

FROM TRUST TO DOUBT: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMERS SKEPTICISM IN INFLUENCER-DRIVEN PURCHASES

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Abstract:

In this paper, the ways in which influencer marketing is growing into a major trend and simultaneously creating scepticism among consumers is explored, with a particular focus on how Central Asian cultures and consumers interpret influencer marketing in their world. Influencers have been a powerful force for marketing on social media helping to shape the perception of a brand and the behaviour of the consumer. But as influencer marketing grows, authenticity and credibility that attracted followers are questioned more. This trust dilemma applies in Central Asia against a background of cultural values promoting community trust and wary consumerism. This research explores the psychological determinants of consumer scepticism, the role of transparency on consumers' choosing, and the cultural dynamics of the attitudes. The study attempts to gain insights on how Central Asian consumers are engaging with the influencer marketing, and how influencers and brands can regain trust in their committed, however cynical market through both quantitative as well as qualitative methods.

Keywords: influencer marketing, scepticism, consumer trust, marketing strategy, social media.

INTRODUCTION

The world is in the era of social media, which has drastically changed our society and consumption. The progress in technology has transferred many aspects of life to the online area, including social media, which has become a key tool in marketing for businesses. In contrast to traditional marketing, social media ensures double-sided communication and allows companies to interact with their potential customers equally.[1] In 2000 many organizations integrated revolutionary changes in marketing their production and worked with customers through social media before the introduction they used traditional marketing.

The last decades have seen a deep transformation as brand attitude toward consumers leads to explosive growth in social media and marketing influence. According to Bakker (2018) modern marketing face with information overload

problem. Customers are tired of intrusive advertising and strive for more personalized interaction with the brand. Digital technologies especially social media open new opportunities for dialogue between the company and their audience. One of the bright facts in this area- influencer marketing.[2] The marketing influencer concept, although widely used in modern marketing practice still has no definite academic definition. The nearest analogy may count as traditional marketing from mouth to mouth which considers spreading information about products or services via personal recommendation. However, in the digital area, this process acquires new form and scale.

Influencer marketing is here, and it's a powerful strategy, but only has an academic definition that isn't universal. The concept is similar enough to regular word of mouth marketing, where products or services are talked about via personal recommendations. Nowadays, though, the process involving the same ingredients has become somewhat more complex and expansive in the digital age. Traditional marketing cannot copy what influencers do; the influencers are individuals with truly huge online followings and are engaged with their audiences in ways that are unimaginable in traditional marketing. Today, they have emerged as an integral part of how a brand is perceived by the consumer, often times that means having an endorsement by a celeb is even more authentic than a traditional advertisement.

In the modern fast-developing marketing ecosystem influencers recommend themselves as one of the effective strategies interacting with brands with consumers. Influencers are capable of formulating relationships and behaviours with customers or followers by content which includes experience and brand promotion. This interaction plays a crucial role in marketing influencer success, as for as marketing influence in significance level depends so perceived "authority" "trust" and "experience" influence people. However, despite to high results of marketing influence, scepticism is also growing which puts at risk its effectiveness. Initially, consumers look to influencer agents as simple and solid alternatives to traditional advertising. Influencers are regarded as real words people who say true thoughts and their authenticity creates strong connections with followers. As the growing marketing industry's influence commercialization increased and the line between truth and lies has become blurred. The increasing amount of content led to the transition from truth to suspicion, so consumers increasingly understand that commercial stimuli stay behind influencer publication

In the case of Central Asia, the speed with which social media is growing has led to specific issues and opportunities for influencer marketing. And the area, that hosting different countries as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan has seen a serious digitalization in which fewer and fewer people engage online,

especially on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Cultural backgrounds, linguistic plurality and divergent economic circumstances play a role shaping the consumption behaviour of Central Asian consumers.

Central Asia also witnessed the rise of influencer marketing, which came after an increasingly youthful demographic eager to share its thoughts in anytime anyplace. Young consumers are extremely dependent on their peers and what they see online so they are easy to influence by the trends around them and harder to ignore inauthenticity. As this demographic shift illustrates, in understanding how cultural attitudes toward trust and authority resonates in consumer perception of influencers in the region. As rapidly increasing Influencer marketing in Central Asia, people lost in confusion on which one can be trusted? Or all of them are not trustworthy?

The question is: How do brands and influencers re-build that trust once there was?

