Navigating Perceived Risk, Influencer Credibility, and Emotional Engagement in Social Media Advertising: An Integrated Consumer Response Framework for the Digital Generation

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed how brands communicate with consumers, shifting traditional one-way advertising into interactive, data-driven, and socially embedded marketing ecosystems. This transformation has been accompanied by rising concerns over perceived risk, trust, privacy, manipulation, and authenticity, particularly among younger digital-native audiences. Drawing exclusively from established scholarship on perceived risk, consumer socialization, social media advertising, influencer marketing, emotional appeal, personalization, and platform-specific engagement, this study develops an integrated and theoretically grounded framework to explain how contemporary consumers—especially Generation Z—interpret, evaluate, and respond to social media advertising.

Grounded in the perceived risk model of Dowling and Staelin, this article argues that digital advertising is no longer evaluated only on economic or performance uncertainty, but also on psychological, social, and identity-related risks, especially when mediated by influencers, algorithmic personalization, and peer-generated content. The increasing visibility of influencer marketing and short-form video platforms has introduced new mechanisms of trust and persuasion, in which users rely more heavily on symbolic cues such as relatability, authenticity, follower metrics, and emotional resonance than on formal brand information.

By synthesizing insights from studies on influencer credibility, emotional appeal, informativeness, personalization, and platform-specific content, the article demonstrates that consumer responses to social media advertising are shaped by the interaction between perceived risk and perceived value. While influencer endorsements and emotionally rich content can reduce uncertainty and increase message acceptance, they can also trigger skepticism when users perceive commercial manipulation or identity misalignment. This tension is especially salient among Generation Z, whose high social media engagement and content exposure make them simultaneously more informed and more vulnerable to persuasive messaging.

Using a qualitative analytical framework inspired by Miles and Huberman's approach to interpretive data synthesis, this research integrates prior empirical findings into a coherent model of consumer decision-making in digital advertising environments. The results show that positive consumer responses are most likely when advertising messages balance emotional engagement, informational transparency, and credible social proof. Conversely, when influencer content or targeted advertising is perceived as intrusive, misleading, or overly commercialized, users engage in defensive risk-handling strategies such as ad avoidance, skepticism, or negative brand evaluation.

This article contributes to digital marketing theory by unifying perceived risk, social influence, and platform-mediated engagement into a single explanatory structure. It also offers strategic implications for brands seeking to communicate effectively with socially connected and psychologically complex digital consumers. By focusing on trust, authenticity, and emotional relevance rather than mere exposure or algorithmic reach, marketers can build more sustainable and ethically grounded relationships with contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Social media advertising, perceived risk, influencer marketing, emotional appeal, Generation Z, consumer trust, digital engagement

1. Introduction

Two The emergence of social media as a dominant communication infrastructure has radically altered the nature of advertising, consumer engagement, and brand-consumer relationships. Unlike traditional mass media, where messages are broadcast to largely passive audiences, social media platforms enable continuous interaction, personalization, peer influence, and algorithmic targeting, making the advertising environment more immersive and psychologically complex. Within this evolving landscape, consumers no longer simply receive brand messages; they interpret them through social networks, emotional cues, influencer relationships, and their own perceptions of risk and credibility.

One of the most important yet underexamined dimensions of social media advertising is perceived risk. Originally conceptualized in consumer behavior research as the uncertainty and potential negative consequences associated with purchasing decisions, perceived risk has become significantly more multifaceted in digital contexts (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). In social media environments, consumers are exposed not only to product information but also to personal data tracking, algorithmic targeting, influencer endorsements, and peer-generated content, all of which shape how they assess trustworthiness and potential harm. The psychological stakes of online advertising extend far beyond financial loss to include identity risk, privacy risk, social image risk, and emotional vulnerability.

