ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE ETHICS OF INFLUENCER MARKETING: AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN DIGITAL ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

In the modern digital environment, where social networks represent a key communication channel, influencer marketing is growing into one of the dominant forms of advertising. Its ubiquity brings numerous advantages in terms of reach and perception of authenticity, but at the same time raises a number of ethical issues, especially related to transparency and accountability to consumers. Influencers, as modern opinion leaders, have transformed the relationship between brands and audiences, especially among younger generations – Generation Z and Generation Alpha – who increasingly trust influencer recommendations, as opposed to traditional forms of marketing. The central challenge of this form of promotion lies in ensuring a clear distinction between sponsored content and personal recommendations. Covert advertising, or unmarked commercial cooperation, can erode user trust and result in the perception of manipulation. Although legal frameworks in many countries prescribe mandatory labeling of sponsored content, their implementation remains uneven. Additional complexity to the ethical and communication challenges is introduced by artificially generated influencers (so-called AI influencers), who are becoming increasingly present thanks to their popularity on platforms such as TikTok. Their use further blurs the lines between real and simulated messages, especially in the perception of younger users, thus creating a need for new regulatory and educational approaches to protecting digital consumers.

Keywords: influencer marketing, ethics in advertising, transparency, hidden advertising, social networks, artificial intelligence, AI influencers, digital consumers

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Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant force within the global advertising landscape. Unlike traditional marketing models that rely heavily on institutional credibility and mass media, influencer marketing thrives on perceived authenticity, peer-to-peer communication, and emotional resonance between content creators and their audiences. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and more recently, Twitch and Threads, have enabled individuals—regardless of their formal status or expertise—to accumulate large followings and shape public opinion. These individuals, often referred to as influencers, wield considerable persuasive power, often surpassing that of conventional celebrities or brand ambassadors. However, this rise of influencer marketing has also triggered significant ethical concerns. Central among them are the issues of transparency, accountability, and consumer protection. While influencers frequently engage in sponsored content, the line between personal recommendation and paid promotion is often blurred, leading to questions about honesty, disclosure, and potential deception. Influencer endorsements may appear as organic content, masking their commercial intent and thus undermining informed consumer choice. This raises critical questions about the ethical responsibility of influencers, the obligations of brands, and the regulatory oversight required to safeguard public trust.

Ethical advertising—whether traditional or digital—should rest on principles of truthfulness, fairness, and respect for the audience. In the case of influencer marketing, these principles are complicated by the informal, intimate nature of social media communication, which can render commercial messages less conspicuous but more psychologically effective. Vulnerable audiences, particularly minors and digitally inexperienced users, are especially at risk of being misled. Moreover, empirical research indicates that many influencers fail to comply with advertising guidelines, either due to lack of awareness, insufficient regulation, or intentional disregard for ethical standards (Evans et al., 2022; Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing, with a particular focus on transparency and accountability in digital advertising. By analyzing how influencers disclose commercial relationships, how consumers perceive such disclosures, and how regulatory bodies respond to emerging ethical dilemmas, the paper aims to establish a comprehensive framework for evaluating ethical practices in the digital marketing ecosystem. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories from communication studies, behavioral economics, media ethics, and consumer psychology, this study contributes to the growing body of literature concerned with building trust and integrity in digital spaces. In doing so, this work does not merely critique current practices, but also explores pathways for ethical reform. These include more robust self-regulation mechanisms, clearer platform policies, enhanced digital literacy among consumers, and harmonization of national and international advertising standards. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a more transparent, responsible, and consumer-centric influencer marketing landscape that aligns with the broader ethical imperatives of the digital age.

Theoretical Framework: Ethics and Transparency in Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is one of the most dynamic forms of digital promotion, where brands collaborate with individuals who have significant influence on social networks to increase their visibility and trust with their target audience. This form of marketing is based on the perception of authenticity and emotional connection between influencers and followers, which makes it particularly effective with younger generations growing up in a digital environment (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2021). Lou and Yuan (2019) point out that the credibility and value of the message conveyed by an influencer have a key impact on consumer trust and their willingness to interact with the brand. On the other hand, the ethical aspects of influencer marketing are becoming increasingly important because we often encounter hidden advertising, i.e., sponsored content that is not clearly marked. Such a practice can lead to the manipulation of user perceptions, especially when it comes to younger, more sensitive groups such as adolescents (Boerman, 2020). Research shows that transparent labeling of sponsored posts significantly increases audience trust and improves the effectiveness of the marketing message (Evans et al., 2022). Transparency in content labeling acts as an important mechanism for strengthening credibility and reducing feelings of deception. Tags such as "#ad" and "#sponsored" are perceived as an indicator of sincerity and honesty, which contributes to preserving the long-term relationship between influencers, audiences and brands.

