



# Let me deinfluence you! The impacts of deinfluencing content

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Received: 28 February 2025 / Accepted: 6 January 2026  
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## Abstract

Social media influencers strive to establish themselves as knowledgeable, desirable sources of information for consumers' purchase decisions. However, the glut of sponsored product endorsements on social media fuels consumer skepticism and undermines influencer trustworthiness. Arguably, *deinfluencing content*—organic social media posts in which influencers discourage consumers from purchasing certain products—might help restore trust. Drawing on influencer marketing research, attribution theory, and persuasion knowledge, the authors derive a conceptual model to predict how deinfluencing content affects consumers, influencers, and brands. With a specific focus on short, vertical videos, a pilot study and four preregistered experiments involving 1,456 participants demonstrate that deinfluencing content enhances influencer trustworthiness by reducing skepticism about their motives, which thereby strengthens consumers' purchase intentions toward subsequently endorsed products. However, the effectiveness of influencer recommendations diminishes if they appear in sponsored collaborations with brands whose products the influencers have previously discouraged. These findings offer theoretical insights into the evolving landscape of influencer communications and provide actionable implications for influencers seeking to build trust-based relationships with online audiences, as well as for brands considering collaborations with influencers who share deinfluencing content.

**Keywords** Influencer marketing · Deinfluencing · Short vertical videos · Skepticism · Trustworthiness

## Introduction

*Let me take a second to ✨ de-influence you ✨.*

*Here are some things I was heavily influenced to buy that aren't worth the money for me—but that doesn't mean I don't love the brands for other products! ❤️*

—Gabriella Lindley (@gabriella; 588 K followers, February 9, 2025, Instagram).

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Michael Haenlein served as Guest Editor for this article.

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Social media influencers are widely recognized for their effectiveness in promoting products, through both sponsored partnerships (i.e., influencer marketing) and unsponsored (organic) recommendations (Libai et al., 2025; Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). The persuasive power of such endorsements traditionally has been attributed to influencers' perceived trustworthiness, such that consumers regard them as more credible, authentic, and relatable than celebrities, journalists, or corporate brands (Pan et al., 2025; Schouten et al., 2021). Yet surges in influencer marketing and sponsored content on social media also prompt consumer skepticism about influencers' actual authenticity (Duffek et al., 2025; Rynarzewska et al., 2025). Recent reports, indicating that less than 35% of consumers trust influencers' recommendations (GWI, 2024; Ipsos, 2023), challenge a key element of influencers' appeal. Such eroded trust raises concerns for influencers' own performance outcomes (Bradley, 2024; Karagür et al., 2022), the \$30 billion influencer marketing industry (Statista, 2025a), and brands that seek strategic alternatives to conventional digital advertising methods (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025a; WordPress, 2024).

Practitioners argue that the growing distrust reflects the dawning recognition among consumers that influencers are motivated by financial gains rather than genuine interest in helping them make informed purchase decisions (Petrovska, 2024; Weisman-Pitts, 2025). Such skepticism arises from real-world examples of influencers who fail to disclose brand partnerships (Gilbert et al., 2023; MacRae, 2024), endorse products they do not personally use (Dufek et al., 2025; Friedlander, 2021), or engage in sponsorships that harm consumers (Giuffrida, 2024; Laborie, 2023). Broader criticisms also cite influencer marketing for its promotion of overhyped products, unnecessary purchases, and overconsumption (Mojica, 2024; Zote, 2024). Although many content creators explicitly strive for transparency and authenticity in their endorsements (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022), the maturing field of influencer marketing must acknowledge and grapple with the challenge of declining consumer trust (Ekinci et al., 2025). In this evolving landscape, consumer skepticism marks a pivotal shift that might require influencers to cultivate more personal brands and authenticity and also prompt brands to pursue more selective, long-term collaborations or rely instead on in-house creators (Mzizi & Masuike, 2025; Schaefer, 2024).

In this transforming environment, we propose that a relevant, promising response could be to embrace *deinfluencing content*—defined as organic social media posts in which influencers advise against purchasing certain products (Benchetrit, 2023; Zote, 2024). In our effort to understand broad, ongoing developments related to trust in influencer marketing, we consider *deinfluencing content* as it appears alongside influencers' traditional organic endorsements, sponsored partnerships, and other content. Notably, prior influencer trustworthiness research (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) mainly addresses positive endorsements and individual post characteristics. To expand this view, we postulate that, if influencers incorporate some *deinfluencing content* into their communications, their posts will feature more balance and transparency. Over time, this strategic approach might help them avoid gaining a reputation for being mere brand advocates and instead establish them as critical content creators who engage thoughtfully with their audiences. This notion also extends beyond the efforts of sustainability or anti-consumption advocates (e.g., Benchetrit, 2023; Karimi, 2023). *Deinfluencing* represents a broad, trust-building strategy that mainstream influencers can adopt strategically.

Drawing on attribution theory (Kelley, 1967; Zuckerman, 1979) and persuasion knowledge research (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Isaac & Calder, 2025), we argue specifically that *deinfluencing content* reshapes online audiences' attributions for the motives that lead to influencer

recommendations and thus reduces their skepticism. The attribution shift improves audiences' perceptions of influencer trustworthiness, which then strengthens the effectiveness of the influencers' other, positive product endorsements. To examine how *deinfluencing content* might drive positive outcomes for influencers and the brands they endorse, we conduct a pilot study and a series of preregistered experiments with consumers who actively engage with influencers on social media. For this research, we focus on video content, a format that is both dominant in digital consumption (Fileri et al., 2023; Penttinen et al., 2022) and, unfortunately, underexplored in extant research. Short, vertical videos represent the most popular content format on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Leung et al., 2022a; Mulier et al., 2021), which also represent channels on which *deinfluencing* is gaining strong traction (Karimi, 2023; Perez, 2024).

Our investigation establishes three key contributions for influencer marketing research (Chen et al., 2023; Libai et al., 2025). First, our conceptualization of *deinfluencing content* enriches communications literature (Leung et al., 2022b; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). We clearly distinguish *deinfluencing content* from traditional influencer content (e.g., Pan et al., 2025) or (negative) online reviews (e.g., Allard et al., 2020), thereby highlighting its unique effects on consumer perceptions and decision-making. Second, relative to studies of influencer motives (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Thomas et al., 2024), we demonstrate that the presence of *deinfluencing content* (vs. positive endorsements alone) favorably affects audiences' perceptions of influencer trustworthiness, which implies its potential to mitigate the ongoing influencer trustworthiness crisis (Ekinci et al., 2025). We also identify reduced consumer skepticism about influencers' motives as the key mechanism driving this effect (Isaac & Grayson, 2017; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018). Third, as a complement to literature on product recommendations (Beichert et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2019), we specify how *deinfluencing content* can benefit subsequent endorsements. That is, by engaging in *deinfluencing*, influencers can encourage enhanced purchase intentions among their online audiences for subsequent, non-sponsored recommendations, because they increase audiences' perceptions of their trustworthiness. However, this effect weakens if influencers engage in sponsored collaborations with brands whose products they previously *deinfluenced*, likely because those partnerships are perceived as inconsistent and potentially opportunistic.

In line with these contributions, we offer practical guidance for how influencers can effectively integrate *deinfluencing content* into their social media communications to enhance their trustworthiness and strengthen the impact of their product recommendations. We also offer managerial implications for brands seeking to collaborate with

influencers, including strategies to navigate the evolving influencer marketing landscape and mitigate potential risks associated with deinfluencing.

## Research background

### Influencer marketing

Influencers gain substantial followings and impacts on social media platforms by consistently creating and sharing original content with their online audiences (Libai et al., 2025; Penttinen, 2025). In their communications, influencers usually share aspects of their everyday lives, personal experiences, and opinions, often focused on specific topics or niches that resonate with their followers, such as food, travel, or beauty (Mouritzen et al., 2024; Sokolova et al., 2024). Within these niches, influencers establish their credibility and, thus, considerable influence over the behaviors and consumption decisions of their online audiences (Beichert et al., 2023; Filieri et al., 2023).

Recognizing these powerful impacts, marketers have actively sought partnerships in which content creators endorse products, giving rise to influencer marketing (Dufek et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2022b). In this distinct form of marketing (AMA, 2025), influencers might endorse specific products or entire brands, express positive sentiments about the offerings, or even directly suggest that followers make purchases (De Veirman et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2022a). In return, influencers typically receive some form of compensation, such as monetary rewards or gifts (Karagür et al., 2022; Nilsson et al., 2023). Such sponsored posts have become integral to social media communications, offering benefits to consumers, influencers, and the brands they endorse (Libai et al., 2025). For consumers, the content provides valuable information that helps facilitate or simplify their purchase decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). For influencers, the partnerships provide a source of income and inspiration for creating content that resonates with their audiences and aligns with their social media personas (Audrezet et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Finally, for brands, influencer marketing has proven effective in helping them achieve various marketing goals, including increasing awareness, improving brand attitudes, and boosting sales (Beichert et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022a).

Influencer communications featuring purchase recommendations also extend beyond sponsored brand partnerships. Many influencers create non-sponsored, organic posts in which they discuss various products and offer opinions based on their independent, personal experiences, rather than any monetary incentives from brands (Chung et al., 2023; Filieri et al., 2023). In these communications,

influencers are not limited to the favorable sentiments that might be required by the brands with which they partner; they can openly and flexibly share negative perspectives too. When they do so, such posts may discourage consumers from purchasing certain products. This deinfluencing content, a relevant form of influencer communication, has received limited attention in academic research to date.

