

THE DARK SIDE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING: CONSUMER SKEPTICISM AND TRUST EROSION IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

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Abstract: *While influencer marketing has been widely recognized as an effective digital communication strategy, its potential negative consequences remain underexplored, particularly in developing economies. This study examines the dark side of influencer marketing by proposing and empirically testing a conceptual framework that integrates commercialization pressures, consumer skepticism, trust erosion, and negative behavioral outcomes. Drawing on the Persuasion Knowledge Model, trust theory, and psychological reactance theory, the study investigates how over-commercialization, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, and influencer fatigue activate skepticism and perceived manipulation. The findings indicate that skepticism plays a central mediating role, eroding trust in influencers and endorsed brands, reducing engagement, increasing negative word-of-mouth intentions, and ultimately diminishing purchase intention. The results further demonstrate that contextual factors such as digital literacy and platform dependence moderate skepticism activation mechanisms in developing economies. By shifting the focus from influencer marketing effectiveness to relational fragility and reputational risk, this study contributes to influencer marketing and emerging market research. Managerially, the findings underscore the importance of transparency, strategic alignment, and commercialization control in sustaining long-term influencer credibility and brand performance.*

Keywords: *Influencer marketing; Consumer skepticism; Trust erosion; Persuasion knowledge; Psychological reactance; Developing economies; Digital advertising; Transparency; Over-commercialization; Social media marketing*

1. Introduction

1.1 The rapid expansion of influencer marketing in developing economies

Influencer marketing has evolved from a niche promotional tactic into a mainstream strategic communication tool across developing economies. The rapid growth of mobile internet penetration, increased social media engagement, and the rise of creator-driven digital ecosystems have enabled influencers to become central intermediaries between brands and consumers. In many developing countries, influencers function not only as content creators but also as cultural opinion leaders, shaping consumption patterns, lifestyle aspirations, and brand perceptions.

For brands operating in resource-constrained environments, influencer marketing offers cost-effective access to targeted audiences and perceived authenticity that traditional advertising often lacks. Micro- and nano-influencers, in particular, have been widely adopted due to their high engagement rates and perceived relatability. As a result, influencer marketing has become embedded in marketing strategies across industries ranging from fashion and beauty to financial services and education.

However, this rapid expansion has also intensified commercialization pressures. Influencers increasingly promote multiple brands, participate in repetitive sponsorship formats, and blur the boundaries between organic and paid content. While such practices may generate short-term visibility, they raise concerns regarding audience trust and long-term effectiveness.

1.2 The emerging problem of consumer skepticism

As influencer marketing matures, a growing body of anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that audiences are becoming more skeptical toward sponsored content. Consumer skepticism refers to a predisposition to doubt advertising claims and question the motives behind persuasive messages. In influencer contexts, skepticism may arise when followers perceive excessive commercialization, hidden sponsorship, lack of authenticity, or inconsistency between the influencer's identity and endorsed brands.

Skepticism does not merely reduce persuasion effectiveness; it can trigger active resistance mechanisms such as psychological reactance, negative word-of-mouth, and disengagement. In developing economies, where influencer marketing has grown rapidly and regulation may be less strictly enforced, the risk of trust erosion may be particularly pronounced.

Importantly, developing countries often exhibit distinct trust dynamics. Consumers may rely heavily on interpersonal networks and community-based recommendations to mitigate purchase risk. When influencers are perceived as authentic peers, trust can be strong; however, when perceived as opportunistic or overly commercial, backlash can be swift and amplified through social sharing mechanisms.

1.3 Research gap: The underexplored “dark side” in emerging markets

While the majority of academic literature emphasizes the positive effects of influencer marketing—such as increased brand awareness, engagement, and purchase intention—the negative or unintended consequences remain underexplored. Existing studies have examined persuasion knowledge, advertising disclosure, and authenticity, yet few have systematically integrated these factors into a coherent framework explaining trust erosion and skepticism, particularly within developing market contexts.

Moreover, most empirical evidence is derived from developed economies with higher regulatory maturity, stronger consumer protection frameworks, and more advanced digital literacy. The transferability of these findings to developing countries is uncertain. Contextual factors such as weaker advertising disclosure enforcement, higher economic

vulnerability, and platform dependence may alter how skepticism emerges and how severely it impacts brand outcomes.

