

RESEARCH NOTE OPEN ACCESS

The Dark Side of Social Media Influencers: A Research Agenda for Analysing Deceptive Practices and Regulatory Challenges

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Received: 23 May 2024 | **Revised:** 5 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 6 December 2024

Keywords: dark behavior | dark side of social media | human influencers | social media influencers | virtual influencers

ABSTRACT

Social media influencers are powerful agents as they broadcast information, steer consumer behavior and social norms. But their influence masks a “dark side,” too. Our research agenda investigates this understudied theme. What happens when social media influencers behave badly? Does the negative influence adversely impact marketing strategies and consumer behavior? We explore a range of areas, including influencers' authenticity, ethics, and their psychological and social impact on followers. Employing interdisciplinary approaches, our research presents the complexities and harms of influencer culture. Organized around six key themes—Harmful Products, Misinformation, Unrealistic Beauty Standards, Comparison Culture, Deceptive Consumption, and Privacy Concerns—the findings provide a comprehensive analysis of the negative impacts of social media influencers in marketing contexts. Additionally, the study proposes six theoretical propositions and presents 35 research questions to guide future investigations.

1 | Introduction

Social media has profoundly reshaped the landscape of marketing (Campbell and Farrell 2020). A notable manifestation of this shift is the rise of influencer marketing, which has grown from a novel concept just a decade ago to a global practice today (Ye et al. 2021). By 2027, the global influencer marketing industry is projected to expand to an estimated \$480 billion (Rossum 2024). Influencer marketing has also fundamentally altered both consumer behavior and brand strategies (Mallipeddi et al. 2022; Li and Peng 2021; Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022; Barari 2023; Marchand, Holler, and Dünschede 2024). According to a recent survey, 60% of consumers trust online recommendations from social media influencers (SMIs), with these endorsements influencing nearly half of all purchasing decisions (Digital Marketing Institute 2024).

Companies are increasingly enlisting SMIs to promote their brands and products, focusing more on fostering long-term partnerships rather than relying on one-off collaborations (Whateley 2024). Consequently, SMIs have considerable power, exerting significant influence over both consumers and corporate marketing strategies (Brown and Hayes 2008; Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip 2014; Bhattacharya 2023; Cheung et al. 2022).

While the inaugural article in this field was published in 2003 (e.g., Subramani and Rajagopalan 2003, Ye et al. 2021), academic interest has surged since 2017 (Fernández-Prados et al. 2021; Han & Balabanis 2024 Sundermann and Raabe 2019; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Research in this area has largely converged around five broad themes: (a) influencer characteristics, encompassing demographics, expertise, and personal branding; (b) content characteristics, such as authenticity, narrative styles, and

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presentation; (c) audience characteristics, including audience size, engagement levels, and stakeholder perspectives; (d) product characteristics, which refer to the expertise of influencers in specific products and their engagement with them; and (e) regulatory characteristics, focusing on ethical concerns and disclosure requirements (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Ye et al. 2021; Vrontis et al. 2021; Cho et al. 2022; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Tanwar, Chaudhry, and Srivastava 2024). Many of these analyses, however, seek to uncover the psychological mechanisms driving influencer marketing (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Pittman and Abell 2021; Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019) and how SMIs exploit parasocial relationships for commercial gain (Lou and Yuan 2019; Lou 2022).

Our analysis investigates the opposite dimension: The risks and negative consequences of influencer marketing. Scholarship in this area is still at an embryonic stage (Barari 2023; Tanwar, Chaudhry, and Srivastava 2024). Early research has, among other things, begun to identify how influencer marketing can increase alcohol consumption (Hendriks et al. 2020), promote fake goods (Palmer 2020), induce concerns about body image (Prichard et al. 2020), and spread misinformation about the effectiveness of vaccines (Harff, Bollen and Schmuck 2022). These, however, are discrete strands of investigation; an overarching view of the field is missing. Our analysis endeavors to fill that gap. We systematize this growing body of research into six clusters and identify six research propositions for empirical and theoretical exploration. We emphasize the ethical, psychological, and societal implications of influencer marketing, and use that to propose a general framework for research. Increasingly, SMIs' detrimental impact on individuals, communities, and the digital culture is gaining public prominence and inviting political responses (Barari 2023). Academic scholarship too must keep pace with these public developments. By reviewing existing analyses and systematizing studies into overarching themes, we advance a more nuanced understanding of the potential harm associated with influencer marketing and identify directions for further scholarly investigations and regulatory responses.

2 | Background of the Study

SMIs are individuals who attain credibility within a specific industry or niche through their online presence and interactions with followers (Freberg et al. 2011; Childers, Lemon, and Hoy 2018; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Unlike traditional celebrities, whose fame is typically rooted in institutional settings such as acting, music, or sports, SMIs gain recognition through social media platforms, often relying on personal branding and consistent engagement with their audiences (Lou and Yuan 2019; Jin and Ryu 2019). Their reach and influence vary considerably, ranging from “nano” or “micro” influencers with smaller, more intimate followings, to “macro” influencers who boast massive audiences across multiple platforms. SMIs act as opinion leaders or experts within their respective domains, frequently reviewing products and leveraging their authority, expertise, or relationships with followers to influence purchasing decisions (Lee and Watkins 2016;

Hwang and Zhang 2018; Casalo, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Sands et al. 2022a; König and Maier 2024).

