

Ethical Influencer Marketing: Synthesis of Literature and Future Research Directions

Devanshi Mehra*, Ashish Gupta, Suraksha Gupta, TC Melewar and Liz Gee

Abstract

Influencer marketing has evolved into a dynamic marketing strategy. Despite its rapid growth, the ethical implications of influencer marketing have been largely overlooked in scholarly discourse. This study addresses this critical gap by delving into the ethical issues of influencer marketing through a two-stage study. Study 1 carried out a systematic literature review of 103 research articles using the 5W1H organising framework to synthesise and consolidate existing fragmented literature on the subject. Through thematic analysis, this study identified five key research themes that encapsulate ethical concerns within influencer marketing. Study 2 incorporated 24 in-depth interviews to capture consumers lived experiences and ethical evaluations of influencer content. The analysis of the interviews triangulated the findings from the literature review, with significant thematic convergence. This study extends the existing knowledge by providing a comprehensive framework of ethical influencer marketing and suggests future avenues for research in the realm of ethics within influencer marketing. The findings can support brands and influencers in crafting ethical and responsible influencer marketing campaigns while also offering government/policymakers essential insights to develop targeted guidelines and regulations for ethical influencer marketing.

Keywords: Influencer, Influencer Marketing, Ethics, Sponsorship Disclosure, Advertising Literacy, Literature Review, Interviews

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1. Introduction

1.1 Influencer Marketing: Persuasion or Manipulation

With the global user base of digital platforms exceeding one billion, the Internet has evolved into a crucial aspect of daily existence ([Anderson et al., 2016](#)). In the online realm, the role of influencers in perpetuating information and shaping awareness without geographical constraints ([Park et al., 2007](#); [Hudders & Lou, 2022](#)). Hence, influencer marketing is being strategically used as a transformative marketing strategy across many industries. It has evolved as a pervasive worldwide phenomenon which has completely altered the way information is created, shared, and marketed ([Enke and Farrell 2020](#); [Enke and Borchers, 2019](#)). For the fashion, beauty and cosmetics industry, influencer marketing has been leading consumers with trends and visuals for affiliate marketing campaigns such as skincare routines, or styling inspirations. Health, fitness, food and beverage industry has used influencer marketing for promoting fitness and wellness through meal or supplement based lifestyle marketing or apparel marketing. However, strategic use of influencer marketing differs across countries. The global influencer marketing industry was valued at 24 billion U.S. dollars, marking a more than threefold increase since 2019 ([Statista, 2025](#)), which [Hub \(2025\)](#) indicates that the industry is expected to surpass \$33 billion by the end of 2025.

In influencer marketing, popular social media users endorse a product, brand, service, or idea, and are compensated for their efforts ([Campbell and Farrell, 2020](#); [Khamis et al., 2017](#)). Today, it is difficult to imagine marketing without these ‘influencers.’ Influencers are generally recognised as individuals with social influence who can shape public perceptions through their words and actions ([Robinson, 2020](#)); are often seen as experts in specific areas such as tourism, finance, food, lifestyle, or wellness; and are regarded by their followers as trustworthy advisors because of their perceived expertise ([Majid et al., 2019](#); [Hudders & Lou, 2022](#)). Consequently, influencers serve as a source of inspiration and inform their followers of the latest trends ([Lou,](#)

2022). In this era of digital dependence, marketers consider influencers to have an edge over traditional celebs, and they are believed to be more effective in delivering brand messages (Jin et al., 2019; Gamage & Ashill, 2022). Influencers occupying prominent positions on various online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have a significant influence on consumer opinions, especially among the youth (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). *Marketers* take advantage of influencers' charm and trustworthiness to grab the attention of consumers, create positive feelings about products and brands, and encourage people to talk about them online (Jin & al., 2020; Jin & Phua, 2014). Influencers, seen as everyday people sharing their opinions, weave endorsements into their personal stories, making them appear unbiased and realistic (De Veirman et al. 2017). *Consumers* view influencers as more trustworthy than just brands or celebrities (Childers et al., 2019) because influencers are genuinely interested in life, making their product reviews feel honest and reliable to their audience (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Influencers, often referred to as 'walking billboards' (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003), have shifted the landscape of influencer marketing from being exclusive to traditional celebrities to empowering ordinary consumers through social media. A substantial percentage of YouTube subscribers believe that influencers on the platform contribute to shaping culture and affecting purchasing decisions (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016).

More than 90% of marketers acknowledge the efficacy of influencer marketing strategies, highlighting their capacity to generate an 11-fold return on investment in contrast to traditional marketing methods (Xie and Feng, 2022). However, the growing popularity of influencer marketing has consequently led to a deluge of associated unethical practices (Borchers & Enke, 2023; Borchers & Enke, 2022). Santora (2024) reported that 60% of the brands encountered influencer fraud in their marketing campaigns, as influencers have been caught using artificial means such as bots to inflate and manipulate their followings. Up to 50% of the engagement

levels shown on sponsored content have been reported as fake which has resulted in a loss of approximately \$1.3 billion accounting for about 15% of global influencer marketing spending (Ross, 2019; Powers, 2019). The growing prevalence of fraud in influencer spaces has necessitated the development of legal guidelines to protect consumers. However, only a few countries have implemented concrete rules for the influencers. In June 2021, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) issued Guidelines for Influencer Advertising on Digital Media to protect consumers from misleading advertisements (Kapoor et al., 2021). Notably, France recently became the first European country to legally regulate influencer marketing and introduce penalties for influencer misconduct (ABC News 2023). While these stances exhibit the presence of unethical issues in the industry, little consideration has been given to them from a scholarly perspective. Previous studies in the field of influencer marketing have examined different types of celebrities, such as Instagram and traditional celebrities (Jin et al., 2019; Nouri, 2018; Piehler et al., 2021), the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Leung et al., 2022; Hugh et al., 2022; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Dimitrieska & Efremova, 2021; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022), and how they affect children (De Veirman et al., 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020; Coates et al., 2019; Ahn, 2021). However, the ethical considerations surrounding influencer marketing have received relatively little scholarly attention (Leban et al., 2021; Gamage & Ashill, 2022; Stubb & Colliander, 2019; Robinson, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020).

The growing body of knowledge about influencer marketing explains short-term behaviour of consumers through engagement tactics applied using credibility of influencers. Current literature tends to ignore how brands can apply influencer marketing with a strategic long-term approach for building brand identity or improving positioning of their brand. Previous scholars have offered limited explanation about use of influencer marketing at the intersection of authenticity, visibility and effectiveness for ethical use of influencer marketing in a fast-paced and algorithm driven marketing applications using emerging new age technologies like

artificial intelligence. This reveals why nuanced, longitudinal and interdisciplinary perspective of influencer marketing is needed.

To the best of our knowledge, no existing research comprehensively reviews the ethics surrounding influencer marketing. To bridge this gap, this study incorporates a systematic literature review and in-depth qualitative interviews to provide a holistic understanding. This study aimed to achieve two objectives. *First*, to consolidate the fragmented body of research and offer a comprehensive and detailed overview of the ethical landscape of influencer marketing. *Second*, the study sought to identify and validate the major themes through the integration of insights from both a systematic literature review and in-depth semi-structured interviews. A literature review is essential for assessing the existing academic knowledge, highlighting gaps, and proposing new research directions (Snyder 2019; Swain et al. 2023; Agarwal et al. 2024; Khanna et al., 2024). Qualitative in-depth interviews helped uncover detailed insights into participants' experiences and perceptions, providing a deeper understanding of ethical issues in influencer marketing. The insights gained from this study will be beneficial to key stakeholders, such as influencers, brands, consumers, social media platforms, and regulatory bodies.

