Influencer Marketing's Trust Crisis: The Impact of Fake Followers, Paid Reviews and Non-Disclosure of Sponsorship on Brand Reputation Damage

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Disclosure practices and authenticity have increasingly become important concerns in influencer marketing of digital advertising. This study influences fake followers, paid reviews, incentivized endorsements, and non-disclosure of sponsorships on perceived influencer credibility and the resultant effect on brand reputation. The data were gathered through a self-administered online questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale and n=549 active social media consumers were approached to complete the questionnaire and analyze the responses with the help of a Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the purpose of investigating how the deceptive practices of influencers impact the perceived influencer credibility decrease (which we term 'trust crisis'). Findings show that trust crisis is a complete mediator between deceptive practices and brand reputation (β =.502, p <.001), and the non-disclosure of sponsorship has the most immense direct effect on trust crisis. The trust crisis is a significant mediator of brand-level reputational damage by fake followers (β =.243, p <.001). The direct effect of paid reviews is calculated to be marginal (β =.094, p =.055). Including trust crisis, 24.7% of the variance in brand reputation is explained (R² = .247), and 16.7% is explained with no mediation (R² =.167). These findings point to the critical role of authenticity and disclosure compliance in ensuring brand reputational results. The study expands the conceptions of trust transfer and source credibility to the context digital influencers. Also, the results demonstrate that disclosure compliance is a key governance system to reduce the effects of trust erosion and safeguard brand reputation in influencer-based marketing.

1. Introduction

The sector of influencer marketing has grown dramatically over the last few years, and the world is predicted to spend more than $25 billion every year (Ahmed & Rathore, 2024). Due to the increased dependence on influencer collaboration as a branding tool, the issues of trust, credibility, and moral persuasion have grown. Even though social media sites have brought about the democratization of content creation and allowed a person to have a persuasive control over the decision-making process of consumers, this growth has also contributed to the emergence of deceptive behaviors that undermine the authenticity of the influencer marketing concept (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). There are three fraudulent behaviors that have proven to be extremely harmful to the authenticity of the influencers. The false followers artificially boost the measurements in the audience, deceiving both customers and companies about the quality of influence and engagement (Zarei & Namvar, 2025). Paid reviews and sponsored endorsements that are not displayed with clear disclosure also lower the sincerity of the message and the principles of honest persuasion (Xie & Feng, 2023). On the same note, the lack of information about sponsorship is a regulatory breach that tarnishes the attitudes towards influencer integrity and moral behavior (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025; Danjuma & Rasul, 2024).

Although the topic of these practices has been studied individually in the past, their overall implications for consumer trust and brand reputation are not fully comprehended. Such regulatory agencies as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), the European Commission have proposed more stringent disclosure policies, but their application is still uneven, and the reputational crises associated with misconduct on the part of influencers are not eliminated (Danjuma & Rasul, 2024). At the same time, the facts show that consumer doubts about recommendation by influencers grow, and they are motivated by issues of authenticity and transparency (Colucci & Pedroni, 2022). The current study fills this gap in research by discussing the ways in which such deceitful activities add to the damage of brand reputation via the mediating variable of perceived influencer credibility (trust crisis). Based on the source credibility theory and the transfer mechanisms, the study is that authenticity breach will invoke credibility loss, which will further increase the reputational damage to the related brands.

The proposed research will result in two academic articles with high impact that cover two different, though complementary issues within the study. The scope is designed in such a way that it is both deep and wide, thereby maximizing the input to the literature without going against the organizational requirements of the standard publication of empirical work in marketing and communication journals.

1.1 Research Questions

☆ What is the extent and how the impact of deceptive influencer practices (fake followers, paid reviews, lack of sponsorship disclosure) harm brand reputation and whether the harm created by deceptive influencer practices interacts directly through influencer credibility perception, or is it direct?

☆ Are there unique credibility violation processes of different types of deceptive practices?

☆ What is the most notorious reputational risk that the endorsed brands fall prey to?

☆ What is the strength of the connection between influencer credibility break and the damage in brand reputation?

1.2 Study objectives

○ Screen the immediate and mediate (indirect) impacts of cheating on brand image loss.

○ Determine whether various practices engage various pathways of credibility violation.

○ Identify the practice with the most reputational risk.