As SMIs gain prominence, marketers are increasingly capitalizing on their ability to foster positive brand attitudes and stimulate word-of-mouth promotion (Martínez-López et al. 2020; Casalo, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020). This includes both human influencers and virtual influencers (VIs), the latter of which combine computer-generated personas with human-like traits (Campbell et al. 2021). Since their entrance in 2016, VIs, such as Lil Miquela, have garnered significant online followings and collaborated with leading fashion brands, occasionally outperforming human SMIs in terms of consumer engagement (TIME Staff 2018; HypeAuditor Blog 2021; Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). Their rapid rise within the influencer ecosystem has made them indispensable to marketers (Sands et al. 2022b; Hofeditz et al. 2022; Igarashi, Bhoulmik, and Thompson 2024). Whether real or virtual, influencers are seen as authentic and relatable, qualities that earn consumer trust and drive purchase intent (Chapple and Cownie 2017; Kapitan et al. 2022).

According to parasocial interaction theory (Horton and Richard Wohl 1956; Bond 2016), SMIs foster a sense of intimacy with their followers by mimicking real-life relationships, creating emotional connections akin to “secondary attachment objects” as described in attachment theory (Thomson 2006; Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991). The success of influencer marketing campaigns hinges on these connections, which allow SMIs to cultivate a loyal audience and maintain the appearance of authenticity and originality; a characteristic that increases the hedonic value of Instagram use, which in turn fosters online consumer engagement (Casalo, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2017). This dynamic encourages SMIs to showcase a glamorous, aspirational lifestyle filled with travel, luxury, and seemingly endless rewards. Such an appearance can often be inspiring to followers, giving them access to information that was previously limited to society's elites. However, beneath this glittering surface also lies a more complex and troubling reality.

As influencers become entangled in brand partnerships and sponsorships, the authenticity of their endorsements often diminishes. The lines between genuine advocacy and commercial motivation blur, creating ambiguity for consumers. This conflation of authenticity with popularity and engagement in a metric-driven social media environment further complicates the situation. Ethical concerns, particularly around transparency and integrity, arise when influencers fail to clearly distinguish between organic content and sponsored advertising. However, beyond these ethical dilemmas, the influence of SMIs extends into psychological and societal domains, shaping perceptions of beauty, success, and self-worth. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986), SMIs present idealized models of behavior that followers may attempt to emulate, influencing their cognition and raising expectations to unrealistic levels. The curated, picture-perfect content that SMIs produce thus contributes to a culture of comparison and unattainable standards, exacerbating issues related to body image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and mental health challenges, particularly among impressionable young audiences. We aim to categorize the extant literature on this dark side of SMIs: the types of negative behaviors some promote and the harms they engender.

3 | Methodology

Before conducting our literature review, we established the boundaries of our research and identified key search terms. Our scope was limited to SMIs, both human and virtual, rather than a broader examination of social media content. Furthermore, we focused specifically on the negative aspects of SMIs, particularly the intentional and unintentional harm caused by influencers to others, as opposed to harm inflicted upon influencers themselves. Given the nascent state of research on SMIs, we restricted our search to articles published within the past 10 years (2014–present) to ensure the relevance of findings. We also limited our review to high-quality articles published in ABS 3&4* or SJR Q2 journals and above.

In defining our search terms, we settled on “Social media influencer,” “Instagram influencer,” and “Influencer” to capture a broad spectrum of relevant literature. Additionally, inspired by a governmental report on the role of SMIs in promoting counterfeit goods (Shepherd, Whitman, and Button 2021), we included the search term “Social Media Influencer Counterfeit” to refine our search.

Our search was conducted in August 2024 via Google Scholar, using the query “Social Media Influencer OR Instagram Influencer OR Social Media Influencer Counterfeit OR Influencer.” This query yielded 23,700 articles. In the subsequent screening phase, we reviewed titles and abstracts to identify those articles that aligned with our predefined scope. To avoid duplication, we excluded any review articles that fit within our criteria. This process substantially narrowed the pool of articles, ultimately leading to the selection of 12 key articles included. However,

our initial search yielded only one article that directly addressed the issue of SMIs promoting counterfeit products. To address this gap, we broadened our search to include general reports and market research while maintaining the original inclusion criteria. This expanded search allowed us to identify a total of 13 key sources, as presented in Appendix. We then identified six major thematic clusters that emerged. These themes were further developed and expanded upon by incorporating additional articles, enabling us to formulate a series of research propositions that contribute to the understanding of the negative aspects of SMIs.

4 | Findings

The six thematic research clusters represent the dark side of social media influencers, highlighting their potential impact on consumers’ quality of life as shown in Figure 1.

These impacts may manifest directly, affecting consumers’ physical and mental health, and economic or social well-being, or indirectly, mediated by variables such as addiction, erosion of trust, anxiety, stress, reputational damage, and loss of consumer confidence. In addition, we complement each thematic cluster with further research questions summarizing the key behavioral implication underpinning the theme, from which we build our specific research suggestions in the following section.

