

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Social media influencers have taken over the essential role in digital communication and marketing, shaping trends and driving consumer behaviour. This study examined the Ethical implications surrounding the growing influence of social media influencers, the extent to which they are held accountable for their content, and the impact of the absence of a regulatory framework on ethical communication. The study was anchored on the Media Ethics theory and supported by the Parasocial Interaction theory. To elicit primary data, the study used qualitative research methodology and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as the research instruments for data collection. The sample size consists of 30 participants who were purposively selected based on their active engagement with social media platforms, regular exposure to influencer-generated content and their direct involvement in the production of content. Findings showed that influence without accountability raises serious ethical concerns and has created an environment where misinformation, manipulation, visibility, and profit motives frequently overshadow truth and influencer social responsibility. Further findings revealed that the lack of regulatory and enforceable ethical standards makes it hard to hold influencers responsible for harmful or misleading content. In many situations, public backlash or callouts become the only form of correction, making accountability reactive instead of preventive. The study recommends a clear code of ethics for influencers in Nigeria. This framework should prioritise honesty in endorsements, respect for audience autonomy, truthfulness in content creation, and a commitment to avoiding harm.

Keywords: Accountability, ethics, influencer, media regulation, Nigeria, social media

Introduction

In recent years, the digital space has become more than just a platform for social interaction; it has recontextualised every part of human life, from single communication to a heterogeneous audience. One can literally learn anything from the comfort of one's home. Buying and selling have been made more interesting in the digital space through e-commerce, e-education, e-health, and industry growth, as well as social networking. The world has become so global that one no longer requires a film setting, a newsroom or an aesthetic environment, nor being famous to be on the new media, but just an android phone, internet and a few followers, anyone can make a positive or negative impact. As Okocha et al. (2020, p.64) attest, “digitalisation has disrupted social structures, reshaped social citizenship and brought about the digital citizenry”.

According to Muhammad (2025), social media influencers have become key figures in providing digital opinions on political information. This aligns with the two-step flow communication theory, which shows that opinion leaders serve as intermediaries who receive information from the media, interpret it and share it with the general public or with their followers who trust them more than the traditional outlets. In modern settings, this role extends to online communication and parasocial interactions, which highlight a more engaging media influence in the digital age. Newman et al. (2025) describe media figures as parasocial opinion leaders, where audiences develop one-sided relationships through frequent interactions on social media. The power of influencers in the digital age goes beyond just marketing; it shapes human perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and even moral choices of what is right or wrong. As postulated by Chumley (2024), influencer marketing has become a key strategy in advertising firms, drawing significant attention from marketers and brands as companies spend over 80% of their budget on influencer collaborations and marketing, with 83% of these marketers believing in their organisation. In buttressing this point, Okocha et

al. (2022) noted that social media offers a platform on which ordinary individuals have the authority to reach, mobilise and persuade a huge audience with a single post. This has created a new breed of digital actors referred to as social media influencers. These influencers are often self-styled content creators who relate with millions of followers around the globe through TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and YouTube to disseminate lifestyle trends, consumer preferences, health and public narratives.

What sets digital personalities apart from traditional media figures is the algorithmic amplification of their voice. The digital platforms push their content to wide audiences, often beyond their followers. As Casaló et al. (2018) argue, the influencer economy is powered by engagement metrics that sometimes reward emotional appeal, virality, and aesthetic presentation at the expense of truth or responsibility. Nowadays, these influencers occupy the same space that used to be filled by celebrities and journalists, endorsing products and performing skits for their followers, some of whom trust the influencers far more than entertainment and see them as sources of valuable information. However, while digital influence is growing quickly, ethical accountability is mostly missing in the Nigerian social media space (Adams & Baba, 2024). It is often said that “With great power comes great responsibility,” and this applies here as well. The influence that comes with such power should be handled carefully. Social media influencers work independently and are not bound by regulations or accountability (Nytse & Agbek, 2023).