○ Determine how strong is the association between credibility, disengagement and damage to the brand reputation.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Source Credibility and Influencer Effectiveness

The source credibility theory is based on the idea that persuasive effect is conditional on perceived credibility of the source of the message (Chatzigeorgiou & Kumar, 2024; McBride & Robinson, 2023). In social media, credibility is conceptualized into three dimensions: expertise (perceived knowledge), trustworthiness (perceived honesty), and attractiveness (perceived similarity and likeability) (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). The efficacy of the influencer marketing is based on the situation when there is alignment in the perception of credibility and the consumer decision-making (Lim & Ng, 2024; Varela-Neira et al., 2024). Current studies confirm that the trustworthiness is a predictor of purchase intention on its own (Varela-Neira et al., 2024). Any type of lies about the authenticity of the followers, payment, and the purity of their recommendation is a violation of the truthfulness dimension, which leads to a negative reevaluation of the personality and intentions of the person who influences people (Lim & Ng, 2024; Tiwari, Kumar, & Verma, 2025).

Trust Transfer and Brand Association: There is a theory of trust transfer, which presumes that credibility attributions to a source of message would be transferred to related entities (Ahmed & Rathore, 2024). Trust on the influencer in terms of influencer-brand partnerships is transferred to the endorsed brands. On the other hand, the negative attributions are likely to roll in the opposite direction, harming the brand image when the credibility of the influencer is undermined (Raguseo et al., 2022). This transmission works by a psychological process in which the consumers engage in influencer trustworthiness as a heuristic in assessing brand trustworthiness. Studies record the power of backward-transfer processes: when a consumer is exposed to information that an influencer had taken part in some form of deceptive behavior, their trust in related brands is significantly lower (Raguseo et al., 2024). The reputational harm goes further than the short-term campaigning to impact on the wider brand equity (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024).

2.2 The Mediating Role of Trust Crisis

Trust crisis is a description of the cognitive-emotional reaction created once consumers learn to be deceived by a person whom they believe in. In influencer marketing, trust crisis is a functionalization that becomes operationalized when perceived credibility is broken because of awareness of fraudulent behavior. The theoretical framework that aids in understanding the phenomenon under consideration is the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model:

influencer practices are a stimulus, credibility perceptions are the response of the organism, and reputation damage is an outcome (Yaqub et al., 2023). This model implies that the credibility perceptions mediation is the central causal process.

Figure No 1: Conceptual Model Framework
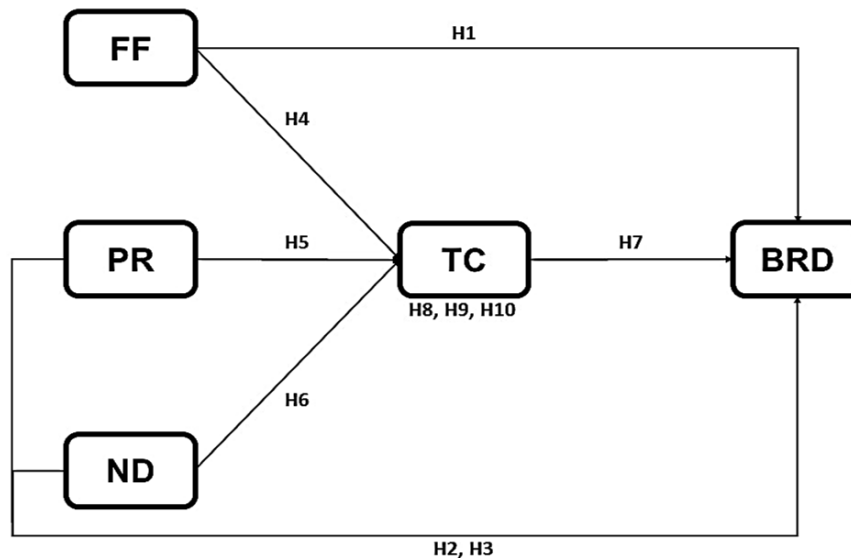
2.1 Development of Research Hypotheses