1. Promotion of harmful products: Often, SMIs exploit trust to promote harmful products and unhealthy consumption behavior (e.g. drinks and food with high sugar content, cosmetic products containing harmful chemicals, diet pills, detox teas, and weight-loss

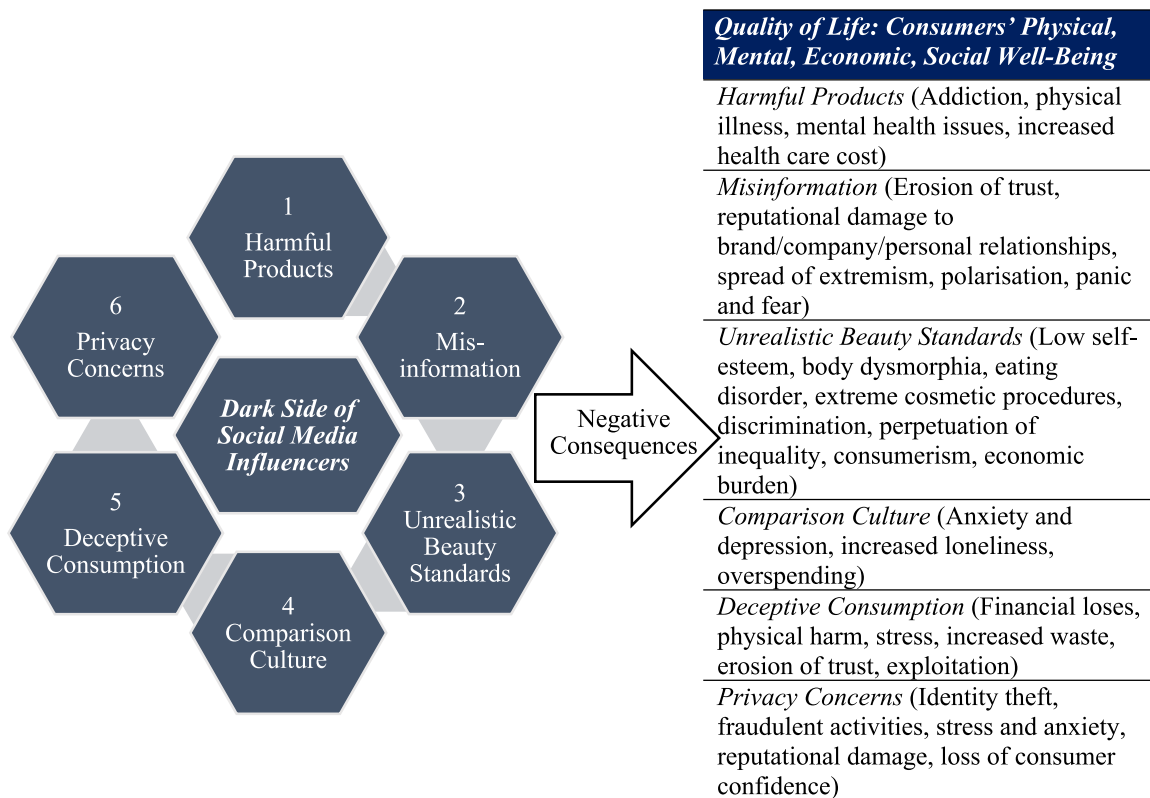


FIGURE 1 | Dark side of social media influencers and their impact on consumers’ quality of life.

supplements in exchange for sponsorship deals or payment). This can adversely impact followers' physical health, especially if they use these products without fully considering their potential risks or side effects. Other products implicitly perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards and unhealthy behaviors. That, too, normalizes harmful practices. But even without direct promotion, SMIs can encourage harmful consumption by glamorizing behaviors such as drinking and drug use. Corcoran et al. (2024) found in a series of focus groups with high school students that influencers were perceived to normalize alcohol use by showing it in a positive light. Furthermore, while peers were also seen as normalizing alcohol use with positive posts, participants believed that influencers were less cautious about the implications of their posts than their peers. Drawing on longitudinal survey data, Smit et al. (2020) also reveal that the self-reported frequency of children watching vlogs had a significant impact on their consumption of unhealthy beverages 2 years later. According to a study by Hendriks et al. (2020), the majority of influencers, comprising 63.5%, had posts regarding alcohol. The posts, primarily shared by lifestyle influencers, radiated positivity and depicted desirable social settings. Although a sizable portion (19.5%) of these posts displayed recognizable alcohol brands, only a small fraction disclosed them as advertisements. Even fewer included educational slogans like "#no18noalcohol". These are alarming findings. The reported behaviors border on criminality. Alcohol-related posts may expose minors to such content, breaching marketing codes and criminal laws. Such posts may also increase alcohol consumption among a vulnerable age group.