Authenticity is a key element of influencer success, as it is based on the perception of sincerity

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and non-commerciality in communication. Audrezet et al. (2020) emphasize that authenticity is the foundation on which trust and emotional connection with followers are built, which directly affects their loyalty and purchase intention. Jin et al. (2019) further emphasize that younger generations, such as Generation Z, prefer influencer recommendations that they perceive as sincere and personal, as opposed to traditional forms of advertising that they perceive as intrusive and less credible. Generational differences in media literacy further influence perceptions of sponsored content. Generation Z, having grown up in a digital environment, has developed a higher level of ability to recognize marketing tactics, while Generation Alpha is just entering the digital world and is still developing the skills to critically reflect on content (Turner, 2015; Seemiller & Grace, 2020; Burke & Kraut, 2022). This difference has implications for shaping ethical and educational approaches in influencer marketing, given the need to protect younger, more vulnerable audiences.

In the context of surreptitious advertising, research shows that unlabeled sponsored content undermines perceptions of the ethics and credibility of influencers (Boerman, 2020; Evans et al., 2022). This form of communication is often perceived by users as manipulative and dishonest, which can lead to a loss of trust and negative attitudes towards the brand. The theory of moral development in marketing supports the claim that transparency and ethical principles in communication are the foundation for maintaining credibility and trust (Vitell, 2003). The emergence of artificially generated influencers (AI influencers) further complicates the ethical aspects of digital advertising. Although these virtual characters are capable of generating compelling content and achieving high levels of engagement, the lack of clear identification of their artificial nature can lead to a sense of deception and reduced credibility (Marques & Ferreira, 2023; Srinivasan, Lee & Park, 2023). Research shows that transparent communication about the artificial identity of AI influencers is crucial for maintaining consumer trust and engagement (Ashraf, Muneer & Hassan, 2024). Furthermore, users are more likely to have negative perceptions of content if they believe that the boundary between real and simulated identities is not clearly demarcated, which further emphasizes the importance of ethical regulation and education in this area.

All of the above findings indicate that transparency is a key component of ethical

influencer marketing. It is necessary to ensure clear labeling of sponsored content, adapt communication strategies to generational specificities, and develop regulatory and educational frameworks for the responsible use of artificially generated influencers. This not only ensures user protection but also preserves long-term trust in the digital marketing of the future. All of the above findings indicate that transparency is a key component of ethical influencer marketing. It is necessary to ensure clear labeling of sponsored content, adapt communication strategies to generational specificities, and develop regulatory and educational frameworks for the responsible use of artificially generated influencers. This not only ensures user protection but also preserves long-term trust in the digital marketing of the future. Recent studies further reinforce these imperatives. For instance, Christodoulides et al. (2023) highlight that perceived authenticity significantly mediates the relationship between transparency and brand engagement among digital natives. Woods and Korovessis (2022) emphasize the importance of emotional congruence between influencers and their content, demonstrating that inconsistencies in labeling reduce not only trust but also recall and persuasive effectiveness. Additionally, Van der Waal et al. (2024) found that younger users, particularly those in Generation Z, are more likely to penalize influencers for unethical behavior—even when it involves subtle omission of sponsorship indicators—suggesting a growing demand for accountability and digital ethics. Finally, Ahmed et al. (2023) report that audiences exposed to clearly labeled AI-generated content were more likely to evaluate both the message and the brand behind it as credible, provided the content included disclaimers and ethical framing.

These new insights underscore the growing sophistication of digital audiences and the evolving standards of ethical marketing in algorithmically mediated environments. As influencer marketing continues to blur the lines between personal expression and commercial persuasion, future research and practice must prioritize ethical clarity, intergenerational responsiveness, and AI transparency to preserve the integrity of digital communication.

Proposed Research Model

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the ethical aspects of influencer marketing in the digital environment, a research model has been

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proposed based on the methodology of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The model is structured as a combined model, incorporating both a measurement model—which confirms the validity and reliability of latent constructs—and a structural model, which tests the interrelationships among variables in accordance with the formulated hypotheses. The aim of this model is to examine how different aspects of transparency and technological mediation influence perceived ethicality, consumer trust, and the recognition of covert advertising, with particular focus on younger user generations. The model includes three key latent variables. The first is perceived ethicality (E1–E4), composed of dimensions such as transparency, honesty, and social responsibility of the influencer. This variable reflects the user's personal evaluation of whether the influencer's content aligns with ethical standards and norms of socially responsible communication. The second latent variable is trust in the influencer (T1–T4), operationalized through indicators such as authenticity, expertise, attachment, and integrity—elements that are identified in the literature as essential to building a high-quality relationship between influencers and their audiences. The third latent construct, recognition of sponsored content (R1–R3), measures the frequency and accuracy with which users identify commercial messages embedded in digital posts.

