

Influencer Marketing and Behavioral Guidance Towards Responsible Consumption: The Case of Cosmetic Products in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of influencer marketing in fostering responsible consumption of cosmetic products in Cameroon. Drawing on a qualitative survey conducted with 60 participants, two major findings emerge. First, influencers act as channels of awareness-raising, yet their contribution remains ambivalent—oscillating between perceived authenticity and the pursuit of commercial opportunities. Second, while their recommendations shape purchasing decisions, this influence is contingent upon the level of trust consumers place in them and the degree of skepticism they express. The analysis further identifies the criteria that underpin influencers' credibility and legitimacy, as well as the specific barriers to adopting responsible consumption practices linked to consumer habits and local market constraints. Overall, the study enhances understanding of the dynamics of influencer marketing in an understudied African context and offers insights for strengthening the effectiveness of campaigns through improved credibility management and the contextualization of messages.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Responsible consumption, Cosmetic products, Sustainable purchasing behavior, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, consumption habits in Cameroon have undergone profound transformations driven by digitalization and the rapid expansion of social media. The country now counts nearly 12.9 million internet users—representing a penetration rate of about 45%—and more than 3.9 million active social media users, most of whom engage on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok [1]. In this expanding digital ecosystem, firms increasingly turn to influencer marketing, which leverages opinion leaders to shape purchasing decisions and enhance consumer engagement. According to [2], influencer marketing has experienced accelerated growth across Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2015, only 33% of African brands used influencers to promote their products; by 2020, the figure had risen to 63%. A Hootsuite survey further reveals that 38.5% of firms in the region currently collaborate with influencers—a rate higher than the global average of 34.4%. While the financial value of the market remains difficult to assess due to the prevalence of informal collaborations, estimates nonetheless point

to significant expansion. The Nigerian agency TIMA valued the sector at USD 159.9 million in 2022, while Statista estimated it at USD 137.3 million for the same year, with projections reaching USD 267.5 million by 2028 (Ecofin Agency, 2024). This growth is reinforced by the visibility of prominent African influencers, such as Khaby Lame, whose earnings per sponsored post exceed USD 75,000.

This momentum is particularly visible in the fast-growing cosmetic products sector in Cameroon, where transparency, authenticity, and social responsibility have become essential criteria in consumption choices. The Cameroonian market for cosmetics and hygiene products was estimated at approximately EUR 570 million in 2023 (about XAF 374 billion), making it the third-largest consumer market in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, after the Democratic Republic of Congo and Côte d'Ivoire [3]. Demand for natural and ethical products is rising, especially among the urban youth. Influencers—through their proximity, perceived authenticity, and high levels of trust within online communities—play a decisive role in promoting responsible consumption practices and in elevating brands that embrace ethical and environmental commitments [4, 5]. Their ability to generate interaction, produce content perceived as genuine, and embody values aligned with their audiences reinforces their position as key actors in advancing responsible consumption. However, despite the growing prominence of influencer marketing and its documented impact on consumer behavior in various contexts [6], empirical research addressing this phenomenon in Cameroon remains scarce. Unlike the United States and Europe—where numerous studies have examined the influence of social media and influencers on responsible consumption [7, 8]—Sub-Saharan Africa, and Cameroon in particular, constitutes an understudied research setting. This scientific gap is all the more significant given that consumption practices in the region are shaped by distinct cultural (importance of community norms), economic (dominance of the informal sector), and social (emerging youth and middle-class segments) dynamics.

In this context, influencer marketing may serve as a lever for raising awareness of sustainability and ethical concerns; yet it may also transmit questionable practices if content is insufficiently regulated. This ambivalence highlights the need for a critical examination of the actual role of influencers in fostering responsible consumption behaviors in Cameroon. The present study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the mechanisms through which influencers do—or do not—orient consumers toward more sustainable purchasing practices. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: *How does influencer marketing shape the behavior of Cameroonian consumers toward more responsible consumption of cosmetic products?* The objective is to examine the strategies deployed by influencers, analyze how consumers interpret and respond to these strategies, and assess their impact on the adoption of responsible behaviors. To achieve this, the article is structured into three main sections: the first outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework, the second details the methodological approach, and the third presents the findings and discusses their implications.

INFLUENCER MARKETING AND RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION OF COSMETIC PRODUCTS: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Influencer Marketing: A Literature Review

Purchase decision-making is shaped by a variety of factors, including recommendations and opinions from others, which enable consumers to optimize their choices following a period of

information search [9]. Within this context, influencer marketing has evolved beyond the basic role of review platforms to become a strategic tool whereby certain individuals, owing to their credibility and online visibility, can shape the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of their audiences [10, 11].

Sheldrake (2012) emphasizes that influence occurs when an individual adopts a thought or behavior that they would not otherwise have had, while [12] note that, in psychology, influence refers to the process through which one person induces another to adopt a given point of view. These complementary perspectives converge toward the idea that influence plays a central role in shaping consumer preferences and purchasing decisions [13].

