





Promotion through social media platform marketing: evaluating the ethical role of social media influencers in Sri Lanka's 2024 political campaigns

Kumrasinghe Hetti Arachchige Nimesha Kumarasinghe  and Shivany Shanmugathas 

Department of Marketing, University of Jaffna, Jaffna, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the role of influencer marketing in political campaigns during Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential election, focusing on the impact of social media on voter perceptions and engagement. As political discourse increasingly shifts to digital platforms, influencers have emerged as central figures in shaping political narratives.

The study adopted snowball sampling to collect data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, involving 10 social media influencers and 50 voters. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: voter trust, voter engagement, the impact of influencers, ethical dilemmas, and the overall role of influencers.

The findings suggest that influencers are viewed as credible and relatable sources of information, especially among younger voters who are more engaged with digital campaigns that effectively leveraged influencers, experienced improved visibility and a stronger connection with their target audience.

The investigation also revealed challenges such as spreading misinformation and concerns regarding the authenticity of influencer endorsements. Participants emphasized the need for transparency in influencer partnerships to maintain trust in political messaging. Ultimately, this study provides valuable insights into the intersection of social media and political marketing, offering a foundation for future research on digital engagement in political contexts within Sri Lanka and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Influencer Marketing; Political Campaigns; Voter Engagement; Sri Lanka; Presidential Election 2024; Digital Marketing

1. Introduction

In an era of advancing digital technologies, social media platforms have fundamentally altered how information is shared and consumed. This transformation is particularly evident in the realm of public affairs and political engagement, where platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube have become pivotal in shaping public discourse, especially among younger demographics who increasingly bypass traditional media outlets (Shahghasemi et al., 2025). In Sri Lanka, political entities are increasingly utilizing these digital avenues for campaign

promotion and engaging with the electorate. A significant aspect of this trend is the rise of social media influencers individuals possessing substantial online followings who can significantly impact public opinion and political discourse. While influencer marketing originated in the commercial sector, it has become integral to political communication strategies globally.(Klüser, 2025) Sri Lankan political parties are now collaborating with influencers to enhance candidate relatability, disseminate key messages, and cultivate personal connections with prospective voters. This integration of influencers into political campaigns, however, introduces complex ethical considerations regarding transparency, authenticity, and the potential for undue influence over electoral outcomes(Bett et al., 2025)

While studies on the global utilization of influencers in electoral campaigns have been conducted across various regions, including the United States, Europe, Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, which underscore their increasing role in digital campaigning and the ensuing challenges to electoral integrity, the integration of influencers into Sri Lanka's political sphere remains comparatively underexplored and lacks comprehensive understanding regarding its impact, underlying mechanisms, and ethical dimension. This paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap by meticulously analysing the ethical implications of social media influencers' involvement in Sri Lanka's 2024 political campaigns, focusing on aspects of transparency, mis/disinformation, and accountability.

1.1. Research problem

Despite a considerable body of research examining influencer-led campaigns across various global contexts, including Western and African democracies, a notable absence of systematic inquiry pertains specifically to Sri Lanka's political arena(Klüser, 2025). Existing Sri Lankan scholarship tends to document the adoption of social media for political campaigning but offers limited insight into the distinctive facets of influencer involvement, such as their tangible effects on voter attitudes, participation rates, and levels of political trust. Moreover, while international studies have explored how influencers shape electoral narratives, disseminate misleading information, and contribute to political polarization, the precise mechanisms and limitations of such influence within Sri Lanka remain insufficiently defined (Venus et al., 2025). This research seeks to address this gap by scrutinizing the ethical dimensions of social media influencer engagement in the 2024 Sri Lankan political campaigns, particularly focusing on how these influencers might contribute to the spread of misinformation and affect public trust in democratic processes (Hattatuwa, 2019).

This research aims to address the limited understanding of both the actual and perceived impact of social media influencers on political engagement within Sri Lanka, a nation characterized by its distinct sociopolitical, technological, and regulatory environments. The central research question investigates the mechanisms and extent to which influencers involved in political campaigns shape public opinion, voter behaviour, and the ethical standards of campaigning in Sri Lanka. This study will also assess the efficacy of current regulatory frameworks in mitigating the risks associated with influencer marketing in political contexts, particularly concerning transparency and accountability.

1.2. Justification of the study

This research is warranted due to Sri Lanka's unique socio-political milieu, characterized by a varied electorate, fluctuating levels of internet literacy, and rapid urban development, which collectively shape a dynamic political communication environment. Consequently, the influence and ethical parameters of campaigns driven by social media influencers necessitate an analysis tailored to this specific context. While extensive global documentation exists regarding the electoral roles of influencers, Sri Lanka's distinct cultural norms, nascent regulatory structures, and ongoing digital evolution present a scenario with particular challenges and emergent opportunities. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka has recently begun issuing directives concerning social media usage in political campaigns, indicating a degree of regulatory ambiguity and underscoring the necessity for evidence-based policy recommendations. Furthermore, comprehending these dynamics is crucial for fostering ethical and responsible digital campaigning that reinforces robust democratic processes and mitigates risks such as the proliferation of misinformation and manipulation. Finally, by concentrating on Sri Lanka, this research contributes context-specific empirical data to the wider discourse on digital democracy, influencer ethics, and political marketing, extending beyond existing analyses predominantly focused on Western and African settings.

In essence, this research endeavours to address the conspicuous absence of knowledge within both academic discourse and policy frameworks concerning the role of influencers in Sri Lankan politics, by scrutinizing their campaign methodologies, the ethical considerations they raise, and their differential impacts across various segments of the voting population.

1.3. Research objectives

- To examine the role of social media influencers in shaping voter perceptions, engagement, and decision-making during political campaigns in Sri Lanka.
- To explore the ethical and regulatory challenges associated with influencer-driven political endorsements.