In addition to these latent constructs, the model includes manifest variables that directly influence the relationships within the model. These include: (1) clarity of sponsored content disclosure, measured on a Likert scale (1–5), which captures the extent to which users can identify the content as being sponsored; (2) *covert advertising*, coded as a binary variable (0 = clearly disclosed, 1 = undisclosed), representing the absence of transparency; (3) *influencer status*, referring to whether the influencer is a real or AI-generated entity (dummy variable); and (4) *generation affiliation* (Generation Z or Generation Alpha), which enables comparison between age groups in terms of their perceptions and behavioral responses to sponsored content. The model is structured around four core hypotheses. Hypothesis H1 predicts that greater clarity in disclosing sponsored content is positively associated with user trust. Hypothesis H2 suggests that members of Generation Z are more likely to recognize sponsored content than members of Generation Alpha. Hypothesis H3 examines the negative impact of covert advertising, which reduces perceived ethicality and consequently

lowers trust in the influencer. Finally, Hypothesis H4 posits that AI influencers generate lower levels of trust compared to real influencers, especially when it is not explicitly disclosed that the entity is artificially generated.

Figure 1.
Structural Model of Ethics in Influencer Marketing
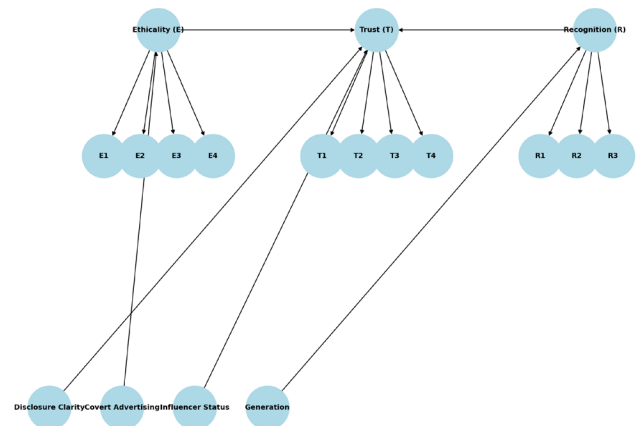
This proposed model provides an integrated analytical framework that allows for a comprehensive examination of the relationships between transparency, ethicality, and trust, as well as generational differences in the perception of influencer marketing. The application of SEM ensures a high level of precision in assessing latent constructs and their interrelationships, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of responsible digital advertising in the age of social media. In the following chapter, this model will be empirically tested on a representative sample of Generation Z and Generation Alpha users, enabling hypothesis validation and the formulation of conclusions relevant to academic theory, marketing practice, and regulatory discourse surrounding influencer marketing.

Research Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the research, which aims to examine the ethical aspects of influencer marketing in the digital environment. The focus is placed on the perception of the ethicality of sponsored content among members of Generation Z and Generation Alpha, as well as the level of recognition of covert advertising and its impact on consumer trust.

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The main objective of this study is to:

- Examine the perception of the ethicality of influencer marketing among younger consumers and the impact of covert advertising on user trust and behavior.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Determine the level of recognition of sponsored content among members of Generation Z and Generation Alpha.

- Examine the relationship between perceived ethicality of influencers and user trust.

- Analyze the difference in the perception of ethicality between content that is clearly labeled as sponsored and content that lacks such labeling.

- Investigate the role of artificially generated influencers (AI influencers) in shaping the perception of ethicality and trust.

Based on the outlined objectives, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

Hypothesis H1: A higher level of disclosure clarity of sponsored content is positively associated with user trust.

Hypothesis H2: Members of Generation Z are better at recognizing sponsored content compared to members of Generation Alpha.

Hypothesis H3: Covert advertising negatively affects the perceived ethicality of influencers and reduces user trust.

Hypothesis H4: AI influencers generate lower levels of trust compared to real influencers, especially when it is not clearly disclosed that the persona is artificially generated.

Participants

The study included a total of 720 participants, of which 420 were members of Generation Z and 300 were parents of Generation Alpha children. Regarding gender, the sample consisted of 380 females and 340 males. Participants came from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, ensuring sample diversity aligned with the study's objectives. They were recruited through online platforms and social media, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of opinions and experiences related to the perception of sponsored content and the influence of influencers. All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the study.

Instrument

A structured questionnaire specifically developed for this study was used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of several sections covering demographic information, perceptions of the transparency of sponsored content, trust in influencers, recognition of sponsorship, and the ethical evaluation of influencers. Most items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where participants could express their agreement or disagreement with statements, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This approach allowed for quantification of attitudes and their statistical analysis.

Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was pilot tested on a sample of 30 participants to check for question clarity, comprehensibility, and the reliability of the measurement instruments. Based on the pilot study results, necessary adjustments and corrections were made. All questionnaire items were constructed based on existing theoretical models and relevant literature to ensure measurement validity and reliability of the results.

Procedures

Data collection was conducted between February 1, 2025, and April 1, 2025, via an online survey. Participants were recruited through social media and email invitations targeted at specific demographic groups, aiming to achieve a representative sample. Before participation, all respondents received detailed information about the purpose of the study, data collection and processing procedures, as well as their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality of all collected data were also ensured.

After providing informed consent, participants independently completed the online questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes on average. The collected data were then carefully processed and prepared for statistical analysis, including data quality checks, cleaning, and

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coding. The entire data collection and processing procedure was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and standards of relevant institutions.

Data Analysis

This study develops an analytical research framework aimed at systematically examining the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing, with a particular focus on transparency, authenticity, and responsibility in digital communication. Given the increasing influence of social media influencers on consumer perceptions and decision-making processes, the model addresses key ethical concerns such as covert advertising, manipulation of information, and audience trust. The analysis seeks not only to identify current norms and practices but also to evaluate their alignment with the principles of professional ethics, digital literacy, and regulatory standards. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of ethics in shaping sustainable and socially responsible marketing strategies within the digital environment. The research aims to explore the level of recognition of covert advertising and its impact on users' trust in influencers. The primary objective is to examine how younger generations perceive the ethicality of influencer marketing, particularly in relation to the absence of clear labeling of sponsored content and its influence on consumer behavior and attitudes. Additionally, the study investigates perceived differences in ethicality between clearly labeled and unlabeled promotional content, with a specific emphasis on the role of artificially generated influencers (so-called AI influencers) in shaping user trust. Through this analysis, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes and behavioral patterns of younger audiences in the context of digital marketing, while also identifying key factors that contribute to the formation of ethical perceptions and trust.

In order to test the defined research hypotheses and achieve the objectives of this study, a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical methods was employed. The following types of statistical analyses were conducted: Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents from Generation Z and Generation Alpha (based on parental responses), including age, gender, education level, employment status, and household income.

The Mann–Whitney U test was applied to examine differences between two independent groups (e.g., Generation Z and Generation Alpha) in their perception of the transparency of sponsored content. This non-parametric test was appropriate due to the ordinal nature of the variables and the non-normal distribution of responses. The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to assess differences among more than two independent groups (e.g., respondents with different levels of education or trust in various types of influencers), particularly in evaluating perceptions of ethicality and trust. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to test Hypothesis H3 and to examine the relationships between ordinal variables—specifically, how recognition of sponsorship and clarity of labeling influence user trust and the perceived ethics of influencers.

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify the influence of sociodemographic predictors (age, gender, education) on dependent variables such as trust in influencers and the ability to recognize sponsored content. The regression models enabled the estimation of the relative contribution of each predictor. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test a more complex, theory-driven model that included both direct and indirect relationships among variables. This method allowed for the examination of mediating effects of trust and sponsorship recognition between demographic characteristics and the perceived ethicality of influencers.These statistical procedures provided a comprehensive analytical foundation for testing the proposed hypotheses. The combination of non-parametric tests, correlation analysis, regression modeling, and structural modeling ensured both robustness and interpretability of the results, given the ordinal nature of the measures and the type of data collected.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the key findings of the research, structured around the defined hypotheses and research questions. The results are interpreted using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, providing a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and behaviors of Generation Z and Generation Alpha in relation to their perceptions of sponsored content and influencer impact.The analyses were conducted to identify statistically significant differences and correlations between variables, taking into account

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the respondents' demographic characteristics, their level of trust in influencers, and their ability to recognize marketing content. Special attention was given to examining the role of transparency, ethicality, and labeling clarity in shaping users' attitudes toward influencers and sponsored content on social media platforms.The discussion is grounded in the theoretical framework of the study and draws upon previous research findings, aiming to connect empirical data with existing knowledge and to highlight relevant practical implications.

Table 1.
Generation Z (N = 420)

Sex	Age	School preparation	Status	Monthly income (EUR)
Men (n=200)	13–25	High school (55%), College (45%)	Students (85%), Employees (15%)	Employees: 700–1.200
Women (n=220)	13–25	High school (50%), College (50%)	Students (80%), Employed (20%)	Employees: 800–1.400

Table 2.
Generation Alpha – Parents' Responses (N = 300)

Parent's gender	Dob djeteta (godine)	Parents' educational background	Number of people in the household	Monthly household income (EUR)
Men (n=140)	6–12	Secondary education (60%), higher education (40%)	3–5 members	2.000–2.800
Women (n=160)	6–12	Secondary education (50%), Higher education (50%)	3–6 members	2.200–3.000

In Generation Z (N = 420), the gender distribution shows a slight predominance of females (52.4%) over males (47.6%), reflecting the growing involvement of young women in social research topics. All respondents are aged between 13 and 25, covering late primary, secondary, and early university years. Educational attainment is evenly distributed—with a slight emphasis on secondary education among males and a balanced distribution among females. The dominance of student status (85% of males and 80% of females) confirms the sample's focus on educated, active users of digital media. Among employed respondents, monthly incomes range from €700 to €1,400, corresponding to entry-level salaries for younger workers in Croatia.