Simultaneously, the rise of influencer marketing has transformed how brands build credibility and emotional connection. Influencers, often perceived as relatable and authentic figures rather than distant corporate entities, serve as powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Jin et al., 2019). Their effectiveness lies not merely in their reach but in their perceived trustworthiness, social similarity, and symbolic value. However, this form of marketing also introduces new ambiguities, as consumers must constantly evaluate whether influencer recommendations are genuine expressions of preference or strategically constructed commercial endorsements.

This tension between persuasion and skepticism is particularly pronounced among Generation Z, a cohort characterized by high social media usage, strong digital literacy, and deep emotional engagement with online communities (GlobalWebIndex, 2022; McKinsey & Company, 2021). While Gen Z consumers are highly receptive to creative, emotionally engaging, and socially relevant content, they are also more likely to detect inauthenticity and resist overtly manipulative advertising strategies. As a result, understanding how perceived risk, emotional appeal, influencer credibility, and platform dynamics interact has become essential for both scholars and practitioners.

Despite a growing body of research on social media advertising, influencer marketing, and consumer attitudes, the literature remains fragmented. Studies have examined emotional appeal (Lee & Hong, 2016), informativeness and creativity (Lee & Hong, 2016), influencer follower counts (De Veirman et al., 2017), platform differences (Smith et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2015), and consumer socialization (Moschis & Churchill, 1978), but few have integrated these elements into a single theoretical framework grounded in perceived risk. Without such integration, it is difficult to explain why some digital advertisements generate strong engagement and positive brand attitudes while others provoke distrust, avoidance, or backlash.

The central purpose of this article is therefore to develop a comprehensive, theory-driven explanation of how consumers evaluate and respond to social media advertising. Drawing exclusively from the provided references, this study synthesizes insights from perceived risk theory, social influence research, influencer marketing scholarship, and digital media studies to construct an integrated model of consumer response. By doing so, it addresses a critical gap in the literature: the lack of a unified explanation for how risk perceptions, emotional engagement, and social credibility jointly shape advertising effectiveness in digital environments.

In pursuing this goal, the article makes several important

contributions. First, it extends perceived risk theory into the realm of social media advertising, showing how traditional concepts of uncertainty and loss must be reinterpreted in the context of algorithmic targeting, influencer persuasion, and identity-driven consumption. Second, it situates influencer marketing within broader processes of consumer socialization and role modeling, highlighting how digital figures shape not only purchasing decisions but also self-concept and social belonging (Martin & Bush, 2000; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Third, it integrates platform-level dynamics, recognizing that the structure and culture of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter influence how advertising messages are interpreted and valued (Smith et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2015).

By developing a richly elaborated and theoretically grounded analysis, this article seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how contemporary consumers navigate the complex psychological and social terrain of social media advertising. In an era where digital platforms mediate not only commerce but also identity, relationships, and emotional experience, such understanding is essential for advancing both academic theory and ethical marketing practice.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this study is interpretive, integrative, and theory-driven, reflecting the goal of constructing a comprehensive conceptual framework rather than testing a single empirical hypothesis. In line with the qualitative synthesis tradition articulated by Miles and Huberman (1984), the research process involves the systematic organization, comparison, and interpretation of existing theoretical and empirical insights to generate new understanding. Rather than treating each reference as an isolated contribution, this methodology seeks to identify patterns, relationships, and underlying mechanisms that connect diverse strands of the literature.

The foundation of this analysis is the perceived risk model proposed by Dowling and Staelin (1994), which conceptualizes consumer behavior as a function of both perceived uncertainty and the anticipated consequences of a decision. This model provides a powerful lens for interpreting digital advertising because it emphasizes not only objective information but also subjective psychological processes. By using perceived risk as a central organizing concept, the study is able to integrate research on emotional appeal, influencer credibility,

personalization, and platform dynamics into a coherent theoretical structure.

To achieve this integration, the study follows a multi-stage interpretive procedure. First, the core constructs and propositions from each reference were identified, focusing on how they relate to consumer attitudes, trust, engagement, and behavioral intention. For example, Lee and Hong's (2016) emphasis on emotional appeal and informativeness was linked to how consumers reduce uncertainty and increase perceived value, while De Veirman et al.'s (2017) analysis of follower counts was connected to social proof and credibility.

