

Negotiating Authenticity in Instagram Influencer Endorsements: Audience Trust, Purchase Intention, and Digital Promotion

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Influencer marketing; authenticity;
audience trust; purchase intention;
Instagram endorsement; digital
communication; social media influencers

The growth influence of marketing on social media has transformed the way brands communicate with audiences, particularly on visually driven platforms such as Instagram. Within this environment, authenticity has emerged as a critical factor influencing audience engagement and the effectiveness of endorsement messages. This study aims to examine how authenticity is constructed in influencer endorsement practices and how audiences interpret and respond to such authenticity in the context of Instagram. This research employs a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews and digital observation to explore the perspectives of influencers, audience members, and small business owners who have collaborated with influencers. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning related to authenticity, trust, consumer response, and business impact in influencer endorsement communication. The findings reveal that audiences interpret authenticity primarily through honest communication, natural storytelling, and the perceived sincerity of influencers when presenting products. Authenticity plays a central role in building audience trust, which subsequently shapes how audiences evaluate endorsement messages and influences their intention to try or purchase promoted products. The results also indicate that influencer endorsements can generate significant promotional benefits for small businesses by increasing visibility, online engagement, and consumer interest. These findings suggest that authenticity functions as a relational communication process that mediates the relationship between influencers, audiences, and commercial partners. Understanding authenticity as a negotiated and interactive construct provides important insights into digital marketing strategies and contributes to the broader study of influencer communication in the digital economy.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the landscape of digital communication and marketing. Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential environments for brand communication due to its visual orientation, interactive features, and capacity for personal storytelling. The rise of social media influences has consequently reshaped promotional strategies, shifting traditional advertising approaches toward more relational and personalized forms of communication. Rather than relying solely on direct brand messaging, companies increasingly collaborate with influencers who act as intermediaries between brands and audiences, translating promotional messages into everyday narratives that appear relatable and authentic (Vrontis et al., 2021; Weismueller et al., 2020). As a result, influencer marketing has

become a central component of contemporary digital marketing strategies across industries (Hastuti et al., 2025).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing, however, is not determined merely by the size of an influencer's audience or the frequency of promotional content. Previous studies demonstrate that the success of influencer endorsements largely depends on the ability of influencers to establish credibility, trust, and emotional connections with their (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Hughes et al., 2019). Influencers often cultivate such relationships by sharing personal experiences, engaging in two-way communication, and providing recommendations that appear grounded in everyday life. These practices foster a perception of authenticity, which has been widely recognized as a key driver of audience engagement and persuasive effectiveness in digital environments (Marwick, 2015; Pereira et al., 2023). Consequently, authenticity has become a central concept in scholarly discussions of influencer marketing.

Despite the growing recognition of authenticity as a critical factor in influencer communication, the concept itself remains theoretically complex and contested. Much of the early literature conceptualizes authenticity as an inherent personal quality of influencers, typically associated with honesty, transparency, and consistency in self-presentation (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Within this perspective, authenticity functions as a measurable attribute that increases audience trust and encourages positive consumer responses. However, more recent studies argue that authenticity should not be understood as a stable or inherent trait, but rather as a socially constructed perception shaped through communicative practices, platform dynamics, and audience interpretations (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). This shift in perspective suggests that authenticity is continuously produced and negotiated through interactions between influencers and their audiences.

The tension between authenticity and commercialization becomes particularly visible in the context of sponsored endorsements. Influencers are expected to maintain a relatable and genuine persona while simultaneously promoting products and fulfilling contractual obligations with brands. This dual role creates a structural dilemma: excessive commercial promotion may undermine perceptions of sincerity, whereas insufficient promotion may reduce the economic value of influence partnerships. Scholars have noted that influencers must therefore engage in strategic communication practices that balance self-expression with promotional intent, often blending personal storytelling with subtle advertising cues (Li et al., 2025; Lou & Zhou, 2024). Understanding how this balance is achieved remains an important issue in contemporary digital communication research.

Previous research has proposed several conceptual approaches to address this tension. One prominent line of scholarship highlights the role of narrative communication in constructing authenticity. Influencers frequently present endorsement messages through personal narratives that integrate everyday experiences, lifestyle representations, and emotional storytelling. Narrative communication allows promotional messages to appear embedded within the influencer's personal life rather than presented as explicit advertisements. Studies suggest that narrative authenticity can enhance audience identification with influencers and strengthen the persuasive impact of endorsement messages (Atiq et al., 2022; Richter et al., 2025).