2. Literature review

The power dynamics in political communication have changed as a result of social media, moving from traditional media outlets to a more user-driven, democratized platform. In according to Ktoridou et al., 2018. Because of this shift, political players now have direct access to voters and may interact with the public in real-time. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have developed into effective instruments for public opinion formation, voter mobilization, and political campaigning on a global scale (Ktoridou et al., 2018). Political campaigns in Sri Lanka, where social media and internet penetration have grown dramatically in recent years, have begun to give priority to these digital platforms to reach a wide range of people, particularly younger voters (Hattatuwa, 2019).

According to the Social Influence Theory the social groups that people belong to have an impact on their attitudes and behaviours, and influencers frequently serve as opinion leaders within these groups (Astuti & Risqiani, 2020). Influencer marketing techniques,

which use social media celebrities to spread political ideas, change public opinion, and rally voters, have been used by political campaigns all over the world in recent years (Graf-Vlachy et al., 2018). As opinion leaders, influencers help close the divide between the public and political leaders, especially with younger audiences who might be fed up with traditional media (Lalani et al., 2019).

In a political context, influencers help humanize candidates and foster emotional connections, potentially leading to increased voter engagement and participation. However, there is limited empirical research on how these dynamics play out in emerging democracies like Sri Lanka, where social norms, trust in influencers and political preferences vary widely across regions and communities. The ethical implications of influencer-driven political campaigns are complex and often controversial. Key ethical concerns include transparency, authenticity, and the potential manipulation of public opinion (Liang et al., 2023). Influencers are often paid to endorse political candidates or parties, which raises questions about the authenticity of their endorsements and whether followers are aware of the transactional nature of these endorsements (Zniva et al., 2023). The lack of clear disclosure regulations regarding paid political endorsements on social media contributes to voter scepticism, as audiences may perceive these endorsements as manipulative. This is particularly relevant in Sri Lanka, where influencer marketing in politics is relatively new, and there are few guidelines on ethical disclosure practices (Lalani et al., 2019).

Globally, there is an ongoing debate over the regulation of political content on social media, especially concerning paid endorsements by influencers. Countries like the United States and the European Union have begun implementing guidelines to improve transparency and prevent misinformation in political advertising on digital platforms (de Gregorio & Goanta, 2022). However, Sri Lanka currently lacks a specific regulatory framework governing political content shared by influencers. This regulatory gap raises concerns about accountability, transparency, and the ethical use of influencers in political campaigns (Hattatuwa, 2019). Developing a structured regulatory framework could enhance the credibility and effectiveness of influencer-driven political campaigns, ensuring they contribute to a fair democratic process.

Although influencer marketing is effective in commercial settings, its use in political campaigns presents unique challenges. Influencers may face backlash if followers perceive their political endorsements as inauthentic or opportunistic (Primasiwi et al., 2021). Additionally, influencer-driven campaigns may struggle to reach certain demographic groups that are less active on social media, such as older voters or those in rural areas. In Sri Lanka, where there is considerable diversity in digital literacy and internet access, the impact of influencer-driven campaigns may be limited by these demographic and technological barriers (Lalani et al., 2019). Moreover, the highly polarized political climate in Sri Lanka can affect the credibility of influencers, as political endorsements may lead to reputational risks and alienate portions of their audience.

The cultural context of Sri Lanka plays a significant role in shaping the effectiveness of influencer marketing in politics. Sri Lanka's diverse ethnic and religious makeup can lead to varied responses to influencer-led political campaigns, as different communities may have distinct attitudes toward social media and political communication (Hattatuwa, 2019). Furthermore, digital literacy varies widely across Sri Lanka, with urban areas having higher internet penetration rates than rural areas (Hattatuwa, 2019). This disparity

limits the reach of digital campaigns and highlights the need for political strategies that address these socio-cultural and technological differences (Weerasinghe, 2004).

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media influencers have emerged as prominent actors, particularly in the sphere of political discourse and voter engagement. Although these individuals with sizable online followings possess the capacity to significantly shape public opinion and electoral behaviour, the absence of robust regulation and oversight has given rise to pivotal ethical concerns (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020).

A key concern surrounding influencers is the issue of authenticity and trust. These individuals are frequently employed by organizations to promote particular products, services, or ideologies, blurring the distinction between genuine endorsement and paid advertising (Zniva et al., 2023). Furthermore, this study mentions that consumers, especially younger demographics, are growing increasingly sceptical of the authenticity of influencer messaging, questioning whether the content they consume truly reflects the influencer's beliefs and interests or simply serves as a means of financial gain.

The erosion of voter trust can have far-reaching implications, as it may discourage individuals from engaging with political information and discourse, potentially leading to decreased voter participation and a weakening of democratic processes (Clarke et al., 2023). Social media influencers wield significant reach and influence, giving rise to critical ethical concerns. These individuals possess the ability to selectively disseminate information, shape public discourse, and directly impact voter behaviour. Influencers may leverage their platforms to advance partisan agendas, propagate misinformation, or employ manipulative tactics that jeopardize the integrity of electoral processes (Goodwin et al., 2023).

The ethical dilemma surrounding the role of social media influencers in voter trust and engagement is further exacerbated by the dearth of regulatory frameworks governing their activities (Riedl et al., 2021). Currently, the operations of these influential online personalities remain largely unregulated, allowing them to function with minimal oversight and accountability. This regulatory void has precipitated a proliferation of dubious practices, including undisclosed sponsorships, paid endorsements, and the dissemination of biased or misleading information.

The lack of regulatory oversight governing the activities of social media influencers exacerbates the ethical dilemma surrounding their impact on voter trust and engagement. Unlike traditional media outlets that adhere to various regulations and ethical standards, these influential online personalities operate within a largely unregulated environment, where their actions often go unchecked (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). This regulatory void has facilitated the proliferation of dubious practices, such as undisclosed sponsorships, paid endorsements, and the dissemination of biased or misleading information (Ayob et al., 2023).

The proliferation of influencer marketing has also raised pressing concerns about the potential impact of these individuals on consumer behaviour and political discourse (Riedl et al., 2021). These social media personalities, with their large and engaged followings, wield significant power to sway public opinion and influence voter behaviour. In the realm of politics specifically, influencers can selectively disseminate information, shape narratives, and directly impact voter engagement and participation (Riedl et al., 2021).

