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Digital Influence, Creator Economies and Communication Ethics: A Conceptual Model of Persuasion, Disclosure and Accountability in AI-Augmented Social Media Marketing

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ABSTRACT

The creator economy has become a primary channel of commercial and political persuasion. Artificial intelligence is now changing it from two directions. Creators use generative tools to produce content at a scale and speed no human team could match, while brands deploy synthetic influencers who never existed and AI systems that can match persuasive messages to individual psychological profiles. This conceptual, non-empirical paper develops a model of communication ethics for AI-augmented influence. It draws on persuasion theory and advertising ethics, on the influencer-marketing and creator-economy literatures, and on peer-reviewed research published between 2023 and 2026 on virtual influencers, AI-generated advertising and algorithmic and psychological targeting. Every source was checked against its Crossref record and screened for retractions and corrections. The paper identifies three requirements that persuasion must meet to be ethically legitimate. The audience must be able to recognise it as persuasion, must be able to identify who is persuading, and must keep the capacity to evaluate the claim. AI augmentation threatens each requirement. Generated content blurs the boundary between commercial and organic material, synthetic personas obscure the persuader, and psychological targeting and persuasive generation at scale weaken evaluation. From this recognition–identification–evaluation framework, the paper derives six propositions on the conditions under which AI-augmented influence remains ethically legitimate and legally compliant. It argues that disclosure rules designed for human influencers are necessary but inadequate, because they address recognition while leaving identification and evaluation largely unprotected. Using Nigeria's fast-growing influencer market and its advertising, consumer-protection and data-protection regimes as the anchoring case, the paper proposes a layered framework of obligations for regulators, platforms, brands and agencies, and creators.

Keywords: influencer marketing; creator economy; persuasion; disclosure; communication ethics

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1. INTRODUCTION

A skincare brand in Lagos can now run a campaign without hiring a single human influencer. Generative tools write the captions and produce the videos, a computer-generated persona with a carefully designed face and backstory presents them, and an ad system decides which of thousands of message variants each user will see, based on what it infers about that user's personality. The same tools serve political campaigns. During Nigeria's 2023 general election, memes, short videos, WhatsApp forwards and influencer-driven narratives were produced with new coordination and speed by student creators, party volunteers and platform gig workers (Oyeniyi, 2026).

The creator economy was already ethically difficult before AI arrived. Influencer marketing works because it does not feel like advertising: followers trust creators as they would trust a friend, and sponsored content sits among personal posts. Disclosure rules, such as requirements to label posts as advertising, were developed to restore the line between the personal and the commercial. Research on those rules is now substantial, and a recent meta-analysis summarises what disclosure does and does not achieve (Liu & Zhao, 2025).

Artificial intelligence changes the problem in ways that existing rules were not designed for. Generative tools make content production nearly costless and blur the difference between what a creator says and what a system produces (Luo & Li, 2026; Rangaswamy & Sivakumar, 2026). Virtual influencers present a persuader with no person behind them, leaving audiences unsure who is speaking and who is responsible (Looi et al., 2025; Pigac & Huang, 2026). Large language models make it possible to tailor persuasive messages to individual traits at scale (Matz et al., 2024; Simchon et al., 2024). Research on each development is growing, but the literatures are separate, and few studies ask what the developments together mean for the ethics of persuasion. African markets, where influencer marketing is growing rapidly and regulation is evolving, receive little attention.

This paper asks three questions. What must persuasion satisfy to be ethically legitimate? How does AI augmentation threaten those conditions? And what obligations should regulators, platforms, brands and creators bear, with Nigeria as the anchoring case? It answers by developing a recognition–identification–evaluation framework, six propositions and a layered regulatory framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Influencer marketing is the paid or otherwise rewarded use of social media creators to promote products, services, causes or candidates to their followers. The *creator economy* refers to the wider system of creators, platforms, brands, agencies and tools through which such content is produced and monetised. *Virtual influencers* are computer-generated personas, often human-like, that are operated by companies and present themselves on social media as if they were creators (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025).

Persuasion is communication intended to change beliefs, attitudes or behaviour. It is ethically legitimate, in the sense used here, when it works through the audience's capacity to judge, rather than around it. *Manipulation* is influence that bypasses or exploits that capacity, for example by concealing intent or exploiting psychological vulnerabilities. Klenk (2024) notes that generative AI enables automated, effective manipulation at scale and argues that responsible design depends on an adequate concept of manipulation.

