

MEASURING CONSUMER VULNERABILITY TO SOCIAL MEDIA MISMARKETING PRACTICES

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Abstract - This study investigates the consumer vulnerability to the social media mismarketing trend, namely, influencer marketing campaigns, false or exaggerated insinuations, and personalized advertising. Employing quantitative research design, a structured Google form questionnaire was used to obtain primary data containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions among social media users in the Calicut district, Kerala. Secondary data was sourced from published research articles and official documents. Patterns of exposure, awareness and response behavior were analyzed through descriptive and percentage analysis. With the use of 'Mismarketing Vulnerability Index(MVI), the results demonstrate that even though the situation with exaggerated or false claims is widely known to consumers, the majority of them do not respond by taking corrective action to realize their limitations in the current reporting system. The most vulnerable group of people turned out to be teenagers and young adults, highly influenced by trends and paid advertising. The paper highlights the importance of the increased regulation, the specific digital literacy campaigns, and the ready grievance redressal procedures that would drive the digital marketing sphere toward openness, liability, and confidence.

Keywords: *consumer vulnerability, social media, mismarketing, influencer marketing, digital literacy*

1 INTRODUCTION

With the advent of social media, the marketing world has undergone a radical shift, opening up opportunities previously unknown to businesses to interface with their consumers, on a real-time basis. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and LinkedIn, allow marketers to maximize brands exposure, reach out to customers, and influence positive conversions by launching specific campaigns (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Appel et al., 2020). The social media marketing process is based on the ability to produce content related and convincing enough, communicate with potential clients two-way and use paid promotions to gain as many people as possible. But with these advantages there has been an associated more disturbing

trend, namely the phenomenon of what has been termed as mismarketing. Mismarketing is an unethical form of promotional practices that include false advertisements, overstating product specs, fake testimonials and counterfeit reviews (Miller & Skinner, 2015). Such practices can become so hard to contain once spread since the social media is viral and can widen the extent of such practices. Social media promotions are usually loosely controlled contrary to regular advertisement since inaccurate information can be widely circulated, just in a short time (Shareef et al., 2019). This has a two-pronged effect in the sense that it puts companies at the risk of damage to their reputations and their consumers at risk of exploitation.

Consumer vulnerability in this aspect can be described as an increased probability of being affected by misleading marketing practices since one is unaware, trusts internet sources, follows recommendations of influencers, or his peers (Baker et al., 2005). Research indicates that younger consumers who are less educated are likely to become the casualties of mismarketing, along with those possessing low digital literacy (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019). This is of special concern in the young economies where the pace of social media adoption is much faster than the formulation of strong consumer protection systems. It is in this light that the study concentrates on evaluating the potential and extent of social media in Calicut district, Kerala in India. In particular, it looks at the influence of some of these habits such as misleading advertisement, false endorsement, and exaggerated product claims have on the consumers and which are the platforms which are closely related to these practices. The analysis of consumer perception and exposures to risks enables the research to give practical recommendations to policymakers, business owners, and companies operating in digital marketing with the view to curbing risks and enhancing ethical marketing activities.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The explosion of social media has revolutionized the world of marketing, offering new avenues of interacting with brands

and at the same time, posing threats to misinformation and mismarketing. Not only had the effectiveness of social media as a marketing tool has been studied in the literature recently, but also it has been discussed that social media activities may be characterized by deceptive practices that decrease consumer trust. According to Singh, Dadhich, and Katoch (2025), the key to the effectiveness of social media marketing campaigns is demonstrated by the audience behaviour and platform algorithms. They emphasize that the marketer who cannot keep in pace with the emerging trends of digital marketing will potentially face ineffective targeting and the risk of mismarketing hence a low brand impact. Likewise, according to a research conducted by Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode (2024) regarding young people in the state of Kerala, it can be concluded that social media is also doing prominent work in initial phases of consumer decision process. Nonetheless, some mismarketing might take place as a result of the promotional messages not meeting the expectations of consumers making them less involved and less useful in achieving campaign results. Espinosa and Adolfo (2024) investigated counter-marketing and deceptive campaigns including fake reviews in order to identify whether it affects client perceptions. The tactics used designates feeling towards brands in the short-term, but this was not necessarily followed by purchase decisions as demonstrated by consumer resistance to certain types of trickery. Kaur and Gupta (2023) discussed the processes of spreading misinformation and the criticality of the active analysis, the control of published content, and honest communication to reduce the risk of reputational loss.

