Exploring the Ethical Dimensions of Influencer Communication in the Fashion Industry

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Keywords: Influencer communication; Ethics; Fashion industry; Social media consumer perceptions; Sponsored content

Abstract: Influencer communication significantly impacts the fashion industry by shaping consumer preferences and purchasing decisions. This research aims to analyze social media consumer perceptions of the ethics of influencer communication in the fashion industry, focusing on understanding sponsored content, credibility, genuineness, and trust in influencer-generated content as a source of fashion product information. A global perspective is taken, with a representative sample of consumers surveyed online. Quantitative research methods are employed, using descriptive statistical analysis to better understand consumer perceptions. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer views on influencer communication ethics and offer potential best practices and guidelines for the fashion industry. The results could benefit fashion brands and influencers by helping them understand their target audience's expectations and improve the authenticity and quality of influencer communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of influencers in the fashion industry began during the early development of social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, allowing influencers to build substantial followings (Tsimonis et al., 2020). As social media grew, the influencer marketing industry became a crucial tool for the fashion business, with brands realizing the value of influencer partnerships in reaching consumers and building brand awareness (Ye et al., 2021). Influencer content was perceived as more authentic and relatable, leading to increased trust, credibility, and sales for brands (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Both high-end and fast-fashion companies collaborated with influencers to generate content (Colucci & Pedroni, 2022; Yodi et al., 2020), and influencers significantly impacted consumer preferences and behaviors (Cabrera et al., 2020). However, the rise of influencer marketing raised questions about ethics, transparency, and credibility in influencer communication (Valsesia et al., 2020). Consumers' increasing consciousness and discernment about online information necessitate understanding their views on influencer communication ethics in the fashion industry (Wallerstein et al., 2019). This research examines consumers' awareness of sponsored content, beliefs about influencer credibility and authenticity, and confidence in influencer-generated content as a fashion product information source. It aims to offer insights into influencer communication ethics in the fashion industry and contribute to best practices and guidelines. This paper addresses the literature gap where social media users are often overlooked as active audiences, which is a similar mistake made in early mass communication research. Limited studies focus on consumers' perceptions of the ethical implications of influencer communication in the fashion industry, particularly regarding transparency and authenticity.

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Having all this in mind, the guiding research question in this study is: How do consumers perceive the ethical dimensions of influencer communication in the fashion industry, and what are their attitudes towards credibility, transparency, and authenticity in influencer-generated content?

Based on the research question, three hypotheses were formulated:

H: Consumers are more likely to engage with ethical, transparent, and authentic influencer-generated content in the fashion industry from credible and genuine influencers.

H1: Consumers perceive ethical issues in influencer communication in the fashion industry and value transparency and authenticity in influencer-generated content.

H2: The credibility and genuineness of influencers significantly impact consumers' perceptions of influencer-generated content.