Disclosure is information given to the audience about the nature of a communication. Two kinds matter here. *Sponsorship disclosure* states that content is paid for. *AI disclosure* states that content was produced or assisted by AI, or that a persona is not human. *Persuasion knowledge* is the audience's

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understanding of persuasion tactics, which disclosure is meant to activate.

2.2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

Persuasion theory and advertising ethics supply the normative starting point. Classic advertising ethics holds that advertising is acceptable when it is identifiable as advertising, truthful and not unfair. The persuasion knowledge model adds that audiences defend themselves against persuasion when they recognise it, so that recognition is a precondition for autonomy. Consumer-protection law in many jurisdictions encodes the same idea by prohibiting hidden advertising and practices that distort consumers' decisions. Kerckaert (2023) analyses how far influencers fall under the European Union's Unfair Commercial Practices Directive and shows that soft law, such as industry guidelines, has been used to fill gaps in the treatment of influencer marketing.

The manipulation literature adds a second strand. Klenk (2024) sets out conceptual, empirical and design questions that must be answered to understand and curb manipulation by generative AI. Simchon et al. (2024) describe the combination of generative AI and personality inference as a potential "manipulation machine" that could target individuals according to their vulnerabilities without human input. These accounts suggest that the ethical question is not only whether persuasion is labelled, but whether the audience can still evaluate it.

Creator-economy theory adds a third strand concerned with labour and platforms. Rangaswamy and Sivakumar (2026) distinguish AI co-creation of content from co-creation of process, and AI augmentation from AI substitution, and they treat privacy concerns and transparent disclosure of AI use as boundary conditions on audience engagement. Tang et al. (2026) show how creators in China use generative tools to benchmark viral content, run networks of accounts and turn virality into a managed outcome. Huang et al. (2026) show that platform policy signals, such as launching an AI image generator or banning AI art, change how creators behave. Platforms, in other words, act as de facto regulators of the creator economy.

2.3 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Sponsorship disclosure. Liu and Zhao (2025) integrated 288 effect sizes from 37 studies and found that sponsorship disclosure increases persuasion knowledge and brand recall but lowers credibility, while its overall effects on attitudes and behavioural intentions are not significant. Disclosure was more effective when made by others rather than the influencer, presented as a hashtag, longer, placed in video, and shown to adults. Field studies add nuance. Cao and Belo (2024) found, using Facebook and Instagram data, that explicit disclosure increased users' awareness of advertising and earned favourability by increasing transparency. Waltenrath (2024), analysing Instagram posts by popular influencers, examined how disclosed and undisclosed advertising affect engagement with the advertisement and with the same creator's later posts.

Virtual influencers. Khalfallah and Keller (2025) systematically reviewed research on virtual influencers and found that authenticity, transparency and the "uncanny valley" shape trust, with cultural context moderating responses. Kim et al. (2025) found in two experiments that human-like virtual influencers produced more engagement and purchase intent than anime-like ones through greater trustworthiness, but only when sponsorship was not disclosed; once it was disclosed, the advantage disappeared. Looi et al. (2025) analysed more than 48,000 comments on a virtual influencer's posts and found that users were confused about the influencer's identity, questioning whether it was robotic or human. Pigac and Huang (2026) found that consumers negotiate trust and responsibility towards virtual influencers, with privacy concerns associated with greater attribution of responsibility to brands and developers. Nair and Manohar (2026) examine how parasocial interaction, trust and authenticity link AI influencers to consumer well-being.

AI-generated content and advertising. The evidence on AI disclosure is mixed. Chen and Haley (2026) found that disclosing AI-generated advertising increased perceived trustworthiness and attractiveness, while disclosure that described data use raised privacy concerns. Wilson et al. (2026) found that consumers who realised an advertisement was synthetic held less positive attitudes towards it and the brand, but did not change their purchase

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intent or engagement. Weiss et al. (2026) show that AI disclosure in advertising leads consumers to infer that the firm also uses AI in service delivery. Outside advertising, labels saying content is AI-generated reduce belief in it even when it is true or written by humans (Altay & Gilardi, 2024), and disclosing AI use can erode trust in the discloser (Schilke & Reimann, 2025; Toff & Simon, 2025). In the creator economy, Luo and Li (2026) found that a generative writing assistant raised the persuasiveness of user posts but lowered audience resonance, an "authenticity penalty".