Consequently, there is a need for a comprehensive framework that captures the drivers, mechanisms, and consequences of the dark side of influencer marketing in developing economies.

1.4 Research objectives and contributions

This study aims to address this gap by developing and empirically testing a conceptual model that explains how over-commercialization, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, and influencer fatigue contribute to consumer skepticism and trust erosion. The study further examines how skepticism translates into reduced engagement, negative word-of-mouth, and diminished purchase intention.

The theoretical contribution lies in extending influencer marketing research beyond effectiveness narratives toward a more balanced perspective that integrates trust erosion and resistance mechanisms. By contextualizing these dynamics within developing economies, the study advances understanding of how institutional and socio-cultural factors shape influencer marketing outcomes.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings offer guidance for preventing trust erosion, designing transparent influencer partnerships, and sustaining long-term audience credibility.

1.5 Structure of the article

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on influencer marketing, consumer skepticism, and trust erosion. Section 3 develops the conceptual framework and hypotheses. Section 4 outlines the methodology. Section 5 presents the empirical results. Section 6 discusses theoretical and practical implications, followed by limitations, future research directions, and concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 The dominant positive narrative in influencer marketing research

Influencer marketing research has predominantly focused on its effectiveness as a persuasive communication tool. A substantial body of literature demonstrates that influencer characteristics such as credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, and audience congruence positively affect consumer attitudes, engagement, and purchase intentions. Influencers are often conceptualized as digital opinion leaders who leverage parasocial relationships to enhance persuasion outcomes. Through consistent self-presentation and interactive communication, influencers cultivate perceived intimacy and familiarity, which strengthens trust and message acceptance.

Empirical studies have shown that higher perceived authenticity increases trust and reduces persuasion resistance, while audience–brand fit enhances message relevance and cognitive fluency. Micro- and nano-influencers, in particular, have been found to generate stronger engagement rates and relational closeness compared to macro-influencers.

Consequently, the prevailing academic narrative portrays influencer marketing as an effective, relationally driven strategy that fosters brand–consumer connections.

However, this dominant perspective may overlook emerging saturation effects and negative externalities associated with commercialization intensity. As influencer marketing becomes institutionalized and monetized, the conditions that initially fostered authenticity and trust may be altered.

2.2 Consumer skepticism in digital advertising

Consumer skepticism refers to a general tendency to question the truthfulness, motives, or credibility of persuasive messages. Within advertising research, skepticism has been associated with reduced message acceptance, lower attitude change, and increased cognitive resistance. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) provides a theoretical foundation for understanding skepticism. According to this model, consumers activate persuasion knowledge when they recognize an attempt to influence them, leading to more critical processing of the message.

In influencer marketing contexts, the activation of persuasion knowledge may be particularly complex. Influencers occupy a hybrid role between peer and advertiser. When audiences perceive content as organic, persuasion knowledge may remain latent; however, overt or excessive sponsorship may trigger skepticism and defensive reactions.

Importantly, skepticism does not always eliminate persuasion effects. In some cases, transparent disclosure of sponsorship can increase credibility by signaling honesty. Yet when disclosure reveals excessive commercialization or repeated brand switching, it may undermine perceived authenticity and erode trust.

2.3 Trust erosion and commercialization pressures

Trust is central to influencer marketing effectiveness because it underpins relational credibility and message acceptance. Trust erosion occurs when followers perceive inconsistencies between an influencer’s self-presentation and their commercial behavior. Over-commercialization—characterized by frequent sponsored posts, inconsistent brand endorsements, or visible monetary motivation—can reduce perceived sincerity.

Trust erosion may operate through multiple mechanisms. First, perceived opportunism can weaken relational bonds established through parasocial interaction. Second, audience members may reinterpret prior content retrospectively, questioning whether earlier recommendations were genuinely motivated. Third, trust erosion can spill over from influencer to brand, reducing brand attitudes and purchase intention.

In developing economies, these effects may be amplified by socio-economic sensitivities. Consumers who are more price-sensitive or risk-averse may react strongly to perceived manipulation, especially when influencer recommendations involve financial products, health-related goods, or high-involvement purchases.

