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Beyond Influencers: Exploring New Promotional Strategies of Luxury Fashion Brands

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ABSTRACT

Over the past nine years, Chiara Ferragni has emerged as one of the most prominent influencers on the global stage, collaborating with numerous internationally renowned fashion brands to promote and endorse their products. However, since December 2023, her reputation has been significantly tarnished due to her involvement in a judicial investigation led by the Public Prosecutor's Office of Milan. Ferragni faces charges of aggravated and continued fraud, with her trial set to commence on 23 September 2025. As a result, several high-profile fashion brands have severed their professional ties with her. This study employs a qualitative approach to examine both the ongoing legal proceedings against the 36-year-old influencer and the evolving marketing strategies that globally recognized fashion brands are adopting in response. Data was collected through a systematic review of diverse sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the influencer industry and its dynamic relationships with brands and consumers. The findings suggest that the role of influencers like Chiara Ferragni, traditionally leveraged to drive sales of luxury products, has significantly diminished and emerging forms of advertising and marketing strategies are gaining prominence. Ferragni's followers, representing a broader consumer base, appear to have developed a more critical and conscious perspective, showing reduced interest in influencer-led campaigns. The study concludes that the traditional influencer model, as it has been known in recent years, is likely to decline, paving the way for new paradigms in brand-consumer engagement.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence in marketing, Brand promotion, Editorial advertising, Influencer strategies, Luxury fashion marketing*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital economy, influencer marketing has emerged as a pivotal element of corporate promotional strategies. Brands collaborate with social media personalities who wield significant online influence, leveraging their reach to market products and services across various platforms. In exchange for financial compensation, these influencers create and disseminate visual and textual content - such as images, videos, and endorsements - on their social media channels, effectively acting as intermediaries between brands and consumers. Their capacity to influence purchasing decisions is directly correlated with the size of their audience, with larger followings enhancing their advertising impact (Di Vietri, 2023). For years, influencers in Western Europe operated without formal regulatory constraints, as no comprehensive legal frameworks existed to govern their activities. This lack of regulation persisted until July 5, 2022, when the European Parliament introduced the Digital Services Act (DSA), marking a significant shift toward greater oversight (Santucci, 2024). Grounded in the principle that unlawful actions in the physical world should also be prohibited in the digital realm, the DSA imposes stringent transparency requirements on online platforms. These include disclosing profiling methods, cooperating with regulatory authorities, and undergoing external audits. The Act establishes a new framework for managing systemic risks, introduces cross-border governance mechanisms, and enforces financial penalties of up to 6% of a platform's annual revenue for non-compliance. Its scope encompasses a wide range of digital services, including e-commerce marketplaces, social networks, content-sharing platforms, travel and accommodation booking services, app distribution stores, and intermediary providers such as internet service companies and cloud hosting firms. The DSA aims to foster a safer and more trustworthy digital environment while strengthening consumer rights (Zorloni, 2024).

Consumer protection laws further mandate that all commercial communications, including those by digital creators, must be transparent. Influencers are prohibited from misleading consumers with false or inaccurate claims about the products or services they promote. Any content that generates revenue or benefits must be explicitly labeled as advertising. When influencers market products or services under their own name, they are subject to the same legal obligations as online retailers, including granting consumers the right of withdrawal. Additionally, influencers must comply with specific regulations concerning audiovisual content, ensuring they do not exploit the vulnerability or naivety of minors (Martinelli, 2024). Chiara Ferragni, once a fashion blogger, transitioned into a prominent influencer role, operating for years without formal regulatory oversight due to the largely unregulated nature of the internet prior to the DSA's implementation. Through strategic acumen, Ferragni transformed her digital presence into a multi-million-dollar enterprise, extending her influence beyond social media into the film industry (Toloni, 2024). However, her success faced a significant setback on December 15, 2023, when she became embroiled in legal controversies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study addresses a relatively unexplored area in the field of influencer marketing, marked by the sudden reputational collapse of a globally celebrated figure: Chiara Ferragni. Traditionally, influencers - particularly those at the top tier - have been portrayed in a consistently positive light, often framed within narratives of luxury, wealth, and aspirational success. The ongoing criminal investigation involving Ferragni, however, disrupts this dominant narrative, offering a rare opportunity to examine the fragile foundations of digital fame and the shifting dynamics of consumer trust.

