autonomy, they remain part of significant neoliberal mechanisms (Dardot & Laval, 2016). It is in this problematized context that many of the actors in the modest fashion market are situated, involving labor exploitation by large companies (Fletcher, 2010), small entrepreneurs' individual accountability for their success/failure (Carmo et al., 2021), and the precariousness or poor remuneration of new careers, such as micro digital influencers (Villegas-Simón et al., 2022).

Given this context, there is room for research involving discussions about the modest fashion market and social media since much of the literature emphasizes the establishment of religious women's identity process in the media and the impacts of social media on religion. Therefore, the material

aspects of social media are still an obscure field in which this article seeks to advance theoretically. Furthermore, most literature dealing with modest fashion refers to the Islamic religion. Thus, the other groups that make up the ‘modest fashion’ label remain underrepresented. Looking at these individuals is as important as the Islamic population because, in some countries, such as Brazil, there are more Christian (Evangelical) individuals who wear modest clothing than individuals from other religious backgrounds (Islamic, Jewish) (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2012). In this sense, this article seeks to shed light on these other consumers who also cooperate in the growth and maintenance of the modest fashion market.

### Conceptual framework: Studying Instagram as a modest fashion market-thinking infrastructure

Highlighting the conceptualization of Bowker et al. (2019), we understand market-thinking infrastructures as

material and social infrastructures that configure entities, organize knowledge, classify things, configure preferences, and govern markets, which have three basic analytical elements: valuation, tracking, and governance (see Table 1). In addition to these conceptual characteristics, we highlight others that also make up market infrastructures, namely: practices (Araujo & Mason, 2021; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022); materially heterogeneous arrangements (Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020), composed of other systems or devices (Chakrabarti et al., 2016); interdependence and modularity (Kjellberg et al., 2019); and poetics (Larkin, 2013). Therefore, this perspective can understand Instagram because this platform was developed and structured to allow interaction between different actors through an algorithmic network that supports classifying and organizing information, data, and users. It was also developed and transformed by the practices of its users, its interdependence with other components, and its poetic (symbolic) dimension (Table 1). Therefore, we verified that, through Instagram, the modest fashion market could be built and formatted, transiting between digital and physical spaces.

**Table 1.** Analytical elements of market-thinking infrastructures.

Analytical elements	Definition
Valuation	Thinking infrastructures generate value by configuring entities, preferences, and classification — and it can develop new valuing methods (Bowker et al., 2019; Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020).
Tracking	Tracking is generally about measured and packaged virtual clicks and responses, which can make the tracked data valuable (Bowker et al., 2019).
Governance	Thinking infrastructures structure collective reasoning and distribute ‘power.’ Nevertheless, simultaneously, they can centralize power — creating paradoxes (Bowker et al., 2019; Kjellberg et al., 2019).
Practices	An infrastructure operates in a certain way and/or can be recognized from a set of practices (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022; Star, 1999).
Materially heterogeneous arrangements	A thinking infrastructure comprises numerous interconnected material elements, forming an arrangement (Chakrabarti et al., 2016; Kjellberg et al., 2019).
Interdependent and modular	It comprises several devices that can be added or removed (Chakrabarti et al., 2016; Kjellberg et al., 2019), and is, therefore, interdependent on them (Kjellberg et al., 2019).
Poetic	Poetics refers to the exaltation of the symbol (infrastructure) in the face of its function (Larkin, 2013). In this sense, infrastructure standards incorporate social and political arrangements and commitments (Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020), which may be associated with the symbolic nature of the infrastructure.

**Note.** Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Based on this theoretical framework, this study sought to understand the sociotechnical role of Instagram in the modest fashion market in Brazil, proposing a theoretical-empirical model for analyzing Instagram as a market-thinking infrastructure. To do so, we considered actors’ practices in the modest fashion market and followed their inclusion within the infrastructure (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022). Subsequently, we deepened the analysis to understand how information and items’ are configured,

organized, and classified in the infrastructure (Bowker et al., 2019). We highlight the heterogeneity, interdependence, and modularity of the devices that make up the infrastructure (Kjellberg et al., 2019). Finally, in the discussions, we deal with the poetic (symbolic) dimensions that are embedded in the present infrastructure (Larkin, 2013), highlighting mainly artist capitalism (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2015) and entrepreneurship imbricated in neoliberal ideology (Carmo et al., 2021).

## METHOD

### Research context

In this article, the scope of the modest fashion market (research object) is delimited to Brazil. There are two reasons for this choice. First, 92% of the Brazilian population follows an Abrahamic religion (IBGE, 2012). The Bible, Quran, and Torah's passages in which God makes clothes for man and woman to use after disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit reveal how clothes are essential. Among the Christian segments in Brazil, the Evangelicals stand out in clothing recommendations for their members (DataFolha, 2016). Second, the evangelical segment grew the most in the country (IBGE, 2012), attracting the attention of several brands and entrepreneurs. In this sense, the study's relevance goes beyond theoretically understanding the phenomenon of Instagram in constructing market niches, including discussions involving modest (Pentecostal) Brazilian fashion. No studies have measured the value of the modest Brazilian fashion market yet. However, it is possible to observe, whether in social or conventional media (e.g., reports), the sector's growth in recent years (Marçal, 2021). This research shows that the sector's growth is linked to the popularization of social media, such as Instagram.

According to Nielsen's research data, Brazil is one of the countries with the most digital influencers and followers globally — ranking first on Instagram (Nielsen, 2022). The search for digital influencers has been mainly motivated by influencers' positive impact on purchase intentions and brand evaluation (Naylor et al., 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the growth of digital influencers, according to data from Non-Stop (Salles, 2021). With a precarious job market (Cardoso et al., 2020) and an increase in the number of unemployed people during the pandemic (Gandra, 2021), many individuals saw social media as a way of generating income and social ascension. As observed in this research, some women interviewed began their careers as digital influencers during the pandemic to reinvent themselves in a period of social isolation and lack of employment and face-to-face opportunities.