Proposition 1. *Exposure to influencer-promoted harmful products is positively associated with increased consumption of harmful products among followers.*

2. Dissemination of misinformation: By establishing intimate para-social relationships with their followers, SMIs can alchemize into powerful thought leaders. Their appeal can surpass that of politicians and celebrities. However, they are not necessarily better informed than anyone else. Nor do they command greater expertise than experts. This chasm between influence and credibility can breed misinformation and disinformation. For example, De Gregorio and Goanta (2022) highlight that while national constitutions protect political speech, commercial speech enjoys far fewer regulations. This can convert influencers into paid conduits for political parties. Similarly, Harff, Bollen and Schmuck (2022) highlights how trust in influencers can spread inaccurate health information among followers. The authors found that a fictitious influencer posting misinformation about COVID-19 measures, such as the ineffectiveness of facemasks, fostered increased mistrust of official guidance in respondents with high perceived influencer credibility. This underscores the value of effective policing. Without regulatory oversight, SMIs can exploit their elevated status to direct followers into perilous beliefs and habits.

Proposition 2. *Exposure to influencer-endorsed views and information is positively associated with attitude change and disinformation belief among followers.*

3. Reinforcement of unrealistic beauty standards: Often, influencers promote (impossible) beauty standards and body image ideals, sometimes artificially created through augmented reality

filters (Ibáñez-Sánchez, Orus, and Flavian 2022), which can adversely impact followers' self-esteem (Deng and Jiang 2023). The latter may adopt extreme dieting or harmful cosmetic procedures to remedy that. For example, Pedalino and Camerini (2022) found that browsing Instagram reduces body appreciation. Adolescent females, especially with higher BMIs, suffered lower body appreciation. Because followers measure themselves against influencers rather than peers, a diminished sense of self-worth besets them. Additionally, Willoughby et al. (2024) found that among posts by 4 of the most followed fitness influencers, objectification was present in more than half of their posts. These results underscore the importance of promoting healthy body image and awareness of influencer posting behaviors among young women. Similarly, Prichard et al. (2020) investigate fitness inspiration images on social media (#fitnesspiration) on young women's mood, body image, and exercise behavior. They found that exposure to these images leads to negative effects on mood and body satisfaction among young women without improving actual exercise behavior. But, these patterns are not limited to women. Tiggemann and Anderberg (2020) discovered that exposure to bare-chested and idealized muscular images on Instagram led to significantly lower body satisfaction among men compared to viewing clothed fashion images or scenery images, which showed no difference between them.

Proposition 3. *Exposure to influencer-promoted beauty standards and body image ideals is associated with decreased self-esteem and body image satisfaction among followers, leading to an increased likelihood of engaging in unhealthy behaviors such as extreme dieting or cosmetic procedures and a lack of overall well-being.*

4. Fostering of comparison culture: SMIs routinely present a majestic lifestyle and followers rush into comparisons. Influencers portray an idealized version of their lives, stoking a false sense of reality. This provokes feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem. As relentless comparisons take hold, it fuels greater dissatisfaction with oneself. Chae (2018) demonstrated this through a panel survey of real social media user behavior. They found that the more users reported seeing SMI content, the more they engaged in negative social comparison behaviors. That in turn triggered greater self-reported envy. This harm disproportionately affected more vulnerable users; those with already low self-esteem engaged in negative social comparison behaviors more. In a related study, Parsons, Alden and Biesanz (2021) found that individuals with higher social anxiety experienced a significant drop in relative social rank perception and self-esteem after viewing influencer posts on Instagram. The comparison culture impacts SMIs, too, not just followers. The pressure to maintain a flawless image online can undermine influencers' mental health. The validation economy—measured through likes, comments, and shares—often engenders anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Proposition 4. *Exposure to glamorized influencer lifestyles is positively associated with negative social comparison behaviors, lifestyle discontent and higher social anxiety among followers highlighting the detrimental effects of influencer culture on mental health.*

5. Fostering of deceptive consumption practices: Some SMIs are involved in fostering deceptive consumption practices

through buying followers or promoting products without disclosing paid partnerships. Such unethicity erodes trust and integrity both among influencers and followers. Occasionally, SMIs also promote counterfeit luxury goods, illegal products or banned substances. These endorsements pose twin risks. They help proliferate illegal activities and expose followers to legal and health injuries. Consequently, they undermine consumer trust and safety while perpetuating a culture of dishonesty and disregard for regulations. Shepherd et al. (2023) found that 22% of respondents had purchased at least one fake good after a recommendation from a SMI. In 2020, Amazon sued two influencers for facilitating the sale of counterfeit products through their platform directly (Palmer 2020). However, such ‘dupe’ influencers who promote close copies of luxury goods are prolific across social media. Their actions reduce sales and soil the reputation of luxury businesses. But they also endanger consumers if counterfeit products involve dangerous components. While there is a significant body of research dedicated to the study of counterfeit products, much of it focuses on the consumers’ desire to purchase or engage with counterfeit items (e.g., Bian et al. 2016). The studies explore the psychological and economic factors that drive consumers to prefer counterfeit products over pure ones. But the SMIs role—and liabilities—in facilitating these transactions also demand scrutiny.