On the other hand, Generation Alpha is represented indirectly—through responses provided by their parents (N = 300). This parental sample also shows a slight predominance of women (53.3%), which may indicate a higher engagement of mothers in completing child-related surveys. The children concerned are between 6 and 12 years old, covering preschool and primary school age groups. Most parents have completed secondary education, although a significant portion hold higher education degrees—especially among women (50%). Typical households consist of 3 to 6 members, with average monthly household incomes ranging from €2,000 to €3,000, indicating a stable middle-class segment with the capacity for consumer and digital engagement within the family context.

This sample structure enables a reliable and comparative analysis of the perceived ethicality of influencer marketing between two generations: one directly engaged in digital culture and the other subject to parental supervision but already highly exposed to digital content. Consequently, the dana provide a solid basis for testing the research hypotheses, particularly those related to differences in perception based on age, education level, and parental influence in digital socialization.

Table 3.
Results of the Mann–Whitney U Test

Group	N	Median	U – Value	p-Value	Interpretation
Generation Z	420	3	–	–	Lower perception of sponsored posts transparency
Generation Alpha	300	4	48291	< 0.001	Higher perception of transparency; significant difference confirmed

The results clearly indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < 0.001$). Generation Z reports a lower median score for perceived transparency (Mdn = 3), suggesting a greater sensitivity to covert marketing and higher expectations from influencers regarding the disclosure of sponsorship. In contrast, parents (Generation Alpha) show a higher median score (Mdn = 4), indicating that they may perceive fewer issues related to undisclosed advertising.

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Table 4.
Results of the Kruskal-Wallis Test

School preparation	N	Median of ethics	χ^2	p-Valure	Interpretation
High school	280	4	–	–	Higher ethical rating
University degree	240	3	–	–	Lower ethical rating; more expressed doubts
University degree/other	200	3	12.83	0.002	Significant difference between groups

The Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference between groups (p = 0.002), indicating that educational attainment is associated with a more critical perspective on influencer marketing. Respondents with a higher level of education (university degree) most frequently question the ethical integrity of influencer content, whereas those with secondary education tend to exhibit greater trust in the content published by influencers. These findings support the proposed hypotheses that younger generations and more educated individuals express greater concern about covert advertising and the ethical standards of influencer practices. The statistically significant differences further justify the need for education and regulation in the field of digital marketing, with a particular emphasis on clear sponsorship disclosure and the responsible use of artificial influencers.

The results of the Spearman correlation analysis conducted to test hypothesis H3 – that covert advertising negatively affects the perceived ethicality of influencers and diminishes users' trust – provide empirical support for the theoretical expectations. The analysis of items P1 through P4 revealed coefficients aligned with the expected directions of association, thereby confirming a high level of user sensitivity to non-transparent communication practices in influencer marketing. Item P1 ("I cannot always tell whether an influencer's content is sponsored") showed a negative correlation with perceived influencer ethicality (rho = -0.42), indicating that low recognition of sponsorship leads to lower evaluations of influencer ethics. An even stronger effect was observed for item P2 ("When an influencer does not disclose that the content is advertising, I feel deceived"), with a correlation of rho = -0.46, confirming that concealing commercial intent elicits feelings of manipulation among users.

Table 5.
Spearman's correlation test for testing hypothesis H3

No. of particles	Description of the statement	Variable type	Related variable	Expected direction of correlation	Spearman rho coefficient
P1	I can't always tell if an influencer's content is sponsored.	Ordinal	Perceived ethics of influencers	Negative	-0.42
P2	When an influencer doesn't state that it's an advertisement, I feel misled.	Ordinal	Trust in the influencer	Negative	-0.46
P3	Unlabeled sponsored content diminishes my trust in the influencer.	Ordinal	Trust in content	Negative	-0.39
P4	I trust influencers who clearly label sponsorships.	Ordinal	Perceived ethics of influencers	Positive	+0.51

Trust in influencers further declined in relation to item P3, which refers to the impact of undisclosed content on personal trust, with a correlation of rho = -0.39. Although somewhat weaker, this association remains statistically significant and underscores the importance of clear sponsorship disclosure for maintaining trust. In contrast, item P4 ("I trust influencers who clearly label sponsored content") positively correlates with perceived ethicality (rho = +0.51), suggesting that transparency in communication significantly enhances influencer credibility in the eyes of the audience.

