

The De-Influencing Paradox

Why “Don’t buy” is the new “Buy now”

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital economy was primarily driven by desire. People aspired to achieve similar lives as those portrayed on social media by influencers and purchased the products and services recommended by those influencers in an effort to replicate their "perfect lives." Trust was the foundation ; if they posted it, we purchased it. But over the last few years , that engine started to stall. As inflation rose and viral controversies exposed dishonest reviews—most notably the "MascaraGate incident that sparked outrage" (StackInfluence, 2025)—, audiences stopped seeing influencers as friends and started seeing them as salespeople. The blind trust was gone.

In its place came a new trend: De-Influencing.

Overnight, the most popular content changed from "You need this" to "Save your money." It seemed like a win for honesty and a loss for consumerism, as creators started racking up millions of views ruthlessly critiquing viral products and publicly criticising brand deals.

But there's a catch.

What this movement preaches, while it claims to stop overconsumption, often merely redirects it. The phrase "Don't buy this expensive brand" is pretty much always followed by " buy this cheaper alternative instead." All this has birthed the so-called "Dupe Economy", a term describing how "dupes have become an established feature of the market" (Mishcon de Reya, 2025),where the urge to shop hasn't disappeared-it has just found a new, "smarter" target.

This research explores that contradiction. We ask: Is de-influencing a genuine revolution in mindful spending, or is it simply a new marketing tactic where telling us not to buy is the most effective way to make us open our wallets?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review integrates findings from 30 recent academic, and industry sources to shed light on the trend of de-influencing. The literature is categorized into four key themes: The Credibility Shift, The Psychology of Anti-Consumption, The "Dupe" Economy, and Strategic Market Responses.

1.The Crisis of Trust and the Rise of De-Influencing

It starts with a foundation that comes from a loss of trust with traditional influencers. Recent research studies introduced a definition for de-influencing: "Cause-Oriented Influencing," where creators act as "citizen regulators" to "advocate for the mindful use of the planet's resources" (Koivunen et al., 2025; Apostol & Asiminei, 2025).

* Credibility of the Source: It has been found that a de-influencer has higher credibility in comparison to other influencers. It is primarily due to the fact that a de-influencer presumably has no profit motive. Through negative reviews of products, they themselves convey their selflessness, which has been considered one of the chief factors in determining consumer trust.

* Negativity Bias: Indeed, there was found in the literature evidence that "negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)" hurts more than positive word-of-mouth helps (Cheung & Lee, 2008). The negative reviews are much more convincing than positive recommendations. This in itself explains that the process of de-influencing through de-influencing videos would be much more convincing than other advertising formats.

2.The Psychology of Resistance

Research has linked de-influencing to other psychological models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

* Guilt and Cognitive Dissonance: The effectiveness of anti-consumer marketing campaigns for consumer boycotts, such as Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket," arises from the "cognitive dissonance" created (Hwang et al., 2016; Choudhary, 2025). The campaigns make the consumer aware of the repercussions of his or her behavior, with guilt being used to instill brand loyalty.

* Gen Z's Dilemma: De-influencing becomes a way for Gen Z to cope. The phrase "de-influence" itself becomes a means for Gen Z to make sense of the dilemma they face regarding social media trends and serves as a justification for not needing pricey things to feel influential and for doing the right thing concerning their finances.

3.The Paradox: From "Don't Buy" to "Buy Dupes"

A critical segment of the literature highlights that de-influencing often redirects rather than stops consumption.

* "The Dupe Culture": This "rise of dupe culture", has arisen as a consequence of the rejection of luxury goods (Mishcon de Reya, 2025). Influencers who "de-influence" a high-end item also endorse the cheaper substitute. This has "democratized" the trend, and people continue the cycle of consumption by taking part in it via cheaper substitutes.

* Legal & Ethical Lines: This has caused confusion between honest reviews and disparaging trademarks of their competitors. Companies are forced to deal with confusing intelligence property and anti-fraud regulations in their advertising acts, "dupes" flooding into the marketplace.

4. Market Reaction: Underdogs and Brand Hatred

Finally, the literature examines the impact of the hostility on the market.