Proposition 5. *The prevalence of unethical consumption behavior among social media influencers, including the promotion of counterfeit or illegal products without disclosure, undermines consumer trust and safety, perpetuates dishonesty, and poses legal and health risks to followers.*

6. Privacy concerns: SMIs, especially mega ones, are giant data factories. They can amass and administer copious amounts of personal data. The access to—and use of—such data poses two types of issues for followers and consumers. Consumers developed a culture of casually sharing data even before the age of social media. This generated a robust literature on privacy paradox (Barnes 2006; Awad and Krishnan 2006; Jorstad 2000): why do consumers volunteer data despite privacy concerns? Scholars have deployed normative and behavioral frames to interrogate this. The normative frame (Dienlin, Masur, and Trepte 2023; Solove 2021; Dienlin and Trepte 2015), grounded in a rationality model, says followers divulge information due to social pressure irrespective of any privacy concerns. The behavioral frame (Adjerid, Peer, and Acquisti 2018; Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein 2015; Norberg, Horne, and Horne 2007) demonstrates followers’ willingness to share data despite grasping the risks to privacy. Central to these analyses—and the paradox—is a distinction between “attitude” and “behavior” towards data privacy. But a growing literature (Solove 2021) rejects this divide claiming that attitude encompasses general privacy concerns while behaviors dictate context-specific disclosure decisions. Now consider SMIs. Influencers’ access to data multiplies with followers. Immediately, risks arise including data vulnerability (Nunan 2021; Echeverri and Salomonson 2019; Martin and Murphy 2017), cybercrimes (Bromium 2019; Basuchoudhary and Searle 2019), identity theft, and more. These, however, are “second-order” risks: SMIs collect data in good faith but lose control over them due to criminal activity. First-order risks, on the other hand, involve

SMIs’ good faith data collection activities. Increasingly, international and national legislation (General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679); The Data Protection Act 2018 (UK); The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (India) regulate data individuals and organizations may collect and process. They apply to SMIs, too. But they risk breaching them due to weak awareness and understanding. This imperils SMIs individually but also brands that may employ them, increasing the prospect of vicarious liability.

Proposition 6. *A culture of casual sharing of personal data and low awareness of data regulations increases risks for both influencers and followers.*

The six thematic research clusters illustrate the darker side of SMI research, highlighting the potential risks, harms, and ethical dilemmas associated with influencer culture and digital marketing practices. In addition to developing six thematic research clusters and research propositions that are primed for further exploration, we have also established a comprehensive research agenda that includes our six research propositions and 35 relevant related research questions as shown in Table 1.

These research propositions are suitable for future investigation using either qualitative or quantitative methodologies. However, to aid future research, we also include the methodology that we suggest would be most intuitive to address each question below in italics. As observed by Han and Balabanis (2024), Source Credibility Theory, Congruity Theory, and correlational studies are predominant in SMI research. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding, future research should broaden its theoretical scope beyond these dominant frameworks, incorporating additional perspectives from consumer psychology and social influence. Employing controlled experiments, longitudinal analyses, and mixed-method approaches to address these gaps will provide deeper and more varied insights. By shedding light on these issues, researchers can contribute to more informed discussions and policy interventions aimed at promoting ethical and responsible practices within the influencer industry.

5 | Conclusion

SMIs engage in a variety of positive and negative behaviors. Some inspire and entertain; others deceive and upset. The deception and damage—and their impact on consumption—deserve a critical mindset. Embarking on the research agenda outlined in this research note can deepen our understanding of the dark side of influencer marketing and its implications for academics and marketing practitioners. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, rigorous inquiry, empirical research, and practical insights, this agenda can inform strategic decision-making, promote ethical marketing practices, and enhance the effectiveness and accountability of influencer marketing initiatives in the contemporary marketing landscape.

Addressing the dark side of SMIs offers several key theoretical implications. First, it expands the understanding of influencer

TABLE 1 | Research agenda for the dark side of SMIs.