Despite the good opportunities, many influencers continue to promote questionable brands without accountability, leaving consumers at risk of misleading endorsements, financial losses, and potential health dangers (Wellman, 2020). One example is the public backlash after several popular influencers endorsed a controversial weight-loss tea. It was later discovered that the tea had harmful side effects and did not work as purported (Adewale et al., 2025). Such a scenario displays

how influencers capitalise on trust without accountability. These concerns matter because the impact of influencer communication goes beyond the influencers themselves. It affects the audiences who consume and engage with their content, see recommendations, opinions, and promotional messages that can shape their attitudes, decisions, and behaviours. Consequently, understanding how audiences perceive the ethical conduct and accountability of social media influencers is essential for evaluating the implications of influencer culture in Nigeria. This reinforces the purpose of this study, which is to examine the ethical implications of their growing influence and how influence without accountability shapes online behaviour and creates room for misleading practices.

Statement of the Problem

Social media influencers have become one of the persuasive voices in the digital space, influencing both opinion, politics and consumer behaviour. While influencer marketing continues to thrive, the ethical and legal boundaries that guide these practices remain unclear (Adeyemi et al., 2024). The lack of undisclosed sponsorships, exaggerated product claims, or promotion of misleading and unsafe products poses a serious threat to public health, safety, and responsible consumption. Also, the lack of proper regulation often makes these issues worse (Muhammad, 2025). While organisations like the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) and the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC) have tried to tackle unethical online advertising, their enforcement remains weak. Many influencers either do not know about these laws or choose to ignore them (Adeyemi et al., 2024). This seeming weakness in the laws guiding online advertising and the mechanism for regulating unethical influencers leaves a yawning gap in existing literature with regard to the ethical implications of the growing influence of social media influencers in Nigeria. This study fills that gap by examining how influence without accountability

shapes online behaviour, affects public trust, and impacts the overall communication environment in Nigeria.

Research objectives

The objective of this study are to:

- i. to examine ethical implications associated with the growing influence of social media influencers in Nigeria.
- ii. to explore perceptions of accountability among Nigerian social media influencers for the content they create and disseminate.
- iii. to explore factors that hinder ethical accountability within Nigeria's influencer culture.

Conceptual Clarification

The following terms are defined to show how they apply to this research work.

Ethics

The word Ethics originates from the Greek term Ethos, which means character or credibility. Ethics, in essence, entails knowing right from wrong and making choices based on that. According to Nyitse and Agbek (2023), Ethics is both a science of morals and a branch of philosophy. It draws on individual values, professional standards, and societal expectations to evaluate human behaviour. As Rachels and Rachels (2019) observe, ethics asks the fundamental question of how people should live, extending beyond personal preference to rational justification for moral decisions. In the same vein, Muhammed (2025) highlights that unethical media behaviour often grows in places with weak regulations where personal gain is prioritised over the public good. This is often seen in the digital space, where ethical breaches such as misleading promotions, exaggerated claims, and manipulation of vulnerable audiences thrive. These concerns are

particularly relevant in influencer culture, where the line between genuine content and sponsored persuasion is thin. Ethics, therefore, becomes central to understanding the activities of social media influencers, whose power to shape opinions and behaviours is rooted in the belief that the audience puts in them.

Accountability

Accountability is a foundational principle generally defined as the obligation of individuals or institutions to justify their actions, accept responsibility, and be answerable for outcomes. Bovens and Schillemans (2014) define accountability as a relationship in which an actor is obliged to explain and justify their conduct to a forum that has the right to question and pass judgment, potentially leading to consequences. This emphasises accountability as both a relational and evaluative concept. A study by Dubnick & Romzek (2021) highlighted that accountability has three connected dimensions: answerability, responsibility, and enforcement. Answerability means communicators must provide honest explanations for their actions. Responsibility refers to the moral and professional duties guiding those actions. Enforcement involves consequences or corrective actions when standards are violated. In digital communication, these dimensions often overlap. Online audiences can demand explanations, challenge misleading content, or urge institutions to act. Similarly, Wellman (2020) stated that accountability is essential for tackling ethical issues in today's Nigerian media and communication practices.