→ *H1: Fake followers directly predict brand reputation damage.*
→ *H2: Paid reviews directly predict brand reputation damage.*
→ *H3: Non-disclosure of sponsorship directly predicts brand reputation damage.*
→ *H4: Fake followers predict trust crisis.*
→ *H5: Paid reviews predict trust crisis.*
→ *H6: Non-disclosure of sponsorship predicts trust crisis.*
→ *H7: Trust crisis directly predicts brand reputation damage.*
→ *H8: The effect of non-disclosure on brand reputation is fully mediated through trust crisis.*
→ *H9: The effect of paid reviews on brand reputation is mediated through trust crisis.*
→ *H10: The effect of fake followers on brand reputation is partially mediated through trust crisis*

3. Methodology

Research Design and Sample: This is a cross-sectional quantitative survey, which enrolled 549 participants, who were online panel recruited and confirmed as active users of social media platforms and had seen influencer-branded content in the last three months. The participants were aged 18-65 (M = 38.4, SD = 12.7) and different in terms of their educational and income backgrounds. Data was collected in four weeks using Qualtrics and the response rate was 67.2. Institutional review board gave full informed consent to the study. Measurement Scales: Measures of all constructs were on 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Based on the suggested methods of conducting SEM research (Hair et al., 2019), the items of the scale were obtained across existing measures in the literature of

influencer marketing and persuasion, but with adjustments to the focus on the specific question of deceptive practices.

Table No 1: Detail of Questionnaire

Construct	Items	Example Item	A
Fake Followers (FF)	5	"This influencer appears to have artificially inflated follower numbers"	.711
Paid Reviews (PR)	5	"This influencer is likely compensated for positive reviews"	.727
Non-Disclosure (ND)	5	"This influencer does not clearly disclose when content is sponsored"	.726
Trust Crisis (TC)	5	"I have lost trust in this influencer"	.713
Brand Reputation Damage (BRD)	5	"My perception of this brand has become more negative"	.702

All the values of Cronbach alpha were above.70 which means that the internal consistency is acceptable. Data Analysis: The choice of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 was determined by the fact that it deals with moderate sample sizes, does not rely on normal distributions, and offers better predictive validity (Sarstedt et al., 2021). Standardized root means square residual (SRMR >. 08) and coefficient of determination (R 2) were used to determine model fit.

4. Results

4.1 Correlations

Intercorrelations among all variables were found to be positive and significant (p <.01). Nondisclosure of sponsorship was the most correlated with trust crisis (r =.543) and trust crisis with brand reputation damage (r =.436). The fake followers and non-disclosure were moderately associated (r =.654), which implies that the mentioned practices tend to appear together.

Table No 2: Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
FF	1.00				
PR	.397**	1.00			
ND	.654**	.597**	1.00		
TC	.367**	.353**	.543**	1.00	
BRD	.373**	.275**	.357**	.436**	1.00

Note. p < .01 (two-tailed). All correlations are positive and statistically significant.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The means scores were between 4.32-4.38, which implied that the respondents viewed deception practices and credibility issues as moderate to highly apparent.

Table No 3: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	M	SD	α	CR	AVE
Fake Followers	4.35	0.67	.711	.789	.507
Paid Reviews	4.32	0.71	.727	.801	.522
Non-Disclosure	4.36	0.70	.726	.799	.519
Trust Crisis	4.38	0.69	.713	.790	.513
Brand Reputation Damage	4.34	0.72	.702	.777	.498

4.3 Direct Effects on Brand Reputation Damage (Without Mediator)

The first structural model which investigates the direct effects of FF, PR, and ND on BRD without mediator returned the results below. The direct impact was the strongest in the case of fake followers (= .243, p <.001), and it confirmed H1. H3 was also supported by non-disclosure, the direct effect of which was notable (=.141, p =.017). H2 was partially confirmed because paid reviews had a marginal effect (0.094, p =.055).

Table No 4: Direct Effects on Brand Reputation Damage (Without Mediator)

Predictor	β	t	P	95% CI
Fake Followers	.243	4.71	.000	[.137, .349]
Paid Reviews	.094	1.92	.055	[−.002, .190]
Non-Disclosure	.141	2.39	.017	[.027, .255]

Model: R^2 = .167, $F_{(3, 545)}$ = 36.42, p < .001

4.4 Effects with Trust Crisis as Mediator

The addition of trust crisis led to an 8.0 percentage point improvement in explained variance (16.7 percent to 24.7 percent) (Sarstedt et al., 2021). With the introduction of trust crisis, the non-significant effect of non-disclosure (β = -.028, p =.646) became apparent, which implies complete mediation. This confirms H8: the non-disclosure of the impact of sponsorship on the brand image works solely in terms of credibility failure. The direct impact of fake followers was slightly decreased (varying between 0.243 to 0.237), and it means that there was partial mediation. This helps in validating H10: fake followers harm reputation by both direct and credibility channel. The paid reviews decreased in both models, 0 - =.094 and 0 - =.078, indicating that there is no direct or indirect effect. The trust crisis showed good direct effect (=.337, p <.001), which proves H7. (Chatzigeorgiou & Kumar, 2024).