* Brand Hate: When a customer perceives a brand has let them down because it has lower quality or has not been ethical, the customer expresses "Brand Hate" which directly affects "negative consumer behaviors" such as "boycott (instrumental aggression) and brand sabotage (hostile aggression)" (Sameeni et al., 2024).

* The Underdog Advantage: "Underdog stories" are being used successfully by smaller brands in this hostile environment. By positioning themselves as the "underdog" alternative to the "corporate giants" that are being 'de-influenced,' the brands earn the sympathy and loyalty of consumers.

3. METHODOLOGY

To understand the phenomenon of "de-influencing," this study analyses a dataset of 30 carefully chosen sources, including scholarly publications, articles and psychological frameworks, as well as current news developments in the industry during the span from 2022 to 2025. This dataset encompasses the entirety of the trend, which includes events such as "MascaraGate" and business cases like Patagonia.

Instead of doing a summary of each document, I decided to do a Thematic Analysis. Through this technique, I could identify some patterns within the literature, grouping results into four main pillars: crisis of trust, psychology of anti-consumption, emergence of "dupe" economy, and market paradox that emerged from it.

The validity of the results can be attributed to the scientific processes employed by the studies in their research. The studies conduct Focus Group Discussions in order to assess the consumer sentiments, Controlled Experiments to establish the cause-and effect relationships, and Large-Scale Surveys to identify the trends. This helps in ensuring that the results established in the paper have validity and are not mere hypotheses.

3.1 RESEARCH GAP

While conducting the literature review, identified a significant gap. We have papers discussing why influencers are losing trust, and separate papers discussing why Dupe culture is rising.

Nevertheless, there is no information regarding any relationship between these factors. We do not have data regarding the exact point at which the consumer, after watching a negative review, purchases a cheaper alternative.

This leads to our primary research gap:

- Does de-influencing lead to a "dead end" in the consumer journey (true anti-consumption), or does it act as a "detour" to a different purchase (the dupe)?

- Do consumers critically verify the negative claims made by de-influencers, or have they merely shifted their blind trust from positive endorsements to negative critiques without factual validation?

* Existing Literature discusses "Dupes" and "De-influencing" as separate or parallel trends.

* Missing link: Data that explicitly connects the two. For example, "What percentage of consumers who watch a 'don't buy this' video immediately buy the recommended alternative?"

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A cross-sectional survey with a quantitative design was adopted. This choice is based on the research question being addressed through the study, which seeks to establish the frequency and co-variation of attitudes, perceptions, and intentions in the target sample at one point in time. In population surveys, cross-sectional designs are the commonly used approach in consumer psychology and marketing research studies (Malhotra, 2019).

As compared to other approaches, such as the qualitative interview method, there were three main reasons why a quantitative design was chosen. First, it facilitates the hypothesis testing procedure, where the researcher can conclude whether the established relationships are valid or not through statistical analysis. Second, it ensures that the sample size ($n = 204$) is large enough to generate reliable frequency distributions and cross-tabulations. Lastly, it allows comparing the data across various demographic categories, including age, gender, and expenditure levels, which is critical in determining which group is more prone to de-influencing.

In summary, the survey questionnaire was utilized as a descriptive and inferential tool. While the descriptive function entailed profiling the frequency of de-influencing exposure and the consumer reaction, the inferential component involved testing five cross-variable hypotheses with chi-square analysis.

3.3 SURVEY DESIGN

The questionnaire contained eleven questions in closed form, developed using four different question types: dichotomous/multiple choice questions (Questions 1-4, 7, 8, 10-11), two Likert scale questions (Questions 5-6), and one demographic set of questions (Questions 1D-3D).

All questions used exhaustive and mutually exclusive response choices to avoid any confusion. In case of Likert scales, a five-point scale was used (1= strongly disagree/very unlikely; 5= strongly agree/very likely), which is quite common when measuring consumers' attitudes and offers enough ordinal categories for non-parametric statistical analysis.

This survey tool was delivered electronically using Google Forms from February to March 2026 by employing convenient and snowball sampling through Instagram and WhatsApp, focusing on people who use social media channels where de-influencing material is commonly available.

3.4 SAMPLING

The study employed a non-probability, purposive convenience sample. Participants had to have social media accounts and be at least 15 years old since the process of de-influencing happens through social media usage only. Age limit was not put on respondents, allowing comparisons by age brackets. Final sample size was $n = 204$ respondents.