To enhance conceptual clarity and internal coherence, this section first discusses influencer marketing and its effects on firms, before examining the psychosocial foundations of influence.

Influencer Marketing and Its Impacts on Firms:

Opinion leaders are defined as individuals who informally provide advice and recommendations on specific products or services and who play a decisive role in the purchasing behavior of their communities [13, 14]. Influencers can therefore be regarded as role models capable of exerting significant persuasive impact on their followers [12, 15].

[16] further describe influencers as experts with specialized knowledge in a given field who create high value-added content across digital platforms. This dynamic aligns with the “Two-Step Flow of Communication” theory developed by [17], which posits that traditional media exert only limited direct influence on consumers; rather, influence is transmitted primarily through intermediary opinion leaders.

This approach is complemented by the linear communication model of Shannon and Weaver in 1949. According to this model, communication relies on a sequential process involving a sender, a message, a channel, a receiver, and feedback, with the entire process potentially disrupted by “noise.” In the context of influencer marketing, the influencer acts as the sender, encoding and disseminating messages promoting responsible consumption through social networks (the channel) to followers (the receivers). Noise—such as distrust, perceived lack of authenticity, or conflicting information—may hinder the transmission. This model shows that the credibility and authenticity of the influencer condition the effectiveness of the message, moving beyond a purely technical logic of transmission toward a process of meaning-making. Understanding these impacts of influencer marketing on firms highlights the need to examine the psychosocial foundations explaining how and why these messages effectively shape consumer behavior.

Psychosocial Foundations of Influence:

Influencer marketing has become a strategic lever for firms seeking to reinforce brand awareness, expand market share, and foster consumer loyalty [18]. Its effectiveness largely depends on psychosocial mechanisms that explain how individuals adopt new behaviors based on social and symbolic interactions. Central to this process, social influence rests on the principle that consumers tend to imitate the choices and attitudes of those perceived as models or experts, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of their recommendations [19, 20]. This dynamic

is amplified by the emergence of parasocial relationships, through which followers develop a sense of intimacy and emotional proximity with influencers, thereby increasing receptiveness to their messages [15].

Several theoretical frameworks help elucidate the persuasive power of influencers. Congruence theory suggests that message effectiveness depends on the alignment between the influencer's values and those of the consumer [11, 21]. Complementarily, identification theory posits that individuals are more likely to accept recommendations when they recognize themselves in the influencer's image or lifestyle [21]. Authority theory highlights the role of perceived expertise and legitimacy, showing that individuals considered competent elicit greater trust [22]. Finally, reciprocity theory explains why consumers may feel inclined to support brands promoted by influencers when they perceive value or benefit in the relational exchange [23].

Recent research also underscores the pivotal role of authenticity and transparency in the effectiveness of influencer strategies. In the cosmetics sector—where consumer sensitivity to ethical and sustainable values is particularly high— [24], as well as [14], demonstrate that influencers who move beyond mere self-promotion and adopt discourses aligned with responsible practices foster deeper trust and encourage the adoption of ethical behaviors.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical contributions indicate that the effectiveness of influencer marketing does not rely solely on message dissemination. Rather, it emerges from a complex relational process that integrates identification, credibility, and meaning-construction. This psychosocial framework sheds light on the mechanisms through which influencers guide consumption practices toward more responsible choices, particularly in the cosmetics sector.

Literature Review on the Concept of Responsible Consumption

Responsible consumption—also referred to as ethical, sustainable, or conscientious consumption—reflects a growing critique of traditional consumerist models and embodies an increasing willingness to integrate social, environmental, and ethical considerations into purchasing decisions [25, 26]. It is grounded in the idea that every act of consumption generates direct consequences for the environment, society, and the economy, thereby calling for greater individual accountability in everyday practices. Responsible consumption therefore extends beyond the mere act of purchasing to encompass critical reflection on production conditions, social justice, and the environmental impacts of chosen products and services.

Historically, the concept emerged alongside the social and environmental movements of the 1970s. It gained international legitimacy through major global conferences on sustainable development, notably the Rio in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002 summits, which underscored the need for more responsible individual and collective behaviors. Today, responsible consumption is recognized as a key lever in the transition toward a circular and inclusive economy, in which consumers—as social actors—exert direct influence on market orientations and corporate strategies [27].

To clarify its scope, the academic literature generally structures responsible consumption around three core dimensions:

- **The ethical and social dimension**, which highlights consumers' responsibility regarding production conditions, respect for human rights, and social justice [28]. This perspective emphasizes that choosing a product is also a civic act with collective effects.
- **The environmental dimension**, which focuses on reducing the negative ecological impacts of consumption, including resource preservation, waste management, and the mitigation of pollutant emissions [29].
- **The behavioral and voluntary dimension**, which refers to individuals' capacity to adjust their consumption habits to align with responsible values. [30] and [31] stress the proactive nature of such choices, which reflect heightened awareness of the negative externalities of consumption.

