

Authenticity in Influencer Marketing, Building Trust and Addressing

Distrust: A Case Study of Sadaf Beauty

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the ongoing battle of Iranian women for freedom and to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. زن زندگی آزادی.

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers are subject to an important- and constraining- paradox. On the one hand, they attract followers by presenting themselves as authentic while, on the other hand, they simultaneously use their popularity to promote products, as an act perceived by some followers as “inauthentic”. Managing this contradiction and creating trust are crucial in their success and affects the number of people they reach. Successful influencer marketers negotiate this contradiction to inspire their followers’ trust. However, while relying on these success factors, sometimes influencers lose control and cannot manage this contradiction which leads to followers feeling betrayed and losing trust. In this research, qualitative method based on case study of a successful Iranian Influencer, Sadaf Masaeli (Sadaf Beauty), assisted to observe how influencers lose control in managing different success factors and to analyze which factors make influencers to lose followers’ trust. Sadaf was chosen as the second most influential beauty influencer of 2019 and the most influential luxury cosmetics influencer of 2019 in the world by *Forbes* (Claudel, 2019). She gained millions of followers from 2019 to 2022. However, in 2022 she lost thousands of followers. This research argues that incautious authenticity (indiscretion) and not setting concrete boundaries, especially in regard to sensitive topics, can cause distrust in followers.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, Trust, Distrust, Influencer, Instagram, authenticity

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Introduction

This thesis examines concepts of authenticity and trust in influencer marketing by making a case study of Sadaf Beauty, an Iranian American Instagram beauty influencer who was named the second cosmetic influencer in 2019 by Forbes magazine. Despite her initial success and strong friendly and meaningful relationship with her followers, she faced significant challenges and a considerable amount of negative feedback and hate during the Women Life Freedom movement in Iran. This socio-political movement highlighted the vulnerability and fragility of influencers' authenticity to external pressures.

This thesis consists of three articles examining (1) notions of authenticity, (2) the cultivation of trust and (3) the loss of trust. This thesis argues, firstly, that the framework of authenticity has some key dimensions that include origin, societal alignment, inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection. Secondly, while the combination of both affective and cognitive factors is influential in building followers' trust, affective factors are more important. Finally, inconsistent authenticity (discretion), poor boundary setting, misunderstanding the audience advertising low-quality products and decreased engagement are the reasons for losing the followers' trust.

The term "Social Media" was first introduced in 1994 within the online environment of Tokyo's Mattise. (Aichner et al., 2021). Over time, social media platforms have gained incredible popularity to the extent that they have millions of active users these days. Social media platforms have changed the way we communicate, share information, and interact.

Social media were initially a way to communicate with family and friends but today its functions have expanded to romantic relationships, professional networking, and even job recruitment (Fertig, 2017). Even the definitions presented for social media have changed over time. Before 2010, the definitions were mostly about connectivity, whereas after 2010 definitions mostly focus on content creation and sharing.

Social media have become a crucial tool in the field of marketing. Influencers who have started as ordinary users of social media managed to harness its power and attract the attention of millions of people to their pages. This introduced an innovative method for brands and companies to connect with their target audience. Brands and companies take advantage of influencers' fame and popularity to promote and sell their services and products instead of the traditional methods. This is called influencer marketing.

Trust plays an important role in creating meaningful relationships between influencers and their followers. Trust can be defined as “a belief held by customers about organizations or their representatives” (Sekhon et al., 2014, p. 413). According to Karouw et al. (2019) and Moore et al. (2018), factors associated with trust are knowledge, expertise, likability, moral authenticity, and similarity. According to the trust theory, these elements are categorized into two main groups: affective (feeling-based) and cognitive trust (reason-based) (MacAllister, 1995). However, trust can be fragile, as seen in cases where influencers face negative feedback and lose their followers' loyalty due to perceived inauthenticity or external controversies.

Authenticity is also a remarkable component in influencer marketing. In general, authenticity is defined as “being true to oneself” (Wood et al., 2008, p. 386). Influencers are expected to present themselves as authentic in order to build strong connections through relatability and transparency (Poyry et al., 2019). However, the paradox of authenticity that exists

in their job forces them to try to strike a balance between being a persuasive marketer and promoter and being genuine and authentic in the eyes of their followers. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study different dimensions of authenticity in the context of influencer marketing.

In this study, first I analyzed the performance of what factors assisted Sadaf to gain followers, then I studied how she lost trust of some of her followers during a critical time in Iranian socio-political history. In this study, different dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing were also studied and were analyzed in the case of Sadaf Beauty.

Social Media

In the early days of 1997, the very first social media platform, Six Degrees, was launched and gained significant popularity over time (Jones, 2022). It allowed users to create profiles, upload photos, and connect with friends. Social media platforms, these days, have millions of active users all over the world. This is because they have proved to be very beneficial in many ways. The very first commonality of social media is to communicate and socialize with family and friends (Aichner & Jacob, 2015). Apart from our friendships and family bonds, social media have influenced our romantic relationships. Literature suggests that social media are a very important tool in shaping the first phases of relationships (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013, Papp et al., 2012). Social media have even emerged as a connection between employers and job seekers (Fertig, 2017). A great number of companies use LinkedIn for talent acquisition and many job seekers use this platform to expand their networks.

Social media are defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 60). Social media consist of "channels of mass personal communication facilitating interactions among users" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 49–

50). Therefore, they rely on content production, open conversations, and human connections. (Burgess and Poell, 2017).

According to the systematic literature review done by Aichner et al. (2021), the definitions proposed by scholars for the term “Social Media” are divided into two main parts. Definitions before 2010 considered social media a tool for connecting people. However, the definitions after 2010 refer to social media as a tool for “creating and sharing user-generated content” (p. 220). This shows that the focus of scholars has moved toward the potential of content production on social media including the influential role that social media influencers play in this dynamic.

Social media have also acquired attention in the interactions between companies and customers. Influencers have become key players in facilitating the interactions between businesses and their clients.

Influencers

In 1987, Feick and Price introduced the idea of “Market Mavens” for the first time (Harrigan et al., 2021, p. 1). Market mavens are the people who know a lot about various consumer topics and share that knowledge with others. Back then, the world was very different particularly in terms of technology, communication, and media consumption. For example, people did not have smart phones, communication methods were slower and limited and they had limited access to information. Today, after over 30 years, these market mavens have become social media influencers and have the power to influence more than half of the population of the earth with a simple click.

Influencers who used to be ordinary social media users have started producing interesting profiles and content (Hudders et al., 2021). Over time, they have gained the attention of a large number of followers by sharing their thoughts, interests, and personal experiences on social media

platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Hudders et al. (2021) suggest that these famous social media users play an important role in the decisions that their followers make especially with respect to purchasing a product. That is why they are called influencers. In studies, scholars use different names for influencers such as social media stars (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021), micro-celebrities (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021), opinion leaders ((De Veirman et al., 2017), etc.

Influencer Marketing

The conduct of influencers has attracted the attention of companies, businesses, and markets that were aiming to promote their services and/or products. This has led to the emergence of influencer marketing. This strategy of marketing where companies and brands use the popularity and fame of influencers to promote their products is called Influencer Marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). Influencer marketing involves relationships that go beyond influencers and their followers. It also encompasses the connections between influencers and brands (Kim & Kim, 2021). This form of marketing has gained popularity in years thanks to the growth of media platforms and the increasing doubts surrounding traditional advertising methods (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Influencers create types of content like photos, videos, stories, and blog posts providing brands with opportunities for collaboration and audience engagement. Brands often choose to work with influencers to promote their products by using marketing approaches because influencers offer them the chance to create versatile and attractive content that resonates with their target customers. This flexibility enables brands to establish relatable connections, with consumers compared to conventional advertisements (Gambhir & Ashfaq, 2021).

A study done by Mediakix, an influencer marketing agency, in 2019 showed that in the past, companies were hesitant to invest money in influencers, but over time many manufacturers and organizations chose to devote a tremendous amount of budget to this area. According to Yahoo Finance's 2019 report, 75% of the organizations surveyed by IEZA influencer marketing agency had influencer marketing line items in their budgets. As a result, businesses cannot ignore this more effective and affordable e-marketing technique (Armstrong et al, 2013). Hubspot (2019) suggests that more than 70% of consumers rely on the products that have been recommended by a person. Some studies call it word-of-mouth (Goldsmith et al., 2003). Ismagilova et al. (2017) claim that social media influencers can assist marketers with online electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. EWOM is defined as any form of online information sharing between customers about a product, service, or brand (Litvin et al., 2008). This shows the remarkable role of influencers in the market.

According to Mediakix (2019), beauty bloggers are among the most popular influencers. To build a friendly and meaningful relationship with their followers, apart from the beauty-related content and tutorials, they sometimes share their personal lives with their followers. In this way, they would increase the engagement of their public accounts. Some beauty bloggers have millions of followers on Instagram. To name a few, Huda Beauty has 53 million followers (Forbes magazine, 2019) and Sadaf Beauty has about 4 million followers.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a multi-layered concept that plays an important role in shaping producer-influencer-consumer relationships. The simplest definition of authenticity is "being true to oneself" proposed by Wood et al. (2008, p. 386). Nowadays, where digital communication has become very crucial in our daily lives, people talk about being true and genuine. It is not only

relatable to companies and brands but also to social media users. This raises questions like: Is authenticity important in today's communication, especially in influencer marketing? If so, how important is it? What does it mean to be authentic, and who qualifies as an authentic person?

Balaban and Szabolcs (2022) suggest that authenticity means being true, genuine, and the real version of yourself. In the context of social media, influencers are expected to present their true and unfiltered version of themselves, rather than showing off the best and/or most luxurious moments of their lives. The first and foremost target of influencers is to increase the number of their followers and be perceived as authentic by a large number of their fans. Poyry et al. (2019) also highlight the importance of authenticity in building strong connections between influencers and their followers. Schulze (2017) suggests that there is a paradox in the definition of authenticity because when you want to label something as authentic, it loses its authenticity. The paradox that exists in the definition of authenticity is also relatable to the field of influencer marketing, making the influencers' career very challenging. On the one hand, they have to look authentic to their followers and gain their trust, on the other hand, they have to be strong promoters and persuasive marketers to gain the attention of brands and companies to do their jobs.

Moreover, there are two different opinions about whether being authentic and trustworthy to followers is positively or negatively associated with influencer marketing. Some scholars suggest that influencers should disclose their financial desires and be transparent about the reasons why they are promoting a product because authenticity is always the answer to gain the followers' trust (Kim & Kim, 2021, Johnson et al., 2019). For example, some social media influencers even include the hashtags "#ad" or "#PaidPartnership" when they advertise (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004), while others believe that frequently sharing sponsored content risks compromising their authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Existing literature on authenticity in influencer marketing highlights the urgent need to explore authenticity and its key dimensions in this field to better understand the existing paradox. As a result, this study tries to answer the following research question in the first article: *What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of influencer marketing?*

Trust

One of the well-known definitions of trust is “a belief that is held by one party about the attitudes and behavior of another party. In conventional marketing terms, trust would be a belief held by customers about organizations or their representatives” (Sekhon et al., 2014, p. 413). It is also defined as “confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Trust is the result of fulfilling the promises (Gronroos, 1990). In communication, trust is the extent to which a listener has confidence and willingness to rely on the speaker (Kim & Kim, 2021). In relationships, people can evaluate and assess the quality of the future of their relationships based on the trust they have in each other (Kim & Kim, 2021). Therefore, trust is the factor that contributes to the maintenance of a relationship. If an influencer assures their followers that they can positively benefit from this interaction, they will be more likely to keep their connection and be loyal to the influencer. A successful influencer is typically characterized by a significant degree of trust and dedication (Scott, 2018).

In the context of influencer marketing, previous research indicates that followers’ trust in influencers is affected by various factors such as knowledge, expertise, likability, moral authenticity, and similarity. These factors help influencers present an authentic and credible image of themselves on their public accounts (Karouw et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2018).

Related literature on trust factors and the paradox that exists in the job of influencers that has previously discussed arises this question *what strategies do influencers employ to manage this*

contradiction and shape their followers' trust in the influencer-follower relationship? This is the question that I tried to answer in the second article.

Distrust

Distrust can be defined as the "belief that a person's values or motives will lead them to approach all situations in an unacceptable manner and as a choice to avoid risks" (Hautala, 2019, p. 11). According to Deutsch, distrust is a choice to avoid a path that likely has more negative than positive consequences (McKnight & Chervany 2001). It involves feelings of suspicion, doubt, and skepticism about the reliability, honesty, or integrity of a person, group, organization, or system (Kim & Ahmad, 2012). In the context of influencer marketing, distrust is the belief that the content produced by influencers may harm the content consumers or followers (Kim & Ahmad, 2012). The relationship between trust and distrust is the subject of disagreement between scholars. Some scholars believe that distrust is as Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary defines absence of trust (McKnight & Chervany 2001), whereas other scholars assume that distrust is one of the dimensions of trust (Tang et al., 2014), meaning that trust and distrust can coexist in varying degrees within the same relationship or context. Therefore, trust and distrust are correlated but not completely opposite.

Distrust and trust are based on different emotions. This means that trust results in feelings of safety, security, and comfortability, while distrust is constructed of insecurity (Hautala, 2019). Trust or not to trust depends both on the content creator and the audience. The audience's beliefs, experiences, perspectives, reasons for seeking information, etc. affect the extent to which they trust or distrust an influencer (Kim & Ahmad, 2012) that shows that trust or distrust has high levels of subjectivity.

In the context of influencer marketing, according to the study done by Berry (2024), demographical factors including gender, age, region of residence, level of education, and level of income contribute to the level of trust/distrust that influencers can gain. However, the literature indicates that there is inadequate research on how influencers lose the trust of their followers after being incredibly successful in presenting themselves as trustworthy, authentic, and credible. Due to the existence of this gap in the literature, this research tries to answer the following research question in the third article: *how do influencers lose control in managing different success factors and which factors make them lose followers' trust?*

Instagram

In 2010, the most effective platform for influencer marketing, Instagram, was launched. According to Instagram (2023), this platform has two billion monthly active users by December 2023. It is the primary platform for influencers, especially in the fashion and beauty sectors (Infographic Journal, 2017). According to a Mediakix survey, 78% of marketers chose Instagram posts as the most effective marketing format because they are easy to produce. The second most effective marketing format is Instagram stories. Mediakix (2019) suggests that Instagram influencers use the feature of stories to share their personal life with their followers. This strategy has been proven to increase the engagement of the accounts. Influencers present themselves as transparent, authentic, and passionate in their stories (Audrezet, 2018).

Sadaf Beauty

Sadaf Masaeli known as Sadaf Beauty is an Iranian American beauty influencer who opened a public account in 2016 on Instagram. She is currently living in San Francisco, California. On her Instagram, she shares tutorials, makeup reviews, and skincare tips. Her followers find her tutorials very easy to follow and her reviews reliable. That is why, since the day she started her career on Instagram, the number of her followers rocketed rapidly to over 4 million people. Most

of her tutorial posts have received more than 50 thousand comments and more than 300 thousand likes. In one of her interviews in MBC Persia, an Iranian TV channel with a London base, in response to the question of how she could gain fame, popularity, and recognition, she stated that the main reason for her success is that she is the first Persian speaking beauty influencer who started her job on Instagram (MBC Persia, 2020).

Sadaf Beauty believes that her followers, whom she affectionately calls “Bache Beauty” in Persian, or “Beauty Guys” in English, consider her trustworthy because she maintains integrity in her reviews. She does not publish positive reviews about cosmetic products just for the sake of financial gain. Sadaf tries to ensure that her audience receives genuine and unbiased opinions about the products she features. This approach has helped her build a loyal and trusting community of followers who value her authenticity.

She also shares some videos and stories of her personal life and experiences with her partner and her dog. She uses this strategy to build relatable and meaningful relationships with her followers. This performance of openness and transparency cultivate trust within the community of her followers. Another equally important strategy that Sadaf uses to forge a unique relationship with her followers is the way she greets them at the beginning of each post, story, or YouTube video. “Hi guys, I am back with another video. How are you?”

Sadaf has been invited to many commercial events of different brands including Shein, Tatcha, Beautycon, Huda Beauty, Too Faced, etc. In August 2019, she was invited to the Beautycon festival in Los Angeles, California. She got the opportunity to showcase her makeup skills and did a makeup on stage on Lori Harvey. In 2020, she collaborated with the makeup brand Sigma and launched her favorite makeup brush set. This set became out of stock multiple times just a few days after its initial launch. She has also collaborated with one of the skincare brands

Tatcha several times and this collaboration has always been very successful since every time many of their products have been sold out. The invitations to different events and her success in collaboration with different brands indicate the strong connection that Sadaf has with her followers.

The interesting fact about Sadaf is that she has gained popularity and recognition in a very short time. She has also been introduced as the second most influential beauty influencer of 2019 and the first most influential luxury cosmetics influencer of 2019 in the world by Forbes (Caudel, 2019).

However, her connection with followers and her recognition was deteriorated in 2022 and thousands of people unfollowed her following the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran. Women, Life, Freedom was a socio-political movement in Iran that started in 2022 after the death of a young girl Mahsa Amini in the custody of Iran’s morality police and continued intensely through the end of 2022 and into early 2023. A great number of Iranians from different ages and ranges including women, students, workers, and various ethnic and religious groups participated in protests and thousands of people were arrested during the movement.

This movement is rooted was the struggle for women’s rights, social justice, and freedom in Iran. Following the start of the movement, Iranian influencers especially those who were residing outside of Iran were expected to use their platforms to raise awareness, share news, and support the protests. They were even expected to stop producing irrelevant content, advertisements, and promotions and focus solely on the content that could support the movement.

Sadaf was among the people who supported and promoted closing businesses. She urgently and seriously encouraged everyone to avoid going to work because she believed that this

collective action was a proper way to force the regime to take action. She herself stopped producing any content other than focusing on the movement and protest. She severely criticized anyone who could not stop working in those days and accused them of not helping the movement.

