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Product Endorsements on Instagram: Consumer Perceptions of Influencer Authenticity

Barry Ardley*, Calista Craig, Abi Hunt, Claire May

Lincoln International Business School, University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln, UK
Email: *bardley@lincoln.ac.uk, craig.calista@gmail.com, abhunt@lincoln.ac.uk, cmay@lincoln.ac.uk

Abstract

From a consumer viewpoint, this paper analyses the factors that constitute an authentic SMI when they endorse products on Instagram. The method is exploratory and qualitative, where focus groups were asked to examine the posts of key influencers. Findings have resulted in the authentic influencer model, composed of four explanatory features. Firstly, *trustworthiness*. The values of the brand and those of the influencer must be closely aligned. Secondly, the SMI must be *transparent*. Endorsers must be open about their paid connection to a sponsor. Thirdly, there must be *relatability* between the SMI and the consumer. Fourthly, the SMI must possess *expertise* in the product. Whilst previous work has been carried out on corporate brand authenticity in social media, relatively little research has so far been conducted on the SMI and consumer perceived authenticity. Consequently, this work assists in filling a gap, where the analysis could be utilised to develop strategies to enhance the authenticity of the SMIs personal brand, and that of the endorsed organisation. The model here could also help spur research, both qualitative and quantitative, in this important area of business and social media marketing.

Keywords

Social Media, Influencers, Authenticity, Branding, Consumers, Qualitative

1. Introduction

Social media outlets like Instagram, YouTube and Twitter have supported the creation of a substantial number of new modern-day influencers (Nurhandayani et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2017). These social media influencers (SMIs) are often celebrities who have significant followings, sharing their personal lives, ex-

periences, and opinions, through outlets such as blogs, tweets, videos, pictures, and online posts (Breves et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2019). Influencers possess the ability to develop authority through their knowledge and experience of topics such as fashion, sports, or makeup (Ki & Kim, 2019; Pang et al., 2016). A current phenomenon is that SMIs are increasingly seen to be endorsing and commenting on products and interacting with their followers (Weismueller et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2020). For consumers, this raises the key issue of authenticity, where there is a broad agreement that it is composed of what is perceived as being genuine, real, honest and true (Goldstein & Carpenter 2021; Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015). Research suggests that consumers today are increasingly prioritising the issue of authenticity. It is perceived as a method of value differentiation in the marketplace (Fritz et al., 2017; Gilmore & Pine 2007), where seeking out the authentic in brands, people experiences, and relationships, represents a key facet of contemporary life (Brown et al., 2003; Goldstein & Carpenter, 2021; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). However, despite the very considerable amount of relatively current research on social media marketing, for example, Ibrahim et al. (2020); Kim and Kim (2021); Fang (2020), it is the case that that there exists a void in explaining what creates an authentic SMI from a consumer viewpoint (Lee & Eastin, 2021). This issue forms the focus of this paper, where the authors seek to understand what an authentic SMI is, and what the ramifications of this are for theory development, marketing policy and further research.

2. Research Focus

Instagram is a popular social media platform as it allows for clear self-presentation through visual aesthetics and filtered imagery that can be used to portray types of lifestyles (Marwick, 2015; Delbaere et al., 2021). Consequently, it is a rich area of research material. With so much activity taking place on this platform, the results of the research into consumers and the authentic SMI will be of considerable interest to a wide range of researchers, policy makers, brands, consumers and influencers themselves. In this context, the research question of this paper asks, what are the key factors from a consumer perspective, that constitute an authentic SMI, when endorsing a product on Instagram? Primary research is used to examine authenticity through focus groups, given the range of research existing on the topic originating in qualitative inquiry (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Becker et al., 2019; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). The other reason is that the concept of the authentic can be viewed just as much from a subjective perspective, as from an objective one (Beverland, 2005). In marketing terms, the extent to which social media followers perceive influencer's as being and acting authentically, will have a sizeable impact on factors like the acceptability of their posts, the image of the brand they present, (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022), subsequent purchasing, E word of mouth marketing (Ardley et al., 2016) and the SMIs own personal brand (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