As the influence of social media platforms continues to grow, it is essential that policymakers and regulatory bodies proactively address the ethical challenges posed by

influencers in the context of voter trust and engagement. Potential regulatory measures may include the implementation of stricter disclosure requirements, the development of industry-wide ethical guidelines, and the establishment of mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing ethical standards among these influential online figures (Riedl et al., 2021). By addressing the ethical concerns surrounding social media influencers, it may be possible to leverage their power in a manner that promotes more authentic and transparent political discourse, thereby strengthening voter trust and engagement and ultimately safeguarding the integrity of the democratic process (Zniva et al., 2023).

Credibility Theory, as proposed by Koch et al. (2024), posits that an individual's trustworthiness and expertise significantly impact their persuasive power. In the context of political campaigns, influencers who are perceived as credible can effectively influence voter opinions. Trustworthiness refers to the audience's belief that the influencer is honest and lacks hidden agendas, while expertise relates to the influencer's perceived knowledge of the political issues at hand (Zniva et al., 2023).

Credibility Theory can shed light on how Sri Lankan voters perceive the authenticity of social media influencers and how this affects their trust and engagement. For instance, do voters view these influencers as credible sources of unbiased political information, or do they see them as self-interested actors whose credibility is diminished? The degree to which influencers disclose their promotional relationships with political parties or candidates is also a critical factor in determining their credibility. (Belanche et al., 2021; Zniva et al., 2023)

Social Influence Theory, as proposed by Kelman, highlights the ways in which individuals can be influenced by the members of their social networks. This theoretical framework outlines three distinct types of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization. In the context of political campaigns, social media influencers may leverage these mechanisms to shape the behaviour of their followers (Dinh et al., 2023). For instance, they can induce compliance by encouraging their audience to support a particular candidate, foster identification by aligning themselves with a political cause, and influence the internalization of attitudes and beliefs toward specific political ideologies.

In Sri Lanka's 2024 political landscape, social media influencers exert a significant influence on political behaviour through various mechanisms of social influence. Their capacity to foster compliance can be particularly impactful in a context where political participation is often contingent on the persuasive influence of social networks. Furthermore, influencers' ability to cultivate identification with political movements can further solidify their sway, especially in an environment where many voters seek personal connection and authenticity in their political choices (Zniva et al., 2023).

Ethical concerns arise when influencers use promotional tactics without transparent disclosure of their political affiliations or when they leverage their social influence to disseminate biased or misleading political information. For example, when influencers endorse a political candidate without revealing paid sponsorships, they may manipulate public perception, cultivating a sense of identification with a candidate that is not rooted in genuine support but rather driven by financial incentives (Ershov et al., n.d.).

The concepts of authenticity and transparency are crucial in addressing the ethical implications of social media influencers' involvement in political campaigns (Boerman, 2020) (Belanche et al., 2021; Zniva et al., 2023).

Social Influence Theory underscores the potential for both constructive and problematic outcomes in political campaigns, contingent on how influencers leverage their persuasive capabilities. In the context of Sri Lanka, where social media has emerged as a critical political instrument, comprehending the ethical implications of this influence is paramount (Fadhlurrohman & Purnomo, 2020).

Existing research has primarily focused on the efficacy of influencers in political campaigns, while overlooking the ethical considerations surrounding their role. Limited studies have critically examined the ethical dilemmas of transparency, manipulation, and authenticity that arise when influencers promote political causes. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed in order to fully comprehend the risks and responsibilities associated with the use of influencer marketing in the political sphere.

Existing research findings have extensively examined influencer marketing in various global contexts, yet the unique dynamics of Sri Lanka's political landscape, characterized by rapidly increasing digital media consumption, remain underexplored. The perceptions of social media influencers and their impact on political outcomes in the Sri Lankan context warrant further systematic investigation.

In addition to transparency, authenticity has become both an ethical and strategic necessity. Followers develop parasocial relationships with influencers and anticipate sincerity in their endorsements; when these partnerships diverge from an influencer's personal identity or values, the audience perceives it as a compromise of their integrity (Abidin, 2016). Consequently, authenticity operates as a crucial element in maintaining credibility, where integrity and consistency are paramount for fostering sustained audience trust. This is especially pertinent in critical fields like health, nutrition, and financial guidance, where exaggerated or unsubstantiated assertions can precipitate adverse outcomes for susceptible consumers (Boerman, 2020).

Furthermore, ethical considerations encompass the engagement with susceptible demographics, particularly minors and adolescents, who may not fully grasp the persuasive nature of content. Academic discourse advises against the endorsement of products with age restrictions and highlights potential risks associated with distorted body image, unattainable beauty standards, and unrealistic lifestyle representations (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Further ethical considerations arise from 'kidfluencers' and family vloggers, with particular attention to issues of consent, financial remuneration, and the lasting digital impact on children. This also extends to the domain of representation and dignity, wherein influencers may face accusations of perpetuating stereotypes, engaging in cultural appropriation, or exploiting personal adversities for increased engagement (Cotter, 2019).

Privacy and data ethics constitute another crucial facet, wherein influencers not only disclose personal information but also solicit disclosures from their audience, potentially creating undue pressure on individuals to reveal sensitive data. Responsible practices mandate adherence to consent protocols, minimization of superfluous data collection, and robust safeguards against doxxing and harassment (Abidin, 2016). In addition, questions of labour ethics arise: many influencers, particularly micro-influencers, face unfair compensation practices, lack of contractual transparency, and exploitation through 'exposure' payments.

In conclusion, the involvement of influencers in political discourse and civic engagement warrants significant scholarly attention. Studies highlight the potential for

undeclared political sponsorships, artificial grassroots campaigns, and precisely targeted misinformation to subvert democratic procedures (Mardon et al., 2018). Academic discourse on ethical conduct in this sphere mandates the unambiguous identification of sponsored political material, the disclosure of financial backing, and a judicious demarcation between factual reporting and persuasive messaging (Kavoliūnaitė-Ragauskienė, 2024). This underscores the imperative for a robust ethical framework specifically tailored to political influencing, one that extends beyond commercial guidelines to address the unique vulnerabilities of democratic processes (Comunello et al., 2022). Considering the pervasive influence of social media platforms in contemporary societies, the ethical considerations for influencers in political campaigns are amplified, necessitating a comprehensive examination of their roles in shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes.