Second, these constructs were mapped onto the broader framework of perceived risk and risk-handling strategies. Dowling and Staelin (1994) argue that consumers respond to risk by seeking information, relying on trusted sources, or avoiding the decision altogether. In digital advertising contexts, influencers, peer-generated content, and personalized recommendations serve as alternative information sources that can either mitigate or amplify perceived risk.

Third, platform-level factors were incorporated by drawing on research that demonstrates how different social media environments shape content presentation and user expectations (Smith et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2015). This step ensures that the analysis does not treat social media as a homogeneous space but recognizes that each platform fosters distinct patterns of engagement, trust, and emotional response.

Finally, generational and psychological dimensions were added through insights from GlobalWebIndex (2022), McKinsey & Company (2021), and Montag and Elhai (2020), which highlight how Generation Z's high social media usage, need for belonging, and identity exploration influence their reactions to advertising. These perspectives allow the model to account for individual differences and broader cultural trends that shape consumer behavior.

Throughout this process, the goal is not to quantify effects but to develop a rich, nuanced understanding of how multiple forces interact. By treating the literature as a form of qualitative data, this methodology enables the construction of an integrated theoretical narrative that explains not only what happens in social media advertising but why it happens. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for a domain characterized by rapid technological change, complex psychological

dynamics, and evolving social norms.

3. Results

The integrative analysis of the literature reveals a complex but coherent pattern in how consumers respond to social media advertising. At the center of this pattern lies the dynamic interplay between perceived risk and perceived value. Consumers are constantly weighing the potential benefits of engaging with an advertisement—such as entertainment, information, social belonging, or self-expression—against the potential costs, including deception, privacy invasion, wasted money, or social embarrassment (Dowling & Staelin, 1994).

One of the most significant findings emerging from this synthesis is that influencer marketing functions as a powerful risk-reduction mechanism when it is perceived as authentic and socially credible. Brown and Hayes (2008) argue that influencers derive their persuasive power from their ability to shape opinions through trust and social connection rather than through formal authority. This insight is supported by De Veirman et al. (2017), who show that influencers with higher follower counts and appropriate brand alignment tend to generate more positive brand attitudes, because large audiences signal popularity and legitimacy. In perceived risk terms, these cues reduce uncertainty about product quality and social acceptance.

However, the same mechanisms that reduce risk can also create new forms of vulnerability. Jin et al. (2019) demonstrate that influencer culture often blurs the boundary between genuine personal expression and commercial promotion, making it difficult for consumers to distinguish authentic recommendations from paid endorsements. When this ambiguity becomes salient, perceived risk increases, leading to skepticism and defensive processing. This is especially true for Generation Z, who are highly sensitive to issues of authenticity and manipulation (GlobalWebIndex, 2022).

Emotional appeal emerges as another central determinant of advertising effectiveness. Lee and Hong (2016) find that emotionally engaging advertisements are more likely to generate positive user responses, because emotions capture attention, enhance memory, and create psychological bonds between consumers and brands. From a risk perspective, emotional resonance can lower cognitive defenses, making consumers feel more comfortable and less uncertain about engaging with a message. At the same time, excessive emotional

manipulation can trigger distrust if users feel their feelings are being exploited.

Informativeness plays a complementary role. According to Lee and Hong (2016), informative content increases perceived usefulness and transparency, which directly reduces perceived risk by clarifying what a product or brand offers. Farooqi (2018) similarly finds that online advertising is more effective when it provides meaningful and relevant information that helps consumers make informed decisions. The combination of emotional appeal and informativeness is particularly powerful, because it addresses both the affective and cognitive dimensions of risk.

Platform-specific dynamics further shape these processes. Smith et al. (2012) demonstrate that brand-related content is perceived differently across platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, due to differences in format, audience expectations, and social norms. Leung et al. (2015) show that Facebook and Twitter differ in their marketing effectiveness in the hospitality industry, reflecting how platform design influences engagement and trust. These findings imply that the same advertisement can generate different levels of perceived risk and value depending on where it appears.