Sadaf herself stopped her marketing and beauty blogger activities for a while and used her account to disseminate news about the movement and even shared a post on her account to ask for help from a global audience and to bring international attention to the political problems of Iran. However, once she decided to be back to her regular activities on Instagram, she was highly criticized and over 200,000 people unfollowed her in a few months. The reasons that brought for her followers were firstly, she had recently bought a mansion and needed to pay the mortgage monthly, and secondly, she had some contracts with different brands and had to meet their expectations or pay fines. It seemed that her reasons were not convincing for some of her followers.

In a short time, she noticed that she was receiving criticism even on TV channels and bigger platforms. In one of her videos, Sadaf says that after receiving much criticism from her followers, she was feeling very uncomfortable and nervous in front of the camera, and she started reviewing her videos several times because of her fear of saying something wrong that could cause criticism once again. “I might have done wrong but the punishment I received was much bigger and what happened to me was unfair,” said Sadaf in one of the stories posted on September 9, 2023 and highlighted in “درد دل” or “dard-e del” which means sharing feelings, emotions and concerns in English.

Comprehensive Overview of Three Papers

Three papers presented in this dissertation collectively explore the complicated nature and dynamics of trust, distrust, and authenticity in the field of influencer marketing. Each paper contributes insights into how influencers manage the paradox of being fake and real at the same time, what strategies help them gain trust, and what factors can lead them to lose the trust of their followers. By integrating these insights, influencers can employ more effective strategies to manage authenticity and trust and ensure their success in the marketing field. In the first article, I conducted a systematic literature review of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing. In the second and third article, I used Sadaf Beauty as a case study to investigate how trust is built in influencer-followers relationship and how it is eroded.

Overview of First Paper

The title of the first paper is, “Authenticity in the Realm of Influencer Marketing”. This study explores the key aspects of authenticity in influencer marketing using the SPAR-4-SLR protocol proposed by Paul et al. (2021). The study includes 88 peer-reviewed academic articles from the Scopus and Project Muse database.

The study of authenticity in the context of influencer marketing is significantly important because it looks at the contradiction that is inherent in the job of influencers. They aim to present themselves, as authentic, reliable, and trustworthy, while at the same time, their external desire is to gain more money, and their audience knows this fact about them. On the one hand, they try to build genuine and authentic relationships with their followers, on the other hand, the financial motivations behind their content can undermine their authenticity. Obtaining a deeper understanding of the nature of authenticity can help influencers employ tactics to overcome this challenge and ensure their success in their job.

The systematic literature review that I used in this part of the study along with the content analysis helped uncover the key dimensions of authenticity in the real of influencers' marketing.

- The first dimension of this multifaceted concept was the emphasis on the origin. This dimension emphasizes the importance of origin and highlights the value of producing genuine and original content.
- The second dimension is the alignment with societal expectations. This dimension shows that influencers are expected to align their content with prevailing cultural norms, such as dress codes, social etiquette, and cultural values.
- The third dimension is expressions of inner integrity. This dimension refers to the demonstration of the influencers' personal values, beliefs, and principles in their actions, content, and interactions with their audience. This dimension emphasizes the importance of influencers staying true to themselves and maintaining authenticity in their online presence.
- The fourth one is the individual interpretation that emphasizes the fact that different audience members interpret and judge the influencers' content and messages in different ways based on their personal beliefs, preferences, and experiences. This dimension shows the subjective nature of authenticity.
- The last dimension of authenticity in the context of influencers' marketing is the intrapersonal connection that the audience establishes with themselves. It refers to the personal and emotional bond that an individual experiences within themselves in response to an influencer's content or message.

Overview of Second Paper

The title of the second paper is, “How Influencer Marketers Inspire Trust: The Case of Sadaf Beauty”. As the title suggests this study focuses on the factors that influencers perform to gain the trust of their followers. As it has been mentioned earlier, the qualities associated with trust are categorized under two main groups: affective (feeling-based) trust and cognitive (reason-based) trust. This raises the question that in the case of Sadaf Masaeli, the performance of which category of qualities -affective or cognitive- is more influential in her success? Therefore, this study tries to answer this question: which strategies did Masaeli employ on her Instagram channel Sadaf Beauty to manage the contradiction and shape her followers’ trust in the influencer-follower relationship?

In this study, I conducted qualitative research using a case study methodology to investigate how social media influencers obtain their followers’ trust. According to Creswell (1997), a case study is an “exploration of a case or a ‘bounded system’ (bounded by time and place) through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (pp. 61–62).

For this study, I selected posts from 2019 on Sadaf’s Instagram because she was recognized as the most influential luxury cosmetic influencer by Forbes that year. This distinction shows that her influence was at a peak in 2019 which makes it the best period for analysis. In 2019, Sadaf posted 85 times among which she had 41 videos. I focused on the video posts in which Sadaf explained about makeup and skincare products because they had more engagement and comments. Out of 41 video posts, I chose 17 posts that had the most engagement and the variety in comments. Another important criterion that I had was to have more sentences and words in comments instead of just emojis. This criterion ensured that the comments provided meaningful insights rather than

superficial reactions. In this phase, my main objective was to find the qualities that were attributed to Sadaf and could be the answer to why followers trust her.

In the phase of content analysis, I did a holistic and thematic analysis at the same time. According to Dey (1993), holistic coding involves understanding the fundamental themes and problems within the data by considering them as a whole, rather than dissecting them line by line. Thematic analysis, as defined by Desantis and Ugarriza (2000), involves collecting and unifying the essence or foundation of an experience to create a meaningful totality. I also added some questions to my interview with the aim of answering the above-mentioned research question about the dimensions of trust that Sadaf used to win her followers' trust.

In regard to coding, I used axial coding. Axial coding that is a component of the grounded theory coding approach involves “cultivating concepts by reducing the number of codes and collecting them through continuous comparison, in a manner that demonstrates a relationship among them” (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 60). Finally, I compiled a list of qualities that followers thought Sadaf possessed that contributed to her being perceived as trustworthy.

The result of this study supports the findings in the previous research about the effective factors that inspire influencers' trust. These factors include physical attractiveness, closeness, authenticity, familiarity, scarcity, engagement, informative content, and being knowledgeable. The influential factors attributed to Sadaf which were found in this study include:

- Perceived Authenticity: Followers believe Sadaf is genuine and sincere.
- Perceived Closeness: Followers feel a personal connection to Sadaf.
- Amiability: Followers believe Sadaf is friendly, cute, funny, and approachable.
- Attractiveness: Followers believe Sadaf is physically attractive.

- Privilege: Followers believe Sadaf has a luxurious lifestyle in San Francisco.
- Being Educative or Informative: Followers believe Sadaf provides valuable and informative content.

The findings also suggest that the qualities attributed to Sadaf can be categorized into two main groups. Affective factors include perceived authenticity, perceived closeness, amiability, and attractiveness. Cognitive factors include privilege and being educative and informative.

This study concludes that:

1. While the combination of both affective and cognitive factors is found in Sadaf's content and helps her build the followers' trust, affective factors are more influential.
2. Factors such as perceived authenticity, closeness, amiability, and attractiveness have a greater influence on building emotional connections with followers.
3. Cognitive factors like privilege and being educative also play a role but are less significant compared to affective factors.

Overview of Third Paper

The title of the paper is, "Factors Affecting the Loss of Followers' Trust: A case of an Iranian Beauty Influencer". This paper argues that influencers are subject to a constraining paradox in their performance. This paradox makes their job very challenging, and they have to manage it to ensure their success. However, they may be very successful in gaining the trust of their followers in a short period of time, but they might lose it at some point.

In this study, I conducted qualitative research using a case study of Sadaf Beauty. I also used content analysis and interviews to answer the following question: how do influencers lose control in managing different success factors, and which factors make them lose followers' trust?

For content analysis, I used the posts and comments that I had already gathered for my second article. In this phase, my main objective was to find the qualities that were attributed to Sadaf and could be the answer to why followers lost their trust after trusting her.

With respect to interviews, I utilized criterion sampling presented by Patton (2002), a method where participants are selected based on predetermined criteria relevant to the research. My goal was to identify interviewees who were active followers of Sadaf in 2019, specifically those who consistently followed her posts, commented, and interacted with her by asking for advice. During the phase of content analysis, I identified the active followers and compiled a list of the potential interviewees. The next step was to recruit interviewees. I did this phase in 2022 when Sadaf had lost many followers' trust, so most of the people who were contacted refrained from participating in my research because they had already unfollowed Sadaf. Apart from this, Iran experienced Internet issues in the Fall of 2022 because of the Women, Life, Freedom movement so it was challenging to reach out to Sadaf followers since most of them were residing in Iran. To overcome this obstacle, I added snowball sampling to my research. I started carrying out interviews with those followers with whom I could contact and who were active followers of Sadaf. Then I asked them to introduce other active followers who could meet the recruitment criteria.

I carried out interviews through video calls on accessible applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Skype. This provided flexibility and convenience for the participants. The interview questions included two parts. In the first part, I asked them a few demographic questions about their age, education, etc. followed by some simple questions about their online activities on Sadaf's Instagram account. In the second part, I asked them when and why participants started

following Sadaf. Finally, I asked them the most important question: Why did she lose many followers in 2022?

This study indicated that there were some reasons why followers lost their trust:

- Inconsistent Authenticity (Discretion): Sadaf was not careful in expressing her emotions and ideas, especially on very sensitive topics such as Women, Life, Freedom movement.
- Poor boundary setting: She failed to set clear boundaries on sensitive topics.
- Misunderstanding her audience: She did not know her followers well enough to avoid misunderstanding.
- Advertising low-quality products: Followers were disappointed with her promotion of Shein that was involved in unethical practices. This conduct damaged her image in the minds of her followers.
- Decreased engagement: After receiving criticism, she reduced her activity and allocated more time to promotions and advertisements.

Although Sadaf did her best to be transparent with followers and produced some videos to explain herself and once again gain the followers' trust, this had limited success. It did help to some extent but did not completely restore the lost trust. This indicates that it is more challenging for influencers to regain their followers' trust after losing it compared to the initial effort of presenting themselves as authentic and trustworthy.

Significance of the Research

The significant and interesting point about this research that makes it very invaluable is that it was a longitudinal study that focused on the case's (Sadaf Masaeli) followers for a long time considering the fact that trust is built over the course of time. It gave me a detailed and

comprehensive understanding of how dynamics change over time both for building trust and losing it.

Another important aspect of this study is that it considers the role of external factors such as socio-political movements in losing the trust of followers. This study shows the impact of socio-political factors in building and losing trust which means it is not just about influencers and their followers, external factors can also play a significant role.

Additionally, the use of mixed methods including content analysis and interviews provides a comprehensive view of followers' attitudes and behaviors. Each method provides unique insights and complements the other.

Moreover, this study could identify new influential factors, such as amiability and privilege for the first time in influencer studies. This expands the existing theoretical framework and offers new dimensions for future research.

Another significant attribute making this study very special is that it shows that although according to the trust theory, trust is categorized into two important groups of feeling-based and reason-based categories, they are not equally important. In the context of influencer marketing, affective trust effect is far more significant than cognitive one.

Finally, this study offers a comprehensive framework for the concept of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing. This framework includes five key dimensions: origin, societal alignment, inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection. This framework can be referred to in future research.

Why this research?

My decision to focus my research on an Iranian beauty influencer is both highly personal and academically significant. Since I am an Iranian woman who has seen how cultural norms and beauty standards have changed both inside and outside of Iran and I grew up in a culture where beauty has long been a means of self-expressions, I have direct experience with the close relationship between tradition and modernity. This background influenced my ability to analyze the intersection of global beauty trends, culture, and identity in the field of influencer marketing.

My academic and professional background provided me with the tools necessary to approach this subject with both critical and empathetic lenses. Having studied social media trends and marketing dynamics, I recognized that the case of Sadaf Beauty offered a unique opportunity to explore not only the notion of trust and authenticity in interpersonal communication but also the deeper socio-political and cultural forces at play.

This research also allowed me to connect my cultural heritage with academic inquiry, bridging the gap between personal experience and scholarly analysis. By examining the intersections of authenticity, trust, and influencer marketing, I aimed to contribute to broader discussions on identity, interpersonal communication and influence, while also offering insights relevant to digital marketing practices.

Implications

This study provides influencers with a comprehensive understanding of the concept of trust and distrust in their marketing job as well as the factors that help them win the trust of their followers and the factors that may damage their trust. Influencers can learn that they have to consider the role of external factors even the socio-political factors that might look very irrelevant at first glance. Relying on the findings of this study, they can figure out how to strategically behave when unpredictable problems arise, such as societal movements or controversies that impact their

reputation. They may think that the performance of authenticity and transparency for the audience is always the key to inspire their trust. However, the findings of this study suggest that influencers have to learn crisis management and strategically adjust their performance and content accordingly. Otherwise, even those influencers who are highly reputable and have millions of followers can lose the trust of their followers and be seen as inauthentic. As a result, practicing cautious authenticity can indeed be more prudent for influencers than striving for the performance of complete authenticity.

The findings of this study can give scholars deeper insights into the concepts of trust, distrust, and authenticity in the context of influencer marketing. They can rely on the findings of trust being established, maintained, and lost in influencer marketing. They can also employ the model presented for authenticity and its key dimensions (origin, societal alignment, inner integrity, individual interpretation, intrapersonal connection) to further investigate whether the authenticity dimensions identified here are unique to influencer marketing or applicable in fields such as corporate branding, public relations, or celebrity endorsements. Therefore, scholars can expand the generalizability of these concepts. Additionally, they can rely on the new factors presented for building trust including amiability and privilege.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the world of social media and influencer marketing is complex and multifaceted. The role of authenticity and trust cannot be overstated in this field. To maintain their loyal followers, influencers have to make a balance between performing as a trustworthy source and and a marketer. The case study of Sadaf Masaeli, an Iranian American beauty influencer demonstrated that the relationship between influencers and followers is very fragile; the trust that

influencers may win gradually can be lost in a short period of time, and regaining the lost trust is significantly challenging and require a substantial amount of time.

The significance of this study lies in being longitudinal. It focuses on Sadaf Beauty and her followers for a considerable amount of time since trust is built gradually over time. It also takes the external factors such as socio-political problems like the Women Life Freedom movement in Iran into account and shows that external factors can shape the followers' trust in influencers.

The implications of this study are significant for both influencers and scholars. Influencers can gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of trust and the factors that influence it. This knowledge can help them strategically manage their performance and content, especially during crisis. The study suggests that while authenticity is crucial, influencers should maintain cautious authenticity.

For scholars, it provides new insights into the concept of trust, distrust, and authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing. The model presented for authenticity including its key dimensions; origin, societal alignment, inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection can be further investigated to see whether this model is exclusively applicable to influencers marketing contexts or can be used in other fields such as corporate branding, public relations, or celebrity endorsements. Finally, the new factors of trust building in the context of influencers including amiability and privilege provide a rich foundation for further research.

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CHAPTER2: Authenticity in the Realm of Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Review¹

Abstract

Authenticity in influencer marketing is a multifaceted concept, playing a crucial role in shaping producer-influencer-consumer relationships. This study employs the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for the Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol to systematically review the existing literature on authenticity within the context of social media influencers. The methodology involves three stages: assembling, arranging, and assessing. Each stage includes sub-stages tailored to ensure thoroughness and accuracy in the literature review process. This analysis suggests that the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing include an emphasis on origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of inner integrity, individual interpretation and intrapersonal connection of the audience. This study equips influencers with a comprehensive understanding of authenticity and enables them to evaluate their content and help them strike a strategic balance between their claims of inner genuineness and external pressures. Additionally, researchers benefit from its contribution to synthesizing authenticity typologies from various fields and its innovative methodological approach.

Keywords: Authenticity, Influencer marketing, Systematic literature review, Social media influencers.

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Introduction

This article describes the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing. Understanding what authenticity means requires examining the concept itself, which creates a circular relation between the concept and its definition (Knaller, 2012). Schulze (2017) finds a paradox in defining authenticity; once you want to label something as authentic, it loses its authenticity and genuineness.

During the last decade, many people on social media have become famous, attracting the attention of a large number of followers by creating interesting profiles and content (Hudders et al., 2021). They mostly share their thoughts, interests, and personal experience on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. These famous social media users, social media stars (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021), or micro-celebrities (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021) are also called influencers because they play a significant role in their followers' decision-making (Hudders et al., 2021). They leverage their expertise, personality, or niche focus to engage and influence their audience, often shaping opinions, behaviors, and purchasing decisions. Influencers are mostly seen as experts or personalities in certain areas, like fashion, fitness, or travel. Because so many people follow them, they can have a big impact on what others think or buy (Vrontis et al., 2021).

As a result, companies, organizations, and brands often approach them to promote their products by using their popularity on social media. This method of marketing is called Influencer Marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). Influencer marketing is a multi-layered relationship since it encompasses the relationship not only between social media influencers and their followers but also between influencers and brands (Kim & Kim, 2021). It has become increasingly popular in

recent years due to the rise of social media platforms and the growing skepticism towards traditional advertising methods (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They create a wide range of content formats, such as photos, videos, stories, and blog posts, providing brands and producers with diverse opportunities to collaborate and engage with audiences. The main reason why brands tend to approach influencers to promote their products instead of using traditional methods of marketing is that influencers offer brands the ability to create diverse and engaging content formats that resonate with their target audience. This flexibility allows brands to connect with consumers in more authentic and relatable ways compared to traditional advertisements (Gambhir & Ashfaq, 2021).

The paradox that Schulze (2017) refers to in the definition of authenticity is clearly visible in what happens in influencer marketing: while influencers claim to share their authentic experience, the main fact behind this endorsement is promoting a product for commercial gain. This fact, hence, raises questions about the authenticity of the influencer. The paradox that exists in their career makes influencers' job very challenging since on the one hand they aim to authentically connect to their followers and on the other hand, their role as a promoter for products and the financial aims behind their content challenge their authenticity.