Taken together, the literature suggests that influencer ethics can be understood through multiple theoretical lenses, including deontological duty (e.g. honesty and disclosure), consequentialist outcomes (e.g. public welfare), and virtue-based frameworks centred on authenticity and trust (Grgurić Čop et al., 2024). Yet despite growing regulation, enforcement is inconsistent and varies across cultural and national contexts. As digital platforms evolve, emerging issues such as AI-generated influencers, livestream commerce, and the rights of child creators highlight the urgent need for adaptive, globally relevant ethical standards (Boerman, 2020; Cotter, 2019).

A more rigorous framework is required to connect the Credibility Theory and Social Influence Theory to the specific research inquiries of this study. While these theoretical perspectives possess broad applicability, their direct relevance to the ethical challenges and efficacy of influencer marketing within Sri Lanka's political campaigns must be clearly articulated and investigated.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the influence of social media influencers on voter perceptions, engagement, and decision-making during Sri Lanka's 2024 political campaigns. It also investigated the ethical and regulatory challenges associated with influencer-driven political marketing. The qualitative research design was chosen to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of these dynamics, with a focus on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations. This methodological approach was particularly well-suited given the sociocultural diversity of Sri Lanka, which is characterized by varying levels of digital literacy, political engagement, and a rapidly evolving influencer culture.

The research timeline spans 18 months, including phases for literature review, methodology design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. This duration allows for a thorough exploration of the complex relationship between influencers, political engagement, and voter perceptions.

The study employed an interpretive research approach, which is premised on the understanding that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent. This paradigm aligned with the research objectives by emphasizing the participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of influencer-driven political campaigns. The interpretive methodology enabled the researcher to delve into the complexities of the dynamic between voters and influencers, as well as the ethical considerations surrounding

influencer marketing. Furthermore, this paradigm facilitated a more nuanced comprehension of how Sri Lanka's distinctive cultural and political landscape shaped voter behaviour and attitudes towards influencers.

The qualitative research approach offered a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between social media influencers, voters, and political campaigns, providing insights that could not be captured through quantitative methods alone. The influencers included in the study were selected based on their active participation in Sri Lanka's 2024 political campaigns. The criteria for their inclusion encompassed a minimum of 5,000 followers, active engagement with political content, and visible involvement in political promotional activities. The study sought to capture a diverse range of perspectives by including social media influencers from various platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Voters were selected based on their engagement with political content on social media, representing a diverse demographic profile in terms of age, gender, geographic location, and political affiliation. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how different voter segments perceived and interacted with influencer-driven political campaigns.

Data saturation was reached with 10 social media influencers and 50 voters, which determined the final sample size of the study. The researchers employed a snowball sampling approach to recruit further participants, particularly influencers, by leveraging referrals from the initial participants. The study utilized two primary qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These methods facilitated an in-depth exploration of individual and collective experiences, providing a detailed understanding of the research questions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with social media influencers to investigate their motivations, strategies, and ethical considerations when endorsing political content. The questions explored the influencers' perceptions of their role in political campaigns, how they maintained authenticity with their audiences, and the ways they addressed potential backlash. Interviews with voters focused on their perceptions of influencer-driven political content, the factors that influenced their trust in these influential individuals, and the impact of such content on their political opinions and decision-making. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min and was carried out either in person or virtually, depending on the participants' preferences and locations. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent.

The study also employed focus groups with voters to gain a collective understanding of their attitudes toward influencers in political campaigns. These group discussions facilitated the sharing and comparison of participant perspectives, unveiling social dynamics and insights that individual interviews may have failed to capture. Each focus group included 6–8 participants and lasted approximately 90 min. The sessions were moderated to ensure all participants could contribute, and they were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The data collected from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method well-suited for identifying patterns and themes within the data. This analysis uncovered salient themes that shed light on the nuanced dynamics between voters and social media influencers, as well as the ethical and regulatory complexities inherent in this relationship. Thematic analysis provides a suitable methodology for this study, as it enables the identification of both explicit and implicit themes within

the data. The research inquiries centre on the perceptions, motivations, and ethical considerations of influencers and voters, and thematic analysis offers a systematic approach to exploring these dimensions (Lochmiller, 2021). The thematic analysis allows the researcher to decompose intricate data into manageable components, arrange them into broader themes, and synthesize them into coherent narratives. The resulting themes provide profound insights into the complex interplay within influencer-driven political campaigns, especially in the sociopolitical milieu of Sri Lanka.

Thematic analysis was employed for data interpretation. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts underwent systematic coding, beginning with the researcher's thorough familiarization through repeated readings to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the material. Subsequently, relevant data segments were coded to identify emergent patterns.

The identified codes were subsequently aggregated into broader categories that encapsulated related ideas and perspectives. Ultimately, these categories were refined and synthesized into overarching themes, providing a structured and coherent interpretation of the data. Examples of emergent codes included perceptions of 'concerns about authenticity,' recognition of 'ethical dilemmas,' and assessments of 'influencer credibility.' These codes were then systematically grouped into key themes, such as 'trust and authenticity,' the 'impact of influencers on political behaviour,' and the examination of 'regulatory and ethical challenges.'

The generation of themes was guided by the data itself, rather than being predetermined by existing literature. This approach ensured that the study's findings were authentically rooted in the participants' narratives, avoiding the imposition of preconceived theoretical frameworks. The data was systematically coded using NVivo 12 software, which streamlined the organization, retrieval, and cross-transcript comparison of codes. The coding process was undertaken by one of the researchers, employing an iterative methodology for reviewing, refining, and validating the codes. This iterative process was instrumental in identifying consistent patterns and developing cohesive themes, thereby upholding both accuracy and analytical rigour.

To bolster credibility, the study utilized triangulation, peer debriefing, and the validation of initial findings by participants. Reflexive journaling was employed to maintain researcher awareness of potential biases. Transferability was facilitated by offering a detailed account of Sri Lanka's sociocultural and political milieu. Ethical considerations were addressed through obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality via pseudonyms, and cultivating a secure environment conducive to open dialogue, acknowledging the study's politically sensitive subject matter.

