

A Critical Review of the Psychology of Social Media Influencers in Digital Consumerism

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Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed the field of marketing and consumer behavior, with social media influencers (SMIs) playing pivotal roles in shaping digital consumption patterns. Understanding the psychological mechanisms that underpin influencer impact is crucial in decoding modern consumerism. This study critically reviewed the psychological dimensions that explain how and why social media influencers affect consumer choices, attitudes, and behaviors in digital marketplaces. The major aim of the study was to explore key psychological theories relevant to influencer-consumer dynamics while examining the intersection of identity, trust, and authenticity in influencer activities. The study employed a literature-based critical review that synthesized peer-reviewed studies from psychology, marketing, and media communication. The review employed a conceptual mapping approach to identify recurring themes such as, theoretical models (e.g., social identity theory, parasocial interaction, and cognitive dissonance), and gaps in current research. Situated in “Parasocial Interaction Theory”, “Social Comparison Theory”, and “Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)”, the study explored how consumer alignment with influencers' identities and

perceived autonomy in choices drive digital engagement. The analysis revealed that perceived authenticity, emotional connection, and social proof are primary psychological handles influencing consumer trust and purchase behavior. The study identified a lack of cross-cultural psychological analysis and long-term impact studies and recommended that research should integrate longitudinal psychological tracking, cross-cultural dimensions, and neurocognitive tools to deepen understanding emphasizing policy implementations around digital literacy and ethical advertising.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Consumer Psychology, Digital Consumerism, Parasocial Interaction, Authenticity

Introduction

The rising influence of social media personalities in consumer culture is reshaping how individuals make purchasing decisions. Unlike traditional celebrities who are often distant from their audiences, social media influencers have created a model of accessibility that nurtures emotional connection and trust. This trust, as Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) observed, stems from their ability to present themselves as relatable figures while maintaining aspirational lifestyles. The psychological foundations of this relationship are strongly tied to parasocial interaction and Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) demonstrated that when followers perceive intimacy and familiarity with influencers, they are more inclined to accept product recommendations. This kind of bond creates a persuasive effect that extends beyond logical evaluation of a product's quality, working instead through emotion and perceived friendship. The fact that consumers may trust an influencer's endorsement more than a brand's official advertisement points at the unique psychological leverage influencers hold.

Hudders and De Jans (2022) noted that adolescents, in particular, are highly vulnerable due to their developmental stage of identity formation. Their susceptibility raises ethical concerns, especially when influencer marketing is embedded in entertainment or lifestyle content without clear disclosure. The impact of this subtle form of advertising on young people's consumer behavior and self-perception makes the study of influencer psychology urgent and socially significant. This study critically reviews the psychological mechanisms underpinning influencer-consumer relationships within digital consumerism. It does this to explore how authenticity, parasocial bonds, and identity formation shape consumer decisions while also considering the ethical challenges that arise. Examining these dynamics, is an important step towards contributing to ongoing debates on the power and responsibility of influencers in shaping modern consumer behavior as well as the psychological dimension of influence in consumer behaviour.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of this study is to:

- i. Analyze the role of parasocial relationships in consumer decision-making. Other specific objectives are to:
- ii. Assess the importance of authenticity and credibility in influencer marketing.

- iii. examine the susceptibility of vulnerable demographics, especially adolescents.
- iv. Evaluate the broader ethical challenges associated with influencer-driven consumerism.

Research Questions

- i. How do social media influencers psychologically shape consumer behavior in the context of digital consumerism?
- ii. What role do parasocial relationships play in influencing consumer trust and purchase decisions?
- iii. How does perceived authenticity and credibility affect the effectiveness of influencer marketing?
- iv. Why are adolescents and young adults more susceptible to the influence of social media personalities?
- v. In what ways does influencer marketing blur the line between genuine recommendation and covert advertising?
- vi. What ethical challenges does the psychology of influencer-driven consumerism present for both consumers and marketers?

Statement of the Research Problem

The growing presence of social media influencers has changed the psychology of consumer behavior in significant ways. What was once a straightforward relationship between brands and consumers is now mediated by individuals who leverage personal storytelling, visual appeal, and perceived intimacy to market products. Influencers rely on their ability to appear authentic, which creates trust that often surpasses traditional forms of advertising. Ki, Cuevas, Chong, and Lim (2020) observed that, consumers are not simply buying products but aligning themselves with lifestyles represented by influencers, turning consumption into a matter of identity construction.