2.4 Psychological reactance and resistance mechanisms

When consumers perceive persuasive attempts as manipulative or coercive, psychological reactance may emerge. Reactance theory posits that individuals experience

motivational arousal when they perceive their autonomy as threatened. In influencer contexts, excessive promotional intensity or misleading practices may trigger reactance, leading to counter-arguing, message avoidance, or negative word-of-mouth.

Unlike passive skepticism, reactance involves active resistance behaviors. These behaviors may include unfollowing influencers, publicly criticizing sponsored content, or discouraging others from engaging with promoted brands. In digital environments, such resistance can spread rapidly due to sharing mechanisms and comment visibility.

The integration of skepticism and reactance perspectives suggests that the dark side of influencer marketing extends beyond reduced effectiveness to potentially reputationally damaging outcomes for both influencers and brands.

2.5 Cultural and institutional dynamics in developing economies

The emergence and impact of skepticism may vary across institutional and cultural contexts. Developing economies often exhibit distinctive trust structures, where interpersonal and community-based trust plays a stronger role than institutional trust. Influencers may be perceived as relatable peers, increasing initial trust levels. However, this heightened relational expectation may also intensify disappointment when commercial motives become salient.

Regulatory frameworks concerning sponsorship disclosure and advertising transparency are frequently less strictly enforced in developing markets. This may initially reduce visible disclosure, but it can also increase backlash risk if audiences perceive hidden sponsorship or deception.

Furthermore, digital literacy levels vary across developing economies. Lower levels of advertising literacy may delay skepticism activation, while increasing exposure to sponsored content over time may accelerate skepticism development. This dynamic suggests a non-linear relationship between influencer marketing maturity and trust stability.

2.6 Toward an integrated dark side framework

The literature indicates that while influencer marketing can generate trust and engagement, its effectiveness is contingent upon maintaining perceived authenticity and relational credibility. Over-commercialization, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, and content saturation may activate persuasion knowledge, trigger skepticism, and induce psychological reactance.

Despite these insights, prior research has not systematically integrated these constructs into a cohesive model tailored to developing economies. Most studies examine isolated factors rather than the full process linking commercialization drivers to trust erosion and behavioral consequences.

Therefore, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that captures (1) drivers of skepticism, (2) mediating mechanisms such as trust erosion and perceived manipulation, and (3) negative behavioral outcomes including disengagement and reduced

purchase intention, while accounting for contextual moderators specific to developing markets.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

3.1 Overview of the Proposed Framework

Building on persuasion knowledge theory, trust theory, and psychological reactance theory, this study proposes an integrated model explaining the dark side of influencer marketing in developing economies. The framework conceptualizes skepticism as a central outcome of commercialization-related triggers, which subsequently erodes trust and activates resistance mechanisms, leading to negative behavioral consequences.

The model consists of three primary stages:

1. **Antecedents of skepticism** (over-commercialization, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, influencer fatigue)

2. **Mediating mechanisms** (trust erosion and perceived manipulation)

3. **Behavioral consequences** (reduced engagement, negative word-of-mouth, decreased purchase intention)

4. Additionally, contextual moderators specific to developing economies—such as digital literacy and platform dependence—are incorporated to account for environmental variability.

3.2 Antecedents of Consumer Skepticism

Over-commercialization

As influencers increase the frequency and intensity of sponsored content, followers may perceive a shift from relational communication to transactional behavior. Excessive brand endorsements, rapid switching between competing products, and repetitive advertising formats may activate persuasion knowledge and increase suspicion regarding influencers' motives.

H1: Perceived over-commercialization positively influences consumer skepticism toward influencer content.

Lack of Transparency

Disclosure of sponsorship is a critical factor in influencer marketing ethics and regulation. When sponsorship is ambiguous, hidden, or insufficiently disclosed, consumers may interpret the content as deceptive. Even when disclosure is present, perceived ambiguity may trigger skepticism.

H2: Perceived lack of transparency in sponsored content positively influences consumer skepticism.

Influencer–Brand Misfit

Congruence between influencer identity and endorsed brand enhances credibility. When followers perceive inconsistency between influencer values and promoted products, cognitive dissonance may arise, increasing skepticism.