Literature Review

Overview of Social Media Influencers and Audience Engagement

According to Abidin (2016), influencer culture refers to a digital ecology that permits individuals to receive attention and curate commercial equity by embodying three traits: being relatable, authentic, and visible. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly called Twitter)

are the primary screens or platforms, the main platforms where these individuals inform, entertain, and inspire their audience (Kayode-Adedede et al. 2024). Influencers come in sizes which are usually categorised by their number of followers and the amount of influence over followers, namely mega, macro and nano influencers.

- a) Mega influencers are at the top of the ladder. These are usually tagged celebrities in the digital space and are widely recognised figures with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers. Their reach is massive, making them ideal for broad campaigns, but they can sometimes feel distant or commercial, which may limit how “authentic” they seem to everyday users (Do, 2025).
- b) While macro influencers have large followers from 10,000 to a billion, micro-influencers have smaller followings that number from 10,000 to 100,000. Micro-influencers lack scale but have high engagement levels. Their audiences are often more focused and loyal, making them great partners for brands trying to reach specific and targeted communities (Chen et al., 2024).
- c) Nano influencers are the smallest in terms of followers, usually under 10,000, but they often have the most intimate relationships with their audience. Because they are seen as peers rather than celebrities, their recommendations tend to come across as more genuine. This authenticity can be a big asset for brands looking to build credibility and real connections (Do, 2025).

Social media influencers function as modern-day opinion leaders. Whether they’re recommending a product, raising awareness about a cause, or simply sharing lifestyle content, their impact lies in their ability to connect with people, which makes them so influential. Beyond commercial advertising, the influence of social media personalities now extends into politics and public

opinion shaping. Onah and Nche (2014) described how political “data boys” and influencers are used to manipulate narratives, spread propaganda, and manage politicians' public images, often without ethical limits. This raises a wider societal issue, which is the commodification of trust and authenticity in online spaces, where credibility is exchanged for sponsorship, trends and attention. As a result, influencer culture in Nigeria poses important ethical questions about truth, about who takes responsibility when an ad goes wrong, and the balance between digital freedom and consumer protection rights.

Social Media Influencers Growth and Impact in the New Media

The rise of new media has changed how people communicate worldwide. At the same time, it made way for social media influencers to prosper. New media is interactive, participatory, and decentralised. It allows people the ability to create, share, and distribute content to an unlimited audience, all without the assistance of traditional gatekeepers (Kayode-Adedeji et al. 2024). Within this space, influencers exist. They leverage platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X, formerly called Twitter, to communicate personal brands, which allows them to garner consumer trust and allow them to significantly influence public opinion and consumer behaviour. What began as a few online personalities sharing product recommendations has now become a multi-billion-dollar global industry. By 2022, the influencer marketing sector was projected to hit \$16.4 billion globally, a figure that reflects just how much brands are investing in this form of digital persuasion (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). A 2022 study by NOIPolls and African Digital Marketing Organisation revealed that 72% of Nigerian urban youths have purchased a product or made a lifestyle decision based on influencer content. It also found that micro and nano influencers in Nigeria have higher engagement rates than their macro counterparts because followers see them as more trustworthy and relatable. In addition, more local brands and startups

are using influencers to avoid traditional advertising costs while reaching digitally connected audiences.

As social media marketing continues to shape buying habits, a study by Olumide and Ayobami (2025) found that social media marketing strongly influenced customers' purchase decisions. Similarly, a 2025 study by Duffett and Mxunyelwa (2025) also showed that influencers' attractiveness and perceived expertise had a direct positive effect on their followers' intentions to purchase. What makes social media influencers so effective is their personal touch. They seem familiar, and followers feel like they know a lot about their lives. But influencers do more than just promote products; they shape how people feel about brands. For example, when a beauty influencer shares a tutorial using a specific foundation or lipstick, they're not just selling a product. They're showing how it fits into their daily life. This emotional and visual storytelling can change how followers view a brand, often leading them to try something new or form a stronger connection to it.

A study conducted by Obidike and Nwafor (2020) found that more Nigerians are gaining internet access through smartphones and mobile data. These digital platforms are highly prioritised, as everyone also wants to create content. While the Nigerian influencer ecosystem is still evolving, its impact is undeniable. As more brands recognise the role of digital personalities in shaping perception and purchase behaviour, influencer marketing is expected to become a \$100 million industry in Nigeria by 2026, as projected by TechCabal Insights (2022). However, with this growth comes the need for regulation, ethical standards, and more data-driven approaches to ensure transparency and effectiveness.

