
**DISCLOSURE PRACTICES AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN
INFLUENCER MARKETING COMMUNICATION**

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become one of the major forms of digital advertising due to the rapid growth of social media platforms. This conceptual paper examines disclosure practices and ethical responsibility in influencer marketing communication by using secondary data, existing academic literature and regulatory guidelines and it mainly focus on how the mixing of personal content with promotional messages often make paid relationships unclear to the audiences. This situation creates ethical concerns related to transparency, possible consumer deception and trust issues among users. Previous studies show that clear and visible disclosures help consumers to recognise advertising contents and improve long-term trust towards influencers and brands, even though the immediate persuasive effect may get reduced to some extent. The paper review important regulatory frameworks, including guidelines issued by advertising authorities and discuss the continuing problems in compliance among influencers across different platforms and regions. Ethical issues such as hidden or unclear disclosures, pressure created by platform algorithms and low level of consumer awareness are critically discussed and the paper also explain the implications of these issues for brands, influencers and consumers, highlighting the need for more transparent and responsible influencer marketing practices for sustainability. Finally, the study identifies key research gaps and suggest future research directions for strengthening ethical standards and improving disclosure practices in emerging digital marketing environments, global markets and changing policy frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Influencer Marketing; Disclosure Practices; Ethical Responsibility; Transparency; Consumer Trust; Digital Advertising; Regulatory Guidelines.

1. INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become a very important form of digital marketing mainly because of the rapid growth of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. These platforms give opportunities for individuals with a large number of followers to share opinions, personal experiences and lifestyle related contents with wide audiences across different regions and backgrounds. Brands now increasingly collaborate with influencers to promote their products and services in a way that appears more informal, personal and relatable when compared to traditional advertising formats. Industry reports and estimates shows that global spending on influencer marketing crossed USD 21 billion in 2023, which indicate its growing commercial importance and relevance in the global advertising industry (Statista, 2023).

Unlike traditional advertisements, influencer promotions are often blended within personal stories, daily routines and entertainment based contents which are shared regularly by influencers on social media. Because of this close mixing of commercial and non-commercial messages, consumers may find it difficult to clearly distinguish between genuine personal opinions and paid promotional contents that are posted online. In many situations, influencer posts does not clearly state whether the content is sponsored or not properly, which create confusion and misunderstanding among the audiences and followers. This lack of clarity raises several ethical issues related to transparency, consumer deception and fairness in marketing communication practices across different digital platforms and channels.

From an ethical point of view marketing communication should respect the consumers' right to be informed in a proper manner at all times. When paid partnerships are not clearly disclosed by influencers consumers may unknowingly trust recommendations which are actually financially motivated in nature and purpose. Previous research has shown that undisclosed or poorly disclosed influencer advertising can mislead audiences and reduce their ability to critically evaluate the persuasive intent behind such messages and contents shared online and on social media (Boerman et al. 2017). This issue becomes more serious especially in the case of young consumers as they often perceive influencers as role models and rely heavily on their opinions lifestyle choices and product recommendations without much questioning or critical thinking on it. Many times they follow what influencers say blindly and do not think much about the intention behind the message.

To address these ethical concerns advertising councils and regulatory authorities in many countries has introduced guidelines that require influencers and brands to disclose paid collaborations in a clear and visible manner to the audiences and followers. However various studies and industry observations suggest that compliance with disclosure norms still remain inconsistent across different platforms and influencer categories used today. In many cases guidelines are not properly followed which create more ethical issues and confusion among consumers.

Many influencers continue to use unclear labels, hidden hashtags or vague wording in their posts, which weaken the overall effectiveness of disclosure practices and transparency in influencer marketing communication process.

