The digital de-influencing wave: redefining trust in online communities

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This research investigates the emerging role of social media de-influencers and their perceived credibility and authenticity, with a particular focus on their impact on consumer behavior. Utilizing thematic analysis, the research identifies key factors that shape de-influencer credibility, including truthful endorsements, consistent visibility, demonstrated expertise, active engagement, unique perspectives, and sincere communication. Focus group discussions with 59 participants from Pakistan revealed that de-influencers advocate for mindful consumption and ethical practices, offering a counter-narrative to the consumerist culture often promoted by traditional influencers. Grounded in Source Credibility Theory, the findings emphasize the importance of trustworthiness and expertise in building de-influencers' authenticity. The thematic analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of participant perspectives, uncovering nuanced insights into how users critically evaluate de-influencers compared to traditional influencers. This research contributes to the literature by addressing the underexplored phenomenon of de-influencers and highlights their role in promoting sustainable consumer behavior, offering valuable implications for brands and marketers in the evolving landscape of social media.

Introduction

Social media is now deeply embedded in modern life, reshaping how people communicate, express themselves, and interact with information (Balaban and Mustăţea, 2019). For organizations, it offers powerful tools for marketing, customer engagement, and brand building, enabling them to reach wide and diverse audiences with personalized messages. In the entertainment industry, it has transformed both content creation and consumption (Duffy, 2017), allowing creators to connect directly with their audiences and fostering interactive, community-driven experiences. Globally, social media has removed many barriers to information and entertainment access, while also influencing societal trends and public discourse. Its impact spans politics, culture, and global connectivity (Al-Azzam and Al-Mizeed, 2021; Zhu et al., 2022; Oranim, 2023).

The rise of digital media has significantly altered communication and human interaction (Mahmood et al., 2023). Social media platforms offer convenient, accessible, and cost-effective ways to communicate (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). This evolving digital landscape has also created new opportunities for individuals known as social media influencers (SMIs), who

have become central to the practice of influencer marketing (García-de-Frutos and Estrella-Ramón, 2021). Influencer marketing is now a key component of many digital strategies, with SMIs playing a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior (Kasumovic, 2024). Their large, engaged followings make them trusted sources of information and product recommendations. Through sponsored posts, product reviews, tutorials, and endorsements, influencers blend advertising with personal storytelling, making promotions feel authentic and relatable (García- de-Frutos and Estrella-Ramón, 2021). This approach makes advertisements seem more like friendly suggestions, which can significantly influence purchasing behavior (García-de-Frutos and Estrella-Ramón, 2021; Keke, 2022; Knoll and Matthes, 2017; Mahmood et al., 2023).

By promoting trends, lifestyles, and products, SMIs often drive aspirational behaviors. Showcasing luxury items or exclusive experiences encourages followers to emulate these ideals, sometimes leading to impulsive purchases without regard for necessity, budget, or sustainability (Al-Abdallah et al., 2024; Kala Kamdjoug, 2023; Kurdi et al., 2022). This culture of instant gratification and conspicuous consumption can undermine efforts to promote mindful, sustainable living. Many influencers prioritize lucrative brand deals, often at the expense of ethical or eco-conscious messaging (Moulard et al., 2015; Patma et al., 2021).

In response to this consumerist dynamic, a new trend has emerged: de-influencing. This phenomenon challenges traditional influencer practices by encouraging audiences to reconsider unnecessary purchases and question the value of viral products. As digital culture continues to evolve, an important question arises: What distinguishes it from the act of influencing, and why should brands prioritize it?

Social media marketing and the rise of de-influencers

Given the prevalence of influencers endorsing highly costly products, it can be challenging to discern which ones are truly worthwhile, particularly for individuals with limited financial resources (Patma et al., 2021). Here come the "De-influencers," whose aim is to encourage mindful purchasing rather than splurge spending on trendy products. Deinfluencing is shaking up the world of creator marketing and pushing for a more thoughtful and discerning approach to consumption (Harneja and Han, 2023). The emergence of de-influencing also mirrors a larger societal trend towards heightened consumer awareness, as individuals now scrutinize the environmental and ethical consequences of their buying choices. In addition, the emerging trend of de-influencing could have a significant impact on the financial performance of businesses, particularly those that excessively promote their products or heavily depend on partnerships with content creators (Brito, 2023).

