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INFLUENCER AUTHENTICITY

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Influencer Authenticity

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

Influencer Authenticity (IA) is a consumer-perceived fundamental characteristic of influencers and is the very logic that governs social media communities. However, what exactly IA is and upon what criteria it should be assessed remain unknown. Based on a mixed-methods approach, this research conceptualizes IA, identifies its dimensions, develops its measurement scales, and investigates its impacts on consumer behavioral outcomes. Using a literature review and two qualitative studies, I conceptualize IA as a multi-dimensional construct containing passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, and transparency. Through a questionnaire and several online surveys, I generate, develop, and validate the measurement scales of IA. In the final field study, I show that IA positively affects customer engagement with the influencer's sponsored post and the sales performance of the influencer's sponsored post. I further consider influencer characteristics including influencer's follower size and expertise, as well as brand characteristics including brand popularity and brand premium. I find that IA is more important for influencers with larger follower size. IA also matters more for more popular brands but less for premium brands. Additionally, my findings also reveal that customer engagement predicts better sales performance. The findings enrich both the influencer marketing literature and the authenticity literature by introducing a new type of authenticity, formally conceptualizing it, empirically testing its impacts on consumer behavioral outcomes, and providing managerial implications to guide marketers in evaluating and selecting authentic influencers.

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed tremendous growth in influencer marketing as a new type of marketing thought and practice. Influencer marketing uses the power of online influencers to facilitate, enhance, or transform the engagement between brands and consumers in order to positively influence consumers' brand-related attitudes and behavior. Especially during the last five years, influencer marketing has experienced explosive growth. Between 2016 and 2020, the worth of influencer marketing has soared from 1.7 to 9.7 billion USD (Influencer Marketing Hub 2021). Despite concerns that influencer marketing (and indeed, all marketing activities) would decrease due to Covid 19, it has actually increased and is estimated to be worth 13.8 billion USD in 2021 (Influencer Marketing Hub 2021). Practitioners partner with influencers for purposes including brand awareness, content creation, product launch promotion, sales improvement, brand reputation, and event promotion (AspireIQ 2021). According to a survey done by Linqia (2021), 71% of enterprise marketers who knew how their marketing budget would be allocated in 2021 claimed that they would increase their influencer marketing budget, compared to only 57% respondents who said they would do so in 2020.

Online influencers are "individuals, groups of individuals, or even virtual avatars who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influences on their network of followers" (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2021). Although sharing some common features with celebrities, online influencers are distinct from traditional celebrities in several ways. First, they gain fame through different

channels and district different ways. Traditional celebrities, such as actors, models, athletes, musicians, gain their fame through traditional channels such as TV, magazine, newspapers, radios, etc. (Barker 2021) by demonstrating their professional achievements in areas like music, arts, sports, movies, and entertainment (McCracken 1989) and institutional certification by authorities (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). In contrast, influencers are known by the public through non-traditional media channels such as vlogs and blogs by generating content on social media platforms and managing their follower base (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2021). Secondly, traditional celebrities are less creative creators who contribute less to the design of brand-related messages. In comparison, influencers are experts in their respective domains and participate freely and actively in creating the promotional content by using their own voices and stories (Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016). Last but not least, celebrities have higher reachability, which could expand across various demographics and customer personas as they have built their followings via their offline careers (Barker 2021). In contrast, influencers reach a specific niche audience who is highly relevant to their domain of interest because they have built the follower base online by attracting homogenous, and like-minded people (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Some examples of real influencers were shown in Figure 1 to Figure 6 in the appendix.

Influencer marketing is defined as a "strategy in which a firm selects and incentivizes online influencers to engage their followers on social media in an attempt to leverage these influencers' unique resources to promote the firm's offerings, with the ultimate goal of enhancing firm performance" (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2021). A key difference between traditional marketing tactics and influencer marketing is that influencers create and share

original content, which allows them to express their ideas and opinions of a product and show their daily life and experiences freely (Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016), thus complementing traditional branding communication through the presentation of their personal tastes and judgments (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Due to this feature, messages of influencers are perceived as "one of the few forms of real, authentic communication" (Scott 2015, p. 295). Indeed, social influencers tend to benefit from overall higher perceptions of authenticity, as consumers tend to be doubtful about corporate brand messages or online ads but to trust people who have personal experiences with and share honest opinions about a given brand. According to a research report published by AspireIQ (2021), nearly of 40% marketers claimed that authenticity is the most important factor in their selection of influencers.

The importance of this factor raises a significant question: What exactly is influencer authenticity? In this paper, based on a series of literature review, qualitative studies and surveys, I define influencer authenticity (IA) as the extent to which consumers perceive that an influencer is passionate, interactive, symbolic, original, and transparent. In practice, although influencer marketing is more genuine than traditional marketing strategies (e.g., ads) due to relatable advocacy and unbiased product reviews, there are still situations of extreme fabrication that cast doubt on the legitimacy of the entire practice (Influencer Intelligence 2021). For example, a real campaign launched by Johnson & Johnson, who partnered with Instagram personality Scarlett Dixon, used an image of Dixon sitting on a bed surrounded by heart-shaped balloons and strawberries, with a bottle of Listerine purposefully placed on the bedside table. Twitter viewers responded negatively to this campaign, commenting that

"somehow social media influencers managed to develop a form of advertising that is less authentic and human than the most sanitized 90s shampoo commercial" (Influencer Intelligence 2021). Worse, instances of corruption have been revealed, such as bought followers, undeclared paid-for content, and fake engagement (Elmhirst 2019), causing a threat to the perceived authenticity of influencer marketing. Practitioners feel the pressure to tackle this issue, as indicated by Unilever's chief marketing officer Keith Weed's statement that it is essential to "rebuild trust before it's gone forever". However, how influencers become authentic and what criteria marketers can use to evaluate the authenticity of an influencer remain unknown.

The literature on online influencer marketing shows little research investigating how marketers can assess the authenticity of an influencer. One exception is a study by Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), representing one of the first academic papers focusing on the issue of IA. The study found that when influencers' content creation involves brand-related information, a threat to their noncommercial orientations might be created. To resolve this threat of brand encroachment into noncommercial content, Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) suggest two strategies for influencers to manage their authenticity, namely, passionate and transparent authenticity. Passionate authenticity requires influencers to show their intrinsic motivation for a specific topic and transparent authenticity requires influencers not to confuse followers when endorsing a product (e.g., disclosing sponsorship). However, none of the existing studies formally developed conceptual dimensions of IA or used systematic approaches in scale development. Besides, they also fall short in employing multi-source

data, particularly field data, to assess the impact of IA on sales performance generated by an influencer post, which could be further varied by influencer- and brand-level moderators.

In sum, *influencer authenticity* (IA), a consumer-perceived fundamental characteristic of influencers and the very logic that governs social media communities (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; McQuarrie, Miller, and Philips 2013), remains a concept that lacks a formal construction. Its impact on consumer behavioral outcomes has not been validated based on field data. Therefore, this paper seeks to fill this gap by addressing four research questions. First, what is IA, and what are its underlying dimensions? Second, how can IA be measured as a construct? Finally, how does IA affect customer engagement and sales performance, two important objectives that practitioners aim to achieve through influencer marketing campaigns, and what are the contingent factors of its impacts on these objectives?

To address these research questions, I first conducted a literature review of authenticity across different disciplines, including marketing, advertising, communication, and management. While there has been prior research on authenticity, I consider IA fundamentally different from the other forms of authenticity, including authentic consumption, brand authenticity, advertising authenticity, and celebrity authenticity, and the literature remains silent on the conceptual and empirical investigation of IA. To capture the essence of what IA means to consumers, I next conducted four focus groups in Hong Kong and assigned an essay writing task in a marketing class to further identify the dimensions of IA. Through the qualitative studies, I identified six initial dimensions of IA: passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency.

I then conducted Study 1 to generate the scales to measure the multidimensional construct and test its structure. Study 1 aims to generate, purify, and validate the IA scales. Specifically, I referred to both the existing scales of the six dimensions and the answers from the qualitative studies as my information sources to develop the scale. Moreover, I conducted a paper-and-pen questionnaire and several online surveys to purify and validate the scales. Through Study 1, I deleted the dimension of consistency due to its low loading on IA. Finally, I retained 18 measurement items out of an initial pool of 57 items, consisting of five dimensions of IA (i.e., passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, and transparency, collectively referred to as PISOT).

After developing and verifying the scale for IA, in Study 2, I present seven hypotheses to examine IA's impact on consumer behavioral outcomes. I postulate that IA has a positive impact on both customer engagement, which is the first (i.e., pre-purchase) stage of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), and sales performance, which is the second (i.e., purchase) stage of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Considering both influencer characteristics (follower size and expertise) and brand characteristics (brand popularity and brand premium), I further explore how they vary the strength of the IA effect. Influencers with larger (vs. smaller) follower size tend to harm the influencer-follower relationship due to the intensified competition for reciprocity obtained from the influencer so that IA is more important for them. In contrast, influencers with higher expertise tend to be perceived as more trustworthy, thus increasing consumers' confidence in them, such that IA may matter less for them. Moreover, I consider the moderating roles of brand popularity, measured by the follower size of the brand account, and brand premium, measured by the

difference between the price of the product endorsed in the focal post and the average price of the same product category with this product. I contend that IA is more important for more popular brands but less important for premium brands. Brand popularity increases the importance of IA because a more popular brand has more followers on social media, which requires a higher level of responsiveness to engage with consumers. Cooperating with authentic influencers is an effective way for popular brands to do so, as authentic influencers have higher interactivity. In contrast, a premium brand has already established customer trust, which makes IA less critical for the brand to achieve engagement and sales goals. At last, I expect that higher customer engagement will lead to greater sales performance.

To test my hypotheses, I obtained 2,100 short videos of 100 influencers from Douyin, the most popular short-video platform in China. I asked three coders to watch 20 videos of each influencer in the past 3 months up to the observation day (2,000 videos in total) to assess their authenticity, based on the IA scales I developed in Study 1. I used the actual engagement and sales data of each influencer's video posted on the observation day (referred to as the focal post; 100 videos in total) as a source for the dependent variables. Brand popularity was measured by using the follower size of the brands' accounts on Douyin, and brand premium was measured by the difference between the price of the product endorsed in the focal post and the average price of the same product category with this product. I obtained the data of influencer's follower size, brand's follower size, product price, and product category average price directly from my partnered data platform. Expertise was coded by two coders.

This research offers several theoretical and managerial contributions. First, it contributes to the authenticity literature by identifying a new type of authenticity – *influencer*

authenticity (IA) – and formally conceptualizing it as a multidimensional construct encompassing five dimensions. Prior research on authenticity has primarily focused on four areas – namely, authentic consumption, brand authenticity, advertising authenticity, and celebrity authenticity. Although sharing the basic aspects of authenticity, IA shows important differences from the other types of authenticity. For example, as influencers are independent individuals, they are not non-person entities like brands or consumption experiences. IA differs from *brand authenticity*, as the latter emphasizes capturing the brand essence, maintaining the brand image and reflecting the brand tradition, while authentic influencers are not required to do so. Moreover, IA is distinct from *advertising authenticity*, as authentic ads capture brand essence, show realistic plots, and connect with consumers' personal moral values (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008), whereas authentic influencers do not need to do. Finally, few studies in the marketing literature address the authenticity of a person, and those that do so mainly focus on *celebrity authenticity* (Moulard et al. 2015). Influencers are distinguishable from traditional celebrities because they gain fame and exert their influence through successful self-branding, sharing originally created content, and communicating with a network of followers on social media (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017). In contrast, traditional celebrities are known by the public for their professional achievements (Friedman and Friedman 1979). Celebrity authenticity studies have investigated how rare behaviors (e.g., talent and discretion) and stable behaviors influence consumers' perception of the authenticity of the celebrity (Moulard et al. 2015). IA does not require the influencer to be professionally outstanding or institutionally certified, but it does require the influencer to disclose his or her true self through content sharing and

engaging with followers in a much deeper way than celebrities. More importantly, celebrity authenticity research has not developed solid measurement scales to reliably measure the construct. Therefore, my study enriches the literature on authenticity by conceptualizing and formally constructing an important yet understudied concept.

Second, IA adds to the influencer marketing literature by introducing an underexamined influencer characteristic that shapes customer engagement and sales performance. Previously, influencer marketing research examined different influencer characteristics, including number of followers (Gong et al. 2017; Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019; Kupfer et al. 2018), number of followees (Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020), overall posting frequency (Stephen et al. 2017; Zhang, Moe, and Schweidel 2017), and source credibility (Lou and Yuan 2019). My focus on IA sheds light on an overlooked, yet important factor that can inform influencer selection decisions to enhance customer engagement and improve sales performance. I broaden the understanding of IA as a multi-dimensional construct by identifying its five dimensions (i.e., the PISOT framework) and developing its measurement scales. By measuring and assessing IA using these measurement scales, marketers are empowered to identify, evaluate, and select influencers who can contribute to higher customer engagement and greater sales performance, thus fulfilling the objectives of brands and marketers.

Third, extant research usually evaluates influencer marketing effectiveness by measuring consumer perceptions of influencers (e.g., likability, credibility, trust), brand-level outcomes (e.g., brand attitudes, purchase intentions), and engagement (e.g., number of likes and retweets). Conversely, few studies have examined the performance of influencer marketing

on product sales. Similarly, in the authenticity literature, studies have primarily revealed the influence of authenticity on consumers' purchase intention but have seldom tested the impact of authenticity on their actual buying behavior. In addition, few studies examined the relationship between customer engagement and sales performance in the influencer marketing context based on real-world data. Therefore, this study goes beyond investigating the impact of IA on engagement and is one of the first to demonstrate that authenticity can lead to desirable sales outcomes. It is also one of the pioneers to reveal the positive link between two key outcome variables based on the field data.