1.2 Unveiling Ethics in Influencer Marketing

Ethicality is characterised by compliance with a set of perceived community norms and regulations (Moraes et al., 2017). With the exponential rise in influencer marketing, irresponsible online behaviour has also surged, encompassing the dissemination of false information (Nieto, 2018), identity theft (Cui, 2024), insufficient disclosure of sponsorships (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023), artificial inflation of reach by purchasing fake followers (Zhou et al., 2023; Cresci et al., 2015), promotion of questionable products to underage followers (Hendriks et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2019), and substantial harm such as public shaming,

obscurity, and vulgarity (Lyu, 2012; Borchers & Enke, 2022). Anonymous Internet interactions, devoid of knowledge about social backgrounds, make it challenging for individuals to adhere to societal norms grounded in in-person relationships (Lyu, 2012). Any moral or immoral conduct displayed by influencers wields considerable attention from followers, who believe that influencers hold ethical responsibilities (Archer et al., 2020; Hudders & Lou, 2022; Archer et al., 2014). Trust, a predominant concept in marketing, underlies the belief in influencers, with virtues such as honesty and benevolence, which are crucial for consumers (Murphy, 1999). In many instances, consumers find it challenging to distinguish an influencer's authentic recommendations from those of other paid marketing activities (King et al. 2014). Despite calls for disclosure, not all influencers comply, creating challenges for consumers in distinguishing between marketed and real content (Liljander et al., 2015). The visual portrayal of influencers often creates unrealistic beauty standards among followers (Sands et al., 2022), contributing to consumer anxiety about their appearance (Deng and Jiang, 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2018). Similarly, Fitness influencers frequently prioritise overall well-being, resulting in feelings of envy, resentment, anxiety, and self-harm (Valkenburg, 2022). Concerns regarding the impact of advertising on children stem from their limited understanding and comprehension of the advertisements (Verhellen et al., 2014).

The absence of an ethical framework that guides influencer marketing makes the evaluation of its ethics more complex (Wellman et al., 2020). Specific guidelines on influencer marketing remain lacking, contributing to the largely unexplored ethical stance of influencers (Fedeli & Cheng, 2023). Given the widespread adoption of influencer marketing, it is imperative to understand the moral dimensions of associated tactics to enhance the professionalisation and protection of all involved parties (Wellman et al., 2020). Extant research covering the domain of influencer marketing has been criticised for not fully addressing the complexity of ethical conduct, with a focus on singular issues such as transparency, payment, or authenticity, and

lacking a comprehensive understanding of the larger ethical landscape (Leban et al., 2021; Gamage and Ashill, 2022; Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Robinson, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020; Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Davies & Hobbs, 2020).

A comprehensive coverage of ethicality in the influencer marketing domain is deemed necessary (Borchers & Enke, 2022), with identified overarching ethical concerns including reciprocity, sincerity, respect, autonomy, loyalty, transparency, professionalism, truthfulness, caring, and social responsibility. (Borchers & Enke, 2022). Understanding ethical practices can guide *influencers* in creating content, maintaining credibility, and establishing stronger relationships with followers (Belanche et al. 2021; Yuan and Lou 2020). *Brands* can develop more effective and responsible marketing strategies because this knowledge can help them choose the right influencers, enhance their brand reputation, and foster consumer trust (Pradhan et al. 2022). These insights can help *regulatory bodies* develop guidelines and regulations related to influencer marketing aimed at protecting consumers and promoting transparency in marketing practices (Ortová et al., 2023).

To create a cohesive structure, we employed the 5W1H (See Table 1) organising framework to synthesise literature (Di Stefano et al., 2023; Callahan, 2014). This framework, encompassing (Who, Which, When, Where, Why, and How) serves as the backbone, systematically guides the exploration of our research. Within this framework, the findings of our review are carefully divided into six primary questions.

Table 1: 5W1H Framework for literature synthesis

Q1	WHY	Why did we select the works that are included in the final data set? (see section 2)
Q2	WHO	Who are the main publication outlets contributing to the body of knowledge on ethical issues in influencer marketing? (see section 3.2)

Q3	WHEN	• When did the academic interest in the Ethics in Influencer Marketing begin, and how has it evolved over time? (see section 3.3)
Q4	WHERE	• Where geographically are the majority of studies on Influencer Marketing Ethics conducted? (see section 3.4)
Q5	HOW	• How do existing studies on Ethics in Influencer Marketing utilise and apply research methodologies? (see section 3.5)
Q6	WHAT	• What theories are prevalent in the Ethics of Influencer Marketing literature? (see section 3.6) • What variables (antecedents, mediators, moderators, consequences) have been studied? (see section 3.7) • What major themes emerge from the existing literature on Ethics in Influencer Marketing? (see section 4)

These questions acted as thematic anchors and contributed to a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. Each question was meticulously framed to delve into specific dimensions, providing a structured and insightful analysis that enriched the overall narrative of our study.

2. Methodology

This study examines the ethical issues of influencer marketing through a two-stage study. Study 1 constitutes a systematic literature review that comprehensively examines the ethical landscape of influencer marketing. Study 2 incorporates in-depth interviews with consumers to learn about their lived experiences and ethical perceptions of influencer marketing.

Study 1: Systematic Literature Review

The review process adhered to the SPAR-4-SLR framework (Paul et al., 2021) to ensure transparency and rigour throughout the study. This framework has been widely adopted in the marketing domain (Khan et al., 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2022; Das et al., 2024; Massa and Ladhari, 2023). The specifics of the systematic literature review are depicted in Figure 1 and discussed in subsequent sections.

2.1 Assembling

The assembly stage included the *identification* and *acquisition* of academic literature. With respect to the *identification* of publications, this review focuses on literature in the domains of influencer marketing and ethics. The aim was to find answers to questions (Q1-Q6) that included performance as well as the thematic structure of the field. The selected source types were confined to peer-reviewed articles. Non-peer-reviewed gray literature, such as book chapters, was excluded from this review (Paul et al., 2021).

In the *acquisition* stage, an exhaustive search mechanism was used, and material acquisition was performed. The Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), and Google Scholar databases were used. The search period was extended from 2008 to December 2024. The decision to begin from the year 2008 is made because it marks the introduction of the influencer as concept (Kiss & Bichler, 2008; Joshi et al., 2023). To identify pertinent keywords, an initial search using the term ‘influencer marketing ethics’ was conducted using Google Scholar. The retrieved articles were scrutinised, and new keywords were noted. This iterative process resulted in a refined keyword string- “Influencer marketing” OR “influencer” OR “blogger” OR “vlogger” OR “content creator” OR “Opinion Leader” AND Ethic*. Boolean operators (OR and AND) and truncation (*) were strategically used to optimise the search results. In total, 712 articles were returned during the acquisition stage.

2.2 Arranging

The arrangement stage includes the *organisation* and *purification* of the search results. In the *organisation* sub-stage, the 5W1H organising framework (Di Stefano et al., 2023; Callahan, 2014) was utilised. The organizational codes were the document type (research articles), subject (Business, Management and Accounting), and language (English). In the *purification* sub-stage, the review excluded articles that (i) were duplicates, (ii) had irrelevant titles or

abstracts, and (iii) could not be retrieved. This stringent criterion led to the inclusion of 103 studies in the meta-analysis.

