

From Humanism to Post-humanism: Understanding ethics in influencer marketing through a conceptual framework

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Abstract

Today, social media is flooded with influencers creating content to promote brands, making ethical marketing key to upholding trust in influencer-consumer relationships and guaranteeing long-term brand sustainability. This study highlights the key areas where ethics plays an imperative role in influencer marketing and how it affects consumer interactions and overall psychological health. The study puts forward a conceptual framework that identifies both human and technological ethical issues in influencer marketing. The framework encompasses the roles of influencers, brands, and consumers, as well as modern marketing aspects, including virtual influencers and AI techniques such as virtual and augmented reality. The study adopts a humanistic and post-humanistic approach, aiming to provide a holistic perspective on ethics in influencer marketing. It also offers recommendations for overcoming these ethical challenges and how influencers, brands, and regulatory bodies can work together to support consumers with ethical standards, strengthen relationships, and build a trustworthy digital environment.

Keywords: Ethics; Digital mindfulness; Influencer marketing; Consumer well-being; Artificial Intelligence; Virtual Influencers

1. Introduction

Because the nature of social media marketing is always changing, companies are now more and more relying on influencer marketing as a powerful means of engaging consumers. Social media influencers, who can nowadays be referred to as the new-generation marketing professionals, have a great deal of potential to affect consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). The global influencer industry is projected to amount to approximately 33 billion dollars in 2025, rising from 11 billion dollars in 2020, and is expected to reach 107 billion dollars by 2027 (Statista, 2025).

Since social media today is home to a plethora of influencers creating content to promote brands, ethical marketing is important for upholding trust in influencer-consumer relationships and guaranteeing brands' continued viability. This study intends to examine the ethical consequences of influencer marketing, specifically in relation to humanistic

values that prioritise transparency, authenticity, and consumer trust.

Brands use influencer marketing to communicate effectively on online platforms. In this optimal situation, influencers serve as a bridge, narrowing the gap between brands and consumers. But sometimes, the situation is not as ideal as it seems. Because of a lack of moral principles and inadequate supervision, influencer marketing has, on various occasions, lost buyers' trust due to false statements and misleading actions (Niestadt, 2025). The ethical issues in this area are significant and should therefore be given top priority in influencer marketing. These ethical concerns cover several aspects, including how brands and influencers collaborate and disclose their relationships, the methods used for advertising, and the risk of targeting vulnerable consumers. These issues can ruin entire marketing campaigns and damage the relationship between influencers and their audiences. Over time, this can cause consumers to feel detached and doubtful, which in turn may impact their well-being.

Research carried out in the past has examined the ethical aspects of social media and influencer marketing, but this research is generally fragmented and therefore fails to provide a full understanding of the ethical difficulties. For instance, Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) looked at the way in which social media interactions influence marketing, yet they did not address the ethical duties of influencers when promoting brands. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) investigated the role of credibility in building trust, but they did not look into the wider factors that underlie ethical problems in influencer marketing. Because of this, there remains a lack of a clear and commonly agreed-upon understanding of the ethical issues involved.

These ethical failures have some serious direct and indirect consequences. Brands may achieve short-lived gains through social media partnerships, but if they are not managed wisely, they may face reputational damage, declining buyer trust, and legal issues in the long run. The deterioration of moral practices in IM can also lead to the loss of audiences on platforms who were once actively engaged and deeply connected to the influencer and brands. (Nanni et al., 2026)

The article provides a conceptual framework that consolidates the ethical subjectivity faced by humans and non-humans in the context of influencer marketing, seeking to fill a gap in the existing literature. By synthesising insights from several studies, the study intends to shed light on the challenges of ethical influencer marketing through a proposed model and further provides recommendations on how to deal with those complexities. Furthermore, this study stresses both difficulties and recommendations in the purview of IM, comprising both human and non-human, i.e. technology-related factors, working to establish a more durable and ethical approach to influencer marketing. In doing so, this study expands the scholarly discussion of ethical marketing and also serves as a practical guide for brands and influencers to strive for integrity in deriving successful marketing outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Zhang & Mac (2023) define social media influencers as individuals who impact consumer decisions through self-created content and online interactions. They have large followings and are experts in their fields. They are an essential part of brand promotion and impact consumer decisions through their posts (Fernandes et al., 2022). The contemporary marketing environment is increasingly using influencer marketing to build long-term relationships between brands and consumers. In this quest to form connections through IM, the ethical aspects of both humanism and post-humanism are often at stake. The humanist approach is more concerned with human values, integrity, and credibility, whereas the post-humanist ethical domain includes technology and virtual influencers (VI), which are now widely incorporated into influencer marketing (IM).