### Data collection and analysis

The research data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation on the Instagram social network. The interviews took place with 27 agents from the modest fashion market, divided into four groups of actors: digital influencers (9); Christian female singers (4); shopkeepers (5); and consumers (9). All interviewed and observed subjects were women since the study's focus was the modest women's fashion market, given that women are the majority of individuals who call

themselves Evangelicals in the country (Balloussier, 2020). It should be noted that the research subjects lived in different regions of Brazil (Table 2). Considering that Instagram is more widespread among young people and that 12.4 million young Brazilians between 16 and 24 declare themselves Evangelicals (DataFolha, 2016), we chose to observe this sociotechnical infrastructure and not other social media, such as Facebook.

We consulted the literature on modest fashion to establish the groups of actors to be researched in this study. Thus, we observed the influence of e-commerce, digital influencers, and consumers. Unlike other research papers on the modest fashion market, the group of actors defined as 'Christian singers' was also included in this research. When observing the modest fashion market in Brazil, one can see the importance of Christian singers, as store owners invite them to sing in physical stores or organized live shows. Unlike influencers who focus on style tips, fashion, beauty, and varied topics of interest, Christian singers are seen as an 'instrument of God,' singing songs and hymns of praise and worship to God. As Cunha (2014) has already highlighted, gospel singers have contributed to the growth of the evangelical cultural market.

The subject interview selection was based on the peculiarities of each group of actors. Christian influencers and singers were chosen for their representation in the market, which meant having more than 5,000 followers on Instagram. Based on these requirements, the authors sent direct messages on Instagram to the influencers inviting them to participate in this research. Consumers were chosen through the snowball technique. The authors had contact with two evangelical women in Minas Gerais and São Paulo who participated in the research and indicated others to participate. Finally, the shop owners were chosen based on their time in the market — over six months. However, when we contacted the shopkeepers through Instagram and in person, it was noticed that they had been in the market longer. Each interviewee's profile is in Table 2. The subject's participation in this research was conditioned to the digital signature of the research's Term of Free and Informed Consent, guaranteeing anonymity for the participants.

The interview scripts for each actor group contained between 10 and 17 questions, which were further evaluated through a pre-test by an experienced construct market researcher. The scripts covered three central themes: (a) cultural-religious influence; (b) social media; (c) perspectives on the modest fashion market. Because they took place during the COVID-19 pandemic period (October/2020 to March/2021), all interviews were conducted online through Google Meet, Zoom, or WhatsApp applications, with the interviewee choosing the platform. Only four interviews were conducted asynchronously via WhatsApp, where

separate audios were sent for each script question. Three interviewees responded via audio, and only one responded in text format. The questions were sent on the same day, i.e., no dialogues occurred on other days.

We finalized the interviews using the criteria of speech repetition. Thus, when reaching the mark of six interviews

with consumers, three interviews with shopkeepers, seven interviews with digital influencers, and three interviews with Christian singers, traces of repetition were observed. For confirmation purposes, we conducted three interviews with consumers, two interviews with influencers, two interviews with shopkeepers, and one interview with a Christian singer.

**Table 2.** Profile of the interviewees.

No.	Pseudonym	Actors' type	Church	Region	No. of followers	Age	Market period	Interviews' type	Platform
1	Ana	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)	13,800			Synchronous	Zoom
2	Sarah	Digital influencer	Assembly of God	Northeast (PE)	37,200			Synchronous	Google Meet
3	Mariah	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Northeast (BA)	9,848			Synchronous	Zoom
4	Deborah	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	South (PR)	11,700			Synchronous	Zoom
5	Milca	Digital influencer	Assembly of God	Southeast (SP)	14,600			Synchronous	WhatsApp
6	Esther	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (MG)	12,400			Synchronous	WhatsApp
7	Keren	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)	18,100			Synchronous	WhatsApp
8	Rebeca	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)	11,300			Synchronous	WhatsApp
9	Ruth	Digital influencer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)	9,375			Asynchronous	WhatsApp
10	Abigail	Christian singer	Assembly of God	Northeast (PE)	38,700			Synchronous	Google Meet
11	Berenice	Christian singer	Pentecostal Church God is Love	Southeast (SP)	22,800			Synchronous	Google Meet
12	Hagar	Christian singer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	South (PR)	81,800			Asynchronous	WhatsApp
13	Noemi	Christian singer	Assembly of God	Midwest (GO)	40,900			Asynchronous	WhatsApp
14	Isabel	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)		19		Synchronous	Google Meet
15	Lia	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)		19		Synchronous	Google Meet
16	Acsa	Consumer	Pentecostal Church God is Love	Southeast (MG)		25		Synchronous	Google Meet
17	Raquel	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)		18		Synchronous	WhatsApp
18	Julia	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (MG)		28		Synchronous	WhatsApp
19	Lia	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (MG)		33		Synchronous	WhatsApp
20	Talita	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)		18		Synchronous	Google Meet
21	Adrielle	Consumer	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (MG)		18		Synchronous	WhatsApp
22	Marta	Consumer	Pentecostal Church God is Love	Southeast (MG)		27		Synchronous	Google Meet
23	Kesia	Shopkeeper	Christian Congregation in Brazil	South (PR)			2.5 years	Synchronous	Google Meet
24	Eunice	Shopkeeper	Christian Congregation in Brazil	South (PR)			2 years	Synchronous	Google Meet
25	Tamar	Shopkeeper	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (SP)			3 years	Synchronous	WhatsApp
26	Diná	Shopkeeper	Assembly of God	Southeast (MG)			6 years	Synchronous	WhatsApp
27	Jemima	Shopkeeper	Christian Congregation in Brazil	Southeast (MG)			3 years	Synchronous	WhatsApp

**Note.** Source: Elaborated by the authors.

We carried out the non-participant observation on Instagram during the same period of the interviews. The non-participant observation was done exclusively on the participants' profiles who agreed to participate in this research. In the observation, the sociotechnical aspects that involved actors in the modest fashion market stood out. We registered the observations in a field diary with 32 pages. In the field diary, we registered the first author's reflections and

screen captures that illustrated and supported the research findings.