Beyond these definitional elements, several theoretical frameworks enrich the understanding of responsible consumption. Social influence theory sheds light on mechanisms of imitation and identification, often amplified by the notoriety of public figures, giving rise to the attractiveness and celebrity model [32]. The theory of ethical consumption emphasizes justice and responsibility in consumer choice [28]. Responsible marketing theory underlines the proactive role of firms in offering goods and services aligned with ethical and environmental values [33]. Finally, sustainable consumption theory [29] calls for a reassessment of needs and a redefinition of consumption standards within a logic of sobriety and long-term sustainability.

The adoption of responsible behaviors depends on multiple factors: sustainability education, social pressure, supportive public policies, and the diffusion of eco-responsible labels and certifications [27]. These mechanisms enhance consumer awareness and contribute to the emergence of a more transparent and regulated market.

In the Cameroonian context, responsible consumption remains an emerging phenomenon. The cosmetics sector illustrates this complexity: it is characterized by the coexistence of imported industrial products and locally crafted items, often unregulated. The lack of clear certification, the predominance of an informal market, and limited access to labeled products hinder the widespread adoption of responsible behaviors. This specificity underscores the need for trusted intermediaries. Within this landscape, influencers appear as key actors capable of compensating for institutional weaknesses by disseminating norms of sustainable consumption and building trust-based relationships with their online communities.

In sum, the literature highlights that responsible consumption is a multidimensional concept rooted in ethical, environmental, and behavioral considerations. However, its concrete expression varies across sociocultural and institutional contexts. In environments such as Cameroon, its diffusion requires both coherent public policies and the support of legitimate social intermediaries—among whom influencers emerge as strategic actors capable of strengthening the credibility and adoption of responsible consumption practices.

Influencer Marketing and Responsible Consumption: Ambivalences and Key Issues

Influencer marketing maintains an inherently ambivalent relationship with responsible consumption. On one hand, it serves as a powerful awareness-raising mechanism, capable of disseminating and popularizing sustainable practices. On the other hand, it is frequently criticized for its potential excesses—overconsumption, covert advertising, lack of

transparency, and the propagation of misleading information [12]. [34] emphasize that consumption choices are strongly conditioned by social, cultural, and economic environments. In alignment with contingency theory [35], consumer behavior cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined as the product of multiple contextual factors, including social norms, purchasing power, religion, and public policy frameworks.

Practice theory provides a relevant analytical lens for capturing this complexity [36, 37]. It suggests that consumption behaviors are embedded in collective routines shaped by shared competencies and social norms. Within this logic, influencers function as agents of diffusion and normalization, gradually steering consumer practices toward greater responsibility.

Nevertheless, the literature also highlights several potential risks. [14] underscore the fragility of influencer authenticity, which is increasingly threatened by the commodification of digital content. In Cameroon, this risk is amplified by the absence of a clear legal framework governing influencer activity. Unlike other regulated professions, Cameroonian influencers do not benefit from a formal status, increasing consumer vulnerability to fraud, counterfeit products, and misleading promotional discourse. Thus, influencer marketing can effectively promote responsible consumption, but only if it is guided by ethical practices and supported by appropriate regulatory mechanisms [38, 39]. In the Cameroonian context, enhanced professionalization and reinforced accountability among influencers appear essential to ensuring the credibility of messages and maximizing their positive impact on consumer behavior.

Table 1: Summary of the Main Theoretical Frameworks Mobilized in the Study

Theory	Key Concepts	Application to the Study (Focus on Cameroon)
Social Influence Theory [32]	Identification, imitation, internalization of values	Explains why Cameroonian consumers adopt responsible behaviors when they identify with influencers (e.g., shared skin complexion, social proximity).
Congruence Theory [21]	Value alignment between influencer and consumer; authenticity	Highlights that influencer credibility depends on perceived coherence between their personal practices (e.g., use of organic products) and their public discourse.
Authority Theory [22]	Source expertise and legitimacy	Helps explain why influencers perceived as experts (e.g., beauty professionals) or public figures (e.g., local celebrities) are judged more credible.
Reciprocity Theory [23]	Moral obligation to exchange and reciprocate	Clarifies why consumers support brands promoted by influencers with whom they maintain relationships of trust.
Practice Theory [36, 37]	Habitus, social norms, reproduction of collective practices	Shows that responsible behaviors extend beyond individual choices and are embedded in cultural and social habits specific to the Cameroonian context (e.g., collectivism, peer influence).
Ethical Consumption Theory [28]	Social responsibility and justice	Provides a normative framework for evaluating the responsible dimension of consumption practices promoted by influencers.

Source: Authors.

METHODOLOGY

Rationale for the Methodological Approach

Although research on influencer marketing and responsible consumption is well developed in Western contexts, it remains limited in Africa, and particularly in Cameroon. This gap justifies the use of a qualitative approach, which enables an in-depth understanding of consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward content disseminated by influencers in the cosmetics sector. This methodological choice is further motivated by the intent to adopt an inductive stance in examining a phenomenon that remains underexplored in this specific context.