These hypotheses contribute to understanding the importance of ethics, transparency, authenticity, and credibility in influencer communication in the fashion industry and their impact on consumers. They will be tested through a survey assessing consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards influencer-generated content in the fashion industry, providing insights into ethical influencer communication and promoting consumer trust and loyalty. The paper consists of an Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Analysis, and Discussion and Conclusion sections. The findings in Results and Analysis demonstrate consumers' engagement with ethical, transparent, and authentic influencer-generated content, supporting hypotheses H, H1, and H2. The Discussion and Conclusion section interprets the results, discusses implications for the fashion industry and influencer communication, and proposes further studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer communication is a growing trend in the fashion industry (Tankosic et al., 2020), with influencers significantly impacting consumer attitudes, beliefs, and purchase intentions (Javed et al., 2022; Nurfadila & Riyanto, 2020; Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Key factors contributing to influencer success include credibility, likeability, and expertise (Gomes et al., 2022). Fashion influencers play a role in setting the agenda, acting as opinion leaders and experts (Ercegovac et al., 2022), and can be effective communication channels for fashion brands (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018; Tankosic et al., 2017). Jacobson and Harrison (2022) found that influencers shape consumer perceptions and attitudes toward sustainable fashion, acting as individual media outlets (Ercegovac, 2022) that inform, educate, and entertain (Wei et al., 2022). Influencers' expertise and experience determine their opinion leadership and impact on consumer decision-making (Casaló et al., 2020). However, as influencer marketing started spreading across the fashion industry as a common marketing tool, it raised ethical questions about authenticity and credibility (Voorveld, 2019). Scholars emphasize the need for transparency and authenticity (Van Driel & Dumitrca, 2021) and consideration of influencer communication's impact on ethical beliefs and moral distress (Ye et al., 2021). Consumers are increasingly aware of influencers' commercial nature (Coco & Eckert, 2020) and may be skeptical of their endorsements (Wellman et al., 2020). Influencers face a challenge in presenting a personal, authentic image while being motivated by financial incentives (Abidin & Ots, 2016). The development of virtual influencers further complicates the ethics of authenticity (Mei, 2021). These computer-generated characters raise questions about the truthfulness of their representations (Conti et al., 2022; Robinson, 2020). The ethics of influencer communication also involve the impact on ethical beliefs and moral distress (Ye et al., 2021). Influencers should be aware of the responsibility that comes with their power (Davis et al., 2021).
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Acikgoz and Burnaz (2021) emphasize the importance of considering the ethical implications of influencer marketing, as it significantly impacts image and brand perception.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology section outlines the research design, data-gathering strategies, and data analysis methods used in this study. A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected through an online survey distributed to a convenience sample of the public interested in fashion and fashion influencers. The sample included 704 participants, predominantly women, which was expected, considering that they are more interested in following fashion influencers and interested in fashion in general (Chae, 2018), with men making up almost a third of the sample. In terms of age, the largest group of respondents were aged 35-44 (40.4%), followed by those aged 25-34 (32.1%), continuing to the group of 45-54 (14.7%). The smallest groups were those aged 65 and older (2.8%) and 18-24 (5.5%). The online survey consisted of 28 questions divided into five sections: Demographic analysis, Awareness of sponsored content in influencer posts, Perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity, Trust in influencer-generated content as a source of information about fashion products, and Perception of the impact of influencer communication on the fashion industry’s image and reputation. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, and the correlation coefficient and Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient were conducted. The research was conducted at the end of 2022 (November and December) and during the first months of 2023 (January and February).

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Data on consumers’ perceptions of ethical aspects of influencer communication in the fashion industry was collected and illustrated using Charts 1-6, focusing on transparency, credibility, and authenticity (Chandler & Munday, 2020). Chart 1 and Chart 6 measured transparency, specifically regarding the disclosure of sponsored content. Word clusters like “sponsored posts should be clearly marked” were tagged as the transparency category. Chart 2 measured credibility, while Charts 3-5 measured both credibility and authenticity. Chart 2 focused on the influence of influencer posts on purchasing decisions, with the word cluster “how much influence do fashion influencer’s posts have” tagged to credibility. Chart 3 assessed consumer trust in influencers’ shared information, linking the word cluster “trust the information” to both credibility and authenticity. Charts 4 and 5 evaluated influencer communication effectiveness in reaching target audiences across age groups, tagging the word cluster “an effective way for the fashion industry to reach its target audience” to both authenticity and credibility. These charts offered insights into consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward ethical dimensions of influencer communication in the fashion industry. The results were analyzed and presented as an overview of the main themes and ethical challenges faced by the fashion industry in influencer communication. The analysis identified key themes and issues related to the ethical dimensions of influencer communication in the fashion industry. Results indicated a significant need for increased transparency in influencer communication, with consumers wanting clear disclosure of compensation (Belanche et al., 2021) or complimentary products for promotion (Chart 1). Users also value authenticity and credibility in influencers’ opinions. Chart 1 showed that a majority (69.7%) strongly agreed that sponsored

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Terms transparency, credibility, and authenticity were defined according to Oxford Dictionary of Mass Communication since influencers are part of media communication as subjects who, during the communication process, are reaching a large number of people – a segment of mass audience. Therefore, influencers should have not only ethical but legal obligation as well to share transparent, credible and genuine media messages, just as any other media source.
posts should be clearly marked, with 21.1% somewhat agreeing. Only 8.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 0.9% somewhat or strongly disagreed. This finding highlights the importance of transparency (Stubb et al., 2019) and the need for ethical guidelines and regulations for influencer communication (De Cicco et al., 2021; Polli Leite & Baptista, 2022).

**Chart 1.** Question - Do you believe that fashion influencer posts that are sponsored should be clearly marked as such?