For interpretation and analysis of the collected data, content analysis was used. The categories were defined after the study — as they emerged from the data. The analysis operationalization took place through the steps proposed by [Bardin \(1977\)](#). First, a superficial reading of

the data was carried out, in which possible categories were identified. Subsequently, we cut and allocated the data into the categories defined in the previous phase and (re) organized these categories. Finally, we treated the data and interpretations based on the theoretical connections proposed in the literature review. The entire analysis process was organized using spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel. In the end, three categories of analysis were compiled and will be discussed in the next section: (a) show/position; (b) aggregate, control, and enhance behavior; and (c) economic transaction mechanisms.

## RESULTS ANALYSIS

### To show/to position

Although Instagram's mission is related to interaction and sharing (Instagram, 2022), for this to happen, people need to position themselves on the network by configuring their user profiles. One of thinking infrastructures' functions is configuring preferences and classifying things (Bowker

et al., 2019). In addition to registering their usernames on Instagram, the users must show themselves and establish preferences. Users have the following resources: bio, profile picture, search and explore, feed publication, reels<sup>1</sup>, and stories<sup>2</sup>, to show activity or position themselves on social media.

The bio is a kind of succinct user biography. Some common characteristics were perceived among market actors in the profiles referring to the modest fashion market observed during the data collection period. Regarding non-content-producing users (consumers), the bio often uses inspirational phrases, professions, beliefs, and indications of relationships. On the other hand, when it comes to content-producing users (influencers or Christian singers), most bios are intended to present the mission of that profile, usually linked to solving a problem for their followers. Finally, there are still bios related to companies (shopkeepers), in which other social networks, shopping sites, contacts, missions, and target audiences (B2B/B2C) are usually mentioned. These characteristics are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Actors' Instagram bios in the modest fashion market.

Source: Adapted from Instagram by the authors.

The bio description and the profile picture (when a personal image is used) are a way of humanizing interactions on the social network and are linked to self-extension technologies. Furthermore, certain groups or social contexts have preferences for specific scripts and behaviors (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019), as exemplified by Figure 1. Although social interaction on social media is known for

its quantitative nature, it is possible to verify subjective or qualitative questions here.

Users utilize the 'search' tool to find people, companies, profiles, and topics of interest. It functions as a mechanism for standardizing user behavior — reflecting their interests and indicating possible matches. Users can

follow some specific subjects using hashtags (#). Thus, whenever a profile publishes something related to the topic and references the hashtag, the publication may be taken to the subject's followers. In this sense, in the Brazilian modest fashion market, it should be noted that there are many hashtags in influencers, singers, and shopkeepers' profiles, such as #modamodesta (#modestyfashion); #modacristã (#christianfashion), #modaevangelica (#evangelicalfashion), #saiamidi (#midiskirt), #ccbfashion; #assembleiadedeus (#assemblyofgod), #lookdodia (#lookoftheday), among others.

Singers and influencers considered the feed publications (profile page) a way to position themselves in front of their audience, share their worldview, and bring tips and content that appeal to the target audience. Regarding the different functionalities used, such as reels, stories, and polls<sup>3</sup>, the primary justification is to 'please Instagram's algorithm' so that the profiles and their content instantly and preferably reach a more significant number of users. The speech of the digital influencer Rebeca illustrates the assertion:

"When I see that I need to increase my engagement, I start making many stories; I do polls because it helps a lot. I also do a collab, which is taking pictures with other friends and sharing them with other friends, and they share with you too."

Here, unlike the bio, sociability is based on the social network's mathematical models (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019). The actions of 'showing oneself' and 'positioning oneself' begin to be quantified by engagement with other network users. These actions are measured by the 'correct' or 'acceptable' use of the platform's available resources. The Christian singer, Hagar, illustrates this point:

"I always try to interact, right? I always try to answer the people who follow me, although sometimes it is humanly impossible because there are too many messages ... Respond as much as I can to people and always be present, right?! Because those who don't show up aren't remembered, so I always try to be there in stories, talking, interacting, posting my day-to-day, posting something from my life, and showing looks."

From these standardized activities, users are grouped and classified into similar sets (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019) — as will be further detailed in the next topic.

## To aggregate, control, and value behavior

Once users position themselves on the network through the available resources, the infrastructure aggregates similar profiles through the 'search' tool, 'profile indications,' or network interaction based on the algorithm. In the modest fashion market, we observed that the actors are connected by their preferences assumed in the network (as exemplified in the speech of consumer Isabel). However, it should be noted that the network infrastructure will standardize user relationships (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019).

"... because, usually, when we follow a digital influencer on Instagram who doesn't follow the same doctrine, we feel out of place, even if digitally. So, by following Christian fashion digital influencers, we feel closer to each other and not alone in the boat."

Each market actor plays a specific role, even though there is no explicit agreement between the actors on how their actions will take place. Instagram's infrastructure contributes to demarcating spaces. Thus, consumers become spectators and evaluators of other profiles. Digital influencers inspire other users, influencing the purchase or use of a particular product through store partnerships. Christian singers inspire a Christian lifestyle, encouraging a particular product/service. However, it is possible to notice market actors' fluid actions in the network. For example, some shopkeepers sometimes behave like consumers and influencers. In other words, actors can be recognized as entity X, but they can perform activities of entities Y and Z. This type of behavior is accepted and even required in the social media infrastructure, such as Instagram — where the connection with the target audience is essential to generate engagement. Thus, the actors' variable ontology is corroborated since their objectives and interests are continuously reconfigured in their networks (Callon, 1998). Figure 2 illustrates the analysis.



