



Creating Authenticity Online: How Transparency in Brand Collaborations Shapes Influencer Credibility

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ABSTRACT

Consumers increasingly engage with social media influencers whose online personas align with their self-construal and in-group identities. Influencer marketing has therefore become a prominent promotional strategy that relies on perceived authenticity and emotional connection. However, the growing prevalence of transparent brand collaborations has raised questions regarding their impact on influencer credibility. This study explored how explicit disclosure of influencer–brand partnerships shapes perceptions of authenticity and follower engagement. Drawing on interview data from 15 active Instagram users, the study examined participants’ interpretations of sponsored content and their perceptions of transparency practices. The findings revealed that overt transparency regarding financial partnerships often weakened perceived influencer authenticity and reduced intentions to engage with or continue following influencers. Participants described sponsorship disclosures as disrupting the perceived sincerity of influencer content and reframing relationships as transactional. By integrating perspectives from influencer marketing and the commercialization of intimate digital spaces, this study provides qualitative insight into how transparency requirements reshape influencer–follower dynamics.

KEYWORDS: influencer marketing, authenticity, social media, sponsored posts

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have revolutionized the ways individuals access information, communicate, and interact with brands. Rather than relying solely on traditional retail websites, consumers now turn to platforms like Instagram and Facebook as primary venues for product discovery, comparison, and engagement with commercial content seamlessly integrated into everyday social interactions. These digital spaces increasingly blur the lines between personal expression and commercial exchange.

In this evolving digital landscape, social media influencers have become pivotal intermediaries connecting brands with consumers. Influencers craft online personas that reflect relatable lifestyles, values, and everyday experiences, fostering emotional connections with followers through perceived similarity and trust. Consequently, influencer marketing has grown into a critical promotional strategy for brands aiming to engage audiences through content that feels authentic and organic.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is closely linked to perceptions of authenticity. Influencers are valued for presenting content that appears sincere, spontaneous, and consistent with their personal identity. Authenticity fosters credibility, emotional attachment, and sustained engagement, positioning influencers as trusted reference figures rather than conventional advertisers.

However, the rapid expansion of influencer–brand collaborations has raised concerns regarding transparency and commercialization. Regulatory bodies have introduced disclosure requirements to ensure that sponsored content is clearly identified. While such measures aim to protect consumers, they also make the financial motivations behind influencer content more visible. This visibility may challenge the perception of authenticity that underpins influencer–follower relationships, particularly in social

media environments characterized by perceived intimacy and emotional closeness.

Despite growing scholarly attention to influencer marketing, limited research has examined how transparency in brand collaborations shapes perceptions of influencer authenticity from the perspective of social media users. Existing studies have largely focused on disclosure effectiveness or advertising outcomes, offering less insight into how followers interpret transparency within relational contexts.

This study addresses this gap by adopting an exploratory qualitative approach to examine how social media users make sense of influencer authenticity in the context of brand collaborations. Rather than testing predefined causal relationships, the study seeks to capture participants’ interpretations, expectations, and emotional responses to explicit sponsorship disclosures. Accordingly, the analysis was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do social media users perceive influencer authenticity in the presence of brand collaborations?

RQ2: How does explicit disclosure of influencer–brand partnerships shape perceptions of influencer credibility and likeability?

RQ3: How do followers interpret the degree of transparency and frequency of sponsored posts in relation to influencer authenticity and engagement intentions?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reference Groups, Identity, and Consumption

Consumption is not solely driven by functional needs but also plays a central role in the construction and expression of self-identity. Individuals actively use consumption practices to define their self-concepts, signal group membership, and differentiate themselves from out-groups (Belk, 1988). This process is reinforced through symbolic meanings attached to brands, which allow



consumers to communicate values, lifestyles, and social affiliations (McCracken, 1988).

Prior research demonstrates that these meanings are transferred to brands through social mechanisms such as word-of-mouth communication, cultural narratives, media representations, celebrities, and reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Reference groups, in particular, serve as powerful sources of influence in shaping consumption choices and brand associations (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consumers tend to exhibit congruence between their group affiliations and product usage, incorporating symbolic value from groups they perceive as relevant to their identity (Moschis, 1985).