In this context, the present paper aim to conceptually examine disclosure practices and ethical responsibility in influencer marketing communication. By drawing on secondary data, existing academic literature and regulatory guidelines available, the paper attempts to highlight key ethical concerns, identify existing research gaps and emphasise the need for more transparent and responsible influencer marketing practices in the current digital marketing environment and communication landscape used by brands and influencers.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The present paper is conceptual in nature and is based on secondary sources of information. The main objectives of the study are:

1. To understand the concept and growth of influencer marketing in the digital environment.
2. To examine the importance of disclosure practices in paid influencer promotions.
3. To analyse ethical responsibility of influencers and brands in marketing communication.
4. To review existing studies related to disclosure, transparency and ethics in influencer marketing.
5. To identify ethical issues, challenges and research gaps in current influencer marketing practices.

2. Review of Related and Similar Studies

Several studies have examined influencer marketing from different perspective such as transparency, disclosure practices and consumer response in the digital marketing environment. Early research highlighted that influencer contents are often perceived as more credible and trustworthy when compared to traditional advertising methods, mainly because it appears personal, informal and authentic to the audiences and followers (Freberg et al.,

2011). This perceived authenticity increases the persuasive impact of influencer communication, but at the same time it also raises serious ethical concerns when promotional contents are not clearly disclosed to the consumers and viewers.

Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa (2017) studied the effects of sponsorship disclosure on consumer understanding of advertising intent and persuasive communication process. Their findings shows that clear and visible disclosure help consumers recognise persuasive intent and also support them to take more informed and conscious decisions. However, the study also indicate that disclosure practices are not always effective in real situations, especially when disclosure labels are unclear, unfamiliar or not easily noticed and understood properly by the audiences.

Evans et al. (2017) examined disclosure practices on Instagram platform and found that disclosures such as #ad or #sponsored improves transparency to some extent only. But many influencers either do not disclose sponsored contents properly or they use ambiguous terms, hashtags and unclear wording in their posts. This create ethical problems related to misleading communication, confusion and lack of clarity among consumers, especially for regular users of social media.

Kaplan (2018) discussed ethical responsibility in social media marketing and argued that both influencers and brands shares moral responsibility for honest, fair and transparent communication practices. The study emphasised that ethical failure in influencer marketing can damage consumer trust and negatively affect long-term brand relationship, image and reputation in the competitive market environment.

De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson (2019) focused on influencer marketing which target young audiences and highlighted ethical concerns related to vulnerability, persuasion and lack of awareness among youth consumers and teenagers. The authors stressed that young audiences are more easily influenced by influencers and their lifestyle portrayals, which increase the need for stronger ethical standards, more consumer awareness and better regulatory enforcement mechanisms in marketing practices. More recent studies have also pointed out that even though regulatory guidelines are issued by advertising councils and consumer protection agencies in many countries, compliance with disclosure norms still remain inconsistent across different platforms and influencer categories (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). This suggest that there is a clear gap between ethical guidelines and actual influencer practices followed in real marketing environment and day-to-day digital platforms.

Overall, the review of existing studies shows that while disclosure and ethics in influencer marketing has received increasing academic attention in recent years, most studies are empirical and platform specific in nature. There is limited conceptual research which integrate ethical responsibility, regulatory perspectives and communication practices together in a single framework, indicating the need for more narrative, theory based and discussion oriented studies in this area.

2. Concept of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing refers to promotional activities where social media personalities endorse brands, products or services to their followers through different online platforms and channels. Influencers are perceived as credible because of their expertise, attractiveness and relatability, which make their recommendations more influential and persuasive than traditional advertising messages and formats used by companies (Freberg et al., 2011).

The secondary evidence presented in Table 1 shows that influencer marketing plays a important role in building consumer trust and engagement. A large proportion of consumers tend to trust influencer recommendations more than the traditional brand advertisements, mainly because influencers are seen as more authentic and relatable when compare to celebrities. The table also highlights that micro influencers generates higher engagement rates than celebrity influencers, which show stronger interaction with the followers. Higher engagement level suggest that audiences are more attentive and more responsive to influencer contents, which helps in improving brand awareness and brand preference. Overall, these findings indicate that influencer marketing can be a effective tool for increasing consumer trust, engagement and brand consideration in the digital environment.