Previous studies have shown the importance of attributes such as credibility, authenticity, and transparency in influencer marketing. A study by Kim & Kim (2019) explains how improper disclosure about the paid partnerships in IM can result in consumer mistrust. They used a quantitative design in which consumers assessed influencer authenticity through a survey. However, the results were based on self-reported data, which may not reflect true consumer behaviour. Hoang & Hua (2024) focus on the strength of authenticity and encourage brands to leverage this influencer attribute, as it positively affects “Brand Trust.” A mixed-method study by De Veirman et al. (2017) suggests that influencers play an important role in shaping consumer perceptions by assessing the impact of influencers’ credibility on consumer attitudes. The results show that the influencer’s credibility positively affects brand perception. The study, however, does not address the moral duties pertaining to IM.

2.1. Understanding of Ethics

Lackniak & Murphy (1993) define marketing ethics as the “study of moral standards that are applied to marketing decisions, behaviour, and institutions.” Further, these ethics are divided into two major approaches: deontological and teleological ethics. Deontological ethics are basically action- and

behaviour-oriented, and teleological ethics are mostly result-oriented (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Casaló et al. (2020) discuss the need for ethical practices to safeguard consumers' interests. The study used a qualitative method, highlighting adherence to ethical marketing standards and the requirement for ethical guidelines that protect consumers' rights. The study lacked a quantitative measurement of the impact of ethical misconduct on consumers' trust.

2.2. Understanding of influencers in digital marketing

“Human influencer” is defined as a real person who communicates opinions, experiences, and recommendations through social media and is strongly engaged with their audiences on a daily basis (Belanche, Casaló, & Flavián, 2024; Dondapati, Malhotra, & Garg, 2024; Ozdemir & Kabadayi, 2023). “Virtual influencer”, on the other hand, is an AI-generated persona or digital character (Belanche et al., 2024) controlled by agencies or brands to endorse and promote brands (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2025; Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2025).

Lou et al. (2023) define “virtual influencers” as digital characters with large followings. These computerised, human-like figures are designed for entertainment and information dissemination, and are used by brands for promotional activities and brand exposure. Kim et al. (2023) define them as human-like, computer-generated characters meant for brand endorsements. Their aesthetics, growing-up stories, and perfect presentation attract followers (Choudhary et al., 2022). The emergence of high-tech marketing through Virtual Influencers (VIs) and Augmented Reality (AR) has raised ethical queries too. McCracken and Lutz (2020) explored the effects of VIs on brand authenticity and consumer belief through interviews with consumers and marketing professionals. The results suggest that VIs significantly affect brand engagement and deepen concerns about authenticity, thereby manipulating consumers' purchase decisions. The study, however, has a limited sample size, restricting the generalizability of its findings. Another study by Lim et al. (2021) adopted a quantitative approach, and the data show that the ethical dilemma arises

when consumers are often unaware that AI-created content in IM is not real and treat it as such. Their study indicated the requirement of transparency and authenticity regarding IM's post-humanistic nature. The study lacks an analysis of the psychological effects of these ethical breaches in AI and technology-related IM, leaving a gap in the literature.

The existing literature fails to provide an all-encompassing framework to tackle the ethical challenges related to IM, notably in the context of humanistic and post-humanistic behaviour. Also, the literature has not clearly covered the effects of influencer marketing on consumers' physical and psychological well-being. Previous studies also fail to adequately highlight actionable tactics to mitigate the negative effects of influencer marketing on the brand-influencer-consumer triad. Therefore, this research plays an essential role in providing a 360-degree understanding of the ethical context of influencer marketing, encompassing both concerns and solutions.