This article discusses the psychological reasons why consumers should trust and be sceptical about influencer influenced purchases. We aim to understand how scepticism from consumers toward influencer recommendations arise, and how these arise influences consumers' buying behaviours and brand loyalty.

Literature Review

As brands jump into the influencer marketing trend on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, this approach is shaping up as one of the biggest ways companies reach consumers. Influencers come across as relatable, almost like "everyday people" who just happen to share products they genuinely love – or so it seems. And because of that, followers often trust them. But as influencer marketing has skyrocketed, consumers have started to wonder: do influencers actually like the products they promote, or are they just cashing in? This shift from trust to doubt is especially noticeable in places like Central Asia, where influencer culture meets unique cultural and economic backdrops in countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Consumers, Scepticism and Paid Content

It's no secret anymore: influencers are often paid to promote products. And for some consumers, this is a major turn-off. When people sense that an influencer is more focused on profit than on sharing things they genuinely love, trust fades. Especially with influencers posting quick successions of brand partnerships, there's a clear shift from trust to doubt. **Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa (2017)** found that sponsored content generally doesn't come across as credible as organic posts. Further, **Campbell and Grimm (2019)** noted that audiences are increasingly sceptical, sometimes questioning whether influencers even use the products they promote, again, **Campbell and Farrell (2020)** claimed that when consumers become aware of how

influencers gain financially from an endorsement, that trust in endorsements is weakened, since there is no transparency in the financial relationship.

Trust in Influencers: Authenticity and Transparency: An Impact

Authenticity dramatically matters in maintaining consumer trust in influencer marketing. It's proven that influencers who boast low levels of trust with their audience, or appeared not to endorse a product, will generally lose or lead away followers. For instance, **Djafarova and Rushworth (2017)** showed that influencers whose products are used personally and their experiences are shared in real life can endure the loss of credibility when content presented is sponsored. Moreover, the way that influencers disclose paid partnerships impacts on consumer perception. For example, **Evans, Phua, Lim and Jun (2017)** suggest that sponsorship transparency reduces or increases scepticism. Disclosures are authentic or they are not; if consumers trust the disclosure, then trust still stands, but if disclosures are vague or overly commercialized, they may spark red flags for consumers. It is further underlined by recent research by **De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson (2022)** that authenticity is extremely important in influencer marketing and their study showed that followers are more inclined to trust influencers who are in constant, honest communication and participate in fewer but more useful collaborations. In work of **(Ashurbayev 2023)** the emergence of the influencer market in Uzbekistan is explored and how consumers in this market are catching on to sponsored content.

Influencer Marketing: Growth in Central Asia

People in Central Asia are growing awareness towards influencer marketing and balancing it with social media platforms became popular in Central Asia owing to growing internet accessibility and people's interest to find out about trends. These studies indicate that the digital marketing landscape of this region has been in line with that of the global digital marketing trends: local influencers are becoming prominent in advertising. Nevertheless, the values of the Central Asian consumer base are distinctive, and influence how they act upon influencer marketing. Research of **(Sharipova, 2022)** into how rituals and tradition work as advertisers in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reveals that local consumers attach great value to the endorsement of their communities, and that this factor is the basis for their reaction to advertising made through the medium of influencer(s). Influencers who interact with cultural values like modesty, honesty, transparency in product promotion are most liked by consumers. Cultural values could not be overlooked and their influence on the consumer trust in Central Asia. Central Asian consumers are less likely to accept influencer campaigns for luxury goods or products that seem too westernized or too remote from local realities, as both **Nazarbayev (2023)** and **Ashurbayev (2023)** suggest, for example, if an influencer in Kazakhstan promotes content related to local traditions, or if that

influencer directly shares their values, their followers are more likely to see them as being credible because they're grounding their message in the worldview of the follower.

It's important to consider that Western style marketing may not cut with consumers in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan where traditional values of community trust, smallness is paramount. Additionally, Central Asia has been rapidly digitalized, and has given rise to a new environment of young and tech savvy consumers who are being exposed to influencer marketing more than ever before. According to **Boerman et al. (2021)**, consumers in emerging markets such as Central Asia are less tolerant of clear sponsorship and are more likely to doubt that influencers who were working for other brands as frequently engaged in paid partnerships engaged in paid partnerships.