Finally, my work provides a more nuanced understanding of IA for influencers to manage and demonstrate their authenticity in terms of the five aspects (i.e., passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, and transparency). Considering influencer characteristics including follower size and expertise, I demonstrate that larger influencers need to pay more attention to their authenticity, as a larger follower size intensifies the competition to gain reciprocity. But cooperating with authentic influencers helps to alleviate this problem. In contrast, influencers who are experts may have already accumulated consumer confidence and, hence, may rely less on authenticity for favorable consumer outcomes. Additionally, taking brand characteristics into consideration, I suggest how different types of brands could use influencers with different levels of authenticity. Specifically, popular brands are advised to partner with influencers with higher levels of authenticity to increase the responsiveness to a larger pool of consumers. In contrast, premium brands do not benefit as much from IA, because their higher prices already signal

product quality that reduces consumer uncertainty. As a result, authenticity is less crucial in consumers' decision-making related to premium brands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Influencer Marketing

The majority of the existing influencer marketing literature can be divided into two broad categories: (1) identifying and investigating the effects of personal characteristics of influencers, and (2) examining the impact of characteristics of content, product, and platform on influencer marketing outcomes.

The first stream of online influencer marketing (OIM) studies identified and examined influencer characteristics including number of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017), number of followees (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020), post frequency (Stephen et al. 2017), perceived credibility factors such as attractiveness (Ki and Kim 2019) and expertise (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019; Yuan and Lou 2020), personality factors such as sincerity (Lee and Eastin 2020), and influencer-brand fit (Torres, Augusto, and Matos 2019). This research stream suggests a set of criteria that could be considered when selecting and evaluating influencers. For example, influencers with a larger follower size are more likable and popular (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). Meanwhile, influencers whose number of followees is smaller are more desirable, as smaller followee size increases their perceived autonomy (Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020). However, if a popular influencer follows

very few accounts, there might be a negative impact on the likability of him/her (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017).

The second stream of OIM research examined specific content characteristics (e.g., informative and hedonic values; Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019), unique features of brand-related content (e.g., campaign incentives, sponsorship disclosure; De Veirman and Hudders 2020; Evans, Hoy, and Childers 2018; Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019; Ki and Kim 2019; Lou and Yuan 2019), product characteristics (e.g., product divergence; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017), and platform characteristics (e.g., Facebook vs. blogs; Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019) that, independently or in moderation with influencer characteristics, affect influencer marketing outcomes. Specifically, Lou and Yuan (2019) illustrate that the informative value of influencer-generated content positively affects followers' trust in their sponsored posts. However, Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019) finds that whether the content should be informative or hedonic depends on the platform type and campaign intent. Evans, Hoy, and Childers (2018) suggest that disclosure language such as "paid ad" leads to greater persuasion knowledge and sponsorship transparency, positively affecting one's brand attitudes and sharing intentions. Conversely, De Veirman and Hudders (2020) show that sponsorship disclosure has a negative impact on brand attitudes by enhancing ad recognition, activating ad skepticism, and thus affecting the influencer's credibility. This stream of research also examines the impact of product-related and platform-related factors in influencer marketing. For example, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) examined the effect of product divergence on brand attitudes and suggested that product type (i.e., divergent level) should be considered when leveraging an influencer

marketing strategy. Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019) took different types of platforms (i.e., blogs and Facebook) and campaign incentives into consideration and found that for sponsored posts on Facebook, posts with higher hedonic content are more effective when the campaign intent is to increase trial (vs. raise awareness).

Existing studies evaluate the effectiveness of influencer marketing by measuring consumers' perceptions of influencers such as likeability (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017), credibility (Yuan and Lou 2020), trust (Lou and Yuan 2019), and attitude (Torres, Augusto, and Matos 2019), as well as brand-level outcomes such as brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Lee and Eastin 2020; De Veirman and Hudders 2020), and using field data such as engagement (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019). Overall, OIM research suggests how firms can select influencers based on the above criteria and how influencer marketing could be more effective by managing influencers' content creation and considering product- and/or platform-related factors.

Although the investigation in OIM research is fruitful, there is little research focusing on the issue of IA. One of the exceptions is a study by Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), who argue that to manage perceptions of authenticity, influencers need to have a real passion for a specific topic, resulting in *passionate authenticity* (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Another strategy that influencers can leverage is to manage *transparent authenticity* by avoiding any risk of confusing followers when endorsing a product, such as by disclosing sponsored content (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Prior research also examined the outcomes of IA. Based on a survey of 592 Instagram followers, perceived authenticity of an influencer was found to positively affect followers' attitudes toward a photo uploaded by the

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influencer as well as purchase intentions toward the products introduced by the influencer (Pöyry et al. 2019). Jun and Yi (2020) conducted a cross-sectional survey and showed that influencer interactivity is positively related to IA, which further enhances followers' emotional attachment.

Prior research related to IA applied the definition of authenticity from studies of other domains (e.g., brand authenticity) to the influencer context. However, as I will discuss in the next section, influencers have unique characteristics that prevent the direct translation of definitions originated elsewhere from adequately capturing IA. Thus, a new study is needed to delineate its conceptual boundaries, develop measurement scales, and investigate its impacts on performance metrics that matter to real-world practitioners.

Authenticity

Authenticity commonly refers to the genuineness, reality, or truth of something (Kennick 1985). Fine (2003) defined authenticity in terms of sincerity, innocence, and originality. Boyle (2003) related it to concepts such as being natural, honest, and simple. Grayson and Martinec (2004) stated that authenticity distinguishes "the real thing" from its copies. While definitions of authenticity differ (Beverland and Farrelly 2010), there appears to be a consensus that authenticity includes being "true to oneself". Moulard, Raggio, and Folse (2021) addressed the lack of clarity in the literature by providing an overarching definition of authenticity as "the degree to which an entity in one's environment (e.g., object, person, performance) is perceived to be true to or match up with something else (i.e., a referent)" (p. 99).

Online influencers are attractive to brands because their content seems to be posted by "ordinary" consumers, non-commercial in nature, and thus more credible and trustworthy (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). However, when influencers collaborate with brands, their intrinsic desires for content creation might be mixed with commercial motivations, and their authenticity thus could be called into question (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Consumers might be skeptical about whether the influencers have indeed used the product and whether their comments about their experience are accurate, or whether they are just confederates of the brand driven by a commercial motivation to sell the product. Due to the potentially mixed motivations of influencers and the resulting increased skepticism of consumers, it is crucial for influencers to manage and enhance their authenticity to avoid losing their appeal to both brands and consumers. Given the emergence of numerous influencers and large budgets invested in influencer endorsements (Influencer Marketing Hub 2021), it is important for brands to select and partner with authentic influencers to avoid running the risk of cultivating a less trustworthy identity or destroying their original identity.

To conceptualize influencer authenticity, I reviewed the literature on authenticity in several domains, including marketing, advertising, communication, and management. I searched for keywords such as "authenticity" and "authentic" in the title, abstract, or keywords of papers published in academic journals in the above disciplines. The identified articles included four types of authenticity that are relevant to my context: authentic consumption, brand authenticity, advertising authenticity, and celebrity authenticity. Table 1 summarizes the definitions and dimensions of each of these types of authenticity.

As shown in Table 1, authentic consumption is defined as "a holistic consumer evaluation based on six components including accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency" (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021). Studies on authentic consumption investigate the evaluation of authenticity from the consumer perspective by focusing on authentic experiences such as white-water rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), scripted reality TV (Rose and Wood 2005), country music (Peterson 2005), and luxury wine (Beverland 2006). Researchers found that consumers assess authentic consumption based on two types of cues: indexical and iconic cues (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Indexical cues can offer evidence that the object is real rather than copied, while iconic cues can resemble the real thing.

Among the six components of authentic consumption, originality, defined as "the extent to which a product or service stands out from mainstream offerings present in the market and does so without unnecessary embellishments" (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021), is related to IA, because an influencer who "takes original photos" and "behaves in a unique and unusual way" is regarded as authentic according to the responses from the participants in the essay writing task. Although there is thus an association between authentic consumption and IA, IA remains distinct from authentic consumption, as influencers are independent individuals who might introduce or endorse a product through their content creation, whereas the consumption context focuses on the experience of consuming a product or service. Unlike in the case of authentic consumption, authentic influencers are not required to be either legitimated (by adhering to shared norms, standards, rules, and traditions) or proficient (by

showing appropriate skills and exhibiting craftsmanship) (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021).

The second relevant type of authenticity is *brand authenticity*, which refers to "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). Brand authenticity emphasizes aspects such as whether the brand is produced using traditional methods (Beverland 2005), whether the brand has a strong connection to a historical period in time, culture, and specific region (Napoli et al. 2014), whether the brand fulfills its promises consistently (Schallen, Burmann, and Riley 2014), whether the brand meets manufacturing quality standards (Napoli et al. 2014), and whether the brand survives over time (Morhart et al. 2015). Existing literature has identified subdimensions of brand authenticity such as status, sincerity, originality, symbolism, and integrity and finds that brand authenticity leads to consumer behavioral outcomes via the transfer of meaning and identity-relevant benefits (e.g., Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn 2017; Schallen, Burmann, and Riley 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen, and Cravella 2012). Specifically, authentic brands enhance consumers' self-congruence by reinforcing one's identity (Beverland and Farrelly 2010), satisfying one's need for self-enhancement, and supporting one's self-esteem (Kressmann et al. 2006).

IA is related to brand authenticity in that influencers need to be original and symbolic just as authentic brands do. For example, authentic influencers are unique and innovative and connect followers with their real selves, thus sharing the dimensions of originality and symbolism with authentic brands. However, IA is different from brand authenticity in that

authentic brands are required to reflect brand traditions (e.g., by using traditional methods of production), capture brand essence, and reflect brand heritage. In contrast, influencers are not required to reflect a certain tradition but instead are expected to be passionate, interactive, symbolic, original, and transparent.

Third, *advertising authenticity* refers to genuine, real, and true advertisements (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019). Similar to authentic brands, authentic ads preserve the brand essence, such as by maintaining consistency with the brand image, and reflect the brand's heritage by relating to the brand's traditions. Advertising authenticity also requires a realistic story. For example, the story illustrated in an ad is suggested to show a realistic situation or an everyday life activity (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019). Authentic ads also connect with consumers' personal moral values (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008) but do not evoke relational benefits between the advertiser and consumers.

In summary, advertising authenticity involves ensuring that ads have key characteristics of authenticity including brand essence, message credibility, brand heritage, and realistic stories (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019). IA is distinct from advertising authenticity, as the key characteristics of authentic ads are not necessary for authentic influencers. Instead, influencers have freedom in their content creation, which does not need to capture the brand essence or reflect the brand heritage.

Finally, *celebrity authenticity* is defined as the consumers' perception that given celebrities are true to themselves when they appear genuine in their relationships with consumers and behave in accordance with their perceived values. Prior research on celebrity

endorsement has explored how rarity and stability affect consumers' perception of celebrity authenticity (Moulard et al. 2015). Researchers found that celebrities' rarity – including talent (i.e., skill in a given field), discretion (i.e., inconspicuousness), and originality (i.e., independent, creative, or individual manner) – as well as their stability – including consistency (i.e., consistent personality), candidness (i.e., consistency between statement and feeling), and morality (i.e., strong values and principles) – lead to higher perceptions of celebrity authenticity (Moulard et al. 2015). Endorsement effectiveness arises from celebrities' ability to achieve rare and outstanding professional status, maintain consistent and moral behaviors, and hence fulfill consumers' wishful identification (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020).

Admittedly, IA is similar to celebrity authenticity, as both involve evaluating individuals who have a certain degree of influence in the social world. In addition, authentic influencers are also required to be original, by creating their own content instead of copying others, and consistent, by behaving in accordance with their true selves. However, there are several unique aspects of influencers that distinguish them from celebrities. First, 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 is in sharp contrast to traditional celebrity endorsers, who are known by the public for their professional achievements (Friedman and Friedman 1979). Second, influencer differ from celebrities because they tend to be more creative and freely in creating their content, regardless of whether non-commercial or commercial messages. Finally, celebrities reach a generally mass audience while influencers target a specific niche. As such,

consumers feel more similar to influencers than to celebrities and trust influencers more than

celebrities (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020).

CONCEPTUALIZING INFLUENCER AUTHENTICITY

In this research, I followed the theory-in-use approach suggested by Zeithaml et al.

(2020) and the approaches used in previous scale development papers (e.g., Kuehnl, Jozic,

and Homburg 2019, Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012, Warren et al. 2019). Best suited

for addressing broad and deep research questions, theory-in-use approach aims to revie data

across participants, seek for common themes offered by participants, identify the

commonalties and abstract them to broader constructs that used to conceptualize the construct

to be examined in the research (Zeithaml et al. 2020). By doing so, Zeithaml et al. (2020)

suggested two steps. First, researchers need to develop conversations by inviting participants

and asking them questions (e.g., What does the construct mean to them; How it is similar to

or differ from the other conceptually similar constructs). Second, researchers start to identify

the common themes based on the answers across participants, abstract those themes to a

higher level (i.e., a broader and more abstract construct, and label the construct with a

name/term (Zeithaml et al. 2020). In doing so, I held four focus groups, each including eight

Hong Kong undergraduate students and lasting one hour, to identify the dimensions of IA. I

then assigned an essay-writing task in a marketing class with a mix of Hong Kong and

European exchange students to further explore the dimensions of IA.

Focus Groups. I conducted four focus groups, each lasting for one hour and including

eight undergraduate students from Hong Kong as students are the most active users of social

media platforms. All participation was voluntary, and no financial incentives were offered. Before each session, participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They agreed to have the sessions recorded and were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Initially, I gave them a definition of social media influencers. Then, the moderator posed several questions, including: What makes an influencer authentic? What are some examples of authentic influencers? What attributes do you think can lead an influencer to be authentic? Next, participants answered these questions in their own words with the guidance of the moderator, who attempted to engage with all participants.