Table 1

Consumer Trust and Engagement in Influencer Marketing: Secondary Evidence.

Sl. No.	Aspect	Key Finding
1	Consumer trust in influencer recommendations	61% of consumers report that they trust influencer recommendations more than traditional brand advertisements
2	Trust compared to celebrity endorsements	Influencer endorsements are perceived as more authentic than celebrity advertisements by social media users
3	Engagement rate of micro-influencers	Micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers) generate engagement rates of around 3–5%
4	Engagement rate of celebrity influencers	Celebrity influencers typically show lower engagement rates, often below 2%
5	Brand preference impact	Influencer marketing positively influences brand awareness and consideration among digital consumers

Source: Compiled from secondary reports published by Influencer Marketing Hub (2023) and industry surveys cited in digital marketing literature

3. Meaning and Importance of Disclosure Practices

Disclosure practices involve informing audiences clearly that content is sponsored. Common disclosure labels include #ad, #paidpartnership and #sponsored. Clear disclosure allows consumers to recognise persuasive intent and evaluate content critically (Evans et al., 2017).

The secondary evidence presented in Table 2 explain how disclosure practices have important impact on consumer understanding and perception in influencer marketing. Clear disclosure help consumers to easily recognise influencer content as advertising, which increase their awareness about the marketing intent behind the message. Disclosure also activate persuasion knowledge, making consumers more careful and alert while interpreting promotional contents. Although transparent disclosure may slightly reduce the short term persuasive impact, it help in building long term trust in both influencers as well as brands. The table also show that consumers generally perceive disclosed influencer content as more ethical when compare to undisclosed promotions. Overall, proper disclosure support informed decision making and protect consumer autonomy, even though it may reduce the immediate persuasion effect.

Table 2

Secondary Evidence on the Impact of Disclosure Practices.

Sl. No.	Aspect Examined	Key Secondary Evidence
1	Advertising recognition	Clear disclosure significantly increases consumers' ability to identify influencer content as advertising
2	Persuasion knowledge	Disclosure activates persuasion knowledge, making consumers more aware of marketing intent
3	Short-term persuasion	Disclosure may slightly reduce immediate persuasive impact of influencer messages
4	Long-term trust	Transparent disclosure improves long-term trust in both influencers and brands
5	Ethical perception	Consumers perceive disclosed influencer content as more ethical than undisclosed promotions
6	Consumer autonomy	Disclosure supports informed decision-making and protects consumer autonomy

Source: Compiled from Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa (2017); Evans et al. (2017); and Boerman and van Reijmersdal (2020)

Secondary Evidence on Disclosure Effectiveness

Existing studies consistently shows that disclosure practices play an important role in shaping how audiences understand influencer promotions in digital platforms. Clear and visible disclosures help consumers to recognise that influencer content is advertising in nature rather than a purely personal opinion shared by the influencer. When audiences are aware about the commercial intent behind a post, they are able to evaluate the message more critically and can make informed decisions based on that understanding.

Research by Boerman et al. (2017) found that clear disclosure significantly increases advertising recognition by activating consumers' persuasion knowledge and awareness. This means that audiences becomes aware that the content is mainly intended to persuade them in some way. While disclosure may slightly reduce short term persuasive impact of influencer messages, it helps in improving long term trust in both the influencer and the brand. Transparent disclosure is therefore viewed as ethically appropriate and beneficial for sustaining credibility and trust over period of time.

The information presented in Table 3 shows the common disclosure practices followed across different digital platforms in influencer marketing , each platform use different disclosure formats like hashtags , paid partnership labels or verbal statements to inform the audience about sponsored contents. Instagram and TikTok mainly rely on hashtags or platform provided branded content tools while YouTube influencers usually combine verbal disclosure with written disclosure in the video descriptions. Blogs generally use sponsored content notice placed at the beginning or end of the article for informing readers about paid collaboration and Facebook use a paid partnership label which is shown below the post to indicate brand association. Overall these practices aims to improve transparency but the effectiveness of disclosure may vary , and depend on how clearly and consistently it is used.

