

INFLUENCER AUTHENTICITY

ABSTRACT

Influencer authenticity, which distinguishes influencer marketing from traditional marketing tactics such as TV ads, company websites, and pop-up ads, remains an important concept, yet lacks formal conceptualization. This research uses a mixed-methods approach to conceptualize Influencer Authenticity (IA), identify its dimensions, develop its measurement scales, and investigate its impacts on customer engagement. Using a rigorous literature review and three qualitative studies, IA is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct containing passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency (the PISCOT framework). Four quantitative studies develop scale items to measure the components of IA reliably. In the final field study, we show that IA positively affects customer engagement by creating higher consumer trust.

STATEMENT OF KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

This research has several contributions. First, it contributes to the authenticity literature by identifying a new type. Prior research on authenticity primarily focused on three areas, i.e., brand authenticity, advertising authenticity, and celebrity authenticity. Although sharing the basic of authenticity, IA is different from these three types of authenticity. First, IA is distinguished from brand authenticity because the relationship between brands and consumers tends to be more exchange-based than communal-based (Aggarwal 2004). Second, IA differs from advertising authenticity by emphasizing positive relationship behaviors rather than creating authentic content, such as showing realistic scenes (Becker et al. 2019). Lastly, IA is different from celebrity authenticity as influencers who are average people like us and become successful by self-branding are distinctive from those traditional celebrities who need

to be institutionally certified or professionally outstanding (McQuarrie et al. 2013).

Second, IA adds to the online influencer marketing (OIM) literature by introducing a new influencer characteristic that shapes customer engagement. Previously, OIM research has examined different influencer characteristics including follower size (Gong et al. 2017; Hughes et al. 2019; Kupfer et al. 2018), the number of followees (Valsesia et al. 2020), overall posting frequency (Stephen et al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2017;), and source credibility (Lou and Yuan 2019). Our focus on influencer authenticity sheds light on an overlooked, yet important, factor that can inform influencer selection decisions and enhance customer engagement.

Third, we broaden the understanding of IA as a multi-dimensional construct by identifying its six dimensions (the PISCOT framework) and developing reliable measurement scales. By measuring and assessing influencer authenticity using these measurement scales, marketers are empowered to identify, evaluate, and select influencers who can contribute to higher customer engagement and thus fulfill the clear objective of most brands and firms.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed tremendous growth in influencer marketing as a new type of marketing thought and practice. It uses the power of online influencers or those who have already built a sizable network of followers on social media (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017), to facilitate, enhance, or transform the engagement between brands and consumers and positively influence consumers' brand-related attitudes and behavior.

However, given the uniqueness of these particular influencers – they are both independent and incentivized by the firm – and their simultaneously social and commercial intents, the

academic literature and the business world have yet to understand the fundamentals of this phenomenon and how it maps with or even pushes the boundary of conventional marketing. In particular, *Influencer Authenticity (IA)*, a consumer-perceived fundamental characteristic of influencers, and the very logic that governs social media communities (e.g., De Veirman et al. 2017; McQuarrie, Miller, and Philips 2013), remains as a concept that lacks formal construction. Therefore, this paper (1) formally constructs the measurement scale of IA, (2) establishes its nomological network, and (3) empirically tests its effects on customer engagement and its underlying mechanism using field data.

Authenticity commonly refers to the genuineness, reality, or truth of something (Kennick 1985). Previous research on authenticity mainly falls into three areas: brand authenticity, advertising authenticity, and celebrity authenticity. While IA shares the conceptual root of authenticity with these related concepts, it is different in major ways. First, IA is distinguishable from *brand authenticity*, a subjective evaluation by consumers that the brand is faithful, true to its consumers, motivated by caring and responsibility and passion, and able to support consumers' link with personal identity (Morhart et al. 2015). As brands are fundamentally driven by commercial motives, consumers' relationships with those brands are more exchange-based and less communal than are the relationship with influencers (Aggarwal 2004). Brands manage their authenticity by providing clear cues, such as brand-congruent employee behavior, communication that emphasizes the brand's roots, virtues, and longitudinal consistency (Beverland 2005; Bruhn et al. 2012; Napoli et al. 2014). In contrast, influencers manage their authenticity and influence followers by developing an emotional bond with those followers and fulfilling their needs or desire for ideality and relatedness (Ki et al. 2020).