Technologically, researchers showed the efficiency of application of machine learning and natural language processing to detect and combat fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nistor, Zadobrischi, 2022). They claim that the expansion of access to automated fact-checking services is an opportunity to effectively minimize the dissemination of detrimental information to the point of being effectively eliminated. Visentin, Pizzi, and Pichierri (2021) have gone further on consolidating this opinion, stating that transparency and authenticity are the most efficient measures that can be deployed, in order to protect the consumer trusts, against unhealthy impacts of misinformation. In a more general aspect of marketing, Appel, Grewal, Hadi, and Stephen (2020) indicated that fast changing trends in social media platforms would demand marketers to be dynamic in their efforts to use the systems to meet changing trends in user behaviour. Bilgin (2018) discovered that customer engagement is the key to mediate the relationship between social media activity and intent to purchase, revealing the possibility of interaction to create a better perception and confidence towards the brand. In conclusion, Alalwan et al.

(2017) in their comprehensive review summed up that the incorporation of social media as a part of the general marketing mix is associated both with the opportunities of personalization and real-time marketing and the danger of miscommunication and mismarketing in case of improper strategy development.

All of these studies point to the fact that although social media is a powerful tool to connect to their consumers, it comes with a lot of challenges such as misinformation, mismarketing, mis-tracking and unethical use of promotions.

Gap in existing studies: Despite the recent studies that explored the impact of the social media on consumer perceptions and the dangers of misinformation, little empirical evidence is available regarding consumer susceptibility to the specific practice of mismarketing. The majority of the present studies concentrate on the positive potential of the social media marketing or cover misinformation in general without separating its manipulative promotional forms. In addition, global and national-level descriptions of this phenomenon are available, although few works have specifically studied this problem at the educated local regions in India-especially on a district of much hyped state in India, Kerala. Also, no specific studies have been conducted on how the negative impact of mismarketing can be reflected on particular segments of the demographic populations, including young people or more vulnerable consumers in regard to digital literacy. The insights on filling these gaps can offer actionable advice to policymakers and marketers to come up with the measures to safeguard vulnerable consumers and conduct ethical marketing techniques.

3 METHODOLOGIES

The study employed a quantitative research design to assess consumer vulnerability to social media, as it enables measurement of variable relationships, prevalence, and hypothesis testing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through a structured Google Forms questionnaire containing closed-ended questions on a five-point Likert's scale and a few open-ended items for qualitative insights. Secondary data came from peer-reviewed journals, books, government publications, and credible reports on digital marketing ethics and consumer protection. The target population comprised social media users in Calicut district, Kerala, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). A total of 100 respondents representing varied ages, genders, and occupations participated. Data were analyzed using percentage analysis to summarize demographics and

descriptive statistics to present trends and variations. Mismarketing Vulnerability Index (MVI) was designed to quantify susceptibility to social media mismarketing using six weighted variables: influencer following, frequency of exposure, perceived exaggeration, sectorial concentration, demographic risk, and reporting behavior. Standardized scores for each variable were weighted, aggregated, and expressed on a 0–100 scale, categorized as low, moderate, or high vulnerability. This index was then applied to analyze demographic patterns and guide targeted recommendations. The study was conducted over three months, covering tool design, data collection, and analysis, with findings limited to the demographic and cultural context of Calicut district.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the primary data collected after interviews with the respondents is presented, analyzed, and interpreted. The aim is to organize the findings in an objective and logical order so as to determine trends that would be related to the research questions.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 Age and Gender Distribution

Age Group	Male	Female	Total	% of Total
Below 20	9	6	15	15%
20–40	30	28	58	58%
41–60	14	10	24	24%
Above 60	3	0	3	3%
Total	56	44	100	100%

Interpretation: The highest percentage of the respondents' lies between the ages of 20 to 40 years (58%), meaning that the target group is the group of young adults to middle-aged individuals. The proportion of males to females is slightly more (56% against 44%). Extremely low turnout by the people over 60 (3%) indicates low representation by older generations.