Table 3

Common Disclosure Practices Across Digital Platforms.

Platform	Disclosure Format	Description
Instagram	#ad, #sponsored, Paid Partnership Tag	Hashtags or platform-provided labels placed in captions or at the beginning of posts to indicate paid promotions
YouTube	Verbal disclosure + written disclosure	Influencers verbally state sponsorship during the video and include disclosure in the video description
Blogs	Sponsored content notice	A clear statement at the beginning or end of the article informing readers about paid collaboration
Facebook	Paid partnership label	Platform-enabled disclosure shown below the post indicating brand association
TikTok	#ad, branded content tag	Hashtags or built-in branded content tools used to indicate sponsorship

(Source: FTC & ASCI guidelines)

4. Ethical Responsibility in Influencer Marketing

Ethical responsibility in influencer marketing refer to the moral duty of influencers, brands and digital platforms to communicate in a honest way and not mislead the consumers in digital space. Influencer promotions often look like personal opinions instead of paid advertisements, which make it more important for influencers to clearly disclose their commercial relationships with brands and companies they work with. If disclosures are not made properly or clearly shown, audiences may not realise that the content is actually sponsored in nature or paid for promotion by companies. Ethical communication therefore requires transparency, honesty and respect for consumer rights in marketing communication practices and activities carried out online (Kaplan, 2018).

Influencers play a strong role in shaping consumer attitudes because many people see them as trustworthy, relatable and authentic in their daily contents and posts shared on social media. This influence can be very powerful on followers behaviour and also on their purchase decisions. When influencers do not disclose paid partnerships clearly or properly, they may unintentionally mislead their followers and viewers who trust them regularly. Such practices go against basic principles of ethical marketing, since consumers are not given enough information to judge the credibility and real intent of the message in a proper manner and time. Brands also share ethical responsibility, as they plan campaigns and provide financial support for influencer promotions and endorsements. Ensuring ethical compliance should therefore be considered as a shared responsibility between influencers and the sponsoring brands involved in the promotion process and communication.

Youth audiences are more vulnerable in influencer marketing environments and also on online platforms. Young consumers often see influencers as role models and they strongly identify with their lifestyle, values and opinions shared on social media sites. This emotional connection makes it harder for them to think critically about promotional contents and advertisements. Many times they trust what influencers say without properly questioning it or thinking deeply. Ethical failures, such as hidden advertising, unclear promotions or exaggerated product claims, may lead to manipulation, unrealistic expectations and also increased materialistic attitudes among youth consumers and followers (De Veirman et al., 2019).

In addition, ethical responsibility does not stop only with disclosure practices and it also include truthful representation of products, avoiding misleading claims and being sensitive

toward social and cultural values of society. Influencers who promote products related to health, beauty or finance have more ethical obligation, because wrong, incomplete or misleading information in these areas can cause real harm to consumers and users. Studies suggest that ethical influencer behaviour help in building long-term trust and credibility with audiences, whereas unethical practices can damage both influencer reputation and brand image over time and in the long run (Kaplan, 2018).

Overall, ethical responsibility in influencer marketing is very important for maintaining fairness, protecting vulnerable audiences and also ensuring sustainable digital marketing practices in the present digital environment. Strong ethical standards help to create a more transparent environment where consumers can make informed choices in a better way. If ethics are not followed properly by influencers and brands, consumers may easily get manipulated by hidden commercial intent and unclear promotions which they may not notice or understand clearly.