Source: Authors’ research

Analysis revealed varying levels of transparency and authenticity among influencers, with some perceived to promote products solely for financial gain (Chart 2). However, there were also influencers recognized for their authenticity and trustworthiness. The study supported H1, showing that consumers perceive ethical issues in influencer communication and value transparency. H2 was also supported, suggesting that consumers are aware of influencers' credibility and genuineness, which can impact their perception of influencer-generated content. The findings emphasize the need for ethical guidelines and regulations to ensure transparent and accountable influencer communication practices and highlight the significant impact of credibility and genuineness on consumer perceptions.

**Chart 2.** Question - In your opinion, how much influence do fashion influencer's posts have on your purchasing decisions?

Source: Authors’ research

Chart 2 shows that fashion influencers have some impact on consumer purchasing decisions, with a majority (60.6%) acknowledging their influence. However, 36.7% reported little to no effect, suggesting that influencers are not the only determinant (Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019). This may also imply that consumers don't perceive themselves as influenced but don't discount others being opinionated (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). Despite the influence of fashion influencers (Gomes et al., 2022), there is a perception of lacking transparency and authenticity (Janssen et al., 2022), affecting credibility (Chart 2) and promotional effectiveness. Promotion for profit (Carpenter et al., 2022) can reduce trust and increase resistance (Farivar & Wang, 2022). Enhancing transparency and authenticity is essential to maintain trustworthiness and credibility (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Ye et al., 2021). Influencer credibility affects purchasing decisions (Andreani et al., 2021) and determines audience trust (Li & Peng, 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2020). Transparency and authenticity impact credibility (De Cicco et al., 2021),
which influences audience purchasing choices (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022; Yodi et al., 2020). The results from Chart 2 support hypothesis H, H1 and H2 and suggest that fashion influencers have an impact on consumer purchasing decisions, but other factors like authenticity and credibility also play a role in consumer engagement.

A correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between the two survey questions: "Do you believe that fashion influencer posts that are sponsored should be clearly marked as such?" and "In your opinion, how much influence do fashion influencer's posts have on your purchasing decisions?" The analysis was performed on a sample of 704 respondents. To calculate the correlation between two questions (Chart 1 and Chart 2), numerical values to the responses were assigned. For the first question, a value of 1 to strongly disagree was assigned, 2 to neither agree nor disagree, 3 to somewhat agree, and 4 to strongly agree. For the second question, a value of 1 to no influence, 2 to little influence, 3 to some influence and 4 to a lot of influence. Using these values, the correlation coefficient using the formula (1) was calculated:

$$r = \frac{n(\Sigma XY)- (\Sigma X)(\Sigma Y)}{\sqrt{(n\Sigma X^2-(\Sigma X)^2))(n\Sigma Y^2-(\Sigma Y)^2))}}$$  

(1)

where n is the sample size, ΣXY is the sum of (response to question 1 x response to question 2) for all respondents; ΣX is the sum of responses to question 1 for all respondents and ΣY is the sum of responses to question 2 for all respondents; ΣX² is sum of (response to question 1)² for all respondents and ΣY² is sum of (response to question 2)² for all respondents. Plugging in the values, it shows:

$$r = 0.186$$

The correlation coefficient (r) between the belief that sponsored posts should be marked clearly and the influence of fashion influencer posts on purchasing decisions is 0.186, indicating a weak positive correlation. This suggests that those valuing transparency might be slightly more influenced by such posts. It is also possible that social media consumers may need time to adjust and become more familiar with the concept of sponsored content in order to start trusting it more. As people become more aware of the prevalence of sponsored content on social media, they may also become savvier about recognizing it and understanding its impact on the content they see. As social media platforms and advertisers become more transparent about their sponsored content practices, consumers may feel more confident in their ability to differentiate between sponsored and non-sponsored content. However, since the correlation is not yet strong enough for definitive conclusions, it presents an encouraging basis for further research that could potentially lead to significant findings. Based on a weak positive correlation the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated in the study using the formula (2):

$$r_s = 1 - 6 \frac{d^2}{n^2-1}$$  

(2)

where d² is the squared difference in ranks and n is the number of data points:

$$r_s = 0.952$$

The Spearman's rank correlation coefficient between these two questions is $$r_s = 0.952$$, indicating a strong positive correlation between the belief that fashion influencers should disclose sponsored posts and the influence of their posts on purchasing decisions. This means that users who believe that influencers should clearly label sponsored posts also believe that influencers
currently do not have a strong influence on their purchasing decisions. These findings align with H1, which emphasizes transparency and authenticity, and H2, which highlights credibility and genuineness, shedding light on the intricate relationship between consumers, influencers, and purchasing decisions in the fashion industry.