While influencers are ruling the social media throne, the trend of 'de-influencing' posts by content creators is also not going slow when it comes to purchasing power and decisions (Brito, 2023; Keyser, 2024). More than 52 percent of viewers use the social media platform to learn more about specific products and watch consumer reviews, making the platform a dominating force in consumer choices. In addition, as of June 2023, the hashtag #deinfluencing generated over 686.6 M, the hashtag #de-influencer generated a total of 81.9 M, and the hashtag #influencer generated a total of 30.9 billion views on TikTok. Influencers try to attract followers to purchase a product by hyping the advantages and usefulness of the product. Whereas de-influencers view the products

may not being a perfect fit for all, so they try to show some alternatives that are sometimes even less expensive options (Keyser, 2024).

The emergence of de-influencers in marketing strategies marks a significant shift in how brands approach consumer engagement and trust-building. As consumers become increasingly wary of traditional influencer marketing, which can sometimes feel inauthentic or overly commercialized, de-influencers have gained traction by promoting transparency, honesty, and critical thinking (Martínez, 2023). These individuals focus on advising their followers to avoid unnecessary or poor-quality products, encouraging more thoughtful and sustainable consumption habits (Harneja and Han, 2023).

Brands are starting to incorporate de-influencers into their marketing strategies by collaborating with individuals who advocate for quality over quantity, and who can genuinely vouch for a product's value. This approach resonates with consumers seeking more authenticity in advertising and can help build deeper trust with audiences. In response to the rise of de-influencers, marketing strategies now increasingly prioritize long-term brand loyalty, ethical consumption, and transparency, shifting from purely promotional content to a more balanced, consumer-first narrative (Harneja and Han, 2023; Martínez, 2023; Keyser, 2024).

While extensive research has been conducted on social media influencers, there is a notable scarcity of studies addressing the growing phenomenon of de-influencers. This research gap presents an opportunity to explore the impact and role of de-influencers in shaping consumer behavior. Therefore, this research aims to conduct qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of users' perspectives on de-influencers, their motivations, and how they influence purchasing decisions. One of the aims of this research is to highlight the credibility of de-influencers; therefore, the research utilized Source Credibility Theory to explore users' viewpoints regarding the key factors that contribute to their trustworthiness and influence. This theory helps frame the investigation into how attributes such as expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity shape users' perceptions of de-influencers and their overall impact on consumer behavior. Moreover, by applying this theoretical lens, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the credibility dynamics associated with de-influencers. Likewise, by focusing on user experiences and perceptions, this research seeks to contribute valuable insights into this emerging trend and its implications for marketing strategies and consumer culture.

Source credibility theory and de-influencers adequacy

Source Credibility Theory explores the impact of a communicator's perceived expertise and trustworthiness on their ability to influence an audience and plays a pivotal role in understanding the effectiveness of social media influencers (Balaban and Mustăţea, 2019; Lou, 2022). According to this theory, influencers who are seen as knowledgeable and trustworthy by their followers are more likely to persuade them to adopt certain behaviors or make purchasing decisions. In the context of social media, influencers often build their credibility by consistently sharing relevant, honest, and engaging content, which fosters a strong sense of authenticity and reliability (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Followers perceive influencers who demonstrate genuine expertise in a niche such as fashion, fitness, or technology as more credible, and this perception enhances the effectiveness of their recommendations. Trust, a key

component of credibility, further amplifies the influencer's impact, as followers are more likely to value and act on their advice if they believe the influencer has their best interests in mind (Lou and Yuan, 2019). This combination of perceived expertise and trustworthiness makes social media influencers powerful figures in shaping consumer behavior and marketing outcomes.