Overview

This study explores the key aspects of authenticity in influencer marketing using the SPAR-4-SLR protocol proposed by Paul et al. (2021). The study includes 88 peer-reviewed academic articles from the Scopus and Project Muse database.

The study of the role of authenticity in influencer marketing is particularly useful because it addresses a subtle but significant contradiction inherent in the role of influencers. While influencers aim to share their authentic experiences with their followers, the primary goal behind

many of their endorsements is to promote products for commercial gain. This paradox described above raises critical questions about the true authenticity of influencers.

Furthermore, Funk (2015) believes that authenticity is a black box making this concept difficult to define. He suggests that to define authenticity, scholars should focus on firstly, the observable, tangible result of it and secondly, the tactics that build it instead of the concept itself.

In this study, thematic synthesis supplements the systematic literature review by uncovering key dimensions that contribute to our understanding of authenticity in this context. By thematic coding of the typologies of authenticity in the existing literature on influencer marketing, five key dimensions were identified. These five key dimensions include an emphasis on origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of the inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection of the audience.

Emphasis on the origin highlights the value of producing genuine and original content, while *alignment with societal expectations* reflects that influencers are often judged by the norms and values of the society. *Expressions of inner integrity* emphasizes the need for influencers to stay true to their own values and beliefs and avoid being manipulated by external desires. *Individual interpretation* highlights the subjective nature of authenticity, where each audience member's perception plays a critical role. Finally, the dimension of *intrapersonal connection* points to the personal resonance that authenticity can evoke in each person.

What Qualities Influencers Possess that Make Them Appear Authentic?

In societies where digital communication plays a central role, there is a continuous conversation about the importance of authenticity. This discussion extends beyond just brands and professional communicators to include social media users as well. This conversation raises questions like whether authenticity is important in our today's communication, specifically, in the

influencer marketing field. If yes, to what extent is it important? What is authenticity and who is an authentic person? What does it mean to be authentic?

According to Balaban & Szabolics (2022), authenticity is about being a genuine, true, and real version of yourself. In the context of social media, authenticity refers to the perception that influencers are presenting themselves as the real and unfiltered version of them and not just showing off the best moments and achievements of your life.

What Does Authenticity Mean Based on the Existing Literature?

The simplest definition of authenticity is “being true to oneself” proposed by Wood et al. (2008, p. 386). The main objective of social media influencers is to grow the number of followers and be seen as authentic by their large community of followers. The more authentic they seem, the more potential they would have to influence their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Poyry et al. (2019) also emphasize the crucial role of authenticity in strengthening the bond between influencers and their followers. He claims that, like traditional celebrities, social media influencers also rely on being seen as authentic, credible, and trustworthy.

There are divided opinions on whether authenticity is positively or negatively associated with influencer marketing activities. Some scholars believe that authenticity has a positive link to influencer marketing efforts particularly when they genuinely recommend products or services (Kim & Kim, 2021). Transparency and open disclosure of the fact that they have received compensation or other benefits for promoting a product can improve the relationship between the influencer and the followers, making their messages more effective (Johnson et al., 2019). Some scholars, however, suggest that social media influencers who regularly share content that has been paid for or financially supported by a sponsor may lose their authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Evolution of Authenticity

The concept of “authenticity” has gone through many changes over time. Dishek (2020, as cited in Schulze, 2017) emphasizes that authenticity has to be studied considering its specific historical discourse because it has developed as time passes. This approach involves tracing the historical development and interconnectedness of ideas, practices, and institutions, the concept of authenticity. The concept of authenticity gains significance and goes to marginality in certain periods (Schulze, 2017). Funk (2015) believes that when society undergoes significant transformations, people care more about what the real experiences are and how to perceive and represent them. In other words, they start thinking more about being real, honest, and truthful. Today, authenticity has the highest value in society because we get informed of almost everything through media, which is obviously second-hand information. We take this information and form our own idea of authenticity (Mair & Becker, 2005).

The term authentic comes from the Greek word “authentikos” which has various meanings related to truth, reality, and genuineness (Kakisch, 2000, as cited in Schulze, 2017). In Latin, the word “authenticus” mostly meant the document that was taught to be written by authorities, in other words, in Greek, it was about being complete, whereas in Latin it was about not being fake. It is difficult to define authenticity because it occupies the space between subjective and objective validation (Knaller, 2012).

Funk (2015) believes that this paradox makes describing this concept impossible. His practical solution to address this issue is to focus on firstly, the tangible, concrete, and observable results of authenticity rather than trying to define authenticity itself and secondly, the strategies creating it.

Funk (2015) introduces a solution to strike a balance between being fake and real at the same time. He calls this solution “reconstruction”. He believes reconstruction helps to solve the tricky problems of authenticity by combining different ideas and perspectives. This process involves both the artist and the audience. They use various strategies like making references to the real world, crafting intense emotional experiences in the content, etc., to make the performance feel authentic. Even though authenticity is a bit of a paradox, the process of reconstruction can bring together different perspectives and make them work. The reconstruction process proposed by Funk (2015) can apply to the influencer marketing since the influencer here is the artist playing a role and has some followers who are their audience. For example, a beauty influencer promoting a new makeup brand might use different strategies, such as sharing before and after photos, providing honest reviews of the product, creating engaging content that tells a story, or sharing a personal experience to resonate with their followers and make the makeup seem effective and authentic.

Existing literature on authenticity in influencer marketing highlights the urgent need to explore authenticity and its key dimensions in this field to better understand the existing paradox. As a result, this study tries to answer the following research question: What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of social media influencers?

Methodology

This study uses a systematic literature review for several reasons. Firstly, a systematic literature review approach contributes to an unbiased and a comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature. It ensures that our analysis covers a wide range of relevant studies and help uncover the existing gaps in the literature (Paul & Criado, 2020). In this way, a systematic literature review can be seen as a platform for knowledge advancement (Palmatier et al., 2018). Secondly, the

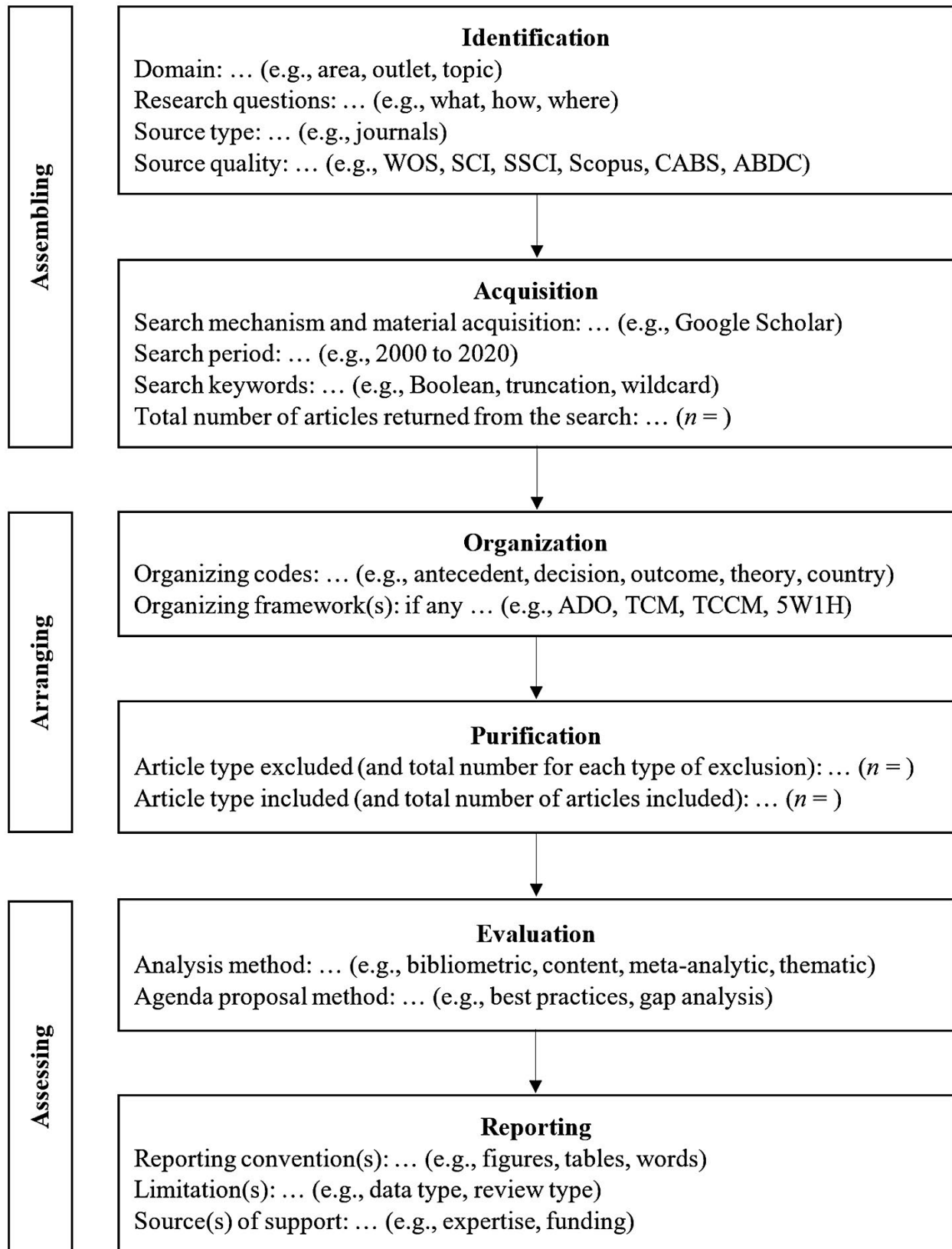
transparent process that it follows facilitates the validity and reliability of the review (Paul & Barari., 2022). Finally, it is a well-suited approach for synthesizing perspectives and theories extracted from a variety of disciplines (Paul et al., 2021).

Paul et al. (2021) develop an innovative protocol to allow researchers to “predict issues, minimize subjectivity, and ensure consistency in their research” in the systematic literature review (p.6). They call their protocol “Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews protocol, or in short, the SPAR- 4-SLR” (P. 6) protocol. Figure 1 shows the three stages and six substages of this protocol.

This protocol introduces three stages including assembling, arranging, and assessing, and six sub-stages which will be explained below. Paul et al. (2021, p. 6):

1. *assembling*, which involves (1a) *identification* and (1b) *acquisition* of literature that have not been synthesized,
2. *arranging*, which involves (2a) *organization* and (2b) *purification* of literature that are in the process of being synthesized,
3. *assessing*, which involves (3a) *evaluation* and (3b) *reporting* of literature that have been synthesized.

Figure 1. The SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Pauel et al., 2021, p. 6)



SPAR- 4-SLR protocol helps define a research question and narrow down the scope of the review to the most relevant studies by setting inclusion and exclusion criteria. Secondly, developing a detailed search strategy using relevant keywords minimizes the risk of missing important studies. Thirdly, this protocol has a systematic selection process that ensures unbiased and reproducible selection of existing literature. Finally, the detailed and transparent stages and substages of this protocol contribute to the possibility of reproducing this review. All in all, this structured approach can pave the way for answering the research question.

(A) Identification

The initial phase of conducting a systematic literature review involves identification. This requires defining the research domain, formulating research questions, determining the types of articles to include or exclude, and establishing criteria for assessing source quality.

(1) Research Domain

According to Paul et al. (2021), *research domain* refers to the main topic, outlet or area which is the central focus of the research. This definition of research domain serves as a guiding framework that aligns my research efforts with the research question. In terms of identification, the *research domain* focuses on theories of authenticity, extracted from the field of social media influencers' marketing.

(2) Research Question

The second sub-stage of identification is *research question*, the purpose of which is to uncover existing knowledge about a particular concept by asking "What do we know about...?" (Paul et al., 2021, p. 7). This systematic review aims to answer the following question: What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of social media influencers?

(3) Source Type

The third sub-stage of identification is to state the *source type*, the validating of which requires a description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the sources. For this review, only conceptual and empirical articles from academic journals were included. I gathered the dataset using the keywords listed in the Table 1 and 2 below.

(4) Source Quality

Here the requirement is to “define the quality of sources of published material” (Paul et al, 2021, p. 7). In this research, two reputable databases were used to extract articles, including Scopus for its scientific focus and Project Muse for its rich collection of journals and books in humanities.

(B) Acquisition

(1) Search mechanism

The first step with respect to acquisition is to define the strategies scholars have employed to acquire their material (Paul et al., 2021). For the acquisition of the sources, this study utilized Scopus and Project Muse as described above.

(2) Search Period

The second step is to identify and justify “the start and end date for the search” (Paul et al., 2021, p. 9). The concept of authenticity has evolved over the course of time. Schulz (2020) believes that this concept has gone through many changes, capturing attention, and going to marginality in some periods. Therefore, I did not limit the scope of the research to any specific start date although the first article in the databases came from 2015. The end date for the literature, is April 25, 2024, the date of this study’s retrieval.

(3) Keyword for Search

Based on the research question, “What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of social media influencers?”, two key words were chosen; “Authenticity” and “Social media influencers” to limit the scope of my research. To capture a broader range of relevant literature I used some synonyms for “social media influencers”, including “social media celebrities”, “online celebrities”, “Internet celebrities”, “Youtubers” and “vloggers”. However, for the term authenticity, I did not introduce any synonym because this term is the central concept in my research. I employed this strategy to identify instances where discussions on authenticity intersect with the realm of social media influencers. It provides valuable insights into the potential overlaps in these two domains.

Table 1. Articles Extracted from Scopus

	Queries	Number
#1	“authenticity”	14067
#2	“Social media influencers” OR “social media celebrities” OR “online celebrities” OR “Internet celebrities” OR “Youtubers” OR “vloggers”	919
#1 AND #2	“authenticity” AND “social media influencers” OR “social media celebrities” OR “online celebrities” OR “Internet celebrities” OR “Youtubers” OR “vloggers”	82

Table 1 shows the number of articles I obtained in the database of Scopus. First, for the keyword “authenticity”, I retrieved 14,067 articles. Then, for the keywords related to “Social media influencers”, I found 919 articles. Finally, I combined both sets of keywords, “authenticity” and those related to influencers, which gave me 82 articles.

Table 2. Articles Extracted from Project Muse

	Queries	Number
#1	“authenticity”	964
#2	“Social media influencers” OR “social media celebrities” OR “online celebrities” OR “Internet celebrities” OR “Youtubers” OR “vloggers”	408
#1 AND #2	“authenticity” AND “social media influencers” OR “social media celebrities” OR “online celebrities” OR “Internet celebrities” OR “Youtubers” OR “vloggers”	13

Table 2 shows that the number of articles retrieved with the keyword “authenticity” and the keywords related to social media influencers are respectively 964 and 408 in the Project Muse database. After combining both sets of keywords, I obtained 13 articles.

(4) Total Number of Articles Returned from the Search

In total, 88 articles were included in this study. The number of articles extracted in the initial retrieval was 95 encompassing 13 articles from Project Muse and 82 articles from Scopus. However, after consideration of their content, I decided not to include 7 articles in my study that will be discussed more in Purification where I explain the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

(C) Organization

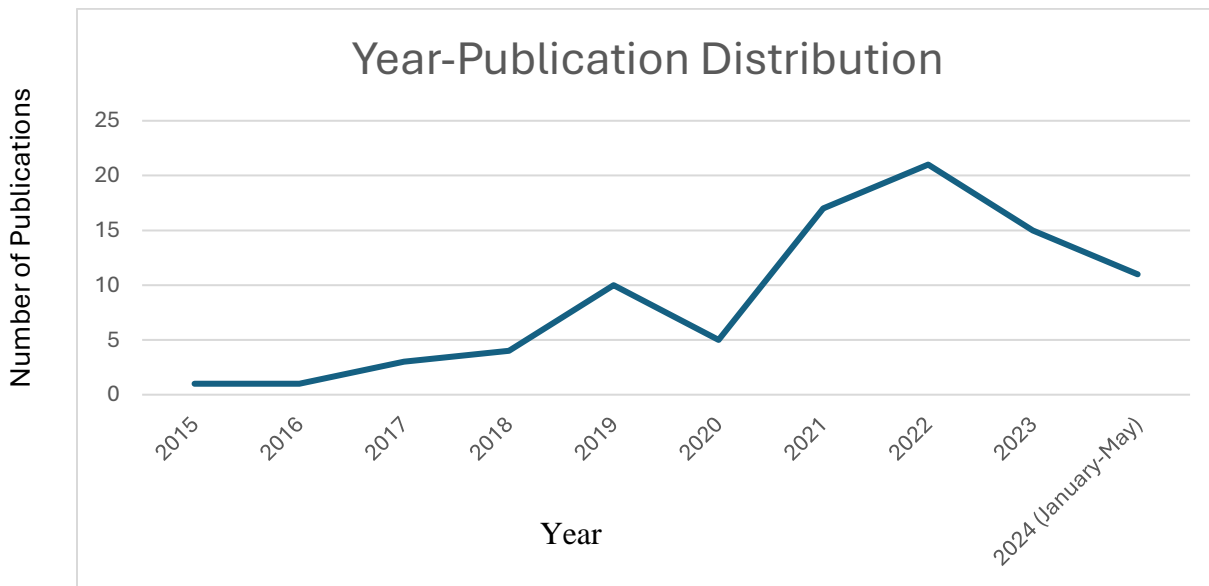
Organization “refers to the code book that researchers rely upon to code and record each article returned from the search” (Paul et al., 2021, p. 9). The first step of organization is to analyze the existing literature based on the year of publication and the number of citations. The next step of organization is to provide a systematic literature review of the concept of authenticity in the connection of social media influencers.

Among the articles extracted for this study, 82 articles out of 88 articles (93%) were obtained from the Scopus database and 6 articles out of 88 articles (7%) were retrieved from Project Muse.