3. Structure of the Paper

In terms of the organisation of this paper, there is the following sequencing of sections. Firstly, a literature review deals with the social media influencer and the key issues relating to authenticity, in a marketing context. Following this review, there is an explanation of the qualitative methodology adopted by the study. Next, findings are presented that indicate what the factors of authenticity are constituted by, from a consumer perspective. Some supportive literature is also added at this stage. The subsequent section to this, then establishes a schematic model for SMI authenticity, composed of four elements, derived from the paper's primary research. These elements, represented in a figure, and then discussed, are *trust, transparency, relatability* and *expertise.* The paper's final section is comprised of a conclusion, containing outline recommendations in terms of strategy and future research possibilities, centring on the topic of SMI authenticity.

4. Authenticity, Marketing and the Social Media Influencer

The notion of authenticity is one that reaches far and wide into the human condition. Literature on the topic derives from several disciplines (Becker et al., 2019; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). For the philosopher Heidegger, living in the world inaugurates the task of achieving one's individual possibilities, of working towards being authentic (Eilenberger, 2020). In marketing, authenticity is often viewed as a remedy to the apparent insincerity that appears to dominate parts of the discipline (Holt, 2002). Other previous work reveals that individuals evaluate the authenticity of an object and an experience based on two cues, these being indexical and iconic (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Indexical cues provide evidence that the object is real or original, whereas iconic cues simply resemble the real thing (Ewing et al., 2012). An indexical cue can be taken to represent a connection between a place or time, or person, that can be genuinely shown to exist (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). This is often the case with regional and international food, for example. Alternatively, the iconic can be constructed by marketers. In this case, authenticity is not always objective, but exists when various prompts and signals influence perceptions, suggesting that authenticity is individually defined (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Hurley, 2019). Goffman's (1959) understanding of the self as a theatrical identity performance, offers insights into the concept of authenticity. For Goffman, identity is a series of performances and in this context, social media provides a digital platform for self-representation. For example, on Instagram, users can make use of filters to alter their appearance. In fact, most social media platforms allow influencers to portray themselves in various creative ways, providing the ability to engage in intimate and diverse communication with an audience (Hurley, 2019). In consequence, followers will expect to connect closely with influencers with an expectation that they are genuine, where being authentic can include relational and affective aspects of human behaviour,

like the posting of carefully phrased and sensitive messages.

As previously pointed out, research on consumer perceptions of social media influencer authenticity is limited. Some studies deal with influencer self-image (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), while others look at business sectors and authenticity, like health-based communications (Jenkins et al., 2020). In terms of consumers, the study by Pöyry et al. (2019), on sponsored photos on Instagram, found that perceived authenticity had a positive effect on follower's attitudes and purchase intentions, although authenticity appeared to be less important than personal attractiveness, in their study. Lee and Eastin's (2021) work into consumer perceptions of authenticity develops five domains, these being sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. The argument is that these domains have varying effects on consumers' disposition to follow an SMI, and subsequent intentions to purchase the recommended products. Luoma-aho et al. (2019) explored how sponsored content shapes the authenticity perception of vloggers among audience members. Endorsers were most often perceived as authentic by consumer groups that were encouraged to participate, for example sharing and discussing content, highlighting the importance of interactivity and social media. The research of Audrezet et al. (2020), uncovered two SMI authenticity management strategies, these being the passionate and the transparent. Passionate authenticity refers to the notion that authentic SMIs are those that are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically, where they are driven by their inner desires, more so than by commercial goals. Alternatively, transparent authenticity refers to the provision of fact-based information about the product or service at the hub of the brand partnership (Audrezet et al., 2020). For Wellman et al. (2020), transparency involves an additional argument, where SMIs openly share details about their personal lives, details that align with their personal brand. Here, SMIs can ethically construct a relationship that merges the individual and the commercial, to create what is an authentic experience for consumers (Marwick, 2015).