Thematic clusters and propositions	Specific research questions and suggested methodology
<p>Promotion of harmful products P1: Exposure to influencer-promoted harmful products is positively associated with increased consumption of harmful products among followers <i>Controlled Experiments or Surveys.</i></p>	<p>RQ1. What are the long-term effects of exposure to influencer content promoting unhealthy products on the mental health and well-being of followers, particularly in terms of addiction, self-esteem, and eating disorders? <i>Longitudinal survey or exploratory secondary data analysis of social media content and followers.</i></p> <p>RQ2. How do the motivations of social media influencers intersect with the promotion of harmful products and/or unhealthy consumption behavior, and what factors influence their decision-making process in endorsing such content? <i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting influencers as participants.</i></p> <p>RQ3. How can regulatory bodies or platforms implement more stringent guidelines or policies to curb the promotion of harmful and unhealthy products by influencers, while still preserving their creative freedom and authenticity? <i>Controlled experiments or RCTs to test the efficacy, and any unintended consequences, of possible policies.</i></p>
<p>Dissemination of misinformation P2: Exposure to influencer-endorsed views and information is positively associated with attitude change and disinformation belief among followers. <i>Controlled Experiments or Surveys.</i></p>	<p>RQ4. How might emerging technologies, such as AI-powered content, moderation tools or influencer authenticity verification systems, be leveraged to identify and mitigate the spread of harmful or misleading influencer content, including products that pose health risks or infringe on intellectual property rights? <i>Field experiments on social media sites if possible, or controlled online experiments to test how effectively AI-powered content, moderation tools and influencer authenticity verification systems can lower deviant influencer behavior.</i></p> <p>RQ5. What are the occurrences of influencer misrepresentation, encompassing fake endorsements, undisclosed sponsorships, and brand alignment discrepancies, and how do these instances impact brand equity or advertising practices? <i>Content analysis of social media posts and brand collaborations or, if possible, qualitative investigations with brand representatives.</i></p> <p>RQ6. How do consumers perceive and respond to social media influencers, examining their trust in influencer recommendations, skepticism towards sponsored content, and perceptions of authenticity regarding influencer endorsements? <i>Controlled experiment to compare behavioral responses, or qualitative investigation with social media users.</i></p> <p>RQ7. What strategies can be implemented to mitigate the spread of misinformation by influencers, especially in critical areas like public health during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic? <i>Controlled experiments or RCTs to test interventions for misinformation spread.</i></p> <p>RQ8. How does the perceived credibility of influencers impact the reception and dissemination of misinformation among their followers, and what factors contribute to this credibility? <i>Controlled experiment to examine the impact of credibility signals on the perception of misinformation, or qualitative investigation with social media users.</i></p> <p>RQ9. What role do platforms and technology companies play in regulating the content spread by influencers, and what measures can be taken to ensure responsible use of influence on social media? <i>Secondary data or qualitative source analysis.</i></p> <p>RQ10. How do cultural and societal factors influence the effectiveness of influencer-led campaigns and the spread of misinformation in different regions or demographic groups?</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Thematic clusters and propositions	Specific research questions and suggested methodology
<p>Reinforcement of unrealistic beauty standards P3: Exposure to influencer-promoted beauty standards and body image ideals is associated with decreased self-esteem and body image satisfaction among followers, leading to an increased likelihood of engaging in unhealthy behaviors such as extreme dieting or cosmetic procedures and a lack of overall well-being. <i>Controlled Experiments Surveys or Qualitative Methods</i></p>	<p><i>Cross-country experiment, or secondary data analysis of social media content.</i> RQ11. How do influencers perceive their own social responsibility, and what motivates them to either prioritize accurate information or engage in more sensationalistic content creation? <i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting influencers as participants.</i> RQ12. What role do influencers play in shaping societal norms and values, particularly in influencing attitudes towards consumerism, beauty standards, and lifestyle choices? <i>Qualitative analysis of social media posts across time.</i> RQ13. How do social media influencers influence political discourse, public opinion, and social movements? <i>Qualitative analysis of social media posts across time.</i> R14. How does influencers' disclosure of photo editing or cosmetic procedures in their content affect the perception of beauty standards and body image among their followers, and what role does transparency play in mitigating negative effects? <i>Controlled experiment to examine perceptions of beauty standards and body image when photo editing and cosmetic procedures are disclosed or not.</i> RQ15. How do cultural differences and societal norms influence the impact of influencer content on body image perceptions, and what cross-cultural comparisons can be made to better understand the universality or specificity of these effects? <i>Cross-country experiment, or secondary data analysis of social media content.</i> RQ16. What interventions or strategies can be implemented to promote positive body image and resilience against negative influencer messaging, particularly among vulnerable populations such as individuals with pre-existing body image concerns or eating disorders? <i>Field experiment, if possible, or controlled online experiments or RCTs to test interventions to protect against detrimental effects of influencer messaging and online presence.</i> RQ17. What are the underlying psychological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between exposure to influencer content and body image dissatisfaction, and how do individual differences (e.g., self-esteem, social comparison tendencies) moderate these mechanisms? <i>Mixed methods approach, beginning with an exploratory qualitative investigation with social media users to identify possible mechanisms, followed by controlled experiments to test them.</i> RQ18. What are the psychological implications of influencer culture on influencers and their followers, specifically focusing on body image concerns, self-esteem issues, and social comparison? <i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting influencers and social media users as participants.</i> RQ19. How do different types of social media influencers (e.g., lifestyle, fitness, beauty) impact their followers' tendencies towards negative social comparison, and are certain influencer niches more likely to evoke feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem among their audience? <i>Controlled experiment comparing reported negative social comparisons when exposed to different types of influencers.</i></p>
<p>Fostering of comparison culture P4: Exposure to glamorized influencer lifestyles is positively associated with negative social comparison behaviors, lifestyle discontent and higher social anxiety among followers highlighting the detrimental effects of influencer culture on mental health <i>Controlled Experiments or Surveys</i></p>	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Thematic clusters and propositions	Specific research questions and suggested methodology
<p>Fostering of deceptive consumption practices P5: The prevalence of unethical consumption behavior among social media influencers, including the promotion of counterfeit or illegal products without disclosure, undermines consumer trust and safety, perpetuates dishonesty, and poses legal and health risks to followers. <i>Controlled Experiments or Surveys</i></p>	<p>RQ20. What role does the perceived authenticity or transparency of influencer content play in mitigating or exacerbating the negative effects of social comparison on followers' self-esteem and mental well-being?</p>
	<p><i>Controlled experiment comparing reported negative social comparisons when exposed to influencer content with manipulated authenticity and transparency.</i></p>
	<p>RQ21. What strategies do influencers employ to cope with the pressure to maintain a flawless image online, and how effective are these coping mechanisms in mitigating the negative impact on their mental health?</p>
	<p><i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting influencers as participants.</i></p>
	<p>RQ22. How do platform algorithms and features (e.g., like counts, comments, suggested content) contribute to the perpetuation of comparison culture on social media, and what changes can be implemented to promote healthier online interactions and reduce the prevalence of negative social comparison behaviors?</p>
	<p><i>Controlled experiment to compare the effect of different social media features and exposure to metrics on social comparison prevalence, and treatments testing interventions to dampen negative effects.</i></p>
	<p>RQ23. What ethical dilemmas arise for both brands and social media influencers in their collaborations within influencer marketing, with a focus on transparency, maintaining integrity in content creation, and compliance with advertising regulations?</p>
	<p><i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting influencers, brands and social media users as participants.</i></p>
<p>RQ24. How do ethical breaches within social media influencer-brand partnerships influence brand reputation and consumer loyalty?</p>	
<p><i>Secondary data or qualitative source analysis.</i></p>	
<p>RQ25. What are the motivations and factors influencing influencers' decisions to engage in unethical practices such as purchasing fake followers or promoting products without disclosing paid partnerships, and how do these behaviors impact their credibility and trustworthiness among followers?</p>	
<p><i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting influencers and social media users as participants.</i></p>	
<p>RQ26. How do followers perceive and respond to influencers who promote counterfeit or illegal products on social media platforms, and what are the potential consequences for consumer trust, safety, and legal liability?</p>	
<p><i>Secondary data analysis of engagement following promotion of illicit goods or qualitative study targeting social media users as participants.</i></p>	
<p>RQ27. What measures can be implemented by social media platforms and regulatory bodies to detect and prevent the promotion of counterfeit or illegal products by influencers, and how effective are these measures in deterring unethical behavior?</p>	
<p><i>Controlled experiment or RCT to test the efficacy of measures to deter unethical behavior.</i></p>	
<p>RQ28. How do luxury brands and legitimate businesses perceive the impact of "dupe" influencers who promote close copies of their products, and what strategies can be employed to protect brand reputation and consumer safety in an environment where counterfeit products are prolific?</p>	
<p><i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting brand representatives as participants and controlled experiment to test interventions to protect brand reputation and consumer safety.</i></p>	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Thematic clusters and propositions	Specific research questions and suggested methodology
Privacy concerns	RQ30. What are the psychological and economic implications of consumers' engagement with counterfeit products promoted by influencers, and how do factors such as perceived social status, price sensitivity, and product quality influence consumer preferences and behaviors in the context of counterfeit consumption?
P6: A culture of casual sharing of personal data and low awareness of data regulations increases risks for both influencers and followers. <i>Controlled Experiments, Surveys, or Qualitative Methods</i>	<i>Longitudinal survey with 'dupe influencer' followers measuring psychological implications of content exposure and purchasing decisions.</i>
	RQ31. How effective are existing regulatory frameworks in tackling privacy and ethical concerns within influencer marketing practices?
	<i>Controlled experiment or RCT to test how effective existing regulations are at deterring unethical influencer behavior.</i>
	RQ32. What strategies can be developed to alleviate the adverse impacts of influencer culture, focusing on implementing enhanced transparency measures, ethical guidelines, and providing mental health support resources?
	<i>Controlled experiment or RCT to test how effective transparency measures, ethical guidelines and the option of mental health support is for mitigating negative consequences of influencer exposure.</i>
	RQ33. How might education and media literacy programs contribute to empowering consumers to engage with influencer content responsibly and effectively?
	<i>Field experiment to trial education and media literacy programs.</i>
	RQ34. How does the current regulatory landscape governing influencer marketing practices impact brands and marketers, and what are its implications?
	<i>Focus group or qualitative study targeting brand representatives and marketing professionals as participants.</i>
	RQ35. What industry best practices and self-regulatory measures exist to foster transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct in influencer-brand collaborations?
	<i>Focus group or qualitative study with industry stakeholders to identify existing practices, and controlled experiment or RCT to test the efficacy of practices.</i>