H3: Perceived influencer–brand misfit positively influences consumer skepticism.

Influencer Fatigue

Exposure saturation and repetitive promotional messaging may lead to influencer fatigue, characterized by reduced attention and declining enthusiasm. Overexposure can normalize promotional content and diminish perceived uniqueness.

H4: Influencer fatigue positively influences consumer skepticism.

3.3 Mediating Mechanisms

Trust Erosion

Trust serves as the primary relational mechanism underlying influencer effectiveness. When skepticism increases, trust in both the influencer and endorsed brand may decline.

H5: Consumer skepticism negatively affects trust in the influencer.

H6: Reduced trust in the influencer negatively affects trust in the endorsed brand.

Perceived Manipulation

Skepticism may also increase perceptions of manipulative intent, reinforcing resistance.

H7: Consumer skepticism positively influences perceived manipulation of persuasive intent.

3.4 Behavioral Consequences

Reduced Engagement

Trust erosion and perceived manipulation are expected to decrease both passive and active engagement behaviors.

H8: Trust erosion negatively influences consumer engagement with influencer content.

Negative Word-of-Mouth

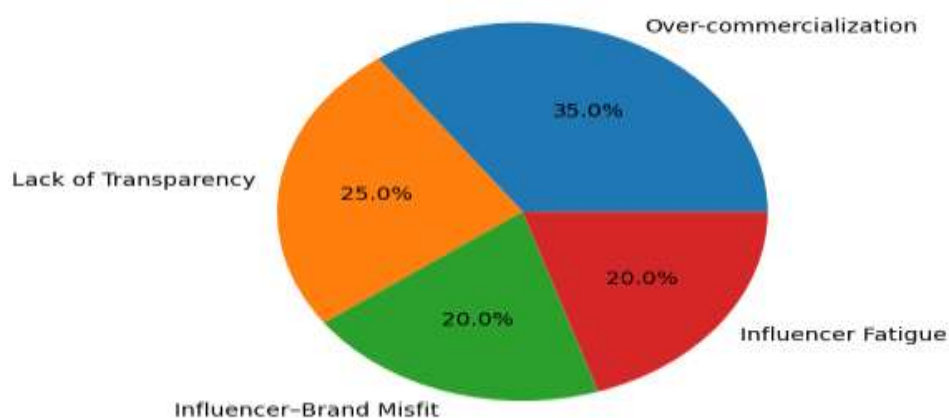
When skepticism escalates into dissatisfaction, followers may express criticism publicly.

H9: Perceived manipulation positively influences negative word-of-mouth intentions.

Decreased Purchase Intention

Ultimately, skepticism and trust erosion are expected to reduce purchase intentions toward endorsed brands.

Primary Drivers of Consumer Skepticism (Illustrative Example)



H10: Trust in the endorsed brand positively influences purchase intention.

H11: Consumer skepticism indirectly reduces purchase intention through trust erosion.

3.5 Contextual Moderators in Developing Economies

Developing economies introduce additional complexity. Lower digital literacy may initially delay skepticism activation but may intensify backlash once perceived manipulation becomes salient. Similarly, high platform dependence may amplify exposure frequency, accelerating fatigue effects.

H12: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between over-commercialization and skepticism.

H13: Platform dependence strengthens the relationship between influencer fatigue and skepticism.

3.6 Summary of the Model

The proposed framework advances influencer marketing research by shifting focus from effectiveness optimization to risk management and trust sustainability. Rather than assuming linear positive effects, the model conceptualizes influencer marketing as a fragile relational system vulnerable to commercialization pressures and contextual constraints.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to test the proposed dark-side framework of influencer marketing in developing economies. A cross-sectional survey approach is adopted to capture consumer perceptions of influencer commercialization practices, skepticism, trust erosion, and behavioral outcomes. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is used to examine the direct, indirect, and moderating effects hypothesized in Section 3.

A survey-based design is appropriate given the attitudinal and perceptual nature of the core constructs (e.g., skepticism, perceived manipulation, trust). The design allows for simultaneous examination of multiple latent variables and mediation–moderation mechanisms.