Chart 3. Question - How much do you trust the information shared by influencers about fashion products?

Source: Authors’ research

Chart 3 results reveal that 24.7% of respondents have doubts about the accuracy of information shared by influencers, stressing the importance of ethical guidelines and transparency in influencer communication (Steils et al., 2022). It also highlights opportunities to improve influencer communication to increase trust among followers (Leung et al., 2022). The findings suggest the fashion industry should use diverse communication channels to reach different target audiences (Bala & Verma, 2018), as influencer-generated content may not resonate with everyone. Employing a variety of channels helps reach a wider range of consumers (Masuda et al., 2022). Interestingly, younger generations (18-34, Chart 4) have less confidence in influencer communication compared to older demographics (Chart 5). It is noteworthy that older respondents (70.6%) view influencer communication as more effective than younger audiences (56.1%). This trend could be attributed to influencer fatigue among younger consumers (Kay et al., 2020) or middle-aged and elderly audiences being more familiar with traditional advertising methods, perceiving social media influencers as authentic sources (Dwidienawati et al., 2020; Hutto et al., 2015).

Chart 4. In your opinion, do you think influencer communication is an effective way for the fashion industry to reach its target audience? vs. Age 18-34

Source: Authors’ research

This study supports both supporting hypotheses. Regarding H1, 24.7% of respondents have doubts about influencers' information accuracy, highlighting the need for ethical guidelines, transparency, and opportunities to improve influencer communication to build trust. In respect of H2, younger consumers experiencing influencer fatigue seek authenticity, impacting their perception of influencer-generated content. Meanwhile, middle-aged and elderly audiences perceive influencers as authentic sources, having higher confidence in the provided information. This supports the idea that credibility and genuineness significantly impact consumers' perceptions.
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For these reasons, it is crucial for brands to carefully choose their influencer partners and to work collaboratively with them (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) to promote products in a way that is authentic, informative, and transparent, which can lead to a more positive impact on consumer behavior and brand loyalty (Abidin & Ots, 2016).

The results show that 83.2% of participants believe influencers do not clearly indicate sponsored content (Chart 6), emphasizing the need for enhanced ethical practices, transparency, and authenticity in influencer communication (Mishra et al., 2021). Social media platforms already have guidelines for paid promotions (Van der Bend et al., 2022), which influencers and brands should follow to prevent deceptive practices (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Promoting responsible and ethical communication can build a trustworthy environment and regain consumer confidence. Ethical considerations in influencer communication are complex (Ingrassia et al., 2022), as influencers balance potential income and exposure (Kim, 2022) with the pressure to maintain their image and deliver sponsored content, potentially leading to unreliable messaging (Bollinger, 2022). This confusion can damage both influencer and brand reputations. The presented data offers insights into the consumer's perspective on the ethics of influencer communication, including their views on transparency (15.6% clear, 56% somewhat clear, 26.6% not very clear, 1.8% completely unclear), authenticity, credibility, and the role of influencer-generated content in shaping consumer behavior.

Table 1 presents a concise summary of research findings for those interested in ethical considerations of influencer communication in the fashion industry. This information can help fashion brands, influencers, and stakeholders develop ethical and transparent practices, leading to a more trustworthy and credible fashion industry.
Table 1. Ethical dimensions of influencer communication in the fashion industry: summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical Dimensions</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>The extent to which influencer content accurately represents the influencer’s personal views or experience, and whether it is created in collaboration with the brand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>The extent to which sponsored content is clearly labeled as such, and whether the influencer discloses the nature of their relationship with the brand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>The extent to which the influencer is seen as a credible and trustworthy source of information, and whether their content is free from conflicts of interest.</td>
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</table>