2.3 Assessing

The final assessment stage involved *evaluation* and *reporting* of the findings. Content Analysis was performed for evaluation. This analysis was conducted to depict the primary sources of literature on the topic (Q2), how interest in the field evolved over time (Q3), where geographically, the majority of studies took place (Q4), how existing studies utilise research methodologies (Q5), and identify the major theories and themes emerging from the literature (Q6). In terms of reporting, this study incorporates a mix of figures, tables, and graphs to align with the reporting guidelines advocated by Paul et al, (2021). The review process and methodological considerations followed the guidelines outlined in the authoritative references for systematic reviews (Lim et al., 2022; Xiao & Watson, 2017; Paul et al., 2021; Bodolica & Spraggon, 2018). The following sections report the findings of this study:

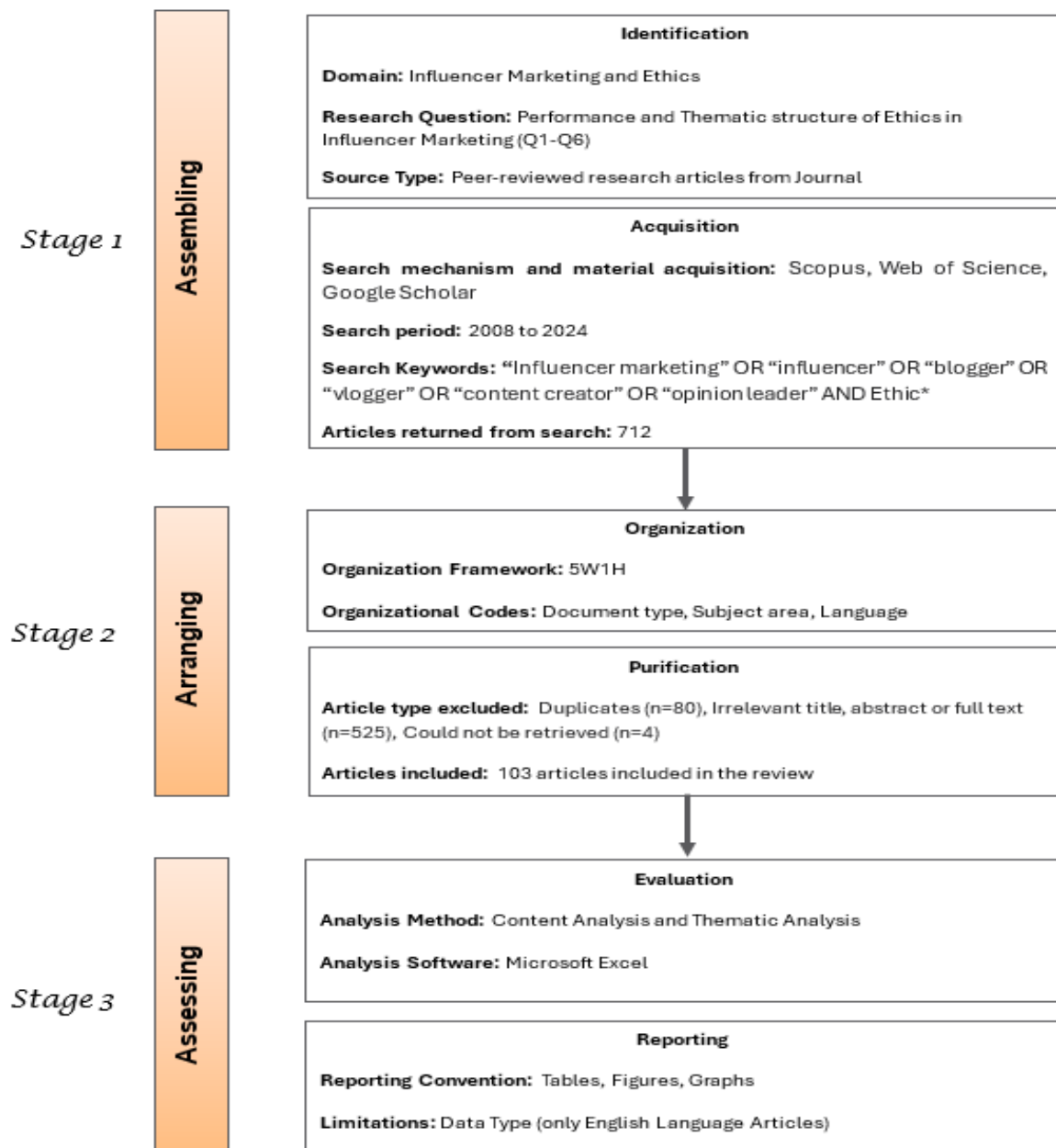


Figure 1: SPAR-4-SLR Framework

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The changing ethical landscape of Influencer Marketing

To understand chronological trends (Yun et al., 2018) in the field of ethics in influencer marketing, the authors conducted word-cloud analysis using an online tool (WordClouds.com). The analysis involved classifying articles published on the topic into four distinct time periods (Khanna et al., 2024). Abstracts from these articles were then processed to identify the most commonly used terms in each period, revealing shifts in focus on ethical concerns. In the first period, 2012-2014, the dominant words were "ethical", "responsibility", "ethics", and "controversies", indicating early discussions about foundational ethical principles. During 2015-2017, terms such as "sponsorship", "credibility", "recommendation", and "integrity" became prevalent, reflecting growing concern over sponsored content and influencer credibility. The period from 2018-2020 saw an emphasis on "consumers", "awareness", "trust", and "intention", highlighting increased consumer awareness and demand for genuine influencer behaviour. In the most recent period, 2021-2024, the key words were "virtual", "authenticity", "disclosure", and "transparency", marking the rise of virtual influencers and a focus on transparency and disclosure in influencer-brand relationships. Figure 2 illustrates these results.

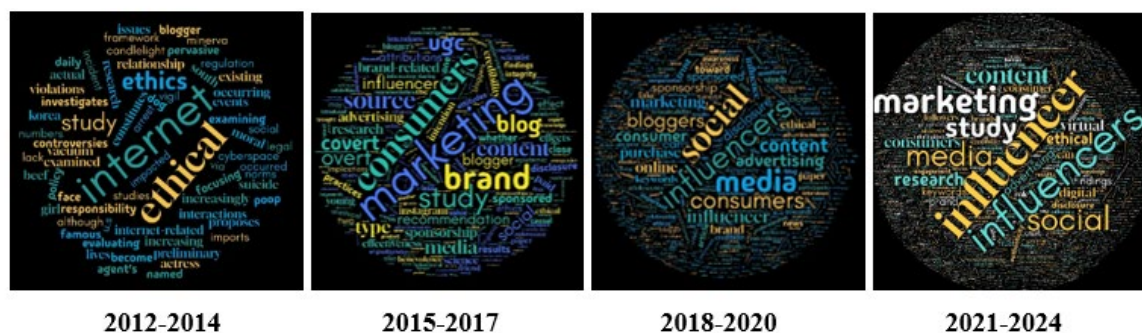


Figure 2: Chronological Trends

3.2 Top sources (Q2)

This review highlights the prominence of this topic in the academic community, with numerous articles published in well-respected journals. The Journal of Consumer Behaviour emerged as the leading journal in terms of the number of published relevant academic articles for our review, followed by the International Journal of Advertising (n=4), Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (n=3), and the Journal of Media Ethics (n=3). Several eminent journals like the European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Australasian Marketing Journal, Journal of Interactive Marketing, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, and Internet Research have contributed to this body of knowledge. Table 2 lists the top 15 journals.

Table 2: List of Top 15 Journals

S. No.	Journal	No. of Articles
1.	Journal of Consumer Behaviour	7
2.	International Journal of Advertising	4
3.	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	3
4.	Journal of Media Ethics	3
5.	European Journal of Marketing	2
6.	Journal of Marketing Management	2
7.	Australasian Marketing Journal	2
8.	Journal of Interactive Marketing	2
9.	Internet Research	2
10.	Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising	2
11.	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	2
12.	Public Relations Inquiry	2
13.	Journal of Product & Brand Management	2
14.	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	2
15.	Young Consumers	2

3.3 Publication Trend (Q3)

The oldest study incorporated into our systematic review dates back to 2012 (Lyu, 2012), signalling the initiation of academic exploration into the ethics of influencer marketing. However, the subsequent six years witnessed comparatively sluggish growth in publications on this subject, with only five articles published during that period. Since 2019, the number of articles has notably increased. Over the last two years, the number of articles addressing the ethics of influencer marketing has substantially increased. Specifically, 22 articles were released in 2022, 24 in 2023, and 36 in 2024, accounting for approximately 80% of all the articles included in the review. This recent upsurge (See Figure 3) mirrors growing concerns within the scholarly community regarding the ethical implications and challenges posed by influencer marketing strategies (Hudders and Lou, 2022).