The study employed robust ethical protocols to uphold participant rights and research integrity. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participant privacy was safeguarded through the use of anonymized identities in transcripts, reports, and publications, with pseudonyms utilized to ensure confidentiality. Given the politically sensitive subject matter, additional measures were taken to foster a safe and non-judgmental environment that encouraged participants to share their perspectives freely.

The researcher took steps to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. This included engaging in peer debriefing sessions with colleagues and experts, which

helped identify potential biases and ensure an objective interpretation of the data (McMahon & Winch, 2018). Additionally, the researcher employed methodological triangulation, utilizing both interviews and focus groups, to corroborate the findings across different perspectives and further minimize researcher bias (Anderson, n.d.). The study employed purposeful participant selection, representing a diverse cross-section of Sri Lankan voters and influencers. This approach ensured the findings reflected a wide range of experiences, enhancing the transferability of the research to similar contexts. Furthermore, the study provided a comprehensive description of Sri Lanka's sociocultural and political environment, enabling readers to evaluate the relevance and applicability of the findings to other settings with comparable social media and political dynamics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Results

The results of the study reveal key insights into how social media influencers shape voter perceptions, engagement, and decision-making, as well as the ethical and regulatory issues associated with influencer-driven political campaigns.

4.1. Voter trust

The study found that trust in influencers was a critical factor in influencing voter attitudes towards political messages shared by them. Voters generally trusted influencers who demonstrated consistent authenticity, transparency, and alignment with the values they regularly promoted. However, trust diminished when influencers appeared to be 'selling out' or were inconsistent in their messaging. Influencers who had a positive, socially conscious image were more successful in swaying public opinion on political issues. Participants expressed that they were more likely to engage with political content shared by influencers who were perceived as having a genuine interest in social causes rather than those solely motivated by financial gain or fame.

Authenticity emerged as a crucial theme, with voters expressing concerns about influencers who appeared to endorse political content for financial compensation or other incentives rather than personal conviction. Across both interviews and focus groups, trust in influencers and the perceived authenticity of their endorsements emerged as central themes. Voters' trust hinged on an influencer's consistency and transparency, with influencers perceived as authentic being more successful in shaping opinions.

The study underscored the ongoing ethical dilemmas in influencer-driven political campaigns. Issues of transparency, disclosure, and manipulation were consistently noted, highlighting a gap in regulatory oversight and an emerging need for ethical guidelines specific to political endorsements.

I like it when influencers ask questions or start discussions about issues. It feels more honest, and I can see different perspectives. It's much better than those who just post-campaign slogans.

[Female, 29, Vavuniya]

The influencers who open up space for conversation and allow followers to share their views are more impactful. It feels less one-sided, and I can respect that.

[Male, 19, Badulla]

Participants reported feeling skeptical when an influencer's political endorsement did not align with their usual content, leading to distrust. Influencers faced potential backlash when their political endorsements seemed insincere or opportunistic. Some voters mentioned unfollowing or disengaging from influencers who endorsed political messages without adequate transparency. This backlash was particularly noticeable among younger voters, who valued authenticity and were quick to call out perceived inconsistencies.

Some influencers come across as genuine, and I feel like I can trust them when they talk about politics. But others just seem like they're doing it for the money or followers. It's obvious when they're not committed, and it makes me want to unfollow them.

[Female, 28, Matara]

I'm wary of influencers who endorse political candidates too strongly. It feels like propaganda, and I'd rather form my own opinion than have someone else tell me who to vote for.

[Male, 30, Batticaloa]

I stopped following one influencer because he seemed to be jumping from one party to another just for the hype. It's like he's not supporting anyone; he's just doing whatever is trendy.

[Male, 22, Galle]

4.2. Voter engagement

Many participants reported that influencers played a significant role in increasing their awareness of political issues and candidates. By following influencers, voters were introduced to political content they might not have actively sought out on their own, thus broadening their understanding of various political perspectives. The study revealed that certain influencers effectively mobilized young voters, particularly through Instagram and TikTok, by sharing easy-to-understand, visually engaging political content. Influencers were able to simplify complex political issues, making them more accessible and relatable to younger demographics. While influencers substantially affected political awareness and engagement, their direct influence on voting decisions was limited. Voters tended to follow influencers for information and perspective but preferred to make independent decisions. Influencers were seen more as catalysts for political discourse rather than as direct determinants of voter choice.

I wouldn't have known much about certain issues if it weren't for influencers breaking them down on Instagram. I don't watch the news much, but seeing political issues presented in an easy-to-understand way on social media helped me understand what's going on

[Female, 18, Kandy]

Sometimes, the only reason I attend certain events or protests is because an influencer I follow promoted it. They're really good at getting people like me involved, especially when we don't know where to start.

[Male, 21, Jaffna]

4.3. Influencers' impact

The study found variations in how influencers impacted voters across different social media platforms. For instance, Facebook influencers tended to reach older demographics, promoting discussions on policy issues, while TikTok and Instagram influencers engaged younger audiences with creative, simplified political content. This platform-specific impact allowed political messages to reach diverse audiences across age groups and levels of digital literacy. Influencers who actively engaged with their followers responded to comments and facilitated discussions were seen as more impactful. Participants appreciated when influencers fostered a sense of community around political issues, as this helped build a more informed and engaged voter base.

Some influencers seem to think that just because they have followers, they can tell us what to think. I prefer those who encourage us to research instead of just telling us who to support.

[Female, 24, Anuradhapura]

I sometimes feel manipulated, especially when influencers are too aggressive with their political opinions. It's like they're trying to push an agenda, and it makes me question their motives.

[Male, 27, Kegalle]

4.4. Ethical dilemmas

The study highlighted ethical concerns around the transparency of political endorsements. Many influencers did not disclose whether they were being compensated for promoting political messages, leading to ethical questions about honesty and manipulation. Voters expressed frustration with the lack of clear guidelines requiring influencers to disclose paid endorsements, particularly in the politically charged context. Voters expressed mixed feelings about the role of influencers in politics, with some feeling that influencers provided valuable information and others feeling that influencers were manipulative. This perception often depended on the influencer's approach to content; influencers perceived as biased or overly promotional were more likely to be seen as manipulative.