Cultural Context: Uzbekistan: The Scepticism of Influencers

Despite its small market, the market of influencers in Uzbekistan is at an early stage, still emerging, yet growing rapidly at the rate of global models in social media and consumer behaviour. Limited research specific to the region but early findings indicate that Uzbek consumers are paying increasing attention to played promotions, as is the case for the consumers market in Western markets. However, it is possible that scepticism can be processed by the local culture. The key for a potential sceptic and doubt regarding the influencer driven purchases in this unique Uzbekistan market context is to understand how Uzbek consumers respond to such purchases. With this knowledge in hand, influencers will be better able to customize their content for how their local audience expects them to show up and how much they trust influential sources.

The purchasing behaviour under the effect of scepticism

“As there are no existing researches about this in the case of Central Asia, but this is important part for to increase the understanding of the readers about the influence-driven purchase, and with this reason we have decide to increase the scope of findings to worldwide”

Attitude affects purchasing behaviour directly and consumers often question everything. Contractability is not a strategy trusted by all consumers, and those on the fence are more likely to conduct further research on the product before buying, thereby keeping the strategy in dispute. As **Grewal, Ahlborn, and Daryanto (2020)** argue, sceptical consumers often ask for more information on any product, including user reviews to trust any influencer endorsements. For example, **Hwang and Jeong (2016)** discovered that consumers who disagree with the influence highly usually use third party opinions on whether or not the influencer pronounces the truth or engages in comparison buying more typically. They embody a value chain shift in how consumers

are interpreting influencer recommendations — no longer instantaneously trusting the suggestion, but rather taking a more critical, evaluative step toward it. **Tsai & Men (2017)**, found that the trust in influencers matters a lot when reducing scepticism about the products that they present and increasing the possibility of purchase. As researcher's findings shows the higher sceptics and doubt towards either product or influencer the purchasing likelihood droops as well, and most affected factor in this part is transparency, as they doubt about the product or intentions of influencers for promoting the product, they tend to do more research about them personally.

The Role of Influence and Regional factors in Consumer Choices

Influencer marketing works by leaning into the trust influencers build with their followers. While traditional celebrities often feel distant or unrelatable, influencers are seen as “real” and, therefore, more trustworthy. Studies show that this connection can drive consumer engagement, with many followers buying based on influencer recommendations (**Audrezet, 2020**). But, as the influencer economy expands, the line between genuine content and paid promotions is blurring fast. Researchers **Jin and Phua (2014)** suggested that influencer endorsements can boost consumer intent to buy, though if a post seems too commercial, it can chip away at that credibility. **In a 2024 study by Chen et al**, it was found that having an influencer who is both professionally and professionally credible significantly increases consumers purchase intentions on social media. We found that when influencers transparently report the brands they work with, and share the positives out of their user's experience, this builds more trust and inspires purchasing behaviour. This fits with the Consumer Attitude Theory emphasizing trust as a determinant factor as regard consumer decisions. Little bit before in 2023 Meta-Analysis was done, A Meta analysis is a method of statistical combination of data from multiple studies to present evidence about the research question. And this meta-analysis about influencer characteristics done by Bansal et al. (2023) and that analysis helped to fine eight characteristics of current influencers, which are; trustworthiness, expertise and entertainment value, among others. Based on their findings, credibility of influencers carries greater weight in influencing purchase intentions, and brands would benefit from working with influencers whose message is relevant to their target listeners to reap the rewards of increased engagement and conversion.

However not only influencers affect the decisions of customers but there are regional factors. Let's dive more into this one as well.

Purchasing behaviour across Central Asia is greatly influenced by scepticism. In the currently studied countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan), consumers have demonstrated that they prefer to conduct additional research before buying products promoted by influencers. In place of accepting influencer recommendations at first

hand, they rely on the inputs of user reviews, peer recommendations, and price comparisons (Ashurbayev, 2023). It is a trend in consumer behaviour within the region which is accommodating shift of the mindset in terms of consumer actions, which is characterized by scepticism and due to this cause of cautious decisions in the market, regardless the conditions whether it is paid promotion or a high-cost product. Also, researchers from international institutions findings shows; Elliott, Meng, & Hall (2012): Research in cross-cultural contexts shows that consumers in collectivist cultures (e.g., China) may exhibit different levels of scepticism compared to those in individualistic cultures (e.g., the U.S.). Trust in family and community-based recommendations reduces scepticism in collectivist cultures. Singh, Zhao, & Hu (2003): Suggest that scepticism toward online transactions is higher in countries with lower levels of institutional trust, making consumers more cautious when making purchases.