In examining the concept of authenticity, it is difficult to ignore the plethora of literature that exists on source credibility, and the SMI, where similar concepts and research exist. For many decades, marketers, advertisers, and researchers in many fields, have attempted to find out whether a high or a low-credibility source will be more effective, or will have no different effects in changing the beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours of an audience (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Munnakka et al., 2016; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2017). In the era before social media, Ohanian (1990), developed a source-credibility scale containing the dimensions of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Ample amounts of contemporary research that explores influencer marketing has been directed by this traditional celebrity endorser model (Weismueller et al., 2020; Breves et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Of the three source credibility dimensions expertise represents the perceived knowledge of the endorser regarding the product category (Ohanian,

1990; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2017). Trustworthiness, the second dimension (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Yuan & Lou, 2020), is defined by Pornpitakpan (2004), as the degree to which an endorser is perceived to be honest. The third dimension of the model, attractiveness, represents the extent to which the endorser is perceived as being appealing to the consumer (Pelsmacker et al., 2006), in terms of two characteristics, these being likeability and similarity (Bhatt et al., 2013). The former refers to the likeability of both the endorser's physical appearance and personality, whereas similarity represents the sameness that is perceived to exist between the endorser and the consumer.

However, there is an argument that suggests much of the success of influencer marketing resides in SMIs appearing authentic, (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Van Driel, & Dumitrica, 2021). Authenticity then, is a feature of contemporary marketing that appears missing from the original source credibility model. While SMIs and traditional celebrities may share similarities, for example both being valued due to their expertise in a chosen field, key variations exist between the two. As a case in point, SMIs are very active on social media platforms where something like Instagram did not exist at the time when Ohanian's model was developed. There was not for example, the intense scrutiny of the celebrity's motives and values that exist today, where SMIs involved in product endorsements, can be judged as authentic or inauthentic, a result of the way they foster relationships with followers and simultaneously reflect the values of the brand (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). To develop a following, SMIs can now utilise high levels of two-way interaction, like personal messages, community discussions and regular collaborative posts. This increased accessibility can frame influencers as authentic, fostering a sense of closeness, and genuineness, that makes their brand recommendations trustworthy to followers (Audrezet et al., 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Alternatively, the SMI can also come across as inauthentic, if they are unable to make meaningful personal connections with followers.

Despite the evident importance of the role of authenticity, as adopted by social media influencers, there does not appear to be a clear, and well-rounded assessment of it by observers. Alternatively, and perhaps imprecisely, it is viewed as being just about what is seen to be genuine. In summary, the main insight and revelation here from the literature review, is that there is a lack of specifics about what authenticity is made up of, from a consumer perspective. This means it is necessary to unpack as fully as possible, the meaning of the word genuine, in a social media context. Existing studies on authenticity in social media deal with research into factors that do not always relate to consumer views of it, like for example, influencer self-image and, also, how particular business sectors are perceived. Additionally, there is an overabundance of work that relates to scrutinising the source credibility model and the SMI, when the issue of authenticity is more important a concern to the consumer. Consequently, it is the case that a vacuum exists where further research is needed on consumers and authenticity,

and it is this that represents this study's contribution to the literature.

5. Methodology

In line with a qualitative approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), a focus group approach was selected as the research method for this paper, in order to seek insights into authenticity. The work here is theoretically informed, as it is attempting to extend understanding, through an analysis of the factors that impact on social media user's perceptions of social media influencers authenticity. To use a focus group, represents an approach where research data is gathered from a group of respondents simultaneously and interactively. Focus groups enable a discussion to take place where perceptions are shared in a natural environment, where participants are influencing and influenced by others, just as they are in life (Krueger & Casey, 2009). During a focus group discussion, respondents are socially constructing reality, drawing on their perceptions of their past and present experiences, in relation to the topic in question.

The composition of the two-focus group in this study was representative of the population of interest, i.e., the users of Instagram. According to OFCOM (2019), 30% of Instagram users are aged 18-24, and consequently, participants within this age range were selected. Young professionals, constituted by undergraduate students at 'Midlands' University in the UK, became members of the focus groups with six people in each group. The participants, in the study here, possess a considerable amount to share on the topic of Instagram and social media, with extended experience enabling detailed discussions to take place (Krueger & Casey, 2009). As Hackley (2003) has pointed out, all data is meaningful and qualitative researchers need not get bound up in an exclusive search for generalisation, although that is not to say this is unimportant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consequently, the limited number of participants in this study means the project is explorative, where it could then be replicated for cross comparative purposes, with other respondents and developed quantitatively if required. The method of non-probability sampling through volunteers was utilised amongst respondents here, specifically self-selection sampling. This sampling method is purposive and convenient, rather than being systematic, an approach widely adopted in qualitative research (Hackley, 2003), where the research project was advertised through carefully distributed posters.