Many participants suggested that regulatory frameworks should be developed to govern influencer endorsements in political campaigns, ensuring transparency and accountability. Participants called for clearer guidelines requiring influencers to disclose their affiliations with political parties or candidates, especially when financial compensation was involved.

Political campaigns that successfully partnered with authentic and trusted influencers could effectively enhance voter engagement, particularly among younger demographics. The study suggests that carefully selected influencers who genuinely align with campaign values are more likely to resonate with audiences. Over-reliance on influencers for political endorsements without maintaining authenticity can lead to voter disengagement. The study highlighted that voters are increasingly savvy and critical of perceived commercialization, making it essential for political campaigns to ensure authenticity in influencer partnerships.

I follow influencers for information, but I wouldn't vote just because they tell me to. I'd rather listen to what they say, think it over, and then make my own decision.

[Female, 21, Ratnapura]

Some influencers share useful insights, but at the end of the day, I'll still vote based on what I think is best. Influencers can only do so much.

[Male, 35, Colombo]

I feel like influencers should be more open about their motivations. Are they promoting a party because they believe in it, or because they're getting paid? It's hard to trust them if they're not transparent.

[Male, 23, Negombo]

4.5. Role of influencers

Voters reported feeling both empowered and skeptical about influencer-driven political content. While influencers provided valuable insights and a sense of community, voters were cautious about potential manipulation and increasingly aware of the ethical complexities involved in influencer marketing. Many participants expressed a desire for influencers to encourage critical thinking rather than dictate opinions. Influencers who posed questions, engaged in discussions, and encouraged voters to research further were more positively received than those who presented one-sided endorsements.

There should be some rules for influencers endorsing political content. Just like how ads have to be clear, influencer posts about politics should also disclose if it's a paid promotion.

[Female, 31, Gampaha]

I'd like to see stricter guidelines on political endorsements. If influencers are getting paid to promote a candidate, it's not fair to the public unless they make it clear. Otherwise, it's just misleading.

[Male, 33, Trincomalee]

I notice that Instagram and TikTok influencers are more effective with younger people. My younger sister is always influenced by what she sees there, but I prefer the more detailed discussions that Facebook influencers post.

[Male, 28, Colombo]

The thematic map (see [Figure 1](#)) provides a visual summary of the study's key findings on the role of influencers in political campaigns. It highlights five central themes: Voter Trust, Voter Engagement, Influencers' Impact, Ethical Dilemmas, and the Role of Influencers. Within these themes, sub-themes such as Authenticity, Transparency, Political Awareness, and Independent Decision-Making are explored, emphasizing the complex interplay between influencers, voter attitudes, and ethical considerations. The thematic map illustrates how influencers shape voter behaviour, with trust as a crucial factor in engagement, and how platform-specific content influences voter perceptions. Ethical concerns, particularly surrounding transparency and paid endorsements, emerge as a critical issue, as voters increasingly demand honesty from influencers. The

map also connects these findings to broader global trends, such as the growing demand for authenticity in influencer marketing and the ethical dilemmas paralleling similar studies worldwide. This layout helps visualize the intricate interconnections between voter attitudes, the role of influencers, and the ethical considerations within political campaigns.

5. Discussion

The study explores the multifaceted role of influencers in shaping voter attitudes, increasing political awareness, and facilitating engagement, while also shedding light on the ethical complexities surrounding political endorsements in the digital age. In particular, the study highlights the critical interplay between trust, authenticity, engagement, and ethical concerns, which are central to understanding the impact of influencers on political discourse.

A key finding of the study is the central role of trust in shaping how influencers impact voter behaviour. Voters were significantly more likely to engage with and respond positively to influencers who demonstrated consistent authenticity and transparency. This is consistent with broader research in social media and marketing that emphasizes the importance of trust in building a strong relationship between influencers and their audience. In the context of politics, trust becomes even more critical, as political messages are often intertwined with an influencer’s personal brand and perceived integrity.

Influencers who endorsed political messages without clear motives particularly those who appeared motivated by financial incentives rather than genuine conviction, were met with skepticism. The study found that younger voters, in particular, were quick to call out inconsistencies in influencers’ political content. This aligns with previous studies that show a growing demand for transparency in influencer marketing, especially

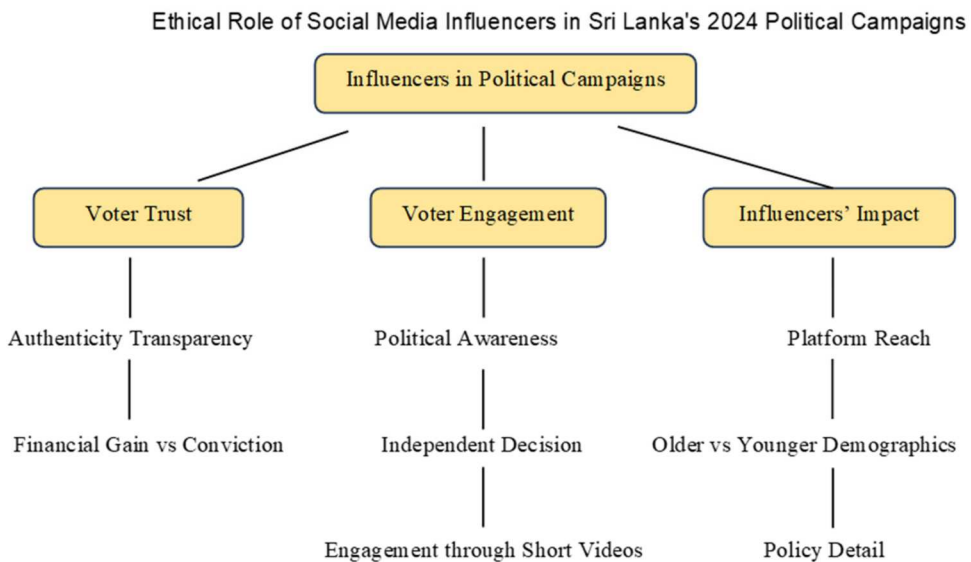


Figure 1. Thematic map of ethical role of social media influencers in Sri Lanka’s 2024 political campaigns.

in political contexts. Participants expressed frustration with influencers who appeared to 'sell out' by endorsing political candidates or parties for financial compensation or popularity (Fainmesser et al., 2020). This skepticism underscores the increasing awareness of the potential for manipulation in influencer-driven political campaigns, as voters become more discerning of the motivations behind endorsements (Khalil et al., 2019).