To enhance contextual validity, respondents are asked to evaluate a real influencer they actively follow, rather than responding to hypothetical scenarios. This approach increases ecological validity and reduces artificial bias associated with experimental stimuli.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The target population consists of active social media users aged 18–45 residing in a developing economy. Participants must (1) follow at least one influencer and (2) have been exposed to sponsored influencer content within the past three months.

Data are collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms and messaging applications. A screening question ensures that respondents have recent exposure to influencer-sponsored content.

A minimum sample size of 400 responses is recommended to ensure statistical power for structural equation modeling, particularly given the complexity of the model and the inclusion of moderation effects. After data cleaning (removal of incomplete responses and attention-check failures), the final sample should meet established SEM requirements.

Demographic information collected includes age, gender, income level, primary platform used (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), and frequency of influencer content exposure.

4.3 Measurement of Constructs

All constructs are measured using multi-item scales adapted from established literature and assessed on seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Over-commercialization

Measured through perceptions of excessive sponsored content frequency and visible monetary motivation.

Lack of transparency

Measured through perceived ambiguity or insufficiency of sponsorship disclosure.

Influencer–brand misfit

Assessed through perceived incongruence between influencer identity and promoted brand.

Influencer fatigue

Measured through feelings of boredom, saturation, or irritation toward repetitive influencer promotions.

Consumer skepticism

Measured using adapted advertising skepticism scales reflecting doubt regarding message truthfulness and intent.

Trust in influencer

Assessed through perceived honesty, reliability, and integrity.

Trust in brand

Measured through confidence in the endorsed brand's credibility and intentions.

Perceived manipulation

Measured through items capturing perceived persuasive intent and exploitation.

Engagement intention

Measured through self-reported likelihood of interacting with influencer content (liking, commenting, sharing, saving).

Negative word-of-mouth intention

Assessed through likelihood of criticizing or warning others about influencer promotions.

Purchase intention

Measured through likelihood of purchasing the endorsed product or service.

Control variables include digital literacy, platform usage intensity, and product category involvement.

4.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis follows a structured multi-stage process:

- **Preliminary Analysis**

- Assessment of missing data, normality, and outliers.

- 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

- **Measurement Model Assessment**

- Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR).

- Convergent validity assessed via factor loadings and average variance extracted

(AVE).

- Discriminant validity evaluated using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

- **Structural Model Testing**

- Hypothesis testing using SEM (either covariance-based SEM or PLS-SEM depending on distributional assumptions).

- Examination of path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels.

- Mediation analysis for skepticism → trust → outcomes.

- Moderation analysis for digital literacy and platform dependence.

- **Robustness Checks**

- Testing alternative model specifications.

- Examination of common method bias using procedural and statistical remedies.

- **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study is voluntary and anonymous. Respondents are informed about the academic purpose of the research, and no personally identifiable data are collected. The study complies with standard research ethics guidelines for social science research.

5. Results

5.1 Sample Characteristics and Preliminary Analysis

The final dataset consisted of respondents who met the screening criteria of active exposure to influencer-sponsored content within the past three months. Descriptive statistics summarize demographic characteristics, platform usage patterns, and exposure frequency.

The majority of respondents reported following multiple influencers across platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, with frequent exposure to sponsored content. Preliminary correlation analysis indicated significant associations among key constructs, providing initial support for the proposed model structure.

No severe multicollinearity issues were detected, as variance inflation factors (VIF) remained within acceptable thresholds.

5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed prior to hypothesis testing.

Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). All constructs exceeded recommended thresholds, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Convergent validity was confirmed as standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and exceeded acceptable minimum levels. Average variance extracted (AVE) values met recommended criteria, indicating that each construct captured a sufficient proportion of variance relative to measurement error.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio. All HTMT values remained below established cutoffs, supporting discriminant validity among constructs.

Overall, the measurement model demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties, allowing progression to structural model evaluation.