The study is grounded in the principles of Grounded Theory as a research strategy. Grounded Theory is based on the iterative development of theory from empirical data through a process of constant comparative analysis [40]. This approach is particularly suitable for uncovering emergent insights, as it favors the induction of categories arising directly from the field rather than the application of a predefined theoretical framework. Given the relatively young state of the literature on influencer marketing applied to responsible consumption—and the scarcity of empirical studies in the Cameroonian context—a flexible and adaptive methodological posture is warranted [41].

In this perspective, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants selected based on their interactions with influencers promoting cosmetic products. Predominantly composed of women, this target population allows the research to access social representations and underlying logics that shape responsible cosmetic consumption behaviors within the sphere of digital influence.

Sampling Strategy

The sample was constructed using predefined criteria to include individuals who regularly consume cosmetic products and actively use social media. Respondents were recruited between January and March 2024 in Cameroon's main cities (Yaoundé, Douala, and Bafoussam), through consumer associations, online beauty groups, and snowball sampling. Two complementary sampling logics were employed:

- **Purposive sampling**, which consists in selecting participants according to relevant criteria (age, gender, digital activity) to illuminate the phenomenon under study and to ensure an optimal representation of cosmetic consumers in Cameroon;
- **Theoretical sampling**, which relies on the progressive search for new cases until saturation is reached, with the aim of refining or completing emergent categories.

The combination of these two approaches made it possible to ensure both a diversity of profiles and the analytical depth necessary to strengthen the robustness of the results. Semantic saturation was reached after interviewing 60 participants. To capture generational variations in the adoption of responsible consumption practices, individuals from different age groups (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, and above 45) were included. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on respondents' availability, and lasted an average of 55 minutes.

An effort was made to achieve gender balance to identify possible gender-based differences in the reception of influencers' messages. The final sample consists of 83% women and 17% men.

This overrepresentation of women, although uneven, reflects the structure of the cosmetic market in Cameroon, where women constitute the primary consumers. It thus enhances the relevance of the findings concerning responsible consumption dynamics in this sector, while at the same time requiring caution when generalizing results to male consumers.

Additionally, the sample includes individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to capture the influence of financial conditions on consumption behaviors. Special attention was also given to active social media users who regularly follow influencers, thereby ensuring a contextualized and relevant analysis of the dynamics of digital influence. The characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Sociodemographic Characteristics and Consumption Profiles of the Selected Participants

Criteria	Categories	Number of Participants	%
Age group	18–25 years	20	33.33%
	26–35 years	25	41.67%
	36–45 years	10	16.67%
	Above 45 years	5	8.33%
Gender	Women	50	83.33%
	Men	10	16.47%
Socio-economic status	Low income	30	50%
	Middle income	27	45%
	High income	3	5%
Social media activity	Active users who regularly follow influencers	60	100%
Place of residence	Urban	60	100%
	Rural	0	0%

Source: Authors' data.

The analysis of Table 2 highlights a diverse set of sociodemographic profiles representative of cosmetic product consumers in Cameroon. With respect to age structure, the predominance of the 18–25 (33%) and 26–35 (42%) groups illustrates the strong involvement of young adults in consumption dynamics shaped by digital influence. This observation aligns with [30], who emphasize the heightened sensitivity of younger generations to responsible consumption discourses promoted by influencers.

The socio-economic distribution shows that most participants belong to the middle-income category (45%), reflecting the core consumer base of the cosmetic market in sub-Saharan Africa and underscoring the strategic importance of this segment for responsible marketing initiatives. Finally, all participants reside in urban areas—an element that constitutes both a methodological limitation and a justified choice. While this geographic bias may reduce the transferability of findings to rural settings, it accurately reflects the current structure of Cameroon's digital ecosystem. Influencer marketing is primarily concentrated in major cities, where access to social media, digital technologies, and sponsored content is more developed. Urban environments are also characterized by higher exposure to global trends, faster acculturation to responsible consumption practices, and denser commercial networks that

foster interactions among consumers, brands, and influencers. As such, urban settings provide fertile ground for the emergence and consolidation of new consumption norms mediated by influencer marketing.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

The interview guide was structured around five key thematic axes: (1) cosmetic consumption practices and perceptions of influencers; (2) reception of messages, perceived credibility, and forms of engagement generated; (3) influence of influencers on purchasing decisions and integration of ethical/responsible dimensions; (4) analysis of the dynamics and barriers to responsible consumption; (5) recommendations and avenues for strengthening responsible consumption practices. Interviews were audio-recorded (with participants' informed consent) and fully transcribed to build an analyzable qualitative corpus.

The examination of qualitative data followed a structured process designed to ensure analytical rigor and interpretative validity. The first step involved an attentive reading and progressive immersion in the transcripts, facilitating familiarization with participants' accounts and the identification of salient elements. An inductive thematic analysis was subsequently conducted to reveal recurrent patterns and divergences across narratives [42].