The study identified several limitations and gaps from the previous studies and has come up with the following research objectives:-

RO1- *To explore the current ethical challenges associated with the humanistic nature of SMI marketing, comprising influencers, brands and consumers.*

RO2- *To identify the current ethical challenges associated with the post-humanistic nature of SMI marketing, which includes technology and virtual influencers.*

RO3- *To propose strategies and recommendations to overcome the ethical issues.*

3. Methodology

The study develops a conceptual framework by reviewing prior studies in influencer marketing, which serves as the foundation for this investigation. It consolidates the ethical issues, both human and tech-related, in a single framework. Based on these ethical issues, the study will also provide recommendations for addressing these challenges in influencer marketing to ensure consumers' safety and overall psychological health.

3.1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework, where ethics in influencer marketing has been categorized into two approaches: the Humanistic Approach and the Post-Humanistic Approach. The humanistic

approach categorizes the ethical issues into three broad categories: influencer-related, brand-related, and consumer-related challenges, while the post-humanistic approach has two broad categories: technology-related and virtual influencer (VI) related challenges.

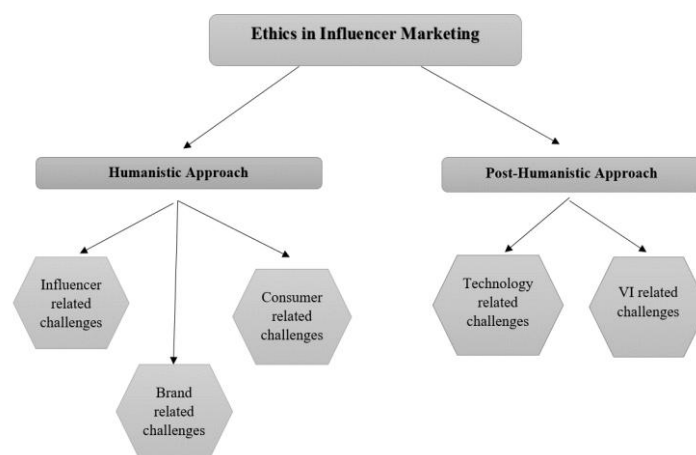


Figure 1: (Source: Author's own work)

3.1.1. Ethics in Influencer Marketing- Humanistic Approach

a. Influencer-Related Ethical Challenges

Ethical challenges in influencer marketing include the spread of misinformation, deceptive or false claims, and disguised product information; the promotion of unrealistic standards, especially in the beauty and fashion industries; and the endorsement of harmful products, such as food, beverages, and wellness products. Because influencers have wider reach through large followings, they may sometimes spread false or incorrect information; for example, myths about the COVID-19 vaccine and other health-related issues spread quickly (Wasike, 2022). This kind of misinformation might have serious consequences, resulting in detrimental behaviour undermining general trust in scientific expertise (Kaňková, 2025; Wasike, 2022). As content becomes viral in social media in split seconds, the impact of such misinformation increases by volumes even when it is unintentional (Ruiz, 2025).

In the quest to gain followers and increase buyer engagement, influencers sometimes violate ethical codes by exaggerating and making false claims

about the products they endorse to generate hype, deceiving both followers and regulators (Ruiz, 2025). Such strategies lead to loss of buyer trust and have a negative impact on the influencer's reputation (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023; Agag, 2019). Because regulations are not strict, influencers take advantage and keep creating deceptive content that misleads consumers for personal gain (Ruiz, 2025).

Influencers, particularly on platforms including Instagram and TikTok, usually promote idealised beauty standards through digitally enhanced images and videos (Linardon, 2023; Rousseau, 2023). The studies showed that these standards incite followers to engage in negative appearance comparisons, internalise beauty ideals, and engage in behaviours like photo avoidance or body dysmorphia, which affect their mental health. The idea of having picture-perfect skin and body, along with the use of filters, skews self-image and worsens these pressures (Rousseau, 2023; Pitaloka, 2025).