Among the most relevant contributions to this discussion is Selvaggia Lucarelli's 2024 investigative book *Il vaso di Pandoro* (Pandoro's Box), which reconstructs Ferragni's career trajectory and the public backlash following her involvement in misleading promotional campaigns. On December 15, 2023, the Italian Antitrust Authority imposed a fine on Ferragni for unfair commercial practices - an event that catalyzed the rapid collapse of her once-unshakable online empire. Within weeks, public opinion turned against her, major brand partners severed ties, and her social media presence diminished significantly. Lucarelli's work frames this downfall as emblematic of the volatility of influencer reputations and the increasing demand for transparency in digital marketing.

Building on this shift in public perception, Alessia Jerman's 2024 study, *Influencer Marketing: esplorando il ruolo della genuinità e della tipologia di sponsorizzazione sulla credibilità percepita* (Influencer Marketing: Exploring the Role of Authenticity and Sponsorship Type on Perceived Credibility), explores the relationship between perceived credibility and influencer effectiveness. Jerman emphasizes that in hyper-connected digital environments, consumers increasingly value authenticity, trust, and expertise. These factors not only shape influencers' persuasive power but also determine the success or failure of branded campaigns. Her research underscores the fragility of the influencer-audience relationship, highlighting how rapidly it can deteriorate when credibility is compromised.

A more regulatory perspective is offered by Antonio Paolo Seminara in his 2023 legal analysis *Marketing d'influenza e pubblicità non trasparente: la responsabilità dell'inserzionista, degli influencer e dell'internet service provider* (Influence Marketing and Non-Transparent Advertising: The Responsibility of the Advertiser, Influencer, and Internet Service Provider). Seminara emphasizes the need for transparent practices in influencer marketing, especially in light of evolving EU regulations. He identifies three critical risks associated with non-transparent promotional content: the distortion of market competition, the erosion of consumer rights, and the manipulation of public opinion. His work provides an essential ethical and legal framework for understanding how influencers can - intentionally or not - mislead audiences and damage brand integrity.

Complementing these findings is Giulia Ferrandino's 2024 study, *Influencer marketing: tra crisi di fiducia e prospettive future* (Influencer Marketing: Between Crisis of Confidence and Future Prospects). Ferrandino traces the exponential growth of influencer marketing between 2010 and 2022, particularly within the luxury fashion industry, where influencers have transformed brand communication into immersive, personal narratives. By fostering para-social relationships with followers, influencers have blurred the lines between commercial and personal communication. Ferrandino stresses that the effectiveness of such strategies hinges on credibility, authenticity, and trust - qualities that require consistent, transparent engagement. She also notes that the public's trust in influencers has been deeply shaken by legal cases such as Ferragni's, marking a potential turning point in consumer expectations and marketing ethics.

Sara Altoubat's 2021 study, Authenticity: The Key to the Success of Influencers in Promoting Commercial Products, provides an important theoretical backdrop to these contemporary developments. Writing before the Ferragni scandal, Altoubat identifies authenticity and honesty as the core traits driving consumer engagement with influencers. Her research introduces a tripartite model of authenticity: the authentic self, the authentic being, and the authentic context. These dimensions collectively shape how audiences assess the trustworthiness of influencer content. Altoubat warns that even minor breaches of perceived sincerity can lead to the rapid deterioration of consumer trust - an observation that, in hindsight, directly anticipates the consequences faced by Ferragni following accusations of dishonesty and unethical conduct.

Finally, the 2023 volume Influencers and Creators: Business, Culture and Practice by Robert Kozinets, Ulrike Gretzel, and Rossella Gambetti offers a broader conceptualization of influencer authority. The authors argue that true influence is not measured by follower counts alone but by the public's perception of credibility and consistency. In an increasingly participatory digital environment, where users actively evaluate and circulate content, the reputation of digital creators becomes a fundamental asset. The authors underscore that credibility is built slowly through demonstrable reliability and can be destroyed quickly through perceived misconduct. This framework is especially relevant to the Ferragni case, where public perception and legal scrutiny have converged to challenge longstanding assumptions about influencer integrity and the sustainability of digital celebrity.

Together, these studies form a multifaceted foundation for analyzing the Ferragni case, highlighting the intersection of personal branding, legal accountability, audience trust, and the evolving nature of influencer marketing in the luxury fashion sector.

RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

In recent years, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful force in digital branding, with human influencers playing a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior and enhancing brand visibility. However, this model is now facing unprecedented scrutiny due to the legal scandal involving Chiara Ferragni - one of the most iconic figures in global fashion influencing. In December 2023, the Italian Public Prosecutor's Office in Milan opened a formal investigation into Ferragni's commercial practices, leading to her indictment on charges of aggravated fraud. The criminal trial is scheduled to begin in September 2025. As a result, several major fashion brands have terminated their partnerships with her, prompting urgent questions about the credibility, transparency, and long-term viability of influencer marketing. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the reputational and strategic impact of high-profile influencer scandals within the luxury fashion industry. Its primary aim is to explore the promotional strategies that established fashion brands may adopt following the dissolution of their collaborations with Chiara Ferragni. More specifically, the research seeks to:

- Investigate the nature and implications of the legal proceedings involving Chiara Ferragni.
- Assess whether the Ferragni case will have long-term repercussions on partnerships between influencers and fashion brands.
- Evaluate the relevance and perceived value of human influencers as a marketing tool in light of shifting consumer trust and brand priorities.
- To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:
- How did consumers respond to the Ferragni case, and what factors led global fashion brands to end their collaborations with her?
- Have human influencers lost relevance within the digital marketing landscape, or is the Ferragni case an exceptional, short-lived incident?
- What alternative promotional strategies might fashion brands pursue in the aftermath of the influencer scandal, and to what extent are human influencers likely to be replaced?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to offer a timely and comprehensive analysis of the transformation underway in luxury brand marketing, highlighting both the vulnerabilities and emerging opportunities in a post-influencer era.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-method approach to examine the Chiara Ferragni case and its implications for the business relationships between global fashion brands and influencers. The methodology integrates three key components: document analysis, qualitative interviews, and media content analysis. A case study framework is employed, which is well-suited for exploring complex issues within their real-world context (Yin, 2018).

Document Analysis

A thorough review of documents related to the investigations conducted by the *Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato* (AGCM) and the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office into Chiara Ferragni's activities was undertaken. This analysis aims to evaluate the nature of her work as a highly remunerated influencer and assess her compliance with the regulations outlined in the EU Digital Services Act (DSA).

Qualitative Interview Analysis

Qualitative interviews with prominent journalists, pundits, and marketing experts from reputable media platforms were analyzed to gather diverse perspectives on the evolving landscape of international e-commerce. Interviews were selected based on their relevance and depth of insight into the subject matter.

Media Content Analysis

A media content analysis was conducted on recent articles published by leading Western newspapers and media outlets. This analysis focused on the portrayal of influencers and their relationships with international fashion brands. Articles were identified using a keyword search strategy, with terms such as "influencer", "transparency", "intellectual honesty", and "consumer rights". The selected articles were examined for content, tone, and potential biases, providing insights into public and media perceptions of influencers and their societal impact.

Data Synthesis

The findings from the document review, qualitative interviews, and media content examination were synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of influencers in contemporary marketing strategies. This triangulation approach ensures the robustness and reliability of the research findings by integrating multiple sources of evidence.

Limitations

While this multi-method approach offers a thorough investigation, it is not without limitations. The document analysis is constrained by the availability and accessibility of relevant materials. The qualitative interview analysis relies on publicly available interviews, which may not encompass all perspectives. The media content analysis may reflect the biases of selected outlets. These limitations are acknowledged and mitigated through careful data triangulation and critical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In November 2022, Chiara Ferragni collaborated with the Italian pastry brand Balocco, operating through two of her companies, to sponsor the Pink Christmas pandoro.

Figure 1. It illustrates Chiara Ferragni's Pink Christmas pandoro campaign.
(Source: https://screenshot-media.com/culture/influencers/chiara-ferragni-charity-cake-apology/)

This Christmas cake featured Ferragni's unique design, incorporating her name and logo. The partnership was promoted as a charitable initiative to fund a new therapeutic treatment machine for children with bone cancer at Regina Margherita Hospital in Turin (Bassi, 2023). Following complaints from consumer associations, Italy's *Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato* (AGCM) initiated an inquiry. The investigation concluded on December 14, 2023, stating that the campaign was deceptive and fraudulent. Consumers were led to believe that purchasing the branded pandoro for €9, compared to the unbranded version at €3.70, would contribute to the hospital donation (Paglia, 2023).