Another strand of research focuses on the psychological mechanisms underlying audience responses to influence communication. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposes that individuals process persuasive messages through either central or peripheral routes depending on their level of motivation and cognitive engagement (Kim et al., 2021). When audiences perceive influencers as authentic and trustworthy, they are more likely to engage with messages through the central route, leading to deeper cognitive processing and stronger attitudinal changes. Conversely, when authenticity is questioned, audiences may rely on peripheral cues such as popularity or aesthetics, resulting in weaker persuasive effects (Plummer et al., 2021). These insights highlight the importance of authenticity as a cognitive trigger in the processing of digital marketing messages.

While these theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights, existing studies often approach authenticity primarily as a factor influencing marketing outcomes such as engagement, brand attitude, or purchase intention. Such approaches tend to overlook the communicative processes through which authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated within everyday interactions

on social media platforms. In particular, relatively limited attention has been given to the dynamic interplay between influencers, brands, and audiences in shaping the meaning of authenticity in endorsement practices (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Addressing this gap requires a perspective that treats authenticity not merely as a marketing variable but as a relational and symbolic process embedded within digital communication.

Responding to this gap, the present study examines how authenticity is constructed and negotiated within Instagram influencer endorsements. Drawing on insights from narrative communication, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and symbolic interactionism, this research conceptualizes authenticity as a communicative outcome produced through interactions between influencers, audiences, and commercial interests. Specifically, the study aims to analyze how influences present authenticity in sponsored content, how commercial and personal identities are negotiated within endorsement practices, and how audiences interpret and respond to claims of authenticity. By focusing on the Indonesian social media context—one of the world's most active digital markets—this research seeks to contribute to the broader literature on influencer marketing by providing a more nuanced understanding of authenticity as a socially negotiated phenomenon in contemporary digital culture.

2. Method

Paradigma Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate how authenticity is constructed and negotiated within influencer endorsement practices on Instagram. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study does not aim to test causal relationships or quantify variables, but rather to explore the meanings, experiences, and communication practices surrounding authenticity in influencer marketing. Previous research has emphasized that authenticity in social media environments is not an inherent personal attribute but a socially constructed perception shaped through interaction, communication strategies, and audience interpretation (Balaban & Szabolics, 2022; Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Therefore, understanding authenticity requires an interpretative framework capable of capturing the symbolic and relational dimensions of digital communication.

The study is grounded in an interpretative–constructivist paradigm that views social reality as constructed through interaction and meaning-making processes. Within this paradigm, authenticity is understood as a negotiated meaning produced through interactions between influencers, audiences, and commercial stakeholders. This perspective aligns with contemporary communication scholarship that conceptualizes influencer marketing not merely as a promotional tool but as a relational communication practice embedded within digital culture (Hughes et al., 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021). Consequently, the research focuses on how actors interpret and negotiate authenticity within everyday digital communication practices.

Research Informants

The selection of informants is guided by purposive sampling to ensure that participants possess relevant experience and knowledge related to influence endorsement practices. The primary influencer selected in this study is the Instagram account @sagitaaaaaaa, which had approximately 8.296 followers as of January 2026 and is therefore considered sufficiently representative of mid-to large scale social media influencers within the Indonesian digital ecosystem. In addition to the primary case, several other influencer accounts such as @tasyafarasya, @fadiljaidi, and @sabrinasosiawan are examined as supporting references to provide comparative insights into the communication strategies used in influencer endorsement practices.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of authenticity negotiation, the study involves three categories of informants: influencers, audience members, and business owners representing brands or small enterprises collaborating with influencers. Audience informants consist of Instagram users who actively follow influencer accounts and have previously interacted with endorsement content through comments, reactions, or other forms of engagement. The selection of audience participants emphasizes meaningful digital participation rather than passive following, consistent with research

suggesting that active engagement provides richer insight into audience interpretation processes (Han & Balabanis, 2023).