**Figure 2.** Actors' fluid roles — Shopkeeper profile.  
Source: Adapted from Instagram by the authors.

As highlighted by [Alaimo and Kallinikos \(2019\)](#), the connections between user models and activities are set by the specific actions that can be computed, for example, follow, like, and save, among others. As interactions occur on Instagram, certain actors occupy a prominent place due to the engagement computed by the media. Thus, some digital influencers and Christian singers that were interviewed commented on creating partnerships (collabs) to increase their level of engagement to maintain their media position. It should be noted that partnerships between shopkeepers and influencers are established through the numbers computed by Instagram. The influencer's audience engagement is shown through the Media Kit tool, which registers the number of likes, comments, and saved items, among others. Digital influencer Sara's speech illustrates the assertion.

"So, stores look for that; they look for people who attract people. Because, in fact, they don't want followers. Followers are essential, but they want, in a way, buyers, people they see who are engaged and

attracted. For example, I pick up a piece and say: Guys, this piece here is essential; you have to have it in your wardrobe; you'll find it in that store. ... As I'm saying, the stores doing it right don't just consider the number of their followers, but the person's engagement, how long they stay there on their Instagram, posting, talking, and interacting with their followers."

Through computed data, Instagram can continuously adjust and redesign its operations to develop its services ([Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019](#)). With user growth on the network, some interviewees stated that they constantly need to post and use all available resources for Instagram to disseminate their content and recommend their profile — which, indirectly, underscores the economic objective that it serves ([Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019](#)). In addition, to favor the user's role (consumer) on the network, the influencers and shopkeepers promote contests and award prizes to followers who interact with the profile (comment, follow, share, save). Figure 3 illustrates the assertions.



**Figure 3.** Contests on the Instagram network.

Source: Adapted from Instagram by the authors.

Therefore, shopkeepers promote look competitions among their customers, rewarding them with clothing or shopping vouchers from the store. These contests are a way to promote the company among its followers, generate engagement with customers, make the store more 'popular' in the market segment, and, as mentioned earlier, maintain the user's role (consumer) in the media.

On the other hand, the contest promoted by Christian fashion digital influencers on Instagram called 'Journey with Bloggers' aims to regulate new influencers' work in this environment while maintaining partnerships with stores. In a way linked to the contests, some Instagram profiles carry out polls in stories called 'battles of looks.' In these battles, two photos of women with modest (Evangelical)

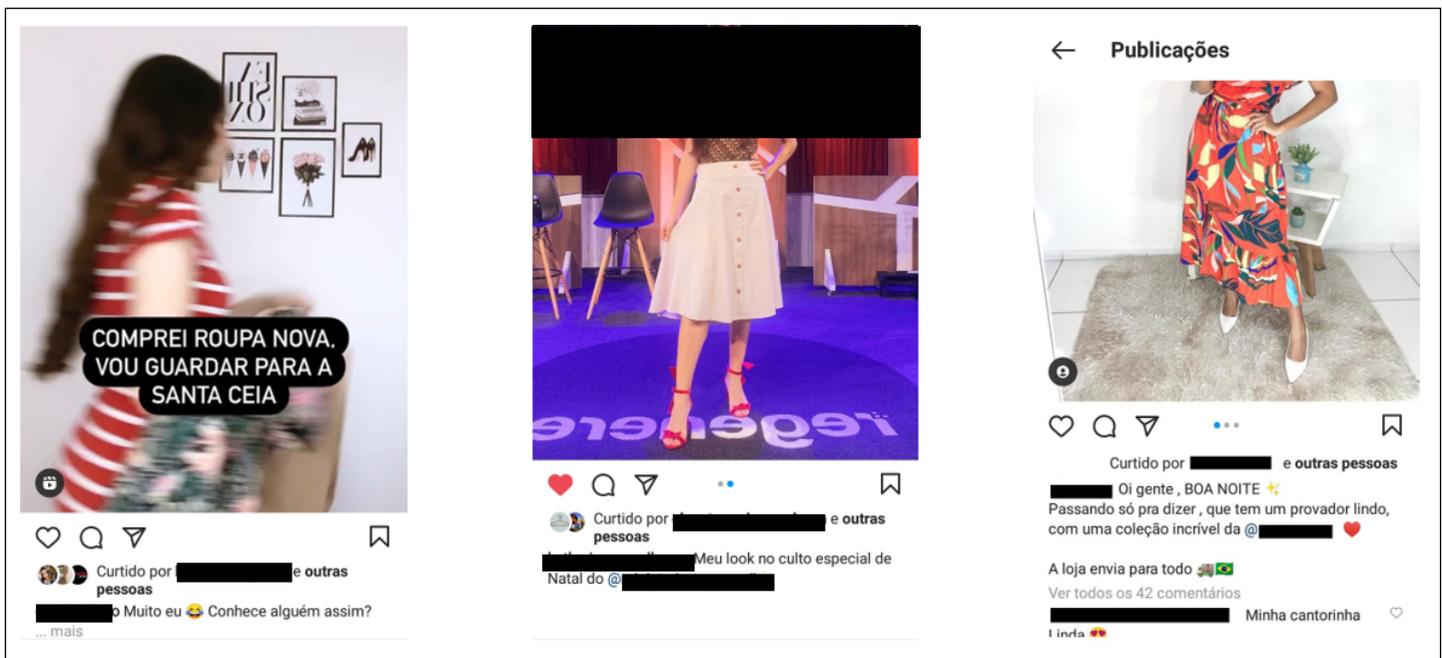
fashion looks compete for public approval. These battles are generally open to all market players, including consumers who only need to upload photos to the organizers. These battles directly influence the market since they give power to specific actors, reinforce the market's image and importance, and keep Pentecostal church customs alive. Thus, market actors' positions on Instagram and economic transactions are secured to a certain extent.