While global organisations like the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States have set guidelines for transparency in influencer marketing, requiring influencers to disclose sponsored content with clear hashtags like #ad or #sponsored, Nigeria has not yet created laws or rules that regulate influencer marketing practices. The Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) has made progress in regulating the broader telecommunications industry, but the social media space is still mostly unregulated. Likewise, the Cybercrime Act of 2015 was introduced to fight digital crimes, but enforcement is inconsistent. This has resulted in many unresolved cases of online harassment (Adams & Baba, 2024). Also, the National Broadcasting Code primarily governs traditional media, but its enforcement over social media platforms remains limited due to the decentralised nature of user-generated content (Adams & Baba, 2024).

The Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) has also emphasised the need for social media content creators to formalise their operations. In February 2024, the Commission announced that influencers and content creators must register their businesses according to the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020. The legal risks of unethical influencer practices are becoming a bigger issue. Under the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Act (FCCPA) of 2018, influencers can be responsible for promoting fake products and unreliable services. Influencers who make claims that cannot be verified or who promote unsafe products may face liability under Sections 123-133 of the Act. The ARCON Act (2022) also allows the Council to review and approve digital advertisements before they go live. However, many influencers are either unaware of these laws or choose to ignore them (Kayode-Adedeji et al. 2024). This framework underlines the moral duty of influencers to guarantee the authenticity and credibility of the goods and services they promote.

Ethical Implications of Influence Without Accountability in Nigeria

Ethics in this context refers to a set of moral principles that guide behaviour, especially about truth-telling, transparency, responsibility, and respect for audiences. Influencers operate in a space that significantly affects public discourse and should therefore be held to similar ethical standards (Nytse & Agbek, 2023). Whether promoting a product, selling a product, bagging an endorsement, or endorsing a product, wanting to trend for a good or bad reason, human rights activist, social activist or participating in hashtag movements, influencers command attention in ways that deeply affect individual choices and consumer decisions. As Kayode-Adedeji et al. (2024) posited, Nigerian influencers are not just trendsetters; they are now gatekeepers of taste, credibility, and desirability in a fast-evolving digital market. Similarly, Kemp (2023) observed that millions of Nigerians now access the internet and social platforms daily, forming a vast and increasingly engaged digital audience. In January 2024, Nigeria's population stood at approximately 226.5 million, with 103 million internet users (45.5% penetration) and 36.75 million social media users (16.2%). Mobile connectivity was also robust, with 205.4 million cellular connections, covering about 90.7% of the population (DataReportal, 2024). Major ethical issues include:

1. **Transparency:** Ethics in social media emphasises values such as transparency and honesty. Content creators must disclose a paid promotion as an opinion promotion to prevent misleading consumers. As observed by Okocha et al. (2022), the absence of formal regulation has allowed practices such as undisclosed sponsorships and deceptive promotions to thrive, which over time chip away at the trust consumers place in influencers. Transparency in influencing is paramount. Adeyemi et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive content analysis of 10,750 user-generated social media advertisements in Nigeria, revealing prevalent ethical issues such as misleading

advertising and the unauthorised use of personal data. The study underscores the necessity for clear disclosure of sponsored content to maintain consumer trust and uphold ethical standards in advertising.

2. **Authenticity:** Authentic content fosters a sense of relatability and connection, and audiences increasingly favour influencer-brand collaborations that feel natural and aligned, rather than overly curated or commercially driven. This authenticity, as observed by Obidike and Nwafor (2020), becomes a foundation for building trust and long-term loyalty, both for the influencer and the brand. According to emerging studies, trust is a central factor influencing repeat engagement and consumer loyalty in the influencer economy.
3. **Misinformation and Harmful Content:** The dissemination of misinformation and harmful content by influencers poses significant ethical concerns. Adams and Baba (2024) highlight the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, and privacy violations on social media platforms in Nigeria. Their study emphasises the far-reaching implications of such unethical practices, including public health risks and societal discord. Furthermore, there is a concerning trend where influencers propagate misinformation or inflammatory content to gain traction and visibility. Because social media algorithms reward virality over accuracy, some influencers prioritise attention-grabbing or controversial takes, even when they are misleading or harmful.
4. **Consumer Exploitation:** Influencers leverage parasocial relationships by building deep emotional connections with followers who trust them implicitly. Because audiences frequently view influencers as authentic and relatable, they develop high levels of trust (Adelabu et al., 2024). This trust, when misused, can lead to exploitative