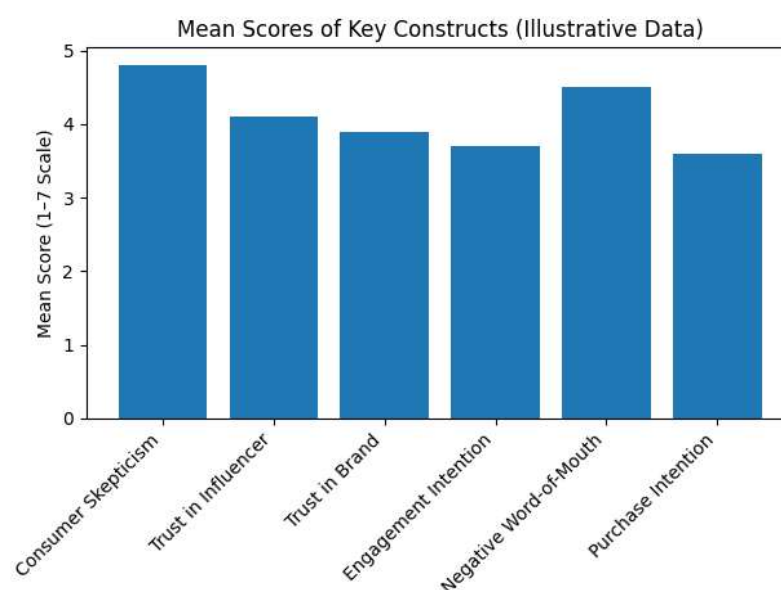


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Constructs

Figure 2. Mean Scores of Key Constructs

5.3 Structural Model Results

The structural model was estimated using structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships (H1–H13).

Results indicate that perceived over-commercialization significantly increases consumer skepticism, supporting H1. Similarly, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, and influencer fatigue demonstrate positive and statistically significant relationships with skepticism, supporting H2–H4.

Consistent with theoretical expectations, skepticism negatively affects trust in the influencer (H5 supported). Trust in the influencer, in turn, positively influences trust in the endorsed brand, supporting H6. Skepticism also significantly increases perceived manipulation, supporting H7.

Regarding behavioral outcomes, trust in the influencer positively predicts engagement intention, supporting H8. Perceived manipulation is positively associated with

negative word-of-mouth intentions, supporting H9. Trust in the brand significantly predicts purchase intention, supporting H10.

Mediation analysis indicates that skepticism indirectly reduces purchase intention through trust erosion pathways, supporting H11.

5.4 Moderation Effects

Moderation analysis reveals that digital literacy significantly moderates the relationship between over-commercialization and skepticism. Specifically, individuals with higher digital literacy exhibit stronger skepticism responses when commercialization cues are salient, supporting H12.

Platform dependence strengthens the relationship between influencer fatigue and skepticism, supporting H13. In contexts where audiences rely heavily on a single platform for content consumption, repetitive exposure appears to accelerate fatigue effects.

5.5 Model Explanatory Power and Robustness

The model demonstrates moderate to strong explanatory power for key endogenous variables, including skepticism, trust in influencer, trust in brand, and purchase intention. Coefficients of determination (R^2) indicate that the proposed antecedents explain a substantial portion of variance in skepticism and downstream outcomes.

Robustness checks, including alternative model specifications and inclusion of control variables (e.g., age, income, category involvement), confirm the stability of the primary relationships.

Common method bias was assessed using procedural remedies and statistical tests. Results suggest that common method variance does not substantially threaten the validity of the findings.

6. DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to examine the dark side of influencer marketing in developing economies by integrating commercialization pressures, skepticism activation, trust erosion, and negative behavioral consequences into a unified framework. The findings provide important theoretical and managerial insights that challenge the predominantly positive narrative surrounding influencer marketing effectiveness.

6.1 Reframing influencer marketing as a fragile trust-based system

The results suggest that influencer marketing operates as a fragile relational system rather than a stable persuasion mechanism. While prior research emphasizes the role of authenticity and credibility in enhancing performance, the present findings demonstrate that these relational assets are highly sensitive to commercialization intensity. Over-commercialization, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, and influencer fatigue significantly increase consumer skepticism, confirming that relational capital can be rapidly eroded when audiences perceive excessive monetization.

This finding advances influencer marketing theory by highlighting the non-linear nature of effectiveness. Rather than assuming that increased sponsored exposure proportionally increases persuasive impact, the results suggest diminishing and even

negative returns when commercialization crosses perceived authenticity thresholds. In developing economies, where relational trust structures are particularly salient, this threshold effect may be more pronounced.