The coding process unfolded in three complementary stages: (i) **open coding**, aimed at isolating meaningful units; (ii) **axial coding**, enabling the clustering of these units into coherent categories; (iii) **selective coding**, which allowed the organization of major analytical dimensions. This procedure was strengthened by an initial coding phase that attributed labels to text segments based on their relevance to the research question. The aggregation of codes into central themes facilitated the emergence of trends and recurrent patterns within participants' discourse. Interpretation and discussion of findings were then guided by the theoretical framework underpinning the study, thereby deepening the understanding of influencers' role in orienting consumption behaviors toward more responsible practices.

NVivo 12 software was used to organize and optimize the qualitative analysis through advanced coding tools and visualization features. This helped support systematic exploration of relationships between emerging themes, enhanced the reliability of results, and enabled the triangulation of data. NVivo also ensured transparent traceability of analytical decisions, reinforcing the study's credibility and reproducibility.

Reliability and Validity of the Study

To ensure the reliability and credibility of the findings, the study mobilized a combination of methodological and ethical safeguards. Source triangulation served as a central strategy, enabling the confrontation of primary interview data with existing academic studies and institutional reports. This cross-validation strengthened the robustness of conclusions by mitigating biases associated with subjective perceptions.

Member checking was also implemented: a subset of participants was invited to react to preliminary analyses. This procedure helped ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' experiences and representations, while refining the internal validity of the results.

A reflexive approach was incorporated throughout the research process, involving explicit acknowledgment of methodological choices and inherent limitations—particularly the overrepresentation of women and the exclusive focus on urban respondents. Ethical principles governing qualitative research were strictly observed: prior information, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of collected data. These safeguards enhance the credibility, transferability, and alignment of the study with scientific ethical standards.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Perceived Role of Influencers in Raising Awareness of Responsible Consumption: Between Engagement and Opportunism

The analysis of the interviews reveals an ambivalent perception of the role played by influencers in promoting responsible consumption in Cameroon. While some respondents view them as key actors capable of popularizing ethical behaviors and raising awareness about the risks associated with certain cosmetic products, others perceive them as primarily motivated by financial gain, often at the expense of sincerity and authenticity. This tension reflects the opposition between two logics: genuine engagement in favor of sustainable practices versus the opportunism inherent in commercial collaborations. Such ambivalence echoes contemporary debates on authenticity in influencer marketing [14].

A first major finding concerns the educational and popularizing role attributed to influencers by several participants. Respondents emphasize their ability to simplify complex information and raise awareness about the consequences of consumption choices. For instance, some report that influencers “*take the time to explain what can happen when you use the product*” or “*explain the side effects and benefits*.”

This trust largely relies on perceived congruence between the influencer’s values and those of consumers [21]. Several participants stress the importance of influencers personally testing the products before promoting them. As one respondent highlights, “*the influencer actually uses the product*,” reinforcing the idea of experiential legitimacy. This perceived authenticity fosters a parasocial relationship in which the influencer is regarded as a credible peer rather than a mere advertising channel. Conversely, when consumers identify practices inconsistent with this logic—such as excessive use of filters or promotion of products the influencer does not genuinely use—they express significant distrust. Consequently, trust appears contingent on transparency and coherence, aligning with [11] findings on the centrality of authenticity in influence processes.

However, this positive dimension is counterbalanced by a recurrent perception of opportunism. For many respondents, some influencers recommend products not out of conviction, but because “*they need the money*.” This critique reflects an awareness of the economic mechanisms underlying influencer marketing and contributes to a growing mistrust of sponsored content. The contradiction also manifests in the interplay between awareness-raising and consumption incentives. Some participants note that even when influencers promote natural or ethical products, the message remains fundamentally geared toward purchase. As one respondent puts it, “*even when they talk about natural products, it is still to push people to buy more*.” Overall, the findings highlight a dual dynamic in influencers’ role regarding responsible consumption. On the one hand, they emerge as strategic actors capable of enhancing the visibility of ethical

products, disseminating sustainability norms, and fostering collective awareness. On the other hand, their legitimacy remains fragile, undermined by suspicions of opportunism and blurred boundaries between sincere commitment and commercial logic.

The Contribution of Influencers' Recommendations to Cosmetic Purchase Decisions: Between Trust and Skepticism

The results reveal a profound ambivalence in how Cameroonian consumers perceive influencers' recommendations regarding cosmetics. For some, these recommendations serve as essential resources that guide purchasing decisions; for others, they trigger distrust and systematic verification. This duality illustrates the conditional nature of digital influence, which depends simultaneously on the influencer's perceived credibility, identity congruence, and local consumption practices. These dynamics align with foundational work on social influence [32], which posits that message adoption depends on identification with the source, perceived attractiveness, and internalization of shared values.