### Deinfluencing content in social media communications

As noted, we define *deinfluencing content* as organic, non-sponsored social media posts in which influencers discourage online audiences from purchasing specific products, typically by offering reasoned arguments. For example, influencers might share personal negative experiences with a particular product or suggest that its price is not justified by its quality. Other posts might feature reasoning based on ethical concerns about the products' negative environmental impacts or the brand's core values. The rationale for sharing deinfluencing content thus can vary, just as it can for positive endorsements (e.g., Filieri et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023), according to influencers' personal experiences, preferences, and beliefs. Notably, these posts are not always entirely negative. In balanced evaluations, influencers might acknowledge certain positive attributes of products while still advising against their purchase. Regardless of the rationale and valence though, deinfluencing content likely prompts consumers to evaluate their potential purchases critically, rather than engage impulsively (Miranda et al., 2024).

Deinfluencing posts share some similarities with negative reviews by regular consumers (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Esmark Jones et al., 2018); both sources aim to discourage or question specific purchase decisions. However, they differ fundamentally. In particular, negative reviews are authored by complete strangers, unknown to the review readers (Deng et al., 2021; Penttinen et al., 2022), whereas (de)influencing posts come from influencers with whom consumers have established (parasocial) relationships (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Because the familiarity that results from these relationships enhances perceptions of influencers' trustworthiness, they can affect consumer purchase behaviors, even with just a single post (Hugh et al., 2022; Mulier et al., 2021). In addition, consumers might intentionally seek online reviews to support their decisions about a specific product they already are considering buying (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Penttinen et al., 2022). In contrast, consumers encounter (de)influencing content on social media spontaneously and may lack any initial interest or knowledge about the specific products that influencers discuss (Libai et al., 2025). Thus, deinfluencing content can dissuade consumers from making purchases and also might shape their first impressions of the focal products.

Because deinfluencing content seeks to influence or change perceptions and behaviors among online audiences in negative ways, we assert that it incorporates elements of both traditional (positive) influencing content and negative consumer reviews, while also differing from them in its underlying dynamics and outcomes. As Table 1 indicates, deinfluencing content represents a distinctive category of

**Table 1** Comparison of influencing content, deinfluencing content, and negative reviews

	Influencing content	Deinfluencing content	Negative reviews
<i>Source</i>	Social media influencers who regularly share product-related content within their known niches of interest and expertise as part of their broader social media presence		Regular consumers who occasionally post product-related opinions
<i>Target Audience</i>	Online audiences who actively follow and engage with influencers, often form parasocial relationships with them, and express interest in the niche topics influencers focus on in their communications. They might not deliberately seek information about the product in question and even might not be aware of its existence. Exposure to information about potential purchases is spontaneous, often occurring during interactions with influencer content on social media platforms. However, they generally express interest in learning about products from influencers and expect influencers to help guide their purchase decisions with honest recommendations		Regular consumers who typically have no preexisting relationships with the authors of negative reviews. Generally, they already have considered purchasing the product in question, so they actively seek relevant information to support their decision-making
<i>Message Intent</i>	To encourage a purchase decision by showcasing benefits, features, and positive experiences associated with a product	To discourage a purchase decision, usually by providing some reasoned arguments, or to identify possible drawbacks associated with a product	
<i>Key Platforms</i>	Social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok		Retailer and review websites, like Amazon and Yelp
<i>Brand Relationships</i>	Sponsored collaborations with brands and organic recommendations unrelated to brand affiliations or incentives	Typically independent of brand affiliations or incentives	Typically independent of brand affiliations or incentives. However, retailers may offer incentives for sharing reviews of any valence

influencer communications on social media. Similar to positive endorsements, it relies on parasocial relationships and the influencer's authority within respected niches, forming part of an ongoing dialogue with online audiences. Yet it discourages purchases, like negative reviews, though reviews typically feature more brief and transactional interactions. This duality uniquely positions deinfluencing content at the intersection: It discourages purchases of specific products while also contributing to the evolving relational dynamics between influencers and their audiences.

Furthermore, deinfluencing posts typically are not a primary focus of social media influencers, though we note some exceptions. Some influencers advocate for zero-waste living (e.g., Bea Johnson, @zerowastehome) and promote efforts to avoid overspending and overconsumption (e.g., Christina Mychas, @christina.mychas). Others specialize in critiquing brands (e.g., Venetia La Manna, @venetialamanna) or influencer marketing overall (e.g., Diana Wiebe, @depressiondotgov). Beyond this notable, vocal minority though, most content creators prioritize other, more prevalent types of content, such as non-promotional communications or (non-)sponsored product recommendations (Fileri et al., 2023). That is, influencers who engage in deinfluencing still predominantly share positive recommendations.

Even when engaged in deinfluencing, they also tend to integrate some explicitly positive sentiment in the messages, beyond acknowledging positive elements of the discouraged product. First, they might offer alternative, positive recommendations as complements to their deinfluencing message. For example, instead of solely criticizing an outdated hotel, an influencer might propose an alternative, nearby hotel where they had a positive experience. Second, influencers sometimes advise against purchasing a specific product from a brand but express support for other offerings from the same brand. In negative posts about seasonal cookie flavors for example, influencers also might mention that the traditional cookie flavors the company sells remain their favorites. Third, some content creators explicitly acknowledge that, despite their personal dissatisfaction with an offering, it might represent a good purchase decision for others. For example, influencers could describe how a recently purchased cleanser dried out their sensitive skin but recognize its suitability for people with other skin types.

Because deinfluencing involves elements of both traditional influencing content and negative reviews, it constitutes a unique type of social media communications. In turn, it likely has distinct, and as yet unknown, impacts on consumers' responses to both influencers and the brands whose offerings are mentioned in their posts (Penttinen, 2025).

## Conceptual model and hypotheses

In our effort to determine how deinfluencing content affects influencers’ perceived trustworthiness and the outcomes of their non-sponsored and sponsored endorsements, shared on social media, we propose the conceptual model in Fig. 1. The hypotheses it contains are grounded in both attribution theory (Folkes, 1988; Kelley, 1967) and persuasion knowledge research (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Isaac & Grayson, 2020).

First, attribution theory suggests that people seek to understand others’ motives (i.e., influencers who share product recommendations) and interpret them as either genuine attempts to provide helpful information or strategies to gain personal benefits (Rifon et al., 2004; Zuckerman, 1979). These attributions then shape consumers’ attitudes and responses to influencers and their recommendations, whether they foster trust and support or, conversely, lead to skepticism and avoidance (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Thomas et al., 2024). When influencers actively discourage rather than promote certain purchases (i.e., engage in deinfluencing), such attributions may be especially salient. Second, persuasion knowledge research predicts that consumers may activate defensive mechanisms like skepticism or resistance when they recognize persuasive or manipulative intent (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022; Isaac & Calder, 2025). Such mechanisms appear particularly relevant for influencer marketing, whose online audiences are increasingly aware of the potential commercial motives underlying endorsements on social media.

### Influencer trustworthiness and skepticism

The effectiveness of influencer endorsements stems largely from the credibility that influencers build as reputable sources of information (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Munnukka et al., 2019). Credibility comprises two main dimensions—expertise and

trustworthiness—both of which shape audience perceptions of influencers and their content (Dhun & Dangi, 2023; Ohanian, 1990). *Expertise* refers to the influencer’s depth of knowledge and ability to provide accurate, relevant insights (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Hughes et al., 2019). Although essential, it represents a baseline expectation of influencers within their respective niches (Mouritzen et al., 2024; Yuan & Lou, 2020). *Trustworthiness* instead reflects qualities such as honesty, transparency, and integrity, which signal that influencers prioritize accuracy and audience interests over promotional motives (Breves et al., 2019; Penttinen et al., 2022). It helps consumers identify influencers who provide genuine, unbiased recommendations (Filieri et al., 2023; Lu & Chen, 2023). Importantly, trustworthiness also encompasses elements of sincerity—defined as expressing genuine thoughts and feelings (Gillath et al., 2010)—which can enhance both persuasiveness and favorable audience responses (Daniels & Wu, 2024; Leung et al., 2022b), in line with our research focus.

Therefore, we examine the impact of deinfluencing content on *influencer trustworthiness* specifically, as a critical quality that affects influencers’ ability to shape online audiences’ attitudes and behaviors but that is not a given. It cannot be established by a single observable behavior captured in an individual post. Rather, influencer trustworthiness emerges from the interplay of influencing, deinfluencing, and other content, which cumulatively shape audience perceptions.

Because influencer endorsements, particularly sponsored ones, signal that influencers might be motivated by personal gains (Chen et al., 2023; Rynarzewska et al., 2025), these communications represent attempts to persuade, such that the endorsements they share may appear less trustworthy (Pan et al., 2025; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). To process such communications, consumers usually engage in attributional reasoning and act as “amateur psychologists” (Folkes, 1988; Kelley, 1967) to infer the motives underlying

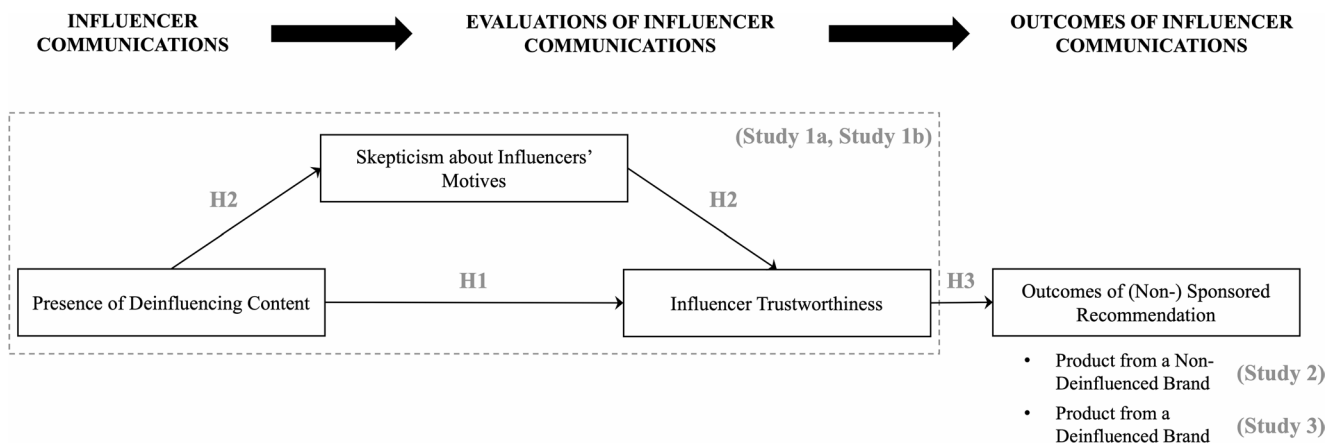


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

influencers' behaviors, which might be altruistic or self-serving (Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018; Rifon et al., 2004). Influencers with *altruistic motives* act out of a genuine desire to benefit audiences, and they tend to foster trust and admiration (Baek & Yoon, 2022; Thomas et al., 2024). Influencers who appear driven by *self-serving motives* and personal gain instead prompt doubt, distrust, and disengagement (Alhouti et al., 2016; Aw & Chuah, 2021).