Brand representatives are included as additional informants to support data triangulation. These individuals are selected from business owners or brand managers who have collaborated with influencers in promotional activities. Their perspectives provide insight into the strategic expectations and commercial considerations underlying influencer endorsement campaigns. Including multiple stakeholder perspectives allows the study to capture the negotiation of authenticity across different actors involved in influencer marketing communication.

Types and Sources of Data

The study relies primarily on qualitative data to capture the depth and complexity of communication practices surrounding influencer endorsements. Qualitative data allows the researcher to analyze participants' experiences, interpretations, and communicative strategies in their natural context. Such data are particularly suitable for examining symbolic processes such as authenticity construction, which involve subjective perceptions and social interpretation rather than measurable numerical indicators.

Two main categories of data are used in this research: primary data and secondary data. Primary data are collected directly from research participants and digital content associated with influencer activities. These data include transcripts from in-depth interviews with influencers, audience members, and business owners, as well as observational records of Instagram content such as posts, stories, reels, captions, hashtags, and audience comments. Digital content functions as an important source of observational evidence because it reflects how authenticity is symbolized and communicated in influencer endorsement practices.

Secondary data consists of academic literature, scholarly articles, and prior research related to influencer marketing, authenticity, and digital communication. These sources provide theoretical grounding and analytical context for interpreting empirical findings. Previous studies have demonstrated that perceptions of authenticity are shaped by narrative communication strategies, credibility signals, and audience engagement practices (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Pereira et al., 2023). Incorporating secondary data therefore enables the study to situate empirical observations within broader scholarly discussions of influencer communication.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this research involves multiple qualitative techniques designed to capture different dimensions of influencer communication. The primary method is semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with influencers, audience members, and business owners. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to maintain focus on key research themes while also providing flexibility for informants to describe their experiences, perspectives, and interpretations in their own words. Interviews with influencers explore communication strategies, considerations in selecting endorsement partnerships, and methods used to maintain perceptions of authenticity. Interviews with audiences focus on how followers interpret endorsement messages and evaluate the sincerity of influencer recommendations.

In addition to interviews, the study employs digital observation through a netnographic approach. Netnography is a qualitative research method designed to study social interactions and cultural practices within online communities. Through this approach, the researcher observes patterns of communication on Instagram, including the narrative style of endorsement posts, visual presentation strategies, frequency of promotional content, and interaction between influencers and followers in comment sections. Observing these interactions provides valuable insight into how authenticity is symbolically performed and interpreted within the digital environment.

Documentation of visual content also forms an important part of the data collection process. Screenshots of influencer posts, reels, stories, captions, and audience comments are collected as empirical evidence supporting the findings derived from interviews and observation. These visual materials serve as artifacts that illustrate how endorsement messages are embedded within personal narratives and everyday lifestyle representations. The use of multiple data collection techniques allows for methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data in this study employs thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for examining complex communication phenomena because it allows researchers to systematically organize data while remaining attentive to the interpretative nature of meaning construction.

The analytical process begins with data familiarization, in which the researcher repeatedly reviews interview transcripts, observational notes, and visual documentation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. This stage allows the researcher to identify preliminary patterns and recurring ideas related to authenticity in influencer endorsement practices.

Following familiarization, the researcher conducts a coding process in which relevant segments of data are labeled according to conceptual categories. Codes are generated based on themes emerging from the data, such as influencer communication strategies, narrative presentation of personal experiences, alignment between influencer identity and endorsed products, and audience interpretations of authenticity signals.

The next stage involves organizing these codes into broader thematic categories that represent meaningful patterns within the dataset. Through this process, themes related to authenticity construction, audience trust, purchase intention, and the promotional impact of influencer communication on small businesses are identified. These themes reflect the relational dynamics between influencers, audiences, and brands in shaping perceptions of authenticity.

The final stage of analysis involves interpreting these themes in relation to the theoretical framework guiding the study, including Narrative Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and Symbolic Interactionism. Narrative Theory helps explain how influences construct authenticity through storytelling and personal narratives embedded in endorsement messages. The Elaboration Likelihood Model provides insight into how perceived authenticity influences audience processing of persuasive messages and subsequent behavioral responses (Kim et al., 2021). Symbolic Interactionism further illuminates how authenticity is negotiated through ongoing interactions between influencers and audiences within digital communities.