Essay Writing Task. Following Warren et al. (2019), I asked a mix of 50 Hong Kong undergraduate students and European exchange students to write an essay as part of an extra credit assignment in a marketing class. Again, before the writing task, I gave them a definition of online influencers and informed them of the purpose and procedure of the task. I then asked them to identify an authentic influencer and explain their reasons for defining each of the identified influencers as authentic. Specifically, the instructions were as follows: "(1) Please identify an online influencer who you consider authentic; (2) Please explain why you consider him/her authentic". All essays were written in English and ranged from one to two pages in length.

I recorded all the answers of authentic influencers offered by the participants and later listed them in a document to be analyzed, summarized, and distilled. I carefully looked through each piece of answer and assigned similar answers to the same theme. I discarded invalid answers such as "I cannot identify any inauthentic influencer" and overly general answers such as "he is bad". I then searched the literature to explore the specific constructs

which matched well with the answers provided and which could cover each identified theme. From this procedure, six themes emerge. Specifically, respondents perceived authentic influencers to be passionate, interactive, symbolic, consistent, original, and transparent. Table 2 lists the participants' descriptions of authentic influencers. As such, the six dimensions of influencer authenticity were identified through this procedure including passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency.

Six Dimensions of Influencer Authenticity

Passion. In the context of influencers, passion refers to consumers' perception that the influencer is intrinsically motivated by his/her true love of the work and activities of his/her domain of expertise, rather than extrinsically motivated by commercial purposes (Moulard et al. 2014). As Trilling (1972) defines authenticity as a display of the hidden inner life, complete with passions and anguish, passion has been considered an integral component of authenticity. For example, an authentic artist is intrinsically motivated by a desire to show his/her passion for and commitment to the craft rather than extrinsically motivated by external rewards (Moulard et al. 2014). Similarly, Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink (2008) described authenticity as the sense that "a passionate creator is involved in making products and is motivated primarily by their love of craft" (p. 12). Passion has also been discussed in the brand authenticity literature. For example, Holt (2002, p. 83) emphasized that an authentic brand must be "disinterested and be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda and by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value". Prior arguments are consistent with the tenets of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), which claims that intrinsically motivated

behavior is authentic in the fullest sense, as it stems stemming from an individual's innate self.

In a similar vein, authentic influencers talk about specific topics because they have a passion for them, or they truly like and have a genuine interest in them (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). For example, Laura Strange, a foodie influencer on Instagram, is passionate about sharing recipes for gluten-free meals to help others adapt to a gluten-free lifestyle after having been diagnosed as coeliac (Roback 2018). Consistent with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000), consumers consider a passionate influencer authentic because they engage in content production and social media activities out of their intrinsic motivations and desires rather than to pursue commercial goals.

Consistent with the literature, a respondent in the focus group pointed out that Duebass is an authentic influencer on Weibo because she truly loves trying the cosmetic products by herself first and later sharing her user experience either through detailed notes or by uploading videos on her social account (respondent #7). Furthermore, some respondents of the essay writing task considered an authentic influencer to be one who "loves posting videos to introduce products and food in Korea" (respondent #2), "enjoys teaching make-up skills and trying all kinds of products to followers" (respondent #22), "is true to his heart" (respondent #27), and "enjoys joining events of different brands" (respondent #35).

Interactivity. Interactivity refers to consumers' perception that the influencer is accessible and close to followers and interacts with followers through various means (e.g., comments, online chatting, responding to followers' questions by uploading videos with answers, organizing live streaming sessions). Prior findings have shown that interactivity is

part of authenticity. For example, Walumbwa et al. (2008) demonstrate that authentic leaders seek feedback to improve interactions with their employees. Marwick and Boyd (2011) illustrate that celebrities who interact and engage with fans are seen as more authentic than those who merely broadcast information. Indeed, what distinguishes influencer marketing from firm-directed one-way communication is that the audience feels appreciated and heard (Quintly 2019), which makes influencers look authentic and "real". More interactive influencers give the impression that they really enjoy the work and have immersed themselves in the process of responding personally to followers and communicating in real time (Jun and Yi 2020). For example, interactive influencers, particularly micro and nano influencers, frequently reply to the comments sent by their followers, establish chat groups to answer followers' questions, and even organize live streaming sessions to meet online and chat with followers in real time.

Such interactivity shows a contrast with traditional celebrities, who are positioned to be distant from the general audience (Colliander and Dahlén 2011). Influencers develop and manage their online communities by sharing self-generates content such as blogs and vlogs that portray their daily life and personal experiences and regularly responding to and interacting with followers (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2021). Thus, interactivity is an important characteristic that leads influencers to differ from celebrities. More importantly, interactivity, as a unique characteristic of influencers, distinguishes them from other human brands or traditional brands, which are not real people. In the marketing literature, interactivity has been mainly discussed in brand contexts, such as the mechanical interactivity of a brand website (Thorson and Rodgers 2006), which measures how actively a website

responds to its consumers. However, mechanical interactivity differs from the interactivity of an influencer, which is a process of two-way communication with a real person rather than a machine.

My respondents also pointed out that interactivity is one of the characteristics of authentic influencers. My respondents from the focus group perceived an authentic influencer as someone who "organizes live streaming sessions to talk with us" (respondent #1), "responds to fans' needs and questions" (respondent #2), "replies to our comments and questions" (respondent #3), and "interacts with us by mentioning fans' names in her videos" (respondent #6). My respondents from the writing task also pointed out that an authentic influencer "has a closer relationship with the audience" (respondent #46).

Symbolism. Symbolism refers to consumers' perception that influencers are able to reflect values they consider important (Morhart et al. 2015). Prior brand authenticity literature argues that authentic brands reflect values that consumers care about by offering self-referential cues as a representation of values, roles, and relationships (Morhart et al. 2015). Similarly, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) demonstrate that the feeling of connectedness, such as being connected to important others, is an important component of authenticity.

Consumers consider the influencer to be authentic when there is a connection between the influencer and the self. In the world of social media, influencers with symbolism can serve as a resource for identity construction, because followers can show the kind of people they are by following an influencer or sharing his or her posts. Followers often become loyal to their favorite influencers as they self-identify as "fans" and construct part of their personal identity revolving around the cultural meanings associated with the influencer (Escalas and

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Bettman 2017). The symbolic meaning embedded in these associations is powerful, as it leads the followers to resonate with the influencer's messages and perceive the influencer as more authentic. For example, Pony Park, a beauty influencer on Instagram, uploads a wide range of make-up tutorials and suggestions of beauty products, which match the key interest of her followers. Coffee Lam, a fitness influencer from Hong Kong, uploads videos to teach yoga and daily movements on YouTube, fulfilling her followers' desires to learn yoga online under the pandemic situation. My respondents considered an authentic influencer as someone who "reminds me about myself" (respondent #7).

Consistency. Consistency refers to consumers' perception that the influencer has not changed over time (Moulard et al. 2016). Attribution theory suggests that observing a person's stable behavior leads to the attribution of such behavior to that person rather than external pressures (Kelly 1973), thus resulting in higher authenticity. This is because stability is considered to show commitment to one's own calling and thus to being true to oneself (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021). For example, one's consistent personality across time and contexts lead to higher self-perceived authenticity (Sheldon et al. 2017). Consistency, or little change over time, is one of the manifestations of stability that contribute to authenticity (Moulard et al. 2016). For example, an authentic brand maintains its essential core and shows that it is true to itself (Gilmore and Pine 2007) by exhibiting consistency in its style, remaining uniform in its design and standards (Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012), and continually corresponding to its ideals (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021). Similarly, wine producers emphasize their consistent production style to show their authentic image even when they use more advanced technology than in the past (Beverland and Luxton 2005).

Furthermore, studies of celebrity authenticity demonstrate that inauthentic celebrities try to change everything about themselves, triggering doubts related to fakeness (Moulard et al. 2016).

In my context, influencers who show clear, consistent values through their bodies of work are considered authentic (Tayla 2019). For example, authentic influencers do not just talk about brands because they are paid to do so. Instead, they might have spoken about a product or service before the brand approached them for a partnership and they might continue to talk about it after the campaign is over and they are no longer being paid to do so (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018). Moreover, working with brands with positioning that is consistent with that of the influencer also contributes to an overall perception of authenticity. Backaler (2018) takes the influencer's perspective and finds that when collaborating with brands, influencers' top concern is how to maintain consistency with their own positioning without being viewed as a "sellout".

Respondents from the focus group illustrated that an authentic influencer is someone who "always has the same objective and dream from the beginning to the end" (respondent #3). Respondents from the essay writing task also indicated that authentic influencers "maintain a popular image for years" (respondent #34).

Originality. Originality refers to consumers' perception that an influencer is unique and creative (Akbar and Wymer 2017; Moulard et al. 2015). Originality is considered a defining property and a key element of authenticity (Mantecón and Huete 2008). Indeed, the root of the word "authenticity", "hentes", means "doer" in Greek, indicating that something authentic has an original creator (Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012). In the context of brand

authenticity, Schallen, Burmann, and Riley (2014) suggest that an authentic brand has individuality, giving it unique ways to fulfill its promises. Akbar and Wymer (2017) find that an authentic brand is unique and is not imitative or derivative. Similarly, authenticity is reflected by being a unique individual with one's own style rather than "following the crowd" (Moulard et al. 2015), because one is true to one's own originality and uniqueness (Van Leeuwen 2001). For example, innovators are regarded as authentic because they are creative and do not follow the crowd (Peterson 2005). Similarly, Fine (2003) illustrates that authentic artwork is distinguished by its uniqueness and unusualness.

In my context, online influencers are perceived to be authentic because they "show how a product fits into everyday life while a brand will often tell the consumer why it should be part of their life" (Pavlika and Vaughan 2017). They share emotional stories or narratives with their followers, weaving the endorsed brands into their daily life (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). Unlike celebrity endorsement or traditional advertising, influencers use their unique, personal, and original ways to create content. Their content is not supposed to be editorial or product copy (Pavlika 2019); it is meant to be their own story and voice. For example, what distinguishes Vanoss Gaming from other gaming influencers is his compilation of funny moments while he is playing (Leskin and Haasch 2021). As another example, with their belief that investing in a student's education should not consist of payment to buildings, parking lots, or administrators, "the Futur" created their own platform involving experts from various disciplines to teach their audience skills on YouTube.

My respondents perceived an authentic influencer as someone who "takes original photos" (respondent #17), "behaves in her own unique and unusual way and always has

different thoughts and arguments on different issues" (respondent #4), and "is unique and innovative" (respondent #40).

Transparency. Transparency refers to consumers' perception that an influencer is honest and willing to present his or her true self to followers. Transparency entails two different aspects of influencer authenticity. First, the brand authenticity literature illustrates that an authentic brand, guided by honesty and transparency, shares unflattering information (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021). Applied to my context, transparency means that influencers give fact-based and unbiased opinions and provide true visual representation to their followers (Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard 2020); they write honest reviews, not just positive ones (Gerdeman 2019). For example, inauthentic influencers may buy fake engagement data, particularly on Instagram, as a media buyer at a digital agency noted that "engagement fraud is definitely a concern amongst brands and agencies" (Monllos 2020). Statistics show that as much as $255 million of the $1.4 billion spent on Instagram was lavished on accounts with fake followers in 2019 in the US and Canada (Monllos 2020). In fact, followers can tell when an influencer seems "fake", and this can make followers feel and betrayed (Tabor 2020). One of my respondents described an authentic influencer as "sharing both advantages and disadvantages of the product" (respondent #12) and "providing photos without unrealistic filtering and Photoshopping".

Second, transparency involves presenting one's true self instead of a fake or distorted self to others by sharing information and the expression of true personal thoughts and feelings (Kernis 2003; Walumba et al. 2008). Similarly, Wood et al. (2008) argues that behaving and expressing emotions in a way that is consistent with one's real state is an aspect of

authenticity. It is suggested that in social media marketing, a blogger's personal disclosure is at the heart of the perception of authenticity (Sandlin and Pena 2014). For example, Tian Lao Lao, an influencer with more than 34 million followers on Douyin, gains popularity by posting about interesting moments in her daily life as an elderly female, such as dancing, playing cards with friends, and educating her grandsons, on the short-video platform.

Respondents from the writing task described an authentic influencer one who is invested in "sharing her real life" (respondents # 33, #34, and #37), "providing photos and videos about herself and families" (respondents #5, #6), "sharing daily life vlogs" (respondent #8), "showing his true feelings" (respondent #43), "sharing his own experiences", "being open about their beliefs and religion even at the risk of condemnation (respondent #7)", and "recording what he is doing" (respondent #22) and one who "always shows the real side of himself" (respondent #42).

In this section, through the two qualitative studies, IA was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct incorporating passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency. However, how academic researchers and practitioners assess IA remains unknown. Therefore, in the next section, I generated, developed, and validated the scales of IA based on a paper-and-pen questionnaire and three online surveys.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted two main studies to develop, purify, and validate the IA scale; test its role in predicting customer engagement and sales performance; identify boundary conditions; and examine the relationship between customer engagement and sales performance. Specifically,

in Study 1, I conducted several surveys to develop, purify, and confirm the scales of IA. Study 2 tests my hypotheses, including the main effect of IA on customer engagement and sales performance, the moderating roles of follower size, expertise, brand popularity, and brand premium, and the relationship between customer engagement and sales performance. The studies and the procedure are summarized in Table 3.

Study 1

Study 1 aims to generate, purify, and validate the scales of IA through a paper-and-pen questionnaire distributed in a marketing class in Hong Kong and several online studies.