Source Credibility Theory is also highly relevant to understanding the impact of de-influencers, who can gain credibility through perceived trustworthiness and authenticity, as they often challenge the conventional promotional content shared by traditional influencers. Thus, by providing honest, often critical opinions, de-influencers are seen as more transparent and aligned with the interests of their audience, which enhances their trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990). Their ability to present themselves as unbiased and not motivated by commercial gain further strengthens their perceived expertise, especially when they offer thoughtful critiques of products or advocate for more sustainable consumption habits (Kapitan et al., 2022). This credibility, built on honest evaluations and ethical stances, allows de-influencers to resonate deeply with consumers who are increasingly skeptical of overly commercialized influencer content. As a result, their influence is rooted in trust and authenticity, key components of Source Credibility Theory, making their messages particularly effective in shifting consumer attitudes and behaviors (Yuan and Lou, 2020). Therefore, Source Credibility Theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for this study, as it underscores how de-influencers build persuasive power through perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and authenticity. This framework will support the overall investigation into how authenticity shapes the effectiveness of de-influencers in influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. The concept of authenticity within the realm of social media influencing is explored in detail in the subsequent section, providing a deeper contextual understanding essential to this research.

Role of authenticity in social media marketing

The authenticity of social media influencers has been recognized as a crucial determinant in the effectiveness of both traditional and native advertising strategies (Brailovskaia and Schill, 2021; Plazibat and Marunica, 2024; Pereira et al., 2023). It is positively linked to influencers' advertising efforts, particularly when they promote products or services with genuine intent while receiving external compensation (Kim and Kim, 2021). Recent studies continue to highlight the central role of authenticity in influencer-based advertising, emphasizing its influence on persuasive communication outcomes (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022; Seran, 2024). Empirical findings further reveal that authenticity is a multifaceted construct shaped by context, personal interpretation, and audience-specific expectations (Schlegel et al., 2011). Lee and Eastin (2021), in their influential work, identified five core dimensions of perceived influencer authenticity: perceived sincerity, truthful endorsements, perceived visibility, perceived expertise, and perceived uniqueness. Each of these dimensions uniquely influences consumer perceptions, impacting their willingness to follow influencers and purchase endorsed products (Balaban and Szambolics, 2022). This complex understanding underscores the critical role of authenticity in determining the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Hwang and Zhang, 2021). According to Lee and Eastin (2021), perceived authenticity fosters trust and credibility, encouraging consumers to act on influencers'

recommendations. When influencers are seen as genuine, their endorsements resonate more deeply, appearing sincere and relatable rather than overtly commercial (de Brito Silva et al., 2023; Zniva et al., 2023). This authenticity enhances emotional engagement with audiences, ultimately boosting marketing effectiveness (Ünalmış et al., 2024) and increasing consumers' intention to follow the advice and make purchases (Lee and Eastin, 2021). While extensive research has examined the role of authenticity in traditional influencer marketing, there remains a notable gap in understanding how perceived authenticity functions in the context of de-influencers, who challenge consumption norms rather than promote them. Further investigation is needed to explore how followers interpret and respond to authenticity in de-influencing practices, especially as this emerging trend reshapes digital consumer behavior (Shoenberger et al., 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019; Lee and Eastin, 2021).