These dynamics inform the influence of *skepticism*, which is a tendency to question, doubt, or distrust the sincerity and motives of others (Foreh & Grier, 2003; Isaac & Grayson, 2017; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Influencer skepticism is particularly heightened when audiences attribute their actions to self-serving motives, such as those related to profits or brand relationships (Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018; Rynarzewska et al., 2025). Once such attributions arise, consumers often activate persuasion knowledge that reflects their understanding of the commercial intent behind marketing messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). This activation does not always lead to negative outcomes (Friestad & Wright, 1994); consumers might appreciate transparent sponsorship disclosures, for example (Cao & Belo, 2024). But it does prompt consumers to scrutinize the message more critically, often resulting in resistance and reduced receptivity to the message.

Sponsored content can evoke particularly strong persuasion knowledge, because consumers recognize that when paid for, influencer endorsements mimic traditional brand advertising (Boerman & Müller, 2022; Waltenrath, 2024). However, non-sponsored influencer content could appear promotional too, due to its similarity, in tone and structure, to sponsored posts. Furthermore, some influencers still fall short of full transparency in their sponsored posts. Therefore, audiences might perceive exclusively positive recommendations generally as persuasive attempts rather than genuine opinions, which ultimately would diminish their perceptions of the influencers' trustworthiness as sources of information.

The presence of deinfluencing content could mitigate such suspicion. If influencers advise audiences to avoid specific purchases, they demonstrate that they are not sharing recommendations solely to promote the brand's offerings, even if they have entered into a lucrative sponsored partnership with that brand (Ren et al., 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The deviation might appear more altruistic (Baek & Yoon, 2022; Rifon et al., 2004), allowing influencers to signal their desire to provide consumers with objective, informed purchase guidance rather than just drive sales for brands (Lee & Johnson, 2022; Liao & Chen, 2024). It also indicates that their recommendations, negative or positive, are relatively free of external pressures. Such signals should enhance overall perceptions of influencer trustworthiness.

In a related effect, we predict that the presence of deinfluencing content disrupts the activation of persuasion knowledge and the belief that influencer communications represent manipulative sales tactics (Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). By deviating from the overtly promotional tone typically associated with influencer marketing, deinfluencing content can shift consumer perceptions of influencers, portraying them as more transparent, caring for the interests of their online audiences, and less commercially motivated (Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Penttinen et al., 2022). In turn, consumers might be less likely to exhibit defensive resistance and skepticism about influencers' motives for sharing product recommendations, as can be triggered by traditional endorsements (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2024). By alleviating skepticism and reducing the negative effects associated with persuasion knowledge, deinfluencing content should enhance audiences' perceptions of overall influencer trustworthiness, leading us to offer the following hypotheses:

- H1** The presence of deinfluencing content in influencer communications enhances influencer trustworthiness.
- H2** Reduced skepticism about influencers' motives for sharing recommendations positively mediates the enhancing impact of deinfluencing content on influencer trustworthiness.

### Deinfluencing and influencer endorsements

Online audiences are selective in choosing which influencers to follow, and they often prioritize content creators they perceive as trustworthy (Breves et al., 2019; Gerrath & Usrey, 2021). Consumers also exercise caution in response to product recommendations, such that they prefer to rely on suggestions from influencers they consider trustworthy (Hugh et al., 2022; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). If they suspect manipulative attempts, they likely respond negatively to both the influencers and their promotional messages (Isaac & Grayson, 2020; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). According to persuasion knowledge research, such adverse reactions are especially pronounced after repeated exposure to sponsored posts, which heightens consumers' awareness of persuasive intent (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Kim et al., 2021) and encourages them to assume influencer recommendations are driven by financial incentives rather than genuine enthusiasm (Boerman et al., 2017; Rynarzewska et al., 2025). Because influencers' organic product recommendations tend to be visually and stylistically similar to sponsored promotions, this skepticism can spill over to non-sponsored content. In other words, the cues that trigger

persuasion knowledge in response to paid endorsements may prompt similar reactance to independent recommendations.

To deal with such skepticism, transparency can be critical, because it mitigates some negative effects of persuasion knowledge activation (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Walentrath, 2024) and even can enhance consumer engagement (Cao & Belo, 2024). As influencer marketing has matured, to become a normative feature of online content, some consumers even prefer that their favorite content creators to engage in brand collaborations (Chen et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2019). To ensure that such collaborations are positively received though, influencers must maintain trustworthiness and clearly communicate the nature of their relationships with the brands (Breves et al., 2019; Sokolova et al., 2024).

Building on this theorizing, we propose that the presence of deinfluencing content in influencer communications, which emphasizes downsides of the offering and discourages purchases, signals independence from brand interests and a genuine commitment to help consumers make informed purchasing decisions. Sharing such content appears altruistic; influencers are unlikely to benefit directly or financially from discouraging purchases. In providing their honest evaluations and expressing independent opinions, some of which diverge from brand interests, influencers demonstrate their thoughtfulness and recommendation selectivity. They are not promoting products indiscriminately but offering critical opinions. A willingness to critique certain products, while still endorsing others, also should accumulate and increase overall trustworthiness (Cao & Belo, 2024; Dhun & Dangi, 2023), resulting in more favorable evaluations of influencers' subsequent positive recommendations, whether organic or sponsored. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

- H3** The improved trustworthiness that results from posting deinfluencing content increases the effectiveness of subsequent (a) non-sponsored (organic) and (b) sponsored influencer endorsements.

## Empirical studies

To explore the effects of deinfluencing content, we conducted a pilot study and four preregistered experimental studies (see Appendix A for preregistration details). To ensure that our experiments reflect the realities of influencer content, we also analyzed 1,000 videos posted by 20 top influencers on TikTok and Instagram during spring and summer of 2025. The analysis confirmed that deinfluencing is present but relatively rare, in support of both our conceptualization of deinfluencing and the design of our experiments (see Appendix B). In Studies 1a and 1b, we test the hypotheses regarding the impact of deinfluencing content

on skepticism toward influencers' motives and trustworthiness. To extend these insights, Studies 2 and 3 focus on how the presence of deinfluencing content affects sponsored and non-sponsored product recommendations. In Study 2, the content includes an endorsement of a product sold by a brand other than the one featured in the deinfluencing video; in Study 3, we explore the outcomes of endorsing a different product by the same brand.

In all these studies, the non-sponsored posts were designed to resemble organic product recommendations commonly shared by influencers, and the sponsored posts included a clear verbal disclosure, in line with modern transparency standards and regulatory requirements for paid partnerships. Table 2 details each study and the corresponding experimental conditions, and Appendix C provides information about the study materials, including illustration of the influencer profile and links to the videos employed in each study.

All the studies involve deinfluencing content that prioritizes informative and constructive insights, rather than provocative content or calls for anti-consumption behaviors. The research context is the beauty market niche, chosen due to the widespread popularity of related content among online audiences and the frequent brand collaborations it prompts. In detail, beauty and skincare ranks among the top three product categories promoted by influencers; it accounts for more than 11% of total sales driven by content creators in the United States (Statista, 2025b). The beauty industry also represents a relatively accessible product category, requiring lower financial investments than sectors like technology or travel. Thus, it is likely that consumers can realistically engage with and respond to the experimental stimuli we developed. Finally, the beauty influencer marketing space has been particularly affected by the rise of deinfluencing, so relevant, context-rich, real-world examples informed the development of our experimental conditions (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025b).

## Pilot study

In a single-factor (deinfluencing content: present vs. absent) between-subjects experiment, all participants viewed two videos in which a real-life influencer provided only positive product recommendations (beauty products she endorsed). Then a third video varied by condition, such that in the deinfluencing absent condition, the influencer shared another positive recommendation, whereas in the deinfluencing present condition, the influencer discussed products she advised against purchasing. Showing multiple videos in a row simulates a typical environment on social media platforms that feature short-form video.