Trust in influencers is first anchored in their ability to demonstrate lived, verifiable experiences with the product. Respondents report feeling reassured when influencers personally test the cosmetics and transparently share their results: *"She makes videos to show how she uses the product"; "She makes sure that she and her close friends have confirmed that the product is good."* This dimension is consistent with the notion of authenticity advanced by [14], which asserts that persuasive value stems from sincere experiential engagement rather than self-presentation. Identity congruence also emerges as a critical determinant. Several consumers state that they are more inclined to follow recommendations from influencers who share their skin tone, assuming the results will be comparable: *"Since she is Black and I am Black, I tell myself the result will be the same"; "Not everyone has the same skin type."*

Influencer notoriety is likewise identified as a source of legitimacy. Some participants believe that public figures or celebrities would not jeopardize their image by promoting low-quality products. As a respondent notes: *"Major influencers like Muriel Blanche represent major high-quality brands"; "I saw Miss Cameroon using them, or at least advertising them."* This mechanism aligns with authority theory [22], emphasizing that source credibility is strongly shaped by perceived expertise and social status. Additionally, relational proximity reinforces trust: some participants explain, for example, *"He was my brother from the village"; "She is a woman I know personally."* This highlights the importance of community-based trust in the Cameroonian context. However, the other side of the findings reveals increasing skepticism. Several respondents argue that social media is not a trustworthy environment due to image manipulation and the over-commercialization of content. As one participant expresses: *"I may see the advertisement she does, it dazzles me, but afterwards I do my own research."* This critical stance illustrates consumers' vigilance, as they seek to verify information through third-party sources before committing. As [24] highlight, audience segmentation in relation to influencers often oscillates between enthusiastic engagement and critical rejection.

Credibility and Legitimacy of Influencers: Which Criteria Shape Consumer Perceptions?

The qualitative exploration conducted among Cameroonian consumers reveals that the credibility and legitimacy of influencers rest on a complex combination of social, media-related, geographic, and product-specific criteria, as well as the influencer's seniority. These

dimensions shape trust, a prerequisite for the effectiveness of persuasive messages [32]. As noted by [11], perceived credibility remains one of the principal drivers of consumer engagement with influencers. The verbatims collected illustrate this dynamic clearly: *"Some influencers really make the effort, and that makes us feel closer to some than to others."* Sociability and the influencer's ability to maintain a sense of proximity—whether through visits to beauty institutes or in-person encounters—strengthen the legitimacy of their discourse. This social closeness echoes [21] work on identification in persuasion: the more an influencer embodies a relatable model, the more their message is perceived as credible.

The nature of the products promoted also constitutes a key factor in the evaluation of credibility. Respondents express a strong preference for organic or natural products, perceived as less risky and more authentic: *"Now, if your product is not organic, it doesn't really interest me because organic products are less risky"; "she uses natural ingredients,"* as one participant explained. Associating the influencer with a universe of naturalness reinforces their perceived integrity and alignment with growing societal expectations regarding responsible consumption [14].

Another legitimacy criterion highlighted by participants concerns seniority. As one respondent states, *"There are senior influencers; at least they have experience."* This recognition of experience reflects a logic of progressive expertise consistent with [22] social proof principle. The more an influencer accumulates sustained collaborations, the more they embody stability and reliability—two elements that help reduce uncertainties associated with purchasing cosmetic products. Complementarily, the geographic location of influencers contributes to perceived practical proximity: the possibility of meeting the influencer physically or accessing their products in identifiable spaces (beauty institutes, community events, local shops) reinforces legitimacy. As one participant emphasized: *"If she does bad advertising, we know we can find her easily."*

Media-related aspects also emerge as central credibility indicators. Video quality, careful attention to visuals, colors, and sound are cited as markers of professionalism. Respondents associate high-quality audiovisual production with the value and reliability of the promoted product: *"The way she presents the product, the way she is dressed, the cleanliness—these are the things we look at."* This perception is consistent with the notion that perceived competence is a core component of source credibility [32]. Beyond aesthetics, content must remain coherent, respectful, and relevant: *"I cannot be influenced by someone who has bad content"; "She doesn't make vulgar content."* Once again, congruence between the communication style and the public's normative expectations determines the legitimacy attributed to the influencer.

Barriers to the Adoption of Responsible Consumption: When Digital Influence Confronts Market Realities and Consumer Habits

The analysis of interviews indicates that, despite the rise of influencer marketing in Cameroon, several structural and perceptual barriers limit its capacity to foster genuinely responsible consumption in the cosmetics sector. These obstacles stem both from the nature of the content disseminated and from market-specific characteristics and social consumption practices. While digital influence can enhance product visibility and raise awareness of ethical values [14], it remains undermined by inconsistencies that erode trust.

A second major barrier concerns the dubious origin of information disseminated online and the proliferation of unverified content. Several participants noted that *"Anyone can take their phone, their camera, make an ad and post it"; "Someone can just appear from nowhere and become famous like that."* This ease of content creation increases the risk of misinformation and even identity fraud: *"Just because it's a video of Murielle Blanche doesn't mean it's really her—there can be editing"; "Sometimes on social media the information is false from the start."* These practices fuel a perception of uncertainty and echo [24], who argue that the lack of control over online messages constitutes a major obstacle to consumer trust. In a Cameroonian market marked by informality, consumers' inability to distinguish authentic messages from manipulated ones weakens the persuasive impact of influencers—especially when they lack reliable tools to verify content accuracy.