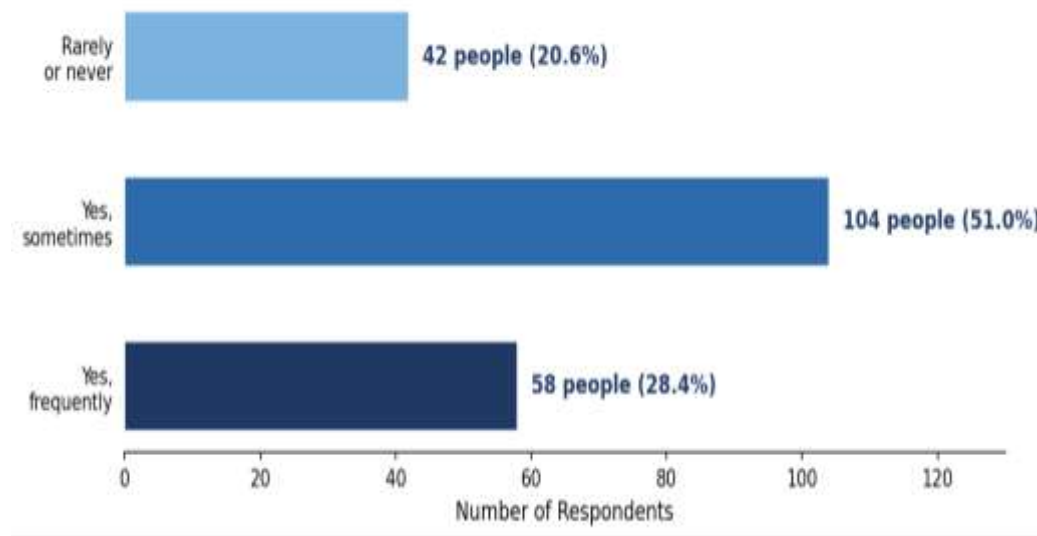
Sample Demographics: Age, Gender and Monthly Spending ($n = 204$)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	15–25 (Gen Z)	148	72.5%
Age	25–35 (Millennials)	45	22.1%
Age	35+	11	5.4%
Gender	Female	138	67.6%
Gender	Male	65	31.9%
Monthly Spending	Under ₹5,000	175	85.8%
Monthly Spending	₹5,000–₹15,000	25	12.3%
Monthly Spending	Above ₹15,000	4	2.0%

Analysis of the data was performed by means of IBM SPSS Statistics (v27). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were employed to summarize the results of all eight questions from the survey. In order to test the hypothesis set, there were three statistical analyses performed, namely, a Spearman's rank-order correlation to investigate the association between belief of quality and willingness to buy, and two chi-square tests of independence to test whether the assumptions regarding prediction of consumer response on frequency of exposure and trust would prove correct. The size of effect was estimated by Cramer's V (chi-square test) and rho (Spearman). All the tests were conducted at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE SEEN DE-INFLUENCING CONTENT ?



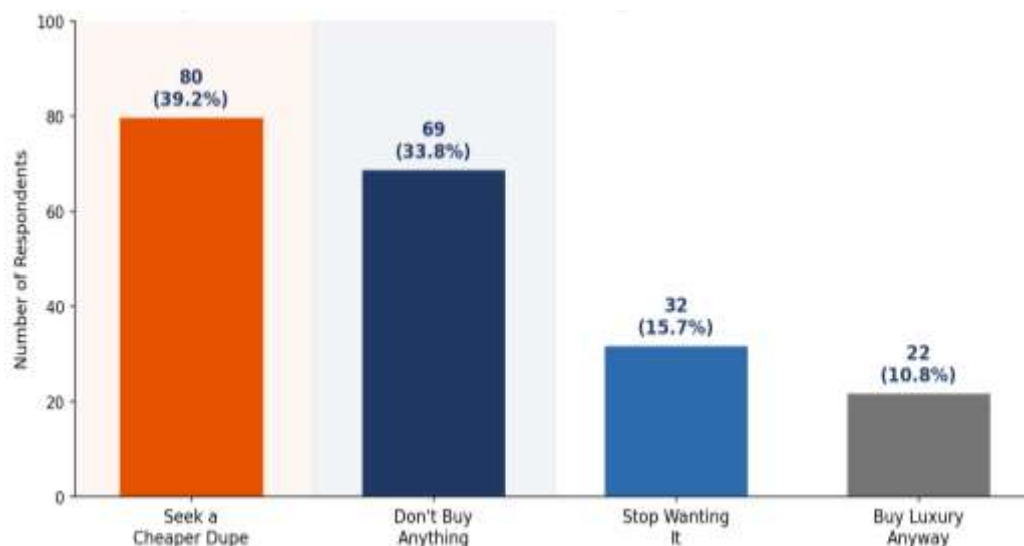
Have You Ever Seen a De-Influencing Video? (n = 204)