**Table 2** Overview of empirical studies

Study	Purpose	Conditions (Videos)
<i>Pilot</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explore whether participants can distinguish deinfluencing content from traditional influencing content</li> <li>- Explore potential outcomes associated with deinfluencing content</li> </ul>	<p><b>Manipulation:</b> Presence of deinfluencing content (absent vs. present), video order randomized.</p> <p><b>Condition 1 (No Deinfluencing)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Influencing (several products)</li> <li>2. Influencing (several products)</li> <li>3. Influencing (several products)</li> </ol> <p><b>Manipulation:</b> Presence of deinfluencing content (absent vs. present).</p> <p><b>Condition 2 (Deinfluencing)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Deinfluencing (several products)</li> <li>2. Influencing (several products)</li> <li>3. Influencing (several products)</li> </ol>
<i>Study 1a</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Examine how deinfluencing content affects influencer trustworthiness</li> <li>- Identify mechanisms underlying this effect</li> </ul>	<p><b>Condition 1 (No Deinfluencing)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Influencing (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing (body cream, Brand B)</li> </ol> <p><b>Manipulation:</b> Presence of deinfluencing content (absent vs. balanced vs. severe).</p> <p><b>Condition 1 (No Deinfluencing)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Influencing (retinol, Brand C)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing (body cream, Brand A)</li> </ol>
<i>Study 1b</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Replicate findings from Study 1a</li> <li>- Test if balanced and severe deinfluencing differentially affect influencer trustworthiness and underlying mechanisms</li> </ul>	<p><b>Condition 3 (Severe Deinfluencing)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Balanced Deinfluencing</b> (retinol, Brand C)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing (body cream, Brand A)</li> </ol> <p><b>Condition 4 (Deinfluencing × Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Deinfluencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing, <b>Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand B)</li> </ol>
<i>Study 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Replicate findings from previous studies</li> <li>- Determine how deinfluencing content affects intentions to purchase products that appear in sponsored and non-sponsored endorsements (third video) for a brand other than the one deinfluenced</li> </ul>	<p><b>Manipulations:</b> Presence of deinfluencing content (absent vs. present) × Type of endorsement (non-sponsored vs. sponsored).</p> <p><b>Notes:</b> Different products of different brands appear in video 1 versus video 3.</p> <p><b>Condition 1 (No Deinfluencing × Non-Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Influencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing, <b>Non-Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand B)</li> </ol> <p><b>Condition 2 (Deinfluencing × Non-Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Deinfluencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing, <b>Non-Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand B)</li> </ol>
<i>Study 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Replicate findings from previous studies</li> <li>- Investigate how deinfluencing content affects intentions to purchase products that appear in sponsored and non-sponsored endorsements (fourth video) for the same brand as the one deinfluenced</li> </ul>	<p><b>Manipulations:</b> Presence of deinfluencing (absent vs. present) × Type of endorsement (non-sponsored vs. sponsored).</p> <p><b>Notes:</b> Different products of the same brand appear in video 1 and video 4.</p> <p><b>Condition 1 (No Deinfluencing × Non-Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Influencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing (cleanser, Brand D)</li> <li>4. Influencing, <b>Non-Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand A)</li> </ol> <p><b>Condition 2 (Deinfluencing × Non-Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Deinfluencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing (cleanser, Brand D)</li> <li>4. Influencing, <b>Non-Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand A)</li> </ol> <p><b>Condition 3 (No Deinfluencing × Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Influencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing (cleanser, Brand D)</li> <li>4. Influencing, <b>Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand A)</li> </ol> <p><b>Condition 4 (Deinfluencing × Sponsored)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Deinfluencing</b> (sunscreen, Brand A)</li> <li>2. Unrelated (day in life)</li> <li>3. Influencing, <b>Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand B)</li> <li>4. Influencing, <b>Sponsored</b> (body cream, Brand A)</li> </ol>

**Bold text highlights differences in the short vertical videos displayed to participants across the different conditions. Except for the pilot study, for which the videos were sourced from the Internet, the studies feature carefully scripted videos, featuring a professional actress, specifically developed for this research. Appendix C provides links to the videos included in the experimental conditions for all preregistered studies**

All the videos were sourced from the internet, were of similar length (25–30 s), were not sponsored (i.e., not accompanied by any disclaimer indicating a sponsorship or paid promotion), and featured a popular beauty influencer discussing products available at Sephora, a leading beauty and personal care retailer. The influencer we selected for this study had shared deinfluencing content in her real-life social media content (see Appendix B). At the beginning of the study, we asked participants to imagine they needed to purchase a gift for a friend who is interested in beauty products. While browsing social media, they came across the account of a beauty influencer that looked promising and caught their interest, so they decided to watch some videos. After watching the videos associated with their randomly assigned condition, all participants completed a short survey.

The initial sample included 117 business students who follow influencers on social media; after excluding 15 participants who failed at least one of the two attention checks (see Appendix D), we analyzed data from 102 respondents (40.2% men, 59.8% women, 0% prefer not to say). Notably, the respondents were based in a market where Sephora is not present, and none of the participants indicated prior familiarity with the influencer. For the manipulation check, we asked them to indicate their agreement with the statement, “The influencer shared only positive product recommendations” (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed the successful manipulation; participants clearly distinguished between the conditions ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 6.09$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 1.73$ ;  $F(1, 100) = 356.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .80$ ).

We measured influencer trustworthiness (adapted from Ohanian, 1990) on a 7-point Likert scale (see Appendix E). According to a one-way ANOVA, participants perceived the influencer as more trustworthy in the deinfluencing condition ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.68$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 5.18$ ;  $F(1, 100) = 6.37$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ). For exploratory purposes, we assessed perceived altruism (adapted from Ryan & Connell, 1989) and attitudes toward Sephora, the featured retailer brand (adapted from Kempf & Smith, 1998), and we present the detailed measures and results in Appendix E. Furthermore, we asked participants about their agreement with the statement, “The videos shared by the influencer were sponsored,” to assess their overall perceptions of the content in each condition, none of which included any sponsored posts. The significant difference in responses ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.97$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 3.68$ ;  $F(1, 100) = 14.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.12$ ) suggests that the presence of deinfluencing content mitigates the negative effects of persuasive knowledge activation among online audiences.

After this experiment ended, we provided all the participants with a brief introduction to the phenomenon of

deinfluencing content and its growing prominence on social media, then asked them to respond to two open-ended questions: “What is your opinion regarding the trend of deinfluencing?” and “What implications do you think this trend has for (1) consumers, (2) influencers and (3) brands?” A thematic analysis of their responses (Braun & Clarke, 2012) provides some novel insights into consumers’ perceptions of deinfluencing.

Specifically, we identified three themes. The first, *Authenticity and Trust*, reinforces the quantitative results pertaining to trustworthiness. Participants viewed deinfluencing as a counterbalance to commercialized influencer marketing, and they acknowledged that honest and sometimes unexpected opinions enhanced their perceptions of authenticity and credibility. The second theme, *Consumer Education and Ethical Consumption*, indicates that participants valued deinfluencing for helping them make more informed and deliberate purchase decisions. Beyond individual decision-making, some responses connected deinfluencing to broader ethical concerns, suggesting that such content could encourage more responsible consumption patterns and motivate brands to act more conscientiously. Finally, the *Risks of Manipulation and Misinformation* theme captures concerns that deinfluencing could be misused to spread biased or inaccurate claims, potentially harming brands or misleading consumers, especially if it were sponsored by unethical competitors (for details, see Appendix E).

The pilot study thus indicates that the presence of deinfluencing content in influencer communications significantly affects perceptions of influencer trustworthiness. It also suggests some likely drivers of this positive effect. Participants perceived that the influencers sharing deinfluencing content considered the interests of their online audiences and offered more independent opinions, according to both the quantitative findings and the thematic analysis (Appendix E). This preliminary evidence indicates that reduced skepticism about influencers’ underlying motives, or the extent to which audiences question the sincerity of product recommendations (positive or negative), could function as a mediator. Furthermore, the pilot study highlights broader impacts of deinfluencing on perceptions of influencers’ accountability for their recommendations (positive and negative) and relevant considerations for brands. We leverage these insights in designing the preregistered experimental studies.

## Study 1a

To specify how deinfluencing content affects perceptions of influencer trustworthiness (H1), we sought not only to replicate the pilot study findings but also to investigate whether reduced skepticism toward influencers’ motives explains the positive effect of deinfluencing content on influencer

trustworthiness (H2). We also aimed to address some limitations of the pilot study, which featured posts from a real-life influencer. The focal influencer shared deinfluencing content, but perhaps not surprisingly, that content centered on products other than those she recommended. Furthermore, the influencer referred to multiple beauty products in each of her videos. To reduce such noise across the experimental conditions, we developed our own videos. They closely mimic real influencer content in tone and appearance, but the content in each video focuses on individual products. In addition, we could develop versions in which the same influencer recommended or did not recommend the same product.

Accordingly, we conducted a casting call for a beauty influencer, selected an actress from the submissions, and recorded a series of videos closely mirroring typical influencer content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok; we use these videos in all our preregistered studies. With the exception of Study 1b, the influencer refrains from recommending other products; in all of them, she maintains a neutral tone, deliberately avoiding any emotional expressions that could introduce bias (see Appendix C).

**Experimental design and participants** In the single-factor (deinfluencing content: present vs. absent) between-subjects experiment for Study 1a, participants were instructed to imagine that they had recently started following a beauty influencer on social media. We provided them with an image of the influencer's profile, which was constant across all conditions (Appendix C). The created profile cited fewer than 200,000 followers, to suggest a mid-tier influencer, who tend to be regarded as relatable but still have achieved meaningful reach (Audrezet et al., 2020; Oestreicher, 2025).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, each featuring three videos of similar length (25–30 s). Two of the videos were the same in both conditions: a “day in the life” video<sup>1</sup> and a video of the influencer providing positive recommendations for a body cream. However, the first video differed between conditions. In the deinfluencing absent condition, participants watched a video in which the influencer provided recommendations for a sunscreen. In the deinfluencing present condition, the influencer instead expressed a negative opinion about the same sunscreen. All the product recommendations appeared as non-sponsored endorsements. After viewing the videos, participants completed a brief survey that contained the dependent variables.

<sup>1</sup> All studies included one video that did not focus on any specific product, to enhance realism. Influencers do not share product recommendations exclusively but instead create various types of content, as evidenced by our analysis of real-life social media content (Appendix B).

We solicited Prolific respondents, aged 18–40 years and residing in the United States who are active on Instagram or TikTok and regularly follow beauty influencers, to participate, in return for \$1.40. Of the 229 participants who completed the study, 21 were excluded for failing one or more attention checks (Appendix D) or not completing the study in the maximum time allocated (20 min). The final sample thus included 208 participants (14.4% men, 85.1% women, 0.5% prefer not to say;  $M_{\text{age}} = 31$  years; 62% with at least a bachelor's degree; 90% bought products recommended by influencers at least once).

