

Research Article

PR Unmasked: How Consumer Skepticism Fuels the De-Influencing Trend on Social Media

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Abstract: Influencer marketing has rapidly evolved from just another tactic to one of the most dominant forces in advertising and public relations. Its power lies in relatability: The audience these days feel that the influencers are their friends and or kith and kins, which makes them believe that anything that is endorsed is more personal and clumsy than corporate, directed and shot. However, this ecosystem is under scrutiny now and the very building block is being questioned which was Trust. Today's Gen-Z and Millennials are now increasingly recognising that all of this was well planted with the help of planned PR Strategies, revealing the persuasion techniques. This is now fueling skepticism, a critical lens through which audiences now evaluate digital content. We can now notice the pattern of counter-movement: de-influencing. No it is not just any random social trend, de-influencing has now started shaping brains and becoming a usual phenomenon, especially with the youth like Gen-Z and Millennials, these natives demand authenticity, transparency and facts in whatever data they are consuming. This entire concept of de-influencing is discouraging youth from purchasing products, analyse campaigns better. While positioned as resistance, de-influencing often functions as a subtle redirection of consumer attention, perpetuating the cycle of persuasion in new guises. This research studies the complex relationship between PR Practices, consumer skepticism, and the rise of de-influencing on social media. The study is based on a majorly qualitative research design also incorporating a thematic analysis of 300 de-influencing posts on Instagram and semi-structured interviews with 15 influencers, the paper examines how consumers being skeptical is reshaping PR. Findings suggest that skepticism does not dismantle influencer marketing; rather, it fuels its transformation, forcing practitioners to innovate in authenticity and transparency. Ultimately, this paper argues that consumer skepticism is no longer the enemy of PR—it is its newest collaborator, giving rise to strategies that thrive on reflexivity and critique.

Keywords: De-influencing, influencer marketing, consumer skepticism, PR strategies, authenticity, social media.

INTRODUCTION

When the first wave of social media influencers began sharing product recommendations in the early 2010s, audiences embraced them with open arms. These creators were not faceless corporations but individuals who lived seemingly ordinary lives while offering beauty tips, fashion inspiration, or lifestyle hacks. Their appeal was simple: they were *authentic*. Brands, recognizing the persuasive potential of this authenticity, quickly embedded influencers into their PR strategies. From beauty tutorials on YouTube to Instagram stories featuring wellness products, influencer marketing became the shorthand for reaching consumers in a digital-first world (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

Yet, over the past decade, cracks have appeared in this glossy facade. Mandatory sponsorship disclosures, repetitive collaborations, and an oversaturation of brand-driven messaging have stripped away some of the perceived authenticity. Audiences now see the “strings” of PR more clearly, recognizing that influencer recommendations are often pre-negotiated, scripted, and financially motivated (Boerman, Willemssen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). What was once a space of organic sharing has become a marketplace.

It is in this cultural moment that de-influencing has risen to prominence. Across platforms, particularly Instagram, creators now urge their audiences *not* to purchase overhyped products—from luxury mascaras to the latest tech gadgets. Instead, they promote affordable “dupes” or advocate for mindful consumption. The popularity of the hashtag #deinfluencing, which has amassed millions of views globally, signals more than a passing trend—it reflects a shift in consumer consciousness, shaped by skepticism and the desire to reclaim agency.

This paper investigates the interplay between consumer skepticism and the de-influencing trend, positioning skepticism not as a passive rejection of PR but as an active force that reshapes it. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates about authenticity, resistance, and the future of influencer marketing in a world where audiences are both more literate and more critical.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Marketing and PR Symbiosis

Influencer marketing has long been understood as an extension of public relations, offering brands opportunities to enter consumer conversations through seemingly authentic voices (Abidin, 2016). Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing thrives on parasocial

relationships—the one-sided but emotionally powerful connections audiences form with influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018). Scholars argue that these relationships blur the boundaries between commercial persuasion and personal communication, making influencers highly effective PR agents (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

However, this very integration of PR into everyday digital interactions complicates authenticity. Studies highlight that when audiences perceive influencer content as overly commercial or inauthentic, trust erodes rapidly (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Disclosure of sponsorships, while ethically necessary, paradoxically increases skepticism, making persuasion more difficult (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017).