Ferragni's social media posts further implied that purchasing the pandoro would support the charity initiative and that she was directly involved in the donation. However, this was not the case, as Ferragni had already received a €1 million fee for her endorsement but had not contributed to the hospital. The AGCM also noted that the inflated price of the branded pandoro misled consumers, exploiting their sensitivity toward charitable causes. In its final report, the AGCM stated that the campaign's advertising led consumers to mistakenly believe that each sale would contribute to the donation, when in fact, Balocco had already donated €50,000 months before the campaign began (Dara, 2024).

As a result, AGCM, acting as the Digital Services Coordinator, imposed fines of €1.1 million on Chiara Ferragni and €420,000 on Balocco (Manca, 2024). The AGCM emphasized that digital entrepreneurs must transparently disclose the advertising nature of the products they promote online, given their role in creating and disseminating audiovisual content (Mastropasqua, 2024). In a similar 2022 campaign, Ferragni received €1.2 million from Dolci & Preziosi to promote branded Easter eggs. The campaign suggested that a significant portion of the proceeds would be donated to I Bambini delle Fate, a non-profit organization supporting children with autism and disabilities (Marchetti, 2023). However, AGCM investigations revealed that the donation of €24,000 was made before the eggs were available for sale, rendering the campaign a commercial strategy disguised as charity. Ferragni was accused of misleading consumers into believing that the inflated price of the branded eggs would support charitable causes (Coviello, 2024).

Figure 2. It depicts Chiara Ferragni promoting Dolci & Preziosi Easter eggs in 2022.
(Source: https://www.ricettasprint.it/spopola-uovo-di-pasqua-chiara-ferragni/)

Following the AGCM fines, Ferragni faced criminal charges of aggravated and continued fraud for using misleading information and unfair practices to promote commercial products online. The charges highlighted her suggestion of a “correlation between product purchases and contributions to charitable initiatives”. This offense is prosecutable *ex officio*, even if consumers were compensated, as the sales occurred electronically, leaving buyers unable to verify the seller’s identity or product quality. Ferragni’s influence, bolstered by her 30 million social media followers, further exacerbated the imbalance (Fazzo, 2025). The case has garnered significant international attention, with global media outlets extensively covering the trial. The implications extend beyond Ferragni, impacting the multi-billion-dollar influencer marketing industry worldwide (Pacho, 2025; Giuffrida, 2024; Salvoni, 2025).

Chiara Ferragni sought to defend herself by posting videos attributing the fines and criminal allegations to communication misunderstandings. She expressed confidence in a favorable legal outcome and firmly denied any wrongdoing, further asserting that the Milan Public Prosecutor had initiated proceedings without sufficient evidence of her guilt. Ferragni added that her high-profile legal team would ultimately resolve the matter in her favor. However, these remarks - perceived by many as dismissive and boastful - were poorly received by the general public. Her tone, particularly the emphasis on the prestige and cost of her lawyers, was widely interpreted as a display of arrogance and privilege, further damaging her public image (Doria, 2024). Ferragni claimed good faith and blamed miscommunication with consumers, deflecting responsibility for how her messages were interpreted. This approach violated a fundamental principle of social media communication: never challenge public perception (Facciolo, 2024). Her involvement in charity initiatives for children with cancer, from which she profited, sparked outrage among her followers, leading to a wave of criticism. In response, she disabled comments on her Instagram profile, halting the engagement crucial for an influencer (Guerrini, 2024). Since December 2023, Ferragni has been losing an average of 500,000 followers weekly, reflecting declining interest in her online presence, with this trend showing no signs of abating.

Digital strategy and crisis communication experts, such as Rosario Magro (CEO of Influencer Marketing Unity Group Enterprise) and Andrea Barchiesi (Director of the globally recognized Reputation Manager Institute), argue that Ferragni has lost her credibility as a trustworthy influencer. Her reputation has sustained irreversible damage, undermining the trust she once commanded. Establishing and preserving credibility is a delicate process, and even a minor misstep can dismantle it (De Carli, 2024). While Ferragni may eventually be cleared of criminal charges, experts believe the tarnish on her reputation will endure. This marks a stark contrast to 2017, when the prestigious U.S. magazine Forbes hailed her as the most influential figure in global fashion, and her business model was analyzed at Harvard Business School (Baroli, 2024).