Targeting and persuasion at scale. Matz et al. (2024) showed across four studies with 1,788 participants that messages crafted by ChatGPT to match recipients' psychological profiles were more persuasive than non-personalised messages, in both consumer and political domains. Simchon et al. (2024) found that political ads tailored to personality were more effective than generic ones, and that such ads can be generated and validated automatically. Hackenburg and Margetts (2024), in a preregistered experiment with 8,587 participants, found that GPT-4 messages were broadly persuasive but that microtargeted messages were not significantly more persuasive than generic ones. Together these results suggest that the evaluation threat lies both in tailoring and in the general persuasive power of generated content at scale.

Nigeria. Political persuasion in Nigeria's 2023 election combined TikTok video, influencer labour, WhatsApp forwarding and coordinated campaigning (Oyeniyi, 2026), and campaign media units both produced disinformation and tagged unwelcome information as fake (Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2026). Influencer marketing reaches Nigerian adolescents as part of a digital food environment that may shape diets and body image (Ademiluyi et al., 2026). State–platform interactions and selective enforcement have created new patterns of marginalisation in Nigeria's social media environment (Owens-Ibie et al., 2026), and dependence on foreign platforms limits local control over data and algorithms (Effoduh, 2025).

2.4 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Three gaps follow. First, research on sponsorship disclosure, virtual influencers, AI advertising and AI targeting proceeds separately, and no framework connects them to a common account of legitimate persuasion. Second, the adequacy of disclosure rules designed for human influencers has not been assessed against the specific threats AI introduces. Third, African influencer markets, including Nigeria's, are rarely studied as regulatory cases. This paper addresses these gaps.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design. This is a theoretical, non-empirical article. It uses integrative conceptual synthesis to build a framework and to derive propositions for later empirical testing. No human participants were involved and no primary data were collected, so population, sampling and instrument validation in the empirical sense do not apply.

Source identification. Literature was identified through structured searches of EBSCOhost databases accessed through the University of South Africa (Unisa) Library (Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, APA PsycInfo and MEDLINE), the Crossref metadata service and the OpenAlex scholarly index. Search terms combined "influencer", "virtual influencer", "creator economy", "sponsorship disclosure", "persuasion knowledge", "AI-generated advertising", "microtargeting" and "personalised persuasion" with "ethics", "trust", "regulation", "Nigeria" and "Africa". Searches were run on 21 October 2026.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2023 and 2026 were included if they addressed influencer or creator marketing, virtual influencers, disclosure of sponsorship or AI use, AI-enabled persuasion and targeting, manipulation, advertising regulation, or influencer and digital persuasion in Nigeria and Africa. Preprints, conference papers, book reviews, editorials, grey literature, items without a resolvable digital object identifier (DOI), and outlets whose peer-review practices could not be confirmed were excluded.

Verification. Each candidate was checked against its Crossref record for DOI, authors, title, journal, volume, issue and pagination, and was screened for retractions, corrections and expressions of concern through Crossref update metadata. One otherwise relevant study of the conversational persuasiveness of a large language model was excluded because a

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correction notice is attached to it. Where an article is indexed in the EBSCOhost databases, its peer-reviewed status and abstract were also confirmed there. Publication year follows the issue year where one exists. Twenty-eight articles met all criteria and are cited. Nigerian statutes are named in the text for context but are not treated as sources of evidence.

Analytic procedure. Sources were coded for the ethical requirement their findings bear on (recognition, identification or evaluation), the form of AI involvement (generation, synthetic persona or targeting), the remedy discussed and the setting. Mechanisms that recurred were stated as propositions, and Nigerian and African studies were used to judge how each mechanism is likely to operate in Nigeria's market.

Bases of judgement and trustworthiness. Conceptual work is judged by clarity, parsimony, explanatory reach and falsifiability. Each proposition is stated so that it could prove wrong, and the discussion identifies evidence that would weaken it.