advertising and deceptive sponsorships, where products are promoted without clear disclosure of paid partnerships or adequate information about their risks (Evans et al., 2017). In such cases, followers may make purchase decisions based on emotional attachment rather than rational evaluation, raising ethical concerns about manipulation, consumer vulnerability, and the blurring of boundaries between genuine content and commercial persuasion

5. **Privacy Violations and Data Misuse:** Another growing concern is the misuse of personal data and violation of privacy by influencers and content creators. Many digital campaigns involve collecting followers' data without proper consent or transparency, especially during giveaways or sponsored contests. Adams and Baba (2024) emphasise that influencers sometimes unknowingly (or deliberately) breach ethical data protection standards, highlighting a lack of awareness about Nigeria's Data Protection Regulation (NDPR)
6. **Promotion of Fake Lifestyles:** The aesthetic nature of platforms like Instagram and TikTok often encourages the display of luxury, wealth, much of which is exaggerated or curated. Scholars argue that this fosters unrealistic expectations and pressures among audiences, particularly Nigerian youth. cc and Nche (2014) critique the ethical implications of such displays, stressing that influencers often glamorise unattainable lifestyles without disclosing that many of these experiences are staged or brand-sponsored
7. **Endorsement of Social Vices and Political Propaganda:** Influencers sometimes directly or indirectly promote social vices such as fraud, substance use, sexual objectification, or online bullying. Adewale et al. (2025) noted that in some cases,

they are co-opted into political propaganda without proper disclosure, misleading followers into believing such content is unbiased.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Media Ethics and supported by Parasocial Interaction. These theories play a key role in examining ethical implications in social media influencer growth in Nigeria.

Media Ethics Theory

The Media Ethics Theory emerged from the growing need to define moral standards for media professionals, especially as communication technologies expanded. This theory has been shaped by many great philosophers to help guide what is considered "right" or "wrong" in media practice, like Aristotle (virtue ethics), Immanuel Kant (duty-based ethics), and John Stuart Mill (consequentialism), but one of its foundational contributors is Clifford G. Christians in his work *Communication Ethics and Universal Values* in 1997. The theory emphasised the moral obligations of media professionals, arguing that ethical communication should prioritise human dignity, truth, and the public interest over commercial gain or political influence (Christians, 1997). As such, the people behind them must take responsibility for the impact of their communication on society (Christians et al 2009). The theory was founded on key assumptions that the public is entitled to fact, accuracy, and fairness; news professionals must deliver that. This position holds that ethical decisions in media are not always black-and-white but require moral reasoning and context-based judgment.

Despite its strength and usage, several limitations have been pointed out, particularly in the internet age, as Kruger (2016) criticises the theory for depending too much on Western presumptions, whereas what seems “right” in a certain culture may not hold in another. The author further asserts that conventional ethics of the old media are no longer applicable to the new era of electronic

media, where influencers, writers, and independent producers are outside the traditional institutional frameworks. This theory applies to the study as it explains the ethical vacuum in Nigeria's influencer sphere. The lack of accountability creates space for deceptive endorsements, followers' manipulation, and loss of the public's trust, all of which the Media Ethics Theory explains.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) was first introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in their work titled "Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," in 1956. The theory explains how individuals feel a sense of closeness, friendship, and emotional attachment to media figures who are unaware of their existence. Parasocial Interaction Theory explains a one-way relationship where the audience feels as if they know the personality intimately, just like they would know a friend or family member. They may laugh at their jokes, trust their opinions, or even feel emotionally affected by their lives. Yet, the media personality does not know the individual.