Beyond losing followers, public sentiment has undergone a marked shift, with many now perceiving her as exploitative. This widespread disapproval became particularly visible in 2024, when her flagship stores in Rome and Milan were vandalized with graffiti bearing the words "criminal" and "scammer". The incidents attracted significant public attention: numerous individuals stopped to take photos, selfies, and videos in front of the defaced storefronts. These images rapidly went viral across social media platforms, accumulating millions of views and further amplifying the reputational damage to Ferragni's image (Canonico, 2024).

Figure 3. It depicts one of Chiara Ferragni's physical stores in Rome, Italy, vandalized with offensive terms such as *Bandita* (Criminal) and *Truffatrice* (Scammer).
(Source:https://www.la7.it/intanto/video/imbrattato-di-insulti-il-negozio-di-chiara-ferragni-a-roma-video-02-01-2024-520678)

Some analysts suggest that an acquittal in the criminal trial could allow the influencer to return to her professional pursuits without significant disruption. However, others argue that the intense media scrutiny, fueled by her high-profile status, has irreparably damaged the trust between Ferragni, her audience, and consumers. The Ferragni case has transcended its legal dimensions, becoming a societal issue too significant to ignore (Ronchi, 2025). Critics claim that Ferragni's career has been marked by self-promotion and a prioritization of profit over ethical considerations. Public opinion, irrespective of personal stance, reflects a strong aversion to excuses, especially when vulnerable groups - such as children with cancer - are affected. This sentiment was particularly evident in the Pandoro Balocco case, where contributors believed their purchases supported a charitable cause. Consequently, the harm to Ferragni's reputation seems irreversible (Arnau, 2024). Recognizing her declining influence, Ferragni has made desperate attempts to regain public trust, though these efforts are unlikely to succeed. Her recent campaign involved distributing thousands of flyers across European cities to proclaim her innocence and mitigate public resentment. However, this strategy risks further alienating the public and could potentially lead to legal consequences for environmental violations (Guarnieri, 2024). The legal proceedings against Chiara Ferragni have prompted numerous prominent international brands to terminate their commercial partnerships with the influencer, often preemptively and well before the commencement of her trial. Among the first to withdraw were Safilo (eyewear), Coca-Cola (beverages), Monnalisa (children's apparel), and Perfetti Van Melle (confectionery and chewing gum). Paolo Pigna, a leading Italian stationery company, also ended its collaboration, citing its corporate code of ethics, which strictly prohibits affiliations with individuals sanctioned for unethical or unlawful behavior. Sammontana, a major global producer of frozen desserts and ice cream, followed suit by terminating all advertising and sponsorship agreements to preserve its brand integrity. Additional companies - such as Tod's (luxury footwear and leather goods), Calzedonia (hosiery and swimwear), Intimissimi (lingerie), Morellato (jewelry and watches), and Pantene (hair care products) - have likewise severed their ties with Ferragni. Marketing analysts anticipate that luxury fashion brands such as Gucci, Hermes, Ferragamo, Chanel and Prada may soon follow suit (Moro, 2024). These decisions reflect a broader reassessment within the corporate sector regarding the reputational risks associated with influencer marketing. In previous years, many of these companies had deliberately aligned their brand image with Ferragni's to capitalize on the influencer's widespread appeal and overwhelmingly positive public perception, often offering highly lucrative compensation in return. However, as Ferragni faces a serious legal battle and mounting public backlash, the reputational capital that once made her an asset has become a liability. Her negative visibility threatens to transfer adverse associations onto the products she promotes, potentially damaging brand equity. In response to these reputational developments, companies are re-evaluating the strategic rationale underpinning celebrity endorsement initiatives. Chiara Ferragni, once regarded as an asset capable of enhancing brand visibility and consumer appeal, is now increasingly perceived as a potential liability. Consequently, firms that previously invested significant resources in leveraging her public image are reconsidering such partnerships to mitigate the risk of reputational damage. This shift reflects a broader, cautious recalibration within corporate marketing strategies regarding the selection and management of influencer affiliations (Patella, 2024).

The loss of these significant collaborations has severely impacted Ferragni's financial standing. Her companies continue to incur losses, with the 2023 fiscal year closing at a deficit of €34 million (Scozzari, 2025). Ferragni's decline as a digital entrepreneur can be attributed to her adoption of unfair and deceptive practices. However, the intense public backlash she has faced - not only from her followers but also from the general public - can also be linked to the growing influence of "economic limitarianism", a philosophical doctrine gaining traction in Western Europe at political, social, cultural, and entrepreneurial levels. This doctrine advocates for the imposition of limits on excessive personal wealth, arguing that extreme economic disparities undermine social cohesion and equity, thus necessitating regulatory measures to curb the accumulation of vast fortunes (Robeyns, 2024). In this context, the scrutiny of Ferragni's wealth and business practices may reflect a broader societal shift toward challenging the ethical legitimacy of substantial personal earnings, particularly when perceived as unfairly acquired. The relationship between this doctrine and the role of social media influencers warrants further exploration and will be the focus of future research.