Table No 5: Effects with Trust Crisis as Mediator

Predictor	β	T	P	95% CI
Fake Followers → BRD	.237	4.81	.000	[.131, .343]
Paid Reviews → BRD	.078	1.69	.092	[−.013, .169]
Non-Disclosure → BRD	−.028	−0.46	.646	[−.150, .094]
Trust Crisis → BRD	.337	7.60	.000	[.247, .427]

Model: R^2 = .247, $F_{(4, 544)}$ = 44.60, p < .001

4.5 Predictors of Trust Crisis

The structural model estimating the predictors of trust crisis was estimated independently to further comprehend the mediation pathways.

Table No 6: Structural Model

Predictor	β	t	P	95% CI
Fake Followers → TC	.020	0.43	.669	[−.082, .122]
Paid Reviews → TC	.046	1.02	.308	[−.053, .145]
Non-Disclosure → TC	.502	9.24	.000	[.411, .593]

Model: $R^2 = .296$, $F(3, 545) = 76.44$, $p < .001$

4.6 Hypothesis Testing

H6 was supported as non-disclosure of sponsorship and was the most significant predictor of trust crisis (= -.502, p <.001). Such an overwhelming effect indicates that the increment of the credibility of consumers is most directly provoked by the inability to reveal sponsorships (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025). H4 and H5 were rejected because fake followers (=.020, p =.669) and paid reviews (=.046, p =.308) were not significant predictors of trust crisis. Impact of such practices of deceit seems to work in other ways besides re-evaluation of credibility.

Table No 7: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Result	Evidence
H1	FF → BRD	Supported	β = .243, p < .001
H2	PR → BRD	Partially Supported	β = .094, p = .055
H3	ND → BRD	Supported	β = .141, p = .017
H4	FF → TC	Not Supported	β = .020, p = .669
H5	PR → TC	Not Supported	β = .046, p = .308
H6	ND → TC	Strongly Supported	β = .502, p < .001
H7	TC → BRD	Strongly Supported	β = .337, p < .001
H8	ND → TC → BRD	Full Mediation	Direct effects become non-significant
H9	PR → TC → BRD	Not Supported	No credible mediation pathway
H10	FF → TC → BRD	Partial Mediation	Direct effect reduced but remains significant

4.7 Discussion

The results can be regarded as empirical evidence of a differentiated model according to which influencer deception harms brand reputation because of selective mediation by the perceptions of credibility (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025). Non-Disclosure of Sponsorship: Full Mediation and Credibility Violation: Full mediation was exhibited by non-disclosure based on trust crisis (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025). When credibility was factored in, the impact on brand reputation was no longer significant (8 = -.028, p =.646), and the direct relationship

between non-disclosure and trust crisis was extremely high (ß =.502). This implies that the negative brand reputation ratings of consumers can be completely explained by new credibility ratings. This is consistent with the regulatory views on sponsorship disclosure as the key element of transparency (Danjuma & Rasul, 2024). In terms of consumer psychology, disclosure requirements are present since trustworthy recommendations mandate the audience to be aware of incentive systems. When the information about sponsorship is hidden, viewers feel that there is intentional concealment of information about the material, and the implicit agreement of honesty in communication is broken (Raguseo, Vitari, & Berta, 2022). This breach of credibility then gets transferred to the brand by association.