This situation presents a research problem because consumer susceptibility to influencer persuasion is not fully understood. While influencers generate strong emotional connections, their commercial motives can conflict with the well-being of their audiences. Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen, and Boyland (2019) showed that children exposed to influencer endorsements were more likely to make unhealthy food choices, illustrating how subtle persuasion can directly affect behavior. The psychological effects extend beyond food marketing, raising concerns about the broader vulnerability of young and impressionable audiences.

Another dimension of the problem lies in the blurred boundaries between genuine interaction and covert marketing. Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) pointed out that the persuasive power of influencers often rests on undisclosed sponsorships, which compromise transparency and undermine informed consumer decision-making. This raises ethical questions about whether audiences can distinguish authentic recommendations from paid promotions. The problem is further complicated by cultural and contextual variations. Here, Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) found that in collectivist contexts such as China, the trust placed in influencers is closely linked to social bonds and community belonging. This suggests that the psychological processes underpinning influencer persuasion are not

universal, and global consumerism must be examined through diverse cultural lenses. The fundamental research problem therefore centers on understanding how psychological mechanisms such as trust, authenticity, and parasocial interaction shape consumer behavior under the influence of social media personalities. Alongside its ethical risks of covert marketing.

Literature Review

Consumers often engage with influencers in ways that resemble friendship, despite the interaction being one-sided. Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019, p. 570) observed that “perceived intimacy and familiarity with influencers” enhances persuasion, as followers treat recommendations as though they come from trusted friends. This intimacy functions at the psychological level by bypassing rational evaluation and tapping into emotions. What makes this significant is not just the relationship itself but how it creates an environment where brand endorsements become personal rather than commercial.

When followers consume influencer content for leisure, they also encounter subtle endorsements rooted in everyday storytelling. Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) showed that many consumers fail to recognize these endorsements as advertisements when disclosures are vague, which deepens the persuasive effect. The intimacy, therefore, raises questions about autonomy since consumers are less likely to resist persuasion from someone they feel they “know.”

Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020, p. 265) argued that “authenticity rather than overt commercialism” drives positive consumer responses. In practice, this means that when influencers appear genuine in their endorsements, consumers are more likely to see their recommendations as trustworthy. The credibility of an influencer is therefore inseparable from how convincingly they maintain a balance between personal identity and commercial activity. This point is extended by Ki, Cuevas, Chong, and Lim (2020, p. 905) described influencers as “human brands” who attach themselves to followers by fulfilling psychological needs for belonging and inspiration. Once credibility is lost, persuasion weakens, and followers disengage. The implication is that authenticity functions both as a psychological mechanism and a strategic business model.

The psychological effect of influencers is not uniform across audiences. Some groups, particularly children and adolescents, are more susceptible. Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen, and Boyland (2019) conducted a trial showing that children exposed to influencer promotions consumed more unhealthy foods compared to those who were not. The study demonstrates how subtle endorsements can have direct behavioral consequences. What makes this troubling is that children may not even recognize that they are being marketed to, making them especially vulnerable.

Hudders and De Jans (2022) added that adolescents are at a developmental stage where identity formation is ongoing, which increases susceptibility to external cues from influencers. The connection between influencer lifestyles and adolescent aspirations creates a strong pull that may override critical thinking. Vulnerability here is not just about age but about the psychological need to belong and construct identity in a digital culture dominated by influencers. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) explained that influencers succeed because they

represent “ordinary people living aspirational lives.” This relatability makes consumers feel that by adopting endorsed products, they are also adopting parts of the influencer's lifestyle. Consumption, therefore, becomes symbolic, as individuals use products to express who they are or who they want to become.

Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) further this idea in their study of YouTube influencers, noting that credibility is shaped by perceived expertise and attractiveness, both of which contribute to consumer identification. When consumers see themselves reflected in influencers, they are more likely to align with their consumption patterns. The identity link transforms the influencer-consumer relationship into one where products function as cultural and psychological symbols. While influencers create powerful psychological effects, the ethical implications cannot be ignored. Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) noted that when disclosure of sponsorship is unclear, consumers often fail to recognize the persuasive intent, raising concerns about deception. The lack of transparency undermines consumer autonomy, particularly when individuals believe they are making independent decisions while in fact responding to covert advertising.

Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) found that in collectivist societies like China, credibility is tied closely to community belonging and shared values. This differs from individualist cultures, where uniqueness and personal identity are stronger motivators. The implication is that, influencer strategies cannot be understood in isolation from cultural factors, as the psychological triggers of persuasion vary across societies. García-Rapp and Ekström (2022) took a critical stance, arguing that influencer culture commodifies intimacy by transforming personal interactions into transactional exchanges. This commodification distorts the line between genuine connection and commercial exploitation, making followers complicit in a system where relationships are marketed as products. Such arguments capture the ethical tension at the heart of influencer psychology: while influencers thrive on authenticity and intimacy, these qualities are often strategically manufactured to serve commercial goals.

Theoretical Framework

The psychology of social media influencers can be better understood by situating the discussion in established theories that explain how consumers process influence and persuasion. This study harps on the following frameworks:

Parasocial Interaction Theory

The concept of parasocial relationships explains how consumers form one-sided emotion bonds with media figures. Horton and Wohl first described this dynamic in 1956, but it has taken on new significance with the rise of influencers. Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019, p. 570) noted that “perceived intimacy and familiarity with influencers” encourages followers to accept recommendations as though they came from close friends. This explains why influencer marketing is often more persuasive than traditional advertising where the consumer is not just listening to a spokesperson but engaging with someone they feel they know personally.

A recent work supports the relevance of this theory in digital spaces as Durmaz and Ceylan (2025, p. 41) argued that parasocial relationships enable influencers to occupy a “hybrid role

between celebrity and peer,” which enhances their power over consumer decision-making. In this sense, parasocial interaction theory helps explain both the trust and the vulnerability that characterize consumer responses to influencers.

Social Comparison Theory

Another relevant framework to the study is social comparison theory, which explains how individuals evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others. Festinger (1954) proposed this theory to account for the motivations behind upward or downward comparison. On social media, influencers become benchmarks for idealized lifestyles, shaping what followers aspire to achieve. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) observed that consumers are drawn to influencers because they present themselves as “ordinary people living aspirational lives,” which invites upward comparisons that can influence purchasing behavior. Social comparison also accounts for vulnerabilities among adolescents and young adults. Hudders and De Jans (2022) are of the belief that adolescents engage heavily in comparisons during identity formation, making them more vulnerable to influencer portrayals of beauty, wealth, or lifestyle. This shows that influencer persuasion is not only about product features, but also about the social meaning attached to consumption.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The elaboration likelihood model provides a useful framework for understanding how consumers process influencer messages. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), persuasion occurs through either the central route, which involves careful consideration of arguments, or the peripheral route, which relies on cues such as attractiveness or credibility. Influencer marketing often operates through the peripheral route, where the attractiveness, relatability, or authenticity of the influencer acts as the main persuasive cue. Ananda and Putra (2025, p. 9) explained that “influencer credibility and parasocial relationships” work as peripheral cues that reduce cognitive resistance to advertising. This theoretical lens clarifies why influencer marketing can be effective even when followers are aware of commercial motives. It also underpins concerns about transparency, since consumers may process influencer endorsements without engaging in critical evaluation.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative secondary research design to investigate the psychology of social media influencers in digital consumerism. Unlike primary research that collects new data, secondary research involves analyzing and synthesizing existing scholarly studies, reports, and datasets to generate new insights. Johnston (2017, p. 619) explained that, secondary research is “an efficient and cost-effective means of harnessing the value of existing knowledge for answering new questions.”

Research Design

The study employs a narrative synthesis approach to bring together insights from different bodies of literature. Greenhalgh *et al.* (2005, p. 417) described narrative synthesis as a method that “relies primarily on the use of words and text to summarize and explain findings across

multiple studies.” This design is appropriate because it allows for the integration of psychological, cultural, and ethical perspectives on influencer marketing.

Data Sources and Sampling

The data for this study are drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and empirical studies indexed in scholarly databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed. Selection criteria include relevance to influencer psychology, consumer behavior, and digital marketing ethics. Only studies published between 2010 and 2025 are included to capture the rise of influencer culture. Purposive sampling guides the inclusion of literature, ensuring that sources directly address parasocial relationships, authenticity, identity, and ethical implications in digital consumerism.