AI usage disclosure. Generative AI tools were used to assist with literature retrieval, metadata checking and language editing. The arguments, interpretations and conclusions were developed and reviewed by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the content. No AI tool is listed as an author, and no source was cited without verification against its publisher record.

Limitations. The synthesis is restricted to English-language journal articles from a four-year window. Most experimental evidence comes from the United States, Europe and East Asia, and peer-reviewed research on influencer marketing in Nigeria is scarce, so the Nigerian analysis relies partly on studies of political persuasion, digital regulation and adolescent media use.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 RESULTS: THE RECOGNITION–IDENTIFICATION–EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The synthesis yields three requirements that persuasion must meet to be ethically legitimate. Each corresponds to a different question the audience must be able to answer. Is this persuasion? Who is persuading me? Can I judge the claim? AI augmentation threatens each requirement through a different mechanism. Table 1 summarises the framework.

Table. 1. The recognition–identification–evaluation framework

Requirement	Audience question	AI threat	Safeguard
Recognition	Is this persuasion?	Generated content at scale blurs commercial and organic material	Sponsorship disclosure, applied by platforms (P1, P4)
Identification	Who is persuading me?	Synthetic personas borrow human trust and hide their operators	Principal disclosure naming operator and sponsor (P2)
Evaluation	Can I judge the claim?	Psychological targeting and persuasive generation at scale	Limits on data use and targeting, especially for minors (P3)

Note. Compiled by the author(s) from the synthesis in Sections 2 and 4.1.

Recognition: can the audience tell that this is persuasion? Recognition is the requirement that disclosure rules were built to protect. It allows the audience to activate persuasion knowledge and apply appropriate scepticism. The evidence shows that disclosure does this job: it raises persuasion knowledge and recall (Liu & Zhao, 2025) and makes users aware of the advertising nature of content (Cao & Belo, 2024). Generative AI weakens recognition in a new way. When creators use generative tools to produce large volumes of content, and when brands generate "organic-looking" material at negligible cost, the boundary between commercial and personal content becomes harder to locate. Networks of accounts that manage virality systematically (Tang et al., 2026) produce content whose commercial purpose may never be stated because no single post is formally sponsored.

Identification: can the audience tell who is persuading? Identification is the requirement that the audience knows the source of persuasion and can hold someone responsible. In human influencer marketing, the persuader is visible, even if the sponsor is not. Virtual influencers break this link. Audiences are unsure whether they are dealing with a person or a program (Looi et al., 2025), and responsibility is spread across brands, developers and agencies (Pigac & Huang, 2026). The finding by Kim et al. (2025) is telling: human-likeness gave virtual

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influencers a trust advantage only when sponsorship was hidden. Synthetic personas thus draw on the trust that audiences extend to people, while the commercial principal behind them remains out of view.

Evaluation: can the audience still judge the claim? Evaluation is the requirement that the audience retains the capacity to weigh the claim on its merits. It is threatened by two mechanisms. The first is psychological targeting: messages tailored to personality are more persuasive (Matz et al., 2024; Simchon et al., 2024). The second is generic persuasive power at scale: even untailored generated messages can shift opinion substantially (Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024), and generative assistance makes posts more persuasive (Luo & Li, 2026). Neither mechanism is addressed by labelling. A label tells the audience that a message is an advertisement; it does not restore the capacity to resist a message engineered to exploit their traits. Vulnerable audiences, such as adolescents exposed to influencer food marketing (Ademiluyi et al., 2026), have less capacity to begin with.