Study 1a: Item Generation and Purification

Study 1a seeks to generate a pool of scale items of each IA dimension, form a purified subset of relevant items of each IA dimension, and test the reliability and factor structure of this initial set of items.

Method. I generated a large item pool for the six dimensions of IA at the initial stage of scale development. Following recent studies on scale development (e.g., Reich, Beck, and Price 2018; Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012) and adopting the scale development paradigm (Churchill 1979), I used a deductive approach for the generation of scale items (Schwab 1980). As information sources, I relied on existing scales that relate to the six dimensions of IA and that are transferable to the influencer context. In doing so, I first reviewed relevant authenticity literature (e.g., brand authenticity, advertising authenticity, artist authenticity, leadership authenticity) extensively. For example, for originality, I examined brand and celebrity research (Bruhn et al. 2012; Moulard et al. 2015; Moulard et al. 2016) and identified scales such as the uniqueness scale, which assesses how consumers view

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brands as special, distinctive, and unique (Moulard et al. 2016). Similarly, for transparency, I reviewed the literature on branding, leadership, relationship, and CSR (Joo, Miller, and Fink 2019; Walumbwa et al. 2008) and found scales such as the relational transparency scale. Then, I listed all the scales and items of each dimension for each authenticity type and selected the ones that best applied to my context to ensure they capture the essence of what influencer authenticity means to consumers. Since my context is different from the prior ones, I revised some of the wording of the adapted items to create semantic style consistency (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009).

Although I invested substantial effort in reviewing scales and items, I cannot depend fully on the existing items, because my context is that of influencers, who are independent individuals and thus different from previous contexts such as branding and advertising. Second, the existing items only partially represent IA, raising concerns that they cannot fully capture the essence of IA. Therefore, I also further examined the student essays used to identify the dimensions of IA as another important source of my item selection. Through this procedure, I initially generated a large item pool of 57 items.

As a scale of this size would be too large to be used easily in research and practice, I next sought to drop unnecessary items. To ensure content validity, or the degree to which a measure's items are representative of a proper sample of the theoretical content domain of a give construct (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994), I assigned a paper-and-pen questionnaire to 50 students in Hong Kong in a marketing class as an in-class assignment. After explaining the definitions of "social media influencer" and "authentic", I distributed the questionnaire to them with all 57 items in random order. I asked the students to name an influencer they

considered authentic and then rate the degree to which the items described the influencer's

authenticity using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "poorly," and 7 = "very well"). Following

Kuehnl, Jozic, and Homburg (2019) and Guo et al. (2017), I asked the participants whether

they could effortlessly and comprehensively understand each IA item. Throughout the whole

process, one research assistant was responsible to address any wording questions or explain

unclear concepts to the participants.

Results. Drawing on the extant scales and the student essays, I generated an original pool

of 57 items representing the six dimensions of the IA construct: passion (9), interactivity (10),

symbolism (4), consistency (11), originality (11), and transparency (12). Using the responses

from the paper-and-pen questionnaire distributed to the students, I 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). I was

thus able to reduce the scale from 57 to 41 items.

Study 1b: Further Purification and Reliability

The objective of Study 1b is to further purify the scale items and assess the internal

reliability of the retained items after the purification. Data were collected via an online survey

on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

Method. To further purify the 41 items, I recruited 150 US residents from MTurk (N =

134 after attention check exclusions; M_{age} = 38.89, SD_{age} = 10.07, range = 20-76 years;

44.5% female) who were paid a nominal fee. After agreeing to participate, they saw an

introduction describing the study as a survey of social media influencers. Based on the

provided definition of social media influencers, participants replied whether they follow any

social media influencers on any social media websites (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, etc.)

Participants who answered no to this question were automatically excluded from the survey.

Thereafter, the eligible participants responded to the set of 41 items that remained after the

purification process in Study 1a on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree," 7 =

"Strongly agree") as well as two attention check questions ("Please select agree for this

question" and "Please select disagree for this question") embedded in the items. Both the

sequence of the six dimensions of IA and the items of its subdimension were in random order

to avoid sequence bias. Finally, participants provided basic demographic information and

were thanked for their participation.

Results. To further purify the 41 items and explore the structure of IA, I 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), I 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 capturing the six dimensions of influencer authenticity:

passion (three items, α = .820), interactivity (four items, α = .865), symbolism (four items, α

= .850), consistency (three items, α = .870), originality (four items, α = .894), and

transparency (three items, α = .839). As such, this procedure reduced the number of items

from 41 to 21. The Cronbach's Alpha of each of the six dimensions falls within Nunnally's

(1978) guidelines and attests to the internal consistency of the scale. Moreover, the construct

reliability (CR), ranging from .831 to .895, and average variance extracted (AVE), ranging

from .586 to .698, for all factors were always above .80 and .50, respectively, 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. I then conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 26. I fitted a measurement model in which the higher-order factor IA predicts the six lower-order factors. Each 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 IA scale was a reliable and structurally valid measure of IA.

Study 1c: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In study 1c, I aim at evaluating the remaining IA items and the underlying structure and validating the six dimensions by conducting confirmatory factor analysis. The data were gathered from a new sample of 150 participants on MTurk.

Method. To further confirm the IA model, I asked a new sample of 150 participants on MTurk, who were paid a nominal fee, to participate in this study (N = 104 after attention check exclusions; $M_{age} = 38.15$, $SD_{age} = 11.56$, range = 20-76 years; 36.6% female). The procedure was similar to that of Study 1b, except the survey involved only the 21 items retained from Study 1b. After agreeing to join the study, participants read an introduction presenting the survey as a study of perceptions of social media influencers and were asked to indicate whether they followed any influencers on any social media platforms. Eligible participants (i.e., those who did follow influencers) were then asked to identify an influencer that they followed on any social media platform and answer questions related to the 21 items

of IA on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree") in turn. Both the sequence of the six dimensions of IA and the items of its subdimension were randomized to avoid sequence bias. Again, there were two attention check question embedded in the items: "Please select agree for this question" and "Please select disagree for this question". Finally, participants provided some basic demographic information and were thanked for their participation.

Results. Using the data obtained from the new sample, I examined another CFA to further confirm the six-factor structure of the overall scale (structural validity; Mokkink et al. 2010) by using structural equation modeling. I used a reflective rather than a formative model, because my conceptualization of IA fits better with the logic of reflective models. That is, the six dimensions derived from the qualitative studies are more appropriately considered as manifestations of the latent construct of IA. I examined the model with IA as the second-order factor and the six dimensions as the first-order factors with their own scale items. Each item loaded high on its subdimension of IA, ranging from .641 to .907. Moreover, all the dimensions except consistency had high loadings onto the second-order construct IA, ranging from .700 to .951.

Following a prior study (e.g., Reich, Beck, and Price 2018), as the loading for consistency was too low (.178), I decided to omit it. After deleting consistency, the loading for the remaining five dimensions ranged from .698 to .953, and 18 items were retained accordingly. The fit statistics of my model with five dimensions of IA showed that all the items had a good fit and thus confirmed my model of IA (chi-square = 252.716, p<.01; CFI = .906; RMSEA = .096; SRMR = .0675). The results based on the newly gathered data

demonstrated that passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, and transparency are five first-order factors that correspond to a higher-order IA construct. In addition, all the CRs of these five factors of IA, ranging from .779 to .894, met the criteria and thus ensured the internal consistency of the scale. All the AVEs for each factor, ranging from .587 to .678, are greater than the .50, fullfilling the convergent validity criteria. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Study 1d: Discriminant Validity and Predictive Validity

To confirm IA's nomological network, I sought to distinguish IA from conceptually similar constructs widely used to compare in the discriminant validity tests in prior authenticity papers. Source credibility is a construct that is "commonly used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message" (Ohanian 1990). Previous research suggests that the persuasiveness of a message's source depends on the audience's trust in the communicator and related perceptions of the communicator's credibility (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson, and Mägi 2016). In particular, trustworthiness, expertise, and likability (Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson 1994) are considered key elements that constitute source credibility and drive the impact of celebrities on the endorsed brands (Russell and Rasolofoarison 2017). In addition, Lou and Yuan (2019) identified influencers' similarity to follower as one of the dimensions of source credibility. Although all of these constructs are assessments from the consumer and there is some overlap among them, I argue that IA is conceptually distinct from influencer trustworthiness, influencer expertise, influencer likability, and influencer-follower similarity.

Moreover, I also compared IA with constructs involving quality, involvement, image, and attachment. Quality reflects the extent to which the influencer attempts to convey to consumers that he/she has superior ability (Frazier and Lassar 1996). Involvement means "a person's perceived relevance of the object [influencer] based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (Zaichkowsky 1985). Image refers to the consumer's mental picture of an influencer (Dobni and Zinkhan 1990), and attachment is defined as "an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object, such as another ordinary person" (Bowlby 1979, 1980). Moreover, I also sought to test IA's predictive power on a set of dependent variables in terms of consumers' cognitional, behavioral, and relational outcomes.

Method. To distinguish IA from conceptually similar constructs and test its predictive power, I recruited 150 participants on MTurk. After attention check exclusion, the final sample size was 120. Initially, participants read a brief introduction to this survey as a study of social media influencers and replied whether they followed any influencers on social media platforms. Then, eligible respondents first completed the IA scale as in the previous studies and answered the scales of the constructs that conceptually related to IA including trustworthiness, expertise, likability, similarity, quality, involvement, image, and attachment. Finally, participants answered questions about their age, gender, ethnicity, and income. They were then thanked and paid a nominal fee for their participation.

Results. To test the discriminant validity and ensure that IA significantly differs from other similar constructs, I used three different methods: Chi-square difference tests (Mathieu and Farr 1991), the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015), and the latent *psi* correlations between pairs of constructs (Warren et al. 2019).

First, I conducted a series of Chi-square difference tests by comparing influencer authenticity with each of the similar constructs mentioned above. For example, when comparing IA with expertise, the Chi-square difference was 51.7 and the p-value was .000 (lower than the criteria of .05). Thus, discriminant validity was established between IA and expertise. The procedure was the same for the comparison with other constructs. All the results (see Table 7 for more details) met the suggested criteria (all p-value <.05), such that the discriminant validity of influencer authenticity with all the similar constructs mentioned above was established.

Secondly, following Warren et al. (2019), I further 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). According to the results, the correlation (SEs) between IA and quality was .705 (.04). Between IA and each similar construct except trustworthiness, each pair of disattenuated correlations was statistically below 1.0 (range: .027 to .8478). Therefore, the discriminant validity of IA with conceptually similar constructs except trustworthiness was further confirmed. As reported in Table 7, the results confirmed the discriminant validity between each pair of constructs.

Last, I computed the HTMT ratio, which is the most recent addition to the discriminant validity tests advocated in the marketing literature and has been shown to offer the best balance of high detection and low false positive rates relative to the three most common tests of discriminant validity (Voorhees et al. 2016). I assessed whether the ratio between the average correlation among constructs falls below the cut-off score. Specifically, I computed

the HTMT ratio between IA and its similar constructs. All the HTMT ratios, ranging

from .581 to .837, were below .85, which is the suggested cut-off score (Henseler, Ringle,

and Sarstedt 2015; Voorhees et al. 2016), thus supporting discriminant validity across all the

similar constructs to IA.

To test predictive validity, following Warren et al. (2019) and Reich, Beck, and Price

(2018), I computed the composite IA score and regressed it on a set of dependent variables,

including attitudes towards the influencer (i.e., influencer attitude), relationship strength (i.e.,

commitment, intimacy, satisfaction, and self-connection), brand attitude, purchase intention

and willingness to recommend. These results showed that influencer authenticity is a strong

predictor of all the dependent variables (all coefficients larger than .878 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).

Discussion

In this study, I generated, purified, and validated the measurement scales of IA, resulting

in a final scale of 18 items that can be reliably used by both researchers and practitioners to

assess the authenticity of an influencer. However, the effects of influencer authenticity on

consumer behaviors remain unknown. Therefore, in the next study, I aim to explore and test

the impact of IA on customer engagement and customers' actual buying behavior (i.e., sales

performance) using field data.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

To investigate the impact of influencer authenticity on consumers' behavioral outcomes in response to the influencer's sponsored post, I consider both the pre-purchase stage and the purchase stage, which are the first two stages of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The pre-purchase stage involves all aspects of consumers' experience with a brand and its environment before purchasing goods from the brand, such as recognizing needs, searching, and interacting with brands (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The purchase stage encompasses all customer interactions with the brand and its environment during the purchase and is characterized by actual purchase decisions such as choice, ordering, and payment (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Relating to the pre-purchase stage, I examine the impact of influencer authenticity on *customer engagement*, defined as consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities in response to an influencer's brand-related posting activities (Hollebeek 2011, p. 555). In this research, I focus on consumers' behavioral activities including giving likes, comments, and shares on the influencer's sponsored posts. On social media, engagement is commonly operationalized as a set of measurable consumer behaviors in response to online content, such as liking, commenting, or reposting content (Malhotra, Malhotra, and See 2013). These forms of engagement can create ripple effects to influence other potential customers, thus contributing positively to firm performance (Kumar, Petersen, and Leone 2010; Palmatier, Kumar, and Harmeling 2017; Pansari and Kumar 2017). Tracking how the audience becomes involved in the content, engagement is an important metric that is used to analyze an influencer marketing campaign's effectiveness (Influencer Marketing Hub 2021). Existing

research also measures OIM outcomes with various engagement data (e.g., Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019; Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020). In this study, I predict that influencer authenticity will increase consumers' engagement with the influencer's sponsored post. Furthermore, I suggest that the effect of IA on customer engagement would depend on two influencer characteristics: an influencer's follower size and his or her level of expertise. Specifically, I propose that IA matters more for influencers with a larger follower network but less for influencers with higher expertise.