In line with these results, it can be concluded that clear labeling of sponsored content is a key element in building trust and perceived ethicality in digital communication. Covert advertising, on the other hand, undermines credibility and weakens emotional connection with the influencer. These findings have important practical implications – not only for influencers but also for marketing professionals and regulatory bodies – and point to the need for strengthening transparency standards in digital advertising, especially in the context of younger generations who exhibit a high degree of critical awareness regarding undisclosed content.

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Table 6.
Kruskal-Wallis Test

Respondent group	N	Confidence median	Middle rank	χ^2	p-Valure	Interpretation
Real Influencers (tagged)	140	4.2	315.2	–	–	Highest trust
AI influencers (tagged)	130	3.5	267.1	–	–	Moderate trust
AI influencers (unmarked)	150	2.8	231.4	18.64	< 0.001	Significantly lower trust

The results presented in Table 6, based on the Kruskal−Wallis H test, provide strong empirical support for Hypothesis H4, which posits that AI influencers elicit lower levels of trust compared to human influencers, particularly when promotional content is not clearly disclosed. The statistically significant difference among the three groups ($\chi^2(2)$ = 18.64, *p* < 0.001) highlights the critical role of both content source and transparency level in shaping user trust. Respondents expressed the highest level of trust in real (human) influencers who clearly disclose sponsorships (Median = 4.2, Mean Rank = 315.2), confirming that authenticity and transparent communication enhance credibility. AI influencers with disclosed sponsorships generated a moderate level of trust (Median = 3.5, Mean Rank = 267.1), while AI influencers without disclosure scored the lowest (Median = 2.8, Mean Rank = 231.4), supporting the view that concealment of the artificial nature of content and its commercial intent undermines perceptions of ethicality and authenticity.

These findings clearly demonstrate that users are increasingly able to recognize and critically evaluate the sources of digital content and that there is a marked skepticism toward automated forms of communication, particularly when they are insufficiently labeled. Furthermore, the results underscore the importance of developing regulatory frameworks that mandate the disclosure of artificially generated identities and the use of AI tools in marketing campaigns. The discussion of these results supports the argument that trust is not solely a function of content, but also of the perceived source and communication context. Transparency, human presence, and clear labeling of commercial relationships are essential elements for maintaining ethical standards in the digital environment. For these reasons, incorporating digital literacy and critical thinking into educational curricula can play an important role in protecting users—especially younger generations—who are increasingly exposed to covert, automated forms of advertising.

Table 7.
Presentation of the analysis model, expected effects and interpretation

Dependent variable	Predictor variables	Analysis method	Expected effect	Interpretation
Perceived ethics of influencers	Age, gender, education	Multiple regression	Significant impact of education	Higher education → more critical attitude
Trust in the influencer	Age, gender	Multiple regression	Lower trust among younger respondents	Mladi korisnici → niže povjerenje u AI
Recognition of sponsorships	Age, education	Multiple regression	The positive impact of education	Better educated people recognize sponsorships more easily
Latent construct: Ethics	All predictors	Structural modeling (SEM)	Mediation effects	Analysis of indirect impacts

Table 8.
Model 1: Trust in the influencer

Predictor variable	B coefficient	Standard error	Beta (standardized)	t	p-Value
Age	−0.031	0.014	−0.122	−2.21	0.028
Gender (0=male, 1=female)	0.118	0.060	0.102	1.97	0.049

R^2 = 0.087, F(2, 417) = 9.96, p < 0.001

$$\hat{Y} = -0.031 \times Age + 0.118 \times Sex$$

The results of two additional multiple regression models provide valuable insight into the role of sociodemographic variables in shaping trust in influencers and the ability to recognize sponsored content. In Model 1, which predicts trust in influencers, statistically significant predictors are age (β = −0.122, p = 0.028) and gender (β = 0.102, p = 0.049). The negative value of the coefficient for age suggests that younger respondents express less trust in influencers, which is consistent with the assumption that Generation Z, although digitally competent, shows a high level of criticism and suspicion towards sponsored content. At the same time, women (coded as 1) on average express a higher level of trust in influencers than men, although the difference is not expressed in a strong

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effect. The explained variance is 8.7%, indicating a moderate but statistically significant influence of demographic factors.