Table 2 Educational Qualification and Occupation

Education Level	%	Major Occupation	%
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		Groups	
No formal education	1%	Government employees	7%
Primary education	3%	Business	15%
Secondary education	2%	Self-employed	15%
Higher secondary education	10%	Unemployed	32%
Graduation or above	84%	Others	31%
Total	100%	Total	100%

Interpretation: Another very impressive result is the 84 per cent of those who either have a graduate degree or higher degree, accurate indication of a highly educated sample. Occupational profile is also diversified, although unemployment stands at 32 per cent with impressive percentages in the category of others (31 per cent), which could comprise students, homemakers and those in the informal sector.

4.2 Social and Geographical Profile

Table 3 Residential Area and Social Media Usage

Residential Area	%	Social Media Users	%
Rural	46%	Yes	95%
Semi-rural	31%	No	5%
Urban	23%	—	—
Total	100%	Total	100%

Interpretation: Almost half of the respondents (46%) reside in a rural area; semi-rural (31%) and urban (23%) live in an area. The level of social media penetration is very high where 95 per cent of the respondents were active users indicating that geographic location is irrelevant as a barrier to adoption.

4.3 Social Media Behaviour and Impact on Purchasing

Table 4 Social Media Platform Usage

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Facebook	53%	22%	11%	3%	11%
WhatsApp	6%	6%	24%	20%	44%
Instagram	14%	8%	10%	14%	54%
Twitter	67%	14%	11%	5%	3%

Interpretation: Most commonly used ones are Instagram (54% always) and WhatsApp (44% always). Engagement in Facebook and Twitter are substantially lower and both with the majority not using them (53 per cent and 67 per cent indicators).

Table 5 Purchase Behaviour Based on Social Media Ads

Purchases behaviour based on SM Ads	Frequency	%	Trust in SM Ads	Response	%
	Always	59%		Yes	19%
	Often	9%		No	40%
	Sometimes	26%		Maybe	41%
	Occasionally	6%		Total	100%
	Total	100%			

Interpretation: Responses indicated that most of the respondents (59 per cent) always make purchases that relate to the social media advertisement, which demonstrates high influence of online marketing on consumption behaviour. Whereas 59 per cent say they will buy everything based on the advertisement, only 19 per cent have said that social media is used frequently and they will trust advertising more. The 41 per cent, who expressed a problem of the words, maybe indicates indecision, meaning there is a possibility of people making purchases based on exposure and convenience and not on trust.

The given demographics tends to be learned, youthful-middle-aged respondent, and gender is in a healthy mix of proportion. There is rural dominance in the geography, but the use of social media is close to ubiquity. Platform preferences would go in favour of Instagram and WhatsApp as compared to Facebook and Twitter. The influence of social media ads in purchasing behaviour is so high that purchase decisions can be easily made without the correspondingly high level of trust.

4.4 Analysis of perception, experience and behavioural pattern

The analysis of the consolidated table No.6 (Appendix 1) gives the integrated observation on consumer perception, experiences and their behaviour pattern regarding practice on social media platforms.

4.4.1 Influencer popularity and their role: The vast majority of respondents (78 per cent) follow some sort of influencer/ star so they are exposed to various influencer materials. Nevertheless, 76 per cent think that sometimes there is exaggeration of the products by influencers. This is reflective of past research (Evans et al., 2021) where the influencers proved to be persuasive, yet their credibility is usually disputed.

4.4.2 Platform Responsibility: Most users (74 per cent) agree that social media sites are not focusing on user safety and only 43 per cent believe that regulation is doing enough with 37 per cent holding no opinion on the topic. This lack of awareness or scepticism of enforcement may mirror such a position of neutrality (Sharma and Verma, 2020).