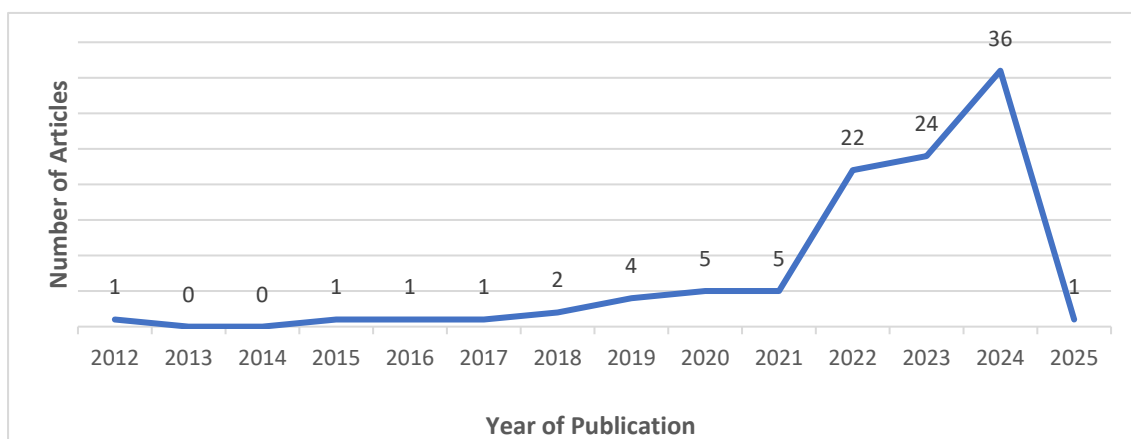


Figure 3: Publication Trend

3.4 Geographical Context

In terms of the geographical context, the extant literature lacks data on the studied countries. Figure 4 visually illustrates the distribution, highlighting the USA as the most commonly examined country, representing approximately 13% of all the studies. The following are China and Germany, each with five studies. The Netherlands context emerged in four studies, whereas the other countries made sporadic appearances, as illustrated in Figure 3. Moreover, only two

studies used a cross-cultural approach. This comprehensive overview sheds light on the geographic coverage of academic studies in this field, emphasising the prominence of certain nations.

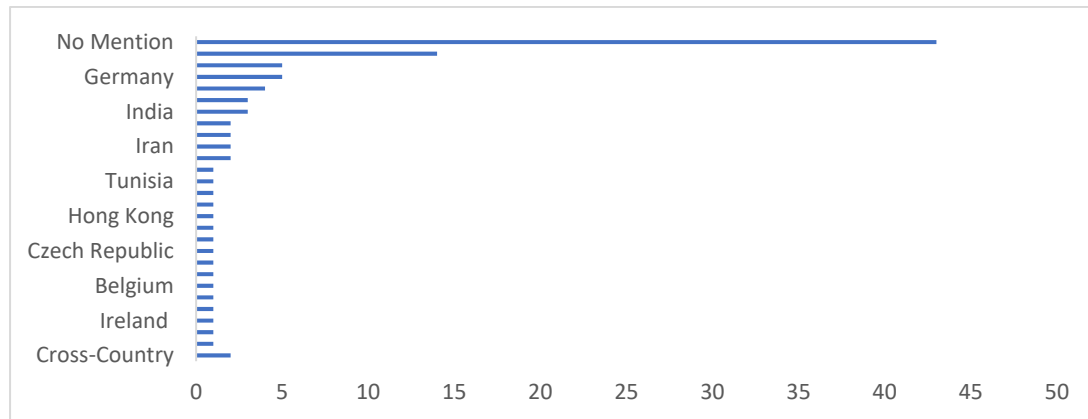


Figure 4: Country-wise distribution

3.5 Methodologies (Q5)

Of the 103 studies reviewed, 38% (n = 42) were quantitative. The qualitative methodology used was 37% (n = 41). Among the quantitative studies, detailed examination revealed that 17% relied on surveys, 19% relied on experiments, and 2% relied on a meta-analysis approach. The qualitative methods included interviews, focus group discussions, netnography, and case studies. Sixteen percent of the studies were review papers and the remaining 9% adopted a mixed-method approach (n = 10). This review underscores a prevalent inclination among scholars towards Survey, Interview and Experimental studies, potentially sidelining opportunities for theoretical and conceptual building in the exploration of ethical dimensions in influencer marketing.

Table 3: Methodologies Adopted in Existing Studies

Methodology	Frequency of occurrence	Supporting Literature
A. Quantitative Methodology		
Survey	19	Gamage and Ashill (2022), Chen et al. (2021), Ashraf et al. (2023)
Experiment	21	Harms et al. (2022), Pradhan et al. (2022), Kapoor et al. (2022)
Meta-Analysis	2	Hochstein et al. (2023)
B. Qualitative Methodology		
Theoretical or Conceptual	4	Robinson (2020), Mouritzen et al. (2023)
Interview	20	Leban et al. (2020), Borchers and Enke (2022), Jacobson and Harrison (2021)
Focus Group	4	Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal (2019), Xie-Carson et al. (2023)
Case study	5	Lyu (2012), De Regt et al. (2019)
Netnography/Ethnography	8	Rodner et al. (2021), Aboelenien et al. (2023)
C. Review	18	Hudders and Lou (2022), Maggiore et al. (2022), Conti et al. (2022)
D. Mixed Method	10	Johnstone and Lindh (2017), Jiang et al. (2023), Ortová et al. (2023)

3.6 Theories used to study Ethics in Influencer Marketing (Q6)

A review of the articles revealed that approximately 46% of the total articles lacked theoretical grounding, indicating a significant gap in theoretical support within the field. The absence of theoretical application can be attributed to the relative newness of the topic, suggesting that scholars are still exploring and developing theoretical frameworks specific to influencer marketing ethics. Table 4 provides an overview of the theories that have been applied in existing research. Scholars have drawn from a diverse range of disciplines, including psychology (e.g. Personal Identity Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Expectation Theory, and Theory of Mind), philosophy (Teleology, Deontology, Social Contract Theory, and Theory of Moral Responsibility), sociology (Goffman's Performativity Theory, Social Identity Theory, Social Exchange Theory), marketing (Theory of Consumer Digital Trust, Diffusion of

Innovation, Personal Branding Theory), and communication (Critical Discourse Theory, Persuasion Knowledge Model, Advertising Literacy Model).

Persuasion Knowledge Model: The model introduced by Friestad and Wright (1994) attempts to develop links between an individual's persuasion awareness and their responses to persuasion efforts. According to the model, individuals develop 'persuasion knowledge', which involves being aware of persuasive tactics and understanding persuasive intention. This knowledge allows consumers to identify and interpret persuasion attempts, thereby influencing their responses to such attempts and leading to resistance, scepticism, or acceptance. This framework is widely applied in the influencer marketing literature (Castonguay, 2021) as it provides a comprehensive understanding of how followers cope with persuasion attempts by influencers in marketing and advertising contexts (Bu et al., 2022; Brüns & Meißner, 2023; Darmawan & Huh, 2021).

Attribution Theory: Developed by Heider (2013), attribution theory lies in social psychology, which investigates how an individual assigns different interpretations and underlying causes to the behaviour and actions of the self and others. The theory claims that people attribute actions and behaviours to internal dispositions (personal factors) or external situations (environment). Subsequent developments in this theory have been made by Kelley (1967) and Weiner (1972). They elaborate on the cognitive processes involved in reaching such attributions. This theory is used in the domain of ethical influencer marketing to illustrate how attributional biases assigned by followers to influencers influence personal and interpersonal outcomes (Kapitan et al., 2022; Kim & Lee, 2017; Kapitan et al., 2021).