Anti-splurging behavior

Anti-splurging behavior represents a conscious effort to restrain excessive spending and promote financial mindfulness. It is often guided by the intention to make more deliberate and purposeful purchasing decisions, reflecting a shift from impulsive or luxury-driven consumption toward fulfilling essential needs and valuing meaningful experiences (Ekvall and Mellberg, 2023; Makri et al., 2020; Peng, 2020). Studies have shown that individuals who adopt anti-splurging tendencies tend to prioritize necessity over desire, consciously avoiding superfluous acquisitions to support more rational and considered consumption patterns (Dimitrova et al., 2022; Ming et al., 2022). Movements like de-influencing have played a prominent role in promoting responsible buying behaviors, as they encourage consumers to critically evaluate their needs and resist the appeal of impulsive purchases, thereby reducing overall purchase intention (Peng, 2020). This behavioral shift is further supported by social marketing campaigns that advocate for reduced consumption, underlining both environmental sustainability and economic prudence as key motivations (Cayaban et al., 2023; Farah and Shahzad, 2020). As consumers become more aware of the broader implications of overconsumption, particularly in impulse-driven sectors such as fashion and cosmetics, their engagement with anti-splurging behavior grows accordingly (Hwang and Lee, 2016). These influences reflect a growing cultural shift toward more mindful, ethical, and financially responsible consumption choices in the digital age.

Methodology

The primary objective of this research was to investigate users' perspectives on social media de-influencers and their perceived credibility. The research has examined the concept of credibility and its impact on perceived trust in influencer marketing, linking it to the emerging role of de-influencers. The present research aims to contribute to the Source Credibility Theory applied to the particular case of social media de-influencers.

Research questions

The research focused on the following research questions:

RQ₁: How are social media influencers perceived in terms of their roles in influencer marketing and their impact on consumer behavior?

RQ₂: What distinguishes social media influencers from de-influencers in terms of their perceived roles, content strategies, and influence on purchasing decisions?

RQ₃: What factors shape the perceived credibility and authenticity of de-influencers within digital marketing environments?

Research design

The research utilizes a qualitative exploratory approach to capture nuanced insights from participants on the emerging phenomenon of de-influencers. This research explored the perspectives of social media users who follow de-influencers, focusing on their understanding of de-influencers' credibility and the types of consumer products de-influencers critique. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected as the primary method due to their ability to facilitate interactive discussions, enabling participants to express their thoughts while responding to others' ideas, which enhances the depth of the data. The research was conducted through focus group discussions, providing a rich, in-depth understanding of user perceptions.

Sampling strategy

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the participant selection process, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit individuals actively engaged with de-influencer content on social media. Participants were approached through outreach campaigns conducted via platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as through community forums and personal networks. Recruitment messages invited users who regularly interacted with de-influencing content to take part in the study.

Given the conceptual novelty of the term de-influencer, a short discussion was conducted at the beginning of each focus group session to establish a shared understanding among participants. This discussion highlighted the defining characteristics of de-influencers as content creators who discourage unnecessary purchases by offering critical, experience-based evaluations of overhyped or non-essential products. To ensure consistency, common examples of de-influencing content such as "Do not buy this" or "Save your money" reviews were provided to anchor the conversations and align participants' interpretations of the concept.

A total of six (6) focus group discussions were conducted between September and October 2024 using the Zoom platform. Each group consisted of 10–12 participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all had relevant experience with de-influencer content. In total, 59 participants (24 males and 35 females), aged between 18 and 45 years, took part in the study. This age group represents the demographic most actively engaged with social media influencers in the Pakistani digital landscape.

Data collection

The focus group discussions were semi-structured, guided by a set of pre-developed questions. This format allows for flexibility, enabling the facilitator to delve deeper into topics as new insights arise.

Data analysis

The recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim, and non-English segments were translated into English for consistency. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and insights across the six (6) focus groups. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that focuses on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within data. This approach is flexible and can be applied across a range of research questions, especially in exploring people's lived experiences, perceptions, and behaviors (Naeem et al., 2023). Here is a step-by-step outline of the thematic analysis process for this research (Table 1).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board before data collection. All participants were provided informed consent before taking part in the research. The participants' identities remained confidential, and their responses were anonymized in all reporting of the findings. They were informed that participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw from the research at any time without any consequence.