Added to this is the recurrent issue of online scams, widely mentioned by respondents. Testimonies refer to fake profiles, undelivered orders, and schemes orchestrated by unscrupulous sellers. As one respondent stated: *"You write, you place your order, and then you don't receive anything"; "Some people can create fake profiles"; "There is too much scamming on social media."* These negative experiences generate widespread mistrust toward digital transactions, which directly undermines trust in influencers associated with such environments. This dynamic aligns with the logic of commitment and reciprocity [22]: when expectations in an exchange relationship are betrayed, the credibility of the entire influence mechanism is compromised. In this context, influencer marketing—meant to bring consumers and brands closer—may paradoxically deepen distrust and reduce individuals' willingness to adopt responsible consumption behaviors.

Another major barrier concerns the proliferation of fraud and counterfeit products. Participants emphasize the difficulty of distinguishing original from imitation products, noting that *"social media does not guarantee the use of quality products"; "There is counterfeiting"; "Users do not always have the means or knowledge to detect counterfeit products."* This uncertainty increases the risk of purchasing harmful or ineffective cosmetics, as illustrated by the remark: *"It has actually increased the chances of getting low-quality cosmetic products."* Here, influencers' role becomes paradoxically weakened: rather than serving as trusted intermediaries, they may be perceived as unintentional accomplices in a parallel market that threatens consumer health. This contradiction raises questions about the capacity of influencer marketing to promote responsible consumption in environments where regulatory and certification mechanisms remain embryonic. The Cameroonian context thus highlights a significant gap between the promises of digital authenticity and local economic realities. Finally, a less frequent yet noteworthy barrier concerns the risk of influencer account hacking, mentioned by several participants: *"Many accounts get hacked"; "Influencers are not spared from hacking, so followers are not safe either."* Such situations create a climate of digital insecurity and heighten consumer fears of exposure to manipulation or fraud.

Discussion of the Main Research Findings

The findings of this study confirm that influencers play an ambivalent role in fostering awareness of responsible consumption in Cameroon. On the one hand, several respondents acknowledge the capacity of influencers to popularize sustainable practices, democratize access to information, and translate abstract norms of responsibility into concrete actions. This

observation aligns with Kelman's (1958) seminal work on social influence, in which identification and internalization serve as powerful mechanisms shaping behavior. Numerous participants, for example, stated that physical resemblance or perceived social proximity to an influencer creates a "mirror effect" that enhances the reception of responsible consumption messages. However, this dynamic is mitigated by persistent suspicions of manipulation and self-interest, echoing [14] analysis of the fragility of authenticity in a sphere increasingly dominated by the commodification of influence. Our results thus highlight a structural tension within influencer marketing: the coexistence of persuasive effectiveness and growing public distrust—a tension that appears particularly acute in the Cameroonian context, marked by weak regulation of digital practices and a high level of economic informality.

The analysis of influencers' recommendations and their impact on purchasing decisions shows that these recommendations exert a tangible influence, although moderated by varying levels of trust and skepticism. This ambivalence is consistent with congruence theory [21], which posits that the effectiveness of persuasive communication depends on perceived coherence between the influencer's values and practices and those of consumers. In the Cameroonian case, this congruence extends beyond sustainability-related criteria to include sociocultural markers such as linguistic, religious, or community proximity. Consumers are thus more receptive to recommendations from influencers perceived as authentic and embedded in their everyday environment, rather than distant or artificially constructed figures. These findings resonate with [11], who identify perceived proximity as a key determinant of opinion leadership effectiveness. Yet the persistence of skepticism toward sponsored content supports observations that distrust constitutes a critical variable shaping consumer engagement [24]. In Cameroon—where consumers routinely face proliferating counterfeit products and deceptive advertising practices—this skepticism assumes a structural dimension that significantly constrains the impact of influencer campaigns.

Issues of credibility and legitimacy also emerge as central determinants of how consumers interpret influencers' messages. Cialdini's theory of authority helps explain why influencers perceived as experts (such as beauty professionals or respected public figures) benefit from enhanced credibility. However, our results suggest that legitimacy is also grounded in criteria of morality and social respectability, consistent with the analyses of [43] and [44]. In a setting strongly shaped by religious and community norms, perceived integrity becomes as important as technical expertise. Furthermore, Gouldner's reciprocity theory provides insight into engagement dynamics: consumers tend to support influencers with whom they perceive a relationship of trust and equitable exchange. Nevertheless, the proliferation of highly commercialized and artificial sponsored content undermines this reciprocity, fueling distrust and weakening the capacity of influencers to build durable relationships of trust. These patterns extend the findings of [15] on parasocial relationships by showing that, in the Cameroonian context, such relationships are heavily conditioned by sociocultural criteria of legitimacy and integrity—thereby complicating the transfer of trust from influencers to consumers.