In this sense, it was not seen as appropriate to apply any statistical sampling techniques to the limited number of respondents and additionally, due to reasons of confidentiality, no personal details are presented. However, all respondents met the key criteria for the study aims and focus group membership, i.e., experienced Instagram users in the appropriate age range, of mixed gender. To develop larger studies for quantitative research would require the use of sampling techniques like the Cochran formula (Woolson et al., 1986). It must be emphasised though, that the current study here is about proposing a tentative

model and is size restricted, with findings that should be viewed as mainly, a basis for further development.

In the write up of the research, each recruited member has been given an anonymous pseudonym, where there was a clear reassurance made to respondents that no real names or personal data would be presented. The focus group members were shown images and posts of four well known Instagram social media influencers, Molly-Mae, James Charles, Katie Price and Scott Disick, celebrities known for having a strong presence and following in areas such as the media, fashion, modelling and make up. A tape-based approach was used for each focus group and an abridged transcript was developed of the most relevant and valuable discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The initial stages of analysis began with the process of reading the discussion text, facilitating data familiarisation (Riessman, 1993). The next stage involved generating potential ideas from the data that then evolved into themes by identifying the repeated patterns, akin to a form of grounded theory approach. Finally, the themes were defined, refined and organised into a coherent and consistent narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes form the basis of the authenticity model presented later in this paper.

This research met the ethical guidelines for human research published by the British Psychological Society (2014) and approved by a university research ethics committee. In following common practice (Hackley, 2003), all participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were also given the opportunity to not participate, review and retract their contribution afterwards. After the collection of data, all recordings and information were stored securely until the end of the study, whereupon they were then destroyed.

On a critical note, it could be argued that individuals may be more reflective in focus groups than they are when making decisions outside of a research environment (Krueger & Casey, 2009). These authors also argue that using small focus groups will result in limiting the range of experiences and perceptions available for analysis and additionally, participants may have also answered a question dependant on how they wished to be seen by others. However, this issue of impression management can potentially be related to all types of social research, where the investigator needs to always take a cautious approach when analysing material (Alvesson, 2003). Finally, here, by way of introducing the findings section, in discussing the posts of the four SMIs in the study, the focus group members were tasked with seeking to address the extent to which these influencers projected an identity that appeared credible. In consequence of using for analysis the categories the respondents adopted in conversing about the issue, the first of the three factors of authenticity to be presented concerns trustworthiness, which is then followed by relatability, expertise and transparency.

6. Authenticity and the Trustworthy SMI

Here, trust is about the existence of a closely associated brand—influencer match.

This is supported in the literature by Lim et al. (2017) and Schouten et al. (2020), where SMI endorsements are regarded as genuine by consumers, when there is a trustworthy fit between them and the product. In social media, this means the extent to which the posts of an influencer reflect and are congruent with, the values and image of the brand they are endorsing (Fritz et al., 2017; Bruhn et al., 2012). The result should be a positive acceptance of the communication by the social media follower, with a potential for later purchasing (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). This point ties in well with the view of Lehman et al. (2019) which suggests that an entity—in this case the influencer—is regarded as authentic if their internal values are reliably displayed through observed behaviour. Besides the negative impact on the SMI, failure to achieve this congruency can also result in a loss of brand equity for the sponsor (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002), where factors like loyalty, positive associations, and quality perceptions, are compromised.

In terms of this link between the social media influencer and the endorsed brand, the focus group participants generally indicated that they would have confidence in the authenticity of an influencer who was promoting a brand, when this activity was consistent with the general image portrayed in their social media posts and elsewhere. Drew the first of our respondents, alludes to this process, where it is argued that the personal assets of the influencer must tie in meaningfully to the brand. The influencer here could be taken to be a sports personality, for example Nikki Blackketter, who has been leveraged by brands as a result of her well-known fitness capabilities (Neate, 2021).