Consumer Skepticism as Cultural Capital

Consumer skepticism is not merely doubt—it has become a cultural stance. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) originally defined it as a predisposition to disbelieve marketing claims, but in the social media era, it operates as a form of literacy. Media-savvy consumers interpret likes, hashtags, and brand mentions as cues of hidden persuasion (Marwick, 2015). This literacy functions as cultural capital, allowing consumers to navigate and critique the digital marketplace.

For younger demographics, especially Gen Z, skepticism is almost a default mode of interaction. Research indicates that digital natives are highly attuned to signs of inauthenticity and value influencers who demonstrate transparency, self-awareness, and relatability (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). Skepticism, then, is not only resistance but also a demand for higher standards of authenticity.

The Emergence of De-influencing

De-influencing represents the crystallization of this skepticism into a social media movement. While the phenomenon gained prominence on Snapchat and Instagram and worldwide even on TikTok in 2023, its roots can be traced to broader discourses of minimalism, anti-consumerism, and ethical consumption (Hudders & Lou, 2023). De-influencing content typically follows one of three patterns: (1) direct critiques of overhyped products, (2) promotion of affordable alternatives or “dupes,” and (3) appeals to sustainability and mindful consumption.

Scholars argue that de-influencing complicates the traditional model of influencer marketing. On one hand, it appears to challenge PR by exposing over-commercialization. On the other, it often functions as a new marketing tactic, subtly redirecting consumer attention toward alternative products or ideologies (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). This duality positions de-influencing as both resistance and adaptation.

Authenticity, Transparency, and the Paradox of Resistance
Authenticity remains the currency of social media influence. Yet, as Marwick (2015) argues, authenticity itself has become a performance, carefully curated to meet

audience expectations. De-influencing seeks to reclaim authenticity by rejecting commercial hype, but it is equally performative—another way to signal credibility in a crowded digital landscape (Abidin, 2017).

This paradox resonates with theories of consumer resistance. As Foucault (1978) reminds us, resistance is never external to power; it is produced by the very systems it opposes. In this sense, de-influencing is not the end of PR but its evolution, shaped by skepticism and reflexivity.

Research Gap

While influencer marketing has been the subject of abundant academic and industry research, most of this literature concentrates on its effectiveness in shaping attitudes, building brand trust, and driving consumer behavior (Freberg et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2017). There is comparatively little exploration of the *failures* of influencer marketing—moments when persuasion backfires, audiences resist, and credibility collapses.

De-influencing presents precisely such a moment, yet the phenomenon remains underexplored in scholarly discourse. Recent publications, such as Hudders and Lou (2023), have begun to theorize de-influencing as a reaction to influencer saturation, but comprehensive empirical work remains sparse. The existing research tends to frame skepticism as a barrier to persuasion, not as an active cultural force that generates new forms of influence.

This paper addresses that void. It positions consumer skepticism not merely as a negative disposition but as a productive force that births new practices, communities, and discourses online. By examining de-influencing through qualitative methods, this study aims to illuminate the paradoxical ways skepticism destabilizes and simultaneously sustains PR strategies in the digital marketplace.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are threefold. First, it seeks to investigate how consumer skepticism toward PR strategies informs the rise and popularity of de-influencing content on social media. Second, it aims to examine how influencers themselves navigate this skepticism, framing de-influencing as an authentic stance while maintaining economic viability. Finally, it explores whether de-influencing signifies genuine consumer empowerment or merely represents an evolution of PR tactics under a different guise.