(Influencer criticises expensive product & recommends a cheaper dupe)

Almost 8 out of 10 participants (79.4%) have witnessed an influencer badmouth an expensive product and endorse a budget-friendly dupe. This is consistent with the literature, which notes that de-influencing is not considered an esoteric form of content anymore but is actually one of the typical things on young social media users' plates, especially on TikTok and Instagram (StackInfluence, 2025; Apostol & Asiminei, 2025).

On the other hand, only one-fifth (20.6%) admit to witnessing de-influencing rarely or never in their lives. These participants are crucial since their actions in the absence of de-influencing content provide the perfect benchmark against which to compare the behavior of regular de-influencing watchers, whose actions are quite different, as the results of Section 5.7 will prove.

4.2 THE CORE FINDING: DETOUR OR DEAD END ?



Consumer Reaction When Told a Luxury Product is 'Not Worth It' (n = 204)

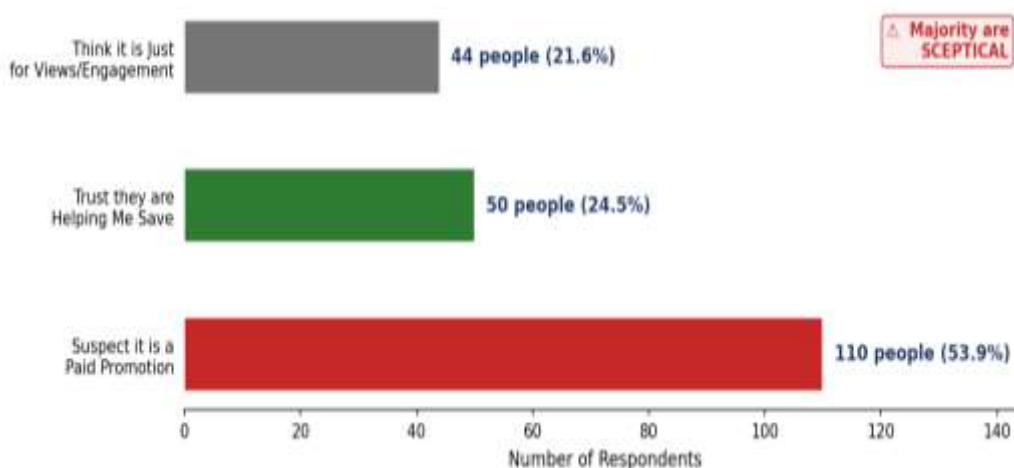
“THE DETOUR WINS , BUT THE MARGIN IS SMALL”

39.2% seek a cheaper dupe (DETOUR) of the item after being exposed to 'Not Worth It' content. 49.5% are clearly against consumption, i.e., they stop buying or stop wanting the product. 10.8% continue without being affected and buy the luxury item anyway.

The power of de-influencing to prevent purchases of luxury goods is extremely high (89.2% don't buy the item), yet it diverts 4 out of 10 people to make a new purchase.

De-influencing Paradox: The movement wants to minimize purchases, but ends up changing WHAT is purchased!