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: social media influencers and influencer marketing

The first subject of the focus groups addressed the way the participants define social media influencers. The respondents were familiar with the elements of social media influencer definitions that were described in the theoretical part of this research. Respondents contended that "*Social media influencers are individuals who build a large following based on their expertise or niche interests, whether that's tech, fitness, or lifestyle. They're not just content creators; they drive trends and influence purchasing decisions through their recommendations. They play a key role in promoting products and services through influencer marketing techniques because they have established trust and credibility with their followers (Male, 15).*" They've become essential in shaping public opinion, especially in consumer industries. Companies rely on them to promote products directly to their audience, often in a more authentic way than traditional advertising. Respondents further argued that "*influencers are kind of like the new-age celebrities. They gain popularity for their personality or content, and people follow them for entertainment, advice, or inspiration. A lot of my peers look up to influencers more than actors or musicians these days (Male, 09).*"

Young people follow influencers on several platforms. They pointed out that "*Social media influencers are digital entrepreneurs. They build a brand around themselves and leverage their online presence to collaborate with companies, often monetizing their content*

TABLE 1 Thematic analysis process, followed in this research.

Sr	Steps	Activity details
1	Familiarization with the data	The researchers reviewed the entire dataset to get a general sense of the information. Make notes about initial impressions and ideas. This step helped in identifying recurring patterns or topics that might be important later on.
2	Generating initial codes	Break down the data into smaller chunks by assigning labels or "codes" to particular segments that are of interest. Each piece of data that appears significant is marked with a code, which represents an essential aspect of the data.
3	Searching for themes	Review the list of codes and group them into potential themes.
4	Reviewing themes	The researchers refined the themes to ensure they were relevant, distinct, and well-supported by the data. Review the coded data level, and check if the themes represent the coded data meaningfully. Review the entire dataset level, and ensure the themes fit well with the overall dataset.
5	Defining and naming themes	The researchers clearly define each theme and identify its core meaning.
6	Writing the report	Write up the analysis, presenting a compelling story that links the themes together.

through brand deals, partnerships, and ads. When an influencer endorses a product, it's perceived as a personal recommendation, which is far more effective than traditional advertising. Their ability to integrate product promotions into their content seamlessly makes it less intrusive and more organic (Female, 08)." They create a connection with their followers by being authentic, or at least seeming authentic, in what they share about their personal lives. Similarly, they asserted that "influencers are now a critical part of digital marketing strategies. They have loyal audiences, and their endorsements feel more personal than a celebrity ad. This kind of influence is powerful because it's grounded in trust (Female, 17)." Respondents were familiar with the social activities of influencers, some of them even consider that the influencers' role is mainly connected to building a community that makes you feel connected, such as "Influencers are people who make a living by sharing parts of their life online. They curate their content to cater to an audience's interest, whether it's beauty, fashion, or lifestyle. They often blur the lines between being 'real' and just doing it for business (Female, 10)." The focus group members view social media influencers as individuals who use their platforms to impact and shape public opinion in various areas. Participants described social media influencers as dynamic figures who operate at the intersection of personal branding and digital marketing. Influencers are perceived not just as trendsetters but as credible sources whose recommendations often carry more weight than traditional advertising. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to integrate promotional content seamlessly into everyday narratives, creating a sense of authenticity and relatability. This perception aligns with Source Credibility Theory, particularly the dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise, as followers interpret influencer content as both informed and sincere. The distinction between being "real" and performing for business purposes was acknowledged, highlighting how influencers skillfully navigate the blurred boundary between genuine self-presentation and strategic promotion. In the Pakistani digital landscape, where celebrity culture is increasingly shaped by social media, influencers are emerging as aspirational figures who reflect local values, lifestyles, and consumer aspirations. Their perceived authenticity, entrepreneurial identity, and consistent engagement make them central to contemporary digital culture and highly effective in shaping public opinion and consumption choices.