Influencers often promote unhealthy foods and wellness products that lack scientific support and negatively affect consumers' health (Kaňková, 2025; Packer et al., 2022). Promotion of HFFS products,

which include high fat, sugar and salt, by celebrities and influencers has been linked to the rise of various health concerns like obesity and diet-related diseases in consumers, especially in children (Packer et al., 2022). Current regulations and policy efforts are insufficient because they lack severity, allowing influencers to continue marketing these products despite the associated health risks. (Packer et al., 2022; Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023).

b. Brand-related challenges

The ethical challenges in the context of brands include various factors such as lack of transparency in paid collaborations, influencer misfit for product promotion, less or no control and monitoring over the influencer content, false claims that do not resonate with the brand values and the absence of contracts or legal agreements in brand-influencer partnerships. Transparency in disclosing paid collaborations is crucial in influencer marketing. This lack of disclosure negatively affects the campaign's effectiveness and reflects on the brand's reputation through a loss of trust and credibility in the eyes of consumers (Dhingra, 2024; Audrezet et al., 2025). Although regulatory agencies like the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) stress the importance of ad disclosure, inconsistent compliance remains a challenge because jurisdictions vary (Dhingra, 2024; Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023). Another important ethical concern is that of the influencer misfit: if an influencer does not share the same values as the brand, it can have a negative impact on how consumers perceive the brand and on the brand's equity (Rathjens et al., 2024). In order to achieve positive marketing results and to remain authentic to consumers, the influencer's characteristics, including their values and the demographics of their audience, must closely match the brand's identity (Ozcelik & Levi, 2020). It is necessary for marketers to employ suitable strategies when choosing influencers in order to prevent such mismatches (Ozcelik & Levi, 2020). Sometimes brands fail to take note of or give insufficient attention to content created by influencers that damages the brand's reputation due to inconsistent postings or content that is inappropriate and goes against the brand's values (Dhingra, 2024). This lack of attention could result

in public relations crises and breaches of advertising regulations (Eslami, 2024).

The improper communication between the influencer and the brand not only leads to consumer mistrust but also increases legal risks for the company (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). Thus, companies must establish a clear communication protocol that aligns influencers with brand messaging (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). Ambiguity around content ownership, usage rights, deliverables, and payments results from the lack of legal agreements in brand-influencer collaborations (Lee Law Firm, 2025). Without clear contract expectations, conflicts can arise over partnerships and intellectual property rights (Bosher, 2020; Lee Law Firm, 2025).

c. Consumer-related ethical challenges

Social media influencers are often involved in promoting idealised body images, luxury lifestyles, and picture-perfect skin, putting followers under pressure and creating negative social comparison, which can adversely affect their mental health, leading to depression, stress, anxiety and psychological distress (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Dhingra, 2024). The young audience, particularly teenagers and children, is most vulnerable due to continued comparison with the influencer-curated images that lead to lowered self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and other mental-health issues (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Dhingra, 2024). The other demographic that is susceptible to ethical complications is children due to undeveloped advertising literacy. Kids' influencers and other influencer content encourage consumers to make poor nutritional choices through subtle advertising, especially regarding food products, while the regulatory protections remain inadequate (De Jans et al., 2017; Friestad & Wright, 1994; De Veirman et al., 2019).

Often, influencers ignore cultural nuances while creating content, which may be perceived as insensitive or offensive and alienate certain audience segments (Gurrieri et al., 2024). Well-known examples, such as tone-deaf ads in international markets, show the consequences of ignoring cultural norms and values, which can

trigger backlash, negative public opinion, and declining brand loyalty (Gurrieri et al., 2024; Hecks, 2025).