4.3 DO CONSUMERS ACTUALLY TRUST DE-INFLUENCERS ?



What Do You Assume When a De-Influencer Recommends a Dupe? (n = 204)

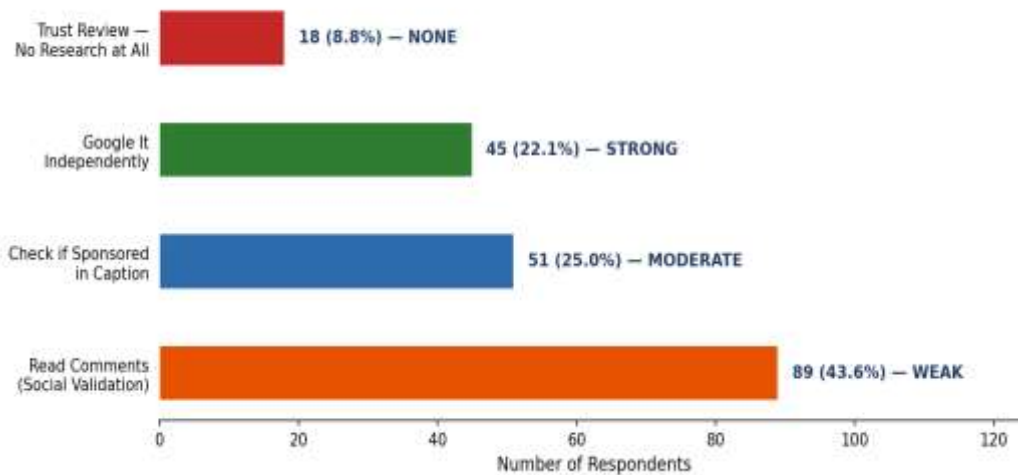
Most people in the sample, 53.9%, were suspicious. These individuals believed that the de-influencer who suggested using the less expensive dupes would likely receive payment from the dupes' company. On the other hand, only 24.5% of the participants fully trusted the intentions of the de-influencer. In addition, 21.6% thought that the videos were made for entertainment purposes only.

In this way, most of the sample, 75.5%, had some level of business suspicion regarding de-influencers' motives. This result supports the literature review results: according to Elhajjar and Itani (2025), de-influencers have higher credibility than influencers; however, the present study indicates that most consumers have suspicions regarding the motives of these influencers.

Here comes the most interesting part: despite their suspicions, many people followed the recommendations made by the de-influencers. More information will be provided in Section 4.6.

4.4 HOW CAREFULLY DO CONSUMERS FACT-CHECK WHAT THEY HEAR ?

If consumers are sceptical, one would expect them to verify claims before acting on them. However, this is not what the research finding indicate. The data reveals a significant gap between feeling sceptical and verifying claims.



How Do You Fact-Check De-Influencing Content? (n = 204)

Just 22.1% of the participants engage in true independent fact-checking, where they search Google for the ingredients or check the claims made for themselves. Reading the comment section, to find out whether others agreed with the video maker, was the most frequent 'fact-checking' method used (43.6%). This is not fact-checking; it is social validation. The audience seeks out individuals who share their opinion, not information.

The process becomes even less credible since social media algorithms will likely push the majority opinion and those who follow the de-influencer will most likely share their anti-luxury sentiment (Wired, 2024). The fact-checking process is thus flawed at the very root – what people see is not an objective reality but one that confirms their existing beliefs.

This answer addresses the second research question directly – the vast majority of consumers do not engage in rigorous verification of the negative claims made by de-influencers. They have transferred their trust rather than developed their critical thinking skills. According to Cheung and Lee (2008), negative reviews carry greater automatic credibility compared to positive ones.

4.5 HOW LIKELY ARE CONSUMERS TO BUY THE RECOMMENDED DUPE ?

Score	What it means	Count	Percentage
1	Very unlikely	22	10.9%
2	Unlikely	48	23.8%
3	Neutral-undecided	81	40.1%
4	Likely	42	20.8%
5	Very likely	9	4.5%
Average (mean)	2.88 out of 5 – Cautiously below neutral	-	-