The theory has been expanded by scholars to include how digital media intensifies parasocial relationships. Scholars like Hartmann (2015) and Eslami et al. (2024) have explored how social media platforms enhance parasocial interactions, making them more immersive through likes, comments, and direct messaging. Another study by Eslami et al. (2024) examined the role of parasocial relationships, unpaid collaborations, and influencer credibility as factors influencing consumer purchasing behaviour. The study found that parasocial relationships significantly impact consumer decisions, reinforcing the idea that audiences trust influencers as if they were close acquaintances. The theory is based on these key assumptions that audiences actively form emotional bonds with media figures, which can influence their beliefs and behaviours. However,

this theory has its limitations. Giles (2002) argued that Parasocial Interaction Theory lacks sufficient theoretical development and needs better integration into social psychology. He suggested that parasocial relationships should be studied in relation to real-world social interactions rather than being treated as an isolated phenomenon. PSI Theory is particularly pertinent in regions like Nigeria, as applied in this study, where social media usage is high, and influencer culture is rapidly growing.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design, using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as a method for data collection to examine the ethical implications surrounding the rise of social media influencers in Nigeria. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants based on their active engagement with social media platforms, regular exposure to influencer-generated content and their direct involvement in the production of content. These participants were drawn from the digital audience, content creators, media practitioners and brand managers. A total of 30 participants took part in the study and were organised into five focus groups consisting of six discussants in each group. The group size was considered appropriate for facilitating meaningful interaction as posited by Morgan (1997).

To ensure anonymity, participants were tagged PJ1 to PJ30. All discussions were held virtually, using the Zoom application and a designated WhatsApp group to facilitate participation. A discussion guide was used to guide each of the discussions, which lasted for 35 to 48 minutes, allowing participants enough time to share their perception towards the subject matter. The collected data were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using an explanation-building approach, allowing the study to link each theme to the research objectives. Data collection was conducted between 11 October and 1 November 2025.

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1: Demographic Data of Participant

Variables	Categories	Frequency
Gender	Male	14
	Female	16
	Total	30
Age range	18-24	9
	25-34	11
	35- 44	6
	45 above	4
	Total	30
Participant category	Digital audiences	10
	Content creators	10
	Media practitioners	5
	Brand mangers	5
	Total	30

Source: *Field Survey, 2025, number of participants*

As shown in Table 1, the study comprised 30 participants, consisting of more females (16) and 14 males. Each participant was identified by sex, age and categories. The majority of discussants were within the age of 25 to 34 years, followed by the 18 - 24, with the 35 - 44, and 45 and above being the smallest.

RO1: Ethical implications of the growing influence of social media influencers in Nigeria

The participants unanimously agreed that social media influencers are key players in shaping opinions, setting trends, influencing consumer behaviour, portraying brand images, and determining what consumers perceive as their choices or preferred social media influencers.

One of the discussants, PJ3, mentioned that these influencers have become even more influential than the traditional sources of information. According to the participant:

Before the advent of social media, we looked up to clergymen, authors and journalists whom we liked seeing on TV, to get their view and direction. Books like Chinua Achebe's helped shape our understanding of African identity. But now things are different; people turn to social media for similar inspiration, and not just that alone, everyone is an influencer now, a content creator in today's digital space; they know something and want to say something at any time.

This was supported by three participants, PJ30, PJ15, and PJ4, who mentioned that social media obviously makes anyone a trendsetter with a large follower base and the ability to engage properly, one can promote and say anything to drive relevance without proper confirmation.

The discussion was almost evenly divided, as eight participants expressed concerns about influencers presenting paid advertisements as genuine personal experiences, making this a recurring theme during the conversation.

As one participant emphasised, “they make it look like they used the product, but it’s just a paid promotion” PJ2. Similarly, participant PJ1 added:

To be honest, most of these influencers cross the line a lot. Something that should be their genuine opinion suddenly becomes a paid promotion, but they still make it look like they have used it and it’s “tested and trusted.” Then, when the product turns out to be fake, and they start getting dragged online, they quickly deny responsibility. Then act like they never really endorsed it, even though they were the ones who convinced people to buy it in the first place. “When the product fails, they refuse to take responsibility” (PJ10) added.