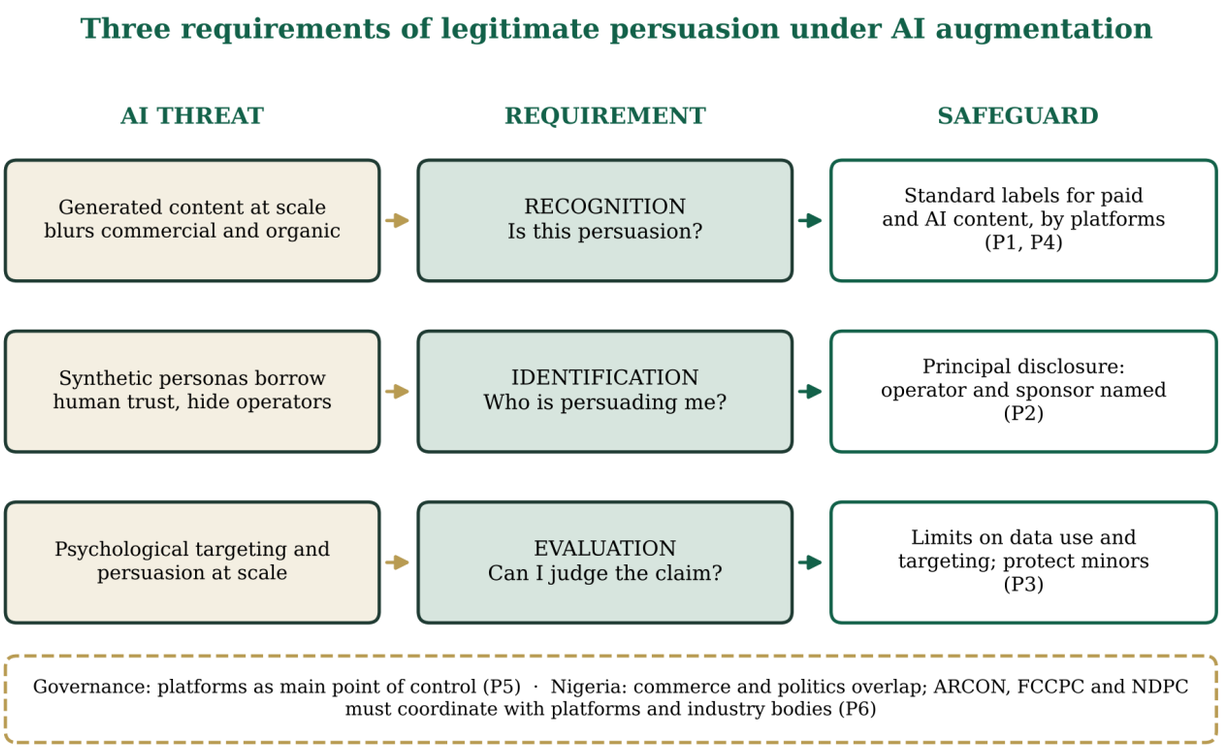


Figure. 1. The recognition–identification–evaluation framework: three requirements of legitimate persuasion, the AI mechanisms that threaten each, and the safeguards that protect them. Source: developed by the author(s).

From the framework, six propositions follow.

Proposition 1: Sponsorship disclosure protects recognition but does little for identification and evaluation, so compliance with disclosure rules is a necessary but not sufficient condition of legitimate AI-augmented influence. Disclosure increases persuasion knowledge but has no significant overall effect on attitudes or intentions (Liu & Zhao, 2025). It signals that persuasion is occurring without saying who is behind it or protecting the audience's judgement. The proposition would be weakened by evidence that disclosure alone reduces the persuasive effect of tailored or synthetic-persona content to the level of ordinary advertising.

Proposition 2: AI augmentation shifts the main ethical risk from hidden sponsorship to hidden principals, so legitimate disclosure must identify the accountable party, not only the commercial nature or synthetic origin of content. Synthetic personas borrow human trust while obscuring their operators (Kim et al., 2025; Looi et al., 2025), and audiences already assign responsibility to brands and developers (Pigac & Huang, 2026). An "#ad" or "AI-generated" label leaves the principal unnamed. The

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proposition would be weakened by evidence that naming the operator of a virtual influencer does not change audience trust or responsibility judgements.

Proposition 3: Psychological targeting and persuasive generation at scale threaten evaluation in ways that disclosure cannot remedy, so their legitimacy depends on limits on data use and targeting rather than on labels. Tailoring increases persuasion (Matz et al., 2024; Simchon et al., 2024), and generic generated content is itself persuasive (Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024). Klenk's (2024) call for a design-oriented account of manipulation implies that safeguards must be built into what systems are allowed to do. The proposition would be weakened by evidence that informing audiences about targeting reduces its persuasive advantage.