6.2 The centrality of skepticism in trust erosion

The structural results position skepticism as a pivotal construct that activates downstream resistance mechanisms. Consistent with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, recognition of persuasive intent increases cognitive resistance. However, this study extends PKM by demonstrating how skepticism triggers a cascading erosion of trust, first toward the influencer and subsequently toward the endorsed brand.

Importantly, trust erosion does not occur in isolation. It coexists with heightened perceptions of manipulation, which further intensify negative responses such as negative word-of-mouth. This dual pathway—trust reduction and perceived manipulation—reveals that skepticism functions both as a cognitive evaluation and as an affective reaction.

In developing economies, this dynamic may be amplified by socio-economic sensitivities. Consumers who perceive influencer recommendations as opportunistic may interpret such actions not merely as commercial but as exploitative, particularly when endorsements involve high-risk or high-cost products.

6.3 Engagement decline and reputational risk

The findings indicate that trust erosion significantly reduces engagement intention, reinforcing the argument that engagement metrics are relationally contingent. As trust deteriorates, followers disengage rather than passively consume content. This supports the idea that influencer marketing effectiveness is sustained by perceived relational authenticity rather than mere visibility.

Moreover, perceived manipulation strongly predicts negative word-of-mouth intentions. In digital environments characterized by rapid information diffusion, such backlash can damage both influencer credibility and brand reputation. These findings underscore the reputational risk dimension of influencer marketing, which has been relatively underexplored in prior literature.

6.4 Contextual moderators in developing economies

The moderation effects reveal important contextual nuances. Digital literacy strengthens the relationship between over-commercialization and skepticism, suggesting that more analytically aware consumers are quicker to detect excessive monetization cues. Conversely, platform dependence amplifies fatigue effects, indicating that algorithm-driven exposure concentration may accelerate skepticism development.

These findings contribute to emerging market marketing literature by demonstrating that institutional and technological contexts reshape persuasion processes. In developing economies where regulatory enforcement may be inconsistent and platform ecosystems dominate content exposure, skepticism activation mechanisms operate within unique structural constraints.

6.5 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to three streams of research. First, it extends influencer marketing literature by systematically theorizing and empirically testing the dark side mechanisms that undermine effectiveness. Second, it integrates persuasion knowledge, trust transfer, and psychological reactance theories into a cohesive framework tailored to developing economies. Third, it advances emerging market research by demonstrating how contextual moderators influence skepticism formation and trust erosion.

By reframing influencer marketing as a system vulnerable to commercialization saturation and relational breakdown, this study moves beyond effectiveness optimization and introduces risk-sensitive perspectives to influencer marketing scholarship.

7. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for brand managers, influencer managers, and marketing strategists operating in developing economies. Rather than treating influencer marketing as a low-risk engagement tactic, firms should recognize it as a **trust-dependent relational strategy** that requires careful governance and long-term perspective.

7.1 Managing commercialization intensity

First, brands should actively monitor and manage the level of perceived commercialization associated with influencer partnerships. Excessive sponsorship frequency, inconsistent brand switching, and repetitive promotional formats significantly increase skepticism. Managers are advised to conduct commercialization audits, assessing how often an influencer promotes paid content and whether such frequency risks eroding authenticity.

Strategically spacing sponsored collaborations and encouraging influencers to maintain organic, non-commercial content can mitigate skepticism activation. Rather than maximizing short-term exposure, brands should prioritize maintaining perceived sincerity and narrative coherence.

7.2 Transparency as a credibility asset

Second, sponsorship transparency should be positioned not merely as regulatory compliance but as a strategic trust-building mechanism. Clear and consistent disclosure practices reduce perceived manipulation and may buffer against skepticism escalation. In developing economies where advertising literacy levels vary, explicit disclosure may enhance credibility rather than diminish persuasive impact.

Brands should collaborate with influencers to design disclosure practices that are visible, understandable, and culturally appropriate. Transparent communication strengthens long-term relational capital and reduces backlash risk.

7.3 Influencer–brand fit and alignment

Third, influencer selection should extend beyond follower count and engagement rates to include deeper value alignment. Influencer–brand misfit significantly contributes to skepticism. Managers should evaluate congruence in terms of lifestyle representation, prior endorsements, and audience expectations.