**Measures** We employed the scales from the pilot study to measure trustworthiness. For skepticism about influencers' motives, we used eight items adapted from Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) and Reimer and Benkenstein (2018). The items all were measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”). As Table 3 reveals, the scales demonstrated reliability and validity. We controlled for participants' age, gender, education, and familiarity with the featured brands, as well as their general influencer marketing skepticism, as measured with a scale adapted from Gaski and Etzel (1986).

**Manipulation check** As in the pilot study, we asked participants if the influencer only shared positive recommendations. A one-way ANOVA revealed that they identified the presence of negative recommendations in the deinfluencing condition ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 6.34$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 2.69$ ;  $F(1, 206) = 487.85$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.70$ ). The manipulation was successful.

**Results** With one-way ANOVAs, we find that the presence of deinfluencing content exerts significant positive impacts on influencer trustworthiness ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.64$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 5.20$ ;  $F(1, 206) = 7.42$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ) and mitigates skepticism about influencer motives ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 3.54$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 3.10$ ;  $F(1, 206) = 6.37$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ). In addition, consistent with the pilot study, we observe a significant difference in participants' overall perceptions that the videos shared by the influencer were sponsored, even though neither condition mentioned any sponsored content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.70$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 3.57$ ;  $F(1, 206) = 21.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.09$ ).

In a mediation analysis (deinfluencing → skepticism → trustworthiness), conducted with the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 4, Hayes, 2022; see Table F4 in Appendix F), we uncover a significant, indirect effect of deinfluencing on influencer trustworthiness through skepticism ( $\beta = 0.45$ ; standard error [SE] = 0.18; 95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.09, 0.79). In confirming a mediating role of skepticism,

**Table 3** Measurement items in preregistered studies

Construct	Source	Measures	Study 1a		Study 1b		Study 2		Study 3	
			$\alpha$	Loadings	$\alpha$	Loadings	$\alpha$	Loadings	$\alpha$	Loadings
<b>Multi-item scales</b>										
To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements: (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree")										
<i>Skepticism about influencer's motives</i>	Adapted from Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) and Reimer and Benkenstein (2018)	I am doubtful about the influencer's intentions behind the videos.	0.94	0.78	0.95	0.87	0.93	0.90	0.94	0.84
		I am skeptical about the influencer's intentions behind the videos.		0.80		0.86		0.89		0.84
		I doubt that the influencer considers their audience's needs when recommending products.		0.66		0.80		0.79		0.88
		I think the influencer tells the truth in her videos. (R)		0.74		0.92		0.79		0.84
		I don't believe what the influencer said in the video posts.		0.74		0.82		0.86		0.82
		I can learn real product information from this influencer. (R)		0.60		0.76		0.73		0.60
		I suspect that the influencer's product recommendations may be misleading.		0.79		0.88		0.89		0.89
<i>Trustworthiness</i>	Adapted from Ohanian (1990)	I believe the influencer would say anything to persuade me to buy the products featured in the videos.		0.69		0.88		0.73		0.92
		In your opinion, the influencer is ...								
		... insincere(1)/sincere(7).	0.97	0.82	0.97	0.94	0.96	0.92	0.97	0.93
		... undependable(1)/dependable(7).		0.78		0.93		0.92		0.91
		... dishonest(1)/honest(7).		0.84		0.96		0.93		0.94
		... unreliable(1)/reliable(7).		0.80		0.94		0.95		0.95
		... untrustworthy(1)/trustworthy(7).		0.84		0.94		0.95		0.95
<i>Purchase intentions</i>	Adapted from Kempf and Smith (1998)	To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements:								
		I am interested in buying [BRAND] cream.	NA	NA	NA	NA	0.93	0.96	0.94	0.92
		It is likely that I buy [BRAND] cream.		NA		NA		0.93		0.92
<i>General influencer marketing skepticism</i>	Adapted from Gaski and Etzel (1986)	I would give [BRAND] cream a try.		NA		NA		0.92		0.96
		To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements:								
		It bothers me when influencers make recommendations.	0.91	0.82	0.91	0.84	0.89	0.89	0.89	0.87
		Product recommendations of online influencers are very annoying.		0.78		0.89		0.86		0.90
		Most posts about products and brands shared by influencers deceive rather than inform followers.		0.77		0.83		0.74		0.79
		If influencers stopped recommending products, consumers would be better off.		0.82		0.79		0.89		0.79
		Most product recommendations shared by influencers make false claims.		0.74		0.84		0.74		0.74
I am generally skeptical about influencer recommendations.		0.72		0.79		0.65		0.66		
<b>Single-item measures</b>										
<i>Sponsorship perception</i>		To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement: The videos shared by the influencer were sponsored.	X		X					
<i>Age</i>		What is your age (e.g., 27)?	X		X		X		X	
<i>Gender</i>		What is your gender?	X		X		X		X	
<i>Education</i>		How would you describe your educational background?	X		X		X		X	
<i>Previous familiarity with brands</i>		Before watching videos in this study, were you already familiar with any of the featured brands?	X		X		X		X	

The factor analysis relied on principal axis factoring extraction with Promax rotation. (R)=reverse coded. \* Items removed due to low loadings. "X" indicates the presence of single-item measures in the studies

these findings suggest that deinfluencing content enhances perceptions of influencer trustworthiness, both directly and by reducing skepticism toward influencer marketing. Appendix F contains the results of additional analyses, including those in which we account for the covariates.

**Discussion** Study 1a demonstrates that the presence of deinfluencing content in influencer communications enhances perceived trustworthiness by reducing skepticism about influencers' motives. Audiences interpret influencers' critical evaluations as signals that they are not purely commercially driven and instead are genuinely concerned with the needs and interests of their online audiences. Similar to the findings of the pilot study, these results suggest that when influencer communications consist solely of positive product recommendations, they tend to be perceived as sponsored, even in the absence of explicit sponsorship disclosures. Deinfluencing content attenuates this perception. Accordingly, Study 1a provides support for both H1 and H2.

### Study 1b

The purpose of Study 1b was twofold. First, we aimed to replicate the findings from Study 1a with a different focal product from the same skincare category (serum instead of sunscreen), to assess the robustness of the effects. Second, we sought to explore whether different degrees of deinfluencing (i.e., balanced vs. severe) yield similar effects.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we compared a balanced deinfluencing condition, in which the influencer discouraged a product while acknowledging some of its redeeming features, with a severe deinfluencing condition, in which she discouraged purchasing the product without offering any positive remarks. As prior research shows, when influencers acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of products, they may be perceived as more trustworthy, such that balanced evaluations tend to reduce perceptions of bias and persuasive intent (e.g., De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Lee & Johnson, 2022). Influencers offer varying degrees of critical commentary, so we test whether the effects observed in Study 1a persist across different degrees of deinfluencing.

**Experimental design and participants** Study 1b features a single-factor (deinfluencing content: absent vs. balanced vs. severe) between-subjects experimental design. Similar to Study 1a, participants assigned to the three conditions viewed two of the same videos—a “day in the life” video and a video of the influencer providing positive recommendations for a body cream—but saw a different first video. The same professional actress recorded three new 25–30 s videos, which refer to a serum product. In the deinfluencing absent condition, the

influencer recommended it. In the balanced deinfluencing condition, the influencer did not recommend the serum but acknowledged some of its positive aspects, and in the severe deinfluencing condition, the influencer neither recommended the serum nor mentioned any positive aspects. No videos offered any explicit sponsorship disclosure. After viewing all three videos, the participants completed a questionnaire.

These Prolific respondents were 18–40 years old, resided in the United States, were active on Instagram or TikTok, and regularly followed beauty influencers; they received \$2.00 to participate. We confirmed that none of them had participated in Study 1a. Of the 342 initial respondents, 22 were excluded on the basis of the criteria applied in Study 1a (Appendix D). The final sample consisted of 320 participants (17.5% men, 81.9% women, 0.6% prefer not to say;  $M_{\text{age}} = 30$  years; 65% with at least a bachelor's degree; 91% bought products recommended by influencers at least once).

**Measures** We employed the scales to measure trustworthiness and skepticism from Study 1a (Table 3). However, the Study 1b participants also read that they had come across the profile of an influencer they found interesting (cf. one they were already following, as in Study 1a). Finally, in addition to the control variables from Study 1a, we assessed their perceptions of the quality of the videos (Appendix G).

**Manipulation checks** We included two manipulation checks. The first one, similar to the pilot study and Study 1a, asked participants if the influencer only shared positive recommendations. The one-way ANOVA affirmed clear distinctions across conditions ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 6.18$ ,  $M_{\text{Balanced}} = 2.56$ ,  $M_{\text{Severe}} = 2.15$ ;  $F(2, 317) = 195.47$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.55$ ). Because the Levene's statistic was significant ( $F(2, 317) = 16.30$ ,  $p < .01$ ), we conducted Games-Howell post hoc tests, which indicated significant differences when we compare no deinfluencing with either balanced deinfluencing ( $p < .01$ ) or severe deinfluencing ( $p < .01$ ) but no significant differences between the two deinfluencing conditions ( $p = .23$ ). For the second manipulation check, participants indicated the extent to which the influencer's recommendation discouraged versus encouraged the purchase of the featured serum (1 = “strongly discourages,” 7 = “strongly encourages”). The one-way ANOVA results confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 5.94$ ,  $M_{\text{Balanced}} = 3.10$ ,  $M_{\text{Severe}} = 2.40$ ;  $F(2, 319) = 194.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.55$ ). The Levene's statistic again was significant ( $F(2, 317) = 7.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the Games-Howell post hoc tests indicated significant differences for all pairs of the three conditions ( $p < .01$ ). Both manipulations thus were successful.