Proposition 4: AI disclosure has unstable effects on trust, which creates incentives to conceal AI use unless disclosure is mandatory, standardised and made by parties other than the creator. AI labels sometimes raise perceived trustworthiness (Chen & Haley, 2026) and sometimes lower attitudes (Wilson et al., 2026), and they can reduce belief in content regardless of its origin (Altay & Gilardi, 2024). Those who disclose may lose trust (Schilke & Reimann, 2025). Disclosure made by others, such as platforms, is more effective than self-disclosure (Liu & Zhao, 2025). The proposition would be weakened by evidence that voluntary AI disclosure becomes widespread without regulatory pressure.

Proposition 5: Platforms are the most effective point of governance in the creator economy, because their policies shape creator behaviour more directly than law. Platform stances on generative AI change creator activity (Huang et al., 2026), and platform-level labels and verification can carry disclosure that individual creators avoid. The authenticity penalty (Luo & Li, 2026) and the favourability earned by transparent disclosure (Cao & Belo, 2024) suggest that platforms can align commercial incentives with ethical requirements. The proposition would be weakened by evidence that platform policy changes have little effect on creator disclosure practices.

Proposition 6: In markets such as Nigeria, where influencer persuasion spans commerce and politics, regulatory capacity is uneven and platforms are foreign, the threats to identification and evaluation are larger, and legitimacy depends on coordination among regulators, platforms and industry bodies. Influencer labour in Nigeria's 2023 election blurred commercial, partisan and personal communication (Oyeniyi, 2026), campaigns used information disorder strategically (Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2026), and enforcement in the digital space has been selective (Owens-Ibie et al., 2026). Dependence on foreign platforms limits local leverage (Effoduh, 2025). The proposition would be weakened by evidence that Nigerian audiences identify sponsors and synthetic personas as reliably as audiences in markets with mature disclosure regimes.

4.2 DISCUSSION

The framework explains why the disclosure debate has stalled. Disclosure research asks whether labels change attitudes or purchases, and the meta-analytic answer is that they mostly do not (Liu & Zhao, 2025). Read through the framework, that result is not a failure of disclosure but a sign that disclosure serves only one of three requirements. It enables recognition. It was never designed to secure identification or evaluation, and AI makes those the more pressing problems.

The framework also clarifies the ambiguous effects of AI labels. If labels sometimes raise and sometimes lower trust (Chen & Haley, 2026; Wilson et al., 2026), creators and brands face an incentive to disclose only when it helps. That is a familiar collective-action problem: honest disclosure by some lowers their standing relative to those who conceal. Mandatory, standardised disclosure, ideally applied by platforms rather than left to individual creators, removes the advantage of concealment. Disclosure should also be layered. A commercial label ("paid partnership"), a synthetic label ("AI-generated" or "virtual persona") and an identification of the principal ("operated by X for Y") answer different questions and should not be merged.

The Nigerian case. Nigeria's influencer market combines rapid growth, heavy political use and evolving regulation. The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act of 2022 places advertising, including advertising on digital platforms, under the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria

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(ARCON). The Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Act of 2018, enforced by the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC), prohibits misleading practices, and the Nigeria Data Protection Act of 2023, overseen by the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), governs the processing of personal data on which psychological targeting depends. In principle, these instruments map onto the three requirements: advertising regulation onto recognition, consumer protection onto identification and fair dealing, and data protection onto the targeting that threatens evaluation. In practice, three difficulties arise. Much influencer persuasion is political rather than commercial and falls outside advertising rules (Oyeniyi, 2026). Enforcement capacity in the digital space is limited and has at times been selective (Owens-Ibie et al., 2026). And the platforms that control targeting and labelling are foreign (Effoduh, 2025). Table 2 sets out a layered framework of obligations that responds to these difficulties.

Table. 2. Layered obligations for AI-augmented influence in Nigeria

Actor	Recognition	Identification	Evaluation
Regulators	Joint guidance on commercial and synthetic labels	Ban undisclosed virtual personas in commercial and political persuasion	Restrict targeting on sensitive inferences and of minors
Platforms	Automatic standard labels for paid and AI content	Verify and display operators of virtual influencers	Data access for regulators and researchers; targeting limits
Brands and agencies	Disclosure clauses in all contracts	Name the principal in campaigns	Record AI use and targeting criteria
Creators	Disclose paid partnerships consistently	Disclose material AI use	Code of practice and training

Note. Developed by the author(s) from the propositions in Section 4.1 and the discussion in Section 4.2.