5. Conclusion

This empirical study tested the harmful effects of deceptive practices of influencers (imitated followers, paid reviews, undisclosed sponsorship) on the brand reputation based on perceived influencer credibility (Chatzigeorgiou & Kumar, 2024; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025). The results of the analysis of 549 respondents based on PLS-SEM revealed three separate paths: non-disclosure is entirely mediated by mechanisms of credibility-mediation (full mediation), fake followers are partially mediated and partially not (partial mediation), paid reviews exhibit only weak credibility-mediated marginal effects (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). The non-disclosure of sponsorship became the most consequential, and it had the greatest impact on credibility (=.502) and significant downstream influence on reputation (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025; Danjuma & Rasul, 2024). This helps to focus regulation on transparency in sponsorship and implies that consumers should incorporate disclosure compliance in the process of making credibility judgments. Direct consequences of fake followers on reputation (=.237) indicate that authenticity of the audience does not only have effects of credibility but may also have effects through perceived product quality, brand integrity and social proof mechanism (Zarei & Namvar, 2025). The complete model with the inclusion of credibility described 24.7 vs 16.7 per cent of brand reputation damage variation with and without mediation, respectively, indicating the significance of credibility reassessment as psychological mechanism (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Credibility represents a proximal mechanism that deceptive practices harm brands, which is supported by a strong credibility-reputation effect (0.337). Since influencer marketing becomes the new dominant promotional strategy, the insight into the credibility mechanisms through which the brand-damaging deceptive practices occur is paramount to the brand managers, influencers, regulators, and platforms (Ahmed & Rathore, 2024). Such studies will be valuable in that they will isolate empirically the pathways through which the authenticity, transparency, and credibility of the influencer can yield brand reputation outcomes in the digital persuasion environment (Lim & Ng, 2024).

5.1 Practical Implication

Brands must be keen on making sure that partnered influencers have open disclosure practices. The non-disclosure reputational damage is mediated by the credibility of the influencer, indicating that the extent of damage escalates when consumers come to know about brutality and revise the evaluations. This reputational pathway can be minimized by verification procedures on compliance with disclosure of influencer. Fake Followers: Partial

Mediation and Direct Disillusionment: The partial mediation was exhibited by fake followers (Zarei & Namvar, 2025). Even with credibility added, the direct effect was still significant (=.237) with insignificant effect through trust crisis (=.020 between FF and TC). This implies that the author is aware that counterfeit followers tarnish reputation in various other ways than by checking credibility. The possible mechanisms are: Direct doubt regarding product effectiveness irrespective of the credibility of the influencer. Brand integrity attributions (inability to detect the influence of manipulation). Minimized belief in social proof mechanisms (artificial popularity signals) The partial mediation result suggests that brand managers need to consider two approaches: (1) verification of the authenticity of influencer audience before collaboration, which can minimize exposure; and (2) initiative-taking communication strategies that can remedy reputation damage when found out because credibility interventions may fail to rebuild reputation fully (Choi et al., 2024).

5.2 Paid Reviews

Marginal Effects and Credibility Ambiguity: Paid reviews had a marginal direct effect (p =.055) which failed to attain conventional significance. Direct and credibility-mediated effects did not have significant roles in the full model. Explanations: Paid review prevalence may be variably aware to the consumers. Compensation fact is confidential data unlike non-disclosure (exhibited by consumers) or counterfeit followers (gaining more prominence through metrics). However, without converting suspicions into strenuous credibility violation, consumers can have skeptical baseline assumptions about compensation without converting such suspicions into strong credibility violation (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). Otherwise, paid reviews can be indicative of contextual consumer expectations difference.

Consumers might require compensation from the influencers and do not punish them too much in case of luxury goods/premium services. Concerns can be even more intense in health/financial services (Lim & Ng, 2024). Practical implication: Paid review bias can be a less significant reputational threat than non-disclosure or fake follower, depending on the measures. Nevertheless, brands must be wary of the fact that covert compensation is an ethically dubious thing and can cause harm in particular areas. The Strength of Trust Crisis as Predictor: Trust crisis had significant direct impact on the damage of brand reputation in all conditions (0.337 in full model to 0.436 in bivariate relationship). Such a big effect grants credibility perception to be a proximal effect, which is the process of carrying out the deceit practices and translating them into evaluations of brand reputation (Chatzigeorgiou & Kumar, 2024). The strength reveals that consumers instantly form negative credibility information on brand evaluation, which aligns with the trust transfer theory (Raguseo, Vitari, & Berta, 2022). In case the influencer is unworthy of belief, the brand concerned is punished significantly. It means that the reputation of the brand is based on the credibility of the influencers, and even though the brands do not involve themselves in actions that may be described as deceptive, they are exposed to reputational risk due to association with image-tainted influencers (Nuji et al., 2023). Theoretical Contributions: Credibility violation mechanisms differentiation: Not every influencer deception works in the same way. There is also a consistent harm to credibility that arises through non-disclosure, and there is also a disillusionment mechanism that works partially through fake followers (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025; Zarei & Namvar, 2025).