> I think if the influencer has a link to what they're promoting, it makes it more trustworthy. If it was like a sports influencer promoting GymShark, you think that they actually want to promote that.

In contrast, if an influencer appears to be promoting a brand they do have an appropriate fit with, in the eyes of consumers, then there is the potential that their authenticity will be called into question. Ainsley, another respondent, provides an example of this. The hypothetical case posed by Ainsley is that of the home cleaning SMI Sophie Hinchliffe, who posts on Instagram under the name of Mrs Hinch. *If the product is in line with the brand and with the influencer, you expect Mrs Hinch to post about a cleaning product, but if it was something else, you'd be like, why?*

A weak, or non-existent fit between the brand and the social media influencer will result in a believability gap appearing for consumers, one likely to impact deleteriously on perceptions of the influencer's authenticity. Ainsley also raises this issue, in a comment about one SMIs post about a weight loss supplement.

For the influencer to be seen as authentic, what they do must be true and compatible with their activity elsewhere. *Especially with her advertising a fitness product, I swear everyone knows her for sub-standard surgery, why would she be trusted?*

7. Authenticity and the Relatable SMI

Authenticity also makes an appearance for the focus group respondents, in the nature of the follower—influencer interface, through the idea of a personally relevant connectedness. The SMI becomes like someone who is personally known, who can be understood and empathised with. This is because similarities are perceived to align with a follower's own experiences and affective state of mind. Another way of saying this is to make the point that endorser authenticity is enhanced when they are observed as being someone who is relatable to, someone who the follower feels a personal connection with (Munnakka et al., 2016). Here, SMIs are seen to be authentic, when that they match up to a follower's real life and real interests. The research of Van Driel and Dumitrica (2021), highlights this, where they discuss the point about an influencer who chooses to share their feelings online. By talking about experiencing feelings of melancholy, as a result of being away from home, it shows that they are, besides being a celebrity, just a normal person, with a life not as perfect as the Instagram feed might indicate. Most consumers and followers can relate to this, as they have probably experienced at some time in their lives, similar moods. Another way in which relatability can find expression, is through showing vulnerability, in that an influencer who displays the latter is perceived to be more genuine by consumers. Expressing this vulnerability is seen as indicating human characteristics that followers can relate to. This challenges the convention that postings by influencers must always reflect a filtered, luxurious lifestyle. In this context, the focus group respondent Oakley explains that,

> Having that vulnerability to talk about topics that aren't going to make them money, because it's important to them. Just showing that vulnerability that they are not always happy how they appear on Instagram, they've got their own struggles, rather than being this perfect image of a person with no flaws.

Another focus group member, McKenzie, emphasises this point of being able to relate personally with the influencer, with a subsequent impact on the acceptability of the product endorsement. *If you can't relate to them off the screen, then they are projecting a fake image than when they are on camera and are promoting things.*

Additionally, it is pointed out by Drew, that relatability can impact positively on purchasing, where the perceived authenticity of the SMI can result in revenue for a sponsoring brand. *I've made a point to follow people that I can relate to, so anything they promote might be something I would want to buy.*

8. Authenticity, and the Expert SMI

SMIs whose status is derived from being knowledgeable in a topic are perceived as more authentic, as talent denotes passion, credibility, and diligence. By demonstrating ability in their field, the SMIs content comes across as real and true

(Moulard et al., 2015; Lee & Eastin, 2021). Talent equates to expertise and know how, the perception that the SMI demonstrates skill in their selected field. In other words, celebrities should possess a special ability that enables them to earn their fame (Till & Busler, 2000). For example, talented brand community members are viewed as authentic when they can repair their own cars without any assistance (Leigh et al., 2006). The argument is that a sense of authenticity is provided when SMIs give expert evaluations of products and services in their posts. With so much communication being visual and interactive, this is a key issue in the social media age and being talented, not only fosters perceptions of SMI authenticity, but also validates fame (Moulard et al., 2015).