### Economic exchange mechanisms

Instagram offers different features to facilitate economic transactions. Users such as shopkeepers/companies may set up a shop on social media with product

photos, prices, and other pertinent information. However, in Brazil, the Instagram infrastructure does not complete the sale, being redirected to the company or retailer's official website. For users like 'buyers,' the 'save' feature is available, in which items can be stored in wish lists, facilitating future purchases.

In addition to these features that facilitate transactions, the role played by digital influencers and Christian singers contributes to the desire to 'buy.' For example, in the modest fashion market, influencers and singers expose their routines based on products and brands, making them attractive and essential, as shown in Figure 4. In this sense, Instagram can be recognized as an infrastructure for social support practices (Araujo & Mason, 2021; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022).



**Figure 4.** Influencers' and singers' routines.

Source: Adapted from Instagram by the authors.

As for the (partnership) transactions established between shopkeepers and digital influencers/Christian singers, one can see an influencer complaint about the payment method. This is because the shopkeepers want to pay for the work of the influencers by barter, i.e., exchanging products (clothes, shoes, bags, etc.). A current critical discussion refers to thinking infrastructures: such infrastructures are not neutral and participate in the distribution of responsibility between 'subjects — objects — subjects'; i.e., they exercise agency (Pujadas & Curto-Millet, 2019). As can be seen, there is a preference for the free market policy; however, there will likely be damage to workers' rights, as in the case of Uber (Pujadas & Curto-

Millet, 2019). Digital influencer Milca's speech illustrates the assertions.

"The point is that it's my job; I should charge for it. Some stores don't understand this, they think it's terrible that when we put it on, we charge a fee! Nobody works for free! I love what I do, but I also value what I'm doing. I'll tell you an example that happened to me. A particular store got in touch with me, saying that they wanted to partner and everything. I presented my Media Kit and charged my value, which is not something exorbitant; it is something that is really my value. And then the store

didn't want to pay. After a week, the store contacted me again and said: If I send you an item of clothing, and you do it at your house, will you still charge me? Then I replied: Of course, it's my time, my energy, I have to organize my photo corner; there are all the procedures."

In addition to items related to Instagram's infrastructure, for partnerships to be established, there must still be cohesion between the store (way of working, item quality, and style) and digital influencers/singers' style/doctrine. Christian singer Berenice's speech exemplifies this, as follows:

"I believe I engage people, and my audience trusts me, so I will not partner with a store I don't trust at work; it doesn't match my style. For example, there's no way I can appear out of nowhere with a photo in my feed, with an outfit that people will see that is not my style. ... I won't use something that doesn't make sense to me. If I'm influencing people to have a Christian style, having all this work to motivate, I'll make myself look bad."

This statement corroborates [Çalışkan and Callon \(2010\)](#), who understand the market as an economic arrangement composed of human beings and material, technical, and textual devices. Here, there is also an organization of the production and circulation of goods; the rules, infrastructures, narratives, knowledge, skills, confrontations, and power struggles ([Çalışkan & Callon, 2010](#)).

## RESULTS DISCUSSION

Although market construction studies defend the existence of a collective effort involving materiality and socialization to construct and understand markets ([Geiger et al., 2012](#)), there is still a fine line regarding the major cultural ideas ([Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2021](#)). Defending the material and social relationship, [Cochoy et al. \(2016\)](#) state that these forces are not mutually exclusive but contribute to market action, as they complement each other. In this sense, the religious market can be an example of social and material (sociotechnical) aspects.

It is observed that Instagram contributes substantially to maintaining Pentecostal church customs related to wearing modest clothing by women and even to the construction of the market (Figure 6). Instagram configures interactional spaces to expose religious culture, promoting ideas, practices, and objects (products), and, consequently, strengthens images of modest fashion markets. Considering a religious group with greater purchasing power and

incorporating capitalist discourses ([Cunha, 2014](#); [Erden, 2019](#)), Instagram can be seen as a democratic infrastructure by giving media spaces to groups that saw themselves as poorly represented by the traditional media.

Thus, this work's first contribution is recognizing that Instagram constitutes a democratic space for people to proclaim their traditions and identity. Instagram supports actors' activities in the cultural market, such as digital influencers, Christian singers, and shopkeepers. However, it is noticeable that this democratic space is only configured in such a way because the modest fashion actors comply with the neoliberal rules that shape this thinking infrastructure. In other words, valued metrics will culminate in purchases/sales, increase in value market, reach new markets, and increase the brand's power, among others. Although the numerical aspects of the network are observed, as highlighted by [Alaimo and Kallinikos \(2019\)](#), this research advances by scoring the subjective (social) aspects that move markets in this infrastructure. In addition to following Instagram's standards, market players must position themselves on the network, find their peers (aggregate), and offer an image compatible with what followers expect. The latter usually depends on providing cultural and symbolic content to generate a sense of belonging, moving the network.

Since consumption is viewed as a social insertion in society, religious women, often stigmatized or forgotten by conventional stores ([Ajala, 2017](#)), see social media as a way of showing their existence, their voice, their creed, and their way of life. Thus, showing a hybrid identity ([Kavakci & Kraepelin, 2017](#)) can be a way of saying that they also occupy other social spaces and have consumer desires and needs, just like secular women. Notably, all the shopkeepers interviewed started their businesses because they were also Evangelicals and found it challenging to find clothes that were adequate to the principles of modesty and kept up with fashion trends. The excerpt from the interviewed shopkeeper Jemima illustrates the statements.

"I, who was born in the church, saw how much evangelical fashion has changed. ... Today, I say that evangelical fashion is style, and... it's a much more expensive fashion, evangelical fashion is luxury ... it's different clothing. And being Evangelical today is status; before, it was bullying, like I suffered for wearing a skirt, for being out of fashion. Imagine, if it were today when I was young, I would be a knockout with the evangelical fashion we have today. ... When I was 12, or 13 years old, I had to send the seamstress to make a skirt because we couldn't find it. Denim skirts were a luxury for those who had them. Today it is not like that; evangelical fashion is status, there is much modeling, and there is even evangelical swimwear."