4.4.3 Frequency and Platform Occurrence: The average consumer also regularly experiences misleading promotions- 48 per cent experience it at times and 16 per cent, frequently or all the time. Instagram is regarded as the most problematic (49%) followed by Facebook, lower are WhatsApp and Twitter. This agrees with the research that the visuality of Instagram promotes false assertions (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020).

4.4.4 Identification Detection: The most common method of detection among consumers is reading review (45 per cent), comparison (26.5 per cent) or personal experience (22 per cent). This highlights the importance of the community judgment and checks (Gupta & Banerjee, 2019).

4.4.5 Drivers and Formats: The highest-ranking driver is the concept of influencer promotion (48 per cent), which is closely followed by the viral trends (21 per cent), and the targeted ads (18 per cent). The prevalent formats show influencer collaborations (40%) and sponsored posts (30%) that demonstrate the influencer ecosystem as a primary channel of advertising that might be at least false.

4.4.6 Industry Concentration: In terms of such promotions, beauty and cosmetics have enough glows (59 per cent), followed by fashion (18 per cent), and health/wellness (13 per cent). This is especially true in the case of these visually oriented industries which are susceptible to overstated assertions (Bian & Forsythe, 2012).

4.4.7 Implications of Harm to Consumer Trust: Deceptive Promotions have a severe to major impact on brand trust-79 per cent were major or severe. This is an echo of previous evidence stating that false advertising can ruin both loyalty and reputation (Darke & Ritchie, 2007).

4.4.8 Demographic Vulnerability: 77 per cent of the most vulnerable are teenagers (49 per cent) and young adults (28 per cent) and reflect the vulnerability of younger and more socially active users (Hudders et al., 2020).

4.4.9 Reporting Behaviour: More than half of the respondents (53%) report such event rarely or not at all, perhaps because of poor complaint systems or lack of awareness. This can lead to a practice of limited user empowerment which is unethical and can continue (Marwick, 2018).

ement which is unethical and can continue (Marwick, 2018).

Synthesis of Findings: Basically, there is a significant role of the influencers, particularly on Instagram, in popularizing deceptive content, and beauty and fashion brands the most. Its adverse impact on trust, significant influence on young people, and the corresponding lack of reports indicate that consumer education, ethical principles on influencers, and more policed platforms should be strengthened. Such findings address research objectives since they demonstrate how it affects perceptions, trust, and vulnerable groups and can be used as the foundation of policies that would increase transparency and accountability in online advertising.

4.5 Mismarketing Vulnerability Index (MVI)

With the emergence of influences and trend-based promotions on social media, consumers are becoming more susceptible to mismarketing, or misleading, overselling, or vaguely transparent marketing. This is particularly a risk to younger populations that have a high level of engagement. In order to measure and examine vulnerability to this, the Mismarketing Vulnerability Index (MVI) was formulated and the significant variables include exposure, misrepresentation perception, and encounter frequency, industry and product emphasis, demographic vulnerability, and reporting practices. The composite score thus formed gives a transparent evidence-based measure to direct any specific interventions and policy actions.

Table 7 Weight Allocation

Stage	Variable	Weight (%)
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1	Exposure to influencers	15
2	Perceived misrepresentation	10
3	Platform responsibility & regulation	10
4	Frequency of encounter	15
5	Identification method reliability	5
6	Drivers of	10
7	Common practices encountered	5
8	Industry involvement	5
9	Impact on trust	15
10	Demographics at risk	5
11	Reporting behaviour	5
Total		100

The idea is to give more weight to factors that directly expose or influence consumers and slightly less weight to peripheral ones.