Summary

A literature review on influencer marketing in Central Asia points to the importance of trust, authenticity and transparency in an area driven by a set of characteristics unique to its culture and socio-economy. Influencers in Central Asia have risen as being huge players in digital marketing, but consumers are becoming more and more sceptical of paid promotions they don't seem to correspond to local cultural values or are seen to be silly for their day-to-day life. In this regard, it becomes important for influencers to strike that ideal fine balance of being trusted, and securing commercial partnerships. While the industry is growing, especially in countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, more and more, it is becoming critical to look at the culture of the country where the influencers operate from, to know the expectations of local consumers, and to follow cultural norms, if the influencers want to be credible or reduce suspicions in the developing digital environment.

Research Methodology

An advanced mixed methods research design combining both qualitative and quantitative methods is adopted here. In particular, this design is well suited to exploring how consumer scepticism relates to influencer marketing: how it infuses the measurable consumer attitude with the psychological and social factors influencing that attitude. The second component is the qualitative one focusing on the consumer scepticism motivations, perception, and emotions, while the first one will quantify the prevalence and the effects of scepticism on purchasing behaviour and brand loyalty. The combination of these supplementary methods allows the research to offer a nuanced and robust analysis of consumer trust and scepticism with influencer marketing.

The research is in Central Asia and (in-depth) on Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Due to the healthy explosion in social media and influencer marketing in this region, it becomes a perfect region to study consumer behaviour. Central Asian stances on cultural, economic, and social diversity are interestingly imbedded with unique opportunities of looking into how source of different cultural norms and social dynamics usually challenge consumer perceptions of influencers. The study seeks to contextualize the research within these emerging social and economic trends, in order to understand whether scepticism is 'probably a reflection of broader regional factors'. This study also fills in the blanks for the lack of research on influencer marketing in this region, and provides valuable knowledge to the field.

This study targets the population between 18 to 35 years old, the best fit of the target population as it is one with an active presence with social media and they will react positively to the influencer marketing. The participants will be approximately 600, a sample which includes urban and rural as well as major cultural sub groups throughout Central Asia to enable the reliability and validity of the findings. Besides age, gender, and socioeconomic status, we will also take into account demographic factors like occupation, social media usage and which platform people prefer to use. By capturing different demographics' experiences and responses to influencer marketing, this diversity improves generalizability and provides increased insight about how various demographics relate to the influencer marketing.

The sampling for representative sampling in terms of demographic characteristics will be performed through stratified random sampling. Using this method, the population is stratified according to dividing it into different strata according to primary key variables such as age, gender and income level and randomly sampled according to each stratum. By using stratified random sampling, we reduce the bias and ensure that every sub group is properly represented. This approach enhances the statistical power of the study, enabling comparisons between demographic groups, and results inform us as to whether scepticism varies with respect to subpopulations.

Doing research takes into accounts ethical considerations and human subjects are always involved. All participants will give informed consent before they come to the data collection. The participants will be informed fully of the research under which the latter is carried out, the voluntary nature of the participation, as well as the right of the latter to withdraw anytime from the study without any consequences. Participants will be given unique identifiers so as to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and all data stored securely in ways compliant with data protection regulations. Research will be carried out after ethically approved by a relevant institutional review board (IRB) or

ethics committee. The last step is very important for keeping the integrity of the research process and for protecting participants' rights.

Longitudinal Component

The study will have a longitudinal component if resources allow. In this case, we are going to re survey subset of participants for six to twelve months from the time of initial survey to see how attitudes towards influencer marketing will change over time. Through longitudinal tracking of participants' scepticism, it will be clear when scepticism trends upward, and whether exposure to influencer marketing or changes to influencer strategies affect consumer trust or scepticism in the long term.

Ethics

In addition to the linearity of the research this research also features ethical considerations especially if the research does involve human subjects. Before any data collection there will be informed consent of all participants and full disclosure of the purpose of the study, the voluntary aspect of participation, and withdraw at any time without repercussions. Provided data will be securely stored and data protection regulations will be followed, data will be kept confidential, participants will be given unique identifiers. Before the research begins, it will be approved by an institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee to ensure integrity and participant rights.

Through the use of both online surveys and in-depth interviews, data will be collected about consumer scepticism in influencer marketing.

A survey will be created and then sent to users handling them through platforms such as Google Forms or SurveyMonkey. A series of closed ended questions would make up the survey with the intent to determine the extent at which consumers have a propensity to be sceptical about influencer marketing as well as determine the strength of attitudes they may have towards the practice. The questions will take the form of a Likert scale and will ask people how much they agree or disagree on statements around trust, authenticity and social media influenced buying behaviour. Demographic questions will also be included to permit subgroup analyses. Especially when we adapt to the online survey format, it is able to tap and hire from a wider crowd and at the same time has a way of collecting data efficiently and quickly.