Research Context

The primary research setting of this study is the Instagram platform, which serves as the dominant environment for influencer marketing and digital lifestyle representation. Instagram's features—including image and video posts, stories, reels, and comment sections—enable influencers to construct personal narratives while simultaneously engaging with audiences in interactive communication. These platform affordances make Instagram a particularly relevant site for studying authenticity negotiation in digital endorsement practices (Cotter, 2018).

Data collection for this study was conducted over a three-month period from December 2025 to February 2026. During this time, the researcher carried out interviews, digital observations, and documentation of influencer content related to endorsement activities. This time frame allowed the researcher to observe patterns of influencer communication and audience engagement across multiple promotional cycles. By sitting the study within the everyday communicative practices of Instagram users, the research aims to capture a realistic representation of how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in contemporary influencer marketing.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Presenting the Results

Description of Research Informants Implementasi

This study involved three categories of informants who represent the main actors in influencer endorsement communication on Instagram: the influencer, audience members, and business owners who collaborated with the influencer. These informants were selected purposively to obtain rich insights into how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in endorsement practices.

The primary influencer examined in this study was the Instagram account @sagitaaaaaaaa, which had more than 8.296 followers at the time of data collection. The account regularly publishes promotional content related to local culinary products and small businesses, making it relevant for examining endorsement practices in the Indonesian digital marketplace.

Audience informants consisted of Instagram users who actively follow the influencer and have interacted with endorsement content through comments, likes, or other forms of engagement. Their participation allowed the research to capture how followers interpret authenticity and evaluate influence recommendations. In addition, business owners representing small and medium-sized enterprises (UMKM) who had previously collaborated with the influencer were included to provide additional perspectives regarding the commercial outcomes of influencer endorsements. The inclusion of these three groups of informants enabled the study to examine authenticity as a relational phenomenon produced through the interaction of multiple actors rather than as an individual attribute of influencers alone.

Perception of Audience toward Authenticity of Influencer Content

The findings indicate that audiences interpret authenticity primarily through the perceived honesty and naturalness of influencer communication. Interviews revealed that followers tend to evaluate whether endorsement messages are delivered sincerely or appear exaggerated for promotional purposes. Participants frequently emphasized that authentic influencer content is characterized by honest expression, straightforward language, and the absence of exaggerated claims about product quality. As expressed by one informant, authentic influencer content is perceived as content that is communicated “honestly and purely, without exaggeration.” (Sagita, 2026)

This perception suggests that authenticity is strongly associated with communication style rather than merely with the presence of sponsorship. Many informants stated that they were able to recognize promotional content but still considered it authentic if the influencer presented the product in a natural manner and appeared to share genuine personal experiences. Influencers themselves also acknowledged that maintaining a natural communication style is essential in sustaining perceptions of authenticity. Rather than relying on scripted promotional strategies, the influencer explained that endorsement content is often presented through personal storytelling and everyday experiences to maintain a sense of sincerity.

These findings resonate with previous research suggesting that authenticity in influencer marketing is constructed through narrative communication and relatable storytelling (Atiq et al., 2022). By integrating promotional messages into everyday narratives, influencers create the impression that product recommendations emerge from personal experience rather than purely commercial intentions. The results also support arguments that authenticity functions as a relational perception shaped by audience interpretation rather than as a fixed attribute of influencers (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

Audience Trust toward Influencers

Another important theme emerging from the analysis concerns the relationship between perceived authenticity and audience trust. Participants consistently reported that their trust in an influencer depends largely on whether they perceive the influencer to be honest in reviewing products. When endorsement messages are perceived as transparent and consistent with the influencer's persona, audiences tend to maintain or even strengthen their trust in the influencer. Conversely, when promotional messages appear exaggerated or inconsistent with the influencer's usual content style, trust tends to decline.

One audience informant explained that awareness of sponsorship does not automatically reduce trust, provided that the promotional message is communicated convincingly and transparently. As one participant noted, knowing that a post contains promotion is considered acceptable if the influencer delivers the message in a believable manner. This statement illustrates that audiences do not necessarily reject sponsored content but instead evaluate the sincerity of the communication surrounding the promotion.

The influencer also acknowledged that maintaining audience trust requires careful selection of endorsement partnerships. During interviews, the influencer stated that she avoids promoting products that she does not personally like or use because doing so could damage the credibility she has built with her followers. This strategy demonstrates the importance of maintaining alignment between influencer identity and the products being promoted. Previous studies have similarly highlighted that credibility and perceived sincerity play critical roles in determining the effectiveness of influencer endorsements (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Hughes et al., 2019).