(1) Distribution of the year of the publications

Figure 2 presents the distribution of the year of the 88 publications existing in this study. As it shows the popularity of the concept of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing has gradually increased over the last decade. In 2015 and 2016, only 2 articles (2%) were published in this field. In 2017 and 2018, the number of publications saw a significant increase, with 6 articles (7%) contributing to the discourse. Subsequently, in 2019 and 2020, there was a notable boost in the interest of scholars, with 15 articles (17%) focusing on authenticity in influencer marketing. In 2021 and 2022, it reached its peak with 38 articles (43%) highlighting the importance of authenticity in this field. In 2023 and the initial half of 2024, the number of published articles was 27 (31%).

Figure 2. Year-Publication Distribution



(2) Distribution of the journals of the publications

Table 3 presents a list of academic journals related to communication and media studies that have published a minimum of two articles discussing authenticity within the domain of social media influencers. The “Number of Occurrences” column indicates how many times each journal is mentioned in the dataset, while the “Percentage of Total” column shows the proportion of occurrences relative to the total number of journals listed. This table helps to identify which journals are most frequently referenced in the dataset and provides insights into the distribution of scholarly publications in the field of communication and media studies. Table 3 also reveals that these articles are mostly published in journals with a focus on Media and Cultural Studies, Advertising/Marketing and Technology Studies, showing that journals with these subfields have stronger interests in exploring topics related to authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing.

Table 3. Journal-Publication Distribution

Journal Title	Number of Occurrences	Percentage
Social Media and Society	4	4.5%
New Media and Society	4	4.5%
Celebrity Studies	4	4.5%
Convergence	4	4.5%
International Journal of Advertising	3	3.4%
International Journal of Strategic Communication	3	3.4%
Feminist Media Studies	2	2.2%
Media, Culture, and Society	2	2.2%
Journal of Advertising	2	2.2%

Public Relations Inquiry	2	2.2%
Advertising & Society Quarterly	2	2.2%

(3) Most cited publications

This study checks the most cited articles in the existing literature on authenticity in the real of influencer marketing. Table 4 displays the most cited articles that received more than 80 citations (based on the information retrieved from Scopus). This shows that these articles have been the most influential ones in this field.

Table 4. Citation-Publication

Article Title	Authors	Year	Citations
In the time of the microcelebrity: Celebrification and the YouTuber Zoella	Jerslev A.	2016	158
Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm	Bishop S.	2018	141
Social media celebrity and the institutionalization of YouTube	Hou M.	2019	116
“This Is What the News Won’t Show You”: YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity	Lewis R.	2020	101

A Call for Authenticity: Audience Responses to Social Media Influencer Endorsements in Strategic Communication	Poyry E.; Pelkonen M.; Naumanen E.; Laaksonen S.-M.	2019	97
Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content	Wellman M.L.; Stoldt R.; Tully M.; Ekdale B.	2020	97
“Charlie Is So Cool Like”: Authenticity, Popularity and Inclusive Masculinity on YouTube	Morris M.; Anderson E.	2015	86
Why are consumers following social media influencers on Instagram? Exploration of consumers’ motives for following influencers and the role of materialism	Lee J.A.; Sudarshan S.; Sussman K.L.; Bright L.F.; Eastin M.S.	2022	80

Jerslev (2016) with 158 citations is the most cited article. This article explores how celebrity culture has changed over time with the popularity of using social media and video-sharing platforms in our daily lives. Bishop (2018) was cited 141 times. The article again discusses the strategies social media influencers employ to strike a balance between being authentic and implying the algorithms of YouTube. Hou (2019) obtained 116 citations and is in the third place of citation. It emphasizes the role of social media in making ordinary people famous. It highlights the fact that social media let anyone become a celebrity without being in the mass media industry. It is also more like a business because being a social media celebrity is tied to making money

through ads, partnerships, and other business deals. This article suggests that authenticity is not just about claims of being real and genuine with your audience, it is also about being smart in how you present yourself online. The fourth most cited article is the article written by Lewis (2020) with 101 citations. This article discusses the manipulation of authenticity. It highlights the cases when political influencers strategically employ tactics to present themselves as authentic in order to elicit a specific political reaction from their audience. All of these articles have a recurring pattern and insight about the strategies influencers use to affect their audience. It seems that this was the main reason for the highest number of citations they have received.

According to Jerslev (2016) and Bishop (2018), one of the strategies that influencers use to affect their audience is to use a unique greeting. Their distinctive and personal greeting help them build friendly rapport with their followers. For example, Jerslev (2016), focuses on a case study who is a famous UK YouTuber called Zoella. Jerslev (2016) states that first strategy is her special way of greeting at the beginning of each video. She uses phatic expressions like “Hellooo everybodyyy!” (p.5241).

The second strategy that influencers use to share their personal life that includes bloopers. Bishop (2018) believes that one of the strategies that Zoella uses in her video production is to include a “blooper reel” (p. 80) in her videos. A blooper reel shows unscripted moments or mistakes in the process of video production aiming to add more authenticity to it. For example, in one of her videos, her dogs’ barking prevents her from talking in the video.

Finally, Lewis (2020) emphasizes on strategic presentation that is the manipulation of authenticity. It highlights the cases when political influencers strategically employ tactics to present themselves as authentic in order to elicit a specific political reaction from their audience. They try to cultivate trust and credibility which are powerful tools to shape public opinions.

Therefore, this article draws attention to the fact that authenticity may not always reflect genuineness, it is sometimes a target tactic to achieve desired political outcomes.

(4) Frequently used keywords

Term Frequency (TF) in text mining refers to the number of times a term appears in a text. It is a fundamental component in text mining. The most important purpose of the investigation of term frequency is to identify the important keywords within a document. The keywords with higher frequencies are often considered more important in the document (Stansfield et al., 2017). In this study, I investigate what keywords are the most central and frequently used. To find keywords, I used the online tool *Wordcounter.net*.

I pasted the material, including the abstracts of 88 articles, into the tool and wordcounter.net generated a detailed analysis of the most commonly used keywords to identify key themes and concepts within the text. I used this technique to find common phrases made of 1, 2, or 3 words, Tables 5, 6, and 7 respectively, demonstrate the key terms. Table 5 shows the nine commonly used keywords in the dataset. Wordcounter does not provide any specific feature to remove stop words (common words such as “the,” “is,” “in,” “and,” “how,” etc.) from the text. As a result, one stop word “how” can be found in the Single Keyword Analysis. The stop word “how” is not meaningful in this analysis, so it has been removed from the keywords table. Then, the 11th most commonly used word “Study” was added to the table.

Table 5. Single Word Keyword Analysis

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Media	240	Influencer	114
Social	205	Content	73

Authenticity	137	YouTube	58
Influencers	126	Self	52
Celebrity	114	Study	49

Table 6. Two-Word Keyword Analysis

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Social Media	173	Purchase Intentions	17
Media Influencers	44	Beauty Vloggers	14
Influencer Marketing	24	Media Influencer	14
Digital Media	20	Influencers Reputation	14
Influencer Industry	20	Media Platform	11

Table 7. Three-Word Keyword Analysis

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Social Media Influencers	44	Influencer Industry Ethics	11
Social Media Influencer	14	(Social) Media Influencers Strategies	8
Social Media Platform	11	Using Social Media	8
Micro Celebrity Practices	11	How Social Media	8
Social Media Influencer's	11	Media Influencers Reputation	8

Analyzing the keywords from the text provides valuable insights into the main topics, themes, and areas of focus within the content. This indicates that the text heavily focuses on themes related to media, social dynamics, authenticity in online personas, influencers, and celebrities.

(D) Purification

According to Paul et al. (2021), researchers have to define the inclusion and exclusion criteria of their literature review. In terms of the exclusion criteria, the main one was to be peer-reviewed. The second exclusion criterion was the language. I excluded studies published in languages other than English to ensure the consistency. While doing a comparative analysis, using one language makes it easier to analyze and organize data the same way throughout the research. Finally, I excluded the articles whose keywords did not include my search terms even if the title or abstract did. While they touch on various aspects of marketing, including the importance of trust, ethics, and authenticity, they do not specifically focus on authenticity in influencer marketing as its primary topic. Instead, their conversations seem to address broader themes related to marketing strategies, the role of the chief marketing officer, biases in technology, and key insights of marketing.

(E) Evaluation

In this substage, researchers have to define the method of analysis they adapt to review the articles of their dataset (Paul et al., 2021). In this article, I used two methods for data analysis. The first method of analysis was bibliometric analysis. According to Donthu et al. (2021), bibliometric analysis is a method employed to evaluate and quantify various aspects of published academic literature within a specific field of topic. Bibliometric analysis typically involves citation analysis (Donthu et al., 2021), journal analysis, publication time patterns analysis (Yang & Wang, 2024), keyword analysis (Pesta et al., 2018), etc.

The second method of analysis is thematic synthesis. Thematic synthesis was used to answer the main research question. Thematic synthesis is defined as a systematic, repeatable method for reducing extensive words of text into fewer content categories by following certain rules of coding (Berelson, 1952, as cited in Stemler, 2001). Thematic synthesis is helpful in finding trends and patterns in textual documents (Stemler, 2001). I explain thematic synthesis steps in the following section.

(F) Report

According to Paul et al., (2021), in this stage of systematic literature review, researchers have to report their findings with words, figures and/or tables. The result of bibliometric analysis has already been presented in Figure 2 and Table 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 and thoroughly discussed.

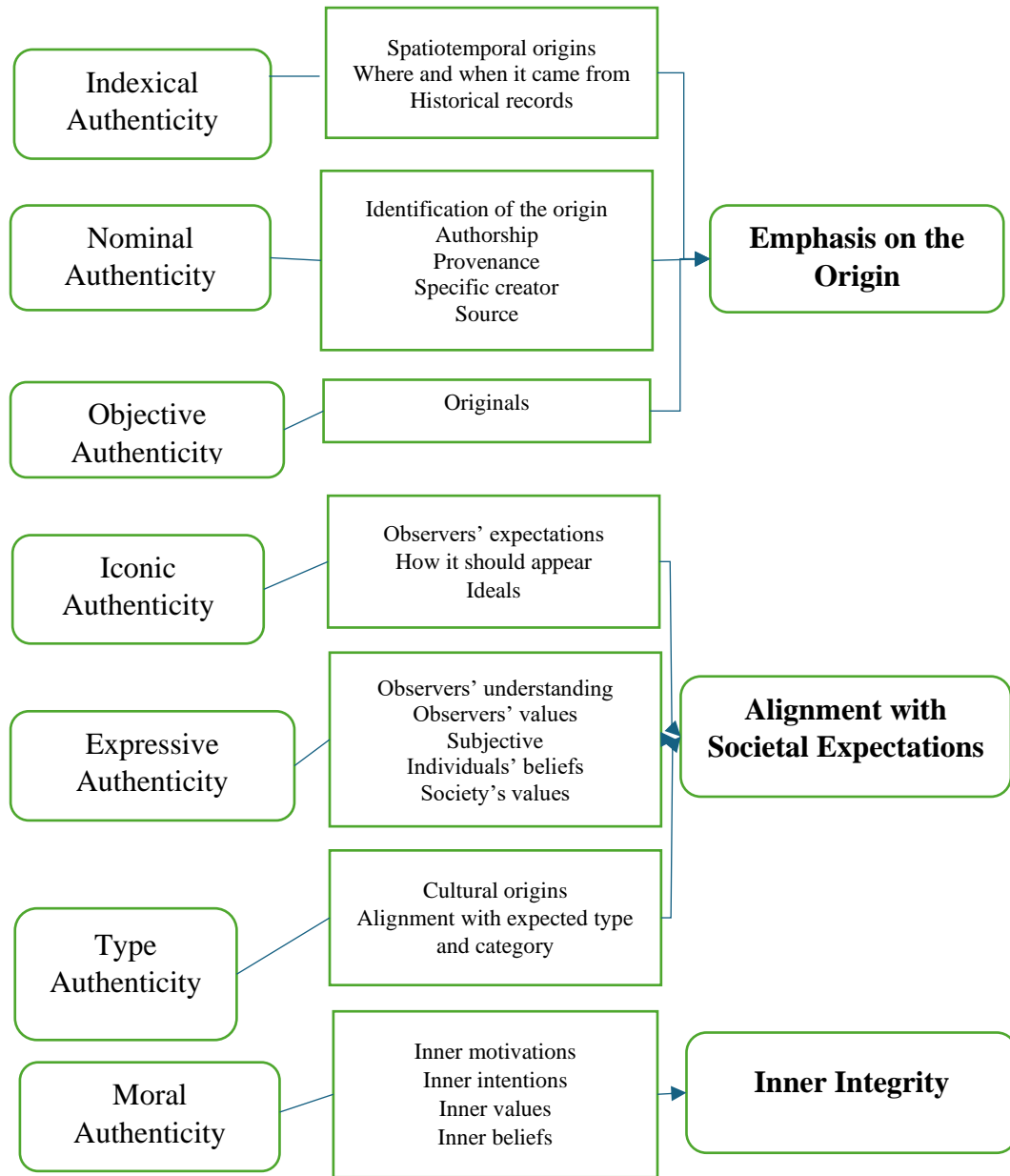
Thematic Synthesis Report

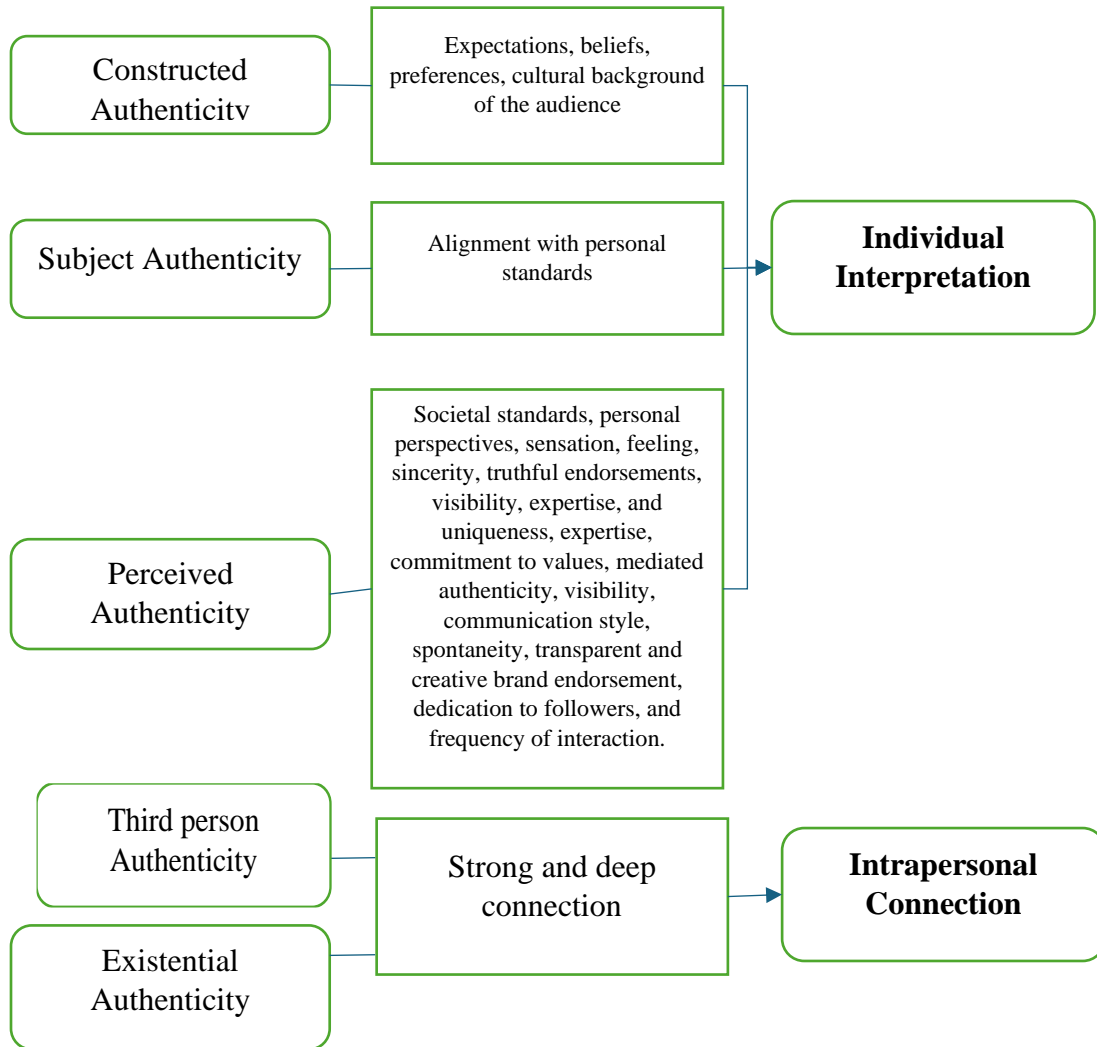
Thematic synthesis was used in this study to answer the research question asking about the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of influencer marketing. Thematic synthesis was done to extract the articles in which scholars had discussed different types of authenticity referring to other scholars and/or presenting a taxonomy for authenticity. Among the 88 articles in the literature, 9 articles had explained different types of authenticity which are in connection with the field of influencer marketing.

In this approach, first different types of authenticity that have been presented by scholars in these 9 articles was discussed. After that, thematic coding was done to categorize and organize the data that presented different types of authenticity. The dataset is not very large, so the most effective way of coding was to process manual coding, an inductive form is done “through a grounded-theory approach of open coding, in which the researchers essentially enter into a dialogue with the data, a back-and-forth comparative process of reading and re-reading a subset of the corpus to look for patterns” (Lauer et al., 2018, p.391). The criterion used for coding is the

usage of keywords in each definition. Themes, which represent the key dimensions of authenticity, are extracted from these keywords. Figure 3 presents the keywords on the left as well as themes on the right.