5. Regulatory Guidelines and Industry Standards

With the rapid growth of influencer marketing across different social media platforms and channels regulatory bodies in many countries have introduced guidelines to ensure ethical and transparent advertising practices are followed properly by influencers and brands. These guidelines mainly focus on disclosure of paid partnerships so that consumers can clearly identify sponsored contents which are posted by influencers on social media platforms. This help audiences to understand whether a post is advertising, or just a personal opinion shared by the influencer online. Without proper and clear disclosure consumers can be easily misled and also become confused about the actual intent and purpose of the message.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States mandates that influencers must clearly and openly disclose material connections with brands including payments free products or other benefits which they receive from companies or sponsors. As per the FTC guidelines disclosures should be easy to notice simple to understand and placed close to the promotional message which is shared by the influencer online (FTC 2019). Vague disclosures or hidden disclosures are considered misleading and unethical in nature and they goes against fair advertising practices as well as consumer protection rules followed in marketing communication.

In India, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) issued specific guidelines for influencer advertising in the year 2021. These guidelines require influencers to use clear labels like #ad, #sponsored or platform based disclosure tools while posting promotional contents on social media platforms. ASCI also emphasise that disclosures must be prominent and should not be hidden among many hashtags or long captions used in the post. If the disclosures are hidden or not clear, consumers may not properly understand the commercial intent behind the post, which again raise ethical issues and transparency concern in influencer marketing.

The information presented in Table 4 highlights the key regulatory guidelines related to influencer marketing disclosure across different countries , different regulatory bodies have framed specific rules to ensure that paid influencer contents are clearly communicated to the consumers. For example the FTC in United States stress the need for clear and unambiguous disclosure of paid partnerships while ASCI in India makes mandatory the use of standard labels such as #ad or #sponsored. In the United Kingdom both ASA and CMA requires influencers to clearly identify advertising content and also avoid misleading the consumers by hiding the commercial intent behind the post. Overall these guidelines aim to improve transparency and protect consumers from deceptive influencer marketing practices , but the level of awareness and compliance may still varies across different platforms and influencers.

Table 4

Key Regulatory Guidelines for Influencer Marketing Disclosure.

Regulatory Body	Country	Key Disclosure Requirement
Federal Trade Commission (FTC)	United States	Clear, visible and unambiguous disclosure of paid partnerships
Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)	India	Mandatory disclosure using standard labels such as #ad or #sponsored
Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)	United Kingdom	Influencer posts must clearly identify advertising content
Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)	United Kingdom	Influencers must not mislead consumers by hiding commercial intent

Source: Compiled from FTC (2019), ASCI (2021) and international advertising standards reports.

Secondary Evidence on Compliance Levels

Despite the presence of regulatory guidelines, compliance with disclosure norms still remain inconsistent in many platforms. Monitoring reports and industry reviews shows that a large number of influencer posts does not fully follow the disclosure requirements in proper way.

In India, ASCI monitoring reports revealed that (Table 5) more than 30% of influencer posts initially violated disclosure norms, which show low awareness among influencers or sometimes deliberate non-compliance by brands and influencers. This situation indicate that rules are available but they are not always followed seriously in influencer marketing practices.

Table 5

Disclosure Compliance in Influencer Marketing: Secondary Evidence.

Aspect	Observation
Rate of non-compliant posts (India)	Over 30% of influencer posts initially violated ASCI disclosure norms
Common violations	Hidden hashtags, unclear labels, late placement of disclosures
Platform variation	Higher non-compliance observed on Instagram and short-video platforms
Corrective action	Posts modified or removed after regulatory intervention

(Source: Based on ASCI influencer monitoring reports and industry compliance reviews.)

6. Ethical Issues and Challenges

Despite the presence of regulatory guidelines, several ethical issues and challenges continue to affect influencer marketing practices in many platforms. One of the most common problem is the use of hidden or unclear disclosures by influencers. Influencers often place disclosure hashtags at the end of captions, use very small font size, or combine disclosure labels with many other hashtags, which makes them difficult for audiences to notice properly. Such practices reduce the effectiveness of disclosure and also weaken transparency in influencer communication.