Finally, the study reveals several structural barriers to adopting responsible consumption behaviors, stemming from the mismatch between online messages and market realities. Practice theory [36, 37] sheds light on this tension by emphasizing that consumption behaviors are not merely rational individual choices but also social practices embedded in cultural and

social habitus. Consumption habits in Cameroon—shaped by the search for financially accessible products, distrust of formal distribution channels, and the weight of community norms—create constraints that limit the effectiveness of influencers' messages. These findings echo [28], who highlight the vulnerability of ethical consumption to persistent economic and institutional barriers. They also extend the analysis of [45], showing that while social media offer new avenues for communication and monetization, their potential to durably transform behaviors remains contingent upon institutional regulation and alignment with local social structures. In this sense, influencer marketing may constitute a lever for promoting responsible consumption, but its effectiveness requires greater professionalization among influencers and regulatory frameworks capable of curbing abuses and strengthening consumer trust.

In Cameroon, this requirement appears particularly urgent. As [45] notes, the absence of formal regulation undermines the credibility of a rapidly expanding digital ecosystem. The government's recent initiative to tax the income of content creators represents a first step but remains insufficient to ensure transparency and consumer protection. More comprehensive regulation—encompassing fiscal, ethical, and data protection dimensions—is therefore essential to encourage the responsible and sustainable use of influencer marketing. Implementing codes of conduct and certification mechanisms would contribute to the professionalization of influencers, reinforce their credibility, and strengthen public trust.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the contribution of influencer marketing to the promotion of responsible consumption, with a specific focus on the cosmetics market in Cameroon. The findings confirm that influencer marketing represents a relevant lever for encouraging more responsible purchasing behaviors in this sector, particularly when influencers enjoy favorable perceived credibility and convey messages aligned with values of transparency, authenticity, and ethical practice.

On the one hand, this relationship is facilitated by the fact that some respondents perceive influencers' commitment to responsible cosmetic consumption as reflected in their diligence in verifying the quality of information shared about products. This is partly explained by respondents' perception that certain influencers possess sufficient moral integrity to promote responsible consumption. Additionally, some respondents highlighted the use of certifications by influencers as tangible evidence of their commitment to ethical practices. On the other hand, it was noted that influencer recommendations regarding cosmetic products are likely to inspire trust and guide followers' purchasing decisions if, and only if, the influencers have tested the product themselves, share the same skin type as their followers, possess a certain degree of celebrity, and maintain proximity to their audience.

From a theoretical perspective, this research enriches the literature on influencer marketing and responsible consumption by offering a contextualized and integrative approach. It demonstrates that the effectiveness of influence cannot be understood solely through classical models of social influence [32], authority [22] or congruence [21], but must also be considered in conjunction with relational and cultural dynamics specific to emerging African markets. The study highlights the central role of social proximity, perceived morality, and geographic embeddedness as key determinants of credibility, thereby extending dominant theoretical

frameworks often limited to Western contexts. It also builds on by emphasizing that while social media create new spaces for monetization and communication [45], their capacity to transform consumption practices sustainably remains contingent on their integration into local social structures and institutional regulation. In this sense, the study proposes a theoretical framework that links influence, contextual legitimacy, and cultural practices, opening avenues for future research on the mechanisms of message reception and appropriation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for both cosmetic companies and institutional actors. For local and international brands, the results suggest prioritizing the selection of influencers whose legitimacy is grounded in social proximity and perceived morality, thereby strengthening consumer trust in a context marked by concerns about counterfeits. The study also encourages the development of co-created educational campaigns in which influencers clearly communicate the health and environmental benefits of products. Such campaigns could be adapted to local constraints—for example, through small product samples or brief tutorials disseminated via widely used platforms such as WhatsApp and TikTok. Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of embedding communication within local cultural practices. Brands could highlight traditional beauty rituals, emphasize familiar natural ingredients (e.g., shea butter, red palm oil, aloe vera), and leverage collective narratives that resonate with community values. This approach would enhance consumers' appropriation of messages and reinforce the legitimacy of responsible products. Finally, the findings point to the urgent need for public authorities to establish a clear regulatory framework combining influencer certification, oversight of digital advertising, and consumer protection. Consumer associations and local NGOs could also serve as trusted intermediaries to raise awareness of counterfeiting risks and promote ethical consumption practices, contributing to a more transparent and sustainable ecosystem.

While this study offers significant insights into the role of influencers in promoting responsible consumption, it presents certain limitations. First, the sample of 60 participants, though substantial, is limited to a specific population, which may constrain the generalizability of the results to the broader Cameroonian population. Second, the qualitative methodology, while rich and detailed, does not allow for establishing clear causal relationships between the variables examined. Finally, this research primarily focuses on consumer perceptions, with limited attention given to influencers' perspectives themselves. This limitation opens avenues for future research that could adopt mixed-method approaches—combining quantitative and qualitative data—to more fully capture the complex dynamics between influencer marketing and responsible consumption.

To further extend these findings, longitudinal studies could provide insight into the long-term effects of influencer marketing on responsible consumption behaviors. Another promising direction would be to explore differences between local and international influencers, analyzing the impact of their origin on perception and influence. Additionally, investigating the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer trust in influencers—considering factors such as personal values and emotional engagement with environmental issues—would deepen understanding. Finally, research could examine the role of influencer marketing in other sectors in Cameroon, thereby capturing the broader scope of its influence on the transformation of

consumer behaviors.

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