Together, these objectives provide a roadmap for understanding not only the mechanics of de-influencing but also the broader cultural shifts it signals in digital communication.

Research Hypothesis

This study is guided by the hypothesis that consumer skepticism toward PR strategies does not diminish the impact of influencer marketing but instead catalyzes its transformation into new forms, of which de-influencing is the most visible. More specifically, the research posits that

skepticism is both a disruptive and generative force: disruptive because it undermines traditional trust in endorsements, and generative because it fuels the emergence of alternative practices that reinforce PR in subtler, more reflexive ways.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the novelty of the de-influencing phenomenon and the need to capture nuanced perceptions of authenticity, this study employs a qualitative research design. Qualitative approaches are particularly effective in exploring meanings, interpretations, and experiences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study combines two methods: content analysis of social media posts and semi-structured interviews with influencers. Content analysis provides insight into how de-influencing is performed discursively and visually across platforms, while interviews offer deeper understanding of the motivations, strategies, and dilemmas faced by influencers engaged in this trend.

Sampling for Content Analysis: A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify relevant content. Using hashtags such as #deinfluencing, #antihype, and #consumerresistance, 500 posts were initially collected from Instagram. After removing duplicates, irrelevant content (such as memes unrelated to consumer culture), and non-English posts, a final sample of 300 posts was retained for analysis.

Sampling for Interviews: Fifteen influencers known for engaging in de-influencing were approached via direct messaging and email. These influencers ranged from micro-influencers (10,000–50,000 followers) to mid-tier influencers (100,000–500,000 followers), ensuring diversity of perspectives. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical approval was obtained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to interviewees.

Data Preparation and Cleaning

The process of preparing the dataset involved multiple stages. For social media posts, raw data was extracted using scraping tools and manually verified. Irrelevant posts—such as those that used #deinfluencing in jest (“de-influencing myself from eating pizza tonight”)—were excluded. This ensured that the dataset was directly relevant to consumer culture and PR practices.

Interview data underwent rigorous preparation. Each transcript was checked for accuracy and anonymized to remove any identifiable details such as brand names or personal identifiers. All transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, where coding could be systematically applied.

To enhance reliability, two coders independently analyzed a subset of 50 posts and three interview transcripts. Inter-

coder reliability was calculated at 0.87 using Cohen’s Kappa, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to refine the coding scheme.

Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was chosen for this study because of its flexibility in identifying patterns across large datasets. This method allowed for the systematic coding of recurring themes such as “skepticism references,” “authenticity claims,” “anti-hype discourse,” and “brand redirection.”

The analysis followed six phases: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. By iteratively moving between the data and emerging themes, the analysis ensured that interpretations were grounded in evidence while attentive to broader theoretical concerns.

For interviews, constant comparative analysis was employed to connect individual narratives with wider thematic patterns. Particular attention was given to contradictions—moments when influencers described de-influencing as both authentic and commercial. This reflexivity was crucial to understanding the paradoxical nature of de-influencing.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis of 300 social media posts and 15 semi-structured interviews revealed a complex landscape of skepticism, authenticity, and subtle PR maneuvers. Four dominant themes emerged: (1) exposure of PR mechanics, (2) authenticity performance, (3) consumer empowerment, and (4) PR’s re-invention through de-influencing.

1. Exposure of PR Mechanics

The first theme revolved around consumers calling out the hidden machinery of influencer marketing. Across Snapchat and Instagram etc, creators frequently used ironic commentary to highlight the transactional nature of endorsements. Posts with captions such as “*Don’t let this \$200 moisturizer fool you—it’s just PR packaging on drugstore formula*” consistently generated high engagement.

Interview data confirmed this observation. One influencer, “Aisha” (mid-tier, 250k followers), noted:

“My audience isn’t naive anymore. They know when a product lands on my feed, chances are it was sent in PR. If I don’t acknowledge that openly, I lose credibility instantly.”