Data Collection

Data collection involves identifying, reviewing, and extracting relevant findings from the selected studies. Snyder (2019, p. 334) emphasized that, the strength of secondary research lies in its ability to organize and interpret fragmented evidence into coherent insights. The collection process includes reading full texts, underscoring core arguments and grouping findings under key psychological themes such as parasocial interaction, social comparison, and credibility.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is applied to the extracted findings. While Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as a flexible tool for identifying patterns across qualitative data, this becomes well suited for the study. In this study, themes such as trust, authenticity, vulnerability, and ethics are developed from recurring insights in the literature. The use of thematic analysis ensures that the research captures both convergence and divergence in existing scholarship, making it possible to identify gaps and propose new directions.

Ethical Considerations

Although secondary research does not involve direct human participants, ethical principles still apply. The study ensures accuracy by using only credible, peer-reviewed sources and by properly attributing all major ideas to its owners. Tripathy (2013) observed that, maintaining integrity in secondary research involves acknowledging original authorship and avoiding misrepresentation of findings. This is particularly important since the study deals with sensitive issues of consumer vulnerability and ethical concerns in marketing.

Findings and Discussion

The synthesis of secondary sources revealed that the psychology of social media influencers in digital consumerism is best understood through five overlapping themes which are: parasocial interaction, authenticity and credibility, vulnerability of specific groups, identity and lifestyle construction, and the ethical challenges embedded in this form of marketing. Each of these themes demonstrates how influencers affect consumer decision-making, while also exposing tensions in trust, agency, and responsibility as elucidated below.

Parasocial Interaction and Emotional Intimacy

Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers thrive on producing content that fosters familiarity and closeness. Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019, p. 570) found that “perceived intimacy and familiarity with influencers” causes followers to treat endorsements as if they came from trusted friends. This finding underscores the psychological weight of one-sided relationships, where consumers perceive a mutual bond even though the influencer remains distant. Lou and Kim (2019) expanded on this by observing that parasocial interaction not only increases consumer trust but also motivates active behavior such as sharing content and recommending products to peers. This indicates that the intimacy created by influencers transforms followers into agents of brand promotion, showing how trust spills over from private feelings to public action.

The significance of parasocial bonds lies in their capacity to bypass critical resistance. When consumers feel emotionally close to influencers, they are less likely to question the persuasive intent behind endorsements. Durmaz and Ceylan (2025, p. 41) argued that influencers occupy a “hybrid role between celebrity and peer,” which makes their messages particularly effective. Traditional advertising is often distrusted precisely because its persuasive intent is obvious. Influencers blur this line, presenting their content as authentic life-sharing while entrenching sponsored messages. The result is a situation where persuasion works not through rational argument but through the affective pull of intimacy. The findings consistently show that parasocial relationships act as a psychological gateway that normalizes consumerist influence.

Authenticity and Credibility as Psychological Drivers

Closely tied to parasocial interaction is the issue of authenticity, which consistently appears as a decisive factor in the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020, p. 560) argued that authenticity is negotiated through “passion-driven authenticity” and “transparent authenticity.” The first relies on showing enthusiasm and commitment to content creation, while the second depends on openly acknowledging sponsorships. Both signal to consumers that the influencer is genuine, thereby sustaining trust even in the presence of commercial motives. This finding illustrates that authenticity is not about the absence of persuasion but about the perception of honesty in persuasion.

Ki, Cuevas, Chong, and Lim (2020) provided empirical evidence that credibility and authenticity strongly predict purchase intentions, suggesting that consumers evaluate the messenger more than the message. Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) confirmed that credibility operates as a heuristic shortcut, enabling followers to rely on influencers' endorsements without expending cognitive effort on evaluating the product itself. These findings demonstrate that authenticity functions as a psychological currency in digital consumerism.

The challenge, however, is that authenticity is fragile and easily undermined. When influencers over-commercialize their content or fail to disclose partnerships transparently, followers perceive them as insincere. García-Rapp and Ekström (2022) described this as the commodification of intimacy, where personal sharing is converted into a profit-driven activity. Consumers are increasingly aware of this commodification, yet studies show they often continue to engage because the relational bond outweighs doubts about motives. This paradox

points at a psychological complexity where authenticity is less about objective truth and more about the perception of consistency between an influencer's persona and their endorsements. This also reveals cultural variations in how authenticity is interpreted, as followers may value influencers who demonstrate alignment with cultural values more than those who emphasize individual passion. This suggests that authenticity is socially constructed and that the mechanisms sustaining it may differ across regions. However, the dominant literature remains Western-centric, leaving an empirical gap in how African consumers for instance, negotiate authenticity under local cultural pressures.