For nearly a decade, Chiara Ferragni stood as one of the most prominent and highly compensated influencers, endorsed by a wide array of prestigious fashion brands. However, her dramatic fall from grace has not only tarnished her image but also cast a shadow over the broader influencer marketing industry. This reputational damage has extended beyond Ferragni herself, affecting other digital personalities irrespective of their individual prominence. As a result, many companies have begun re-evaluating their reliance on influencer-based marketing strategies. By mid-2023, individuals who previously served as ambassadors for luxury brands through social media platforms increasingly came to be seen as potential liabilities rather than assets (Conti, 2025). Numerous cases revealed that some influencers prioritized personal enrichment through misleading or ethically questionable practices, thereby contributing to a climate of growing consumer skepticism. Contemporary experts in digital marketing contend that Chiara Ferragni's downfall marks a pivotal and likely irreversible turning point in the evolution of digital marketing. According to this view, the era of celebrity influencers - those with millions of followers - may be nearing its end. The financial and reputational backing that once elevated these individuals to global prominence is rapidly diminishing. Without the support of major corporations, who previously invested heavily in such partnerships, the influence and visibility of these online personalities are expected to decline significantly. This disinvestment reflects a broader industry recognition that aligning with individuals perceived as controversial or ethically compromised can pose serious reputational risks. Moreover, global brands are increasingly prioritizing their brand reputation, recognizing it as an asset of strategic value that transcends short-term profit margins. In an era of heightened public scrutiny and social accountability, these companies are reluctant to associate their image with figures whose credibility has been publicly questioned. The reputational capital of a brand - carefully cultivated over years or even decades - is now seen as too valuable to risk through associations that might provoke public backlash or consumer mistrust. As a result, a marked shift is underway: from influencer-driven endorsements toward marketing strategies that emphasize transparency, corporate integrity, and long-term brand equity (Fontana, 2024).

A comparative analysis of influencer-driven business volume from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2024, underscores this shift. Goldman Sachs reported that global influencer marketing revenue reached €700 billion in 2023, with €420 billion generated in Europe alone. However, by 2024, this figure had dropped to below €200 billion. Early 2025 estimates suggest a further contraction, as Morgan Stanley projects that industry turnover will not exceed €50 billion by year-end (Cirio, 2025). These forecasts are reinforced by platform-specific data: The State of Fashion 2024, the annual report by Business of Fashion and McKinsey, highlights a significant decline in Instagram's performance, noting that user engagement has decreased by 30% since the end of 2023. This sharp drop in interaction reflects the diminishing impact of influencer-based marketing and signals a broader industry downturn (Fellini, 2024).

Despite this decline, self-proclaimed influencers remain active online, though they no longer promote renowned brands. Instead, many engage in illicit activities, selling counterfeit goods, fraudulent wellness products, or even illegal drugs, thereby deceiving consumers and endangering public health and safety. Between March and July 2024 alone, approximately 86 million counterfeit or adulterated items were seized within the European Union, according to a recent report by Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Naef, 2024).

Currently, both high-fashion entrepreneurs and consumers appear increasingly disinterested in traditional influencers, no longer engaging with their content. As a result, even major corporations have shifted their marketing strategies, showing reluctance to invest in this professional category, which has dominated the advertising and e-commerce sectors for nearly a decade. Additionally, young people aged 14 to 20 exhibit what is commonly referred to as "influencer fatigue", a sense of boredom and disengagement with influencers who seem to have lost their appeal and ability to connect with online audiences (Nicolosi, 2025). A recent study conducted by Ypulse - a European research firm specializing in the preferences and emerging trends of young Millennials - surveyed a sample of six million European citizens aged 14 to 20 in May 2024. The findings revealed that 79% of respondents do not follow fashion influencers, perceiving them as lacking credibility. This skepticism arises from the belief that product endorsements, such as clothing or accessories, are motivated solely by contractual obligations rather than genuine personal preference. Furthermore, 66% of respondents agreed that influencers no longer hold the same persuasive ability they once had and predicted that their role would become obsolete within the next five years (Bolchi, 2024).