3.1.2. Ethics in influencer marketing- Post Humanistic Approach

a. Technology-related challenges

Influencer marketing often involves collecting and synthesizing large amounts of consumers' personal data. This increases data privacy issues, as consumers often lack control over, or awareness of, how their data is collected or used by the other party (Álvarez-Monzonillo, 2023). The constantly changing regulatory environment also makes it difficult for marketers to combine personalization with a sense of ethical responsibility while complying with data protection regulations (González-Díaz & Quintas-Froufe, 2024; Álvarez-Monzonillo, 2023). Consumer trust may be damaged and people's privacy rights infringed if their personal data is misused or if their data handling practices are not transparent (Abbasoğlu et al., 2025). Technologies such as deep fakes are capable of producing artificial faces, voices, and behaviour that appear almost real. This technology can be used without any limits to impersonate individuals without their permission in order to produce synthetic advertisements (Verma, 2025). Because of these technologies, it has become even more difficult to tell whether content is genuine, since fake content can look extremely realistic, and this causes consumers to feel deceived and manipulated. This raises questions about the ability of consumers to distinguish between real and fake content, and consumers' trust often gets exploited in the whole process, putting brand integrity in jeopardy (Abbasoğlu et al., 2025). Consumer decision-making is also deeply influenced by fake or AI-generated reviews, which violate fair market dynamics and severely manipulate consumer perception and trust. (Lim et al., 2025) The deep learning algorithms can also produce synthetic influencers and fake advertisements that appear to be human-like, posing a threat to the traditional influencer marketing and holding the power to impact consumers' purchase decisions (Verma, 2025).

b. Virtual influencer-related challenges

Since Virtual influencers are system-generated or made-up characters, their transparency and authenticity become questionable and raise ethical issues. Consumers are often deceived, as brands or influencers sometimes disguise themselves and hide the artificial nature of these virtual influencers (D. Kim & Wang, 2023; Ananda et al., 2025). These deceptive strategies shake the confidence of consumers in the brand and subsequently lead to depletion in brand trust and consumer loyalty. Virtual influencers lack human touch and emotion; therefore, studies emphasize the importance of ethical practices such as credibility, authenticity, and consistency to secure consumers' trust and loyalty (van Berlo & Breves, 2025; Ananda et al., 2025; D. Kim & Wang, 2023).

In VI marketing, authenticity is a key component of ethical practice. As the nature of VI marketing is such that it cannot truly reflect sensitivity and real human emotions, it is often perceived as too fabricated and lacking human essence. This poses a challenge for brands and marketers to strike a balance between emotions and VI content to it is relatable and authentic. The brands also have a high risk of losing their credibility if the consumers feel disassociated with the VI influencers (Audrezet et al., 2025). Further, the virtual influencers are demonstrated with perfect body, facial features and idealized appearance that has an ill effect on the audience, especially the younger generation, as they also desire similar looks, features and lifestyle. This leads to baseless social comparisons, lowered self-esteem and also deteriorates their mental health (Nasr et al., 2024). These concerns highly relate to human influencer marketing, but the effects are more intensive as the virtual influencers are entirely made-up characters flaunting perfection (Adeane & Stasiak, 2024; Audrezet et al., 2025).

Although self-regulatory initiatives in India, such as the India Influencer Governing Council (IIGC) (IIGC, 2025), mention a code of conduct regarding transparency in influencer marketing, it still overlooks the legal aspect. There does not exist a unified and stringent regulatory framework that sets clear guidelines to deal with the ethical challenges

faced in virtual influencer marketing and AI- driven marketing content (González-Díaz & Quintas-Froufe, 2024). Some marketers and creators take advantage of these loopholes in the policies and regulations for financial gains and personal benefits,

ignoring consumer interests. The absence of accountability is the biggest hindrance in establishing an ethical marketing environment (Mertens & Goetghebuer, 2024).

Table 1 summarises the ethical challenges and factors related to both humanistic and post-humanistic approaches