Relating to the purchase stage, I examine the effect of influencer authenticity on another important dependent variable: *sales performance* derived from the influencer's sponsored post. Researchers and practitioners concur that sales performance is one of the key evaluative outcomes to assess firms' marketing communication effectiveness (McAlister et al. 2016) and an important metric that firms use to gauge the effectiveness of their OIM campaigns (Influencer Intelligence 2018). In this study, I predict that consumers are more likely to buy products endorsed by a more authentic influencer, which means that influencer authenticity will have a positive effect on sales performance of the influencer's sponsored post. In this stage, I consider two brand characteristics including brand popularity and brand premium. I expect that the strength of the positive impact of IA on sales performance will vary based on two brand factors: brand popularity and brand premium. Specifically, I posit that IA is more important for more popular brands but matters less for premium brands. The overview of the conceptual framework was provided in Figure 5.

Effect of Influencer Authenticity on Customer Engagement

I posit that influencer authenticity will positively affect customer engagement of the influencer's sponsored posts due to two reasons. First, authentic influencers are perceived as more trustworthy, motivating consumers to engage with them more. Prior studies of authenticity suggest that authentic brands foster benevolent trust (Moulard et al. 2016)—that is, the belief that brands are concerned about consumers' wellbeing beyond their commercial motives (Schlosser, White, and Lloyd 2006). Similarly, Schallen, Burmann, and Riley (2014) claim that authentic people are more predictable, as they act according to their past behavior, thus lowering the risk of uncertainty and creating higher trustworthiness. Consistent with the literature, I also predict that IA increases the influencer's trustworthiness, which further contributes to higher customer engagement with the sponsored post. According to the commitment-trust theory (Morgan and Hunt 1994), trust positively relates to commitment. For example, consumer trust leads to consumer loyalty as the consumer engages in positive word of mouth (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). In this vein, consumers with confidence in authentic influencers can demonstrate a public commitment to them by engaging in comments, likes, and shares on social media platforms. Overall, I contend that the higher trustworthiness of authentic influencers enhances customer engagement.

Second, I argue that consumers engage more with the influencer's sponsored post due to consumers' higher attachment to authentic influencers. Authenticity is a valued quality that has been shown to result in positive outcomes in interpersonal relationships. For instance, previous research shows that employees engaged in deep acting are perceived as more authentic, and this perception leads to higher customer-employee rapport and positive

affective outcomes (Henning-Thurau, Houston, and Sridha 2006). Likewise, an authentic artist shapes attitudes toward the artist and subsequent behavioral intentions in a desirable way (Moulard et al. 2014). Moreover, previous psychological research finds that being authentic leads to better-functioning interpersonal relationships (Brunell et al. 2010) and brings relational benefits such as relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, attachment orientations, and trust (Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn 2017; Lopez and Rice 2006; Wickham 2013). Similar positive outcomes of authenticity have been observed in consumption contexts (Arnould and Price 2000; Beverland and Farrely 2010). In the branding context, for example, higher brand authenticity triggers greater emotional brand attachment (Morhart et al. 2015) As such, I suggest that an influencer who is perceived to be authentic, or one who is perceived to be passionate, interactive, symbolic, original, and transparent, is likely to foster consumers' attachment to the influencer. Consumers will perceive the influencer to be reliable, and this attachment will lead to higher customer engagement. Attachment theory predicts that consumers are motivated to expend their own resources, such as time and effort, to maintain proximity to others (Bretherton 1985). When a consumer is attached to an influencer, he/she is more likely to support the influencer through the public display for advocacy (Elbedweihy et al. 2016; Park et al. 2010; Rabbanee, Roy, and Spence 2020; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Therefore, I argue that consumers' attachment will drive them to engage in liking, commenting, and sharing the authentic influencers' posts.

Based on the trustworthiness of authentic influencers and the consumers' attachment to them, I postulate that consumers can form a public commitment to them by engaging in

comments, likes, and shares with the authentic influencer's sponsored post. Overall, I contend that IA contributes to higher customer engagement with the influencer's sponsored post.

H1: Influencer authenticity positively affects customer engagement.

Moderating Effects of Influencer Characteristics on Customer Engagement

In the pre-purchase stage, consumers are involved in activities such as needs assessment, search, and consideration (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). As brand endorsers, influencers play a significant role in influencing consumers' pre-purchase behavior. As such, I consider two influencer characteristics as moderators of the link between IA and customer engagement. In particular, I examine influencers' follower size and expertise, as these are two important influencer selection criteria that have been examined in prior literature (e.g., Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019; Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020).

Follower size refers to an influencer's total number of followers on a social media platform. This variable is relevant for two key reasons. First, authenticity of influencers with a larger follower size tends to be lower from the consumer perspective. Influencers with many followers, such as mega-influencers or macro-influencers, are regarded as less authentic than their micro counterparts because they might frequently partner with brands, thus regularly exposing their audience to a large share of branded content regularly (Sober 2019). In this vein, their recommendations may seem less authentic, and their followers may become desensitized to the high percentage of sponsored content. This is likely to be an issue for marketers, as partnering with such influencers might backfire due to the higher risk of consumer skepticism and numbness. In contrast, micro-influencers, who have a smaller follower size and spend more time interacting with their audience, tend to be considered more

authentic because they are still seen as regular people and thus are more relatable to consumers (Willmott 2020). As such, IA matters more for influencers with a larger (vs. smaller) follower base due to consumer skepticism.

Second, a larger follower base might decrease consumers' attachment to the influencer. Followers seek reciprocity from influencers; that is, they expect influencers to interact with them on social media platforms (Lu et al. 2021). This means that if an influencer's follower size is large, the chance for a follower to gain reciprocal attention from the influencer might decrease, because a greater number of followers intensifies the competition for reciprocity (known as the *N-effect* in social psychology; Garcia and Tor 2009). The failure to gain reciprocity will jeopardize the development of relationships (Gross and Latane 1974) between followers and influencers, resulting in dissonance for the followers (Shumaker and Jackson 1979). As a result, their attachment to influencers might be weakened. Cooperating with authentic influencers might be a possible solution as authentic influencers form consumers' attachment. Hence, influencers with a larger follower size might suffer from higher consumer skepticism and lower consumer attachment caused by the failure to reciprocate, making IA more important for them. Formally:

H2: The positive effect of influencer authenticity on customer engagement is stronger (vs. weaker) when the influencer has a larger (vs. smaller) follower size.

Influencer expertise is defined as the extent to which the influencer has the ability to discuss a product or a service (Alba and Hutchinson 1987) and the qualification to make correct assertions (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953). For example, athletes can be appropriate endorsers of sneakers and sportswear, while doctors can be feasible endorsers of

medicine and healthcare products because of their solid professional knowledge in their own fields (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953). Abundant prior research suggests that an individual's expertise is an indication of his or her perceived credibility and persuasive power. For example, drawing on source credibility theory, the celebrity endorsement literature suggests that consumers show more favorable attitudes toward celebrity endorsers with higher expertise because they are perceived to be more credible (Ohanion 1991). Similarly, opinion leaders' expertise primarily drives their perceived credibility (Kiecker and Cowles 2002) so that consumers prefer products endorsed by experts. Indeed, in the sponsored blogging context, a high-expertise blogger can be regarded as "making an expert endorsement of the product", whereas a low-expert blogger can be perceived as "making a novice endorsement of it" (Uribe, Buzeta, and Velásquez 2016). In influencer marketing, an influencer's expertise was found to positively affect the influencer's perceived taste and opinion leadership (Ki and Kim 2019), thus arousing followers' interests in the influencer's endorsed products (Yuan and Lou 2020).

In this vein, influencers with higher expertise have already gained the trust of consumers due to their higher degree of skill or knowledge in their specific fields. Thus, IA plays a relatively less important role in affecting customer engagement for these influencers. However, influencers with lower expertise do not benefit from the initial trust signaled by the power of "experts", so they might be perceived to present fewer thought-out ideas (Braunsberger and Munch 1998) and thus need to complement the lack of trust by collaborating with more authentic influencers. Therefore:

H3: The positive effect of influencer authenticity on customer engagement is weaker (vs. stronger) when the influencer has higher expertise (vs. lower expertise).

Effect of Influencer Authenticity on Sales Performance

Meanwhile, I propose that influencer authenticity will have a positive impact on the sales performance of the influencer's sponsored posts for two reasons. First, IA creates higher trustworthiness of the influencer, which will lead to better sales performance of the influencer's sponsored posts. In the branding context, consumers perceive authentic brands as more trustworthy (Eggers et al. 2013). Specifically, consumers who rate a brand as authentic also believe it to be trustworthy, because authentic brands perform based on their promises without unexpected problems (Napoli et al. 2014). The current marketplace is characterized by a higher level of consumer skepticism (Arnould and Price 2000), as brands are commonly involved in deception, trickery, and exaggeration (Holt 2002), and authenticity provides an antidote for such trustworthiness issues (Eggers et al. 2013). In the influencer marketing context, when influencers act in an authentic way that builds trust, consumers perceive lower risk associated with the product information being provided, which positively shapes their attitudes towards the product/brand and fosters greater confidence in their purchase decisions (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002).

Second, influencer authenticity leads to higher relationship quality and thus enhances the sales performance of the influencer's sponsored posts. Existing literature investigating the outcomes of authenticity shows that authenticity leads to better relational outcomes and thus shapes purchase intentions. For example, Liu and Jang (2009) find that authenticity has a

positive effect on consumers' satisfaction in the context of restaurants. Similarly, within the psychological literature, authenticity has been discussed as a major determinant of relationship well-being and commitment (Wickham 2013). For example, partner authenticity has a significant positive impact on relationship quality evaluations (Wickham 2013). In the branding context, brand authenticity was found to increase the brand relationship quality and thus promote consumers' purchase intention as well as their willingness to pay a price premium (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn 2017; Smit, Bronner, and Tolboom 2007). Based on authentic influencers' higher trustworthiness and relationship quality, I predict that IA will encourage consumers to purchase the products endorsed by the influencer, thus contributing to better sales performance of the influencer's sponsored posts. Formally:

H4: Influencer authenticity positively affects sales performance.

Moderating Effects of Brand Characteristics on Sales Performance

Brand popularity refers to the extent to which a brand is widely sought and purchased by a large population (Kim and Chung 1997; Magnini et al. 2013) and illustrates a brand's acceptance and goodwill over time (Kim and Chung 1997). Brand popularity has a strong presence on social media, affecting the commercial success of a brand (Kim, Moon, and Lacobucci 2019). Although brand popularity can be perceived to be associated with higher quality (Buzzell and Wiersema 1981; Szymanski, Bharadwaj, and Varadarajan 1993) and considered as the accumulation of marketing acceptance and the good reputation of the brand across time (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012), it also intensifies the competition for

reciprocity at the same time, thus decreasing the relationship quality between consumers and the brands.

The *norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner 1960), which is considered a universal principle (Morales 2005), is considered one of the key components that can consolidate an enduring long-term consumer-firm relationship (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998). Consumers seek a reciprocal relationship with the sellers from whom they purchase products and services (Schultz and Bailey 2000). For example, consumers demonstrate "personal reciprocity" by rewarding firms for efforts directed towards them individually (Morales 2005). As popular brands are generally sought and purchased by a mass of consumers, brands need to be reciprocal to a larger group of consumers, which intensifies the competition for reciprocity (*N-effect*; Garcia and Tor 2009). Studies show that failing to gain reciprocity harms the development of relationships (Gross and Latane 1974; Staub 1972) between brands and consumers. For popular brands, partnering with authentic influencers might be a remedy to this problem due to the higher relationship quality to which they contribute. Therefore, IA is more effective in improving sales performance for more popular brands due to the higher relationship quality associated with authentic influencers. As such, I propose that:

H5: The positive effect of influencer authenticity on sales performance is stronger (vs. weaker) when brands have higher popularity (vs. lower popularity).

Brand premium is characterized by both high prices and excellent functional quality (Steenkamp 2014). Premium brands command higher prices due to their superior product attributes such as excellent quality or a high technological level (Quelch 1987; Trefzger et al. 2016; Vigneron and Johnson 2004), as consumers place more value on quality than on prices

in their purchase decisions (Zeithamal 1988). Prior literature shows that higher price signals greater product quality (Caves and Greene 1996; Milgrom and Roberts 1986), and consumers use the price-quality relationship to infer the product quality from its price (Erdem, Keane, and Sun 2008). Therefore, for premium brands, higher prices already imply their superior product quality, which helps to reduce consumer uncertainty and increase brand trustworthiness. This means that collaborating with authentic influencers matters less for premium brands, as it is not necessary for them to leverage the benefit of trustworthiness offered by authentic influencers. In contrast, non-premium brands have lower prices, which do not suggest the same initial trustworthiness offered by premium brands. In this vein, cooperating with authentic influencers could transfer the meaning of "being authentic" to non-premium brands (McCracken 1989) so that they can leverage the trustworthiness of authentic influencers to offset their initial lack of consumer confidence and thus enhance the sales performance. Hence, I hypothesize:

H6: The positive effect of influencer authenticity on sales performance is weaker (vs. stronger) when the brands are premium (vs. non-premium) ones.

Effect of Customer Engagement on Sales Performance

According to the engagement theory, customer engagement had both direct and indirect contributions to both tangible and intangible firm performance outcomes (Pansari and Kumar 2017). One of the direct contributions is customer purchases of products or services that offer direct value to the firm performance (Gupta et al. 2004). Therefore, I also expect that engaging consumers are more likely to buy the products/services endorsed by the authentic influencer, thus enhancing the sales performance. More formally:

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H7: Customer engagement positively affects sales performance.