This sentiment was also buttressed by PJ20 and PJ22, who noted that Influencers today “no longer sell ideas, they just want to sell lifestyles and model unrealistic standards of beauty, success and even wealth,” making the younger followers who look up to them desire to imitate them. Although some of the participants emphasised that not all social media influencer behaviour is deliberate, some are driven by the pursuit of visibility and financial gain. However, other participants during the discussions also argued that such negligence has moral consequences on audiences, especially young people who tend to trust influencers more than the traditional means they grew up with. As people no longer pay good attention to information but follow what has been said by their favourite social media influencer. Based on the above, the influence of these social media influencers carries ethical weight and should therefore be exercised with a sense of responsibility and honesty rather than just for social status.

RO2: Accountability of Nigerian Social Media Influencers for Their Content

Participants generally expressed concerns about the level of accountability shown by social media influencers in Nigeria. During the focus group discussions, many participants argued that

influencers are rarely held responsible for misleading advertisements, false claims, or harmful content shared with their followers. Nevertheless, some participants observed that influencers are occasionally held accountable through public criticism on social media, particularly when followers challenge or "call out" wrongful claims.

Supporting these points, PJ11 added:

Although there have been a few cases of public backlash where an influencer has been criticised or called out for fake products, there is no consistent legal or institutional consequence they face for misinformation or advertising fake content.

Similarly, participant PJ17 emphasised that:

There have been instances where influencers are forced to remove misleading or offensive content, and some even apologise to their followers, but the fact remains that these actions are reactive rather than preventive.

One participant, PJ15, further buttressed this point by narrating how some Followers often defend influencers regardless of questionable practices, making it difficult to hold them to ethical standards. Participants also highlighted that while platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have community guidelines in Nigeria, enforcement is weak. Influencers are pretty much doing their own thing. Although harmful posts get flagged at times, checks and balances need to be put in place. From the interactions, it is obvious that accountability is currently driven by public outrage, not by structured policy. This lack of institutional regulation has led to a moral vacuum in which content is guided by popularity and visibility rather than portraying integrity.

RO3: factors that hinder ethical accountability within Nigeria's influencer culture

The majority of participants agreed that the absence of a regulatory framework is one of the issues in the Nigerian ecosystem, as it has promoted lots of unethical practices. Unlike traditional journalism or advertising, social media influencer marketing lacks professional guidelines and is not subject to legal consequences for misinformation. This has led to recurring issues in the digital

space, which include misinformation, deceptive advertising, cyberbullying, data misuse, and the promotion of unrealistic lifestyles that distort social values.

One of the participants, PJ19, stated that:

The government and relevant communication bodies have been slow to recognise influencer marketing as a formal communication field that also requires regulation. Another participant, PJ1, emphasised that people are not ready to take responsibility; they act nonchalantly without taking into consideration what consequences their actions will cause. There should be a framework, a workable framework, guiding influencer conduct in Nigeria. These guidelines will help create an environment where influencers not only shape public discourse and consumer choices, but they can also be held accountable for any potential harm that their activities or promotions may cause.

The views of two participants summarised the position of the other participants that, if there were a law or even a professional code for influencers, or if the law provided by professional bodies were adhered to, half of what we see online wouldn't happen. As a result, there is an urgent need to put in place ethical education with digital literacy programs to complement the formal regulation. This will help influencers understand their social responsibility as well as the ethical consequences attached to every action.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective was to examine the ethical implications of the growing influence of social media influencers in Nigeria. The results showed that social media influencers are key actors in shaping opinions, setting trends, influencing consumer behaviour, portraying brand images, and determining what consumers perceive as their choices or preferred social media influencers. The findings also raised concerns that not all social media influencer behaviour is intentional; some are done for the pursuit of visibility and financial gain, while some argued that, whether intentional or not, such negligence has moral consequences on audiences, especially young people who tend to trust influencers more than the regular traditional media. This view is supported by Media Ethics

as the theoretical framework of this study, which highlights influencers as media agents expected to act ethically, without spreading misinformation or manipulation. It also confirms Nyitse and Agbek's (2023) position that ethics should serve as a guide for moral conduct within the media space, ensuring that content creation aligns with broader societal values. Nevertheless, the issues related to misinformation and manipulation of audiences as a result of influencer practice outweigh the potential benefits. Overall, influencers should therefore act with a sense of responsibility and honesty rather than just social flex.