**Figure 5.** Pentecostal tradition maintenance through Instagram.

Source: Adapted from Instagram by the authors.

By positioning themselves on social networks, actors in this market seek to demystify opinions about their group, for example, ‘evangelical women are cheesy, tacky’ (as seen in influencers and shopkeepers’ profile reels). This excerpt from the influencer Maria illustrates that:

"And we, a while ago, were very criticized for not knowing how to dress, for being, shall we say, tacky, right?! There were many comments like that back in the day, right?!"

Many of these actors in the modest fashion market try to (re)build, through social media (e.g., Instagram), a new ‘elegant, modern’ image for this market, in which they want to be inserted. As consumer Raquel points out:

"... but since the issue of influencers is growing, it is showing without losing the essence. It is modernism in the evangelical fashion, and society is more open to this public."

Thus, the second contribution of this work is observed, centered on the understanding of how Christian influencers and singers carry out ‘fetishized’ practices, seeking to change the image of the market. In other words, many practices tend to renew images previously seen as excluding, such as romanticizing the Christian lifestyle, modernity in line with secular societies, and beautiful modesty. Such images strengthen cultural consumption and attract women outside

this social group, popularizing the modest fashion market. We can also infer that the modest fashion market incorporates the poetic dimension (innovation and modernity) (Larkin, 2013) in Instagram’s infrastructure. As the digital influencer Milca mentions:

"My purpose is to show that evangelical fashion is spectacular! It is to show women that they can dress decently and be beautiful, be elegant. I believe women don’t have to be vulgar to be worthy. With evangelical fashion, you dress decently, elegantly, and highly valued."

In the evangelical fashion market, we noticed that the actors’ actions complement each other, maintaining the market through social or material interactions, corroborating Çalışkan and Callon (2010) and Nøjgaard and Bajde (2021). We also verified that Christian influencers and singers strategically select photo locations and what to portray routinely, making it more beautiful and desirable. Thus, most photos are taken in tourist spots, high-end homes, and businesses prepared for the digital/virtual union. Therefore, market actor coordination on Instagram has contributed to popularizing this type of fashion, with a special offer of a greater variety of modest products encompassing secular innovations and fads. Thus, modest fashion becomes attractive to women who may or may not follow religious traditions.

The article’s last contribution is to portray the tensions between market actors regarding shopkeepers’ payment of services provided by influencers and Christian singers. This conflict occurs because the free market policy governs the market-thinking infrastructures; therefore, no guarantees are given to the subjects who make their living in this market. Pujadas and Curto-Millet (2019) have partly studied this issue, stating that such infrastructures should not be considered neutral since they distribute responsibility among users. Thus, it is questionable how much these infrastructures drive economic growth through poorly paid ‘labor’ functions with almost no regulation. As Villegas-Simón et al. (2022) warn, social media, through its supposed creative and performative freedom and monetization, makes being an influencer an attractive job. This topic becomes relevant since such infrastructures are indirectly positioned against the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN), specifically the eighth, which involves decent employment and economic growth. Therefore, recognizing this situation and the elaboration/implementation of public policies are necessary to revert this scenario. The hours digital influencers spend building a faithful community do not always bring them financial returns. Therefore, success in social media can be unfair (Villegas-Simón et al., 2022). Furthermore, we can understand that these unpaid working hours, in which influencers produce content to entertain users of this infrastructure, are a new form of exploitation and a way to maintain capitalism and these platforms’ financial gains (Villegas-Simón et al., 2022).

We believe this issue’s emergence is partly linked to the poor working conditions faced by Brazilian workers in recent years, aggravated by the pandemic. Thus, many women believed social networks could generate income and social ascension. In this sense, such women began to ‘play the game’ proposed by the infrastructure based on neoliberal rules. Precarious work may be an alternative to the crises of the 21st century, and the infrastructure’s apparent invisibility hides capitalist control (Villegas-Simón et al., 2022). On the

other hand, as Bauman (2004) points out, society primarily engages its members as consumers in late modernity. Having a normal life means consuming (Bauman, 2004). However, many evangelical women are portrayed as unable to do this because they are excluded from conventional stores, often resorting to sewists and other spaces to satisfy their needs/desires. Thus, social media provided this visibility and recognition, growing the modest fashion market.

Therefore, we are immersed in a culture that encourages consumption and, finally, that has entrepreneurship as an ideology. It should be noted that this work did not aim to discuss labor issues involving market-thinking infrastructures. However, these emerged spontaneously in the interviews. In this way, this work contributes by highlighting the power asymmetry between the small digital influencers in this thinking infrastructure and encouraging future research in this work context.

### MODEL PROPOSAL: SOCIAL MEDIA (INSTAGRAM) AS MARKET-THINKING INFRASTRUCTURE

This section uses the research findings to propose a theoretical-empirical model for analyzing social media as a market-thinking infrastructure. We explore the peculiar characteristics of thinking infrastructures, demonstrating how they contribute to building, shaping, and popularizing markets. First, we outlined the theoretical concepts referring to our research findings, discussing and relating them to market-thinking infrastructure theory (Table 3). Later, we illustrated the findings through a theoretical-empirical model of social media as a market-thinking infrastructure, using Instagram as an example (see Figure 6).

The data analysis from this research allowed the development of three new concepts that can help understand market-thinking infrastructures, as highlighted and explained in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Theoretical concepts present in market-thinking infrastructures.

Concept	Sub-elements	Definition
To show/to position	Social practices and valuation (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022; Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020)	It concerns users’ obligation to present themselves on the network, establish preferences and opinions, and position themselves.
To aggregate and value behaviors	Tracking, governance, and poetics (Bowker et al., 2019; Larkin, 2013)	It concerns the ability to bring together similar profiles through positioning, tracking clicks and virtual responses, quantifying interactions, and demarcating power.
Economic exchange	Interdependent and modular (Kjellberg et al., 2019)	It concerns the different available resources used to facilitate and encourage economic exchanges.