This symbolic transfer process reinforces in-group identification while encouraging avoidance of out-group symbols, thereby strengthening emotional attachment to brands that align with one's perceived social identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Celebrity endorsements have traditionally functioned as one mechanism through which brands leverage reference group influence. By associating a brand with a well-known figure, firms aim to enhance brand awareness and transfer desirable attributes from the celebrity to the product (Erdogan, 1999). Empirical research has consistently shown that celebrity-brand congruence enhances advertising effectiveness and fosters positive brand attitudes (Misra & Beatty, 1990; Belk, 2010).

2.2 Influencer Marketing and Sponsored Content

In the digital environment, the influence of reference groups has increasingly shifted toward social media influencers. Influencers are individuals who possess sizable online followings and collaborate with brands by integrating branded content into their social media presence (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often present themselves as ordinary individuals, which enhances perceived relatability and trustworthiness.

From a brand perspective, influencer marketing enables firms to embed products within everyday contexts, making brand messages appear more authentic and accessible to consumers. Influencers thus operate as intermediaries between brands and consumers, facilitating targeted engagement and fostering emotional connections with specific audiences (Kumar et al., 2013). Their perceived candidness and personal disclosure further enhance message credibility, often generating higher engagement than traditional advertising formats (Audrezet et al., 2018).

Previous studies suggest that influencer-generated content is generally perceived as more authentic than paid advertisements, resulting in lower consumer resistance to persuasive messages (Abidin, 2016; De Vries et al., 2012). However, regulatory changes have altered the dynamics of influencer marketing. In 2016, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission mandated that influencers disclose sponsored content using explicit indicators such as hashtags or sponsorship labels (Grafström, 2018). While intended to increase transparency, these disclosures may disrupt the perceived naturalness of influencer content and challenge audience perceptions of authenticity.

As influencer posts increasingly resemble native advertisements, followers may become more aware of the commercial intent behind seemingly personal content. While some scholars describe such practices as stealth marketing—where

consumers are unaware of persuasive attempts (Roy & Chattopadhyay, 2010) the growing visibility of sponsorship disclosures raises questions about whether and how authenticity is affected by brand collaborations.

2.3 Authenticity and the Commercialization of Intimate Spheres

Authenticity is commonly associated with being genuine, sincere, and true to oneself (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Psychological research conceptualizes authenticity as a multidimensional construct encompassing self-awareness, congruence between internal states and external behavior, and responsiveness to social contexts (Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Wood et al., 2008). While authenticity is often understood as an individual trait, it also operates within social and commercial environments.

Recent studies have extended authenticity research to organizational and brand contexts, demonstrating that perceptions of authenticity influence evaluations of credibility, legitimacy, and value (Kovacs, Carroll, & Lehman, 2017). Importantly, authenticity judgments are shaped not only by subjective interpretation but also by socially constructed consensus within a given context.

In social media environments, this consensus is often reinforced through visible metrics such as follower counts and engagement levels. Influencers connect products to lifestyles and experiences in ways that encourage users to perceive alignment between their own values and the influencer's self-presentation (De Vries et al., 2012). Followers derive hedonic and symbolic value from these relationships, perceiving influencers as reflections of their own aspirations and identities (Beverland, 2008).

However, the commercialization of these intimate digital relationships introduces tension. Research suggests that excessive or poorly aligned brand collaborations may erode perceived authenticity and undermine trust (Grafström et al., 2018). While some level of commercial activity is expected, overt promotional intent may shift audience perceptions from relational to transactional, diminishing credibility.

Economic sociology further highlights the complexity of monetizing intimate spheres. Traditional perspectives argue that introducing monetary exchange into intimate relationships can corrupt social meaning and diminish authenticity (Anderson, 1993; Satz, 2010). In contrast, Zelizer (2005) contends that economic and intimate relations can coexist, provided boundaries are carefully managed. Applied to influencer marketing, this suggests that authenticity loss is not inevitable but contingent upon how commercial relationships are framed and communicated.