**Results** According to the one-way ANOVAs, the presence of deinfluencing content significantly increased perceptions

<sup>2</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

of influencer trustworthiness ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.68$ ,  $M_{\text{Balanced}} = 5.41$ ,  $M_{\text{Severe}} = 5.35$ ;  $F(2, 317) = 9.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ ) and significantly reduced skepticism about the influencer's motives ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 3.61$ ,  $M_{\text{Balanced}} = 3.03$ ,  $M_{\text{Severe}} = 3.02$ ;  $F(2, 317) = 6.35$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ). For each dependent variable, Tukey post hoc tests revealed significant differences between no deinfluencing and balanced deinfluencing ( $p < .01$ ) and no deinfluencing and severe deinfluencing ( $p < .01$ ) but not between balanced and severe deinfluencing ( $p > .94$ ).

We also checked if participants regarded the content as sponsored. Consistent with the pilot study and Study 1a, participants in the no deinfluencing condition were more likely to assume the content shared by the influencer was sponsored ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 5.30$ ,  $M_{\text{Balanced}} = 3.96$ ,  $M_{\text{Severe}} = 3.91$ ;  $F(2, 316) = 23.74$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.13$ ). Noting a significant Levene's statistic ( $F(2, 316) = 4.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ), we conducted Games-Howell post hoc tests. They indicated significant differences of the no deinfluencing condition with both balanced deinfluencing ( $p < .01$ ) and severe deinfluencing ( $p < .01$ ) but not between the balanced and severe deinfluencing conditions ( $p = .97$ ).

For the mediation analysis (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  trustworthiness), we used the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 4, Hayes, 2022; Table G4 in Appendix G). For our multicategorical deinfluencing variable, we apply indicator coding, with the no deinfluencing condition as a reference. The analysis then refers to the indirect effects of balanced and severe deinfluencing, relative to no deinfluencing (Hayes, 2022); it affirms significant relative indirect effects on influencer trustworthiness, through skepticism, for both balanced deinfluencing ( $\beta = 0.50$ ;  $SE = 0.16$ ; 95% CI: 0.17, 0.82) and severe deinfluencing ( $\beta = 0.50$ ;  $SE = 0.17$ ; 95% CI: 0.18, 0.83). These outcomes confirm a mediating role of skepticism in the impact of deinfluencing content on influencer trustworthiness.<sup>3</sup> Appendix G contains additional analyses, including those that integrate the covariates.

**Discussion** Study 1b reinforces the support we find for H1 and H2 by showing that the presence of any degree of deinfluencing content in influencer communications enhances perceptions of influencer trustworthiness, mediated by skepticism about influencers' motives for sharing product recommendations. Whether the deinfluencing is balanced or severe, it operates similarly ways, as indicated by our finding of no significant differences between the two

<sup>3</sup> The mediation results remain the same if we collapse the two deinfluencing conditions into one category (i.e., 0 = deinfluencing absent, 1 = deinfluencing present), such that the indirect effect of deinfluencing content on influencer trustworthiness through skepticism is still significant ( $\beta = 0.50$ ;  $SE = 0.15$ ; 95% CI: 0.20, 0.79).

deinfluencing conditions, despite their successful manipulation. Unlike traditional influencer content, in which balanced opinions tend to strengthen positive perceptions, the very act of discouraging purchase triggers similar cognitive and evaluative processes. These results are consistent with our conceptualization of deinfluencing content as organic (i.e., non-sponsored) posts in which influencers actively discourage consumption, regardless of whether they frame their message in terms that are more or less favorable toward the product.

## Study 2

In addition to investigating if and how the presence of deinfluencing content shapes the effectiveness of subsequent sponsored and non-sponsored product endorsements (H3), with Study 2 we test the robustness of our previous findings, and particularly the positive effects of deinfluencing on influencer trustworthiness (H1 and H2).

**Experimental design and participants** In a 2 (deinfluencing content: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (endorsement: non-sponsored vs. sponsored) between-subjects experimental design (see Table 2), participants were instructed to imagine discovering the beauty influencer's profile on social media, as in the preceding studies. In each of the four conditions, participants saw three videos of similar length (25–30 s). In the first video, the influencer either recommended (deinfluencing absent condition) or did not recommend (deinfluencing present condition) the product (sunscreen). The second video was the unrelated, "day in the life" post, which stayed the same across conditions. Then in the third video, the influencer recommended a different product (body cream), either without any sponsorship disclosure (non-sponsored condition) or while clearly thanking the brand for sponsoring the video (sponsored condition). After viewing the three videos, participants completed a brief survey.

The Prolific respondents, aged 18–40 years and residing in the United States who are active on Instagram and/or TikTok and regularly follow beauty influencers, were paid \$1.70 to participate. None of the Study 2 participants were exposed to Studies 1a or 1b. Of the 440 initial participants, 25 had to be excluded according to the criteria applied in our preceding studies (Appendix D). The final sample consisted of 415 participants (14.7% men, 85.8% women, 0.5% prefer not to say;  $M_{\text{age}} = 30$  years; 61% with at least a bachelor's degree; 95% had bought products recommended by influencers at least once).

**Measures** Study 2 uses the scales from Studies 1a and 1b to measure skepticism about influencers' motives and

influencer trustworthiness. We added measures of purchase intentions for the endorsed product, adapted from Kempf and Smith (1998), to gauge the effectiveness of subsequent influencer endorsements. Together with the purchase intentions items, we provided an image of the product endorsed in the third video, to ensure participants understood to which product the questions referred. All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”), and they exhibited reliability and validity (Table 3). The control variables were those from the previous studies too.

**Manipulation checks** With regard to the deinfluencing content, we used the single manipulation check from Study 1a, asking participants if the influencer only shared positive recommendations. A two-way ANOVA showed no significant interaction effect ( $F(1,411)=1.96, p=.16$ ), a significant main effect of deinfluencing ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 6.20, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 2.51; F(1, 411)=638.74, p<.01, \eta^2 = 0.61$ ), and no significant main effect of type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 4.26, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.50; F(1, 411)=1.74, p=.18$ ). For the sponsorship manipulation, participants indicated their agreement with the statement, “One of the videos shared by the influencer was sponsored and included a clear sponsorship disclosure” (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”). A two-way ANOVA showed no significant interaction ( $F(1,411)=0.01, p=.96$ ), no significant main effect of deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.34, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 4.24; F(1, 411)=0.17, p=.68$ ), and a significant main effect of type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 2.92, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 5.76; F(1, 411)=338.92, p<.01$ ). Thus, both manipulations were successful.

**Results** A two-way ANOVA, with influencer trustworthiness as the dependent variable, shows no significant interaction effect ( $F(1,411)=1.11, p=.29$ ) but a significant main effect of deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.72, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 5.21; F(1, 411)=12.66, p<.01, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ) and a marginally significant effect of the type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 5.08, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.83; F(1, 411)=3.52, p=.06, \eta^2 < 0.01$ ). Another two-way ANOVA, with skepticism about influencers’ motives as the dependent variable, indicates no significant interaction effect ( $F(1,411)=1.56, p=.21$ ), together with significant main effects for both deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 3.80, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 3.33; F(1, 411)=12.46, p<.01, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ) and the type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 3.39, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 3.76; F(1, 411)=7.91, p<.01, \eta^2 = 0.02$ ).

The mediation analysis (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness), conducted with the PROCESS

4.2 macro (Model 4, Hayes, 2022; Table H4 in Appendix H), concurs in demonstrating a significant indirect effect of deinfluencing on influencer trustworthiness through skepticism ( $\beta=0.39; SE=0.11; 95\% CI: 0.18, 0.62$ ). Another PROCESS 4.2 macro analysis (Model 8, Hayes, 2022; Table H6 in Appendix H) includes the type of endorsement as a moderator and indicates a non-significant index of moderated mediation (index =  $-0.27; SE=0.22; 95\% CI: -0.71, 0.14$ ). According to the indirect effects, the deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness mediation is significant when no sponsorship disclosure is offered ( $\beta=0.52; SE=0.15; 95\% CI: 0.23, 0.83$ ) but not significant when a sponsorship disclosure is present ( $\beta=0.25; SE=0.16; 95\% CI: -0.07, 0.56$ ). Collectively, these outcomes replicate the findings of Studies 1a and 1b, which did not present any sponsored endorsements.

With regard to the effects of deinfluencing on purchase intentions for the product recommended in the third video, a two-way ANOVA shows no significant interaction effect ( $F(1,411)=0.83, p=.77$ ) but a significant main effect for deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.60, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 4.96; F(1, 411)=6.74, p=.01, \eta^2 = 0.02$ ) and a marginally significant effect for the type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 3.86, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 3.52; F(1, 411)=2.82, p=.09, \eta^2 < 0.01$ ). A serial mediation analysis (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness  $\rightarrow$  purchase intentions) conducted with the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 6, Hayes, 2022; Table H8 in Appendix H) confirms that this positive effect is driven by improved influencer trustworthiness ( $\beta=0.23; SE=0.07; 95\% CI 0.10, 0.37$ ).

Finally, in a moderated serial mediation analysis with the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 85, Hayes, 2022; Table H10 in Appendix H), type of endorsement serves as the moderator. None of the three indices of moderated mediation is significant. However, the serial mediation (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness  $\rightarrow$  purchase intentions) is significant without any sponsorship disclosure ( $\beta=0.30; SE=0.09; 95\% CI: 0.13, 0.50$ ) and not significant with a sponsorship disclosure ( $\beta=0.14; SE=0.09; 95\% CI -0.04, 0.33$ ). Appendix H contains more detailed analyses, including covariates.

**Discussion** Study 2 reinforces the Study 1a and 1b findings: Deinfluencing content enhances influencer trustworthiness by reducing audiences’ skepticism (H1 and H2). Furthermore, it demonstrates that the presence of deinfluencing content positively affects subsequent product endorsements, with beneficial effects on consumers’ purchase intentions (H3a). The activation of persuasion knowledge through a sponsorship disclosure weakens these positive effects though, so even if deinfluencing enhances the persuasiveness of all influencer recommendations, through improved

influencer trustworthiness, its positive effects are more pronounced for non-sponsored endorsements.