**Note.** Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As noted in the interviews, individuals must subscribe to the network to be part of the social media infrastructure, which requires them to ‘display/position’ via preference setting. These activities can be valuation actions because infrastructures can produce value by configuring preferences, classifications, and user/data configurations (Bowker et al., 2019; Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020). In this sense, we can observe that the adopted positions depend on users’ social practices arising from the physical environment — returning to the practices inscribed in the infrastructures (Araujo & Mason, 2021; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022). Thus, social practices and ‘values’ from the physical environment are transferred to the digital one. However, these transfers do not guarantee the maintenance of these values, which go from qualitative attributes linked to evangelical women’s uses and customs and modest fashion to quantitative valuation systems present in this infrastructure, such as the number of likes, comments, ‘saved,’ and others forms of engagement (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019).

Although individuals are named network users, it is observed that as soon as they start to interact on the network, they become actors with agency capacity to shape realities and even markets. The social media infrastructure aggregates similar profiles through tracking clicks and virtual responses (Bowker et al., 2019). Thus, infrastructure demarcates spaces and distributes power (Bowker et al., 2019; Kjellberg et al., 2019). It should be noted that this entire process takes place online.

One can also see the continuous transfer of elements from the physical world (usages and customs) to the online environment and their transformations. Thus, market actors such as influencers and Christian singers resize and modify the modest fashion market images, exhibiting greater modernity, innovation, and luxury. Thus, we can infer that social media’s poetic dimensions (Larkin, 2013) specifically Instagram, extend to its users and markets represented by them. Thus, the modest fashion market is shaped by Instagram’s infrastructure, becoming digitally and physically popular as the infrastructure allows for economic exchanges.

It should be noted that there is a combination between the physical world and the online world represented in social media. This resumes one of the basic characteristics of market-thinking infrastructures: the heterogeneity of arrangements (Kjellberg et al., 2019). Thus, it is possible to identify in Instagram, in particular, numerous material elements, such as reels, stories, and hashtags, which imply the popularization of the market, providing ‘economic exchange.’ In addition, the various devices used by the infrastructure to be continuously involved in its users’ social practices, such as notifications,

rewards for engagement, and recommendations, among others, can be seen in the interviewees’ statements. Such devices resume infrastructure characteristics like interdependence, and modularity, which concerns adding or subtracting devices in a larger infrastructure (Kjellberg et al., 2019).

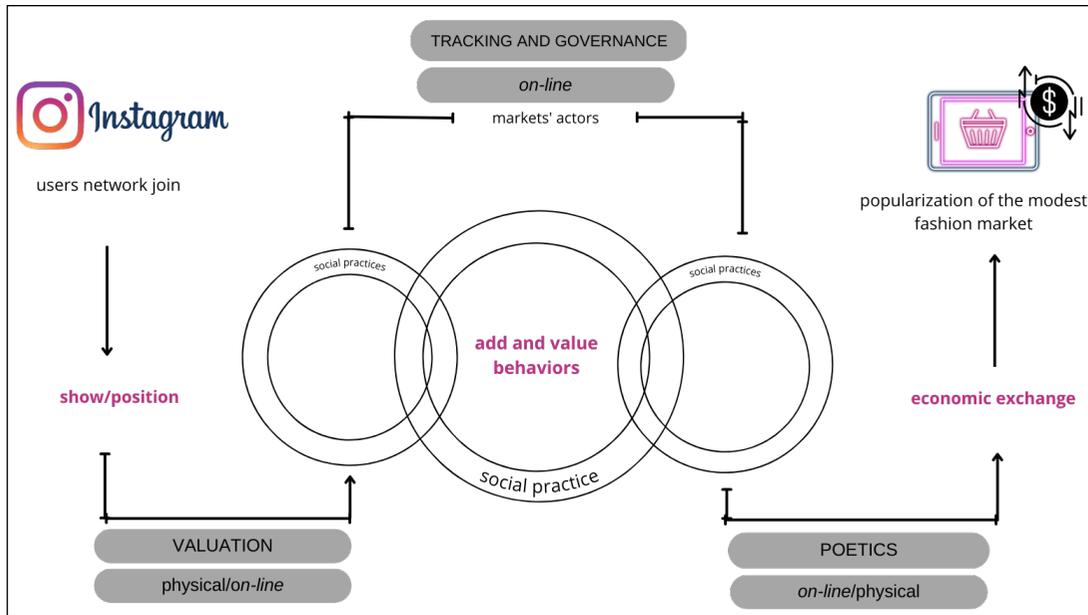
Figure 6 demonstrates the organization of social media as a market-thinking infrastructure. We emphasize that, although Instagram is portrayed, the built model can be used in different types of social media since these concepts (devices) are relevant to increase the community and its interaction, obtaining a valuable data asset for decision-making and scenario forecasting, and increasing market popularity. However, it is worth noting that the way the infrastructure organizes these devices (display; aggregate; and economic transactions) can partially differ from Instagram — the object analyzed in this research. Thus, showing/positioning oneself or carrying out economic transactions can differ from one social media to another, even if the concepts (devices) are present in all these types of infrastructure.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Theoretical implications

These research findings are relevant from both a theoretical and a managerial point of view. Its theoretical implications are threefold. First, we reverberate Araujo e Mason (2021) by noting how the concept of market infrastructures offers a broad notion to investigate markets and the innovations that occur in their domains. In addition, we found that few studies explore and describe markets from this perspective (Araujo & Mason, 2021).