Second, IA differs from *advertising authenticity*, which refers to genuine, real, and true advertisement (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019). Unlike IA which centers on positive relationship behaviors and outcomes (Brunell et al. 2010), authentic ads preserve brand essence, show realistic plots, and connect with their consumers' moral values (Becker et al. 2019; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008), but without evoking any relational benefits between advertiser and consumers.

Perhaps, the closest concept to IA is *celebrity authenticity* because both target the evaluation of human beings. An online influencer accumulates fame and influence through successful self-branding, sharing self-generated content, and maintaining a network of followers on social media (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017). This process is in sharp contrast to traditional celebrity endorsers, who are known by the public for their professional achievements (Friedman and Friedman 1979). Prior research suggests that endorsement effectiveness arises from a celebrity's ability to achieve rare and outstanding professional status, maintain consistent and moral behavior, and hence, fulfill consumers' wishful identification (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Still, IA does not require the influencer to be professionally outstanding or institutionally certified, but it does expect the influencer to disclose its true self through content sharing and engaging with followers in a much deeper way than it does with celebrities.

As an important and unique concept, IA has never been formally constructed. To fill this research gap, following the recent literature on construct development, we use the grounded-theory approach to conceptualize IA, identify its dimensions, and explore its impacts on customer engagement.

CONCEPTUALIZING INFLUENCER AUTHENTICITY

We followed the approach used by previous scale development papers (e.g., Kuehnl et al. 2019, Warren et al. 2019, Batra et al. 2012, Spiggle et al. 2012). Thus, we conducted a rigorous literature review of authenticity, held four focus groups, and assigned one writing task in a marketing class in turn.

Literature Review. We looked through the literature of authenticity in several domains, including marketing, advertising, communication, management, and celebrity studies. We summarized the dimensions of each specific type of authenticity along with its definitions and adopted those that fit our context. This procedure resulted in the identification of four dimensions, namely, passion, symbolism, consistency, and originality.

Focus Groups. We then engaged with 4 focus groups, each lasting for an hour with 8 undergraduate students from Hong Kong. Before each session, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study as well as its procedure. Participants then described in their own words what influencer authenticity meant to them with the guidance of the moderator who attempted to engage with all the participants. To this procedure, we added two more dimensions of interactivity and transparency, resulting in six dimensions of influencer authenticity.

Essay Writing. Following Warren et al. (2019), we asked 50 Hong Kong undergraduate students to write an essay as part of an extra credit assignment for a marketing class. They needed to identify an authentic influencer and an inauthentic influencer and explain their reasons. All essays were written in English and ranged from one to two pages in length. We looked through the essays carefully and assigned each sentence to one of the six dimensions

identified already. We found there was no new dimension, thereby confirming our designated six dimensions of IA.

The Six Dimensions of Influencer Authenticity

Passion. Trilling (1972) defines authenticity as a display of the hidden inner life, complete with passions and anguish. Thus, passion has been considered an integral component of authenticity. For example, an authentic artist is intrinsically motivated by showing his/her passion and commitment to the craft rather than being extrinsically motivated by external rewards (Beverland et al. 2008; Moulard et al. 2014). Similarly, authentic influencers talk about specific topics because they have a passion for it or a genuine interest in it (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Consistent with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000), consumers consider passionate influencers authentic because they engage in content production and social media activities out of their own intrinsic motivations more than by commercial goals. Our respondents also considered Slime an inauthentic influencer because he is “always engaged in commercial motives”, while others said inauthentic influencers “have many sponsored advertisements” and are thus “too commercial”.

Interactivity. Influencers, unlike celebrities who are too busy to communicate with their fans, can interact with their followers in real-time by replying to their comments or directly sending them messages. Walumbwa et al. (2008) demonstrated that authentic leaders seek feedback to improve the interactions with their employees. Marwick and Boyd (2011) indicated celebrities who dialogue and engage with fans are seen as more authentic than those who just ‘broadcast’ information. Indeed, what distinguishes influencer marketing from other firm-directed one-way communication is that the audience feels appreciated and listened to (Quitly 2019), which makes the influencers look authentic and “real”. The respondents

pointed out that an authentic influencer “values his or her followers” and “treats followers as friends”.