Ethical Approach Type	Ethical Challenges	Major factors	Discussed by
Humanistic Approach	Influencer Related Challenges	Spread of misinformation Deceptive claims Unrealistic standards, especially in the beauty and fashion industry Endorsement of harmful products, especially in the food and wellness industry	(Kaňková et al., 2024; Wasike, 2022; Ruiz, 2025; (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022; Packer et al., 2022;) Rousseau, 2023; Linardon, 2023)
	Brand Related Challenges	Lack of transparency on paid collaborations and sponsored content Inappropriate choice of influencers Poor monitoring of the influencer content False claims by the influencers about the brands due to improper communication of the brand values Absence of contracts and legal agreements in brand-influencer partnerships.	(Dhingra et al., 2024; Audrezet et al., 2025; Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023; Ozcelik & Levi, 2020; Eslami et al., 2024; Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022; Boshier, 2020)
	Consumer Related Challenges	Psychological distress Children's susceptibility to the misleading content affecting their health is due to a lack of regulations and policies concerning children's interests. Non-compliance with the cultural sensitivity of the targeted audience.	(De Veirman et al., 2019; Dhingra et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2021; De Jans et al., 2017; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Gurrieri et al., 2024)
Post Humanistic Approach	Technology Related challenges	Data privacy concerns Use of Deep fake technology for commercial gains Generating fake reviews, ads, and synthetic influencers through deep learning algorithms. Lack of AI-generated content verification tools.	(Abbasoğlu et al., 2025; Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022; González-Díaz & Quintas-Froufe, 2024; Verma, 2025)
	Virtual Influencer (VI) Related Challenges	Non-disclosure of artificial nature of the virtual influencers by the brands Dishonesty and lack of authenticity in content. Effect on overall consumers' mental well-being due to idealized depiction of virtual influencers. Lack of a regulatory framework to safeguard consumers' interests in the context of AI-driven advertising.	(D. Kim & Wang, 2023; Ananda et al., 2025; van Berlo & Breves, 2025; Audrezet et al., 2025; Adeane & Stasiak, 2024; Nasr et al., 2024; Mertens & Goetghebuer, 2024)

3.2. Recommendations

3.2.1. Recommendations to overcome influencer-related ethical challenges

a. Maintaining Credibility and Authenticity in Content

Influencers should follow ethical marketing strategies rather than pursuing short-term fame and financial gain. Producing genuine and authentic content builds long-term consumer trust (D. Y. Kim & Kim, 2021), which benefits the influencer in the long run. Influencers should also involve themselves in prior research before endorsing any product and should refrain from making any false claims. Influencers should also be trained about ethical and responsible marketing through various programmes and specially designed courses (Kaňková, 2025; Rousseau, 2023) to create a safer digital marketing ecosystem.

b. Implementation of Regulatory Framework and Ethical Guidelines for Influencers

For creating an ethical marketing ecosystem, there is a need for stringent regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency and accountability. The studies have highlighted the importance of stricter rules and policy guidelines that prevent the misuse of social media from spreading misinformation and deceptive marketing tactics (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023; Packer et al., 2022). Further, the ethical guidelines will encourage influencers to create genuine, authentic and culturally sensitive content (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Regulations and legal guidelines also encourage open disclosure of sponsored and paid partnerships in influencers' content. Governments and regulatory bodies should implement stricter regulations regarding influencer marketing, particularly when it comes to advertising directed at children.

3.2.2. Recommendations to overcome brand-related ethical challenges

a. Clear ad disclosure and sponsored content

The brands should encourage influencers to be transparent about the paid partnerships and sponsored content with proper hashtags. This will lead to increased consumer trust in both the brand

and the influencer and help the consumers to make an informed decision (Dhingra, 2024; Audrezet et al., 2025).

b. Brand-Influencer fit

While choosing the influencers, the brands should keep in mind that they should align with the brand's identity. By carefully examining the influencer's previous content, the brands must ensure that the endorsed product syncs with the influencer's audience, demographics and other attributes like personal appearance, values and authenticity for successful marketing outcomes (Ozcelik & Levi, 2020). The strategies may involve the use of tools for audience analysis and influencer selection.

c. Clear communication and content monitoring mechanism

The brands must communicate their brand philosophy beforehand for marketing effectiveness. The communication should be seamless, and the generated content must be brand-approved before going online. Any discrepancies in the content must be dealt with through proper feedback and support systems (Dhingra, 2024). The brands should establish clear communication protocols and guidelines and should constantly monitor the influencer content for effective brand messaging (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023).

d. Well-defined Brand-Influencer Contract Terms

After selecting the influencer, brands should prepare a well-defined contract that outlines all policy terms regarding content ownership, usage rights, deliverables, and payment terms. This is important to minimise brand-influencer conflicts that may arise in the absence of an established legal framework (Lee Law Firm, 2025; Bosher, 2020).