Second, we move forward by verifying how the poetic dimensions of infrastructure (Larkin, 2013) are transmitted to social practices, products/services, and users that are part of them (e.g., modest fashion market). As we show in this article, the interviewees use Instagram to rewrite modest women’s images in the market and even their societal role. To this end, they expose a routine based on modern, luxurious products/services, high-end homes, and tourist environments, which insert them into different spaces and give them the authority to use this thinking infrastructure. Thus, we contribute so that market construction studies increasingly portray, in an intertwined way, the interaction between human and non-human elements in market conception and development (Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2021). Both exercise agency with each other — acting and reacting according to their performance and change.



**Figure 6.** Social media (Instagram) as market infrastructure.  
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Third, we advance in proposing concepts about market-thinking infrastructures, giving special attention to social media. Thus, we conceptualize three new elements present in these infrastructures: showing/positioning, adding and valuing behaviors, and economic transactions, as well as explaining this infrastructure’s functioning in market popularization. Thus, we contribute with recent literature (Araujo & Mason, 2021; Bowker et al., 2019; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2022; Kjellberg et al., 2019), which have explored how to understand and describe markets.

### Practical implications

From a managerial point of view, our findings help market actors understand the infrastructure’s influence on their actions. Given infrastructure response expectations, we instigate market actors to consider how frequently they act. In Instagram’s case, we see how neoliberal ideology, the quantification of social interactions, can determine the success of a given user on the network. Although apparently democratic, social media, such as Instagram, promote profiles that bring more quantifiable results, i.e., those that follow neoliberal standards, like high productivity rates (content in various formats: reels, feed publication, stories), and that have a high engagement rate. In addition, we emphasize how social practices are present and should not be left aside. As we can see, social practices and cultural issues are fundamental to positioning oneself on the network and allowing user combination.

We indicate special attention to the infrastructure’s capacity to connect with others (Araujo & Mason, 2021). Instagram has grown because it allows connection with other networks to carry out economic exchanges. This means that market actors/promulgators need to develop and extend their actions in infrastructures that allow the flow of exchanges not only within the limits of their infrastructure but that can expand to others, such as financial and banking institutions. Although Instagram did not initially emerge to support economic exchange, we can infer that the increase in unemployment, the cost of living, the precarious working conditions, and the spread of the entrepreneur’s cult changed this infrastructure’s purpose. Thus, we understand that once the Instagram infrastructure connects with other thinking infrastructures (websites, WhatsApp Business, marketplaces), it can also be co-responsible for the interactions and precarious conditions that arise from them. In this sense, we draw public policymakers’ attention to the co-responsibility of thinking infrastructures in maintaining ideologies or precarious work situations. It is important to emphasize that government action is necessary to regularize and standardize market actors’ interactions to guarantee rights/duties, social welfare, and justice.

Finally, we corroborate the research findings by Almeida et al. (2018) by demonstrating the importance of opinion leaders, here influencers, and Christian singers, in social media engagement. We advance this last literature by demonstrating how modest fashion retail companies form

partnerships with opinion-forming individuals to carry out economic exchange and to maintain in the market. In addition, we describe a series of resources used by market actors to carry out offers, promotions, and market popularization, which can be applied in other markets, such as content marketing (lifestyle tips), association with personal branding (digital influencer), influencer competition, raffles for customers, among others.

## Limitations and directions for future research

Despite theoretical and practical implications and contributions, this study is not free of limitations. One of this study's limitations is the restriction of profiles observed on Instagram. Following the ethical regulations regarding observing non-participants in social media, the study's scope was restricted to the interviewees' profiles. Another limitation is the average participant age in this study, which predominantly highlighted young women (consumers, singers, and influencers). Only one consumer and the shopkeepers were over 30 years old. By portraying this specific profile, market descriptions need to be viewed with caution. With this in mind, we recommend researching the behavior of middle-aged modest fashion consumers to understand whether social media influences their choices.

We suggest that future studies investigate virtual and face-to-face interaction through market infrastructures since there is a migration of personal or organizational narratives in social media, which was accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, making a tendency for subsequent years. In the 19th century, circulation infrastructures were growing, while in the 21st century, we find thinking structures growing (Bowker et al., 2019). In the coming years, it is expected that infrastructures will integrate both because of greater resource optimization or because this is the direction of social interactions. Furthermore, these research suggestions are based on Nøjgaard and Bajde (2021), who argue for the interaction between market system dynamics and constructivist market studies to understand markets.

Bearing in mind the problematized context that many actors in the fashion market find themselves in, such as unhealthy conditions, individual accountability of small entrepreneurs, and poor remuneration for new careers (Carmo et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2010; Villegas-Simón et al., 2022), we suggest carrying out research that studies such issues from a sociotechnical perspective. Infrastructures are often seen as 'neutral,' incapable of acting. However, we observed in this research that they standardize the actors' actions and, consequently, shape markets and social relations (work, political, environmental, and social). Thus, we encourage looking at infrastructure as something that exercises power and takes a political stand (Pujadas & Curto-Millet, 2019). In this sense, future research can explore how ideologies and practices are intertwined in the market infrastructure, as well as how it is possible to create more ethical infrastructures with social well-being.

Despite the limitations, the study provides the reader with an understanding of market-thinking infrastructures and the construction of the modest fashion market. Finally, we conclude that the standardization designed to 'neutralize the network's agency power' in the users' actions can have the opposite effect, (re)affirming the political and symbolic elements surrounding it. Instagram can be considered a democratic space if its users understand and apply its neoliberal rules. Since actors in the modest fashion market act according to Instagram standards, this market becomes visible on social media, becoming popularized beyond digital spaces.

## NOTES

- 1 Reels: feature that allows you to create 30-second videos, which can appear in stories, in the 'explore' tab and in the Instagram feed.
- 2 Stories: feature that makes photos, videos and polls published by the profile available for 24 hours.
- 3 Polls: feature that allows interaction between users, through stories, with questions and alternatives.

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## Authors' Contributions

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## Data Availability

The authors claim that all data used in the research have been made publicly available through the Harvard Dataverse platform and can be accessed at:



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