A shift in investment strategies among emerging brands has become increasingly evident, particularly in the aftermath of declining public confidence in traditional influencers such as Chiara Ferragni. This transformation has prompted a growing reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) as a disruptive and innovative force within the influencer marketing sector. By late 2024, virtual influencers - digitally generated personas engineered to engage audiences and endorse products - had gained substantial momentum. These figures, characterized by meticulously curated appearances and consistent brand alignment, are capable of operating continuously, thereby ensuring uninterrupted audience engagement. Their adaptability and risk-free nature make them particularly appealing to brands seeking to avoid controversies tied to human influencers' conduct (Cataleta, 2025).

One prominent example is @lilmiquela, who rapidly amassed over two million followers and has since collaborated with emerging fashion labels such as Tove, Feben, and Diotima. However, she is far from an isolated case. Lu do Magalu, a virtual influencer from Brazil, currently boasts 7.2 million Instagram followers and collaborates with leading brands such as Red Bull and Burger King. Praised for her perceived "authenticity", Lu engages her audience by responding to comments, reviewing products, and encouraging interaction, thus fostering a strong sense of connection and trust. Similarly, Imma, a Japanese AI influencer, distinguishes herself through partnerships with both human and digital influencers, as well as with globally renowned brands including Valentino, Calvin Klein, Porsche, and Nike. Her strategic collaborations and cross-platform presence have earned her nearly 7 million followers. Further demonstrating the market's embrace of non-human influencers is Aitana López, a hyperrealistic 25-year-old virtual persona from Catalonia, known for her distinctive pink hair and life-like appearance. With approximately 5 million followers, Aitana represents the new generation of AI-generated influencers. Shudu, a South African digital model, has also achieved considerable recognition through her work with prestigious fashion houses such as Louis Vuitton, and her presence in iconic publications like Vogue and Cosmopolitan. Ana Kamali offers a different approach: created to captivate users through visually intriguing and dynamic content, she is emerging as a virtual supermodel with significant potential. Lastly, Emily Pellegrini - a 23-year-old AI persona based in Los Angeles - has drawn widespread attention, particularly from high-profile individuals who, unaware of her digital nature, have mistakenly believed her to be a real person. Her Instagram following has surpassed 4 million (Rallo, 2024). Beyond their visual appeal and branding flexibility, AI-driven influencers present distinct advantages in terms of operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Most notably, they eliminate the reputational and financial risks commonly associated with human influencers. Moreover, the integration of advanced data analytics enables these AI entities to personalize marketing content, align campaigns with user behavior, and adapt in real time to shifting consumer preferences. As a result, virtual influencers are not only reshaping the field of digital marketing but are increasingly viewed as credible, scalable alternatives to their human counterparts in an evolving promotional landscape (Gillio, 2025).

In response to the growing disillusionment with both human and AI-generated influencers, several globally renowned luxury brands have made a decisive shift away from influencer-based marketing. This strategic recalibration reflects a desire to reclaim narrative control and restore the authenticity of brand identity in an increasingly saturated and volatile digital environment. Dolce & Gabbana, Giorgio Armani, and Ermenegildo Zegna - three iconic figures in the global fashion industry - epitomize this trend. After years of actively engaging bloggers, digital celebrities, and social media influencers for campaigns and runway shows, they have reversed course. The reputational fallout from the Ferragni scandal, which triggered widespread skepticism toward influencer credibility, prompted these designers to return to traditional print media as a means of reasserting their distinctiveness and communicating their values with clarity and depth. This broader movement is also visible in the practices of heritage brands such as