Study 2

To test my hypotheses, I used data obtained from the most popular short-video platform, Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok). I asked three coders to assess IA by watching influencers' videos uploaded on Douyin. I expect that IA positively affects customer engagement with the influencer's sponsored post and that this positive impact is stronger for influencers with larger follower size but weaker for influencers with higher expertise. This is because larger influencers are considered as less authentic and cause relational issue. Influencers with higher expertise already gain consumer trust. Meanwhile, I predict that perceived IA has a positive impact on the sales performance of the influencer's sponsored post. The positive impact of perceived IA on sales performance is stronger for more popular brands but weaker for premium brands. This is because popular brands need to address the decreased relationship quality caused by the intensified competition for reciprocity and premium brands have initial trustworthiness signaled by their higher prices.

Data

I cooperated with an AI-based data platform called New Rank to collect my data of the online videos posted by influencers on the most popular short-video platform in China, Douyin. Douyin is one of the predominant short-video platforms in China with around 680 million active users (iiMedia Research 2021). It is also widely used by around eight million firms and brands to introduce and promote products, often embedded in the short videos, which serve as one of the most preferred ways to reach target consumers (iiMedia Research 2021). As such, Douyin has attracted a myriad of social media influencers, who are

individuals or companies paid to create sponsored posts for brands on the platform (New Rank 2021).

To collect the data of the dependent variables (i.e., customer engagement and sales performance), I used a randomly selected date, May 19th, 2021, which was neither a weekend day nor a public holiday, as the date of the focal posts to be used as the source of both customer engagement and sales performance. The engagement data and sales data captured the total engagement and total sales of 16 days in total (from May 19th, 2021, to June 4th, 2021). At the time of sampling influencers and collecting videos for coders to evaluate IA, due to the large number of influencers on Douyin, I took the following steps to select the samples. The data platform divides influencers into 20 different categories, such as entertainment, game, food, travel, enterprise, and education, using algorithms that take their video content and endorsed products into consideration. I first obtained the distribution of all the influencers by their categories. Based on the distribution of approximately 33,000 influencers falling within 20 categories, I selected the five categories with the highest number of influencers: fashion (5,282 influencers), food (1,990), entertainment (1,807), housing (1,643), and fitness and health (1,292). Within each of the five categories, I randomly selected 20 influencers based on two criteria. First, the influencer needed to have at least twenty video posts during the three months before May 19th (i.e., February 18th to May 18th), 2021, to ensure that there would be enough videos for coders to assess the five dimensions of IA. Second, the influencer needed to endorse a product in a post on May 19th, 2021. This post is the influencer's sponsored post (i.e., focal post). I also excluded brand and celebrity accounts to ensure that the selected sample contained influencers only.

After identifying the 100 influencers, I asked New Rank to collect all the videos

uploaded by these 100 influencers between February 18th and May 18th on Douyin. These

influencers uploaded 13,680 videos in total, and each influencer uploaded approximately 1.5

videos per day on average, during these three months. I randomly selected 20 videos of each

influencer from the entire pool of their videos during these three months. This simple random

sampling procedure resulted in a total of 2,000 videos for coders to examine to evaluate the

IA of each selected influencer. Then, I randomly selected one video post that introduced a

product uploaded on May 19th, 2021, for each of the 100 influencers, resulting in 100 focal

posts in total. I also collected each video's duration, posted content, URL, engagement

metrics (i.e., number of comments, shares, and likes) as well as the endorsed product's price,

title, and final sales in each video.

Operationalization

Following previous work (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019; Tellis et al. 2019), I

recruited three coders to watch the 20 videos of each influencer (i.e., 2,000 videos in total),

evaluate the five authenticity dimensions of IA based on the watched videos, and code the

expertise of the influencer and some important control variables of the video content. The

coders first watched videos and then assessed IA based on the 18 items generated in Study 1

on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree"). Next, to

evaluate the influencers' expertise as one of the moderators, coders were asked to look at the

profile of the influencer to check whether the influencer's educational affiliation (e.g.,

Bachelor of Design) or influencer credential (e.g., "fashion specialist") present in his/her

introduction (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019). Finally, as Peng et al. (2019) found

that both attractive and unattractive sellers have higher product sales than their more average-looking counterparts, they coded physical attractiveness of the influencer as one of the control variables. The five dimensions of IA were randomized to avoid sequence bias, and the evaluation of IA was based on the overall assessment of the influencer rather than on individual posts.

Upon finishing the IA coding of one influencer, coders watched the focal post on May 19th, 2021, of the same influencer and coded control variables including the video's emotional appeal and information appeal, as well as the presence of some elements involving baby and storyline. Prior literature cites several control variables that might affect ad video effectiveness. Emotion-focused ads are more likely to be shared by viewers compared with information-focused ads (Akpinar and Berger 2017). Therefore, coders were asked to evaluate content cues including emotional appeal, assessing whether each video aroused eight individual emotions, both positive and negative, that often appear in the videos on Douyin (e.g., warm, joyful, sad, and fearful), and information appeal, using items adapted from previous studies (e.g., "The video uses logical reasoning"; Tellis et al. 2019). Following Tellis et al. (2019) and Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz (2019), coders were also requested to code two video elements to check whether they were present in the video (i.e., baby and storyline; 0 = "absence," and 1 = "presence").

Coding Procedure

I recruited three coders, all blind to the research questions and objectives, to participate in the coding task. Before the coding, I organized a two-day training session, in which I explained the definition of each variable, the scales of each IA dimension, and the control

variables in detail and clarified any wording problems. I also asked the coders to code 10

influencers unrelated to the selected sample before they evaluated the selected 100

influencers in the sample. I then reviewed discrepancies and clarified the definitions to

minimize the potential occurrence of future discrepancies and personal biases in the coding.

Next, I gave the 20 sample videos from each of the 100 influencers and the focal posts to the

coders to code independently and at their own pace. I recommended that they not code more

than 20 influencers per day and take a break after coding each set of five influencers. Since

the duration of the videos is relatively short (M = 35 seconds, SD = 208 seconds), coders

needed 10 to 20 minutes to code each influencer's IA and 1 to 2 minutes to code each video

(i.e., focal post). The sequence of the influencers also differed for each coder to avoid biases.

The coding efficiency increased as they coded more influencers and it took about one month

to finish the whole coding task. Because there were three coders, I used the intraclass

correlation coefficient (Bartko 1966) to test interrater reliability. All the variables, ranging

from .829 to .927, exceeded the recommended criterion of .80 (Weir 2005).

Measurements

Dependent Variables

Customer engagement. Viewers can comment on, like, or share posts on Douyin.

Customer engagement was measured by the sum of likes, comments, and shares received by

the focal post (Moro, Rita, and Vala 2016). I used the natural log of it to account for the large

spread (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019).

Sales performance. Each focal post has its own link with the sponsored product. Thus,

the sales volume of the product sponsored in the focal post is easy for New Rank to track and

record. Following Kupfer et al. (2018), sales performance was measured by the total sales volume of the product introduced in the focal post. I used the log transformation of the sales volume of each sponsored product to account for the large spread.

Independent Variable

Influencer authenticity. For IA, I determined the final value of each item of the five dimensions of it to reflect the agreed-upon value when at least two coders gave the same score for this item (Tellis et al. 2019). Otherwise, I used the average score of their ratings.

Influencer Variables

Follower Size. Following Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes (2020), follower size was measured by the total number of followers of the influencer on Douyin, which is a proxy for influencer strength. I used the natural log of it in my models because it had a large spread.

Expertise. Following Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019), expertise was measured by the presence of either the influencer's educational affiliation (e.g., Bachelor of Design) or a credential demonstrating the influencer's status. Expertise is the sum of these two measures and ranges from 0 to 2. The coders coded expertise by viewing the introduction on the influencers' main page on Douyin.

Brand Variables

Brand Popularity. Following Swani et al. (2017), popularity was measured by the follower size of the brand endorsed in the focal post. Specifically, I recorded the number of followers of the brands' official accounts on Douyin at the time of data collection.

Brand Premium. Following Sethuraman and Cole (1999), brand premium was measured by the difference between the price of the product endorsed in the focal post and the average

price of the same product category with this product. Products endorsed in the focal posts were placed in 11 categories such as clothing, food, housing appliances, car, toys, and sports. For each product category, I obtained its average price from New Rank.

Control Variables

Following Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz (2019), I determined the final value of emotional appeal using the maximum rating among all eight individual emotions. Similar to IA, I determined the final value of physical attractiveness and information appeal if two coders gave the exact same score. Otherwise, I used the average score of the three ratings (Tellis et al. 2019). For dummy variables (i.e., the presence of baby and storyline), the final value of each variable was determined if at least two raters gave the same rating. The measurements for all of the variables are summarized in Table 7.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before testing my hypotheses, I conducted a CFA to further confirm the five-factor structure of the overall scale by using structural equation modeling (SEM) based on the data obtained from New Rank. I used a reflective model in which IA served as the second-order construct and its five dimensions served as the first-order constructs with the set of 18 items generated in Study 1. Each item loaded high onto its subdimension of IA, ranging from .769 to .955. Moreover, the dimensions had high loadings onto the second-order construct (i.e., IA), ranging from .647 to .794, except interactivity (.391). The reason of the low loading of interactivity might be that coders are not followers of the focal influencer so that it might be difficult for them to capture the accurate interactive level. Following prior work (Warren et

al. 2019), although the loading of interactivity is not very high based on the field data, I

retained it because its loading onto IA was high (.698) in Study 1c. The fit statistics of my

model showed that all the items had good fit and thus confirmed my model of IA (chi-square

= 166.894, p = .016; NNFI = .978; CFI = .981; RMSEA = .054; SRMR = .0940). The CFA

results based on the field data comfirmed that passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality,

and transparency are the five first-order factors that correspond to a higher-order IA

construct. All the CRs of these five factors of IA, ranging from .923 to .968, met the criteria

and thus ensured the internal consistency of the scale. All the AVEs for each factor, ranging

from .751 to .863, are greater than.50, fullfilling the convergent validity criteria. The results

were summarized in Table 9.

Main Effects

I tested H1 and H4 by estimating the structural equation model (SEM) using AMOS 26.

In my model, IA, the second-order construct reflected by the five first-order dimensions with

the set of 18 items generated in Study 1, was the independent variable. Customer engagement

and sales performance served as dependent variables. IA was found to predict higher

customer engagement (b = .430, p <.01), thus supporting H1. Also, the results showed that IA

is positively related to sales performance (b = .546, p < .01), thus supporting H4.

Moderating Effects

To test the moderating effects of follower size and expertise on the IA–customer

engagement link (H2 and H3) and the moderating effects of brand popularity and brand

premium on the IA–sales performance link (H5 and H6), I used multiple regressions. I

estimated the following model equations:

log (customer engagement) = α + β$_1$ (IA) + β$_2$ (follower size) + β$_3$ (expertise) + β$_4$ (IA ×

follower size) + β$_5$ (IA × expertise) + β$_6$ (duration) + β$_7$ (attractiveness) + β$_8$ (information

appeal) + β$_9$ (emotion appeal) + β$_{10}$ (brand premium) + β$_{11}$ (brand popularity) + β$_{12}$ (clothes) +

β$_{13}$ (food) + β$_{14}$ (sports) + β$_{15}$ (baby) + β$_{16}$ (storyline) + ε, (1) and

log (sales performance) = α + β$_1$ (IA) + β$_2$ (brand popularity) + β$_3$ (brand premium) + β$_4$ (IA ×

brand popularity) + β$_5$ (IA × brand premium) + β$_6$ (follower size) + β$_7$ × (duration) + β$_8$

(attractiveness) + β$_9$ (information appeal) + β$_{10}$ (emotion appeal) + β$_{11}$ (expertise) + β$_{12}$

(clothes) + β$_{13}$ (food) + β$_{14}$ (sports) + β$_{15}$ (baby) + β$_{16}$ (storyline) + ε, (2), where α and β$_i$ are

coefficients that need to be estimated and ε are error terms initially assumed to be

independently and identically distributed.

I did two regression analysis by involving customer engagement and sales performance

as the dependent variables in the model separately to test H1 and H4. First, the main effects

of IA on customer engagement and sales performance were further confirmed in the main-

effects-only model (i.e., model 2). According to the results, IA has a positive impact on both

customer engagement (b = .570, p < .05) and sales performance (b = .884, p < .01), thus

supporting H1 and H4. This means that when IA increases by one unit, with all else being

equal, the total engagement of the influencer's sponsored post will increase by 57%.

Moreover, when IA increases by one unit, with all else being equal, the sales performance of

the product introduced in the influencer's sponsored post will increase by 88.4%. The main-

effects-only model explains 61.4% of the total variation in customer engagement and 34.6% of the total variation in sales performance.

Customer engagement model. Table 10 also reports the results of the model with total engagement as the dependent variable (N = 100). The VIFs were all below 2.27, illustrating that there is no concern regarding multicollinearity. According to Table 10, the interaction between IA and follower size was significant (b = .481, p <.01) in the full model in which the interaction terms were included, thus supporting H2. However, the interaction between IA and expertise was marginally insignificant (b = -.494, p = .151), which does not support H3. The full model explains 65.2% of the total changes in customer engagement.

Sales performance model. Table 11 reports the results of the model with sales performance as the dependent variable (N = 100). Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were all below 2.07, indicating no issues of multicollinearity. As shown in Table 11, the interaction between IA and brand popularity was significant in the final full model incorporating the interaction effects (b = .480, p < .05), which supports H5. The interaction between IA and brand premium was also significant in the sales performance full model (b = -.780, p < .05), supporting H6. The full model explains 42.3% of the total variation in sales performance.

Effects of Customer Engagement on Sales Performance

To test the positive relationship between customer engagement and sales performance, based on the model 5 of customer engagement model, I further involved customer engagement as one of the dependent variables (shown as model 2 in Table 12). VIFs were all below 1.0, demonstrating there is no concern for multicollinearity. According to Table 12, the

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coefficient of customer engagement is significantly positive (b = .472, p < .01), thus

supporting H7. The model explains 53.6% of the total changes in sales performance.