Figure 3. Key Dimensions of Authenticity Extracted from Definitions Using Keywords





Thematic Coding

The left column of the Figure 3 shows different types of authenticity discussed in my literature. In other words, they derive from the 9 articles mentioned above which are talking about the types of authenticity engaging in the field of influencer marketing. The middle column shows the key sentences and words of the definitions of each authenticity type. Basically, those sentences can define the focus of each type of authenticity. From the middle column we can see that some authenticity types have similar themes and key words, therefore we can put them together and

derive one general theme from them. In general, five different themes emerged from this thematic synthesis of different types of authenticity mentioned in an influencer marketing literature.

Thematic Synthesis Discussion

1. Emphasis on the Origin

One of the key dimensions acquired from this comparative analysis is the focus on the origin. Indexical, nominal, and objective authenticity all merge on this aspect and emphasize the importance of where things come from or who made them. They are interested in verifying the origin or history of an item.

Indexical Authenticity

This concept has already been used several times in different studies over time (Beverland et al., 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014; Newman & Smith, 2016; de Kerviler et al., 2021). Indexical authenticity focuses on verifying the spatiotemporal origins of an item. It is about where and when something came from that is often done through historical records, documentation, or physical evidence.

Nominal Authenticity

Nominal authenticity refers to “the correct identification of the origin, authorship or provenance of an object” (Dutton, 2003, p. 259). It involves confirming whether an object is genuinely attributed to a specific creator or source, such as determining if a painting was truly created by Picasso.

Objective Authenticity

Wang (1999, as cited in Newman & Smith, 2016) identifies this type of authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to the authenticity of originals. For example, a Native American headdress should be worn by a famous chief to have objective authenticity.

2. Alignment with Societal Expectations

The second dimension is alignment with societal expectations. Iconic, expressive, and type authenticity merge in this aspect, despite their apparent distinctions. Iconic authenticity assesses whether an item meets observers' expectations of its appearance or behavior which are rooted in cultural or societal perceptions. Expressive authenticity focuses on the genuine expression of individual or societal values and beliefs. Similarly, type authenticity evaluates whether something aligns well with its expected type and category. These dimensions collectively highlight the importance of authenticity strongly rooted in alignment with societal expectations.

Expressive Authenticity

Expressive authenticity is very subjective and relies heavily on the observers' understanding and values. Dutton (2003) defines expressive authenticity as “true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs” (p.259).

Iconic Authenticity

Iconic authenticity is concerned with whether an item meets observers' expectations of how it should appear or behave. It is about meeting the ideals of authenticity. This dimension is more subjective and relies on cultural or societal perceptions (Dutton, 2003).

Type Authenticity

Carroll (2015) introduces this kind of authenticity. The first one is Type authenticity that refers to whether something represents its cultural origins and aligns well with its expected type and category.

3. Expressions of Inner Integrity

The third key dimension of authenticity is the expressions of the inner integrity. Inner integrity refers to the alignment of decisions and actions with personal values and beliefs. This dimension which has been derived from the definition of moral authenticity, emphasizes the importance of sincerity and integrity in the influencers' choices, which display an inner authenticity that is independent of external factors such as brand partnerships, sponsorships, audience expectations, and financial desires.

Moral Authenticity

Moral authenticity helps to the inner motivations and intentions behind the actions. It focuses on whether the decision aligns with its values and beliefs rather than following societal norms and expectations. Carroll (2015) introduces this kind of authenticity as well.

4. Individual Interpretation

Another key dimension of authenticity is individual interpretation. Definitions proposed for constructed authenticity, subject authenticity, and perceived authenticity all share an important insight which is the critical role of individual interpretation in attributing authenticity to someone or something which are shaped by personal experiences and perspectives. This key dimension acknowledges the diversity of perspectives and the subjective nature of authenticity assessment.

Constructed Authenticity

Another type identified by Wang (1999, as cited in Newman & Smith, 2016) is constructed authenticity, and this type can be built by complying with the expectations, beliefs, preferences, and cultural background of the audience. To elucidate, this is individuals who decide to assign or attribute authenticity to objects or people.

Subject Authenticity

Knaller (2012) identifies this type of authenticity based on who confirms its genuineness. Subject authenticity refers to the type of authenticity where an individual decides about one's authenticity according to their personal standards.

Perceived Authenticity

Lee & Eastin (2020) define perceived authenticity as "Public perceptions of the authenticity of social media influencers" (p. 822). They confirm that perceived authenticity is described as a multifaceted and subjective concept that is influenced by various cues. They acknowledge that authenticity is subjectively determined and influenced by societal standards and personal perspectives, rather than being determined by predetermined standards. Some scholars highlight the subjective aspect of authenticity, suggesting that it is perceived as a sensation or feeling (Schlegel et al., 2011, as cited in Lee & Easting, 2020). After examining existing literature on the topic, Lee & Easting (2020) have identified five specific aspects that contribute to the understanding of perceived authenticity in social media influencers. These aspects include sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. Lee et al. (2022) also state that perceived authenticity has a direct relationship with perceived trust. Finally, Balaban and Szabolics (2021) propose a model for the components involved in perceived authenticity. These components include sincerity, expertise, uniqueness, commitment to values, mediated authenticity,

visibility, communication style, spontaneity, transparent and creative brand endorsement, dedication to followers, and frequency of interaction.

5. Intrapersonal Connection of the Audience

Another key dimension of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing is the intrapersonal connection that the audience establishes with themselves. Based on the definition of existential and third person authenticity, I suggest that this aspect highlights the deep inner harmony and bond that followers and fans cultivate with themselves.

Existential Authenticity

Another type identified by Wang (1999, as cited in Newman & Smith, 2016) is activity related or existential authenticity. This authenticity focuses on achieving a certain personal feeling or being connected to oneself. For example, when someone watches a movie or listens to music and feels connected with themselves, even if that piece of art does not comply with societal pressure and standards.

Third Person Authenticity

Moore (2002) identifies a new type of authenticity called third person authenticity. This type of authenticity refers to a scenario when the audience feels a strong and deep connection with what they witness. While Moore's concept of third person authenticity was primarily applicable to analyzing musical performances, it can be also relevant to the field of influencer marketing. This is because this concept is not inherent in the music, but it is defined by the audience. In the case of the influencer marketing, the audience is followers. This concept of third person authenticity emphasizes the fact that the authenticity of an influencer's content is determined by how their audience perceives it.

Thematic Analysis Results

Based on the discussion we can suggest that authenticity is a crucial component for influencer marketers and other individuals in influential roles. However, authenticity is not just being oneself. It is a vast concept with many definitions. This complication makes the performance of authenticity difficult. Social media influencers in the marketing field must effectively perform authenticity. When doing so, they should take into account a number of dimensions such as: focus on originality, alignment with societal expectations, expression of inner integrity, individual interpretation and intrapersonal connection of the audience. Ignoring these dimensions can cause the loss of followers' trust.

(G) Limitations and Implications

This study provides influencers with a comprehensive understanding of the concept of authenticity in the real of influencers marketing. Relying on the findings of this study, they can evaluate their content and try to employ strategies to strike a balance between being real and fake simultaneously. Insights from this study can guide influencers in making strategic decisions about content creation, partnerships, and audience engagement. Understanding the importance of origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of the inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection can help influencers tailor their approach to better resonate with their audience.

Apart from the influencers, researchers can also benefit from this study. It contributes to the academic literature by synthesizing existing typologies of authenticity in influencers' marketing and using them to extract the key dimensions of authenticity. This study can also offer innovative methodological approaches in the study of authenticity by using a new protocol in a systematic literature review. The article identifies five key dimensions of authenticity: origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of inner integrity, individual interpretation, and

intrapersonal connection. These dimensions offer a framework for scholars to understand the various facets of authenticity in influencer marketing. In terms of the paradox of authenticity, scholars can learn that paradox inherently exists in the job of influencers so they can investigate what strategies are used to handle it and/or to what extent they are helpful in trust building.

Finally, apart from influencers and scholars that directly benefit from this study, ordinary people in whatever position they are can also rely on the findings of it and use them in their daily lives in several ways. By being aware of the dimensions of authenticity and having an understanding of it, they can foster genuine relationships with others. They would be also able to inspire and motivate others once they embrace authenticity in their daily lives.

Regarding the limitations of this study, the first one is the limitation that both Scopus and Project Muse have determined for the first article retrieved. The first article had been published in 2015. It can limit the scope of the data in the review. Another important limitation was the language of the articles since I only retrieved English articles. Articles in other languages may somehow change the result of this study. Finally, I also limited my retrieval to the academic published articles. Book chapters and other types of publications, such as conference proceedings, theses, and non-peer-reviewed articles, were excluded. This restriction may have led to the omission of valuable insights and findings available in those sources such as practitioners' insights published as non-peer-reviewed articles. They provide valuable insights of the practical insights and real-world applications. I also excluded theses and dissertations that often deeply focus on case studies and present detailed and extensive datasets.

Conclusion

With the popularity of social media, traditional marketing methods have been replaced by innovative influencer marketing strategies. The concept of authenticity plays a pivotal role in

shaping the relationships between producers/brands, influencers, and customers. This study aims to fill the gap existing in the literature that stems from the new nuances of social media. Applying Scientific Procedures and Rationales for the Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol revealed that the first key dimension is the importance of origin, according to the definitions proposed for indexical, nominal, and objective authenticity. Additionally, the convergence existing between iconic, expressive, and type authenticity revealed that there is a focus on alignment with societal expectations. Another significant dimension of authenticity is expressions of the inner integrity, derived from moral authenticity' definition. It focuses on the deeply rooted wishes and inner values, not external influences especially financial incentives.

Furthermore, the analysis highlighted the role of individual interpretation in attributing authenticity, as seen in constructed, subject, and perceived authenticity. Finally, the exploration uncovered the intrapersonal connection of the audience with themselves. These dimensions collectively demonstrate the fact that authenticity within influencer marketing has a complex nature.

The result of this study can contribute to the influencers' understanding of the concept of authenticity in the field of marketing. They can rely on the findings and balance the existing paradox in their job which is being fake and real simultaneously. This paradox makes their job very challenging since they always have to present themselves authentic while they pursue their external financial desires. These insights can guide them make wiser decisions in content creation, partnerships, and engaging with their audience. Obviously, understanding authenticity can help influencers connect better with their followers because striking a strategic balance between being authentic and fake at the same time is the key to their success.

This study can also help scholars identify the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencers marketing. In addition, this study is highly valuable methodologically because it employs an innovative protocol in the systematic literature review, synthesizing the theories derived from it.

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CHAPTER 3: How Influencer Marketers Inspire Trust: The Case of Sadaf Beauty²

Abstract

This article presents a qualitative case study of Iranian beauty influencer Sadaf Masaeli (Sadaf Beauty), focusing on how she has cultivated her followers' trust on her Instagram account. Sadaf was identified as the second most influential beauty influencer of 2019 in the world by Forbes magazine (Caludet, 2019). Her example provides insight into how influencer marketing has become a popular way to increase brand awareness, find new customers and enhance purchase intention. In particular, it highlights the effects of a contradiction shaping influencer marketing. On the one hand, influencers appear as authentic social media users, to attract followers whilst, on the other hand, they use their popularity to promote products, an act that might be perceived as “inauthentic” by followers. Managing this contradiction and creating trust are crucial in their success and affects the number of people they reach. This case study, drawing on past research about trust and influence suggests that demonstrating qualities like moral authenticity, similarity, expertise, likability plays a crucial role in influencers' ability to inspire followers' trust. This article suggests that successful influencer marketers are focusing more on factors related to affective trust—like moral authenticity, similarity, and likability—rather than factors related to cognitive trust—like expertise and knowledge.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, Trust theory, Trust model, Influencer, Instagram, authenticity

² Amini, M. (2024). How influencer marketers inspire trust: The case of Sadaf Beauty. *Iowa Journal of Communication*, 56,121-139.

Introduction

Over the past decade, as social media have grown, many users have turned into content creators, and, more important, into influencers. By sharing pictures and videos and telling their own stories, they have drawn an increasing number of followers and, consequently, the attention of marketers in the past decade for their brand awareness and promotion.

Past research traces the emergence of influencer marketing to 2016; since that time, companies have sought to use influencers to increase brand awareness, attract new audiences, generate sales, manage their reputation, and improve customer satisfaction (Woods, 2016; Backaler, 2018). The influential marketing agency Mediakix, which was established in 2011, conducted research on figures related to influencer marketing in 2019, showing that at the time influencer marketing emerged the companies were hesitant to spend in it, but by 2019, their budgets had climbed by 65%. Influencer marketing now accounts for \$5 to 10 billion annually in revenue, and Instagram receives two thirds of marketers' influencer marketing budgets (Mediakix, 2019). However, marketers and companies still struggle to find the effective influencer marketers for their businesses.

From influencer marketers' perspective, there are two priorities: to attract followers and to attract advertising agencies. Influencers must be seen by their followers as trustworthy and authentic users, even while they are also a marketer, which the followers may view as fake. Thus, trust is a key component of their work. Although this is a new field of study that needs more exploration, research on trust and the elements that influence it in influencer marketing has been conducted in recent years.

Previous studies have shown that followers' trust is influenced by a variety of qualities, including knowledge, expertise, likeability, moral authenticity, and similarity, qualities that influencers use to strengthen their perceived credibility (Karouw et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2018). These elements fall into the affective (feeling-based) and cognitive (reason-based) trust categories, according to trust theory (MacAllister, 1995).

In the current study, I examine how influencers simultaneously serve as advertisers and gain the trust of their audience. I focus on Instagram, because it is a primary channel where beauty and fashion influencers are active (Mediakix, 2019), looking specifically at Iranian Beauty influencer Sadaf Masaeli, named the second popular beauty influencer by *Forbes* in 2019 (Claudet, 2019). My research question is: *which strategies did Masaeli employ on her Instagram channel Sadaf Beauty to manage this contradiction and shape her followers' trust in the influencer-follower relationship?* In particular, which dimensions of trust did she address to persuade followers to perceive her as a trustworthy source that they could learn from, who was relevant to the topic that they were talking about, and who could offer new content that the audience/followers cannot find anywhere else (Backaler, 2018)?

I conclude that new successful influencer marketers are focusing more on factors related to affective trust—like moral authenticity, similarity, and likability—rather than factors related to cognitive trust—like expertise and knowledge.

Literature Review

Influencer Marketing

Content creators on social media who gain a large following through blogging or other content creation are known as social media influencers. They divulge the intimate details about their daily routines, encounters, and viewpoints to their followers. Therefore, followers view influencers as approachable, believable, intimate, authentic, and credible. According to De Veirman et al. (2017, p. 801), "influencers or digital opinion leaders are able to influence the attitude, behavior, and decisions of their followers."

Fashion and beauty bloggers whose their content is mostly about makeup tutorials and makeup products are among the most popular influencers (Mediakix, 2019). These influencers sometimes make content about their personal life in addition to tutorials to build a relationship with their followers and increase the engagement on their accounts. These beauty influencers are considered effective by cosmetic manufacturers in their product promotion campaigns (Forbes, 2016; Globalwebindex, 2020). Some of the beauty influencers have millions of followers on Instagram, such as Huda Beauty, who has 53 million followers and a net worth of \$ 610 million (Forbes magazine, 2019).

Ismagilova et al. (2017) claim that social media influencers can assist marketers with online electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. EWOM marketing means any informal messages sent to customers via the Internet regarding the characteristics or use of particular products and services, or their vendors (Litvin et al., 2008).

According to definitions of eWOM, communicators may have financial incentives. Online reviewers can be compensated to provide their opinions about a product, service, etc., which is one

explanation. To be fair and transparent, some social media influencers even include the hashtags "#ad" or "#PaidPartnership" when they advertise (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004). EWOM is effective in part because it is permanent, which allows a single product post to be saved online, available across various platforms, and able to reach a large audience regardless of where they are in the world. Even though eWOM is an effective marketing tool, many businesses are still hesitant to employ it or are unsure of how to use it properly (Ismagilova et al., 2017).

Sadaf Beauty

Sadaf Masaeli started her activity as a beauty blogger on Instagram in 2016. She is an Iranian beauty influencer who lives in San Francisco, California. Sadaf is self taught with respect to her beauty skills, and she does not have any degree in makeup.

Sadaf has almost 4 million followers on her Instagram account where she shares both tutorial posts and personal stories. She stated that she believes she is the first Farsi-speaking makeup blogger, and this is one of the reasons she became successful so rapidly, in an interview with MBC Persia, an Iranian TV channel with a London base (MBC Persia, 2020).

Some of Sadaf's approaches made her to be known as a trustworthy influencer. For example, Sadaf receives beauty items from firms. She usually tries them for a while before posting about their qualities and letting her followers know if she was happy with them. In some cases, she tells her followers not to buy certain products after using them for a while.

According to Forbes magazine (Cited in Claudet, 2019), Sadaf was ranked as the world's first most prominent luxury cosmetics influencer and the second most influential beauty influencer in 2019 by *Forbes*.

Influence Theories

According to Forbes (2016), the theory of social learning helps the comprehension of the power that social media influencers have. Social behaviors are taught or "spread," in the words of Ford and Jenkins (2013), primarily through imitation, modeling, and observation. According to Forbes (2016), influencers lead by example by using advertorials to support or endorse goods they find appealing. As a result, marketers employ this tactic to raise sales and brand exposure.

According to Herbert Kelman's (1958) social influence theory, occasionally people are influenced by someone because they like or respect them but sometimes also the influence is internalized means people believe in the person both publicly and privately. Influencer marketers try to affect followers internally; therefore, they can create more trust (Kelman, 1958).

Robert Cialdini (1984) believes that there are "six weapons" or strategies to influence: scarcity, authority, likeability, commitment, reciprocity, and social proof (herd behavior or a psychological phenomenon when members of the same community mimic one another and act similarly in comparable circumstances). These elements are also present in influencers' actions, as the literature demonstrates.

Social impact theory (Latane, 1981) identifies immediacy and proximity as the factors that increase social influence. In a study done by Bond and Smith (1996) culture was recognized as an effective factor as well. According to their study, collectivist nations exhibit greater degrees of conformity or compliance with social norms than individualistic nations.