marketing by incorporating social, ethical and legal dimensions, emphasizing the need for a multidisciplinary approach. This perspective integrates insights from marketing, psychology, and ethics to assess the broader societal impact of SMIs not just positive impact. Second, it highlights the critical role of authenticity and transparency in shaping consumer trust and engagement, providing a foundation for future research on trust-building mechanisms in digital interactions. Third, it identifies the growing importance of inclusivity and well-being in content creation, offering a basis for theorizing how brands can influence positive societal norms through their partnerships.

From a managerial standpoint, addressing the dark side of SMIs necessitates actionable strategies that protect brands while fostering a positive social media environment. Managers should establish rigorous vetting processes for influencer partnerships, prioritizing ethical standards and compliance with regulations to safeguard against reputational risks. Promoting content that embodies inclusivity, well-being, and authenticity is essential not only to counteract harmful societal norms, such as

unrealistic beauty standards, but also to build consumer trust and enhance brand reputation. Transparency in influencer collaborations, particularly regarding paid promotions and data privacy, is vital to meet legal standards and maintain credibility with audiences. Moreover, active monitoring of influencer content, combined with clear communication of brand values, ensures alignment and prevents deceptive practices that could harm consumer trust. By adopting these practices, brands can lead the way in creating a more ethical and sustainable digital marketing landscape.