The second objective sought to explore accountability among Nigerian social media influencers for the content they create and disseminate. The study revealed that accountability among Nigerian influencers remains weak and inconsistent. While some social media platforms have community guidelines, enforcement in Nigeria is minimal, especially regarding product marketing or promotion. This situation leaves influencers largely unmonitored as social media algorithms reward virality and visibility. These findings reflect Kayode-Adedeji et al. (2024), who state that the lack of transparency makes it hard for consumers in Nigeria, where digital literacy is still developing, to tell the difference between genuine recommendations and advertising. Participants agreed that in most cases, influencers face no structured consequences when they spread false information, promote harmful content, or engage in deceptive advertising. In contrast, some fans will always come to the defence of influencers, no matter how questionable the influencers' behaviour might be. These followers often view influencers as a trusted figure rather than mere content creators. The finding aligns with the Parasocial Interaction Theory, as used in this study, which explains the illusion of a real relationship between influencers and their audience. This outcome suggests that influence without accountability can pose as much of a social risk as it presents an opportunity for positive change

The last objective revealed factors that hinder ethical accountability within Nigeria's influencer culture. It was found that the absence of a regulatory framework is one of the issues in the Nigerian ecosystem, as it has promoted lots of unethical practices, unlike traditional journalism or advertising, which are subject to guidelines. These concerns align with Eslami et al. (2024), who pointed out that without accountability, media players may choose profit over doing what is right. The findings also confirmed that the recurring issues in the digital space include misinformation, deceptive advertising, cyberbullying, data misuse, and the promotion of unreal lifestyles, which negatively influence followers' perceptions, behaviours, and value systems. These challenges match what Okocha et al. (2022) observed, that the misuse of digital practices, including cyberbullying and false representation, has become normalised across social media space. Collectively, these findings emphasise the urgent need for ethical regulation and accountability frameworks that guide influencer conduct and protect audiences from manipulation in the evolving Nigerian digital ecosystem.

Conclusion

The study examined the Ethical implications surrounding the growing influence of social media influencers, the extent to which influencers are held accountable for their content, and factors that hinder this ethical accountability within Nigeria's influencer culture. The study posited that influence without accountability raises pressing ethical concerns and has created an environment where misinformation, manipulation, visibility, and profit motives frequently overshadow truth and influencer social responsibility. In addition, the absence of regulatory and enforceable ethical guidelines has made it difficult to hold social media influencers accountable when their content or posts cause harm. Without formal sanctions or oversight mechanisms, accountability often depends on audience reactions, such as public backlash or online callouts. However, these

responses are usually reactions rather than proactive measures. They address the damage only after it has happened. Moreover, some followers defend influencers even when their practices are questionable. Many view them as trusted figures or friends, not just content creators. This emotional connection creates the illusion of a real relationship, making it harder to hold influencers responsible. Addressing these challenges requires more than isolated actions. It needs a combined effort that includes ethical education for influencers, digital literacy for audiences, and a clear policy framework that promotes accountability across all digital platforms.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

1. There is an urgent need to create a clear code of ethics for influencers in Nigeria. This framework should prioritise honesty in endorsements, respect for audience autonomy, truthfulness in content creation, and a commitment to avoiding harm. Communication scholars, policymakers, and practitioners should collaborate to develop these guidelines, making them inclusive and practical.
2. Brands and agencies that partner with influencers should also be accountable for misleading advertisements. Contracts should include sections that require influencers to follow advertising rules and regulations. This shared responsibility will help both influencers and brands act openly.
3. Finally, improving digital and media literacy among the public and providing ethical education for influencers is essential for navigating the digital landscape with awareness. The government, educational institutions, and regulatory bodies have to collaborate to achieve this.

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