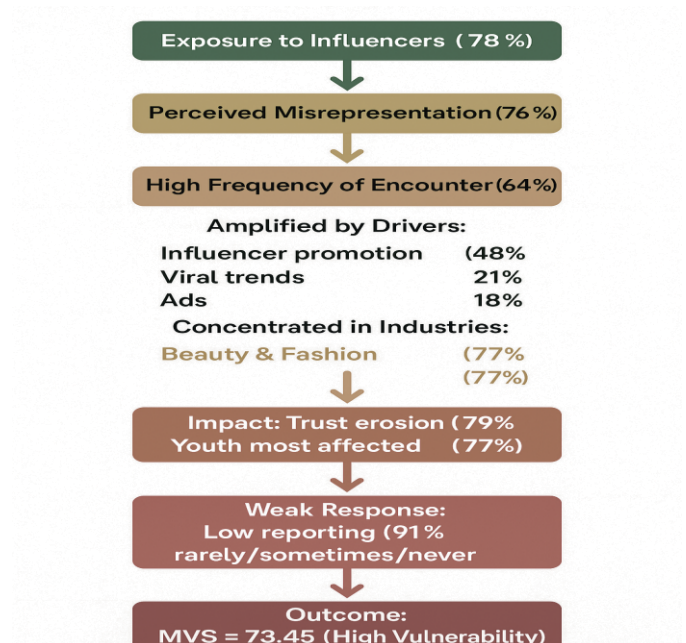
Table 8 Scoring Method

Stage	Variables	% High Vulnerability	Weight	Weighted Score
1	Exposure to influencers	78%	15	11.7
2	Misrepresentation perception	76% (Always/Often/Sometimes)	10	7.6
3	Platform responsibility (No + Neutral)	74% No priority + 37% Neutral/Disagree → 55% avg risk	10	5.5
4	Frequency of encounter (Sometimes/Of ten/Always)	64%	15	9.6

5	Identification method (non-verified sources)	55%	5	2.75
6	Drivers of (Influencer/Viral/Ads)	87%	10	8.7
7	Common practices (Paid collab + sponsored posts)	70%	5	3.5
8	Industry involvement (Beauty + Fashion)	77%	5	3.85
9	Impact on trust (Significant + Severe)	79%	15	11.85
10	Demographics (Teen + Young adults)	77%	5	3.85
11	Reporting behaviour (Rarely/Sometimes/Never)	91%	5	4.55
Total			100	73.45

For each variable: High vulnerability indicators get a score close to 1 (e.g., high % following influencers = more risk). Low vulnerability indicators get a score closer to 0. Weighted score = Weight × Normalized value (0–1 scale).

Figure 1 Mismarketing Vulnerability Index score



Examination of Vulnerability Score (MVS) indicates high level of vulnerability (73.45) among respondents, which can be regarded as the influence of exposure (78%), regular confrontation (64%), and industry concentration in beauty and fashion (77%). Although 76 per cent of all respondents are aware that they can find exaggerated or misleading claims, they do not take that to heart as 91 per cent of all participants rarely or never report such content. Susceptibility is considerably intensified by paid promotions, viral trends, and targeted advertising, which may render individuals more vulnerable, particularly teenagers and young adults (77%), who can be defined as the most vulnerable group. This repeated exposure and a lack of efficient reporting systems lead to extreme levels of trust decay (79%), and there is an urgent need to provide more stringent regulations of platforms, educate consumers specifically, and enable complaint systems.

Implications

The risk level of high Vulnerability Score (MVS) is 73.45, which indicates the great risk to consumers especially teenagers and youths and requires immediate policy and educational decisions. The presence of influencer-driven content and the concentration of the sector in the beauty and fashion industries imply that the regulatory authorities might consider focusing their attention on both of these spheres. Although the level of awareness on this topic is relatively high, the difference between awareness and behaviour illustrates how ineffective the existing mechanisms of consumer protection is. This requires the platforms to create more easily accessible and noticeable mechanisms of complaints, as well as campaigns promoting those

mechanisms and motivating the consumers to report. Furthermore, the results imply that intervention measures such as special digital literacy initiatives, particularly in younger age groups, may contribute to decreasing vulnerability to paid advertising, viral trends, and other ad practices that can manipulate viewers. The rebuilding of trust in digital marketplaces will involve a joint efforts of policymakers, social media apps, and educational establishments to create a more open and accountable environment of digital marketing.