### Study 3

To build on and extend these findings, we examine how consumers respond when they encounter endorsements for products sold by a brand that influencers previously cited in their deinfluencing content, across sponsored and non-sponsored conditions (H3). Realistically, influencers might critique certain products sold by a brand but endorse others, and we seek to understand the consequences in such conditions. Furthermore, we leverage Study 3 to test the robustness of our findings regarding how deinfluencing affects influencer trustworthiness (H1) and skepticism about influencers' motives (H2) in different endorsement contexts.

**Experimental design and participants** We employ a 2 (deinfluencing content: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (endorsement: non-sponsored vs. sponsored) experimental design, similar to Study 2 (Table 2). However, for Study 3, the focal products in both conditions represent the same brand. The scenario instructions asked participants to imagine they had discovered the profile of the same influencer. Then they were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions, each of which featured four sequential videos. The first video recommended (deinfluencing absent) or did not recommend (deinfluencing present) a sunscreen from Brand A; the second video was the same "day in the life" post; the third video recommended a cleanser product from Brand D; and the fourth video recommended a body cream from Brand A (i.e., same brand as the sunscreen), offering either a non-sponsored or sponsored endorsement. The inclusion of the third video (cleanser from Brand D) enhances ecological validity; influencers typically would not post influencing and deinfluencing content in direct succession. After viewing all four videos, participants completed the survey.

Prolific respondents who did not take part in our previous studies were paid \$1.90 to participate. They were between 18 and 40 years of age, residing in the United States, active on Instagram and/or TikTok, and regular followers of beauty influencers. Of the 442 participants who completed the questionnaire, we excluded 31 (Appendix D), resulting in a final sample of 411 participants (11.7% men, 87.8% women, 0.5% prefer not to say;  $M_{\text{age}} = 29$  years; 61% with at least a bachelor's degree; 93% had bought products recommended by influencers at least once).

**Measures** Study 3 included the scales to measure skepticism of influencers' motives, influencer trustworthiness, and purchase intentions, as well as the control variables,

from Study 2. Table 3 contains the validity and reliability indicators.

**Manipulation checks** For the deinfluencing content, we applied the same manipulation check as in preceding studies, and the two-way ANOVA offers a significant interaction effect ( $F(1,407)=6.00, p=.01, \eta^2 = 0.61$ ). In the main effects analysis, when deinfluencing content is absent, no statistically significant difference arises between participants exposed to different types of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 6.24, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 6.26; F(1,407)=0.02, p=.94$ ). When deinfluencing content is present, we identify such a difference ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 2.04, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 2.75; F(1,407)=13.75, p<.01, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ). Thus, the deinfluencing content manipulation worked as expected (Figure 11, Appendix I). For the sponsorship manipulation, we used the check from Study 2, asking participants if one of the videos they saw was sponsored and included a clear sponsorship disclosure. The two-way ANOVA shows no significant interaction ( $F(1,407)=2.12, p=.15$ ), no significant main effect of deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.32, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 4.26; F(1, 407)=0.51, p=.47$ ), and a significant main effect of type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 2.89, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 5.78; F(1, 407)=329.19, p<.01; \eta^2 = 0.48$ ). Thus, this manipulation was also successful.

Noting the complexity of the Study 3 design, we also sought to ensure that participants recognized that the influencer presented two different products from the same brand. Therefore, we included the item, "The influencer talked about two different products from the [BRAND]," with a 7-point agreement Likert scale. In a one-sample t-test, in which we compare the mean response ( $M=5.60$ ) with the neutral midpoint (4), the significant difference ( $t(410)=20.35, p<.01$ ) suggests participants were aware that the body cream and sunscreen featured in the videos represented the same brand ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 5.68, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 5.52, M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 5.73, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 5.47$ ).

**Results** A two-way ANOVA, with influencer trustworthiness as the dependent variable, shows a marginally significant interaction effect ( $F(1,407)=3.66, p=.06$ ), a significant main effect for deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.28, M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 4.64; F(1, 407)=6.27, p=.01, \eta^2 = 0.01$ ), and a non-significant effect for the type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 4.59, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.36; F(1, 407)=2.33, p=.13$ ). In the main effects analysis, in the absence of deinfluencing content, no significant difference in influencer trustworthiness emerges across different types of disclosure ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 4.26, M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.31; F(1,407)=0.07, p=.79$ ). However, when deinfluencing content is present, we find a significant difference in influencer trustworthiness

for various types of disclosure ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 4.89$ ,  $M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.39$ ;  $F(1,407)=6.48$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ ) (Figure I2, Appendix I).

When we run a two-way ANOVA with skepticism about influencer motives as the dependent variable, the result shows a marginally significant interaction effect ( $F(1,407)=3.62$ ,  $p=.06$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ), a significant main effect of deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.12$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 3.77$ ;  $F(1, 407)=6.62$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ ), and a significant main effect of the type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 3.74$ ,  $M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.10$ ;  $F(1, 407)=7.79$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ ). The main effects analysis shows that in the absence of deinfluencing content, no significant difference in skepticism occurs for different types of disclosure ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 4.06$ ,  $M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.19$ ;  $F(1,407)=0.36$ ,  $p=.55$ ), but in the presence of deinfluencing content, a significant difference in skepticism emerges for different types of disclosure ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 3.45$ ,  $M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.09$ ;  $F(1,407)=12.06$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ) (Figure I3, Appendix I).

The mediation analysis (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness), with the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 4, Hayes, 2022; Table I4, Appendix I), concurs and evinces a significant indirect effect of deinfluencing on influencer trustworthiness through skepticism ( $\beta=0.32$ ;  $SE=0.13$ ; 95% CI: 0.08, 0.57). An additional analysis (PROCESS 4.2 macro, Model 8, Hayes, 2022; Table I6, Appendix I) also includes the type of endorsement as a moderator and reveals a non-significant index of moderated mediation (index = -0.48;  $SE=0.25$ ; CI: -0.96, 0.02). The indirect effects establish that the deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness mediation is significant when no sponsorship disclosure is offered ( $\beta=0.56$ ;  $SE=0.17$ ; 95% CI: 0.22, 0.89) but not significant when the influencer discloses a sponsorship ( $\beta=0.08$ ;  $SE=0.19$ ; 95% CI: -0.28, 0.44). This analysis thus replicates the Study 2 findings in a scenario in which the focal products come from the same brand.

We accordingly evaluated the effects of deinfluencing on purchase intentions for the subsequently recommended product of the same brand, when the first product was recommended or not. A two-way ANOVA shows no significant interaction effect ( $F(1,407)=2.36$ ,  $p=.12$ ), no significant main effect for deinfluencing content ( $M_{\text{No Deinfluencing}} = 4.43$ ,  $M_{\text{Deinfluencing}} = 4.39$ ;  $F(1, 407)=0.09$ ,  $p=.76$ ), and no significant main effect for the type of endorsement ( $M_{\text{No Sponsorship}} = 4.49$ ,  $M_{\text{Sponsorship}} = 4.32$ ;  $F(1, 407)=0.96$ ,  $p=.32$ ). In the serial mediation analysis (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness  $\rightarrow$  purchase intentions), conducted in the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 6, Hayes, 2022; Table I8, Appendix I), the positive effect appears driven by greater influencer trustworthiness ( $\beta=0.12$ ;  $SE=0.06$ ; 95% CI: 0.02, 0.26).

Finally, a moderated serial mediation analysis with the PROCESS 4.2 macro (Model 85, Hayes, 2022; Table I10, Appendix I) features type of endorsement as a moderator. The three indices of moderated mediation are not significant. The indirect effects reveal though that the serial mediation (deinfluencing  $\rightarrow$  skepticism  $\rightarrow$  influencer trustworthiness  $\rightarrow$  purchase intentions) is significant when no sponsorship is disclosed ( $\beta=0.20$ ;  $SE=0.09$ ; 95% CI: 0.05, 0.41) and not significant when a sponsorship is disclosed ( $\beta=0.03$ ;  $SE=0.07$ ; 95% CI: -0.10, 0.19). This replication affirms the Study 2 findings, even when the products come from the same brand. Appendix I provides relevant, additional analyses.

**Discussion** Study 3 reconfirms H1, H2, and H3a in a situation in which influencers reject one product but endorse another product from the same brand in a separate post. In this sense, rather than undermining influencers' ability to function as effective brand endorsers, their deinfluencing actually reinforces their perceived trustworthiness and signals their more discerning recommendations. However, our results raise a key limitation too: When an influencer follows up deinfluencing content with a *sponsored* endorsement for a product from the same brand, consumers become more skeptical. Perhaps online audiences interpret such series of events as evidence of brand-driven attempts to counteract the negative effects of deinfluencing. Alternatively, audiences might judge the transition, from a lack of brand support in earlier, non-sponsored recommendations, to paid endorsements in later posts, as suspicious and doubt the influencer's motives.

## General discussion

Influencer product recommendations provide important sources of information for consumers and represent powerful marketing tools for brands. However, their effectiveness hinges on influencer trustworthiness, which is increasingly challenged by growing consumer skepticism. In response to calls to specify and clarify emerging nuances in the maturing influencer marketing industry, we propose that posting *deinfluencing content*, an approach substantially underutilized by influencers, can serve as a strategic tool for them to restore and enhance their trustworthiness, strengthening their reputations as credible opinion leaders and persuasive brand endorsers. By integrating negative recommendations with traditional positive endorsements, influencers can signal their independence from commercial pressures, which helps foster audience trust. In a series of experimental studies with consumers who actively engage with influencers on social media, we provide empirical evidence in support

of this assertion. Our findings contribute to a greater understanding of influencer trustworthiness and persuasion in digital environments; they also offer actionable insights for influencers and brands navigating the constantly evolving influencer marketing landscape.