This adds to the source credibility theory by showing that the different dimensions of credibility are triggered depending on the nature of deception (Chatzigeorgiou & Kumar, 2024). Transfer of trust in online situations: The strong influence of trust in the credibility of the influencer on brand reputation confirms transfer of consumer trust in the sources on to the endorsed entity in related associative dynamics (Raguseo, Vitari, & Berta, 2022), and proves the extension of the theory of trust transfer to online scenarios (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). Trust crisis operationalization: This study quantifies credibility breakdown, which subsequently allows assessing intermediate processes by which the deceptive practices harm brand reputation (Choi, Lim, & Park, 2024)which in turn will allow future research to measure credibility repair and communication intervention (Raguseo et al., 2022).

5.3 Implications

Influencer Selection and Authentication: Before a partnership, brands are to adopt stringent measures to gauge the authenticity of influencer audience (Zarei & Namvar, 2025). This is the essence of risk management because the impact of fake followers on reputation is strong (=.243). Sponsorship Disclosure Protocols: Since non-disclosure effects are fully mediated by credibility, it is preferable that the contractual agreements involve the use of clear non-disclosure agreements that have platform-specific hashtags (#ad, #sponsored) placed on a prominent position (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025). Regular non-compliance should lead to the end of the cooperative relationship of the brands (Danjuma & Rasul, 2024). Transparency Communications: Transparency communication as an initiative should be adopted by those brands that uncover manipulative influencer actions (Raguseo, Vitari, & Berta, 2022). Instead of letting the consumers find out the problems independently, which provokes the crisis of credibility and destroys the reputation. Product Category Views: The payment-based review marginal effect is likely to be different depending on the category (Lim & Ng, 2024).

The categories that are highly dependent on credibility (health, financial services, luxury) should put more emphasis on paid review transparency. Diversification Strategy: Brands should not have many influencers with high followers but diversify to various influencers (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024) to diversify their reputation risks. Regulatory and Ethical Implications: The notable impact of non-disclosure on the trust crisis (=.502) is empirical evidence of regulatory enforcement of sponsorship disclosure conditions (Danjuma & Rasul, 2024). The regulatory bodies have a good reason to enforce non-disclosure violations as this amounts to meaningful credibility violations that would have substantial reputational impacts. Findings however indicate regulatory structures can be enhanced by differentiated practices. The non-disclosure should be stringently enforced, and false followers and paid reviews should be subjected to transparency programs and consumer education instead of punishment enforcement (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2025). The fake followers could be dealt with by a platform that shows credibility measures without regulatory intervention. The fact that brands are reputational victims of influencer deception (even without their knowledge) begs the issue of fairness. The existing enforcement introduces the brands to liability, which encourages strict auditing of influencers (Danjuma & Rasul, 2024). This distribution is served by deterrence reasoning (brands can be cheap but more effectively than regulatory agencies evaluate the practice of influencers) but should be reevaluated as the technology of deception advances.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences; the self-report could have exaggerated correlations; general measurement without identifying influencers/brands can hide the significant variations; online panel sampling can have sampled internet-savvy people who are more likely to be skeptical of the baseline. Future Research Directions: Longitudinal studies on the dynamics of reputational damage stories and the ability of brands to rebound once consumers get beyond credibility crisis (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Controlled manipulation in experimental studies of aspects of deception that allow better causal inference (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). Brand Characteristics: Moderation tests find out whether effects differ according to brand characteristics. 7 Consumer Characteristics: Moderation tests determine whether effects differ according to consumer characteristics. 13 Contextual Characteristics: Moderation tests find out whether effects differ according to contextual characteristics. Qualitative study examining the rationale that consumers develop regarding credibility failure and the way they differentiate between types of deception (Choi, Lim, & Park, 2024). Intervention studies that assessed the strategies of reducing reputational damage and restoring credibility (Raguseo, Vitari, & Berta, 2022).

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