The focus group research found that perceived expertise had a positive impact on consumer perceptions of authenticity. An exemplar example is provided by Drew, when discussing James Charles Instagram posts. *I think because his main thing is make-up, I've scored him higher on expertise, because I think he knows what he's talking about, he seems knowledgeable.*

Conversely, the point is made about the impact of lack of expertise by Mackenzie, who says that I *think expertise is important if it's like fitness stuff. If they are not an expert, why would you follow them?*

Finally, in a wider interpretation of the notion of expertise, Alex highlights that acting in a professional manner can bestow a degree of authenticity on the SMI. Commenting on an Instagram post by Molly-Mae it is pointed out that by revealing the post is a paid one, the proficiency of the SMI is heighted in the eyes of the follower.

> *I think it gives her more expertise, because that is a business contract, making it very obvious. I think actually, my rating of expertise would go up.*

9. Authenticity, and the Transparent SMI

An area of importance in terms of its impact on the authenticity of the influencer, is that of sponsorship disclosure (Dodoo et al., 2020; Boerman et al., 2010; Wellman et al., 2020). Whether the influencer reveals, or does not reveal, that they are receiving some form of financial compensation, will impact on social media followers' views of the endorser (Wojdynski et al., 2018). The author's study here, argues that this notion of transparency differs from trust in the sense that it means being obvious, being clear, unambiguous, and open. Someone may be acting in a trustworthy manner, but not openly express it. Being transparent means SMIs must disclose the nature of their affiliation with the brand and be crystal clear about their partnerships by openly informing their followers of any incentivised content, thus preventing confusion in the consumer mind about motives (Van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019). As a result of some ongoing discontent in this area, the regulation body in the United Kingdom, the Advertising Standards Authority has recently developed some guidelines for social media influencers to use, including the use of labels such as '#ad' in online content, thus

making it clear the material posted is sponsored (ASA, 2020). An important point is made by Kay et al. (2020), that the impact of disclosure on the actual influencer is comparatively unknown, whilst considerable research exists on both the negative and positive effect of influencer disclosure on the sponsoring brand (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2020).

The focus group research in this paper indicates that the lack of sponsorship disclosure is seen to have a negative impact on consumer perceptions of influencer authenticity. For Ainsley, this is a problem of openness. *Why are you hiding it? It's obvious you're getting some money from this. Better you said and be upfront.*

The lack of acknowledgement of payment, a process of concealment, represents the opposite of transparency. Dale, another respondent sees this as being devious. *I do think it's a good thing when they have to put #ad. I do think it's quite shady when people avoid making it obvious. It does make it a bit more open.*

Hayden from the focus group also speaks in an affirmative fashion about the importance of disclosure, reflecting the more general view that posts of this nature demonstrate the influencer's authenticity, where transparency is highly valued. *I like it when I see that. People are acknowledging that they are in a paid partnership. It would make me more likely to click it.*