Theme 2: social media influencers vs de-influencers

Social media marketing has evolved with the rise of SMIs, who leverage personal brands to promote products to large audiences. Recently, de-influencers have emerged, advocating for mindful consumption and authenticity by discouraging unnecessary purchases. This shift highlights changing consumer preferences toward credibility and transparency in digital marketing strategies. Participants were asked to describe the key differences between social media influencers and de-influencers in terms of their role, content, and impact on their purchasing decisions. How do you perceive the motivations behind their messages? Participants highlighted key factors that create a notable distinction between Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and de-influencers. They claimed that "Both SMIs and de-influencers are the same" (Male, 24), built a large following on social media platforms, and used their influence to promote products, services, or ideas to their audience (Male, 29). Further claimed that "they create engaging content across various social media platforms, using similar formats like reviews, tutorials, product comparisons, and lifestyle posts" (Male, 22). Respondents were familiar with the activities of influencers and de-influencers, and they highlighted the key differences between them by arguing that "Social media influencers push the idea of splurging, often encouraging people to buy the latest products or follow trends without considering if it's necessary. De-influencers, on the other hand, promote anti-splurging behavior (Male, 16). They're focused on mindful consumption, warning their audience not to waste money on overpriced or ineffective products. This makes their content seem more credible because they aren't trying to sell something, they are trying to protect the consumer" (Male, 13).

They further asserted that "Influencers are all about getting you excited to spend. While de-influencers counter that by promoting anti-splurging behavior" (Male, 20). Respondents believed that influencers highlight the best features of a product, often urging you to upgrade even if you do not need to. However, de-influencers critically assess products and often advise against buying unless it's truly necessary. Some of them even consider that "I think de-influencers are seen as more trustworthy because they are not pushing you to buy, which makes their reviews feel more genuine. Influencers are usually getting paid to push you toward buying, which can sometimes make their recommendations feel biased. De-influencers come across as more

consumer-first, encouraging people to avoid splurging on unnecessary or overhyped products" (Female, 17).

Social media influencers often collaborate with brands to market products and sway consumer behavior through their personal content, credibility, and relationships with followers. Respondents argued that *"Influencers often glamorize splurging on expensive or trendy items, creating a fear of missing out. De-influencers directly address this by advocating for thoughtful spending"* (Female, 33). Someone uttered that *de-influencers' messages are more credible because they are grounded in practicality and transparency.* In the group discussions, respondents emphasized both the differences and similarities between SMIs and de-influencers, two central concepts in influencer marketing. They mentioned that *"SMIs and de-influencers are influencers who produce engaging content on various social media platforms, significantly shaping the opinions, behaviors, and purchasing decisions of their followers; however, they thrive on consumerism and often encourage people to splurge on things they do not need. De-influencers offer an antidote to that by promoting anti-splurging and mindful consumption"* (Female, 28). They further emphasized that *"De-influencers often share personal experiences about how they wasted money on something, making their message more relatable and trustworthy"* (Female, 29).

In the group discussions, respondents emphasized sustainability and argued that *"Influencers encourage a lot of wasteful consumption, pushing people to constantly buy more, while de-influencers promote buying less and focus on sustainability. Their credibility comes from the fact that they are not tied to brand deals in the same way influencers are. They're more about promoting conscious, thoughtful spending, which aligns with environmental values"* (Female, 32). The focus groups highlight distinct differences between social media influencers and de-influencers, especially when it comes to consumer behavior and message credibility.

The contrast between influencers and de-influencers, as perceived by participants, reflects a broader shift in digital consumer culture toward credibility, transparency, and mindful consumption. While both use similar content strategies, de-influencers are seen as more trustworthy due to their critical stance on overconsumption and their lack of overt commercial motives, an interpretation closely aligned with Source Credibility Theory, particularly in terms of perceived trustworthiness and expertise. Participants valued de-influencers for promoting anti-splurging behavior and sustainability, positioning them as more aligned with consumer interests than profit-driven influencers. This distinction also resonates within the Pakistani cultural context, where increasing economic pressures and growing awareness of ethical consumption have amplified skepticism toward influencer marketing. De-influencers, in this light, are viewed not only as content creators but as advocates of financial prudence and social responsibility within a rapidly evolving digital economy.