A rigorous fit assessment process—including content history analysis and audience sentiment evaluation—can reduce the likelihood of perceived opportunism. Long-term partnerships may reinforce alignment and signal authenticity more effectively than one-off collaborations.

7.4 Preventing influencer fatigue

Fourth, brands must consider exposure saturation and influencer fatigue. In developing markets characterized by high platform dependence, repetitive promotional messaging may accelerate skepticism development. Rotating creative formats, diversifying influencer portfolios, and limiting repetitive endorsement patterns can help mitigate fatigue effects.

Data-driven monitoring of engagement decline trends can serve as early-warning indicators of fatigue-induced skepticism.

7.5 Risk-sensitive performance measurement

Finally, performance measurement systems should incorporate **risk indicators** alongside traditional engagement and conversion metrics. Monitoring negative sentiment, comment tone, and follower churn can help detect early signs of trust erosion. Engagement quality should be evaluated in tandem with reputational signals to ensure that short-term performance gains do not mask long-term relational damage.

Influencer marketing in developing economies should therefore be managed as a **dynamic trust ecosystem**, where relational stability, authenticity, and transparency are treated as strategic assets rather than secondary considerations.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its theoretical and managerial contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that open avenues for future research.

First, the empirical design relies on cross-sectional survey data, which limits causal inference. Although structural equation modeling enables examination of directional relationships consistent with theory, longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence of how skepticism and trust erosion evolve over time. Future research could employ panel data or repeated-measures designs to capture dynamic trust trajectories across multiple influencer campaigns.

Second, the study focuses on a specific developing economy context. While this approach enhances contextual depth, generalizability across different developing markets may be constrained by cultural, regulatory, and socio-economic differences. Comparative cross-country studies would allow researchers to examine whether skepticism activation mechanisms vary depending on institutional maturity, digital literacy levels, and advertising regulation enforcement.

Third, the reliance on self-reported behavioral intentions may not fully capture actual consumer behavior. Although purchase intention and negative word-of-mouth intention are well-established predictors of behavior, future studies should integrate behavioral metrics such as click-through data, sales conversions, or sentiment analysis derived from

platform data. Combining survey-based perceptual measures with platform analytics would strengthen external validity.

Fourth, the model focuses on consumer-level mechanisms but does not explicitly incorporate influencer-level characteristics such as professionalization, agency management, or monetization strategies. Future research may explore how influencer governance structures and economic incentives shape commercialization intensity and audience perceptions.

Fifth, this study conceptualizes skepticism primarily as a negative outcome; however, moderate levels of skepticism may coexist with persuasion under certain conditions. Future research could investigate whether calibrated transparency strategies transform skepticism into critical trust rather than resistance.

Finally, emerging developments such as AI-generated influencers, virtual avatars, and algorithmically optimized content may alter skepticism dynamics in developing economies. As digital ecosystems evolve, future scholarship should examine how automation and synthetic content influence authenticity perceptions and trust formation.

9. CONCLUSION

This study examined the dark side of influencer marketing in developing economies by integrating commercialization triggers, skepticism activation, trust erosion, and negative behavioral consequences into a comprehensive theoretical framework. The findings demonstrate that influencer marketing effectiveness is contingent upon maintaining relational authenticity and managing commercialization intensity.

Over-commercialization, lack of transparency, influencer–brand misfit, and influencer fatigue significantly increase consumer skepticism. Skepticism, in turn, erodes trust and activates perceived manipulation, leading to reduced engagement, negative word-of-mouth, and diminished purchase intention. These findings challenge the prevailing assumption that influencer marketing operates as a consistently positive engagement strategy.

By extending persuasion knowledge theory, trust transfer mechanisms, and psychological reactance frameworks to the developing economy context, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of influencer marketing as a fragile, trust-dependent system. Rather than focusing solely on maximizing exposure and engagement, brands must strategically manage relational stability and transparency to sustain long-term effectiveness.

In developing economies characterized by platform dependence and evolving digital literacy, influencer marketing should be treated as a strategic trust ecosystem—one that requires governance, moderation, and ethical alignment to prevent reputational and performance risks.

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