Vulnerability of Adolescents and Young Adults

Another critical finding is the disproportionate susceptibility of adolescents and young adults to influencer persuasion. Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen, and Boyland (2019) demonstrated this vividly in a randomized trial showing that children exposed to influencer-promoted food brands consumed significantly more calories than those who were not. The study revealed that persuasion operates subconsciously, influencing behavior even when children lack explicit recognition of the endorsement. Hudders and De Jans (2022) confirmed this trend by showing that adolescents often fail to distinguish between sponsored and non-sponsored content, making them particularly vulnerable.

The vulnerability of this demographic is explained by developmental psychology. Here, adolescents are in a critical stage of identity formation, making them highly sensitive to social comparison. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019, p. 1434) observed that micro-celebrities present themselves as “ordinary people living extraordinary lives,” inviting upward comparisons that shape consumption desires. Young consumers aspire to replicate these lifestyles, often without questioning the feasibility or sustainability of such aspirations. Unlike adults who may exercise critical resistance, younger consumers are less equipped to navigate the blurred boundaries of commercial and personal content.

Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) pointed out that disclosure language matters significantly, with vague disclosures failing to alert younger audiences to the persuasive nature of content. The cumulative evidence shows that adolescents and young adults are not just another consumer segment but a particularly vulnerable group whose psychological development amplifies the impact of influencer marketing. What remains underexplored is how protective mechanisms can be designed to mitigate this vulnerability. Most studies identify the problem but stop short of proposing solutions. This absence of practical strategies captures an important research gap with policy implications, particularly in non-Western contexts where regulatory oversight may be weaker.

Identity, Aspiration, and Lifestyle Construction

Beyond immediate persuasion, influencers play a significant role in shaping consumer identity and lifestyle. Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) noted that followers often look to influencers to reconcile tensions between individuality and belonging. Adopting the styles, preferences, or habits modeled by influencers, consumers negotiate their place in social groups while maintaining a sense of personal uniqueness. This finding suggests that influencers serve

not only as marketers but also as cultural guides who help followers navigate identity dilemmas.

Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) found that consumers perceive micro-celebrities as relatable, interpreting their lifestyles as attainable despite being aspirational. This relatability fosters a powerful form of persuasion where consumption becomes tied to identity performance. Lou and Kim (2019) showed that brand loyalty often arises when followers see influencers as role models for lifestyle choices rather than mere product endorsers. The implication is that consumerism in digital spaces is not just about goods but about symbolic capital, where products signify membership in aspirational communities.

These findings align with social comparison theory, where upward comparisons generate motivation to emulate perceived role models. However, the aspirational function of influencers also raises concerns about consumer pressure and psychological well-being. Constant exposure to idealized lifestyles may contribute to dissatisfaction and materialistic values. García-Rapp and Ekström (2022) suggested that influencers normalize consumption as a pathway to happiness, structuring materialism into everyday life. This stresses the dual role of influencers being they empower consumers with models for identity construction while simultaneously reinforcing consumerist ideologies. Influencers often blend global consumer trends with local cultural references, creating hybrid identities that sits well with young consumers. This hybridization remains under-researched, pointing to a need for context-sensitive studies that capture how influencers mediate between global consumerism and local cultural values.

Ethical and Cultural Concerns in Digital Consumerism

The final theme emerging from the findings is the ethical and cultural challenge posed by influencer marketing. Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) are of the opinion that influencer promotions often blur the line between commercial and non-commercial content, which reduces advertising recognition. This lack of transparency raises questions about fairness, especially for vulnerable audiences. García-Rapp and Ekström (2022) extended this critique by showing that influencers commodify personal intimacy, turning private life into marketable content. Consumers are encouraged to invest emotionally in influencers while simultaneously being targeted for consumption.