3.2.3. Recommendations to overcome consumer-related ethical challenges

a. Spreading Awareness and Digital Literacy

The more consumers are digitally literate, the less are the chances for them to get duped by misleading claims and deceptive advertising (Linardon, 2023; Ruiz, 2025). This gives them the power to choose rather than fall prey to the superficial marketing gigs going viral. Consumers should not just unthinkingly

follow influencers; fact-checking their content and assessing the genuineness of testimonials is equally important. The youth, especially children and teenagers, should be educated about the subtleties of marketing and the possibility of manipulation in influencer endorsements through the collective efforts of parents, schools, and society (De Jans et al., 2017). This will promote the overall physical and mental well-being of the consumers through healthier consumption behaviour.

b. Encouraging Cultural sensitivity, body positivity and mental awareness in content

Brand marketers, influencers, and other stakeholders should work collectively to prioritise ethical content that promotes a range of body shapes, skin tones, and lifestyles to minimise the negative effects on consumers (Dhingra, 2024), especially women, teenagers, and children. This aids in minimizing the detrimental issues that lead to lowered self-esteem, body dysmorphia and other psychological issues like anxiety, stress and depression. Further, understanding the cultural nuances is equally important, as the curated content should not hurt the cultural sentiments and belief system of any community in particular, thus fostering an inclusive environment (Gurrieri et al., 2024). Influencers should also create content that talks about the mental health-related issues through social media usage. This will bring awareness among the audiences, creating a healthier online environment (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

3.2.4. Recommendations to overcome technology-related ethical challenges

a. Clear communication on consumer data

The brands must focus on maintaining transparency regarding the collection of consumer data and its usage. These practices help in amplifying consumers' trust in brands, which results in positive marketing outcomes. Offering consumer-friendly privacy policies and asking for consent from consumers through clear communication strengthens the relationship with the consumers, which benefits the marketers in the long run (González-Díaz & Quintas-Froufe, 2024).

b. Data Protection and Accountability measures

The brands should strictly comply with data protection policies, such as the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) (Council, European Union), the EU-based information privacy law. When it comes to data security, companies must use advanced encryption technologies to prevent unauthorised access, data breaches, and misuse (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). The brands should also reinforce robust monitoring and audit systems to detect any discrepancies related to influencer practices, data handling, and usage, in order to maintain ethical standards (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023).

c. Responsible use of technology

Brands and influencers must prioritize the responsible use of AI technologies like deep fakes while creating synthetic content. Clearly marking the artificial nature of the content through watermarking enhances trust and confidence among audiences (Verma, 2025). Moreover, consent is essential from the individual whose likeness has been adopted while curating that artificial content (Verma, 2025). To mitigate the complexities of AI technology, review boards should comprise a diverse group of stakeholders to ensure ethical standards. Ethical standards can also be upheld by collaborating with technology providers to verify that the tools and technology used in marketing follow the required standards. This reduces the possibility of any abuse and encourages tech-safety. Joshi (2023) suggests that ethical organizations and technology firms should work together toward responsible innovation.

3.2.5. Recommendations to overcome VI-related ethical challenges

a. Content Relatability and Transparency

As virtual influencers are artificially generated characters, it is suggested that marketers put effort into producing content that finds human emotions as relatable. To elicit a positive audience response, marketers can incorporate real-life stories and experiences with virtual influencers to enhance content authenticity and minimize the unreal nature of VIs (van Berlo & Breves, 2025). Also, to promote the genuineness of the VIs, the brands should declare that VIs are synthetic characters and not

actual persons. This promotes brand credibility and consumer trust and prevents deception (D. Kim & Wang, 2023).

b. Self-Regulatory System

To minimize the negative effects of Virtual Influencer marketing, brands and influencers must devise self-regulatory systems that comply with frameworks such as the IIGC (Indian Influencer Governing Council, 2025). These policies enhance accountability among brands and influencers, encouraging them to produce content that meets ethical standards. These systems should include guidelines and a code of conduct for creating VI content. The timely audits and self-compliance measures will also aid in winning consumer trust, thus creating an ethical marketing ecosystem.