Theme 3: de-influencer credibility/ authenticity factors

Social media de-influencer credibility is rooted in their perceived authenticity, transparency, and alignment with audience values. Unlike traditional influencers who promote products, de-influencers critique or discourage consumption, focusing on ethical, sustainable, and informed decision-making. Participants were asked to describe the most important factors that make a de-influencer credible or authentic. They alleged that *"Social media de-influencer credibility is crucial as it determines their ability to effectively influence consumer perceptions and behaviors. Credibility ensures that their critiques are trusted, fostering meaningful conversations about ethical consumption and product quality"* (Male, 20). During the discussion, participants emphasized the importance of the de-influencer's credibility for consumer decision-making. They argued that *"Without credibility, their impact diminishes, and their messages risk being perceived as biased or insincere, undermining their role in promoting informed and responsible consumer decision-making"* (Male, 16). Participants further emphasized the critical factors contributing to the credibility of social media de-influencers. *"Key factors influencing their credibility include truthful endorsements, consistent visibility, expertise in their critique area, active engagement with followers, and sincerity in their messaging. Their ability to offer unique, balanced perspectives without appearing overly biased further strengthens their trustworthiness and impact"* (Male, 21). Similarly, respondents argued that *"Credibility ensures that their critiques are trusted, making their advocacy for mindful consumption impactful. Without credibility, their opinions may be dismissed, limiting their effectiveness in shaping consumer behavior and promoting responsible decision-making* (Female, 28). Female respondents also asserted that *"authenticity, expertise, trustworthiness, engagement, content quality, consistency, and relevance to the niche are crucial factors of de-influencer credibility."*

Male participants consistently highlighted that *"If an influencer does not know much about a product category, how can you critique it properly? That's where some de-influencers fail"* (Male, 13) This sentiment was mirrored by a female participant who stated, *"I trust de-influencers who know what they are talking about. Irrespective of the product, they must convey a well-informed perspective, or I'll dismiss their critique"* (Female20).

One male participant remarked, *"If you only see them post once in a while, it's hard to take them seriously as a de-influencer."* A female participant echoed this sentiment, explaining, *"A good de-influencer should be active in discussions with their followers. Their consistent presence is important. If they disappear for long periods and then come back with strong critiques, it does not feel authentic to me."* A female participant additionally stated, *"It's easy to criticize products, but I trust someone who explains their reasoning clearly and provides proof."* Similarly, *"If they are not sharing real experiences or explaining their opinions properly, they lose credibility."* The focus group participants perceive social media influencers as agents leveraging their platforms to influence and mold public opinion across diverse domains. Participants consistently emphasized that a de-influencer's credibility hinges on factors such as transparency, expertise, consistency, and sincere communication—elements that strongly align with the dimensions of Source Credibility Theory. Rather than promoting products, de-influencers are valued for their critical, experience-based assessments, which audiences interpret as more honest and consumer-centric. The expectation for regular engagement and in-depth product knowledge suggests that credibility is not only about what is said but also about how consistently and contextually it is communicated. In the Pakistani digital context—where consumers are increasingly mindful of economic constraints and ethical considerations—authenticity is closely tied to perceived intention and effort. De-influencers who offer well-reasoned critiques, grounded in real experiences, are seen as more legitimate voices in a digital environment saturated with commercial messaging.

Conclusion

Participants viewed social media influencers as influential figures who shape public opinion and consumer behavior across various domains through personal branding and trend promotion. While some respondents highlighted their roles in marketing and branding, others emphasized their authenticity, emotional connection with audiences, and impact on lifestyle decisions. These perceptions align with prior research underscoring the significance of influencers in lifestyle branding and digital consumer engagement (Bhati, 2024; Chikweche et al., 2024; Günay and Akgiş İlhan, 2024). A clear distinction emerged between influencers and de-influencers: while influencers are often linked to aspirational marketing and consumerism, de-influencers advocate for mindful consumption, offering honest critiques and promoting financial responsibility. Their content is perceived as more authentic and trustworthy, primarily due to the absence of overt commercial motives. This shift reflects evolving audience expectations and broader cultural concerns around overconsumption, particularly in the Pakistani context.