Cartier, Prada, Givenchy, Bottega Veneta, and Vivienne Westwood, which have revived their own print magazines and large-format catalogues. These publications are no longer mere promotional tools; rather, they have become curated artistic platforms that showcase new collections while fostering interdisciplinary dialogue among artists, writers, and designers. In doing so, brands reframe themselves not only as fashion houses but also as cultural actors with a commitment to aesthetic and intellectual refinement (Fiorino, 2024). Paper-based communication holds particular relevance in the luxury sector, where the tactile and visual dimensions of print create a multi-sensory experience that digital platforms cannot emulate. Catalogues, brochures, monographs, and even printed invitations serve as physical extensions of brand identity. Enhanced by refined techniques - such as foil embossing, laser cutting, specialty binding, and Pantone-calibrated printing - these materials convey elegance, exclusivity, and permanence. While digital content is fleeting and vulnerable to algorithmic distortion, print is perceived as both credible and enduring (Quadri, 2025). Furthermore, recent studies confirm that consumers devote greater attention to print media, retain more information, and experience a stronger emotional connection to printed content. The physicality of paper invites interaction, promotes memorability, and allows for high-fidelity color reproduction - an essential consideration for brands that invest heavily in the visual integrity of their identity. In this context, the use of paper becomes not merely a communication choice, but a deliberate act of positioning. It enables brands to distinguish themselves from the digital crowd, reaffirm their prestige, and engage audiences in a slower, more contemplative form of consumption (Pereira, 2025). Ultimately, this return to print should not be interpreted as a rejection of innovation, but rather as a reaffirmation of strategic values: longevity, quality, and controlled storytelling. In an era where brand image can be destabilized by a single influencer controversy, paper media offers luxury brands a medium that is both expressive and resilient - a platform through which to craft narratives that endure beyond the lifecycle of a social media trend (Premoli, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The Chiara Ferragni scandal has revealed critical vulnerabilities in the influencer marketing landscape, particularly surrounding issues of honesty, transparency, and regulatory compliance - values consistently emphasized in both scholarly literature and EU regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA). As highlighted by Lucarelli, Jerman, Ferrandino (2024), and Seminara (2023), consumer trust in digital marketing relies heavily on transparent promotional practices and ethical communication. Ferragni's misleading campaign confirmed these concerns, illustrating how the absence of transparency can provoke public backlash, damage brand reputation, and prompt institutional scrutiny. Our findings underscore this dynamic. Survey data and public reactions underscored a widespread perception that Ferragni acted dishonestly, violating not only consumer expectations but also the ethical standards increasingly demanded in digital commerce. In light of this erosion of trust, many luxury fashion houses have recalibrated their strategies. While brands such as Louis Vuitton have turned to AI-generated influencers to mitigate reputational risks, others - like Zegna, Dolce & Gabbana, and Armani - are retreating from the influencer economy altogether. This strategic withdrawal supports what prior research has suggested: that digital engagement may offer visibility, but not always credibility. The return to traditional media, especially high-end print publications, signals a deliberate move toward controlled storytelling and brand consistency, privileging long-term identity over short-term exposure. By emphasizing editorial curation, artistic integrity, and tactile luxury, these brands aim to re-establish a relationship with consumers grounded in trust, refinement, and emotional depth. Ferragni's case has acted as a catalyst, not only exposing the fragility of influencer-based promotion but also reaffirming the relevance of regulatory frameworks and ethical standards in shaping digital marketing. The response of luxury brands suggests a growing awareness that credibility, transparency, and alignment with consumer values are not optional, but foundational for sustainable brand communication in a post-influencer era (Flaccavento, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study highlights the radical transformation that began in 2024 and continues to reshape the influencer marketing landscape. Figures such as Chiara Ferragni, once emblematic of digital celebrity culture, have experienced a significant loss of public credibility. As a result, several renowned fashion brands have distanced themselves from such high-profile influencers, seeking alternative marketing strategies that better align with evolving consumer expectations. These shifts are unfolding within a broader context of profound political, economic, and cultural changes across Western European societies, all of which have played a crucial role in shaping both consumer behavior and public perceptions of influencer culture. Several digital marketing experts argue that the figure of the influencer may not be disappearing entirely, but rather transforming. Nano and micro-influencers are increasingly perceived as more authentic and trustworthy, often achieving higher engagement rates and fostering stronger relationships with niche audiences. These figures offer brands a strategic opportunity to communicate with targeted consumer segments, enhancing credibility and emotional connection (Primavilla, 2025). Future research should explore this shift in greater depth, particularly the role of smaller-scale influencers in shaping purchasing decisions and rebuilding consumer trust. Additionally, further investigation is warranted into the regulatory developments initiated by EU institutions in the wake of the Ferragni scandal. These proposals aim to enhance consumer protection by strengthening existing legislation, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), and introducing stricter sanctions for influencers who engage in deceptive or manipulative practices. As the digital marketing environment continues to evolve, ongoing academic inquiry will be essential for understanding both its ethical implications and its practical applications across the luxury fashion industry and beyond (Occhipinti, 2024).

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