Table 9.
Model 2: Sponsorship recognition

Predictor variable	B coefficient	Standard error	Beta (standardized)	t	p –Value
Age	0.017	0.012	0.073	1.42	0.157
Education	0.203	0.049	0.237	4.14	<0.001

$R^2 = 0.092$, $F(2, 417) = 11.33$, $p < 0.001$

$$\hat{Y} = 0.017 \times Age + 0.203 \times Education$$

In Model 2, whose dependent variable is sponsorship recognition, the results reveal that education is a strong positive predictor ($\beta = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$), while age is not statistically significant ($p = 0.157$). This difference indicates that cognitive abilities associated with education level – such as critical thinking and interpretation of communication signals – play a key role in identifying covert marketing. Respondents with a higher level of education are significantly more likely to recognize sponsored posts and express greater sensitivity to unethical practices. The model explains 9.2% of the variance, confirming the usefulness of sociodemographic predictors in the analysis of digital behavior. Taken together, these results point to education as a consistent predictor of ethical sensitivity, while age is more closely linked to the emotional dimension – trust. In further research, it is recommended to extend the model to psychographic variables (e.g. digital literacy, experience using social networks), which could further explain variations in the perception of influencers and the ethics of digital content

A structural model (SEM) was designed to examine the direct and indirect effects of demographic predictors on the perceived ethics of influencers. The model included three exogenous variables (age, gender, education), two mediator variables (recognition of sponsorships and trust in the influencer), and one endogenous latent variable – influencer ethics. Model structure:

1. Sponsorship_recognition = $\gamma1 \times$ Age + $\gamma2 \times$ Education + $\zeta1$

2. Trust = $\gamma3 \times$ Age + $\gamma4 \times$ Gender + $\zeta2$

3. Ethicality = $\beta1 \times$ Sponsorship_recognition + $\beta2 \times$ Trust + $\zeta3$

Where:

γ –regression coefficients between exogenous and mediator variables

β –regression coefficients between mediator and latent dependent variable

ζ –residual variances of each part of the model.

Sponsorship recognition and trust are expected to mediate the relationship between demographic variables and influencer ethicality ratings. Education should positively influence the ability to recognize sponsorships, which in turn positively influences perceptions of ethicality. Age and gender predict the level of trust, and trust is a strong predictor of ethicality.

This Structural Equation Model (SEM) illustrates the direct and indirect effects of demographic and behavioral predictors on the perceived ethicality of influencers. The model includes exogenous variables (age, gender, education), additional predictors (frequency of social media use, familiarity with AI influencers), two mediators (recognition of sponsorship and trust in influencer), and one endogenous latent variable – perceived ethicality of the influencer.

Figure 2.
Structural Equation Model of Predictors of Perceived Influencer Ethicality
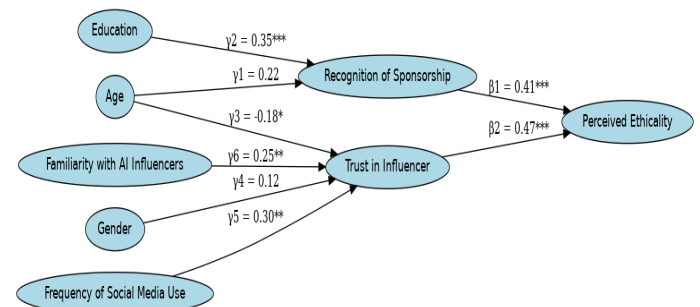
Despite offering valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing and the role of transparency in shaping consumer trust, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research design is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to establish causality between variables. Although the structural model suggests direct and indirect effects, longitudinal data would be needed to confirm the temporal sequencing of the observed relationships. Second, the sample is geographically confined to

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Croatia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or regulatory contexts. Cultural norms, digital literacy, and local advertising regulations vary significantly across countries and may influence perceptions of influencer ethics differently.

Table 10.
Standardized Path Coefficients

Path	From	To	Coefficient (γ / β)
$\gamma1$	Age	Recognition of Sponsorship	0.22
$\gamma2$	Education	Recognition of Sponsorship	0.35***
$\gamma3$	Age	Trust in Influencer	-0.18*
$\gamma4$	Gender	Trust in Influencer	0.12
$\gamma5$	Frequency of Social Media Use	Trust in Influencer	0.30**
$\gamma6$	Familiarity with AI Influencers	Trust in Influencer	0.25**
$\beta1$	Recognition of Sponsorship	Perceived Ethicality	0.41***
$\beta2$	Trust in Influencer	Perceived Ethicality	0.47***

Third**,** the representation of Generation Alpha was indirect, relying on parental responses rather than self-reports. While this approach was ethically appropriate given the age group, it may not fully capture the children's authentic digital experiences or perceptions. Fourth**,** although the study included AI influencers as a relevant emerging phenomenon, the fast-evolving nature of AI technologies and consumer awareness regarding artificial content means that perceptions may change rapidly, potentially affecting the relevance of the findings over time. Fifth**,** the analysis primarily focused on sociodemographic and behavioral variables. Psychographic factors such as personal values, attitudes toward advertising, or digital skepticism were not included but could significantly shape trust and ethical evaluations in digital environments.