10. Discussion: The Proposed Authenticity Framework

This paper set out to examine an under researched area of social media, the gap that exists in our knowledge regarding what creates from a consumer viewpoint, an authentic SMI. It can be argued based on the focus group responses, that authentic brand endorsements cultivate the impression that brand partnerships are not just a means for influencers to profit by taking advantage of their network, but a self-extension opportunity through associating with brands the influencer feels enthusiastic about, and genuinely committed to. To be authentic, is to be real and true, and a research question was devised to find out from a qualitative perspective, the specific factors that make up, and impact, on consumer views of authenticity, when products are endorsed on Instagram. The focus group research thus facilitated the development of a framework representing the views of consumers, as to what they saw authenticity to be about, in the context of social media. The resulting schema is represented in Figure 1, below. The model is composed of four elements, proposed as constituting an authentic endorser. Being an expert, being relatable to, exhibiting the characteristics of trustworthiness and transparency, these are the ways in which the authenticity of the SMI is established. In terms of the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), through maintaining a consistent approach in these four areas, the influencers can successfully uphold their authenticity in the eyes of consumers, who will remain interested in their posts and content. Consequently, this paper posits the authentic framework model as constituting an answer to the research question posed earlier.
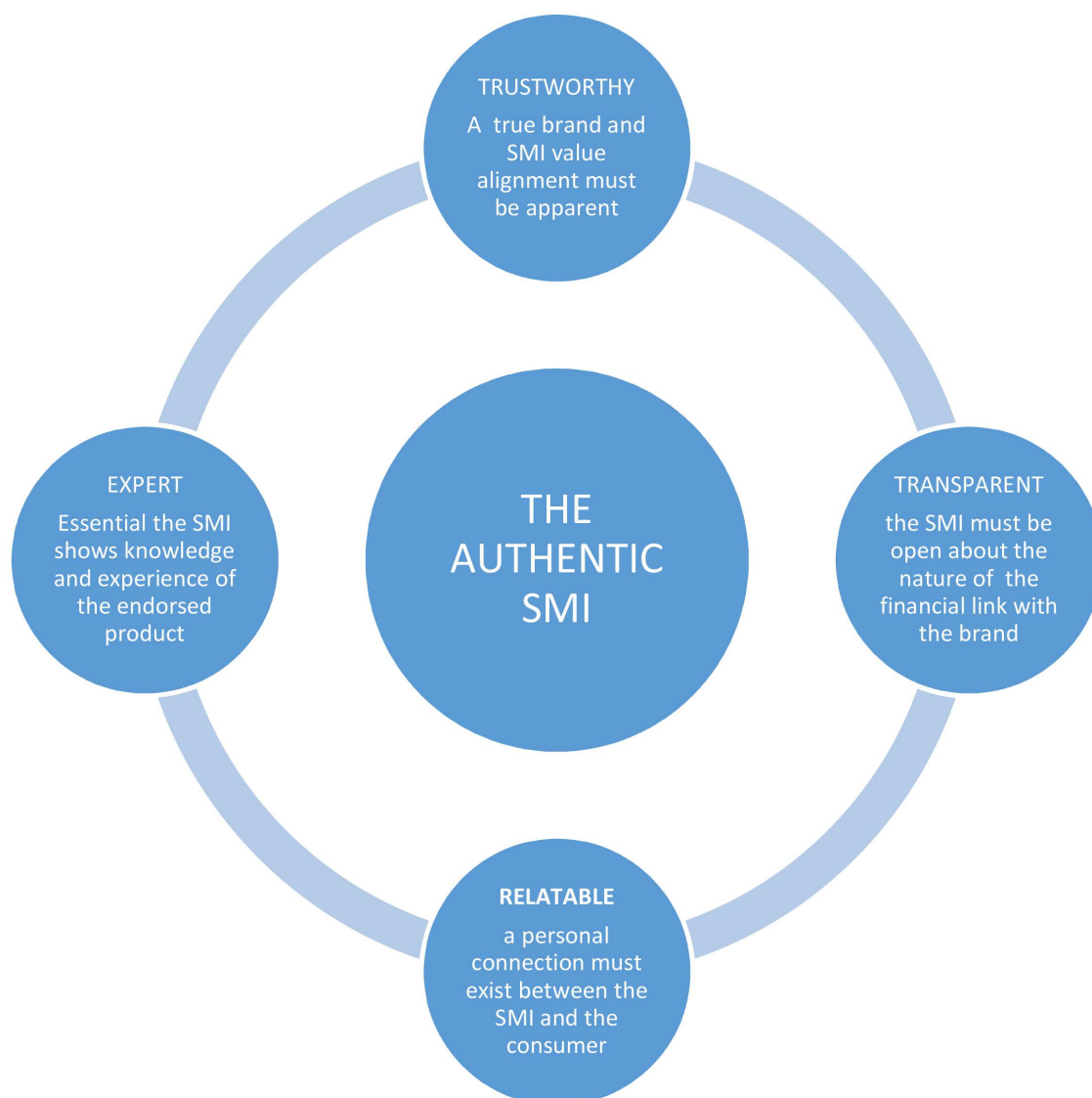
Source: authors own model.

Figure 1. The components of authenticity for the SMI.

Like Lee and Eastin (2021), this paper found that *trustworthy* endorsements are a central element of authenticity, alternatively though, the focus group interviews related trust mainly to the SMI and the sponsoring brand fit, whereas these authors linked it to honest evaluations of the product. This is an important distinction requiring further research. Another of Lee and Eastin's domains, that of uniqueness, is certainly additionally worth more research, but it was not a term the focus group respondents used in the research reported here, along with another of their elements, namely sincerity. In the study here, the trustworthy findings indicate that most importantly, the values of the brand and the influencer must truthfully be aligned, with a close fit existing between the two. Otherwise, the endorsement might possibly be seen as fake, with the resulting harmful impact on a follower's sense of authenticity.