These findings further support theoretical arguments derived from the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which suggests that credibility cues such as authenticity and trustworthiness influence how audiences process persuasive messages (Kim et al., 2021). When audiences perceive an influencer as authentic, they are more likely to engage cognitively with the message and evaluate product recommendations seriously. In contrast, when authenticity is questioned, audiences may dismiss promotional content as purely commercial communication.

Influence of Influencer Content on Audience Purchase Intention

The analysis also reveals that influencer content can influence audience purchase intentions. Several audience informants reported that they became interested in trying certain products after viewing endorsement posts created by the influencer. Review-style content that includes personal experiences and detailed explanations of product features appears to be especially persuasive. One informant stated that after seeing the influencer promote a product, they felt curious and motivated to try it themselves. (Sagita, 2026)

This finding suggests that authenticity operates as an important mediator between influencer communication and consumer decision-making. When audiences perceive endorsement messages as genuine reflections of personal experience, they are more inclined to view the recommendations as credible sources of information. Consequently, the likelihood of purchasing or trying the promoted product increases.

However, the study also found that audience responses are not always uniformly positive. Some informants reported situations in which the product they purchased did not fully match the expectations created by influencer content. For instance, one informant described trying a culinary product after seeing it promoted by the influencer but later finding that the taste differed from what had been suggested in the promotional content. Despite this discrepancy, participants generally did not attribute the experience solely to influencer dishonesty. Instead, they acknowledged individual experiences with products can vary and that differences in product quality or timing may affect perceptions.

These findings highlight that audience interpretations of authenticity remain flexible and contextual. Even when discrepancies occur between promotional claims and personal experiences, audiences may still maintain trust in influencers if they perceive that the endorsement was originally communicated in good faith. This observation reinforces the notion that authenticity is a negotiated perception shaped by ongoing interaction rather than by a single promotional event.

Role of Influencers in Promoting Small and Medium Enterprises

Beyond influencing consumer decisions, the study also reveals the broader economic role of influencers in supporting small and medium enterprises (UMKM). Interviews with business owners indicated that collaboration with influencers can significantly increase product visibility and customer engagement. After their products were promoted through influencer content, several business owners reported noticeable increases in visitor numbers and online interaction.

One business owner explained that after the influencer published promotional content, the business experienced higher levels of activity both in physical store visits and in online engagement metrics such as Instagram views and comments. (Sagita, 2026) In addition, comment sections often became spaces where audiences asked about product locations, tagged friends, or expressed interest in visiting the promoted establishment.

These observations illustrate how influenced communication can function as an effective promotional channel for small businesses. Influencers not only introduce products to broader audiences but also facilitate interactive engagement between potential customers and business owners. This interactive dimension distinguishes influencer marketing from traditional advertising because audiences can directly participate in discussions about the promoted products.

The findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that social media influencers can play an important role in shaping consumer awareness and brand engagement (Vrontis et al., 2021). In the context of small businesses, such promotional exposure can be particularly valuable because many small enterprises lack the resources for large-scale advertising campaigns.

Research Relationship Model

The thematic analysis ultimately revealed a conceptual relationship among four major themes identified in the data: authenticity of influencer content, audience trust, purchase intention, and business impact. These relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

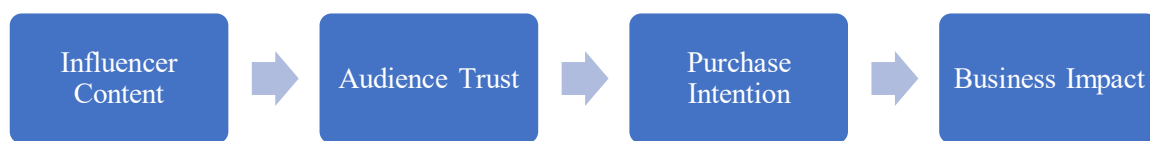


Figure 1. Conceptual Relationship Model of Influencer Endorsement Effects Authenticity of

The model suggests that authenticity functions as the foundational element in the influencer–audience relationship. When audiences perceive influencer content as honest, natural, and reflective of genuine personal experience, they develop trust toward the influencer. This trust then influences how audiences interpret product recommendations and shapes their willingness to try or purchase the promoted products. Increased consumer interest subsequently contributes to broader business outcomes, including higher visitor numbers and increased online engagement for promoted businesses.