At the same time, the study found evidence that influencers who are perceived as authentic, consistent, and genuinely engaged with political issues can be effective in driving increased interest and engagement in the political process. Participants reported feeling more motivated to research political candidates and issues after exposure to influencers who demonstrated a nuanced, well-informed perspective. This suggests that political influencers have the potential to serve as ambassadors of political education and literacy, helping to bridge the gap between young people and the often complex and intimidating world of politics.

Authenticity emerged as a crucial theme across focus groups and interviews, with many participants preferring influencers who engaged in dialogue about political issues rather than presenting one-sided endorsements. As one participant noted, influencers who ask questions and foster discussions on social issues were seen as more honest and engaged. This desire for open-ended conversations reflects a broader cultural shift toward more participatory forms of engagement, where followers are encouraged to critically engage with political issues, rather than passively receiving information. Beyond their role in shaping voter attitudes, the study also found that political influencers have the potential to increase overall political engagement, particularly among younger demographics.

The study also explored how influencers increase voter engagement and raise awareness of political issues. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, serve as powerful tools for delivering political content to younger, tech-savvy audiences. Through visually engaging posts and simplified explanations of complex political issues, influencers successfully broadened the political knowledge of their followers. This is especially significant in a context where traditional media may not always effectively engage younger demographics or present issues in an accessible format.

While influencers undeniably mobilize political discourse, their direct influence on voting decisions was found to be limited. Most participants stated that while they followed influencers for information and perspective, they still preferred to make their voting decisions independently. This suggests that influencers are seen more as catalysts for raising political awareness and fostering discussions, rather than as direct decision-makers in electoral choices. The findings also indicate that voters value a nuanced and balanced approach, where influencers share information that allows followers to make their own informed decisions, rather than pushing for a specific political outcome.

However, the study also found significant platform-specific variations in how influencers engaged their audiences. On platforms like Facebook, influencers tended to target older demographics, discussing policy issues in more detail, while younger audiences were more engaged with simplified political messages on Instagram and TikTok. This segmentation highlights the diverse needs and expectations of different voter groups, and suggests that political campaigns must tailor their strategies to fit the particular social media platforms and audiences they aim to reach.

One of the most pressing concerns raised by participants was the ethical dilemmas associated with influencer-driven political content. The study uncovered widespread concern about the lack of transparency around paid endorsements and political affiliations. Many participants expressed frustration with influencers who did not disclose whether they were being compensated for promoting political messages, raising critical questions about honesty, integrity, and the authenticity of endorsements.

As the study highlighted, there is a clear need for ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks that address the transparency of political endorsements in influencer marketing. Voters called for more stringent disclosure rules, similar to those required for traditional political advertisements (Weismueller et al., 2020). Such measures would not only protect consumers from manipulation but would also ensure that influencers uphold higher standards of accountability when endorsing political candidates or causes.

Interestingly, while some participants acknowledged the value of influencer-led political content, others expressed concerns that influencers could easily become vehicles for propaganda. This tension between providing valuable insights and engaging in potentially manipulative practices reflects a broader ethical dilemma in the intersection of social media, politics, and marketing. The study's findings suggest that a more responsible and transparent approach to political endorsements by influencers would mitigate these concerns and enhance the credibility of influencer-driven political content.

The findings also underscore the inconsistency that voters feel about influencer-driven political campaigns. On one hand, many participants reported feeling empowered by influencers who provided insights and fostered community discussion around political issues. These influencers were seen as playing an important role in increasing political awareness, particularly among younger, more disengaged voters. As one participant noted, they attended protests or events based on an influencer's promotion, demonstrating the significant mobilizing power of influencers in driving civic participation.

On the other hand, there was considerable skepticism about the potential for manipulation. Participants expressed wariness about influencers who were overly aggressive in promoting political candidates, as this approach was perceived as an attempt to push a personal agenda rather than foster thoughtful discourse. This reflects a growing concern about the ethical implications of influencers using their platforms to sway voter opinions, especially when their motivations are unclear or appear to be driven by commercial interests rather than genuine political beliefs (Riedl et al., 2021). This study provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between influencers, voters, and political campaigns. Influencers can serve as powerful tools for increasing political engagement, particularly among younger voters, by simplifying complex issues and fostering discussion. However, their influence is not without its ethical challenges. Voters demand greater transparency and authenticity in political endorsements, and influencers must navigate the fine line between providing valuable information and avoiding the perception of manipulation.

As political campaigns increasingly rely on influencers to engage voters, it will be essential for both influencers and political organizations to ensure that their partnerships are built on genuine values and ethical transparency. Regulatory frameworks that enforce clear disclosure requirements for paid political endorsements, as well as guidelines for authenticity in content, will help mitigate ethical concerns and enhance the credibility of influencer-driven political campaigns (de Gregorio & Goanta, 2022; Dinh et al.,

2023). Moving forward, balancing engagement and ethical responsibility will be crucial for ensuring that influencers remain a positive force in democratic participation (Riedl et al., 2023).

The study highlights the urgent need for ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks to govern the use of influencer marketing in political campaigns. It identifies concerns about transparency and authenticity in influencer-driven political endorsements and echoes global calls for stricter disclosure requirements regarding paid political endorsements on social media platforms (Gui et al., 2024).