5 Conclusions

The study on Consumer Vulnerability to Social Media Mismarketing Practices presents a worrying rate of vulnerability among consumers with a scoring of total Mismarketing Vulnerability Score (MVS) of 73.45. These observations suggest that influencer-based marketing campaigns, being constantly exposed to misleading lives claims and market saturation with beauty and fashion-related posts are a significant predisposing factor in the development of risks, especially among adolescents and young adults. Though most respondents show evidence of being aware of exaggerated or false claims, little operationalizes what they understand, which indicates structural failures to report and hold platforms responsible. The continuous effects of the paid promotion, viral trending, and special advertisements lead to significant erosion in the understanding of trust and represent long-term risks to consumer welfare and market integrity. This study highlights an urgent necessity to achieve a multi-level response of a tighter control over the digital marketing practices, active monitoring of the platform, as well as creating available channels of consumer complaint. Moreover, specific literacy programs in digital transformation, particularly among the young population, are essential in giving consumers the right to analyse web-based information and defame manipulative marketing. By tackling these weaknesses with engaged policy action on the part of policymakers, social media platforms, and schools, a more visible, ethical, and consumer-friendly digital marketplace would be realised.

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Appendix 1

Table 6: Indicators of Mismarketing Vulnerability on Social Media

Sl. No.	Variable / Indicator	Categories	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
A. Exposure to Influencers & Content				
1	Follow any influencer or celebrity	Yes	78	78
		No	22	22
B. Perceived Misrepresentation				
2	Influencer promoting products with exaggerated claims	Always	22	22
		Often	18	18
		Sometimes	36	36
		Rarely	15	15
		Never	9	9
C. Platform Responsibility & Regulation				
3	Social media companies prioritize user safety	Yes	26	26
		No	74	74
4	Social media platforms regulate effectively	Strongly agree	16	16
		Agree	27	27
		Neutral	37	37
		Disagree	13	13
		Strongly disagree	7	7
D. Frequency & Channels of mismarketing encounters				
5	Encounter on social media	Never	11	11
		Rarely	24	24
		Sometimes	48	48
		Often	7	7
		Always	9	9
6	Platforms with most practices	Facebook – Never	16	—
		Facebook – Rarely	14	—
		Facebook – Sometimes	43	—
		Facebook – Often	12	—
		Facebook – Always	15	—
		WhatsApp – Never	19	—
		WhatsApp – Rarely	32	—
		WhatsApp – Sometimes	34	—
		WhatsApp – Often	7	—
		WhatsApp – Always	8	—
		Instagram – Never	12	—
		Instagram – Rarely	9	—
		Instagram – Sometimes	30	—
		Instagram – Often	25	—
		Instagram – Always	24	—
		Twitter – Never	27	—
		Twitter – Rarely	22	—
		Twitter – Sometimes	37	—
		Twitter – Often	13	—
		Twitter – Always	1	—
		Others – Never	24	—
		Others – Rarely	13	—
		Others – Sometimes	37	—
		Others – Often	16	—
		Others – Always	10	—
E. Methods of Identifying mismarketing in social media				
7	How is identified	Comparing with other sources	26	26
		Personal experience	21	21
		Reading reviews	45	45
		Others	7	7
F. Drivers of Mismarketing encounters (likelihood)				
8	Aspects increasing likelihood of	Frequent scrolling	13	13
		Influencer	48	48

		promotion		
		Targeted ads	18	18
		Viral trends	21	21
9	Most frequent practice encountered	Stories	13	13
		Sponsored posts	30	30
		Influencer collaboration	40	40
		Others	17	17
G. Industry Involvement				
10	Industries most involved in	Beauty & cosmetics	50	50
		Fashion & apparel	18	18
		Health & wellness	13	13
		Tech & gadgets	10	10
H. Impact & Demographic Vulnerability				
11	Impact on consumer trust	Minimal	13	13
		Significant	54	54
		Severe	25	25
		No impact	8	8
12	Age group most affected	Teenagers	40	40
		Young adults	28	28
		Middle-aged adults	15	15
		Elderly people	8	8
I. Reporting Behaviour				
13	Frequency of reporting	Never	15	15
		Rarely	38	38
		Sometimes	38	38
		Often	7	7
		Always	2	2

Source: Primary Data