Symbolism. Authentic brands reflect values that consumers care about and help the consumers construct their identity (Morhart et al. 2015). Similarly, consumers consider the influencer as authentic when the influencers symbolize an identity, or there is a connection between the influencer and the personal self. In the world of social media, influencers with symbolism can serve as a resource for identity construction because followers can show what kind of people they are by following an influencer or sharing his/her posts. Followers often become loyal to their favorite influencers as they self-identify as a “fan” and construct part of their identity by having it revolve around the cultural meanings that are associated with the influencer (Escalas 2017). The symbolic meaning embedded in these associations is powerful as it leads the followers to resonate with the influencer’s messages and perceive them as more authentic. For example, the respondents evaluated Smiling Boris as inauthentic because “his videos are meaningless.....not useful”, and he “posts stuff without value”.

Consistency. Attribution theory suggests that watching one’s stable behavior leads to the attribution of such behavior to that person rather than accepting external pressures (Kelley 1973), thereby resulting in higher authenticity. Stability is considered as showing commitment to one’s own calling and thus being true-to-oneself (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021). For example, an authentic brand exhibits consistency in its style, remains uniform in its design and standards (Spiggle et al. 2012), and continually corresponds to its ideals (Moulard et al. 2021). Influencers who have clear, consistent values that are shown through their bodies of work are considered authentic (Tayla 2019). For example, authentic influencers don’t just talk about brands because they are paid to do so. They may have spoken

about the product before the brand approached them for a partnership and continue to talk about it after they are no longer being paid to do so (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018). Respondents also indicated that authentic influencers “maintain a popular image for years”.

Originality. Originality is considered a defining property of authenticity (Mantecon and Huete 2008). In the context of brand authenticity, Schallehn et al. (2014) suggest that an authentic brand has its own unique ways to fulfill its promises. Similarly, authenticity is reflected by a person being a unique individual with one’s own style rather than “following the crowd” (Moulard et al. 2015). In our context, online influencers are perceived to be authentic because they “show how a product fits into everyday life while a brand will often persuade the consumer why it should be part of their life” (Pavlika and Vaughan 2017). These influencers share emotional stories or narratives with their followers, weaving the endorsed brands into their daily lives (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Unlike celebrity endorsement or traditional advertising, influencers use unique, personal, and original ways to create content, and that content is not supposed to be editorial or product copy (Pavlika 2019). Our respondents suggested that Billie Eilish was authentic because “she behaves in her own unique and unusual way”.

Transparency. Transparency includes two different aspects of influencer authenticity. First, transparency means that influencers offer fact-based opinions and provide true visual representations to their followers (Audrezet et al. 2020). They write honest reviews, not just positive ones (Theran 2011). One respondent described the authentic influencer as “sharing both advantages and disadvantages of the product” and “providing photos without unreal filtering and photoshop”. Transparency also involves presenting one’s true self to others by sharing information and the expression of personal and true thoughts and feelings (Kernis

2003; Walumbwa et al. 2008). Similarly, Wood et al. (2008) argue that behaving and expressing in a manner that is consistent with one's real state is an aspect of authenticity. It is also suggested that in social media marketing, a blogger's personal disclosure is at the heart of the perception of authenticity by others (Sandlin and Peña 2014). The respondents described an authentic influencer as "sharing her real life and personal feeling", "providing photos and videos about herself and families", and "being open about their beliefs and religion even at the risk of condemnation".

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

We hypothesize that influencer authenticity will positively affect *customer engagement*, defined as consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities in response to an influencer's brand-related posting activities (Hollebeek 2011, p.555). This positive impact is mediated by consumer trust or the willingness to rely on the influencer in whom consumers have confidence (Moorman, Deshpandé, and Zaltman 1993, p.82).

Consumers seek authenticity in their consumption contexts (Arnould and Price 2000; Beverland and Farrelly 2010), and thus authenticity is generally considered desirable and results in positive outcomes accordingly. Specifically, previous findings have shown that authenticity leads to interpersonal relationships that function better (Brunell et al. 2010), generating identity-relevant benefits (Rose and Wood 2005), and producing relational benefits, such as relationship satisfaction, commitment, attachment, and trust (Fritz et al. 2017; Lopez and Rice 2006; Wickham 2013). As such, an authentic influencer entails perceptions of being passionate, interactive, symbolic, consistent, original, and transparent. These further lead to higher consumer confidence in the influencer as someone they can rely on. Therefore, we expect that influencer authenticity positively relates to consumer trust.