Political influence. The framework applies with particular force to political persuasion, where the stakes for public life are higher and the rules weaker. Commercial influencer content is at least nominally covered by advertising law. Paid political content delivered through creators often is not, and its sponsors may be campaigns, factions or interests that prefer to remain unseen. In Nigeria's 2023 election, much of this work was carried out by precarious creators and gig workers whose relationship to campaigns was informal (Oyeniyi, 2026). Recognition fails because the content looks like personal opinion. Identification fails because the principal is a campaign unit or a broker rather than the visible creator. Evaluation is strained because the content is often emotional, fast and embedded in group identities. Generative tools and synthetic personas would intensify each of these failures, since a campaign could run many apparently independent voices without hiring any of them. Evidence that generated political messages persuade even without tailoring (Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024) suggests that the volume and quality of such content, not only its targeting, deserves regulatory attention.

Minors and vulnerable audiences. The evaluation requirement also explains why protections for minors should be stronger than labels. Disclosure works better for adults than for younger audiences (Liu & Zhao, 2025), and adolescents in Nigeria encounter influencer food marketing as part of a wider digital food environment linked to body-image pressure and unhealthy diets (Ademiluyi et al., 2026). For such audiences, a label may be noticed without being understood. Limits on targeting minors with tailored commercial content, and on the use of virtual influencers in marketing directed at them, follow directly from the framework.

Implications for theory. The paper extends advertising ethics from a single requirement, identifiability, to three, and links each to a distinct AI mechanism. It reframes the persuasion knowledge model: recognising persuasion is not enough when the persuader is synthetic and the message is engineered to fit the person. It also positions platforms, rather than creators, as the main moral agents of the AI-augmented creator economy.

Counterarguments. One objection is that audiences enjoy virtual influencers and generated content, and that paternalistic rules will stifle a creative industry. The framework does not oppose AI-augmented influence; it specifies conditions under which it is legitimate, and evidence that transparent disclosure can earn favourability (Cao & Belo, 2024) suggests that the conditions are commercially compatible. A second objection is that tailoring is no more effective than generic messaging (Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024). The framework accommodates this: the evaluation threat comes from persuasive power at

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scale as well as from tailoring, and safeguards on data use remain justified by privacy and by evidence that tailoring can be effective (Matz et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

AI is transforming the creator economy into an industrial system of persuasion. This paper has argued that persuasion is legitimate when the audience can recognise it, identify the persuader and evaluate the claim, and that AI threatens each requirement through a different mechanism: generated content blurs recognition, synthetic personas obscure identification, and targeting and persuasion at scale weaken evaluation. Disclosure rules designed for human influencers protect recognition but leave the other two requirements exposed. Legitimacy therefore requires layered disclosure that names the accountable principal, limits on data use and targeting, and governance in which platforms carry obligations.

Several recommendations follow. Nigerian regulators, including the advertising, consumer-protection and data-protection authorities, should issue joint guidance on AI-augmented influence that requires layered disclosure (commercial, synthetic and principal), prohibits undisclosed virtual personas in commercial and political persuasion, and restricts psychological targeting based on sensitive inferences, particularly for minors. Electoral authorities should extend disclosure duties to paid political influencer content. Platforms should apply standard labels for paid and synthetic content automatically, verify and display the operators of virtual influencers, and give regulators and researchers access to data on paid influencer content. Brands and agencies should contract only on terms that require disclosure and should keep records of AI use and targeting criteria. Creators' associations should adopt a code of practice and training on AI disclosure. Researchers should test layered disclosure with Nigerian audiences and measure identification and evaluation directly.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The paper contributes in four ways. Conceptually, it offers a recognition–identification–evaluation framework that connects separate literatures on sponsorship disclosure, virtual influencers, AI advertising and AI targeting to a single account of legitimate persuasion. Theoretically, it shows why disclosure designed for human influencers protects recognition but not identification or evaluation, and it states six falsifiable propositions on legitimacy and disclosure adequacy. Practically, it proposes layered disclosure and a framework of obligations distributed across regulators, platforms, brands and creators. Contextually, it brings Nigeria's influencer market and regulatory regime into the international study of AI-augmented persuasion.

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