### Theoretical contributions

Extensive research into influencer marketing (Leung et al., 2022a; Libai et al., 2025) often addresses positive endorsements (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pan et al., 2025), without sufficiently explicating the effects of content in which influencers actively discourage certain purchases. By addressing such *deinfluencing content*, we highlight its clear relevance for the maturing world of influencer marketing. Building on attribution theory (Kelley, 1967) and persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we examine how deinfluencing content (cf. exclusively positive recommendations) can encourage positive outcomes for both influencers and the brands they endorse. In turn, we offer three key theoretical contributions.

First, we conceptualize deinfluencing as a distinct form of organic (i.e., non-sponsored) social media content, in which influencers advise against purchasing specific products and support their claims with objective or subjective reasoning. Although deinfluencing content shares some similarities with traditional influencing content (i.e., the source, audience, long-term relationships, and platform are the same; Chen et al., 2023; Hugh et al., 2022) and with negative product reviews (i.e., critical stance; Esmark Jones et al., 2018; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010), it represents a distinct content format. If they incorporate this format into their posted content, influencers can encourage more deliberate consumer decision-making, temper unrealistic expectations, and encourage more critical evaluations of potential purchases. In turn, deinfluencing content helps influencers position themselves not as mere brand advocates but rather as discerning content creators who thoughtfully engage with the marketplace, prioritize their audiences' interests, and contribute to well-informed consumer purchase behaviors.

Second, across four experimental studies, we consistently find that deinfluencing content, when integrated with positive recommendations and unrelated content typical of a social media feed, significantly enhances influencer trustworthiness. This effect is driven by reduced skepticism about the influencer's motives; audiences perceive influencers who engage in deinfluencing as less commercially driven and more genuine in their reasons for sharing their opinions (Ekinici et al., 2025; Liao & Chen, 2024). These findings align with attribution theory (Kelley, 1967; Rifon et al., 2004) and its suggestion that when audiences attribute

influencer content to altruistic motives, they respond more positively and with greater trust (Baek & Yoon, 2022; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018). We also find that balanced deinfluencing, which combines negative assessments with some positive product sentiment, and severe deinfluencing, which exclusively highlights negative aspects, do not differ in their impacts. In contrast, for conventional influencer content, balanced messages tend to be evaluated more favorably than purely positive endorsements (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020).

Third, the detailed insights regarding the impact of deinfluencing content on both non-sponsored and sponsored product endorsements (Filiari et al., 2023; Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024) clarify that this content significantly enhances purchase intentions for non-sponsored product recommendations. Such content accounts for a considerable share of influencer-generated content, as reflected in our analysis of real-world social media posts (Appendix B). However, although still directionally positive, this effect is less pronounced for sponsored endorsements. The positive impact of deinfluencing content appears driven by greater influencer trustworthiness, which extends to subsequent endorsements, thereby producing the positive effects on consumers' purchase intentions. These findings align with persuasion knowledge research (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022; Isaac & Calder, 2025): Once persuasion knowledge has been activated, it can be difficult to avoid. They also emphasize the importance of trustworthiness for influencer marketing success (Hugh et al., 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020). For sponsored endorsements, we further identify a critical boundary condition: When influencers promote a product sold by a particular brand, after previously deinfluencing another product from that brand, consumers' purchase intentions toward the endorsed product decline. Deinfluencing and influencing for the same brand, especially in close succession and without any indication of prior brand support, evokes skepticism, such that consumers regard those partnerships as particularly manipulative (Kim et al., 2021; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013).

Collectively, the findings suggest that deinfluencing content is a noteworthy phenomenon that enables influencers to reposition themselves strategically, as more critical and less brand-biased opinion leaders. Our studies consistently demonstrate that deinfluencing can effectively mitigate the growing trustworthiness crisis in the maturing influencer industry, with positive outcomes for both influencers and the brands they endorse. By broadening the scope of influencer marketing research beyond traditional endorsements (e.g., Breves et al., 2019; Ren et al., 2023), we offer new insights into how influencers can address audience skepticism and sustain trust in this evolving landscape.

## Practical implications

Social media enable individual opinion leaders to build successful careers as influencers by fostering relationships with online audiences. They also offer brands expanded opportunities to connect with consumers through influencer marketing. Yet this market is undergoing major transformation. As online audiences grow more skeptical of frequent (sponsored) endorsements, influencers increasingly explore audience-based monetization models (e.g., subscriptions, tips, platform rewards), which may require them to develop their personal brands and stronger relationships with loyal followers. Meanwhile, brands exhibit greater selectivity in their collaborations, including efforts to develop in-house influencers who can represent them authentically and maintain direct consumer relationships, in line with the noted benefits of employee takeover strategies (see Penttinen, 2023). In response, content creators might use deinfluencing strategically, to reinforce their authenticity and maintain audience trust. The implications of such relatively new practices thus resonate with both influencers and the brands that consider hiring them.

**Implications for influencers** As our findings indicate, if they share deinfluencing content, influencers might improve followers' perceptions of their trustworthiness as sources of helpful information, reduce skepticism about their intentions for sharing product recommendations, and differentiate themselves from mere product endorsers. Supplementary analyses (reported in Appendix J) also imply that a deinfluencing strategy might attract new followers; participants in our studies expressed clear preferences for influencers who shared both positive and negative opinions. Although these findings consistently indicate that influencers should strategically share negative recommendations, we add that they must account for three key considerations when doing so.

First, the negative recommendations must be honest, authentic, and rooted in the best interests of their online audience, rather than resulting from self-serving motives, such as attracting interest or increasing engagement. Second, deinfluencing content should be consistent with influencers' existing style, so that it integrates seamlessly with their broader communications. Third, even if balanced brand endorsements (critiquing some products while praising others of the same brand) enhance consumer trust, they could threaten existing contracts and potential future brand partnerships. If the brand dismisses an influencer as inconsistent or opportunistic, it is unlikely to enter a contract with them. Therefore, for influencers who seek to establish a reputation for sharing honest opinions but also hope to collaborate with

brands, we recommend that they craft an overall narrative in their content, consistently conveying their overall appreciation for the brand, even if their authenticity requires them to criticize some product releases.

**Implications for brand managers** Because our findings indicate that deinfluencing content strengthens the effectiveness of both organic influencer endorsements and sponsored recommendations, brand managers must acknowledge that deinfluencing is more than a threat to their brand reputation. Considering that such content can temper consumers' product expectations and promote more critical evaluations and careful purchasing decisions, it creates relevant strategic opportunities. The strong positive impacts that deinfluencing content can produce on purchase intentions for endorsed products indicate that brands that shy away from working with influencers who share deinfluencing content are missing out. In developing these alliances, brands should work to build long-term relationships with influencers who have supported their offerings over time, even if they occasionally voice dissatisfaction with certain products. However, they should avoid partnering with influencers who recently criticized their products, without offering any prior brand support, because in that case, it may seem like the brand has "paid off" the influencer to put a stop to their negative comments. Beyond the suggestions for selecting partnerships, we further urge brands to leverage deinfluencing content as a source of valuable consumer insights. Influencers who criticize products often highlight inefficiencies, unmet expectations, or shifting consumer preferences. By closely monitoring deinfluencing content, brands can therefore gain a deeper understanding of consumer concerns, use this information to refine their offerings, and enhance their products' positioning among target audiences.

## Limitations and further research

Our investigations of deinfluencing content provide novel insights for influencer marketing literature and practice, and thus some suggestions for continued research. We recommend examining different types of deinfluencing messages, such as those that provide assessments of quality issues or pricing concerns versus those based on preferences. Exploring content that discourages all consumption or suggests alternatives also could establish valuable distinctions. In light of our findings on endorsements of previously deinfluenced brands, we encourage scholars to investigate whether the negative effects can be mitigated. For example, they could examine what happens when influencers share positive recommendations for a brand's other products in separate posts prior to the deinfluencing message, or when the

deinfluencing content signals that, despite disliking a particular product, the influencer still enjoys other products from the same brand. Finding an appropriate balance between deinfluencing and conventional influencer content—possibly over time—requires more insights too. Perhaps varying the proportion, frequency, or timing of such posts affects perceptions of deinfluencing content, influencers, and their endorsements in specific ways. Research also could examine additional consequences of deinfluencing content, such as perceived sincerity in individual posts (due to tone or facial expressions) and its effects on the long-term evolution of influencer–audience relationships.

Whereas the current research focuses on short vertical videos, to capture contemporary consumer experiences with deinfluencing, continued studies might integrate other formats, such as text-based posts or combinations of text and images. In addition, the beauty category we study is prominent but represents only a single segment of influencer-driven content. Exploring other influencer niches, such as hospitality or technology, could broaden the applicability of our findings. Researchers also might test the impacts of contradictory deinfluencing messages, their interactions with other information sources or consumers' personal experiences, and the potential for backlash from loyal brand advocates. Finally, continued research should address how brands can and should respond to deinfluencing, as both a potential threat and a powerful opportunity in the influencer marketing domain.

**Supplementary information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-026-01141-9>.

**Acknowledgements** We thank Maya Paletta for portraying the influencer featured in the experimental videos. We also thank Kelsey Neuman and Nadja Vestergaard for their coding work. In addition, we extend our gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, which greatly improved the quality and clarity of this manuscript. Finally, we are deeply appreciative of the Editor for providing thoughtful direction and guidance throughout the review process.

**Authors' contributions** Valeria Penttinen: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Writing – Original Draft, Review & Editing; Visualization, Project Administration. Robert Ciuchita: Formal Analysis; Validation; Conceptualization (supporting); Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization. Susanne Pedersen: Funding Acquisition; Conceptualization (supporting); Writing – Review & Editing. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding** Open Access funding provided by Hanken School of Economics. The project was funded by the Aarhus University Research Foundation (AUFF NOVA); Grant number: AUFF-E-2024-9-10.

**Data availability** The data is available for the review processes upon request.

## Declarations

**Compliance with ethical standards** The Institutional Review Board of Northern Illinois University determined that this study was exempt from review (protocol number HS24-0319). Data collection and handling were conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Northern Illinois University, Hanken School of Economics, and Aarhus University.

**Competing interests** The authors have no financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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