Construal Level Theory: A psychological framework developed by Trope and Liberman (2003). This theory aims to examine how psychological distance from an object or event

influences an individual's thoughts, actions, and behaviours. The core theme of the theory is that the more an object is psychologically distant, the higher the degree of abstraction the individual will have while thinking about it (high-level construal). Similarly, when an object is psychologically closer, the individual develops more concrete thoughts (low-level construal). This difference between high- and low-level construal influences the decisions, judgments, and predictions of an individual (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The theory's implications in marketing illustrate that by altering perceived psychological distance, marketers can influence how consumers process information and make purchase decisions (K. Jiang et al., 2024; Kapoor et al., 2022).

Several studies have incorporated a combination of theories into a single study. Notably, most theories have been utilised only once, suggesting the need for further theoretical development and integration within the field.

Table 4: Theories used to Study Ethics in Influencer Marketing

Field	Theory	Citation
(A) Psychology	● Personal Identity Theory ● Theory of Mind ● Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory ● Psychological Reactance Theory ● Visual Attention Theory, ● Expectation Theory, ● Attribution Theory, ● Theory of Planned Behaviour, ● Construal Level Theory, ● Schema Theory, ● Associative Learning Framework, ● Uncanny Valley Theory ● Theory of Anthropomorphism ● Health Belief Model (HBM)	Robinson (2020) Loose et al. (2022) Zhao and Du (2023) Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal (2019) Rocha et al. (2023) Muniz et al. (2023) Kim and Lee (2017) Johnstone and Lindh (2017) Kapoor et al. (2022) Darmawan and Huh (2021) Kapoor <i>et al.</i> (2022) Castonguay (2021) Xie-Carson et al. (2023) Mouritzen <i>et al.</i> (2023) Willis et al. (2023)
(B) Ethics & Moral Philosophy	● Moral Responsibility Theory, ● Transparency Theory, ● Teleology, ● Deontology, ● Social Contract Theory,	Pradhan <i>et al.</i> , (2022) Robinson (2020) Lyu (2012) Lyu (2012) Lyu (2012)

	● Assignment of Moral Responsibility, ● Kohlberg's Moral Stage Theory	Lyu (2012) Sweeney <i>et al.</i> (2021)
(C) Communication & Media Studies	● Parasocial Identification, ● Parasocial Theory, ● Parasocial Interaction Theory, ● Source Effect Theory, ● Elaboration Likelihood Model, ● Persuasion Knowledge Model, ● Advertising Literacy Model, ● Sponsorship Transparency Theory, ● The Heuristic-Systematic Model, ● Two-Step Flow Model, ● Uses and Gratification Theory, ● Expectation Theory, ● Social Construct Theory	Chen <i>et al.</i> (2021) Bi and Zhang (2022) Wasti <i>et al.</i> (2024) Ashraf <i>et al.</i> (2023) Ashraf <i>et al.</i> (2023) Foroughi <i>et al.</i> (2023) Bu <i>et al.</i> (2022) Rocha <i>et al.</i> (2023) Ducros <i>et al.</i> (2023) Haastrup and Marshall (2024) Lou <i>et al.</i> (2022) Muniz <i>et al.</i> (2023) Palem and Gadagamma(2024)
(D) Marketing & Consumer Behaviour	● Social Influence Theory, ● Social Impact Theory, ● Role Theory, ● Signaling Theory, ● Congruence Theory, ● Theory of Consumer Digital Trust, ● Trust Theory, ● Diffusion of Innovation, ● Personal Branding Theory, ● Attitude Theory	Gökerik (2024) Zhou <i>et al.</i> (2023) Čop <i>et al.</i> (2023) Valmohammadi <i>et al.</i> (2024) Chen <i>et al.</i> (2021) Hochstein <i>et al.</i> (2023) Gerlich (2024) Cenizo (2024) Smith <i>et al.</i> (2021) Rocha <i>et al.</i> (2023)
(E) Sociology & Cultural Studies	● Social Identity Theory, ● Social Exchange Theory, ● Relationship Management Theory, ● Interpersonal Theory, ● Social Capital Theory, ● Hofstede's Model of National Culture, ● Goffman's Performativity Theory	Kim and Lee (2017) Darmawan and Huh (2021) Coco and Eckert (2020) Pérez-Sánchez <i>et al.</i> (2024) Leung, Gu and Palmatier, (2022) Muniz <i>et al.</i> (2023) Jacobson and Harrison (2021)
(F) Business & Management	● Agency Theory, ● Servicescape Theory, ● Equity Theory	Robinson (2020) Nafi and Ahmed (2019) Huang <i>et al.</i> (2024)

3.7 Variable Studied in the context of ethics in Influencer Marketing (Q6)

3.7.1 Antecedents

The literature on ethics in influencer marketing examines several antecedents. These antecedents have been categorised into four sub-categories: influencer-related, consumer-related, platform-related, and message-related. Credibility, trustworthiness, influencer type, and authenticity were the most examined antecedents in the influencer-related category. *However, consumer-related* antecedents have rarely been investigated. Many of these antecedents have only been tested once in the literature. Sponsorship disclosure and its type have received academic attention under both *platform-* and *message-related* antecedents.

3.7.2 Mediators and Moderators

Scholars have tested the mediating and moderating roles of certain variables. Attitude was studied as a mediating variable. Other variables include trust and credibility. For moderating relationships, scholars have explored variables such as influencer type, product type, and brand–influencer fit.

3.7.3 Consequences

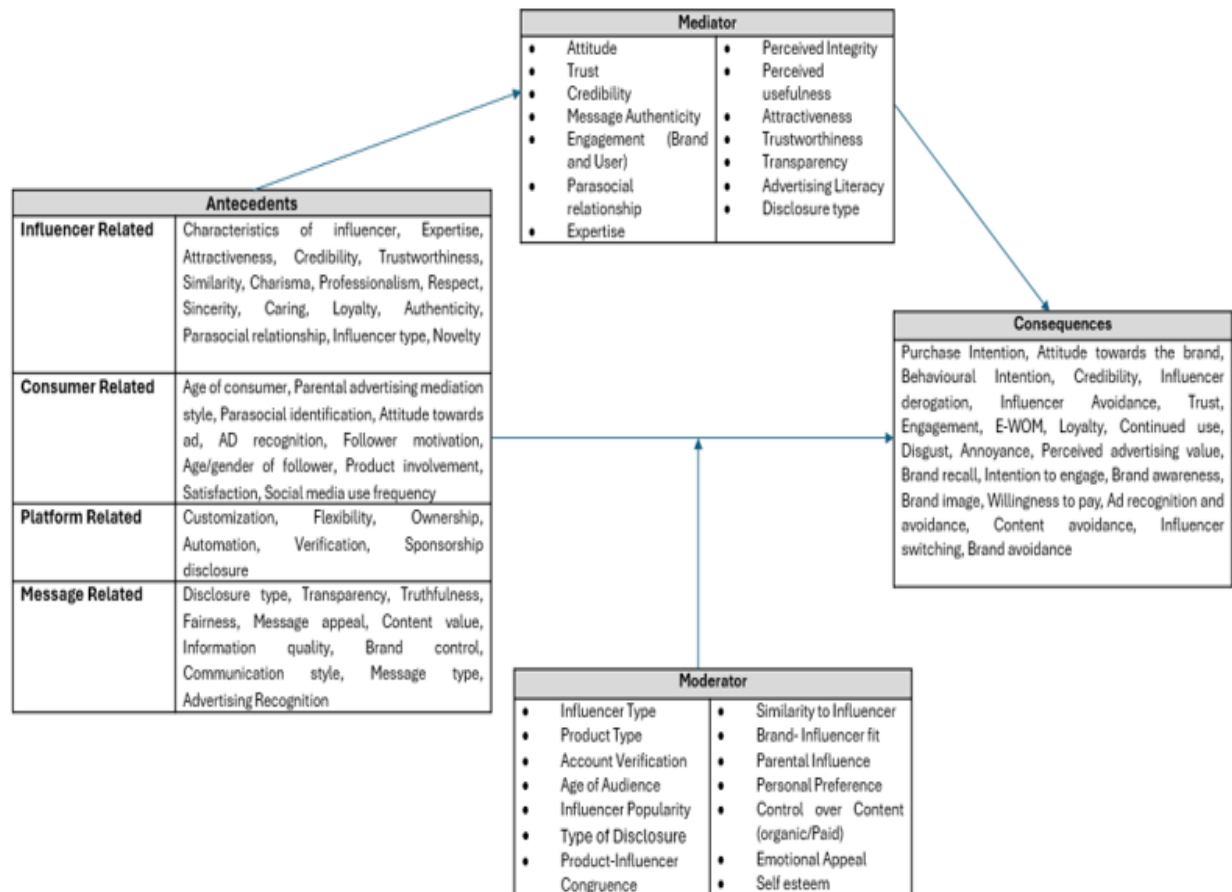
The literature on ethics in influencer marketing has examined various consequences. The most common consequence is consumers’ purchase intention. This was followed by attitude towards the brand and behavioural intention. Other variables were also studied, as shown in the table below. Table 5 presents the details of the variables studied and the supporting literature. Figure 5 illustrates the comprehensive ethical influencer marketing framework.

