The Truth is Rarely Pure and Never Simple: An Exploration into Deception's Role in Influencer Marketing.

Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a central strategy within commercial communications, particularly within the wellness sector, where influencers are positioned as relatable and trustworthy sources of health guidance. However, this form of marketing raises ethical concerns due to the prevalence of deceptive practices, including concealed sponsorships, exaggerated claims, and idealised self-presentation. While deception in advertising has been widely examined, less attention has been paid to how deception operates within influencer marketing and why audiences continue to accept it. This study addresses this gap by examining deception in wellness influencer marketing from a consumer perspective.

The study is guided by the hypothesis that deception in wellness influencer marketing is not hidden from audiences but is instead recognised, normalised, and emotionally rationalised within digital culture. Three research questions underpin the investigation: (1) How does deception manifest within the wellness influencer space? (2) How do Generation Z consumers perceive the intent behind deceptive strategies used by wellness influencers? and (3) Why do Generation Z consumers continue to accept deceptive practices in this context?

Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach, this research employed a two-phase design consisting of digital diaries and semi-structured interviews with Generation Z women, who represent one of the most active consumer groups within online wellness spaces. Digital diaries captured participants real-time reactions to influencer posts, while interviews enabled deeper exploration of perceptions, emotional responses, and trust. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing key patterns of meaning to emerge inductively.

The findings reveal that deception within wellness influencer marketing is embedded within everyday influencer practices rather than occurring as isolated incidents. Three dominant themes were identified: manufactured authenticity, sold on insecurity, and scale and motive. Participants demonstrated awareness of deceptive tactics such as selective disclosure, paltering, and idealised body portrayals. However, this awareness rarely resulted in disengagement. Instead, deception

was frequently reframed as "normal," "harmless," or an acceptable trade-off for free content. Emotional attachment, parasocial relationships, aspirational lifestyles, and perceived authenticity were found to play a central role in sustaining trust despite recognised deception.

This study contributes to commercial communications literature by challenging assumptions that deception loses effectiveness once detected. Instead, it demonstrates how influencer marketing reshapes deception into a socially tolerated and emotionally justified practice. Future research should examine emerging forms of digital deception, such as synthetic imagery, alongside the long-term effects of normalised deception on consumer trust.