These findings reveal an ethical dilemma at the heart of influencer marketing. On one hand, influencers create genuine communities where followers feel connected. On the other hand, this intimacy is strategically monetized, raising concerns about the exploitation of trust. This suggests that the ethical dimension is not sufficiently theorized. While disclosure requirements have been studied, broader issues of commodified intimacy, consumer autonomy, and cultural exploitation remain under explored. Cultural variation also complicates the ethical picture. For instance, Western contexts, regulations on advertising disclosure are relatively strong. In some third world countries especially in Sub Saharan Africa, regulatory frameworks are weaker or less enforced. This creates a risk that consumers may be even more vulnerable to manipulative practices. Hudders and De Jans (2022) warned that children's exposure to commercialized content is already a concern in Western societies. The risk is likely amplified in settings where media literacy and consumer protection are limited. These findings point to an urgent need for

context-specific ethical frameworks that account for cultural norms and regulatory environments.

Conclusion

The psychology of social media influencers in digital consumerism is best understood as a convergence of emotional, cognitive, and cultural processes. This study asked how psychological mechanisms shape consumer responses to influencers and addressed this through questions of trust, authenticity, vulnerability, identity, and ethics. The findings and discussion has shown that parasocial interaction and authenticity are the central drivers of influence. These findings underscore the point that influencer marketing does not operate primarily on rational evaluation but on emotional intimacy. Authenticity further sustains this intimacy. even though the literature also revealed that authenticity is fragile, easily disrupted when influencers are perceived as overly commercial. These contradictions reflect the psychological complexity of consumer trust as it rests not only on what influencers say but on how their lives align with the values and expectations of their audiences.

The findings also point at the particular vulnerability of adolescents and young adults showing that influencer marketing exploits developmental susceptibilities in ways that traditional advertising cannot. Finally, the study emphasized the ethical and cultural dilemmas rooted in influencer marketing. These confirm that the psychological success of influencer marketing comes at a social cost, particularly in contexts where regulation and consumer protection remain weak. The psychology of influencer marketing lies in its ability to merge parasocial trust with performative authenticity, to target consumer vulnerabilities while offering aspirational models of identity, and to do so in ways that challenge ethical boundaries. These findings not only answer the research questions but also underscores the urgent need for critical engagement with the psychological consequences of digital consumerism.

Recommendations

The insights from this study point to several recommendations for policymakers, educators, brands, and influencers themselves. These recommendations aim to reduce the risks of exploitation while preserving the positive potential of influencer culture. They are:

- i. Strengthening media literacy education: The vulnerability of adolescents and young adults calls for targeted media literacy initiatives. Schools and community programs should integrate curricula that teach critical engagement with digital content, emphasizing how parasocial relationships can be exploited for commercial gain.
- ii. Establishing stricter regulatory frameworks: Here, regulatory bodies need to enforce clearer guidelines for sponsorship disclosures. Policies should mandate explicit and culturally relevant disclosure cues that are easily understood by young and less media-savvy audiences.
- iii. Encouraging ethical influencer practices: Influencers should be encouraged to adopt ethical codes of conduct. Influencer associations and marketing agencies could establish self-regulatory standards that emphasize transparency, moderation in promotional activity, and sensitivity to the age and vulnerability of audiences.

- iv. Promoting authenticity grounded in cultural values: Authenticity was found to be central to consumer trust but also culturally variable. Brands and influencers should leverage authenticity not just as a marketing tactic but as a reflection of cultural identity and values. This would not only foster trust but also ensure that digital consumerism aligns with local social contexts.
- v. Safeguarding adolescent consumers: Given the evidence that influencer marketing affects children's behavior subconsciously age-based restrictions on certain categories of influencer promotions, especially unhealthy food, alcohol, or financial products, should be considered. Policymakers and platforms alike should adopt child-focused protections similar to those applied in traditional advertising.
- vi. Fostering critical awareness among consumers: Beyond regulation and literacy, consumers themselves need to cultivate critical awareness of influencer marketing. Public awareness campaigns should bring to the fore these psychological dynamics, empowering individuals to reflect on the broader consequences of their consumption choices.
- vii. Expanding scholarly research in African contexts. Much of the existing literature on influencer psychology comes from Western contexts, which limits its applicability to SSA and Africa more broadly. This study recommends the need for more empirical research that explores how cultural position shapes the reception of influencer marketing. Collaborative research between universities and marketing firms could provide unique insights to inform culturally relevant strategies.

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