Table 5: Constructs Studied and their Supporting literature

(A) Antecedents	Attributes	Supporting Literature
<i>Influencer-Related</i>	Characteristics of influencer, Expertise, Attractiveness, Credibility, Trustworthiness, Similarity, Charisma, Professionalism, Respect, Sincerity, Caring, Loyalty, Authenticity, Parasocial relationship, Influencer type	Mouritzen et al. (2023), Ashraf et al. (2023), Foroughi et al. (2023), Maggiore et al. (2022), Van Esch et al. (2018), Borchers and Enke (2022), Chen et al. (2022), Bi and Zhang (2022), Bu et al. (2022)

<i>Consumer-Related</i>	Age of consumer, Parental advertising mediation style, Parasocial identification, Attitude towards ad, AD recognition, Follower motivation, Age/gender of follower, Product involvement, Satisfaction	Johnstone and Lindh (2017), Harms et al. (2022), K. Chen et al. (2021), Van Esch et al. (2018), Brüns and Meißner (2023), Coco and Eckert (2020), Picazo-Sánchez et al. (2022), Jiang et al. (2023), Maggiore et al. (2022)
<i>Platform-Related</i>	Customization, Flexibility, Ownership, Automation, Verification, Sponsorship disclosure	Mouritzen et al. (2023), Dumas and Stough (2022), Bu et al. (2022), Darmawan and Huh (2021)
<i>Message-Related</i>	Disclosure type, Transparency, Truthfulness, Fairness, Message appeal, Content value, Information quality, Communication style, Message type, Brand control	Darmawan and Huh (2021), Harms et al. (2022), Borchers and Enke (2022), Kapoor et al. (2022), Foroughi et al. (2023), Maggiore et al. (2022), Pradhan et al. (2022)
(B) Mediators	Attitude, Trust, Credibility, Message Authenticity, Engagement (Brand and User), Parasocial relationship, Perceived Integrity, Perceived usefulness, Transparency, Cognitive Advertising Literacy, Disclosure type,	Dumas and Stough (2022), Harms et al. (2022), Kapoor et al. (2022), Foroughi et al. (2023), Brüns and Meißner (2023), Rocha et al. (2023),
(C) Moderators	Influencer Type, Product Type, Account Verification, Product-Influencer Congruence, Similarity to Influencer, Platform Disclosure, Brand-Influencer fit, Emotional Appeal, Self esteem	Pradhan et al. (2022), Kapoor et al. (2022), Hochstein et al. (2023), Foroughi et al. (2023), Van Esch et al. (2018), L. Chen et al. (2022), Jiang et al. (2023), Bi and Zhang (2022)
(D) Consequences	Purchase Intention, Attitude towards the brand, Behavioural Intention, Credibility, Influencer derogation, Influencer Avoidance, Trust, Engagement, E-WOM, Loyalty, Continued use, Disgust, Annoyance, Perceived advertising value, Brand recall, Intention to engage, Brand awareness, Brand image, Willingness to pay, Ad recognition and avoidance, Content avoidance, Influencer switching, Brand avoidance	Coco and Eckert (2020), Maggiore et al. (2022), Harms et al. (2022), Kapoor et al. (2022), Foroughi et al. (2023), Pradhan et al. (2022), Liljander et al. (2015), Brüns and Meißner (2023), Han and Du (2023), K. Chen et al. (2021), Kim and Lee (2017), Muniz et al. (2023), Xie-Carson et al. (2023)

Fashion & Beauty	Tourism	Finance	Healthcare	Food
Influencer Marketing Industry				



Theories				
Attribution Theory	Construal Level Theory	Uncanny Valley Theory	Persuasion Knowledge Model	Others

Figure 5: Comprehensive Framework of Ethical Influencer Marketing

4. Thematic Analysis (Q6)

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a method used to identify important patterns in academic research (Clarke & Braun, 2016). This helps us to understand the main themes associated with a specific topic. Instead of following the coding system, we examined articles without predetermined

categories. This allowed us to discover themes directly from the data, especially because the research area was relatively new (Vrontis et al., 2021; Yang & Gabrielsson, 2018; Cooke et al., 2019). We first studied 103 articles considering their objectives, arguments, and main ideas. Each article was provided with a description and name, based on its focus. We then organised and compared these articles to create major research themes. These themes were then grouped according to their similarities. Five main research themes (See Table 6) emerged from the literature: (1) sponsorship disclosure, (2) influencer type, (3) influencer characteristics, (4) advertising literacy, and (5) ethics of virtual influencers. Table 6 presents the research trends and questions for future research aligned with the themes identified.

Table 6: Research Themes, Trends and Future Research Questions

S. No.	Research Theme	Research Trends	Research Questions
1.	Sponsorship Disclosure [Hochstein (2023), Hudders & Lou (2022), Stubb (2019), Rocha (2023)]	- Types of sponsorship disclosure and consumer reaction. - Consumer's reaction to disclosed vs undisclosed sponsorship. - Regulatory compliance and guidelines regarding sponsorship disclosures.	- How consumers react to different kinds of sponsorship disclosures (e.g., explicit hashtags like #ad, verbal mentions, or label disclosures)? - How consumers react to disclosed vs. undisclosed sponsorships, including the potential for consumer skepticism? - How do regulatory bodies ensure transparency in sponsorship disclosures to protect consumers from deception?
2.	Influencer Type [Johnstone & Lindh (2017), Zhao & Du (2023)]	- Impact of different types of influencers on consumer's purchase intention. - Ethical Issues Surrounding Child Influencers	- How different influencer categories (e.g., mega, macro, micro, nano influencers, virtual influencers) impact consumer's purchase intention? - What are the responsibilities of parents, brands, and platforms in protecting

			child influencers and their well-being?
3.	Influencer Characteristics [Gamage & Ashill (2022), Hochstein (2023), Pradhan (2022), Multas & Hirvonen (2021)]	● Importance of Authenticity, Expertise and knowledge. ● Diversity, Inclusivity, and Representation ● Dark Sides of being an Influencer.	● What are the ethical responsibilities of influencers who are considered experts, in sensitive areas like health, finance, or technology, where misinformation can have significant consequences? ● How do diverse and inclusive influencers shape consumer views on a brand's authenticity and ethical values? ● How do influencers navigate the risks of privacy invasion and online harassment?
4.	Advertising Literacy [Sweeney (2021), Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal (2019), Loose (2022)]	● Consumer's recognition of advertisement in influencer content. ● Effectiveness of disclosure types on Ad recognition.	● How well do audiences recognize organic vs paid content and what factors influence their ability to do so? ● How do different types of sponsorship disclosures (e.g., #ad, #sponsored) impact consumer recognition of advertising in influencer content?
5.	Ethics of Virtual influencer [Robinson (2020d), Mouritzen (2023), Conti (2022), Xie-Carson (2023)]	● Virtual Influencers vs. Human Influencers ● Transparency in Virtual Influencers ● Ownership of Virtual Influencers ● AI driven Virtual influencers	● How does the ethical perceptions of virtual influencers differ from human influencers, particularly in terms of trust and authenticity? ● How important is transparency in the case of virtual influencers, particularly in disclosing that the influencer is not real? ● Who owns the intellectual property rights to virtual influencers and how should accountability be attributed?