4.6 DO CONSUMERS BELIEVE DUPES ARE AS GOOD AS THE REAL THING ?

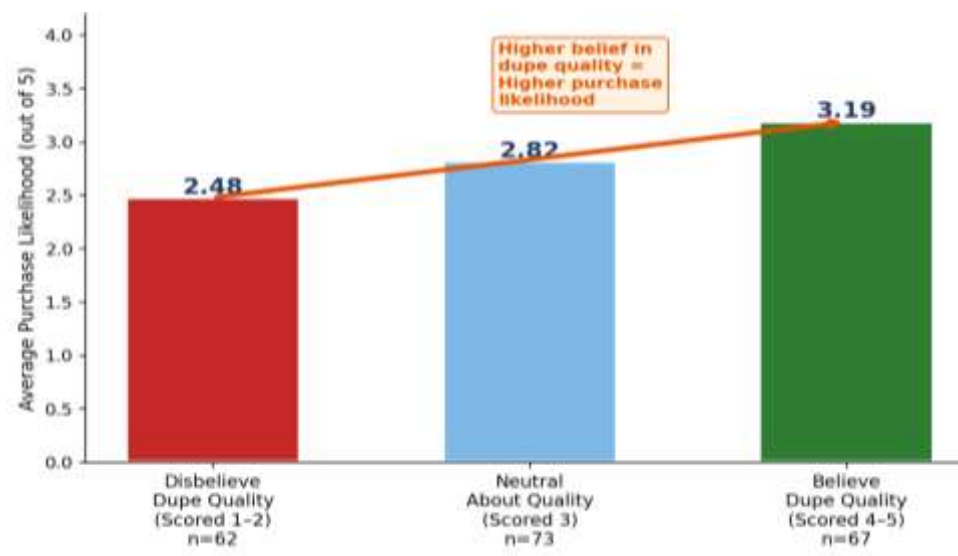
The mean score of quality belief at 2.98 is very close to the exact middle of the scale, indicating that consumers, on average, really do not know if dupes are as good. They are undecided. This indecision is important as it indicates that

there are many consumers who purchase dupes without being convinced that their quality is comparable.

31% actively disbelieve in dupe quality, while 33% are convinced. In between lies the 36% of undecided consumers. From this distribution, it can be concluded that the market for dupes is driven not by conviction but by uncertainty, economic necessity, and ideological opposition to luxury brands (as discussed in Section 4.8).

4.7 [TEST 1] DOES BELIEVING IN DUPE QUALITY MAKE YOU MORE LIKELY TO BUY ONE ?

The correlation between these two variables was tested through a simple relationship test: Do individuals who believe that dupes meet luxury quality standards also purchase them?



Spearman Correlation: Quality Belief vs Purchase Likelihood

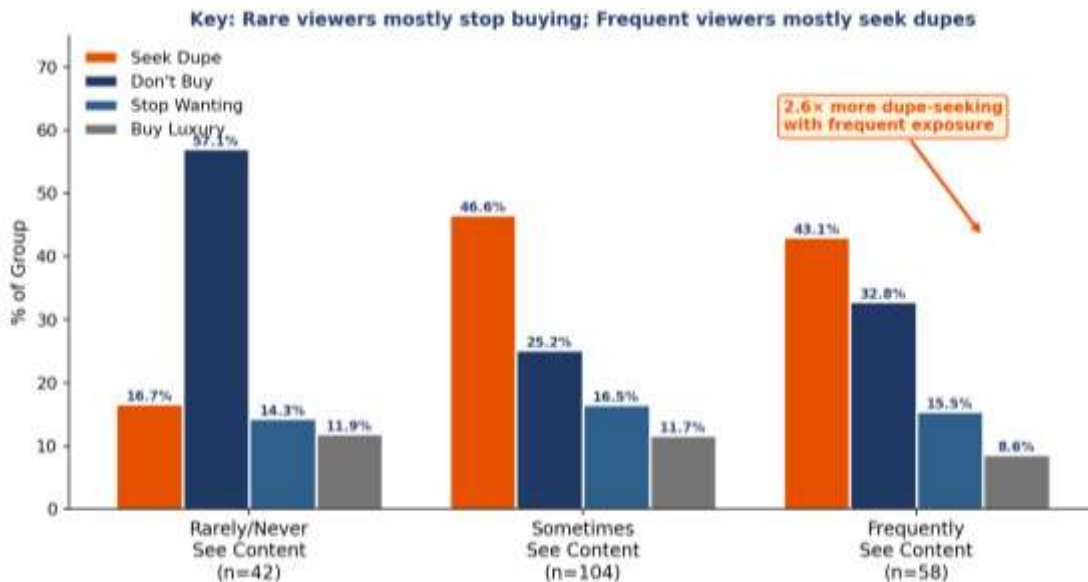
Quality Belief Group	n	Mean Purchase Likelihood	Interpretation
Disbelieve dupe quality (scored 1–2)	62	2.48	Below neutral — unlikely to buy
Neutral about quality (scored 3)	73	2.82	Below neutral — unlikely to buy
Believe dupe quality (scored 4–5)	67	3.19	Above neutral — more likely to buy