Empirical findings remain mixed. Some studies indicate that sponsorship disclosure does not necessarily harm brand attitudes, as consumers recognize firms' persuasive intentions (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). Others argue that consumers hold higher expectations of sincerity in social media contexts, where emotional trust and perceived intimacy are central (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Consequently, the impact of brand collaborations on influencer authenticity and consumer responses remains underexplored.

Despite growing interest in influencer marketing, there is limited empirical evidence on how brand collaborations affect perceptions of influencer authenticity. Existing studies provide conflicting insights regarding sponsorship disclosure, promotional

frequency, and audience trust. This study addresses this gap by examining whether and under what conditions brand collaborations on social media damage influencer authenticity, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of authenticity in digitally mediated consumption contexts.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how transparency in influencer-brand collaborations shapes perceptions of influencer authenticity and follower engagement. A qualitative approach was selected because the research question concerns subjective interpretations, emotional responses, and relational dynamics that are not easily captured through standardized quantitative measures. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit in-depth insights into participants' perceptions and experiences with influencer marketing on social media.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 social media users who actively followed influencers on Instagram. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that all respondents had prior exposure to influencer-generated content and sponsored posts. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years old and regularly using Instagram.

Interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a conversational format that allowed participants to freely express their views while ensuring that core topics relevant to the research question were consistently addressed. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

3.2 Interview Protocol

The interview guide was designed to explore participants' perceptions of influencer authenticity, their awareness of brand collaborations, and their reactions to transparency and sponsorship disclosures. Key topics included participants' reasons for following influencers, expectations of authenticity, perceptions of sponsored content, and perceived changes in engagement when financial partnerships were explicitly disclosed.

While the interview guide provided a common structure, follow-up questions were adapted based on participants' responses to encourage elaboration and clarification. This flexible structure allowed for the emergence of unanticipated insights while maintaining comparability across interviews. As a result, several thematic areas, including participants' definitions of social media influencers, emerged; perceptions of influencer motivation and sincerity, interpretations of authenticity and self-congruence, expectations regarding transparency in brand collaborations, emotional connection and engagement, and factors influencing following and unfollowing decisions.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively to capture recurring

ideas and patterns related to authenticity, transparency, and engagement. These codes were then reviewed and refined through an iterative process to identify broader themes.

Across the interviews, a dominant theme emerged indicating that explicit transparency regarding brand collaborations negatively affected perceived influencer authenticity and participants' intentions to engage with or continue following influencers. This theme was consistently articulated across respondents, although the intensity of reactions varied. The analysis focused on identifying shared meanings and recurring interpretations rather than quantifying responses.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis. Consistency in data collection was ensured through the use of a semi-structured interview guide. Analytical rigor was supported by iterative coding and careful comparison of themes across interviews. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate key themes while preserving participants' anonymity.

The study followed standard ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Participation was voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected or reported.

4. Results

4.1 Qualitative Findings

The interview analysis revealed a dominant theme across participants' accounts: explicit transparency in influencer-brand collaborations was perceived to negatively affect influencer authenticity and follower engagement intentions. While participants demonstrated general awareness that influencers collaborate with brands, overt disclosure of financial relationships altered how influencer content was interpreted.

Participants described influencer authenticity as being rooted in sincerity, spontaneity, and perceived alignment between the influencer's lifestyle and promoted products. When sponsorship disclosures were made explicit, participants reported a shift in perception from personal expression to promotional intent. Sponsored posts were frequently described as less natural and more strategic, which heightened skepticism toward influencer motivations.

This perceptual shift also influenced engagement intentions. Participants reported being less inclined to interact with sponsored content or to continue following influencers who frequently disclosed brand partnerships. Repeated exposure to overt sponsorship disclosures prompted some participants to reassess the influencer's credibility and emotional sincerity, weakening relational attachment over time.

Although a minority of participants acknowledged the necessity of transparency and accepted sponsorship disclosures as inevitable, they nonetheless differentiated between occasional collaborations and frequent, highly visible partnerships. Overall, transparency was not viewed as inherently problematic, but as a factor that could disrupt the relational foundation of influencer-follower interactions when overly emphasized.