Discussion

Using the data obtained from the leading short-video platform in China, I tested my

seven hypotheses. The results of both SEM and regression analysis supported the hypotheses

on the main effects (i.e., H1 and H4). The regression analysis results also supported the

moderating roles of follower size (H2), brand popularity (H5), and brand premium (H6) as

well as the positive relationship between customer engagement and sales performance (H7).

However, the moderating role of influencer's expertise failed to receive support (H3).

Consistent with my prediction, IA was found to increase customer engagement and sales

performance of the influencer's sponsored post. Moreover, influencers with a larger follower

size should pay more attention to their authenticity compared with those with fewer

followers. Furthermore, my findings also revealed that the positive impact of IA was more

important for more popular brands and non-premium brands. At last, the pre-purchase stage

outcome (i.e., customer engagement) significantly predicts better purchase stage outcome

(i.e., sales performance).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

What characteristics does an authentic influencer have? Based on a multi-method

approach, this study finds that authentic influencers are passionate, interactive, symbolic,

original, and transparent. For brands and marketers, cooperating with authentic influencers

will promote customer engagement and enhance sales performance. Specifically, Study 1

used a paper-and-pen questionnaire and online surveys to generate, purify, and validate the

measurement scales of IA and confirm the five subdimensions of the multidimensional

construct of IA—passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, and transparency—with 18

measurement items. Furthermore, the results of Study 2 reveal that IA increases customer

engagement and leads to better sales performance. Evidence from the dominant short-video

platform in China shows that influencers with higher authenticity received larger numbers of

likes, comments, and shares, and the sales volume of the products that they endorsed is also

greater.

Theoretical Contributions

The present research contributes to the online influencer marketing literature in two

ways. First, I identify and conceptualize the construct of influencer authenticity (IA), which

constitutes one of the prominent benefits of influencer marketing compared with other

marketing strategies but lacks prior investigation and formal conceptualization. Emerging

literature about authenticity in the influencer marketing context shows how influencers can

manage their authenticity when brand-related messages call their initial perceived

authenticity into question. For example, Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) illustrates

that influencers need to show their intrinsic motivations and non-commercial orientation,

referred to as passionate authenticity; offer unbiased information about the product or service;

and disclose their partnership with brands, known as transparent authenticity. However,

existing research does not formally conceptualize, comprehensively identify, and articulate

the characteristics of influencer authenticity or study the impact of authenticity on consumer

behavioral outcomes. The present work identifies and delineates the five dimensions of IA

and empirically tests its impact on customer engagement, which is the first (pre-purchase)

stage of the customer journey, and on sales performance, which is the second (purchase) stage of the customer journey, based on real-world evidence.

Second, this research also enriches the literature on authenticity by identifying a new type of authenticity. Prior work in authenticity has conceptualized authenticity and uncovered its effects in consumers' behavioral and relational outcomes in contexts including consumption, branding, advertising, and celebrities, but little attention has been paid to the authenticity of influencers. For example, authentic consumption experience was found to positively affect consumers' information search about products, their purchase intention, and word of mouth (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021). Morhart et al. (2015) shows that authentic brands, being faithful and true to consumers, trigger higher emotional brand attachment. Similarly, Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn (2017) reveals that authentic brands can enhance consumers' self-congruence, thus leading them to appreciate their relationship with the brand more strongly and creating higher brand relationship quality accordingly. The present work identifies a novel type of authenticity that can alter consumers' engagement behavior and purchase behavior. I demonstrate that IA significantly increases consumers' engagement with the influencer 's sponsored post and their actual buying behavior of the product in the influencer's sponsored post.

Finally, few investigations of the real-world impact of authenticity have been conducted in the marketing literature. In contrast, I provide evidence of the effect of influencer authenticity on customer engagement and sales performance by examining the authenticity level of influencers on Douyin with actual engagement and sales data. As such, my work enhances the external validity of authenticity on consumers' actual engagement and

purchasing behavior. Besides, to my best of my knowledge, prior research has not examined

the relationship between customer engagement and customer actual buying behavior based on

real-world data. As such, my findings provide empirical support for the positive link between

the two key outcome variables.

Managerial Implications

This research also has several managerial implications. First, influencer authenticity is an

important factor that could drive the failure or success of an influencer marketing campaign,

and managers have long sought to determine how to assess the authenticity of an influencer

(AspireIQ 2021). My findings provide a set of criteria that practitioners can utilize when

identifying and selecting authentic influencers, which helps to address the urgent issue faced

by them. My results show that managers can consider five aspects of an influencer's

authenticity: passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, and transparency. Furthermore,

they can quantify the aforementioned dimensions using the 18-item measurement scales I

have developed, which can simplify evaluation and comparison with other options.

Additionally, my findings show that authenticity matters more for influencers with a

larger follower base because these mega-influencers, with greater product endorsements, are

perceived as less authentic. Besides, with a larger follower size, mega-influencers intensify

the competition for reciprocity and thus jeopardize the consumers' attachment to them.

Therefore, my results alert mega-influencers and their associated companies that they should

pay more attention to managing their authenticity. In this vein, they could improve their

authenticity by displaying their passion to their followers. For example, they can reduce the

frequency and number of product endorsements or any other commercial messages in their

content creation. They can also interact with their followers more frequently by replying to their comments or answering their questions in a timely manner. It would also be advisable for them to post more personal content, such as a vlog on a trip with their family, to their social accounts. Meanwhile, my findings also remind marketers that collaborating with a very popular influencer may backfire, making it necessary for them to weigh and deliberate the advantages and disadvantages before making a final decision.

Finally, considering the brand-level moderators, my work also has implications for different types of brands. I show that authenticity is more important for more popular brands, due to its ability to address the issue of intensified competition for reciprocity, and for non-premium brands, due to the lack of trustworthiness signaled by lower prices. Therefore, brands with higher popularity are advised to work with more authentic influencers. Moreover, non-premium brands should emphasize and invest higher efforts into identifying and selecting authentic influencers by leveraging their benefits to complement the initial lack of trust caused by their lower prices.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, although the current work reveals that IA has desirable outcomes in terms of both customer engagement and sales performance, it did not identify the antecedents of IA. Future research could identify and test possible antecedents such as the ratio of positive reviews to total reviews (Gerdeman 2019). If this ratio is excessively high, the influencer might be a confederate of the associated brand, and thus it might be assumed that his/her opinions and suggestions could be biased or fake.

Second, I tested the impact of IA on the dependent variables based on the assessment of the IA of 100 influencers on Douyin. To test external validity, future research could use a different social platform, such as Instagram or YouTube, to further examine the impact of influencers' IA on these platforms on customer engagement or sales performance and to check whether the results are consistent with those of the present study. Moreover, they could also compare the relative weight (i.e., importance) of the five dimensions of IA on consumer behavioral outcomes across different cultures. For example, interactivity and symbolism might be more important in interdependent cultures, such as those of Asian countries, as individuals involved in these societies value tightly and integrated relationships (Hofstede 2011). As such, they might expect influencers to be more interactive and symbolic.

Another opportunity for future research is to explore the impact of IA on different dependent variables. In this research, I tested its effect by considering the first two stages of the customer journey (i.e., pre-purchase and purchase stage) but not the final stage (i.e., the post-purchase stage). Future studies could investigate the role of IA in predicting post-purchase outcomes, such as usage and consumption, post-purchase engagement, service requests, and the loyalty loop (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). These future efforts could further enhance the current findings on IA and better capture the essence of the present work's theorization.

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Table 1. Concepts of Authenticity in Marketing

Concepts	Definition	Components	Antecedents	Outcomes	Mechanism/ Theory	Representative papers
Authentic consumption	Defined as a holistic consumer assessment determined by six component judgments (accuracy, connected-ness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency).	Accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, proficiency	×	Information search, purchase, WOM	Brand attitudes	Beverland (2006) Rose and Wood (2005) Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021)
Brand authenticity	Defined as 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.	Heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitment, relationship to place, method of production, downplaying commercial motive, status, sincerity, continuity, originality, reliability, naturalness, credibility, integrity, symbolism	*Indexical Cues*: brand scandals, brand-congruent employee behavior *Iconic Cues*: communication style emphasizing a brand's roots and virtue *Existential Cues*: brand anthropomorphism, uniqueness, scarcity, longevity, longitudinal consistency Perceived brand marketing communications	Emotional brand attachment, positive WOM, expected quality, trust, purchase intention, price premium, forgiveness	Personal identity evoking, meaning transfer, quality signaling, proof for brand abilities	Beverland (2005) Beverland and Farrelly (2010) Bruhn et al. (2012) Fritz et al. (2017) Napoli et al. (2013) Morhart et al. (2015) Schallehn et al. (2014)
Advertising authenticity	Defined as the genuine, real and true advertisement that conveys the illusion of realistic life in reference to a consumption situation, connects with tradition and origin, and helps consumers link with personal moral values.	Brand essence, brand heritage, realistic plot, message credibility	×	Brand sales	Emotional attachment, empathy and sympathy evoking,	Stern (1994) Beverland et al. (2008) Becker et al. (2019)
Celebrity authenticity	Defined as the consumers' perception that a celebrity is true to his or her self when they appear genuine in their relationships with consumers and behave in accordance with their perceived values.	Consistent with held values, openness and honesty, true self, reliability	×	Purchase intention	Self-determination theory, wishful identification fulfillment	Moulard et al. (2015) Schouten et al. (2020)
This study: **Influencer authenticity**	Defined as the extent to which consumers perceive an influencer is passionate, interactive, symbolic, original, and transparent.	Passion, interactivity, symbolism, originality, transparency	×	Customer engagement, sales performance	Trustworthiness Attachment Relationship quality	

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Table 2. Selected Consumer Narratives from Focus Group in Support of IA Dimensions

Dimension	Authentic Influencer	Inauthentic Influencer
Passion	"loves posting videos to introduce products and food in Korea" (respondent #2)	"always engages in commercial motives" (respondent #39)
	"enjoys teaching make-up skills and trying all kinds of products to followers" (respondent #22)	"has many sponsored advertisement" (respondent #8)
		"posts for making money" (respondent #11)
	"is true to his heart" (respondent #27)	"is too commercial" (respondent #17)
	"enjoys joining events of different brands" (respondent #35)	"sells too many products" (respondent #1)
		"her videos are mainly about advertisement" (respondent #35)
		"always tries to market the brands and sends posts on purpose" (respondent #39)
Interactivity	"organizes live streaming sessions to talk with us" (respondent #1)	"does not care about his followers" (respondent #37).
	"responds to fans' needs and questions" (respondent #2)	
	"replies to our comments and questions" (respondent #3)	
	"interacts with us by mentioning our fans 'names in her videos" (respondent #6)	
	"values his followers", "treats followers as friends" (respondent # 49)	
	"has a closer relationship with the audience" (respondent #46)	
Symbolism	"reminds me about myself" (respondent #7)	N/A
Consistency	"always has the same objective and dream from the beginning to the end" (respondent #3)	N/A
	"maintains popular image for years" (respondent #34).	
Originality	"takes original photo" (respondent #17)	"Hook's videos are quite similar to others" (respondent #4)
	"behaves in her own unique and unusual way and always has different thoughts and arguments on different issues" (respondent #4)	
	"is unique and innovative" (respondent #40)	

Transparency	"enjoys sharing her life moments" (respondent #2)	"not giving true comments of the products" (respondent #20)
	"he invites his family members as well to present in his videos" (respondent #8)	"playing fake tricks on each other intentionally" (respondent #23)
	"sharing both advantages and disadvantages of the product" (respondent #12)	"failing to provide proof for her endorsement" (respondent #29)
	providing photos without unreal filtering and photoshop" (respondent #14)	"is pretense" (respondent #36)
	"sharing her real life" (respondents # 33, #34, and #37)	
	"providing photos and videos about herself and families" (respondents #5, #6)	
	"sharing daily life vlogs" (respondent #8)	
	"showing his true feelings" (respondent #43)	
	"being open about their beliefs and religion even at the risk of condemnation (respondent #7)	

Table 3. Overview of the Studies

Study	Objective	Data and methods	Results
1a	Item generation and purification	• Literature review • Essay writing from a mix of 50 HK and European students • Content validity check using paper-and-pen questionnaire from 50 HK undergraduate students	• Identification of six IA dimensions • Initial item pool of 57 items • Reduced items to 41
1b	Further purification and reliability	• Survey on MTurk with 134 US consumers • Statistical procedures (EFA, CFA)	• Reduced items to 21 (Table 4)
1c	Confirmatory factor analysis	• Survey on MTurk with 104 US consumers • Statistical procedure (CFA)	• Reduced the dimension of consistency, resulting in the five dimensions • Reduced items to 18 (Table 5)
1d	Discriminant validity and predictive validity	• Survey on MTurk with 120 US consumers • Discriminant validity test: Chi-square difference tests, latent psi correlation, and HTMT ratio • Predictive validity test: regression analysis	• Discriminant validity of the IA dimensions from a set of variables was shown (Table 7) • Predictive validity of the IA on a set of dependent variables was shown (Table 8)
2	Field study	• IA was coded based on 2,000 videos of 100 influencers from Douyin • Customer engagement and sales data of 100 focal video posts of 100 influencers from Douyin • Both SEM and multiple regression analysis	• IA has a significant positive impact on customer engagement and sales performance • The positive impact of IA on customer engagement is stronger for influencers with larger follower size • The positive impact of IA on sales performance is stronger for more popular brand but weaker for premium brands