Trust Theory

Generally speaking, trust is defined as "a belief that is held by one party about the attitudes and behavior of another party" (Sekhon et al., 2014, p. 413), yet different fields have different meanings for it. According to Sekhon et al. (2014), "trust" can be defined as "a belief held by

customers about organizations or their representatives" in the context of conventional marketing (p. 413).

In e-marketing, trust—more especially, interpersonal trust—is crucial to the relationship between an influencer and a buyer. High levels of commitment and trust are typically listed as prerequisites for becoming a successful influencer (Scott, 2018). Trust and authenticity are also mentioned by Sudha and Sheena (2017) in their definition of influencer marketing as the essential components that influencers employ to "expand their audience and turn them into loyal customers."

McAllister (1995) categorizes trust in two types based on evidence from the social-psychological literature on trust in relationships. These two key types are *cognitive* and *affective*. Cognitive trust is when there is trust based on good reasons and it is created by logical or rational (McAllister, 1995, p. 26) evidence. Available knowledge about a person helps the trust decision and affects others' faith in the person. On the other hand, affective trust is based on "emotional bonds between individuals" (McAllister, 1995, p. 26). In this type of trust, people rely on each other based on their emotional experience, they express care and concern for each other, and they believe that these feelings are reciprocated.

According to Glen L. Urban (2003), trust-based marketing is a different new strategy for marketing that is based on building relationships with customers through trustworthy dialogue and unbiased information. One of the methods used by influencers, according to this strategy, is an "unbiased" (Urban, 2003, p. 9) comparison of competing products or, rather, the appearance of *unbiased* comparison, as Urban ignores the fact that advertising cannot be completely unbiased. This way, followers trust influencer unreflectively without searching about the products themselves or finding a good reason or evidence for using the product. This strategy also leads to "pass along" which means trusting the people trusted by those you trust which is also an

unreflective kind of trust (Urban, 2013). This theory can help us to understand factors performed by influencers which are related to affective trust.

Trust Factors in Influencer Studies

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the factors that influencers need to handle the conflict between being a trustworthy user and an advertiser.

An investigation was carried out in 2019 to introduce social media influencers' value model. The data gathered by online surveys distributed among influencers' followers demonstrated that, in addition to informative content generated by influencers, trustworthiness (or "the receiver's perception of a source as honest, sincere or truthful"), attractiveness (or the "source's physical attractiveness"), and similarity (or the "perceived likeness of the source to the receiver") are factors that positively affect followers' trust on influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 61).

In 2018, a study using the persuasion and trust theories was carried out to examine the effects of various elements on the success of influencers. According to this study, in order for social media influencers to gain followers' trust, they need to project a certain set of qualities. It has been discovered that the three most important characteristics that support influencers are likability (or "who followers present themselves as or they want to be"), authority (or knowledge), and authenticity (Moore, Yang and Kim, 2018, p. 2). Scarcity (or when the demand is greater than the supply) and targeting (or focusing on a specific group of followers that seem to be potential customers for a product) were also mentioned as being beneficial in the outcome of this research (Moore, Yang and Kim, 2018). Scarcity in marketing refers to a tactic that presents products as difficult to obtain and gives a fear of missing to customers (Siddiqui, 2011).

Authenticity is another factor that was mentioned in different studies as a characteristic that assists influencers in inspiring followers' trust. Audrezet (2018) defines authenticity as

following: “according to self-determination theory, which addresses issues of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, authenticity involves an individual’s engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviours—those that emanate from a person’s innate desires and passions. These behaviours involve active engagement with tasks that [one] finds interesting” (Audrezet, 2018, p. 3). On the other hand, inauthenticity involves engagement in extrinsically motivated behaviours—those driven by external pressures such as reward or punishment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A useful definition of authenticity in the context of influencers and this study is moral authenticity (Beverland et al., 2008), which refers to a situation where producers are seen as driven more by their passion for their work than by money. Herminia Ibarra (2015) sheds light on a particular dilemma concerning the concepts of authenticity. According to her, being authentic means expressing or being the version of oneself that is suitable for the given circumstance rather than always being exactly who you are.

According to a study on Instagram influencers, there is a conflict between influencer marketers' roles as advertisers and as perceived real Instagram users. This study asserts that in order to strike a balance between drawing in advertising and being authentic—that is, driven by internal motivations—influencers must operate strategically in an imperceptible way. Influencers must professionalize their activity when they begin to monetise their accounts in order to maintain devoted followers and appeal to advertisers (Dumitrica & Van Driel, 2020).

A study from 2019 about the concept of trust in influencer marketers’ activities and crucial factors for earning followers’ trust demonstrates that influencers should be knowledgeable and provide informative content. To elucidate, influencers should be expert, skilled and experienced to be successful in attracting followers (Karouw, Worang & Pandowo, 2019). Besides expertise, knowledge, skill and experience that were mentioned in different research, product matchup or

relevance is also enumerated as being an important factor in attracting followers and increasing their purchase intention (Lim & Wong, 2017).

According to MacAllister’s (1995) trust theory, we can categorize all these factors found in different research as crucial factors in influencers’ trust model. Some of these attributes like similarity, attractiveness, likability and authenticity are created by emotions rather than reflexive thought. Followers feel that the influencer is attractive, similar, or authentic. In fact, these factors are created based on followers’ emotions and create affective trust. To elucidate, influencers apply these factors to influence followers’ affections and consequently attract their trust.

On the other hand, some other characteristics are formed in followers’ minds based on the evidence that they see. They analyze evidence consciously in their mind and conclude that they can trust the influencer. For instance, expertise, experience, relevance and making informative and frequency in posting allow cognitive trust to shape in followers’ minds. In fact, if we ask followers why they trust the influencer, they can rationalize their trust based on some facts that they witness.

I summarize all factors that I found in my literature in the table below:

Table 1. Trust factors shaping influencers’ relationships with their followers.

Affective trust factors	Cognitive trust factors
Attractiveness	Informative content
Similarity/Likability	Expertise/Authority (i.e., knowledge/skill)
Perceived (moral) authenticity (i.e., perceived as being transparent, passionate)	Experience

Scarcity	Targeting (i.e., relevance/product matchup)
Engagement/Frequency (e.g., familiarity)	
Trustworthiness	

In order to determine which trust type has a greater impact on the performance of influencer marketers, I compared the efficacy of these factors in a case study of a successful influencer marketer.

Methodology

In this study I investigated which factors are more influential in managing the contradiction influencers are facing and shaping trust in the influencer-follower relationship, in particular, which factors help influencers to make followers perceive them as a trustworthy source that they can learn from, whom they can relate to and who can offer new content that the audience/followers cannot find anywhere else (Backaler, 2018).

I used a case study as the organizing framework for this qualitative investigation. Creswell (1997) defines a case study as an investigation of a case or a "bounded system" (one that is limited in space and time) through an organized, in-depth data collection involving numerous sources of contextually rich information (Creswell, 1997, pp. 61–62).

In order to do a content analysis, I looked at Sadaf's activities by examining comments left on her Instagram posts from 2019 (bounded time), when she attracted thousands of followers. I also interviewed some of her followers to triangulate my findings from the content analysis.

Content Analysis

Since Forbes magazine (Cited in Claudet, 2019) named Sadaf the most influential luxury cosmetic influencer of the year in 2019, I decided to focus on her Instagram postings in that year. I chose to utilize videos because she provides product information in them, and there are typically more comments and interactions under her videos than under her photos, which are basically the finished goods from her makeup tutorial videos. In 2019, she made 85 posts. There are 41 videos within these 85 posts. I looked at the 41 posts and examined the ones with more than 300,000 likes (her page's median number of most liked posts). Furthermore, I went through every one of these video posts' comments and selected the ones with the most varied comments means the ones that were demonstrating followers' ideas about Sadaf rather than just emojis.

My objective was to find comments that addressed Sadaf, her followers' perceptions of her, and the reasons for their feelings toward her, rather than about the actual content of the videos. I ultimately analyzed 17 posts on Sadaf's account based on the parameters mentioned above. In the next part, I provided an explanation of comment analysis.

Interviews

For this research, I found that criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) is appropriate in finding interview subjects. In this approach, participants fulfill predefined requirements. In order to conduct the interviews, I had to determine which interviewees were Sadaf's followers in 2019, which are people who regularly follow her postings, leave comments on them, and engage with her to ask for additional advice. These individuals were identified by the analysis of the comments under her posts (Patton, 2002).

After identifying some users who were appropriate to do an interview with, I contacted them one by one. Since I did not receive enough responses and I needed more interviewees, I added snowball sampling to my approach as well. I therefore began by interviewing a small number of potential recruits, and from there I inquired of them and others to introduce interviewees who were actively following Sadaf and trusted her advice.

I chose women for my sample because the majority of Sadaf Beauty's followers are women. In my research, I define “women” as any individual who considers herself to be a woman, and who uses makeup products.

I contacted the users I had selected by sending a direct message to their Instagram account. I needed to verify that they were actual users and that their profile photo was real, so I told them about my research and offered them to take part in an online video interview. The comfort and consent of the interviewees were taken into account in each step of these processes.

There were two sets of questions on my questionnaire. The initial round of questions focused on demographics, including age, gender, and place of residence. In an attempt to put them at ease and create a conversational tone for our upcoming discussion, I then asked them some questions regarding their Instagram activity.

I designed the second set of questions based on my research questions, goals, and themes identified by my literature review and initial data analysis. These questions were open-ended. I developed the questions after thinking about the precise facts I wanted to learn from this discussion (Donalek, 2005). The majority of questions concerned participants' reasons for following Sadaf. Through these questions, I intended to identify the initial characteristics that drew in the followers.

Data Analysis

Content Analysis

For analyzing the comments in this research, I used two methods, holistic and thematic analysis.

Dey (1993) defines holistic coding as understanding the fundamental themes and problems in the data by taking them in as a whole as opposed to breaking them down line by line (Dey, 1993). On the other hand, thematic analysis means collecting and unifying an experience's essence or foundation to create a meaningful totality (Desantis and Ugarriza, 2000). I found the combination of these two methods efficient for this research.

I did the analysis by reading the comments under each of the 17 posts that I had chosen. I scanned the comments beginning with the most recent ones and continued for as long as I found new information. When the comments started to get repetitive and I was unable to find anything new, I reached the saturation point and I stopped. I made notes of the remarks regarding Sadaf and her followers' thoughts and sentiments as I read. Once I had a large file of comments, I divided them up into several themes using various colors. Each color was related to one theme and the usage of keywords related to the definition of that theme. For example, I categorized keywords like "someone like us", "Iranian woman", "Young woman" under the "similarity" theme. Basically, according to the meaning of each theme, I related keywords used in the comments to them. Some of these themes already existed in previous research; therefore, I used the same names for them, and some were new, and I chose names for them based on the definition.

To clarify, I employed axial coding in this step, which is a component of the grounded theory coding approach and signifies "cultivating concepts by reducing the number of codes and

collecting them through continuous comparison, in a manner that demonstrates a relationship among them" (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 60). After refinement of all these themes, I ended up having a list of qualities that followers find in Sadaf:

Table 2. Coding process of Sadaf qualities in 2019

Key words	Axial codes (Relationship between keywords)	Selective codes (Core category)
Not fake, being herself, not acting, clear, honest, unique, model, different, innocent.	Scarcity Honesty	Perceived authenticity
Similar, close, family, at ease, friend, Iranian (Same nationality, woman (same gender), attached, engaged, living with us.	Similarity Friendliness Engagement	Perceived closeness
Successful, creative, powerful, passionate Loves the work, motivated, independent, perseverant, brave, special, clever, storyteller.	Successfulness Having good soft skills Powerfulness Good public speaking skills	Charisma
Thankful, fair, judge, logical, patient.	Leadership qualities	Leadership
Positive energy, funny, hopeful, happy,	Sense of humour	

active, kind, nice, peaceful.	Positivity Lightness	Amiability
Professional Experienced, informative, useful content, up to date, precise, reliable, having good taste.	Expertise Experiment Trustworthiness	Perceived authority
Beautiful, attractive, sexy, pretty, cute.	Physical attractiveness	Physical attractiveness
Supportive family, quality gadgets, rich, wealthy, attractive lifestyle, facilities.	Being supported Good life situation	Privilege
Being among the first, popular subject, polling, quality content (video, audio qualities).	Blogging techniques Innovation	Avantgardiste

All factors mentioned in the literature review were present in the comments I analyzed. There were also extra qualities that were found in my analysis that I added to the table above. Most of the extra qualities found in my analysis were affective and based on followers' emotions and feelings, suggesting that affective trust is more of the case in influencer-follower relationships. The more influencer is successful in affecting followers' emotions and inspiring their affections (with the help of the qualities mentioned above), the more she/he can inspire their trust.

Interviews

All interviews were done online and on video calls. All participants gave me permission to record the audio of the interviews. I used both audio recordings and my notes during the interviews, for recording the data and then doing the analysis and coding. Interviews were in Farsi, so I translated the keywords, codes, and themes.

Participants mentioned different reasons as the first motivator to follow Sadaf. The motivators are as following: having a cute pet, being funny and cute, being educative and sharing some useful information that you cannot find elsewhere about beauty products, being among the first Iranian beauty influencers (Scarce), entertaining coverages of different events of her life like her marriage and shopping for the event or coverage of her trips. Participants mentioned that they felt they were experiencing what she was showing themselves.

After transcribing the interviews. I started reading the data and highlighting the keywords that were related to my research question: *which strategies did Masaeli employ on her Instagram channel Sadaf Beauty to manage this contradiction and shape her followers' trust in the influencer-follower relationship?* Some of the qualities mentioned by participants were similar to the qualities I found in posts analysis, but some were new.

After highlighting all the keywords. I made a list of all of them and counted how many participants used each key word to be able to find which qualities are considered as most influential according to my participants. The table below lists the keywords mentioned in the interviews, classified by the number of participants who used them:

Table 3: Keywords from the interviews

More than 7 participants	4-5 participants	2-3 participants	Less than 2 participants
Real and honest	Beautiful	Successful	Self-confident
Interesting lifestyle and traveling	Comfortable in front of the camera	A good relationship with family members	Self loved
Closeness	Trustworthy	Concerned about Iranian social and political issues	Creative
Educational	Happy	Attractive	Different
	Energetic	Storyteller	Independent
	Fun	Engaged	Wise
	Friendly	Similarity	Kind
		Among the first	Persistent
			Expert
			Perceived vulnerability

Based on the table above and comparing it with Table 2, the themes extracted from posts analysis, I concluded which qualities are repeated the most in the whole data.

Results

By comparing the tables 2 and 3, we see that core categories of perceived authenticity, perceived closeness, amiability, physical attractiveness, and privilege are the most mentioned in both posts and interviews. Both in comments and interviews the first characteristics that followers

mention about Sadaf are honest, real, being herself, beautiful, fun, cute, friendly, and close. They also mention her lifestyle and trips as one of the main reasons they follow her.

Authenticity seems to be a key factor in inspiring trust. Some qualities are also in a positive relation with authenticity. For instance, perceived similarity and friendliness by using some tools like good public speaking skills, make followers perceive the influencer as authentic and honest. In addition, relevance between the audience and the content is in a positive relation with the perception of similarity and closeness by followers. The more followers find their desired relevant content on Sadaf's page, the more they feel similar, familiar and close to her. Based on Latane (1981)'s social impact theory, proximity or familiarity is important in increasing the social influence.

The educational quality of Sadaf's page was also mentioned a lot in both the interviews and posts. One of the most informative categories of videos according to her followers are the ones in which she criticizes different beauty products and uses them herself to let her followers know which ones are better. According to Glen L. Urban (2003)'s trust-based marketing strategy, providing this unbiased information helped her to build a relationship with her followers.

The other categories which were mentioned in comments several times such as charisma, leadership, perceived authority and avanguardism were less mentioned in the interviews.

Some new effective factors or qualities were found in this research that was not mentioned in previous research like vulnerable, amiable (generating positive feelings), privileged, charismatic, avant-gardist.

One new factor that came up in one of the interviews and was indirectly mentioned in the comments, was vulnerability. The participant explained this term as the fact that Sadaf is a beauty blogger but unlike the other ones, she is not scared of showing the flaws of her appearance and

even her life. She shows her natural skin even when she has pimples, and she discusses about her fights with her husband, etc. This description was relevant to some other comments under the posts and in other interviews. Although others did not use “vulnerability”, they mentioned it in another way like “she shows everything about herself”, “she is not editing her videos much”, “she is showing everything”, etc. According to the interviewee, vulnerability built some form of comfort for followers that they engage more and comment for Sadaf as if she is their family or friend. Basically, when the influencer showcases her imperfection, the follower feels she is someone like them and close to them who is showing them her real life.

The analysis demonstrates that followers get attracted to and trust someone who seems charismatic. The performance of success, independence, leadership, and authority makes followers to find the influencer informative and educative. In this research many users and interviewees mentioned qualities related to these categories as influential.

This research suggests that some personal soft skills like sense of humor, storytelling, the ability to give positive vibes to the audience are very influential in attracting followers, help the influencer to be more entertaining and increase followers’ engagement.

The other quality that I tagged as privileged, which is related to influencer’s life situation and wealth, means the ability to travel, shop or experience something that followers cannot, was mentioned several times in this research. Followers believe that they can experience what the influencer is experiencing with her and makes the content entertaining and attractive for them.

Being up to date and producing quality content in terms of audio and video were also mentioned in this research. Followers find quality content scarce and different. This also makes

followers to believe that the influencer cares about them and the content she is making which leads to more trustworthiness.

Discussion

The result of this research demonstrates that many factors can help influencer marketers to inspire followers' trust. Based on McAllister (1995)'s trust theory, we can categorize these factors in two types, affective and cognitive means factors who inspire trust based on emotions or evidence.