We also predict that consumer trust facilitates higher customer engagement. First, when influencers act in an authentic way that builds trust, consumers perceive there is lower risk with the product information being provided, thereby positively shaping their attitudes towards the products/brands and building higher confidence in making their purchase decisions (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002).

Second, according to the commitment-trust theory (Morgan and Hunt 1994), trust positively relates to commitment. For example, consumer trust leads to consumer loyalty by having the consumer engage in positive word of mouth and repetitive purchases (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). In this vein, having confidence in authentic influencers, consumers can form a public commitment to them by engaging in more comments, likes, and shares on social media platforms. Overall, we thus contend that consumer trust contributes to higher customer engagement and offer the following hypotheses:

H1: Influencer authenticity positively affects customer engagement.

H2: Consumer trust mediates the positive effect of influencer authenticity on customer engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Using a multi-methods approach, we conducted two main studies to develop, purify, and validate the IA scale, test its role of predicting customer engagement, and identify its underlying mechanism. Specifically, in Study 1, we conducted several surveys to develop, purify, and confirm the scales of IA. Study 2 tests our hypotheses for the main effect and the mediating role of consumer trust. We asked three coders to evaluate all authenticity

dimensions, consumer trust, and control variables by watching 20 videos of 100 influencers (i.e., 2,000 videos in total) from a short video platform. We plan to conduct a regression of IA on the engagement (i.e., comments, likes, and shares) for a focal video post of the influencers on the same day and a mediation analysis of consumer trust. As this coding work is still ongoing, here we only report the studies for scale development (Study 1), which are also summarized in Table 1.

Study 1: Scale Development and Refinement

Study 1a: Item Generation and Purification

Method. We generated a large item pool for the six dimensions of IA at the initial stage of scale development. Following Kuehnl et al. (2019), we relied on the existing scales that related to the six dimensions of IA as the source of our information. We listed all the items for each dimension and selected the ones that best applied to our context. Since our context is different from the prior ones, we revised some of the wording of the adapted items to create semantic style consistency (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009).

We then sought to drop items from the initial large group. To ensure content validity, we assigned a new paper-and-pen questionnaire to 50 exchange European students in Hong Kong in a marketing class. We asked the students to name an influencer they considered as authentic and point out the degree to which the items describe the influencer's authenticity using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "describes poorly," 7 = "describes very well").

Results. By reviewing the existing scales, we generated an original pool of 66 items. We then removed items with a mean rating below 4 and rejected items not rated by more than 10% of respondents, presuming poor comprehensibility of these items (see Bruhn 2012 for this

approach). We eliminated items from 66 to 57 in this step accordingly to better formulate our IA items.

Study 1b: Further Purification and Reliability

Method. To further purify the 57 items, we recruited 150 US residents from MTurk ($N = 134$ after attention check exclusions; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.89$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.07$, range = 20-76 years; 44.5% female). Participants who did not follow any social media influencers were automatically excluded from the survey. Then, the eligible participants answered the set of 57 items that remained after the purification process in Study 1a on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 7 = “Strongly agree”) and two attention check questions embedded in the items.

Results. We used a principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation. Factors with eigenvalues of at least 1 (Kaiser 1960) and containing at least three items (Tabachnick and Fidell 2001) were retained. Following Reich, Beck, and Price (2018), we retained individual items if they: (1) loaded on its primary factor at .60 or greater, (2) did not cross-load on any other factor at .40 or greater, and (3) had a corrected item-to-total correlation of .40 or greater. The initial PCA results justified the retention of six factors. Through this procedure, the items were reduced from 57 to 21. The final set of 21 items reflected 6 factors with satisfied reliability (all Cronbach’s Alpha greater than .80). Further, construct reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) reliability statistics for all the factors were almost always above .80 and .50 respectively, thereby meeting the suggested criteria (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981).

The final set of 21 items formed the basis for further structural testing through confirmatory factor analysis. We then conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We fitted a

measurement model in which the higher-order factor influencer authenticity predicted the six lower-order factors. Each of the lower-order factor's measured scale items were constrained to load only on that factor. The CFA suggested a good fit for this measurement model (Chi-square = 315.721, $p < .01$, CFI = .911, RMSEA = .078, SRMR = .0609). The results of EFA and CFA indicated that the influencer authenticity scale was a reliable and structurally valid measure of influencer authenticity.