Another major challenge arises from platform algorithms that give priority to engagement, visibility and reach. Influencers may feel pressure to make promotional content appear more natural and non-commercial so that engagement is not reduced. Because of this, influencers may use subtle advertising techniques where commercial intent is deliberately blended with personal content and storytelling. As a result, ethical disclosure is sometimes treated as a secondary concern rather than a primary responsibility.

Low consumer awareness further complicate this issue in influencer marketing. Many social media users do not fully understand the meaning of disclosure labels such as #ad or #sponsored used in posts. This lack of understanding limits consumers ability to recognise advertising intent and to evaluate content critically. The blending of personal storytelling with promotional messaging creates ethical confusion and weakens consumer autonomy, as

many audiences may not realise that they are being persuaded or influenced (Audrezet et al., 2020). These challenges clearly indicate that ethical compliance in influencer marketing is influenced not only by regulations, but also by platform design, influencer behaviour and the level of consumer awareness.

7. Implications for Brands, Influencers and Consumers

Ethical disclosure practices have important implication for all the stakeholders involved in influencer marketing activities. For brands, transparent disclosure help in building long term credibility and trust among the consumers. Brands which support ethical marketing practices are more likely to develop sustainable relationship with consumers, rather than only depending on short term sales that are driven by hidden persuasion or unclear promotional contents.

For influencers, ethical behaviour help in protecting their personal reputation and credibility in online platforms. Influencers who disclose paid partnerships honestly are often perceived as more trustworthy and authentic by their followers and audiences. Ethical disclosure also help influencers to avoid regulatory penalties and reputational damage which may arise because of misleading or unclear practices.

Consumers benefit from ethical disclosure because it enables informed decision-making process. When consumers are aware of commercial intent behind influencer posts, they can evaluate product recommendations more critically and exercise greater control over their purchasing decisions. Secondary studies suggest that transparent influencer marketing contribute to sustainable brand–consumer relationships and also enhance overall trust in digital marketing communication and practices over time (Kaplan, 2018).

8. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although influencer marketing has attracted many academic attention in recent years, several important research gaps still remain in this area and need more discussion and clarity. Most of the existing studies are empirical in nature and mainly focus only on specific platforms like Instagram or YouTube. There is very limited conceptual research which integrates ethical responsibility, regulatory frameworks and communication theory together into a single analytical perspective or framework, and this aspect is still missing or not clearly addressed in many studies.

Future research can focus more on ethical literacy of youth audiences and their understanding about disclosure practices used by influencers in social media. Another important area is the

role of social media platforms in enforcing disclosure guidelines and also promoting ethical behaviour among influencers and brands who use these platforms. Cross cultural studies can also explore how disclosure practices are interpreted differently across countries cultures and regulatory environments, which is not studied enough till now.

Emerging developments such as AI generated influencers and virtual influencers present new ethical challenges which require more conceptual examination and discussion. Issues related to authenticity accountability and transparency in AI driven influencer marketing remain largely unexplored by many researchers till date. Addressing these research gaps will help in strengthening ethical standards and guide more responsible influencer marketing practices in the future and also in the coming years.

9. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper examined disclosure practices and ethical responsibility in influencer marketing communication by using secondary data, existing literature and regulatory guidelines available. The review highlights that even though disclosure regulations exist in many countries, ethical compliance still remain inconsistent across different platforms and among influencers. Low consumer awareness , hidden disclosures and platform driven pressures tend to continue to challenge transparency and ethical communication in influencer marketing.

Transparent disclosure is extremely important for protecting consumers, especially youth audiences and also for maintaining trust in influencer marketing practices. Stronger ethical awareness among influencers and brands, improved consumer education and greater platform accountability are required to ensure more responsible and sustainable influencer marketing practices. By emphasising ethical responsibility and transparent communication, influencer marketing can slowly evolve into a more trustworthy and consumer friendly form of digital advertising in future.

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