This research suggests that a combination of affective and cognitive factors make an influencer successful in terms of attracting followers' trust, but affective factors predominate. These factors are perceived authenticity, perceived closeness, amiability, attractiveness, privilege and being educative or informative. To elucidate, these factors shape internalized influence and make followers believe in influencer internally (Kelman, 1958).

In this list amiability and privilege are factors that were not mentioned in previous research and are new effective factors or qualities that were found in this research. Amiability refers to some personal soft skills like sense of humor, storytelling, the ability to give positive vibes to the audience which attracts followers and help the influencer to be more entertaining and increase followers' engagement. Privilege refers to influencer's life situation and wealth, which means the ability to travel, shop or experience something that followers cannot. Followers believe that they can experience these with the influencer.

It is worth mentioning that based on this research most of these influential factors are correlated. Therefore, a combination of these factors will lead to inspiring audience trust and performing one or a few of these factors even if they are among the most influential ones might not necessarily make an influence marketer successful.

Conclusion

The main question of this research was: *which strategies did Masaeli employ on her Instagram channel Sadaf Beauty to manage this contradiction and shape her followers' trust in the influencer-follower relationship?*

This research confirms the results of the previous research mentioned in the literature review and demonstrates that all those factors mentioned in previous research such as physical attractiveness, closeness, authenticity, familiarity, scarcity, engagement, having informative content, being knowledgeable, etc. are effective in inspiring followers' trust.

Based on this research, we can conclude that some qualities and factors that influencers either have or perform affect followers more than others and most of these influential factors are affective (based on the Trust theory). Basically, these factors shape internalized influence (Kelman, 1958). Although in general influential factors are a combination of affective and cognitive factors. The most mentioned qualities based on the analyzed comments and interviews in this research are perceived authenticity, perceived closeness, amiability, attractiveness, privilege and being educative or informative. Perceived authenticity, perceived closeness, amiability, and attractiveness are affective factors, while privilege and being educative are cognitive factors. Therefore, affective factors appear to have a greater impact.

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CHAPTER 4: Factors Affecting the Loss of Followers' Trust: A case of an Iranian Beauty Influencer

Abstract

Social media influencers are subject to an important- and constraining- paradox. On the one hand, they attract followers by presenting themselves as authentic while, on the other hand, they simultaneously use their popularity to promote products, as an act perceived by some followers as “inauthentic”. Managing this contradiction and creating trust are crucial in their success and affects the number of people they reach. Successful influencer marketers negotiate this contradiction to inspire their followers’ trust. However, while relying on these success factors, sometimes influencers lose control and cannot manage this contradiction which leads to followers feeling betrayed and losing trust. In this research, qualitative method based on case study of a successful Iranian Influencer, Sadaf Masaeli (Sadaf Beauty), assisted to observe how influencers lose control in managing different success factors and to analyze which factors make influencers to lose followers’ trust. Sadaf was chosen as the second most influential beauty influencer of 2019 and the most influential luxury cosmetics influencer of 2019 in the world by *Forbes* (Caudel, 2019). She gained millions of followers from 2019 to 2022. However, in 2022 she lost thousands of followers. This research argues that incautious authenticity (indiscretion) and not setting concrete boundaries, especially in regard to sensitive topics, can cause distrust in followers.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, Trust, Distrust, Influencer, Instagram, authenticity

Introduction

As social media grew over the last two decades, many users became content producers themselves. They have been attracting more and more followers by posting photos and videos and narrating their own stories. In the last 15 years, these users, known as influencers because of their vast effect in social media environment, attracted marketers' attention, due to their ability to promote products more effectively and more cost-efficiently.

In 2019, Mediakix, an influencer marketing agency founded in 2011, undertook a study about key statistics of influencer marketing. This study showed that in the first years of influencer marketing, companies were reluctant to invest money in it, but by 2019 their influencer marketing budgets increased 65% and represented a 5 to 10-billion-dollar industry annually (Mediakix, 2019). Therefore, influencer marketing is a new way of attracting customers. In recent years many companies and businesses prefer to allocate budget to this area. The results of IEZA influencer marketing agency surveys showed that 75% of the companies have influencer marketing line items in their budget (Yahoo Finance, 2019). Therefore, companies cannot turn a blind eye to this e-marketing strategy which is cheaper and more efficient (Armstrong, Kolter, Harris & Piercy, 2013) than traditional marketing.

Influencer marketers need to attract both followers and marketing companies. In fact, they need to be perceived as an authentic user that followers trust and also be an advertiser, promoting products, which might be perceived as inauthentic by those same followers. The concept of trust is one important part of influencers' work because their success depends on the relationship that

they have with their followers and how much they can inspire their trust. In recent years research has been done about *trust* and the factors related to it in influencer marketing.

Previous research demonstrated that different factors like moral authenticity, similarity, likability, expertise, knowledge, etc. affect followers' trust and that influencers can apply these factors to be perceived as more reliable (Karouw et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2018).

This study investigates how one popular influencer lost control in managing different success factors and which factors made her to lose followers' trust. Qualitative research based on a case study is used to observe this phenomenon more thoroughly, since the goal was to investigate how an influencer can lose her follower's trust when their interpretations of her appeals to authenticity change.

A beauty influencer was investigated in this research because beauty influencers are currently among the most active on social media. Instagram was chosen as the platform to study because it is one of the main platforms where influencers are active in fashion and beauty (Mediakix, 2019). Sadaf Masaeli (Sadaf Beauty) was selected as the case for study since she was identified as the second most influential beauty influencer in the world in 2019 by *Forbes* (Claudel, 2019). She has around 4 million followers on Instagram. Sadaf lives in the United States but most of her followers are Iranians living all over the world.

The findings of this research are helpful for influencer marketers, as well as for doing further research into influencer marketing and increasing the awareness of this phenomenon. This investigation is built on previous research about trust concepts in influencer marketing and social influence (Kelman, 1958; MacAllister, 1995).

Literature Review

Social Media

Social media are defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). Social media consist of “channels of mass personal communication facilitating interactions among users” (Carr and Hayes, 2015, p. 49–50). So, they are based on the exchange of content, open dialogue, and human relationships (Burgess and Poell, 2017). Millions of users utilize social media for different purposes like interpersonal interactions, businesses, political involvement, reading news, entertainment, etc. (Kapoor et al., 2018.) In fact, the need for connectedness drives many users to different social media platforms. Brands and companies find social media to be a good source of data for helping their businesses (Van Dijck, 2013).

For marketing, social media as an important way of advertising are a useful platform for promoting products. “Traditional marketing tactics utilize media such as newspapers, radio and television to reach an audience. These traditional tactics are helpful in terms of increasing brand awareness but do not create a relationship between customers and the brand” (Guruge, 2018, p. 24). With the advent of social media, this system has changed and new strategies, like influencer marketing, are being used to build this relationship and to inspire customers’ trust. Influencers use interactive visual content to invite their followers to purchase a product (Glucksman, 2017).

Instagram

Instagram, one of the most effective platforms for influencer marketing, was launched in 2010 and by December 2023 had over two billion monthly active users (Instagram, 2023). Instagram is the main platform where influencers are active, especially in fashion and beauty (Infographic Journal, 2017). According to the Mediakix survey, the format of Instagram posts was

chosen as the most effective format for marketing by 78% of marketers because posts are easy to produce. Compared to long videos on other platforms, on Instagram, influencers can post a picture and caption quickly (Mediakix, 2019). Instagram stories are the second most effective and popular post formats for marketing. Stories are easier to navigate than permanent posts and they tend to depict more “off the cuff” moments of an Instagrammer’s life. Consequently, they are perceived by their followers to be more authentic and real (Mediakix, 2019), since influencers perform in a way that they are passionate and transparent (Audrezet, 2018).

Sadaf Beauty

Sadaf Masaeli (known as Sadaf Beauty) is an Iranian beauty blogger living in the United States. She began her activities as a beauty blogger on her Instagram account in 2016. She does not have any degree or training in makeup but has stated that she has been always excited about makeup and practiced herself by watching tutorials online and helping people around her to do their makeup. Her makeup tutorials are known as easy to learn and she presents herself in a friendly way. For instance, she always starts her videos with “Hi guys, I am back with another video. How are you?”. She also shares moments of her personal life, often accompanied by her husband and her pet dog, with her followers via Instagram stories.

Sadaf has around 4 million followers on Instagram and most of her tutorial posts have more than 50 thousand comments and average more than 300 thousand likes.

In her interview with *MBC Persia*, an Iranian TV channel based in London, she said that she finds herself the first makeup blogger that speaks Farsi and she believes this is one of the factors that made her successful so quickly (MBC Persia, 2020).

What is special about this influencer is that she was able to gain her large number of followers and their trust in such a short time, giving her the requisite credibility to promote beauty

products professionally. She has gained a reputation, as her number of followers and her rank of influence among the beauty influencers of the world show.

However, in 2022 thousands of her followers unfollowed her due to different reasons which are investigated in this research.

Influencer and Influencer Marketing

Social media influencers are content creators who attract a great number of followers by blogging or creating content. They share personal information about their daily lives, experiences, and opinions with followers. Influencers are therefore perceived by followers as accessible, believable, intimate, credible, and authentic. “Influencers or digital opinion leaders are able to influence the attitude, behavior and decisions of their followers” (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 801). *Authenticity* in influencers’ case can be defined as a performance of being intrinsically motivated (Beverland et al., 2018; Ibarra, 2015). This is also called *perceived authenticity* according to Bruns (2018), which is discussed more in the next section (trust in influencer marketing). Influencers also gain credibility through time and engagement in the relationship with their followers. They provide two-way communication with their followers that helps this close engagement happen (Alic et al., 2017).

Fashion and beauty bloggers are one of the biggest influencer groups on social media, especially on Instagram and YouTube (Mediakix, 2019). Beauty influencers known as “beauty gurus” use their makeup skills while cooperating with beauty brands to increase their brand awareness. (Forbes, 2016). Since people are using social media more these days—there are more than 4.9 billion active social media users in December 2023, 1.1 million new users compared to 2020 (Wong J.D., 2023)—and following beauty influencers more and more often, cosmetic brands

find it efficient to use these beauty influencers for promoting their products (Forbes, 2016; Globalwebindex, 2020).

Backaler (2018) believes that the era of *interruption marketing*—meaning disruptive ads everywhere in the streets, in the newspapers, on television, etc. that people can virtually not choose what they are watching—is ending. People now want to learn from trusted sources, not “faceless companies” (Backaler, 2018, p. 4). “Influencer marketing is an extension to the original concept of word of mouth [(WOM)] marketing” (Sudha and Sheena, 2017, p. 16). According to Ismagilova et al. (2017), social influencers can help marketers to do electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) (Ismagilova et al. 2017, p. 17), meaning “all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers” (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 461).

EWOM affects consumers’ brand choices and sales of goods and services (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006): “It is the most important source for making buying decisions, followed by advice from friends and family” (Cisco internet business solution group, 2013, cited in Ismagilova et al., 2017, p. 27).

Influence Theories

Robert Cialdini (1984) argues that there are “six weapons” or tactics to influence: reciprocity, commitment, liking, social proof (herd behaviour or a psychological phenomenon in which people from the same society imitate each other and behave the same way in similar situations), authority and scarcity. As the literature shows, these factors are present in influencers’ activities, too.

According to Bibb Latane's (1981) social impact theory, strength and importance of influential groups, the number of people in the group, and immediacy or physical proximity with influential people are three factors that increase the likelihood of responding to social influence.

Culture is considered as one of the effective factors in the influence process too. For instance, a study in 17 countries demonstrated that collectivist countries show higher levels of conformity or compliance with societies' standards than individualistic countries (Bond and Smith, 1996). A society's culture can, therefore, affect its members' behaviour on social media and the extent to which they can fall under the influence of other users.

The theory of social learning assists us to comprehend the power that social media influencers have (Forbes, 2016). According to Bandura (1971), social behaviours are learned, mostly by observations, modeling, and imitation. Influencers are like models who recommend products through advertisements. (Forbes, 2016). Therefore, marketers use this strategy to increase their brand's awareness and sales.

Trust

Trust has different definitions in various disciplines, but generally trust is "a belief that is held by one party about the attitudes and behaviour of another party. In conventional marketing terms, trust would be a belief held by customers about organizations or their representatives" (Sekhon et al., 2014, p. 413). Trust, specifically interpersonal trust, is very important in the relationship between an influencer and a customer in e-marketing. A high level of trust and commitment are usually enumerated as the basic elements related to a successful influencer (Scott, 2018). Sudha and Sheena (2017) in their definition of influencer marketing even mention trust and authenticity, which is defined in the next section of this paper, as the key elements that influencers use to "expand their audience and turn them into loyal customers" (Sudha and Sheena, 2017, p. 16).

Trust in Influencer Marketing

Different studies have been done to identify factors that help influencers attract followers' trust and manage the contradiction of being a reliable user and an advertiser at the same time.

A study was conducted in 2018 in this regard, based on persuasion and trust theory. Thirty observations were done in this investigation using the phenomenographic interpretive approach. This study suggests that social media influencers must present themselves as having certain characteristics in order to attract followers. It is found that the three most influential attributes that help influencers are *authenticity* (discussed below), *likability* (or “acting in ways followers want to emulate”) and *authority* (or displaying expertise) (Moore, Yang and Kim, 2008, p. 2). *Scarcity* (or supply outstripping demand) and *targeting* (or focusing on a specific group of followers that seem to be potential customers for a product) were also mentioned as being beneficial in the outcome of this research (Moore, Yang and Kim, 2018; Siddiqui, 2011).

Authenticity itself is one factor that helps influencer marketers to attract followers' trust. To make the concept of authenticity clearer here, we have to define it in this context. Audrezet (2018) explains the definition of authenticity and inauthenticity as follows:

According to self-determination theory, which addresses issues of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, authenticity involves an individual's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviours—those that emanate from a person's innate desires and passions. These behaviours involve active engagement with tasks that [one] finds interesting (Audrezet, 2018, p. 3).

In contrast, inauthenticity involves engagement in extrinsically motivated behaviours—those driven by external pressures such as reward or punishment (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and often

determined by other individuals or groups. However, we need to narrow down this definition to demonstrate how exactly influencers perform to be perceived as “authentic.”

One of the definitions of authenticity that will be helpful in influencers’ case and this research is *moral authenticity* (Beverland et al., 2008), or a status in which producers are perceived as motivated by the love of the task rather than financial rewards. So, in this research authenticity is defined as a representation of being intrinsically motivated by the love of the task (Newman and Smith, 2016).

Herminia Ibarra (2015) explains one paradox with respect to ideas of authenticity. She believes that authenticity is not always being exactly yourself, but it is being or performing the self that is appropriate for the situation. For example, a person that is normally introverted, unfriendly, or shy cannot be a successful influencer by being exactly herself. So, exposing an inner self that can be “perceived” as authentic by followers is important in an influencer’s job (Ibarra, 2015).

One of the main concerns of influencers is how to perform and maintain authentic connections with followers without being viewed as salespeople (whose extrinsic motivations are clear). To perform authenticity, which is a crucial factor in an influencer marketers’ job, they need to keep their perceived *neutrality* and *independence*. According to Michael Krigsman, an industry analyst, the best influencers will not sell or pitch a company’s product. They do not become the company’s salesperson. They have clarity around the mutual roles, the role of an advertiser and the role of an influencer. To be perceived as authentic, influencers need to be *transparent* about their collaboration with a brand and be careful about the products that they promote. If they promote products they don’t believe in, for simple profit, they risk damage to their reputation and credibility (Backaler, 2018).

A study in 2020 on influencers in Instagram demonstrates an existing contradiction in influencer marketers work as a perceived authentic user on Instagram and an advertiser. This research, which is based on interviews with eleven influencers on Instagram, claims that influencers need to act strategically in an invisible way to create a balance between being authentic (meaning being motivated intrinsically) and attracting advertisers. In fact, when influencers start to monetize their accounts, they need to professionalize their activity to be able to have loyal audiences and satisfy advertisers. (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

In this research, by analyzing the role of these attributes in an influencer marketer case and applying theories explained above, it was investigated how influencer marketers lose control over managing their relationship with followers and therefore lose trust among followers.

Methodology

I organized this research around a case study, a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (1997), case study is “exploration of a case or a ‘bounded system’ (bounded by time and place) through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1997, pp. 61–62). For building the case study I used content analysis and interviews.

For content analysis, I studied Sadaf activity by analyzing comments on her posts on her Instagram account (bounded place), that were recorded during 2019 (bounded time) when she gained thousands of followers. Then I interviewed some of her followers in 2022, when she lost some followers. By comparing these data which were recorded four years apart, I answered the research question: how influencers lose control in managing different success factors and which factors make them to lose followers’ trust. In posts analysis, I searched for qualities that made

followers trust her and in interviews I searched for the changes to these qualities and the reasons why some followers distrusted her.

Instagram Posts

I chose the posts published in 2019 on Sadaf's Instagram account because of her selection as the most influential luxury cosmetic influencer in this year by *Forbes*. I used videos because she explains about products she promotes in her videos and there are usually more comments and interactions under video posts, while her photos are normally the final looks of her makeup tutorial video posts. She posted 85 times in 2019. Of these 85 posts, 41 are videos. Among these 41 posts, I analyzed the ones that have more than three hundred thousand likes (the median of the most liked posts in her page). In addition, I checked the comments under all these video posts, and I chose the ones that have more diverse comments under them rather than just emojis, which means more than 50% of the comments consisted of sentences rather than emojis without words.

My goal was finding comments that were focused on Sadaf and the reason followers trust or distrust her and how they feel about her rather than the content of her tutorial. Based on these two criteria, I ended up analyzing 17 posts in Sadaf's account. Comments analysis is explained in the next section.

Interviews

I found criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) useful for finding interviewees for this research. In this strategy, participants meet predetermined criteria. Since I needed to identify interviewees who were Sadaf's followers in 2019, which means users who follow her posts constantly, comment under her posts, and ask her for more advice by commenting on her posts and interacting with her. While analyzing the comments on selected posts, I was able to find these participants.