Result: With a strong and significant Spearman correlation ($\rho=0.296$, $p<0.001$), it can be confirmed that quality belief acts as a valid predictor for purchase intention. As illustrated from the group means, there is a clear trend of a stepwise progression: 2.48, 2.82, 3.19 with an increase in quality belief. The null hypothesis is hence rejected. Nevertheless, with a small-to-moderate effect size ($\rho=0.296$), quality belief cannot be considered a sole driver for purchase intent.

4.8 [TEST 2] EXPOSURE VS REACTION

Does how often someone consumes de-influencing content predict their reaction?

Hypothesis: Consumers who watch de-influencing content frequently are more likely to seek a dupe than consumers who rarely watch it.



Chi-Square: De-Influencing Exposure vs Consumer Reaction

Chi-Square Output	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	16.500
Degrees of Freedom	6
p-value	0.0113
Significance	Significant ($p < 0.05$)
Cramer's V (effect size)	0.202 — Weak effect
N	203
Minimum expected cell frequency	4.55 (above 5.0 threshold — OK)
Cells with expected frequency < 5	8.3% (below 20% threshold — chi-square assumption MET)

The significance of this test is that it directly addresses the first research gap in a meaningful way. While only 57.1% of those who do not view the de-influencing content very often stop the purchase process — the dead end — in case of regular watchers of the content, the percentage lowers to 34.5%, while the number of consumers trying to make a substitute purchase increases to 43.1%.

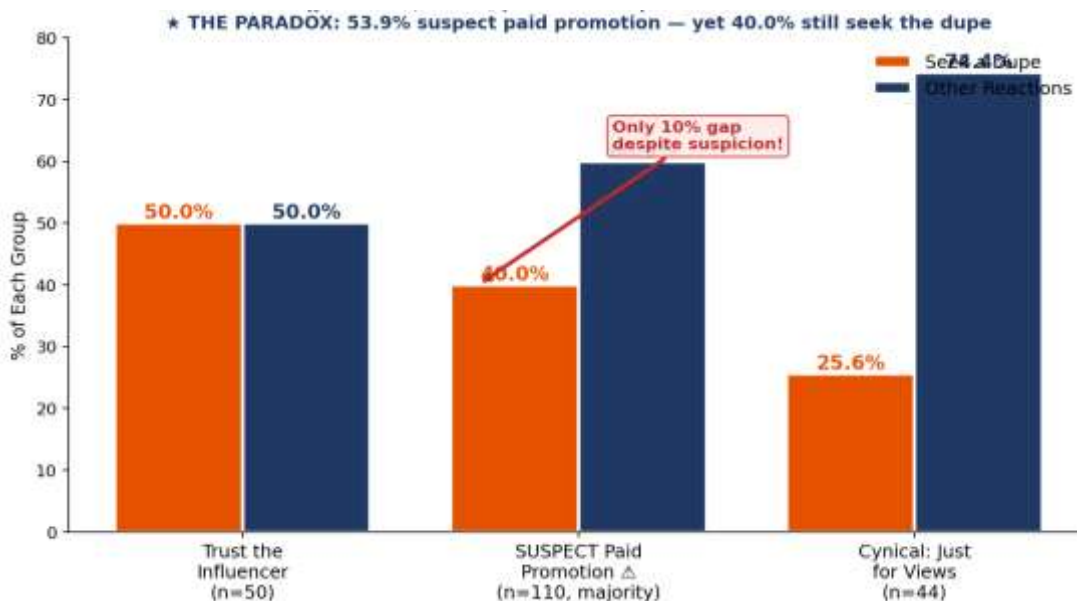
These results show that not only the consumer's behavior changes, but the content itself provokes it. The casual watching of the content leads to the consumers' disengagement from the purchase of a luxurious product. In case of its regular watching, however, the disengagement becomes an opportunity for making a substitute purchase.