Overall, the findings highlight that authenticity operates as a central mechanism in influencer endorsement communication. Rather than functioning merely as an individual personality trait, authenticity emerges through communicative practices, relational interaction, and audience interpretation. By presenting endorsement messages through natural storytelling and maintaining alignment between personal identity and commercial partnerships, influencers can sustain trust and influence consumer behavior while simultaneously supporting the growth of small businesses in the digital economy.

3.2 Create a Discussion

Authenticity of Influencer Content and Audience Interpretation

The findings of this study highlight that audiences primarily interpret authenticity in influencer endorsement through the perceived honesty and naturalness of communication. Participants consistently described authentic influencer content as content that appears sincere, straightforward, and not exaggerated. This interpretation aligns with broader scholarly discussions suggesting that authenticity in digital communication is constructed through communicative cues rather than existing as an inherent personal trait (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022). In the context of Instagram endorsement, authenticity emerges from how influencers narrate their experiences, present their reactions to products, and integrate promotional messages into everyday storytelling.

The results reinforce the argument that narrative communication plays a central role in constructing authenticity within influencer marketing. Narrative Theory suggests that individuals understand social reality through stories that provide coherence and emotional meaning (Dyner, 2024). Influencers who frame product endorsements through personal experiences, lifestyle narratives, and informal storytelling are therefore able to create a sense of intimacy with

their audiences. Such narratives make promotional content appear embedded within the influencer's daily rather than presented as purely commercial advertising. This narrative strategy has been widely recognized as an effective mechanism for enhancing relatability and engagement in influencer communication (Atiq et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the emphasis on natural communication style observed in the findings reflects the relational nature of authenticity in digital environments. Influencers who appear overly scripted or exaggerated risk being perceived as commercial actors rather than relatable individuals. This observation supports previous research indicating that authenticity is closely tied to the perceived alignment between an influencer's online persona and their communication style (Lee & Eastin, 2021). When audiences perceive such alignment, influencer content becomes more credible and persuasive.

Authenticity and the Development of Audience Trust

Another important insight emerging from this study concerns the relationship between authenticity and audience trust. The findings demonstrate that audiences tend to trust influencers when they perceive their product reviews as honest reflections of personal experience. Trust is therefore not derived solely from influencer popularity or follower count but from the perceived sincerity of communication. This observation is consistent with prior studies indicating that credibility and trustworthiness are central determinants of influencer effectiveness in digital marketing environments (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Hughes et al., 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, this relationship can be understood through the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). According to ELM, audiences process persuasive messages through either a central route or a peripheral route depending on their level of motivation and cognitive engagement (Kim et al., 2021). When influencers are perceived as authentic and trustworthy, audiences are more likely to process endorsement messages through the central route, leading to deeper cognitive engagement with the information presented. This process increases the likelihood that audiences will evaluate the product recommendation seriously and potentially adjust their attitudes toward the promoted product.

In contrast, when authenticity is questioned, audiences may rely on peripheral cues such as influencer popularity, visual attractiveness, or brand reputation rather than carefully evaluating the message itself. This dynamic explains why influencers in this study emphasized the importance of promoting only products they genuinely like or have personally tried. By maintaining consistency between personal identity and promotional content, influencers can sustain audience trust and protect their credibility.

Authenticity, Purchase Intention, and Consumer Decision-Making

The findings further demonstrate that perceived authenticity influences audience purchase intention. Several participants reported that they became interested in trying products after watching influencer endorsement content, particularly when the influencer shared detailed personal experiences with the product. This suggests that authenticity functions as a key mechanism linking influencer communication to consumer behavior.

Previous studies have similarly identified authenticity as a critical factor shaping consumer responses to influencer marketing. Research indicates that when audiences perceive influencers as genuine and trustworthy, they are more likely to accept product recommendations and develop positive attitudes toward the endorsed brand (Pereira et al., 2023). Authentic endorsement messages are therefore more effective because they resemble peer recommendations rather than traditional advertising.