Table 4. Study 1b Results

Constructs and items	Item-to-factor loading	Cronbach's α	Factor – IA loading	CR	AVE
Passion		.820	.611	.831	.625
Is excited about his/her domain of interest.	.831				
Has true passion for his/her domain of interest.	.721				
Enjoys activities relating to his/her domain of interest very much.	.740				
Interactivity		.865	.537	.866	.618
Can be contacted easily by his/her followers.	.780				
Is willing to interact with his/her followers.	.776				
Responds to his/her followers in a timely manner.	.850				
Is accessible and close to followers.	.824				
Symbolism		.850	.702	.850	.586
Creates posts that add meaning to followers' lives.	.753				
Creates posts that reflect important values followers care about.	.770				
Connects followers with their real selves.	.702				
Connects followers with what is really important.	.700				
Consistency		.870	.533	.873	.698
Does not change much over the years.	.869				
Has stayed the same over the years.	.856				
Has maintained a consistent personal image.	.813				
Originality		.894	.498	.895	.680
There is something about this influencer that makes him/her stand out.	.791				
Is different from all the other influencers.	.872				
Is unique.	.840				
Distinguishes himself/herself from other influencers.	.836				
Transparency		.839	.849	.845	.647
Shows the real self to his/her followers.	.704				
Is willing to share his/her daily life in an open and honest way.	.815				
Is honest on the status updates.	.659				

Table 5. Study 1c Results

Constructs and items	Item-to-factor loading	Factor – IA loading	CR	AVE
Passion		.708	.779	.639
Is excited about his/her domain of interest.	.818			
Has true passion for his/her domain of interest.	.780			
Enjoys activities relating to his/her domain of interest very much.	.837			
Interactivity		.698	.894	.678
Can be contacted easily by his/her followers.	.827			
Is willing to interact with his/her followers.	.742			
Responds to his/her followers in a timely manner.	.879			
Is accessible and close to followers.	.840			
Symbolism		.829	.893	.677
Creates posts that add meaning to followers' lives.	.837			
Creates posts that reflect important values followers care about.	.881			
Connects followers with their real selves.	.826			
Connects followers with what is really important.	.742			
Originality		.932	.850	.587
There is something about this influencer that makes him/her stand out.	.822			
Is different from all the other influencers.	.704			
Is unique.	.764			
Distinguishes himself/herself from other influencers.	.770			
Transparency		.953	.840	.639
Shows the real self to his/her followers.	.868			
Is willing to share his/her daily life in an open and honest way.	.685			
Is honest on the status updates.	.833			

Table 6. Constructs and Measures in Study 1d

Construct	Measures	Scale	References
Trustworthiness	This influencer is trustworthy.	Seven-point Likert scale	Ohanion (1990)
	This influencer is sincere.		
	This influencer is reliable.		
	This influencer is hones.		
	This influencer is dependable.		
Expertise	This influencer is an expert.	Seven-point Likert scale	Ohanion (1990); Hughes et al. (2019)
	This influencer is experienced.		
	This influencer is knowledgeable.		
	This influencer is qualified.		
	This influencer is skilled.		
Likability	This influencer is likable.	Seven-point Likert scale	Rysen (2005)
	This influencer is friendly.		
	This influencer is warm.		
	This influencer is approachable.		
Similarity	This influencer and I have a lot in common.	Seven-point Likert scale	Munnukka et al. (2016); Spiggle et al. (2012)
	This influencer is similar to me.		
	This influencer and I are a lot alike.		
	I can easily identify with this influencer.		
Quality	How do you rate the influencer on the following characteristics (1 = "low end", and 7 = "high end")?	Seven-point semantic differential	Morhart et al. (2015)
	Image of the influencer		
	Performance of the influencer		
	Overall influencer quality		
Involvement	This influencer is:	Seven-point semantic differential	Zaichkowsky (1985); Bruhn et al. (2012)
	Unimportant to me/important to me.		
	Of no concern to me/of concern to me.		
	Irrelevant to me/relevant to me.		
	Means nothing to me/means a lot to me.		
	Useless to me/useful to me.		
	Insignificant to me/significant to me.		
Image	It is easy to describe many features related to this influencer.	Seven-point Likert scale	Laroche et al. (2005); Bruhn et al. (2012)
	I could easily explain many features associated with this influencer.		
	It is not difficult to give a precise description of this influencer.		
Attachment	If he/she was permanently gone I would be upset.	Seven-point Likert scale	Thomson (2006)
	Losing him/her forever would be distressing to me.		
	I miss him/her when he/she is not around.		

Table 7. Study 1d Discriminant Validity Tests Results

Construct pairs	χ^2 difference (*p*-value)	HTMT	Psi correlations Correlation (SE)	95% confidence interval
IA -- Trustworthiness	42.5 (.000)	.828	.915 (.06)	[.798, 1.032]
IA -- Expertise	51.7 (.000)	.667	.735 (.05)	[.6375, .8325]
IA -- Likability	47.5 (.000)	.837	.871 (.054)	[.5982, .8478]
IA -- Similarity	39.6 (.038)	.659	.723 (.064)	[.5982, .8478]
IA -- Quality	65.2 (.000)	.668	.705 (.04)	[.027, .783]
IA -- Involvement	42.4 (.003)	.680	.692 (.056)	[.5828, .8012]
IA -- Image	52.617 (.000)	.722	.710 (.046)	[.6203, .7997]
IA -- Attachment	36.5 (.005)	.581	.645 (.065)	[.5183, .7718]

Table 8. Study 1d Predictive Validity Test Results

Predictor	Unstandardized *b*	Std. error	Standardized *β*	*p*-value
Influencer attitude	1.004	.106	.657	.000
Commitment	.980	.094	.691	.000
Intimacy	.903	.084	.702	.000
Satisfaction	1.086	.101	.705	.000
Self-connection	1.171	.116	.682	.000
Brand attitude	.878	.147	.562	.000
Purchase intention	1.142	.219	.511	.000
Willingness to recommend	1.177	.203	.552	.000

Table 9. Study 2 CFA Results

Dimensions	Factor – IA loading	CR	AVE
Passion	.794	.950	.863
Interactivity	.391	.968	.833
Symbolism	.701	.923	.751
Originality	.752	.954	.840
Transparency	.647	.933	.824

Table 10. Study 2 Moderator Analysis (DV = Customer Engagement)

	Customer Engagement				
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**
Independent Variables					
IA		.533 (.256)**	.684 (.255)***	.763 (.289)**	.903 (.290)***
Follower size (FS)	1.039 (.130)***	1.014 (.128)***	.982 (.125)***	.984 (.129)***	.950 (.125)***
Influencer expertise (IE)	.155 (.318)	.135 (.312)	.294 (.306)	.136 (.310)	.275 (.304)
IA x FS			.472 (.183)**		.477 (.182)***
IA x IE				-.508 (.354)	-.524 (.342)
Control Variables					
Duration	.003 (.005)	.005 (.005)	.005 (.004)	.006 (.005)	.006 (.004)
Attractiveness	.110 (.163)	-.002 (.168)	-.034 (.163)	.011 (.167)	-.021 (.162)
Information appeal	-.170 (.212)	-.181 (.208)	-.186 (.201)	-.137 (.209)	-.142 (.202)
Emotion appeal	.356 (.145)**	.260 (.149)*	.184 (.147)	.228 (.150)	.150 (.148)
Brand premium	.323 (.181)*	.390 (.181)**	.446 (.176)**	.393 (.180)**	.449 (.175)**
Brand popularity	3.112E-7 (.000)	1.313E-7 (.000)	8.286E-8 (.000)	4.542E-8 (.000)	-6.222E-9 (.000)
Clothes	.882 (.579)	.857 (.568)*	.764 (.551)	.719 (.573)	.620 (.555)
Food	-.294 (.363)	-.301 (.356)	-.339 (.345)	-.223 (.358)	-.259 (.346)
Sports	-.344 (.757)	-.226 (.774)	-.025 (.725)	-.271 (.740)	-.069 (.719)
Baby	.228 (.854)	.188 (.837)	.415 (.815)	.292 (.835)	.524 (.812)
Storyline	-.353 (1.049)	-.489 (1.031)	-.508 (.998)	-.481 (1.024)	-.500 (.990)
N	100	100	100	100	100
F	9.319***	9.307***	9.716***	8.936 ***	9.406***
F Change	9.319***	4.337**	6.620**	2.063	6.968***
R	.768	.782	.800	.788	.806
R^2	.591	.611	.640	.620	.650
Adjusted R^2	.527	.545	.574	.551	.581

Notes: * $p< .1$; ** $p< .05$; *** $p< .01$

Table 11. Study 2 Moderator Analysis (DV = Sales Performance)

	Sales Performance				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Independent Variables					
IA		1.298 (.304)***	1.341 (.298)***	1.156 (.301)***	1.204 (.295)***
Brand popularity (BP)	6.511E-7 (.000)	2.126E-7 (.000)	-7.934E-8 (.000)	2.572E-7 (.000)	-.1608E-8 (.000)
Brand premium (bp)	-.423 (.232)*	-.258 (.215)	-.273 (.210)	-.600 (.250)**	-.594 (.245)
IA x BP			.294 (.306)**		.490 (.229)**
IA x bp				-.827 (.334)**	-.777 (.328)**
Control Variables					
Follower size	.404 (.166)**	.344 (.152)**	.339 (.149)**	.377 (.148)**	.370 (.145)**
Influencer expertise	-.612 (.407)	-.610 (.371)	-.453 (.369)	-.693 (.362)*	-.543 (.361)
Duration	-.004 (.006)	.002 (.005)	.002 (.005)	.001 (.005)	.002 (.005)
Attractiveness	.216 (.208)	-.056 (.200)	-.043 (.195)	.044 (.198)	.050 (.194)
Information appeal	-.507 (.271)	-.083 (.247)	-.036 (.242)	-.153 (.241)	-.106 (.237)
Emotion appeal	.371 (.185)**	.138 (.177)*	.117 (.174)	.198 (.174)	.175 (.171)
Clothes	.655 (.742)	.594 (.676)*	.514 (.661)	.690 (.657)	.610 (.644)
Food	.341 (.454)	.325 (.423)	.241 (.415)	.398 (.411)	.316 (.405)
Sports	-.387 (.969)	-.100 (.885)	-.080 (.864)	.457 (.888)	.442 (.869)
Baby	1.583 (1.093)	1.485 (.996)	1.606 (.974)	1.503 (.966)	1.614 (.947)*
Storyline	-.472 (1.343)	-.802 (1.226)	-.690 (1.198)	-.596 (1.192)	-.504 (1.168)
N	100	100	100	100	100
F	1.542	3.027***	3.301***	3.410 ***	3.621***
F Change	1.542	18.222***	5.065**	6.141**	4.571**
R	.439	.581	.614	.620	.646
R^2	.193	.338	.377	.384	.417
Adjusted R^2	.068	.226	.262	.271	.302

Notes: * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

Table 13. Study 2 Customer Engagement – Sales Performance

	Sales Performance	
	(1)	**(2)**
Independent Variables		
IA	1.690 (.295)***	1.264 (.324)***
Follower size (FS)	.269 (.144)*	-.179 (.173)
Influencer expertise	-.389 (.350)	-.519 (.323)
(IE)		
IA x FS	.799 (.209)**	.574 (.200)***
IA X IE	-.326 (.394)	-.079 (.366)
Customer engagement		.472 (.117)***
Control Variables		
Brand popularity	7.554E-8 (.000)	7.847E-8 (.000)
Brand premium	-.162 (.201)	-.374 (.192)*
Duration	.002 (.005)	-.001 (.005)
Attractiveness	-.103 (.187)	-.092 (.171)
Information appeal	-.065 (.232)	.002 (.214)
Emotion appeal	-.012 (.170)	-.083 (.157)
Clothes	.348 (.638)	.055 (.590)
Food	.310 (.398)	.432 (.366)
Sports	.213 (.828)	.245 (.760)
Baby	1.935 (.934)*	1.688 (.860)*
Storyline	-.829 (1.139)	-.593 (1.047)
N	100	100
F	4.013***	5.435***
F Change	4.013***	16.164***
R	.665	.732
R^2	.442	.536
Adjusted R^2	.332	.437

Notes: * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

Figure 1. Austin (Jiaqi) LI (beauty influencer) from Alibaba's Taobao

Figure 2. PewDiePie (gaming influencer) from YouTube

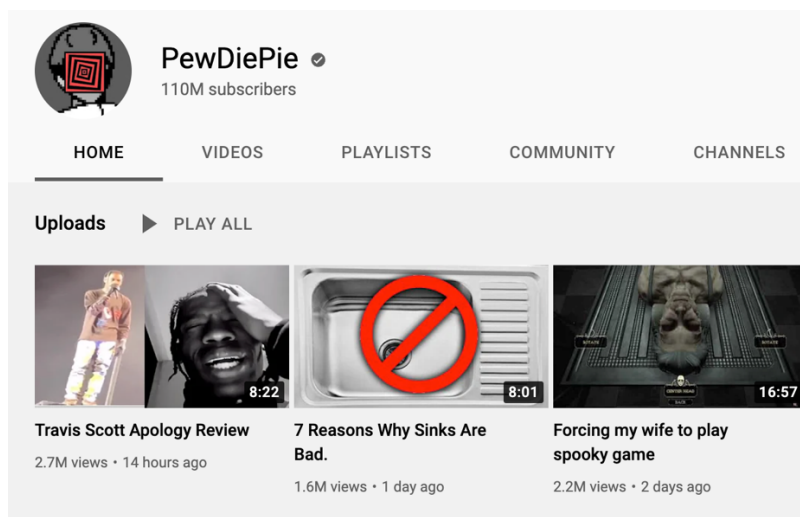**Figure 3.** TianLaoLao (entertainment influencer) from Douyin (Chinese Tik Tok)

Figure 4. Kylee (food influencer) from Twitter

kyleecooks
@kyleecooks

This Crusty Braided Poppy Seed Loaf is EVERYTHING! #bread #baking #loaf #recipe #kyleecooks bit.ly/2wkerGK

Figure 5. Conceptual Framework