In conjunction with the survey data collected, in depth qualitative interviews will be conducted with a subset of 30 respondents who would be willing to participate in the survey phase. The interviews will be of a semi structured design to encourage open ended responses that will allow the subject to explore further the perceptions and experiences with influencer marketing. Questions that guide the interviews will focus on a set of core questions, but without constraining the freedom of the participants to share what they would like. Perceived authenticity of influencers, emotional responses

to influencer endorsement, experiences of dissonance of influencer advertisements with personal values and factors that motivate scepticism are some of the key topics discussed.

The research will utilize various tools for data collection and analysis to ensure the robustness and reliability of the findings:

Survey Platform: The online survey will be created in Google Forms or SurveyMonkey, both of which will make collecting and analysing data easy.

Interview Recording: In order to gain accurate overview of the whole, they will use audio recording devices or software (Zoom or Audacity) to tabulate the in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis Software: Quantitative data analysis will be conducted using software like SPSS or R and statistical analysis will be conducted using software like such as SPSS or R. Finally, for qualitative data analysis you will use software such as NVivo (or Atlas.ti) to code and select themes in interview responses.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches will be used for the data analysis to understand the consumer scepticism in totality.

Overall descriptive as well as inferential statistics will be conducted on the quantitative data gathered from the online surveys. Demographic data and general trends in consumer scepticism of and attitude towards influencer marketing will be summarized through descriptive statistics. Inferential statistics is done: regression analysis and chi square test to see the relationship between different variables, for example correlation between amount of scepticism and amounts of purchasing behaviour in cases where social media influencers play a role in purchasing behaviour. In this analysis, the effects of scepticism on consumer decision process will be analysed.

In this qualitative data analysis, in-depth interviews will be conducted and qualitative data used to be coded by themes and patterns recurring themes and patterns in the context of scepticism and influencer marketing. Thematic analysis gives insights into consumer attitudes and the experience in myriad ways and brings to the fore key dimensions that breed scepticism. This methodology will allow the researcher to incorporate into a rich narrative participants' perceptions of influencer marketing and the psychological mechanics of their scepticism about influencer marketing.

The research is anticipated to yield several significant findings regarding consumer scepticism in influencer marketing:

Prevalence of Scepticism: Given the prevalence of scepticism toward influencer marketing in Central Asian consumers, expectations exist that a high prevalence of scepticism will be found in Central Asian consumers' scepticism toward influencer

endorsements based on perceived authenticity and transparency of influencer endorsements.

Factors Influencing Scepticism: The objective of studying is to pinpoint different factors affecting an individual's level of scepticism such as culture norms, personality traits, previous experiences with influencers, and trustworthiness in influencers.

Impact on Purchasing Behaviour: It is anticipated that the work will demonstrate a good tendency correlation of consumer dissension and the reduction of the purchasing behaviour. Lower trust levels towards influencer recommendations might create lower trust levels towards the recommendations of the consumer as a whole and redact the probability of purchase based on these recommendations.

Strategies for Brands and Influencers: The findings should offer actionable knowledge to brands and influencers on how to mend the relationship with the sceptical consumers. Authenticity, transparency, ethical marketing practices, are some of the key ways to achieve effectively engagement with the consumers of influencer marketing.

Cultural Insights: Finally, the study will highlight the effect cultural differences play in Central Asia on consumer perception of the influence and their effectiveness in marketing. At the end of the day, marketers who want to prevent influencers in Asia from simply dismissing their campaigns will need to understand those cultural nuances.

Conclusion

Brands in Central Asia face both challenges and opportunities with influencer marketing, now that consumers are getting more critical about paid promotions. The message suggests that keeping the consumer trust requires authenticity, transparency, and that there is cultural alignment. Central Asian consumers are highly suspicious of influencers, particularly if the commercial effect trumps the authenticity, and they like to hear about recommendations commensurate with local cultural norms. One point this study stresses is that industry has to complete adequate analyses of cultural nuances and local economies of the consumers for influencer strategies. As this new breed of market emerges, brands and influencers with a focus on these aspects can cultivate trust and forged lasting relationships. In the increasingly digital Central Asia, influencer marketing can still remain relevant and effective, as long as the scepticism is being addressed by transparent and culturally sensitive content.

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