Table 1 Transparency as a Disruptor of Influencer Authenticity



Theme	Description	Illustrative Participant Insights
Transparency as a Disruptor of Authenticity	Explicit disclosure of influencer–brand collaborations reframed content as commercial promotion, weakening perceived authenticity and engagement intentions.	Participants described sponsored posts as “less sincere,” “more strategic,” and “harder to trust,” particularly when disclosures were frequent or prominently displayed.

Note: Participant quotations were paraphrased to preserve anonymity

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how transparency in influencer–brand collaborations shapes perceptions of influencer authenticity and follower engagement within social media environments. Guided by qualitative interviews with active Instagram users, the findings offer insight into how audiences interpret explicit sponsorship disclosures and how these interpretations influence relational dynamics between influencers and followers.

Across interviews, participants consistently described influencer authenticity as being grounded in sincerity, spontaneity, and perceived alignment between an influencer’s lifestyle and promoted content. Transparency regarding brand collaborations did not go unnoticed; rather, explicit disclosures altered how influencer content was evaluated. Participants frequently described a shift in perception from personal expression to commercial communication once financial relationships were foregrounded.

The findings suggest that overt transparency may reframe influencer–follower relationships by increasing awareness of strategic intent. When sponsorship disclosures were highly visible or frequent, participants reported heightened skepticism and reduced emotional connection. These responses indicate that followers actively interpret disclosure cues as signals of motivation, using them to assess whether influencer content remains trustworthy or has become primarily transactional.

Importantly, participants did not reject brand collaborations outright. Many acknowledged that monetization is an expected aspect of influencer activity. However, distinctions were made between occasional partnerships and sustained patterns of overtly sponsored content. Transparency was therefore not perceived as inherently negative, but as a factor whose impact depended on degree, frequency, and contextual fit with the influencer’s established identity.

These findings contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the commercialization of intimate digital spaces. Social media platforms encourage relational closeness and personal disclosure, creating expectations of authenticity that differ from those associated with traditional advertising. When commercial motives are made explicit, they may disrupt these expectations by reshaping how relational cues are interpreted. In this sense, transparency operates not only as an ethical or regulatory mechanism but also as a relational signal that influences trust and engagement.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the importance of managing transparency practices carefully. While disclosure is necessary and valued, excessive emphasis on sponsorships may undermine the relational credibility that sustains influencer engagement. Influencers and brands may therefore benefit from integrating sponsored content in ways that preserve narrative coherence and limit perceived over-commercialization.

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged.

The qualitative design and sample size restrict generalizability, and findings reflect subjective perceptions rather than observed behavioral outcomes. Nevertheless, the exploratory approach provides depth and contextual understanding that can inform future research. Subsequent studies may examine how different disclosure formats, influencer categories, or platform norms moderate authenticity perceptions, or employ mixed-method designs to extend these insights.

Overall, the study advances understanding of influencer authenticity by foregrounding follower interpretations of transparency. By examining how sponsorship disclosures are experienced within perceived intimate relationships, the findings offer a nuanced perspective on the challenges of authenticity management in contemporary influencer marketing.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the implications of transparency in influencer–brand collaborations for perceived influencer authenticity and follower engagement in social media contexts. By focusing on how overt disclosure of commercial relationships reshapes audience perceptions, the research contributes to a clearer understanding of the relational mechanisms underlying influencer marketing effectiveness.

The findings highlight authenticity as a central but fragile resource within influencer–follower relationships. While transparency serves important regulatory and ethical functions, making financial motives highly visible may alter how influencer content is interpreted, particularly in environments characterized by perceived intimacy and emotional proximity. These dynamics suggest that influencer marketing differs fundamentally from traditional advertising, as its effectiveness relies on relational credibility rather than purely informational persuasion.

This research extends existing work by integrating insights from studies of digital marketing and the commercialization of intimate social spaces. In doing so, it emphasizes the need to consider not only consumer protection and promotional effectiveness but also the social context in which commercial messages are embedded.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of carefully managing transparency and monetization practices in influencer marketing. As digital platforms continue to evolve and regulatory oversight increases, understanding how commercial disclosure affects authenticity and engagement will remain essential for both researchers and practitioners.

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