Source: Authors’ research

The study supports hypotheses H1, H2, and H, emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations, transparency, and authenticity for influencers and brands to build trust and maintain a positive reputation in the fashion industry (Chen et al., 2023). H1 is supported as most participants agreed that sponsored fashion influencer posts should be explicitly labeled, highlighting the value of transparency in influencer-generated content. H2 is supported by varying levels of transparency and authenticity among influencers, with consumers aware of how credibility and genuineness impact their perceptions. Lastly, H is supported by the overall findings, suggesting consumers engage more with ethical, transparent, and authentic content from credible and genuine influencers.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study reveals that consumers hold varying views on the ethics of influencer communication in the fashion industry. They are aware of sponsored content and value transparency and authenticity (Abidin & Ots, 2016), while they question influencers’ credibility and genuineness. The findings emphasize a strong demand for transparency in influencer communication. Influencer communication is an effective tool to reach the audience but not a universal solution. Brands should consider alternative channels to reach those less receptive to influencer-generated content. It’s crucial for brands to collaborate with influencers to promote products authentically, informatively, and transparently. The study highlights the role of influencer-generated content in shaping consumer behavior. While fashion influencer posts may influence purchasing decisions, other factors like personal preferences, budget, and brand loyalty play crucial roles. Brands should focus on creating high-quality, engaging content (Mohammad et al., 2020) rather than solely relying on influencer content. The research also emphasizes the importance of age and demographics in influencer communication. Younger consumers seek authentic experiences, while older audiences view influencer communication as more effective. This highlights the need for brands to tailor their strategies to specific age groups and demographics. The results analysis shows the need for ethical guidelines and regulations to ensure transparency and accountability in influencer communication practices. Social media platforms have guidelines in place for paid promotions, which should be followed by influencers and brands. By promoting responsible practices, the fashion industry can build a trustworthy ecosystem and regain consumer confidence.

Table 2 sheds light on crucial factors influencing consumers’ perceptions of ethical influencer communication in the fashion industry. The research focuses on concerns about the authenticity and transparency of influencer content, especially regarding sponsored posts and product endorsements. Factors include transparency in influencer communication, relevance and authenticity (Abidin & Ots, 2016) of endorsements, and the influencer’s alignment with brand values.
Table 2 offers valuable insights into consumers' perceptions of the ethical implications of influencer communication, aiding in establishing trustworthy industry practices and enhancing consumer trust and credibility.

**Table 2. Consumers' perceptions of ethical influencer communication in the fashion industry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chart 1</td>
<td>Consumers perceive ethical issues in influencer communication and value transparency: 69.7% strongly agree; 21.1% somewhat agree which means that 90.8% of the surveyed population to some degree (strongly or somewhat) agree that transparency is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart 2</td>
<td>Fashion influencers affect buying choices, but with perceived limited transparency and authenticity as 36.7% see little influence, while 23.9% none. This suggests that 60.6% doubt influencers' information is genuine and transparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart 3</td>
<td>A significant proportion of respondents (24.7%) have doubts about the accuracy of information shared by influencers about fashion products, as they responded with &quot;Somewhat distrust&quot; or &quot;Completely distrust&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart 4 and Chart 5</td>
<td>The older population of respondents (70.6%) viewed influencer communication as a more effective marketing tool than the younger audience (56.1%), which may be attributed to influencer fatigue among younger consumers and the middle-aged and elderly members of the audience being more used traditional advertising methods and therefore more trusting towards the influencers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart 6</td>
<td>A significant number (37.4%) of respondents were unaware of sponsored content in influencer posts, emphasizing the need for improved transparency in fashion industry influencer communication.</td>
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</table>

**Source:** Authors’ research

The study supports hypotheses H1, H2, and H regarding influencer-generated content in the fashion industry. H1 highlights consumers' awareness of ethical issues in influencer communication, while H2 emphasizes the value of transparency and authenticity. These ethical considerations are crucial for building trust and maintaining a positive reputation for both influencers and brands. The study found that credible and genuine influencers are trusted more by consumers, impacting their perceptions of influencer-generated content. This makes consumers more likely to engage with content from authentic influencers. Future research could focus on the quality and content of influencer posts, emphasizing transparency and authenticity. Investigations into ethical considerations across different regions and cultures are warranted, as well as the impact of regulations and enforcement mechanisms on influencer communication practices. This includes examining the effectiveness of social media platforms' guidelines and government regulations. The discrepancy between consumers' self-perception and general perception of influencer impact could be explored. Such research on ethical dimensions of influencer communication in the fashion industry could contribute to promoting responsible practices and building consumer trust. As social media and influencer culture continue to grow, ensuring ethical and sustainable communication aligned with fashion industry values is essential.

**References**


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