However, the study also reveals that audience experiences do not always align perfectly with influencer claims. Some participants reported instances in which products they tried did not fully meet the expectations created by influencer promotion. Interestingly, these discrepancies did not automatically lead to a loss of trust in the influencer. Instead, audiences often interpreted such differences as normal variations in personal experience rather than as deliberate deception.

This finding highlights the interpretative flexibility of audiences in digital environments. Rather than evaluating authenticity based on a single promotional interaction, audiences appear to assess influence credibility over time through repeated exposure to content. This pattern supports the view that authenticity is not a fixed quality but an evolving perception shaped by ongoing interaction between influencers and their followers (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Influencers as Intermediaries in the Promotion of Small Businesses

Beyond influencing individual consumer decisions, the findings also reveal the broader economic role of influencers in supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. Business owners interviewed in this study reported noticeable increases in customer visits and social media engagement after their products were promoted by influencers. This demonstrates how influenced communication can function as an effective promotional mechanism within the digital economy.

The ability of influencers to generate visibility for small businesses reflects the relational structure of influencer marketing. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer endorsements often occur within interactive digital communities where audiences can immediately respond through comments, likes, or direct messages. This interactive environment allows promotional messages to spread organically through social interaction and peer discussion.

Scholars have noted that influencers serve as intermediaries who bridge the gap between brands and consumers within digital communication networks (Vrontis et al., 2021). In this role, influencers do not simply transmit marketing messages but reinterpret brand narratives in ways that resonate with their audiences. This process transforms promotional communication into a form of socially embedded recommendation, which can be particularly valuable for small businesses with limited marketing resources.

Negotiating Authenticity in Influencer Endorsement Practices

Taken together, the findings suggest that authenticity in influencer endorsement is best understood as a negotiated communicative process. Influencers must continuously balance personal identity, audience expectations, and commercial partnerships. This balancing process reflects the broader dynamics of self-branding and identity commodification within influencer culture.

The concept of the influencer as a "human brand" highlights how personal identity becomes a central asset in digital marketing (Nejadghanbar & Shaahdadi, 2025). Influencers are therefore required to carefully manage the presentation of their personal lives while simultaneously maintaining commercial partnerships with brands. This dual role creates a structural tension between authenticity and commercialization.

Symbolic Interactionism provides a useful framework for understanding how this tension is negotiated in everyday communication. From this perspective, meaning is constructed through ongoing interaction between social actors. In the context of social media, interactions such as comments, reactions, and audience feedback contribute to shaping collective interpretations of authenticity. Influencers adjust their communication strategies based on these responses, while audiences continuously reassess the sincerity of influence endorsements.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that authenticity operates as a relational and dynamic construct within influencer marketing. Authenticity is not simply a personal characteristic possessed by influencers but a communicative achievement that emerges through narrative strategies, relational interaction, and audience interpretation. By presenting endorsement messages through natural storytelling and maintaining alignment between personal identity and promotional partnerships, influencers can sustain audience trust while simultaneously contributing to the visibility and growth of small businesses in the digital marketplace.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how authenticity is constructed and interpreted in Instagram influence endorsement practices and how these perceptions influence audience trust, purchase intention, and the promotion of small businesses. The findings demonstrate that authenticity is primarily perceived through honest communication, natural storytelling, and consistency between the influencer's personal identity and the products being promoted. Rather than being understood as an inherent personal trait, authenticity emerges as a relational construct shaped through ongoing interaction between influencers, audiences, and commercial partners.

The study shows that authentic communication strengthens audience trust, which subsequently increases the likelihood that followers will consider or try the endorsed products. Trust is built when influencers present promotional content as part of genuine personal experiences and maintain transparency in their communication. However, the findings also indicate that audiences remain aware of the commercial nature of influencer endorsements and actively evaluate the sincerity of promotional messages.

Another important implication concerns the broader economic role of influencers in supporting small and medium enterprises. Influencer endorsements can significantly increase product visibility, customer engagement, and consumer interest, making influencer marketing an effective promotional channel for small businesses with limited advertising resources.

Overall, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in digital communication and influences studies by conceptualizing authenticity as a negotiated communicative process rather than a fixed attribute. Future research may explore how authenticity is negotiated across different social media platforms, cultural contexts, and influence categories to further understand the evolving dynamics of digital endorsement practices.

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