Thus, it can be clearly concluded that de-influencing does not necessarily result in the dead end as many researchers think. Instead, the test has proven that for most consumers, especially for frequent watchers of such content, the outcome becomes a detour.

4.9 [TEST 3] TRUST ASSUMPTION VS REACTION (THE PARADOX TEST)

Does what consumers assume about the de-influencer predict their reaction?

Hypothesis : Consumers who suspect paid promotion will be less likely to seek a dupe than those who trust the influencer.



THE PARADOX: Trust Assumption vs Consumer Reaction

Assumption	n	Seek Dupe	Don't Buy	Stop Wanting	Buy Luxury
Trust the influencer	50	50.0%	26.0%	24.0%	0.0%
Suspect paid promotion	110	40.0%	31.8%	13.6%	14.5%
Cynical — just for views	44	25.6%	48.8%	11.6%	14.0%

The test is important, however, the results are quite surprising. Even consumers who suspected the de-influencer was paid to recommend the dupe proceeded to search for the dupe 40% of the time, just 10 points lower than the consumers who trusted the creator completely (50%). In other words, lack of trust in the motives of influencers did not affect their actions.

However, a much bigger discrepancy occurs between consumers who were a bit suspicious of the influencer and those who considered the video to be purely made for views and likes. The latter had the largest number of no purchase responses (48.8%), and they searched for dupes significantly less often (25.6%). It can be assumed that it takes a certain amount of dismissal of the video for the behavior of the viewers to change.

The explanation for such behavior lies in the very nature of de-influencing – the product is compared not because of how much the viewer trusts the influencer, but because it is cheaper, has the right ingredient list, and so on. Even if you think they're being paid, the information still makes sense on its own.

The final point is that no one who believed in the de-influencer fully bought the luxury item. Once the person fully believes in the message, purchasing the luxury option is inconsistent. People who purchased the luxury items despite seeing the content belonged primarily to the distrusting or disbelieving categories, those who did not fully accept the information.

This answers the main research gap: even if one knows they could be influenced, they cannot resist influence. As long as the content seems reasonable, the doubt does not make a difference. And that is what makes de-influencing unique and powerful.

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of the research was to establish whether the concept of de-influencing is a true trend of mindful anti-consumerism or merely a "detour" towards the new kind of consumer economy – the dupe economy. As the results of the quantitative analysis of consumer behavior showed, de-influencing can hardly be considered a "dead end", but rather another way to redirect consumer purchases and choices. While the movement is very efficient in preventing people from the purchases of certain luxury items (89.2%), it pushes almost four out of ten people to buy cheaper alternatives instead.

Indeed, the influence of such de-influencing content is actively promoted by the consumers themselves: people who watch such videos frequently tend to look for dupes in much higher numbers (43.1%) than individuals who rarely do. However, the research also revealed the paradox of consumer attitude regarding influencers' intentions and the degree of trust in them. Indeed, according to the results, up to 75.5% of the participants are suspicious about the intentions of the people who create de-influencing videos and assume that such recommendations are made due to promotions. Nevertheless, consumer skepticism does not cancel the impact of de-influencers. As many as 40% of consumers still try to find alternatives despite believing in paid promotion of the latter.

This is caused by the inherent persuasive powers of negative reviews. As long as the suggested alternative is economically sensible, consumer suspicions cannot play a role in decision-making. In addition, the absence of critical thinking further contributes to consumer manipulation and the emergence of the "dupe economy". Specifically, only 22.1% of consumers conduct independent verification of the authenticity of the content, while up to 43.6% use comments for validating the information provided in videos. Combined with the fact that participants were undecided regarding the quality of cheap alternatives to luxury goods (the average rating being 2.98 out of 5), this means that the motivation behind their decisions is economic in nature and associated with anti-consumerism.

Overall, "The De-Influencing Paradox" is a truly paradoxical phenomenon. Indeed, as a result of the research, de-influencing proved to be an ineffective way to reduce consumerism because its essence lies in redirecting consumers towards another type of products. Hence, de-influencing did not manage to overcome the problem of consumerism, but succeeded in changing it and promoting the emergence of a new economy – the "dupe economy".

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