Study 1c: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Method. To further confirm the IA model, we asked another 150 participants on MTurk to participate in this survey (N = 104 after attention check exclusions; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.15$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.56$, range = 20-76 years; 36.6% female). The procedure was similar to Study 1b, except the survey involved only 21 items retained from Study 1b. Again, the respondents were asked to identify an influencer that they followed and answer questions on the 21 items of IA.

Results. We examined another CFA to further confirm the six-factor structure of the overall scale (structural validity; Mokkink et al. 2010). The fit statistics showed that all the items had a goodness of fit and confirmed our model of IA (chi-square = 317.426, $p < .01$, CFI = .903, RMSEA = .089, SRMR = .0643). The results based on the newly gathered data demonstrated that passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency are six first-order factors that correspond to a higher-order influencer authenticity construct. In addition, all the CRs met the criteria and thus ensured the internal consistency of the scale. All the AVEs were greater than .50, thereby fulfilling the convergent validity criteria.

Study 1d: Discriminant Validity and Predictive Validity

To confirm the IA's nomological network, we sought to distinguish influencer authenticity

from conceptually similar constructs including *expertise*, *similarity*, *quality*, *involvement*, *image*, and *attachment*, all widely used to compare for the discriminant validity tests done in the prior authenticity papers. We also sought to test its predictive power.

Method. We recruited 150 participants on MTurk. After attention check exclusion, the final sample size was 120. Respondents first completed the IA scale as in the previous studies, and then answered the scales of the constructs that conceptually related to IA.

Results. To test the discriminant validity and ensure that IA significantly differs from other similar constructs, we used three different methods, namely, Chi-square difference tests (Durvasula et al. 1993), the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015), and the latent *psi* correlations between pairs of constructs (Warren et al. 2019). First, the Chi-square difference tests results met the suggested criteria, so that the discriminant validity of influencer authenticity with all the similar constructs mentioned above was established. Secondly, following Warren et al. (2019), we tested discriminant validity by estimating the disattenuated, latent *psi* correlations between multiple pairs of variables to test whether their 95% confidence intervals fell significantly below 1.0 (Bagozzi and Yi 2012). These results confirmed the discriminant validity between the constructs. Last, we computed the HTMT ratio between influencer authenticity and its similar constructs. All the HTMT ratios were below .85, the suggested cut-off score (Henseler et al. 2015; Voorhees et al. 2015), thereby supporting discriminant validity across all the similar constructs for influencer authenticity.

To test predictive validity, following Warren et al. (2019) and Reich et al. (2018), we computed the composite IA score and regressed it on a set of dependent variables. These

results showed that influencer authenticity is a strong predictor of all the dependent variables (all coefficients larger than .80 and all $p_s < .001$). Thus, the influencer authenticity scale exhibited highly satisfactory predictive validity in predicting consequential attitudes toward the influencer (influencer attitude), the relationship with the influencer (commitment, intimacy, satisfaction, self-connection), attitudes toward the brand (brand attitude), and behavioral outcomes (purchase intention, and willingness to recommend).

CONCLUSION

This research conceptualized an important, yet understudied, concept – influencer authenticity. We identified its six dimensions including passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency and developed a measurement scale. We also conducted field studies to support our prediction that IA has a positive impact on customer engagement through trust in the influencer. Our findings contribute to both the authenticity literature and the OIM literature and also offer practitioners suggestions on how to evaluate and select authentic influencers.

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES FOR SCALE DEVELOPMENT

Study	Objective	Data and methods	Results
1a	Item generation and purification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Focus groups with 8 undergraduate students in Hong Kong • Essay writing from 50 undergraduate students in Hong Kong • Content validity check using a paper-and-pen questionnaire from 50 European exchange students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of six IA dimensions • Initial item pool of 66 items • Reduced items to 57
1b	Further purification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey on MTurk from 134 US residents • Statistical procedures (EFA, CFA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced items to 21
1c	Confirmatory factor analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey on MTurk from 104 US residents • Statistical procedure (CFA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirmation of the final set of 21 items
1d	Discriminant validity and predictive validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey on MTurk from 120 US residents • Discriminant validity test: Chi-square difference tests, latent psi correlation, and HTMT ratio • Predictive validity test: regression analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discriminant validity of the IA dimensions from a set of variables was shown • Predictive validity of the IA on a set of dependent variables was shown

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