De-influencers are increasingly recognized for their role in challenging mainstream consumer narratives. By discouraging excessive spending and offering cost-effective alternatives, they promote anti-splurging behavior (Brito, 2023; Morozova and Vlaev, 2024) and encourage more sustainable purchasing patterns (Ruby, 2023). Participants identified several factors contributing to de-influencer credibility, including transparency, consistent engagement, niche expertise, and sincerity. These attributes mirror findings from prior studies on influencer authenticity, which highlight the importance of truthful communication, relatability, and trustworthiness (Liskova, 2023; Lee, 2020; Nafees et al., 2021).

Further, recent studies point to growing public skepticism toward traditional influencer marketing, with de-influencers gaining favor for their honest and consumer-first messaging (Ekvall and Mellberg, 2023; Mahmood et al., 2023; Wang and Weng, 2024). Studies on generational perceptions also emphasize sincerity, expertise, and visibility as core components of influencer credibility (Singer et al., 2023; Zhafira et al., 2022). These findings align closely with Source Credibility Theory, which asserts that a communicator's influence depends on perceived expertise and trustworthiness. Participants emphasized that de-influencers gain credibility through honest evaluations, consistent presence, and sincere engagement qualities that enhance audience trust and reflect the theory's core principles. Thus, de-influencers emerge as credible, consumer-aligned voices promoting ethical and responsible consumption in the evolving digital marketplace.

Practical and research contributions

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for marketers, brands, and content creators navigating the evolving landscape of digital influence. First, the growing credibility of de-influencers highlights a shift in consumer values toward authenticity, ethical consumption, and financial mindfulness. Brands can no longer rely solely on traditional influencer strategies rooted in aspirational marketing; instead, they must foster transparency and prioritize genuine value in their offerings. Collaborating with de-influencers who promote honest, experience-based critiques can help brands build deeper trust and long-term loyalty with increasingly skeptical consumers. Moreover, marketers should consider integrating anti-splurging and sustainability-focused messaging into their campaigns, aligning with the expectations of a consumer base that is becoming more conscious of overconsumption and its consequences. Finally, for content creators, establishing credibility through consistent engagement, niche expertise, and sincere communication is critical for gaining and maintaining audience trust in a digital space saturated with commercial messaging.

While this study provides valuable insights into the credibility and perceived authenticity of de-influencers within the Pakistani context, it also opens several avenues for future research. First, further studies could explore how de-influencing operates across different cultural or socioeconomic settings to assess the universality or variation in audience responses. Longitudinal research may also help determine whether the credibility of de-influencers remains stable over time or shifts with market trends and consumer expectations. Additionally, future qualitative or mixed-methods research could investigate brand perspectives on partnering with de-influencers, examining how such collaborations affect marketing outcomes and brand image. Lastly, the role of platform-specific dynamics (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok) in shaping de-influencer visibility and impact remains an underexplored area deserving deeper inquiry.

Cultural reflection and study limitations

While this study offers meaningful insights into the perceptions of de-influencers, its findings should be understood within the cultural and socio-economic context of Pakistan. Local values such as modesty, financial prudence, and growing awareness of ethical consumption play a significant role in shaping how authenticity, trust, and consumer behavior are perceived in digital spaces. These culturally embedded perspectives influence how participants interpret influencer and de-influencer content, which may differ from interpretations in other regions. As the data was collected solely from Pakistani participants using purposive sampling, the study's findings may not be fully transferable to other cultural or geographic contexts. This limitation highlights the need for caution when applying these insights more broadly and suggests that future research should explore de-influencing across diverse cultural settings to assess the universality of emerging trends in digital consumer behavior.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by CBA Research College Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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