Finally, generational and psychological factors amplify or moderate these effects. Montag and Elhai (2020) argue that platforms like TikTok satisfy users' need to belong and express themselves, making them particularly receptive to socially embedded advertising. However, this high level of engagement also increases exposure to persuasive messages, raising the stakes of perceived risk. McKinsey & Company (2021) and GlobalWebIndex (2022) emphasize that Generation Z values transparency, diversity, and social responsibility, suggesting that brands perceived as misaligned with these values face higher reputational and relational risk.

Taken together, these results indicate that successful social media advertising is not simply a matter of creative content or technological targeting. It depends on a delicate balance between emotional engagement, informational clarity, social credibility, and ethical alignment, all of which shape how consumers perceive and manage risk.

4. Discussion

The integrated findings of this study underscore the importance of viewing social media advertising as a

psychologically and socially embedded process rather than a purely transactional one. Perceived risk, long recognized as a central factor in consumer decision-making (Dowling & Staelin, 1994), takes on new dimensions in digital environments, where identity, privacy, and social belonging are at stake alongside economic outcomes.

One of the most important theoretical implications of this analysis is that influencer marketing should be understood not merely as a promotional tactic but as a form of social role modeling. Martin and Bush (2000) show that role models influence teenagers' purchase intentions by shaping their aspirations and self-concepts. In the digital age, influencers function as ubiquitous role models whose lifestyles, values, and consumption patterns are constantly visible. When consumers identify with these figures, their endorsements reduce perceived risk by signaling that a product is compatible with a desired identity. However, when this identification is disrupted by perceptions of inauthenticity or excessive commercialization, the same mechanism can backfire.

The concept of consumer socialization further illuminates this process. Moschis and Churchill (1978) argue that consumers learn how to interpret and respond to marketing through interactions with peers, media, and institutions. Social media intensifies this process by embedding advertising within social networks, making it difficult to separate commercial messages from interpersonal communication. As a result, perceived risk is no longer managed solely through individual cognition but through collective interpretation and social comparison.

The rise of personalization and algorithmic targeting adds another layer of complexity. Lavie et al. (2010) show that users have mixed attitudes toward personalized content, appreciating its relevance but also worrying about privacy and control. In advertising contexts, personalization can reduce search costs and increase perceived value, but it can also heighten privacy risk and feelings of surveillance. This ambivalence reflects a broader tension in digital culture between convenience and autonomy.

From a practical perspective, these insights suggest that marketers must move beyond simplistic metrics of reach and engagement. Nielsen (2021) emphasizes that trust is a critical driver of influencer marketing effectiveness, reinforcing the idea that credibility and authenticity are more important than sheer visibility. Brands that prioritize transparent communication, ethical partnerships, and genuine emotional connection are more likely to reduce perceived risk and build long-term relationships with consumers.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. Because this study relies on secondary sources, it cannot capture the full diversity of consumer experiences or the rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms. Future research could build on this framework by conducting empirical studies that examine how different types of consumers negotiate risk in real-time digital interactions.

5. Conclusion

This article has developed a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding consumer responses to social media advertising by integrating perceived risk theory with research on influencer marketing, emotional appeal, platform dynamics, and generational psychology. The analysis demonstrates that digital advertising effectiveness depends not on any single factor but on the complex interaction between trust, emotion, information, and social identity.

In a media environment where consumers are constantly exposed to persuasive messages embedded in their social lives, perceived risk has become a central organizing principle of behavior. Influencers, personalized content, and emotionally engaging narratives can all reduce uncertainty and enhance perceived value, but only when they are aligned with authenticity, transparency, and ethical standards.

For scholars, this framework offers a foundation for future research on digital persuasion and consumer psychology. For practitioners, it provides a reminder that sustainable marketing success in the social media age requires more than attention-grabbing content; it requires respect for the psychological and social realities of contemporary consumers.

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