			• What ethical threats are posed by AI driven virtual influencers?
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4.1 Sponsorship Disclosure

Sponsorship disclosure refers to the practice of influencers, content creators, or individuals who acknowledge and openly reveal any monetary support they receive from a marketer to create and promote content (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Sponsorship disclosure aims to ensure transparency and honesty in advertising and marketing (Jhavar et al. 2023). Influencers often hesitate to reveal that their content is sponsored, fearing that they might upset or annoy their followers (Karagür et al. 2022). Currently, many brands exercise control over the content shared by influencers by sponsoring them (Kim and Kim, 2021). However, when followers are aware of the commercial motive behind shared content, the influencer and the shared content lose credibility. While some studies suggest that disclosing sponsorships could harm influencers and brand perceptions, research by Naderer, Matthes, and Schäfer (2021) suggests that revealing sponsorship can build influencer trust. Additionally, qualitative research indicates that followers typically accept sponsored content when it is appropriately balanced with non-commercial and authentic content (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019).

Many countries have established regulations on sponsorship disclosure, with bodies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) developing guidelines for influencers in the United States (FTC, 2019). These guidelines typically require influencers to clearly and conspicuously disclose material aid received from brands, which helps maintain trust between influencers and their audiences while preventing deceptive advertising practices. When influencers receive compensation for posts or reviews, it is crucial to clearly disclose them. Along with abiding by the guidelines (Mudge & Shaheen, 2017), this safeguards followers' moral rights when they are the target of persuasive efforts (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998).

Integrating sponsorship disclosure information into influencer content can directly impact how viewers perceive influencers and sponsored brands (Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020).

4.2 Influencer type

The existing literature on influencer marketing ethics delves into the various types of influencers and their ethical considerations. One notable category is the sustainable influencers. These influencers actively promote sustainable lifestyles by focusing on zero waste and motivating their followers to adopt sustainable practices encompassing areas such as travel, food, and fashion (Yıldırım 2021). Particularly within the millennial consumer subgroup, influencers play a significant role in shaping attitudes and moral values by normalising sustainability values both consciously and unconsciously (Johnstone & Lindh, 2017). However, the literature also highlights potential ethical challenges, especially among nano- and micro-influencers who may engage in more aggressive actions, including immoral conduct or unethical practices, to gain larger followings (Oliveira et al. 2020). Specialised influencers, known as "greenfluencers", focus on advocating environmentally friendly lifestyles which are sustainable and eco-friendly, motivating their followers to actively participate in environmental protection efforts (Pittman and Abell, 2021).

4.3 Influencer Characteristics

This theme revolves around the influencers' perceived characteristics, encompassing *authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness*. Followers expect influencers to demonstrate integrity and an ethical perspective, endorsing only brands which they genuinely consider interesting to their audience (Zhou et al., 2021). Robinson (2020) suggests that audiences appreciate 'authentic' influencers who display a range of emotions, share the ups and downs of life, discuss mental health, and post makeup-free photos. Previous studies have highlighted that

the credibility of influencers' suggestions positively influences consumer attitudes towards a product (Pan & Chiou, 2011). The perceived credibility of a message is linked to customer beliefs about the source's independence, authenticity, and factuality (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Influencers are regarded as one of the most trustworthy message sources valued for their realness and relatability, as customers trust that their opinions are unbiased (Gamage et al., 2023). Followers consider the advertised content credible when they believe that the influencer is honest and reliable rather than endorsing products only for commercial benefits (Stubb et al., 2019). Authenticity has been studied as a major ethical concern, as highlighted by Wellman et al. (2020), although empirical evidence suggests additional ethical concerns such as sponsorship disclosure (Borchers & Enke, 2022).

4.4 Advertising Literacy

Another significant theme that emerged from this review is advertising literacy. In particular, young audiences, who have poor capacity for critical reflection on information, are extremely susceptible to the negative effects of advertising (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). According to Rozendaal et al. (2011), children lack the information and abilities necessary to differentiate advertisements, which allows them to resist temptation and critically evaluate persuasive efforts. Research has indicated that higher levels of advertising literacy are a result of sponsorship disclosure of information (Boerman and Van Reijmersdal, 2019). Ethical concerns regarding potential fraudulent persuasion targeting children are raised by the fact that, compared to adults, children are more vulnerable to influencer marketing because of their relatively underdeveloped cognitive abilities and literacy towards commercials (De Veirman et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2020).

4.5 Ethics of Virtual Influencer

This theme revolves around virtual influencers, a distinctive category that has garnered significant scholarly attention, warranting their treatment as an individual theme. The intriguing aspect of virtual influencers lies in the blurred line between the 'virtual' and 'real-life', prompting ethical considerations concerning the 'identity' formation and its various possible influences on upholding societal values like trust in online spaces (Robinson, 2020). While real-life influencers bear clear responsibility for their content, the accountability of virtual influencers remains less evident (Robinson, 2020; Jhavar et al., 2023). The narratives and content shared by virtual influencers can contribute to false representations of society (Mouritzen et al., 2023), creating unrealistic portrayals of human lives and abilities due to their ability to go anywhere and exist at any time (Conti et al., 2022). However, some studies posit that partnerships with virtual influencers are viewed as more secure than collaborations with real-life influencers, particularly because of their non-indulgence in scandals and immoral behaviours (Guthrie, 2020; Pradhan et al., 2023). The possibility of anonymity enjoying virtual influencers (Ciuchita et al., 2022) raises concerns, as it provides a potential avenue for exhibiting unethical behaviour, such as purposefully spreading misinformation.

Study 2: Qualitative Investigation using Consumers' Perspective

In Study 1, we systematically reviewed the existing literature, identified the most prevalent theories, and categorised the variables as influencer-related, consumer-related, message-related, and platform-related. Through thematic analysis, we identified five key themes from the literature. To gain further understanding of ethical issues in influencer marketing, we incorporated a complementary empirical study by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with social media users.

In-depth Interviews

We utilised a semi-structured in-depth interview approach to enrich our understanding of the topic. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. This technique enabled us to include only those individuals who were active on social media and followed social media influencers. A total of 24 interviews were conducted using Zoom. The sample comprised 14 female and 10 male participants, representing different backgrounds and age groups. Each interview followed a structured protocol and lasted for approximately 25–30 minutes. Participants were asked to provide informed consent prior to data collection.

The interviews were transcribed and uploaded using a qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA). Two independent coders analysed the documents and conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews. To cross-check and ensure inter-coder reliability, Cohen’s kappa value was determined to be 0.85, thus indicating significant reliability of our themes. The inductive thematic analysis process captured seven central themes that encapsulated the discussion on ethical issues in influencer marketing with social media users. Out of these identified themes, five triangulated our findings from the literature review, and we obtained two additional themes. Table 7 illustrates the thematic analysis of the seven themes based on open, axial, and thematic coding.