Furthermore, future research should also explore the ethical and managerial implications of virtual influencers, an emerging area with unique challenges. Exploring their potential for positive influence and risks related to authenticity and consumer perception can provide deeper insights into digital marketing strategies. Research could also identify innovative approaches to boost ethical compliance, enhance consumer well-being, and foster a healthier digital ecosystem for all stakeholders. Together, these efforts contribute to a more responsible, transparent, and legally compliant approach to influencer marketing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix

Literature on Social Media Influencers and Dark Behavior

Authors	Types of negative behavior	Context	Methodology	Theories discussed	Harm caused
Smit et al. (2020)	Promoting unhealthy food and drink products	Online vlog watching in Holland.	Longitudinal survey data from 453 8-12-year-old children	Processing of commercial media content model (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010).	Increases consumption of unhealthy foods and drinks, increasing the risk of obesity and noncommunicable diseases
Coates et al. (2019)	Promoting unhealthy food and drink products	YouTube vloggers on Instagram in the UK	In-person questionnaire experiment	The reactivity to embedded food cues in advertising model (Folkvord et al. 2016).	Increases consumption of unhealthy foods and drinks, increasing the risk of obesity and noncommunicable diseases
Hendriks et al. (2020)	Posting positive alcohol-related posts which circumvent regulations that prohibit advertising alcohol to minors	Online alcohol-related content, in Holland.	Content analysis of Instagram posts of 178 popular influencers.	Two-step flow theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944) Diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers 1983) Social norms theory (Perkins and Berkowitz 1986) Social learning theory (Bandura and Walters 1977) Meaning-transfer model (McCracken 1986)	Increases drinking behaviors, particularly in minors.
Corcoran et al. (2024)	Posting positive alcohol-related posts which circumvent regulations that prohibit advertising alcohol to minors	Online alcohol-related content in the USA.	Virtual focus groups with 40 high school students between the ages of 15 and 19 years.	Social norms theory (Lapinski and Rimal 2005)	Normalizes and encourages alcohol use through alcohol-positive content.
Palmer (2020) for CNBC	Promoting counterfeit products	Luxury fashion in the USA.	News Article	None	Increased use of harmful products (counterfeit)
Shepherd et al. (2023)	Promoting counterfeit products	Social Media Influencers in the UK.	Online survey of the UK public.	Homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton and Richard Wohl 1956)	Increased purchase of counterfeit products
De Gregorio and Goanta (2022)	Creating unregulated political content - potentially for profit	Online social media influencers	Discussion article	None	Unregulated political influence
Harff, Bollen and Schmuck (2022)	Spreading misinformation	Instagram influencers in Belgium.	Longitudinal experiment	Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1962; Anspach and Carlson 2020). Differential susceptibility model (Valkenburg and Peter 2013)	Increased mistrust in official information sources

(Continues)

Authors	Types of negative behavior	Context	Methodology	Theories discussed	Harm caused
Pedalino and Camerini (2022)	Promoting unrealistic beauty standards	Instagram influencers in Italy.	Paper or online survey advertised at a high school and through Facebook and Instagram	Tripartite influence model of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance (Thompson et al. 1999) Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954)	Lower levels of body appreciation in women through upward social comparison with influencers
Deng and Jiang (2023)	Promoting unrealistic beauty standards	Social media influencers in China.	Online questionnaire experiment.	Uncanny valley theory (Mori 1970; Mousas, Anastasiou, and Spantidi 2018)	Viewing human and virtual influencers induced higher appearance anxiety, but humans induced more than virtual influencers.
Willoughby et al. (2024)	Promoting over sexualized beauty standards	Instagram fitness influencers in the USA.	Content analysis of Instagram posts of 4 popular fitness influencers.	Self-Efficacy (Bandura 1982) Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991)	Perpetuating the objectification and sexualization of female bodies.
Chae (2018)	Promoting unattainable lifestyle	Social media influencer exposure in South Korea	Two-wave longitudinal panel survey on 782 female smartphone users	Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954)	Viewing influencer content more frequently evoked negative life comparisons and envy.
Parsons, Alden and Biesanz (2021)	Promoting unattainable lifestyle	Instagram influencers in Canada	In-person questionnaire experiment	Cognitive-evolutionary theory (Gilboa-Schechtman et al. 2020).	Browsing influencer profiles negatively affected social rank perceptions in high social anxiety individuals.
This paper (2024)	Identifying dark side of SMI behavior by examining six types of negative behavior including the promotion of harmful products, dissemination of misinformation, reinforcement of unrealistic beauty standards, fostering of comparison culture, deceptive consumption practices, and privacy concerns.	Wide range of social media influencers and social media platforms across different countries including UK, USA, China.	Systematic literature review.	Source credibility theory, congruity theory, TBP, social comparison theory, attachment theory, social norms theory, parasocial interaction theory, gratification theory, attachment theory.	Consumers' physical, mental, economic, and social well-being has diminished.