Finally, while self-report measures are suitable for capturing perceptions and attitudes, they are also subject to social desirability bias and may not always reflect actual behavior. Future research should aim to address these limitations by adopting longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, incorporating qualitative methods to capture deeper motivations, and integrating psychographic constructs to better explain user responses to ethical challenges in influencer marketing.

In the context of rapid technological development and the pervasive presence of digital advertising, influencer marketing represents a complex and multidimensional field that requires continued empirical and theoretical investigation. The ethics of digital communication, advertising transparency, and consumer trust in influencer-generated content—especially in the era of artificial intelligence—are key domains for scholarly inquiry. Future research should aim to address a number of open questions related to the dynamic interplay between users, influencers, brands, and platforms. First, it is essential to conduc**t** longitudinal studies that would track changes in the perception of ethicality, trust, and transparency over time. Such an approach would provide insights into the evolution of user attitudes in relation to regulatory changes, cultural shifts, and technological innovations. Long-term samples enable a deeper understanding of how digital behavioral norms are formed and transformed. Second, future studies should include psychographic variables, such as personal values, digital literacy, attitudes toward advertising, and media consumption behavior. These factors provide a more nuanced understanding of the motivations behind the acceptance or rejection of influencer content and explain varying levels of sensitivity to covert advertising.

Third, considering the global nature of digital platforms, it is useful to conduct comparative international analyses. Cultural norms, levels of media literacy, and regulatory frameworks differ across countries, resulting in divergent perceptions of ethicality and acceptability of influencer practices. Such comparative studies can help identify both universal and context-specific ethical challenges. Furthermore, the integration of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, can complement quantitative analyses and provide richer insights into the emotional and cultural dimensions of the relationship between users and influencers. This approach is particularly valuable for exploring perceptions among younger audiences, who often form strong emotional bonds with digital content. From a methodological standpoint, it is recommended to apply experimental designs to examine causal effects of different sponsorship labeling formats (e.g., #ad vs. #sponsored) and the perceived differences between human and AI influencers. These experiments allow for precise testing of variable effects that may be difficult to isolate in real-world conditions.

The rise of AI influencers and algorithmic content distribution opens new avenues for research.

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It is necessary to investigate how users perceive the ethicality of artificially generated identities, especially in the context of covert advertising. Moreover, an analysis of how recommendation algorithms (e.g., *TikTok's* "For You" page) influence exposure to unlabelled commercial content is warranted, as well as whether users are aware of the algorithmic nature of content distribution. Another key area is the evaluation of regulatory mechanisms. Future studies should examine the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and self-regulatory models (e.g., influencer codes of conduct) in enhancing transparency and protecting consumers, particularly vulnerable groups such as minors and adolescents. In addition, gender and generational differences in the interpretation of ethical norms and emotional responses to covert advertising represent a fertile field of research. Considering differences in digital competencies and media socialization between Generations Z and Alpha, it is possible to identify specific educational and communication strategies for protecting digital consumers. Finally, future research efforts should be interdisciplinary—integrating knowledge from communication studies, psychology, ethics, marketing, and artificial intelligence. Only such a comprehensive approach can adequately explain complex behavioral patterns in the digital environment and contribute to the development of sustainable, ethically grounded models of digital advertising.

Conclusion

In the modern digital environment, in which influencers – including those that are artificial intelligence – increasingly shape consumer behavior, the question of their ethics is becoming crucial for understanding the relationship with the audience. This paper investigated the direct and indirect effects of demographic and behavioral predictors on the perception of influencer ethics through structural modeling. The results of the SEM analysis indicated a multidimensional structure of influence, in which the recognition of sponsorship and trust in the influencer play a key mediating role. The significant positive effects of age and education on the recognition of sponsorships suggest that older and more educated users more easily recognize commercial intentions in influencer content. Trust in influencers is strongly associated with behavioral factors – the frequency of use of social networks and the level of familiarity with AI influencers. These variables indicate that technological and digital literacy is associated with greater trust in new forms of influence.

The greatest contribution to the explanation of the perception of ethics comes from two mediators: recognition of sponsorships and trust in the influencer. Their impact on ethics is statistically significant and strong, confirming the hypothesis that ethics is not an inherent trait of influencers, but the result of cognitive evaluation and emotional connection by the audience. The results also have practical implications: for platforms, marketers and content creators, transparency and building trust are key. Special attention should be paid to educating users about sponsored content and responsible communication design, especially in the context of the increasing use of AI influencers, whose authenticity status is additionally complex. In conclusion, this paper contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms through which audiences form attitudes about the ethics of influencers, offering an empirically supported model that integrates demographic, digital and perceptual variables. Future research should include longitudinal approaches, a broader cultural context and qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the moral dimensions of digital influence.

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