The study should delve more critically into the existing global regulatory landscape, examining how countries with more mature influencer-marketing industries, such as the US or the UK, are addressing ethical issues. This would enable a more robust discussion on the need for context-specific regulations that reflect Sri Lanka's cultural, political, and economic conditions. Global case studies of regulatory measures could be used to compare and contrast what Sri Lanka could potentially adopt or adapt in response to its unique ethical concerns (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021).

The study could benefit from a deeper examination of how Sri Lanka's distinct political culture and social media landscape shape the dynamics of influencer campaigns. The country's ethnic diversity and political fragmentation present unique challenges for influencers seeking to engage voters authentically and without political bias (Hattatuwa, 2019).

6. Conclusion

This study contributes significantly to the understanding of the role of influencers in shaping political engagement, voter perceptions, and awareness, especially in the context of contemporary digital media landscapes. It offers valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer-driven political campaigns, emphasizing that trust, authenticity, and transparency are critical to their success. By simplifying complex political information and mobilizing younger demographics, influencers have proven to be effective agents of civic engagement. However, while they play a key role in raising awareness and fostering engagement, their direct impact on voting decisions remains limited. Voters continue to prioritize independent, informed decision-making, suggesting that influencers may serve more as catalysts for engagement rather than as primary influencers of electoral outcomes.

This study contributes to research on how social media, influencer marketing, and political engagement intersect. It emphasizes the importance of trust and authenticity in influencer-driven campaigns, suggesting these are more crucial than the volume of endorsements or promotional content. The findings show that younger voters value transparency and genuine commitment to social causes over traditional political advertising. This research lays the groundwork for further exploring how digital media influencers shape political discourse and calls for including diverse perspectives in future studies.

Political campaigns should partner strategically with influencers whose values align with the campaign, ensuring authenticity and trust among followers. Campaigns should foster open discussions, critical thinking, and participatory engagement, rather than aggressive or overly promotional tactics. Influencers should be seen as partners

in encouraging voters to reflect on social and political issues, not just as vehicles for promotional messaging. This emphasis on authenticity and ethical communication has important implications for future campaign strategies in digital spaces.

The study recommends establishing clear ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks to govern the use of influencers in political campaigns. It suggests that regulatory authorities should collaborate with influencers and campaigns to develop policies promoting transparency and accountability in digital political communication. This would help safeguard the integrity of influencers and inform voters of potential conflicts of interest or financial compensation, preserving the credibility of digital political engagement as a constructive force for civic participation.

The study's limitations indicate that future research should consider a more representative sample, capturing perspectives from diverse voter demographics, including those from rural or marginalized communities with limited digital access. This would ensure that the voices of these underrepresented groups are included in the context of influencer-driven political campaigns. Furthermore, the emphasis on prominent social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram disregards the potential influence of emerging digital spaces, such as YouTube Shorts, TikTok, or novel platforms, where influencer strategies may diverge. Future research should investigate how influencers on these emerging platforms engage with political topics and whether platform-specific trends differentially impact voter behaviour.

The study's dependence on self-reported data poses the risk of response bias, as participants may have tailored their responses to align with socially desirable attitudes. To address this limitation, future research could incorporate more objective measures of political engagement, such as behavioural data on social media interactions, voting patterns, or participation in offline civic activities. The study's cross-sectional design limits its ability to capture long-term trends in the effects of influencer involvement on voter behaviour. Longitudinal investigations that monitor the impact of influencer-driven campaigns across multiple election cycles would offer more profound insights into the sustained influence of these strategies.

Lastly, comparative analyses of influencer-driven political campaigns across diverse sociopolitical and cultural contexts would provide a more nuanced understanding of both universal trends and context-specific dynamics. Additionally, the research could investigate how political influencers are perceived and operate within more authoritarian or restrictive media environments, where social media engagement may face greater limitations. Furthermore, as emerging artificial intelligence technologies increasingly shape the production and distribution of influencer-driven political content, future research should examine how AI-generated material, automated communication, and data-driven targeting may impact voter perceptions and behaviours in divergent ways from conventional influencer practices.

This study emphasizes the pivotal role played by social media influencers in contemporary political campaigns, highlighting their ability to raise awareness and foster civic engagement. However, the research underscores that the success of such influencer-driven campaigns hinges on maintaining trust and authenticity. To address the ethical challenges surrounding transparency, the study recommends the development of clear regulatory frameworks. This would enable influencers to continue serving as a positive force for civic participation and informed political discourse. The findings of this study provide a roadmap for future research that explores the diverse and evolving

landscape of political communication in the digital age, offering practical insights for campaigns, policymakers, and the academic community.

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Notes on contributors

Ms. Kumrasinghe Hetti Arachchige Nimesha Kumarasinghe is a Lecturer (On Contract) in the Open University of Sri Lanka. In 2023, Nimesha Kumarasinghe graduated from Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. So, she received the dean's award based on her first-year results. She is studying for the Master of Business Administration degree at the Postgraduate Institute of Management at the University of Sri Jayewardhanapura. She obtained the Digital Marketing Diploma from the Asia-Pacific Institute of Digital Marketing. She is not only a marketing person. She is also pursuing a Chartered Accountancy with the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka. She finished the business level and is currently pursuing the corporate level. Nimesha is interested in conducting research on a variety of areas. There are digital marketing, branding, entrepreneurship, political marketing etc.

Prof. Shivany Shanmugathas, Professor in Marketing and Chartered Marketer (CIM, UK), demonstrates a strong commitment to community development through youth-centred teaching and learning. Her expertise lies in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in marketing and gender mainstreaming, areas in which she has made significant contributions both within academic institutions and in broader community contexts. She is deeply committed to youth capacity development, recognising it as a critical driver of transformational change, particularly in post-war development settings. Professor Shivany has consistently promoted youth and women's participation, reflecting her dedication to social inclusion and women's empowerment. Her career reflects a balanced integration of academic excellence and social responsibility, with a focus on nurturing intellectually capable and socially conscious youth. She has published extensively in the fields of marketing, gender, and work-related issues, and has served as both a principal investigator and collaborative researcher in numerous local and international research projects.

ORCID

Kumrasinghe Hetti Arachchige Nimesha Kumarasinghe  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-8389-9757>
Shivany Shanmugathas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9820-2695>

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