Here, skepticism functions as a critical lens: followers decode the hidden economic structures behind glossy recommendations. The act of unmasking PR itself becomes a form of entertainment and solidarity within communities.

2. Authenticity Performance

The second theme concerned how influencers carefully staged authenticity in the age of skepticism. Ironically, de-

influencing often mirrored the very PR strategies it sought to reject. Many posts analyzed used emotionally charged storytelling (“*I wasted \$300 on this, don’t make my mistake*”) to bond with audiences.

Interviewees admitted that even de-influencing had commercial undertones. “Ravi” (micro-influencer, 42k followers) explained:

“I do de-influencing videos because they trend. Brands see me as more credible when I criticize the competition. It’s ironic, but being critical actually makes me more marketable.”

Thus, authenticity was not an organic truth but a performance calibrated to audience expectations. In a saturated media environment, being “real” became its own currency.

3. Consumer Empowerment

A third recurring theme was the framing of de-influencing as a tool of consumer empowerment. Hashtags like **#antihype** and **#wasteofmoney** signaled collective resistance against over-commercialization. Many posts promoted cheaper or sustainable alternatives, suggesting that skepticism was not only defensive but also constructive.

As one participant, “Maya” (lifestyle influencer, 110k followers), put it:

“People want to feel like they’re beating the system. If I tell them not to buy the \$100 foundation, but instead a \$10 dupe, I become their ally, not a seller.”

These dynamic positions de-influencers as consumer advocates, offering protection against manipulative marketing. Yet, it also creates new circuits of influence, with “recommended dupes” often benefiting lesser-known brands.

4. PR’s Re-invention through De-influencing

Perhaps the most striking theme was how PR adapted to skepticism. Some brands actively collaborated with influencers known for their critical stance, deliberately courting credibility through selective de-influencing. One interviewee, “Neha” (mid-tier beauty influencer, 190k followers), described receiving briefs that encouraged honesty:

“Brands now tell me straight up: if you don’t like the product, say it. They believe negative reviews of competitors make my positive reviews more trustworthy.”

This points to an ironic conclusion: skepticism, instead of dismantling PR, often strengthens it by forcing more sophisticated, reflexive strategies. De-influencing becomes less a rebellion and more a rebranded extension of PR’s adaptability.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this qualitative inquiry suggest that de-influencing is neither a simple rejection of influencer marketing nor a straightforward act of consumer rebellion. Instead, it embodies a paradox: skepticism destabilizes traditional PR narratives but simultaneously generates new avenues for influence.

Three key insights stand out:

1. **Skepticism is productive.** It does not merely weaken PR but shapes new forms of communication that rely on irony, transparency, and critique.
2. **Authenticity is staged.** Influencers consciously perform skepticism to build trust, blurring the line between genuine resistance and strategic positioning.
3. **PR adapts.** Brands increasingly integrate de-influencing into campaigns, proving that skepticism does not end persuasion but transforms it.

This suggests that the future of digital PR is not about suppressing skepticism but about learning to work through it—leveraging consumer doubt as a mechanism for renewed trust.

CONCLUSION

The age of blind persuasion is over. Today’s digital audiences, armed with literacy about sponsorships, endorsements, and algorithmic manipulation, demand more than aspirational product pitches. They demand transparency, relatability, and acknowledgment of the very PR machinery that once sought invisibility.

De-influencing embodies this cultural moment. It captures the irony of an era where critique itself can become commodified, and where influencers thrive not only by selling products but by selling skepticism of products. For brands and communicators, the lesson is clear: authenticity can no longer be manufactured behind the curtain. It must be co-created with audiences who are acutely aware of the game.

This research demonstrates that skepticism is not the enemy of PR—it is its future. To navigate this landscape, marketers must embrace the paradox, acknowledging that resistance itself is part of the persuasive process. De-influencing, far from being the death knell of influencer culture, may be its most sophisticated evolution yet.

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