Another significant finding is the factor of *relatability*. With lots of engagement between followers and influencers taking place on Instagram, (Evans et al., 2017; De Veirman, 2017) consumers will consider the SMI authentic, if it is an individual, they feel they have a trusting personal connection with, where the strong two-way communication processes and technology of web 2.0 facilitates a close affiliation (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). The closeness of, and the sheer number of interactions on Instagram and other platforms, facilitates the ability of social media followers to make intelligent and informed evaluations of the purposes and principles behind any endorsements. This means the perceived authenticity of the SMI is contingent on the motivations of numerous followers, where they value the relatability attribute, one that must be seen to be expressed in social media. Clearly, this is an area that links strongly with modern marketing practices associated with consumer communities and consumer engagement, (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Leigh et al., 2006).

The third factor proposed is *transparency,* in the model above, where endorsers are expected to be open, clear and unambiguous about their paid connection to a sponsor. Disclosure is likely to become more and more central (Stubb et al., 2019) with followers expecting endorsers to act in ethical ways, where this element is supported in the work of Wellman et al. (2020) and Audrezet et al. 2020). Lee and Eastin (2021) subsume this factor into their truthfulness domain, but the authors here regard transparency to be a key separate feature of the life of SMIs, where they are expected by followers, to be open and clear about any financial link to a brand. Fourthly, the SMI must be an *expert* in the product, for the endorsement to be regarded as being an authentic one. The scrutiny that SMIs come under and the high level of interactivity in today's web-based world, suggests that any postings making claims about a product that are unsupported, or that SMIs know little about, will soon be regarded as inauthentic. It is a critical area that has also emerged as important in other studies of the SMI, (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

11. Concluding Comment

Without these above four authenticity factors of the relatable, the trustworthy, the expert and the transparent SMI being in place, and where appropriate strategies are not adopted, then problems are likely to occur. Firstly, the brand equity of the sponsoring company will likely be adversely affected. This would be along with that of the personal brand of the influencer. For the former organisation, a reduction in equity will probably be accompanied by falls in returns on investment, and additionally, negative e word of mouth will result. For the SMI, falls in shares, likes and followers will potentially occur. In order to avoid these types of situations, careful analysis and clear strategic action are required. A particularly fruitful further research could involve a scrutiny of SMI authenticity and their relationship strategies with consumers. On a more theoretical point, another suggestion here is that the source credibility model needs some refining, as

some limitations to its explanatory power seem apparent. The factors discussed in this paper, like disclosure and SMIs being relatable too, are unique to a social media environment and the nature of the interactions it engenders. To compound this, much of the work on the source credibility model is also predicated on an earlier passive and easily persuaded consumer where alternatively, in present times, followers in social media create content and collaborate through their engaged and agentic online voices. In this way, the consumer helps to generate that which is authentic, and this needs greater recognition.

Regarding reflections on the paper's limitations, whilst the findings on authenticity have provided good insights, it would have been useful to extend the study to a wider number of respondents. With gaps existing in knowledge, more research must take place, that examines the importance of establishing authentic social media strategies for influencers. Research involving more diverse and more numerous respondents might have revealed other authenticity factors to the ones here and, more direct questioning on what authenticity is composed of, would have been beneficial. For example, deeper and wider probing might have uncovered insights into other elements that might be considered part of the authentic, i.e., sincerity, and what it means, and how it translates into social media strategy. Consequently, as the model proposed here is exploratory, more can probably be established about the drivers of authenticity. With additional data helping to saturate the topic, our authenticity model could be held up to scrutiny, enhanced, refined and changes made where necessary. From an alternative methods viewpoint, the model also has the potential to be operationalised and developed, from a quantitative perspective. Finally, despite the limitations outlined, we suggest the material in the paper has added to the nascent work on social media influencer authenticity and will be viewed as a meaningful contribution to the field.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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