c. Addressing Health Concerns

The consumer's health, be it physical or mental, is highly affected by the fabricated content of VIs with idealized bodies and lifestyles. This negative impact is more aggravated among children, teenagers and women. The brands are advised to be aware of these concerns, which arise from mental health issues among followers, and to restrict themselves from posting such content (Adeane & Stasiak, 2024). The brands and VIs are suggested to be indulged in spreading body positivity, realistic beauty standards, promoting healthier lifestyle choices by collaborating with health experts and curating content that is scientifically backed to enhance authenticity.

4. Implications

Addressing the ethical concern in influencer marketing has several theoretical implications. The first point is that it uses a multidisciplinary approach which combines ethical marketing with psychology, computer science, and media communication and stresses the importance of further exploring this field in future research. The second point is that it establishes the basis for subsequent studies concerning the importance of authenticity and credibility in building consumers' trust during online interactions. The third point is that the study looks at the physical and mental health of social media users and the increasing significance of responsible

content creation, proposing a theory about their impact on society.

In addition to its theoretical implications, the study also offers marketers some practical strategies. It stresses the need for brands to form partnerships with influencers and with regulatory authorities in order to enhance consumer trust and create a favourable social environment. The study sets out ethical guidelines and points out factors such as cultural sensitivity, transparency, authenticity, and clear communication which serve the interests of consumers, help to build brand value, and contribute to greater credibility. Moreover, effective monitoring, auditing, and the provision of feedback on the content developed help to maintain ethical standards and result in positive marketing outcomes.

5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Even though the study is comprehensive, it does have some limitations. It is completely dependent on earlier literature and therefore includes no empirical results. Since influencer marketing is a developing field, it might not be able to account for recent advances. Furthermore, the study is limited to the conceptual framework and thus may overlook other ethical issues that lie outside its scope. Also, given the dynamic character of AI technology and virtual influencer marketing and the ethical problems associated with them, these may not be fully addressed within the scope of this research. Researchers in the future could use empirical methods, case studies, and experimental approaches to further examine the ethical dimensions separately.

Moreover, while the study pays attention to the ethical issues, it might neglect the possible advantages and the innovative approaches that can arise from influencer marketing. It does not take into consideration the cultural differences between various regions, as these could affect how consumers perceive and respond to influencer marketing. Also, the recommendations might not be suitable in all cases, since they will depend on the particular market and consumer needs. Finally, the fact that technology is constantly changing—especially in the area of virtual influencers and AI-generated content—brings with it continuous challenges which this research may not deal with

fully. Future research should look into empirical data and case studies in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the complexities involved in influencer marketing.

6. Conclusion

The current study advances the literature through a holistic framework that addresses ethical issues in influencer marketing, from fake claims and poor brand-influencer alignment to AI-driven deep fakes and idealized virtual portrayals. The study mentions the ill effects of ethical fallouts, specifically among vulnerable groups like children and youth, and how they erode trust, cause physical and psychological distress, and promote an unhealthy lifestyle. The study further elaborates on strategies such as clear disclosures, responsible information dissemination, and digital literacy to foster a safe and ethical marketing environment. As the sector advances aggressively, ethical lapses may wipe its reputation, hindering industry growth and consumer well-being. Humanistic values like authenticity, transparency, credibility, and trust must be prioritized alongside post-humanistic accountability in AI and virtual tools. This study provides a roadmap for sustainable relationships among influencers, brands, and consumers. Finally, complying with regulations such as the FTC guidelines and adhering to them strongly builds long-term trust and supports mental health in the digital landscape. Future studies should empirically validate the framework using surveys or experiments across cultures. Non-negotiable, stringent policies must be developed by policymakers for AI influencers and deep fakes, while brands implement mandatory ethics training and audits. Marketers and influencers must prioritize culturally sensitive, body-positive content and transparent use of technology to support growth and innovation in this sector.

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