Table 7: Thematic Table of in-depth Interviews

S. No	Theme	Scope	Sub-Theme	Sample Quotes from Participants Interview
1.	Advertising Literacy and Ethical Awareness	The theme captures consumer’s awareness and understanding of influencer marketing practices. The theme also highlights how consumers feel and respond to negative experiences	• Awareness of Influencer marketing • Understanding of Influencer Marketing • consumers awareness of Ethical problems • consumer behaviour	• Yes, I am aware of influencer marketing (P13) • When a brand pays to an influencer for doing something kind of a promotion, uh, it can be in terms of, you know, promoting their product or reviewing their product or simply just, uh, creating an ad or imbibing, um, product promotion in their content (P15) • I think awareness is continuously growing, but many consumers still trust influences blindly, without

		with influencers.		considering the potential for bias. (P4) ● It will affect me, and I will stop engaging with that influencer's page (P12) ● I would feel betrayed because that is not something that I expect when I follow someone (P22)
2.	Influencer Type and Consumer Preferences	The theme explores the social media usage patterns and the consumers' preferences for different types of influencers.	● Social Media Usage ● Content Vs Followers ● Influencer Type Preference	● I'm active. And the platforms I use mostly are LinkedIn, Twitter, and obviously Instagram (P18) ● If the content is good, then I might get influenced by the content creator regardless of his number of followers (P14) ● I actually trust smaller influencers than celebrity. I think celebrity influencers are really fake and are more money oriented than the smaller influencers. (P11)
3.	Perceptions of Influencer Authenticity and Trust	The theme delves into how consumers assess the authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers.	● Following Behaviour ● Influencer Authenticity, credibility, and transparency ● Reasons to trust influencer promotion ● Influencers Personal story sharing	● I look for the credibility and I look for the following a particular person has and the quality of content they are making. And if I find that content relatable to me, then I follow. (P3) ● When they post something about a product which they have actually used. Because then only they can post any authentic or honest review about that product. (P13) ● When we see that so many people are trusting this person already, it gives us a sense of credibility that we can also try and trust this person. (P8) ● The influencer provided me a detailed breakdown of the course content. He provided me a track record in the area the course focused on, and he also offered me money back guarantee reducing which reduced the risk. (P4) ● The stories, the struggles which they tell, makes me feel connected to the influencers (P2)
4.	Sponsorship Transparency	The theme focuses on	● Identification of Paid Promotions	● There are certain algorithm methods that help such as paid

	and Disclosure Practices	consumers' expectations and perceptions regarding the disclosure of sponsored content. It explores how consumers identify sponsorships.	● Influencers responsibility to disclose ● Disclosure of sponsorships	promotion taglines, or sometimes influencers themselves say that it is a paid promotion. (P12) ● As an audience, I would like to know if my influencer or the person I'm watching or I'm looking up to is disclosing that he is in collaboration with the brand or not. (P10) ● Some influences are transparent, but to others try to hide the fact that they are being paid. (P4)
5.	Ethical Issues and Misconduct in Influencer Marketing	The theme examines the ethical concerns that consumers associate with influencer marketing.	● Harmful Influence ● Inauthentic or Deceptive Practices ● Blind Following of Influencers	● They are also portraying a very negative image to the young girls, young impressionable girls who end up believing that why don't I have this flawless skin (P18) ● I have seen that this stock marketing, trading, betting apps are getting advertised openly. (P2) ● The number of followers might also be something that they have purchased (P21) ● Many consumers still trust influences blindly, without considering the potential for bias (P4) ● Sometimes you realize that I never even followed this person. Oh. But somehow, I am that follower (P16)
6.	Perceptions and Ethics of Virtual Influencers	The theme explores consumers' awareness, perceptions, and the trust they have on virtual influencers.	● Awareness about virtual influencers ● Perception of virtual influencers ● Trust on virtual influencer	● No. What are virtual influencers (P1) ● At first, I was not able to differentiate. But after engaging in the comments, I got to know that it was AI generated. (P12) ● I would not trust a virtual influencer (P10) ● Virtual influencers are created by the coding. Engineers will create the company, so the company can manipulate any decision, any words, the way you want to represent their product. (P7)
7.	Role of Brands, Platforms, and Regulation	The theme explores consumers' expectations for regulation	● Recommendations for Regulation	● They should actually take full responsibility if any mishap happens, if a customer is buying due to their influence. (P11)

		within the influencer marketing space and their views on the responsibility of Brands and Influencers.	• Role of Brands and influencers in maintaining ethics	• No, I don't think they are doing enough. There is still a lack of transparency in regulation in the industry (P4) • There can be multiple, uh, you know, uh, uh, grading mechanism or what I would say quality mechanism, which a platform can add on the platform (P15) • Like clear labeling of sponsored content, clearly mentioning about the sponsored content and consequences for misleading promotions. And also, guidelines for marketing to minors (P9) • From the platform perspective, there should be, you know, a regulation around this, that there should not be any fake followers (P15)
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5. Theoretical Contribution

This study examines the ethical landscape of influencer marketing using a two-stage approach, combining a systematic literature review with 24 in-depth interviews. Although general literature reviews on influencer marketing have been published, no author has comprehensively studied the ethical aspects of this topic. As the publication trends highlight the rising number of scholars working on the topic, this literature review is timely. Therefore, this study extends the current knowledge and offers several important theoretical contributions. *First*, it highlights the emergence and evolution of ethical discussions surrounding influencer marketing over the past 17 years, offering a comprehensive understanding of the past trends and developments in the field. *Second*, it brings together theories from various disciplines that have been applied to study ethics in influencer marketing. Notably, the persuasion knowledge model, the uncanny valley theory, and the attribution theory have emerged as critical frameworks for understanding ethical considerations in this domain. *Third*, the identified variables from past studies offer opportunities for future research as they provide the groundwork for empirical testing. *Fourth*,

the thematic analysis conducted in this study resulted in five key themes that dominated the ethical discourse in influencer marketing. *Finally*, the convergence of the five themes across the literature review and qualitative interviews demonstrated methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the findings. Future studies can build on these themes, extend the conversation, and address emerging challenges in the evolving influencer-marketing landscape.

6. Managerial Implications

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the findings of this study have important practical implications for brands, influencers, consumers, social media platforms, and policymakers involved in influencer marketing. This study highlights the significance of ethical practices in brand influencer collaboration. By understanding the evolving ethical landscape, *brands* can better design responsible marketing strategies that prioritise elements such as transparency and trust, which are crucial for developing long-term relationships with consumers.

For *influencers*, this review emphasises the need to be authentic and prioritise ethical standards in the process of content creation. This not only builds credibility with followers but also ensures that they comply with the advertising guidelines.

This study highlights the importance of advertising literacy for *consumers*. As influencer marketing becomes more prevalent, consumers should be able to critically evaluate sponsored content. They should be able to recognise both ethical and unethical practices to make informed decisions.

Insights on ethical concerns allow *social media platforms* to shape content recommendations to prioritise ethical and well-disclosed influencer content. Moreover, this highlights the importance of using the different sponsorship disclosure labels available on these

platforms and the regulation of fake followers. This ensures that users are offered more reliable content.

For *policymakers*, the themes and trends identified offer insights into emerging ethical concerns which can guide the development of best practices, targeted regulations, and guidelines to ensure ethical conduct in influencer marketing.

7. Conclusion, Limitation and Future Research Direction

This paper aims to synthesise the available academic research on ethics in influencer marketing and enrich that knowledge through the support of in-depth interviews. To achieve this goal, academic literature on the topic was first acquired and then examined to understand the theoretical foundation and methodological approaches used in the field. Subsequently, a systematic literature review was combined with an in-depth interview analysis to derive key themes that encapsulate ethics in influencer marketing.

In addition, this study offers valuable guidance for future research by providing five key thematic clusters which lay the groundwork for future research by specifying key trends and questions that may be addressed in future research (See Table 6).

Like any other study, this study has some limitations. *First*, the selection process for the studies included in the review followed predetermined criteria for inclusion and exclusion. *Second*, due to language constraints, only articles written in English were included in this review. Consequently, articles that could have been relevant to this study might have been overlooked.

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