Surprisingly, among around 70 users that I selected and contacted in 2022, most refused to do the interview since they unfollowed her. It is worth mentioning that most of Sadaf followers are Iranians; therefore, I chose to have an Iranian sample. However, the interview as part of my research coincided with some social and political movements in Iran in fall 2022, so it was difficult to reach Iranians who resided in Iran due to internet problems.

To find enough participants to do the interviews, I had to add snowball sampling to my method. Therefore, I started by interviewing a few participants that I could recruit and then asked them and asked around to find interviewees who were following Sadaf actively and trust her advice.

Since most of Sadaf Beauty followers are women, my sample was women. I define women in my research as meaning an individual who defines herself as a woman and who consumes makeup products.

For reaching individuals after choosing them, I sent a message to their direct message in their Instagram account. I explained my research to them, and I invited them to participate in my research by means of an online video interview, since I needed to confirm that they are real users and that their profile photo is not fake. In all these steps interviewees' consent and comfort was taken into consideration. Video calls were accessible in different applications like Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype, etc. I ended up interviewing ten participants but since the information I was receiving from the participants became repetitive in the last two interviews, I reached the saturation point by ten interviews. In addition, the data from interviews was in alliance with the data from the Instagram posts analysis.

My questionnaire had two series of questions. The first series of questions were demographic ones about age, gender, and their places of residence. Then I asked some questions about their activity on Instagram, to make them more at ease and in the atmosphere of what we will talk about later.

The second series of questions were open-ended questions based on my research questions, research goals, and themes that are uncovered by my literature review and my first data analysis. I considered what specific information I want to get from this conversation, and I formulated the questions based on that (Donalek, 2005). These questions were mostly about when and why participants started following Sadaf. By these questions, I was searching for the qualities that attracted the followers at first. Then I asked about the characteristics that they attribute to Sadaf and finally the main “why” question of my research, namely why she recently lost many followers in 2022.

For avoiding ethical issues, written consent to participate was included.

I had interviews with my sample on the video chat. These interviews were in Farsi because the majority of Sadaf followers are Iranian, and my sample was Iranian.

Data Analysis

Instagram Posts

For analyzing comments under the selected posts. I used *thematic and holistic analysis*, which are appropriate for “qualitative research with a variety of data forms” (Saldana, 2013, p. 121). In my data (comments) specifically, the different forms are notes and *emojis* (graphical icons depicting various emotions). Creswell (1998) believes that holistic analysis is the suitable coding method for case studies. According to Dey (1993), holistic coding is “grasping basic themes

and issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole (the coder as lumber) rather than by analyzing them line by line (coder as splitter)” (Dey, 1993, p. 1040). This step also helped me generate the questions I used for my interviews.

I also used thematic discourse analysis, since I categorized the data based on themes, which means “capturing and unifying the nature or basis of an experience into a meaningful whole” (Desantis and Ugarriza, 2000, p. 362). In fact, for themeing we search among codes which are “essential” in the phenomenon, “without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107).

For doing so, I read comments under all the 17 selected posts. They are organized chronologically under each post on Instagram. Therefore, I started from the newest comments and read them until I could find new information. I stopped when I reached a saturation point means comments became repetitive and I could not find anything new. While reading, I took notes of the comments that were about Sadaf and followers’ feelings and ideas about her. After having an extensive file of comments, I categorized them in different themes with different colours.

My criteria for categorizing comments in different themes was the usage of keywords related to the extensive meaning of each theme. For example, if in the comments some keywords or key phrases like “beautiful”, “attractive”, “sexy” were used for describing Sadaf, I categorized these comments in “physical attractiveness” theme. Similarly, I categorized comments about “being herself” and “honest” as belonging to the “authentic” theme. Based on the definition of each theme, I related keywords to them. Each comment might have been categorized in more than one theme, since there might have been different keywords related to different themes in one comment.

My unit of analysis was a phrase, meaning expression of a single idea at the sentence or sub sentence level, an approach that allowed me to break the comments into smaller pieces and allocate them to different qualities and themes or to more than one category, capturing the complementary and contradictory dimensions of followers' interactions.

Some of these themes were already in previous research like attractiveness, authenticity, similarity, etc. that I used the same names for them. Some of the qualities just emerged in my research and I chose names for them based on their meaning. For listing the new emerging categorizes, first I took note of some repetitive key words and key phrases that I could not categorize in existing themes. Then I found relations between these repetitive phrases and make some groups and themes out of them. In other words, in this step I used axial coding which is a part of the grounded theory coding method, “reducing the number of codes and collect them through constant comparison, in a way that shows a relationship among them and create concepts” (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 60).

In the final step, I refined my previous themes more and reached to the main themes. (See Strauss and Corbin, 1990). See table 1:

Table 1. Coding process of Sadaf qualities in 2019

Key words	Axial codes (Relationship between keywords)	Selective codes (Core category)
Not fake, being herself, not acting, clear, honest, unique, model, different, innocent.	Scarcity Honesty	Perceived authenticity
Similar, close, family, at ease, friend, Iranian (Same nationality, woman (Same gender), attached, engaged, living with us.	Similarity Friendliness Engagement	Perceived closeness

Successful, creative, powerful, passionate Loves the work, motivated, independent, perseverant, brave, special, clever, storyteller.	Successfulness Having good soft skills Powerfulness Good public speaking skills	Charisma
Thankful, fair, judge, logical, patient.	Leadership qualities	Leadership
Positive energy, funny, hopeful, happy, active, kind, nice, peaceful.	Sense of humour Positivity Lightness	Amiability
Professional Experienced, informative, useful content, up to date, precise, reliable, having good taste.	Expertise Experiment Trustworthiness	Perceived authority
Beautiful, attractive, sexy, pretty, cute.	Physical attractiveness	Physical attractiveness
Supportive family, quality gadgets, rich, wealthy, attractive lifestyle, facilities.	Being supported Good life situation	Privilege
Being among the first, popular subject, polling, quality content (video, audio qualities).	Blogging techniques Innovation	Avantgardiste

This data is triangulated by adequacy, coherence (Merrigan et al., 2012) and also doing interviews.

Interviews

I used thematic analysis to analyze the data gathered from the interviews. I used “thematic coding” to code the data because it is an appropriate and most-used coding methods for interviews. (Lochmiller, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79).

In my thematic analysis of the data from interviews, I used value coding because in this method the data is coded based on participants' beliefs and judgments of the situation (Saldana, 2013). What I extracted the factors that interviewees identified as the most important with respect to how influencers lose followers' trust.

In the final cycle of analysis, codes were narrowed down to themes and categories based on similarity, in order to extract meaning out of the data (Saldana, 2013). Based on themes in table 1, I analyzed which factors are mentioned more by followers in the interviews. This information revealed which factors prompt followers to distrust the influencer, comparing to the patterns identified in the analysis of followers' comments.

Results

Factors leading to Trust

Interviewees mentioned different reasons as the first motivator to follow Sadaf. The motivators are as following: being funny and cute, being educative and sharing some useful information that you cannot find elsewhere about beauty products, being among the first Iranian beauty influencers (Scarce), entertaining coverages of different events of her life like her marriage and shopping for the event or coverage of her trips. Participants mentioned that they felt they were experiencing what she was showing themselves.

Table 2 shows the positive qualities interviewees attributed to Sadaf.

Table 2: Keywords for positive qualities in 2019 from the interviews with 10 participants.

More than seven interviewees	five to four interviewees	two to three interviewees	Fewer than two interviewees
Real and Honest	Beautiful	Successful	Self-confident
Interesting lifestyle and traveling	Comfortable in front of the camera	A good relationship with family members	Self loved

Closeness	Trustworthy	Concerned about Iranian social and political issues	Creative
Educative	Happy	Attractive	Different
	Energetic	Storyteller	Independent
	Fun	Engaged	Wise
	Friendly	Similarity	Kind
		Among the first	Persistent
			Expert
			Perceived vulnerability

Factors leading to Distrust

All participants stated that although Sadaf still has 3.9 million followers, she and her activity have changed during the past few years and that made some of her followers to unfollow her. They enumerated different reasons:

Table 3: Factors leading to distrust in 2022 from the interviews with 10 participants.

More than 7 interviewees	Fewer than three interviewees
Lack of concrete boundaries or incautious authenticity and indiscretion	Not knowing her audience enough
	Peer pressure
Decrease of engagement	Advertising for Shein (not quality)

Participants believe that Sadaf did not “set concrete boundaries for sensitive topics” and “did not try enough to know her audience” properly. For instance: “She is expressing too much of her ideas. She should set boundaries.”, “She should inform herself about sensitive topics and know better when to express all her ideas”, “She should act and talk more wisely sometimes, specially when she talks about politics.” A good number of Sadaf’s followers reside in Iran and most of

them are among her first followers, since she was a beauty influencer which was a new thing for Iranian women residing in Iran and she was living abroad which made her lifestyle different and therefore interesting for her audience in Iran. Her expression of authenticity at the beginning of her activities helped her to get more followers. This big audience experienced many social and political challenges in the country and based on the comments and what participants mentioned, since they felt close to bloggers, they started expecting them to be affected by the situation also and to comment on it. At the same time, this topic was so sensitive that it made bloggers' work difficult since they had to figure out how to comment to avoid making the audience angry. In addition, in 2022 when "Woman, life, freedom" movement, a political and social movement in Iran which focuses on women's rights and demands the end of discriminating laws against women, happened, Iranian Instagram users expected all bloggers to stop their businesses and irrelevant posts and use their platform to just help the movement.

Participants in this research had different ideas regarding Sadaf's reaction to Iran's situation, some believed she was so blunt and she did not have boundaries, some believed she should have commented more and discussed more about the issues, while some others believed that she was involved enough and there was no reason for her to post or comment more about a topic that is not the main subject of her page. This inability to find the best position was referred to as "low social intelligence" by interviewees.

Another change that participants referred to was the fact that Sadaf's engagement and activity in her Instagram page decreased a lot, especially since 2022. For instance, participants said: "She is not as active as before" or "She disappeared". Some related this less engagement to the criticisms she received for her posts and comments about Iran. Some participants mentioned that after receiving criticisms Sadaf tried hard to justify herself and most of her stories were allocated to

defending herself for a while and then suddenly her engagement decreased, and she mostly posted advertisements. Some participants believed that this process shows her, “inability to deal with the crisis”, as they describe.

Some participants said that social media wave against Sadaf was like a “peer pressure” that made them to unfollow her for a while or hide the fact that they were following her.

Meanwhile, during the past few years, she started advertising for the clothing brand Shein. Participants believed that Shein is “low quality”, as they describe, and it made them surprised that Sadaf has a contract with Shein and is advertising for them, since usually what she was suggesting to her followers to buy were high quality or luxury brands. Shein is a Chinese brand with lower price products which does not have a good reputation, since there was some news about its unethical activities, and it has been accused of exploitative practices (Daily mail, 2023). Sadaf defended herself by mentioning that Shein has good quality products too and even herself is using them but according to participants this made some followers to lose trust. They also mentioned that compared to a few years ago, Sadaf is doing more advertisements to monetize her page, and she cares less about what she is advertising. Although some participants said that they still feel the difference between the advertisements just for money and advertisements based on the quality. Since they feel that she is not using enough energy on the low-quality ones and she is just posting them, while when she really wants to suggest a product, she discusses more about it and talks about the features.

Regarding the issues she experienced on 2022 during the movement in Iran, in September 2023 (after the interviews of this research were done), one year after those waves of criticisms about her, she posted a series of videos and explained what happened to her in the past year and why her engagement decreased.

In these series of videos published and highlighted in her Instagram account as “درد دل” or “dard-e del”, which means sharing feelings, emotions and concerns in Farsi, Sadaf explained that she was surprised by the number of criticisms and attacks she had received during the Iranian movement, and she did not know that she had made such a big impression as a blogger in Iranian public view. She stated that she received a large number of messages from her followers saying that she should publish the news and use her platform to inform people. One mistake that she thinks she made was that she thought she could continue being herself and express all her ideas in front of a big audience, as she had been doing before, but she was worried that she was not a political or social expert, and her ideas might have been wrong. In a short time, she noticed that she was receiving criticism even on TV channels and bigger platforms. She lost 200,000 followers in a few months and the number of reactions to her postings was more than she expected, consequently she stopped posting and, according to herself, she started being nervous in front of the camera and whenever she wanted to post something, she reviewed it several times and censored what she thought might be controversial. “I might have done wrong but the punishment I received was much bigger and what happened to me was unfair,” said Sadaf. (Dardedel, Sadaf Beauty Instagram Account, 09, Sep, 2023)

What Sadaf says in her videos is in accordance with my analysis results. Same as the participants she believes that the lack of boundaries and not being careful about her comments regarding a sensitive issue decreased her popularity and trustworthiness.

Discussion

Comparing the results of the comments on 2019 under Instagram posts and interviews in 2022 shows that some of the main qualities that made followers trust Sadaf at the beginning were perceived authenticity, familiarity and closeness, being educative, having an attractive lifestyle

and amiability. However, in Sadaf's case the main reason why she lost the trust of some of her followers was incautions authenticity (indiscretion), her inability to set concrete boundaries for sensitive topics, not knowing her audience properly and enough, advertising low quality products and decreased engagement.

The findings show that perceived authenticity was one of the main reasons that in 2019 followers trusted Sadaf. Although authenticity helps followers to inspire trust, it can in some sensitive situations trigger the audience feelings and harm the relationship. Since influencers have a big audience with different beliefs and ideas, they cannot express their personal ideas about sensitive topics without any filters, and they should set some boundaries.

According to Cialdini (1984), commitment and social proof (herd behaviour) (discussed in literature review) are among the qualities that increase the influence. In Sadaf's case the fact that followers found her close and from their own society (since most of her followers are Iranian) made her influential and trustworthy for them. This quality in Sadaf created the expectation of commitment for followers and her unconsidered comments about social issues in Iran due to pure performance of authenticity made followers to find her uncommitted or unfaithful and made them distrust her at some point.

Interviewees mentioned that peer pressure also made them to unfollow Sadaf. The herd behaviour that helped Sadaf gain more followers in earlier years, also worked against her when her followers felt pressured to unfollow her (Cialdini,1984).

Bond and Smith (1996) also talk about the effect of collective culture on people to fall under the influence of others in their society. Since Iranians experienced a collective battle in 2022 during the "women, life, freedom" movement, they became sensitive about the activity of well-

known people in this regard and majority's judgment pushed all members to act the same, in this case unfollowing Sadaf.

According to Sadaf, when she lost control of her relationship with her followers, she decreased her engagement. According to interviewees, though, this loss of engagement did not help her in inspiring the trust back or controlling the situation. However, when she decided to be transparent with her followers and explained all that happened in a chain of videos, she could regain some control, for instance she increased her activities again and became more engaged.

According to Beverland et al. (2008), *moral authenticity* or a status in which producers are perceived as motivated by the love of the task rather than financial rewards is crucial in inspiring trust. According to this research, by advertising for Shein, Sadaf lost a balance between the advertiser and influencer roles, since Shein is known for being unethical, and advertising for this brand made followers feel that Sadaf was more of a salesperson or advertiser than a trustworthy influencer.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the careful balancing act influencers need to take between commercial promotion and authenticity. It illustrates, through the example of Sadaf Masaeli, that although being genuine is important to win followers' trust, being overly or impolitely sincere can backfire and drive followers away. Influencers who are unable to successfully strike this balance run the danger of alienating their followers, which can negatively affect their reputation and level of success.

This study makes a contribution by shedding light on the dangers of handling boundaries and authenticity ineffectively. It provides brands and influencers with useful advice on upholding trust in the face of intricate social media dynamics. The results hold significance for

comprehending how influencers might more successfully conform to the expectations of their followers and for businesses looking to profit from influencer relationships.

This study has important ramifications for marketers, influencers, and companies. Influencers may carefully handle delicate topics while acting in ways that suggest honesty by using this information to improve their approach. Influencers can more skillfully manage their connections with followers by being aware of the dangers of unthoughtful authenticity and the value of establishing boundaries. This helps them avoid situations that can erode followers' confidence.

The study offers valuable information for companies and marketers regarding the selection and management of influencers who possess the ability to strike a balance between authentic involvement and business objectives. With this knowledge, businesses can create alliances that work better and create campaigns that meet the needs of their target market. All things considered, the results provide a strategic framework for upholding trust and improving the efficacy of influencer marketing campaigns.

Future Studies

This research is a qualitative case study therefore it is not generalizable, but it provides other researchers a significant literature of the matter. Other investigations may build upon this work by examining the ways in which various categories of influencers—for example, micro-versus macro-influencers—manage boundaries and authenticity. Further insights could be obtained by examining the ways in which followers' judgments of authenticity and trust are influenced by different demographic parameters, including age, gender, and cultural background. Furthermore, longitudinal research might look at how followers' trust and loyalty are affected by changes in influencer behaviour over time. The function of particular content kinds or

communication techniques in reducing the likelihood of authenticity-related problems could also be investigated through research.

Future research might provide a more thorough understanding of the relationships between influencers and their audiences by expanding the scope and methodology, which would further improve best practices for upholding trust in the always changing social media marketing scene.

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CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Overview

In this chapter, I will synthesize the key findings of the three articles: Authenticity in the Realm of Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Review, How Influencer Marketers Inspire Trust: The Case of Sadaf Beauty, and How Influencer Marketers Lose Followers' Trust. This chapter brings together insights on authenticity, trust, and distrust in influencer marketing through the case study of Sadaf Beauty, an Iranian American beauty influencer whose Instagram account has attracted more than 4 million followers in a few years and could obtain the place of the second cosmetic influencer in 2019 by Forbes magazine.

This synthesis shows that authenticity is critical for building and maintaining trust between influencers and their followers. It also shows that authenticity is a multifaceted construct including origin, societal alignment, inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection. Moreover, this synthesis demonstrates that trust is fragile and can be easily eroded by actions such as promoting low-quality products, excessive advertising, and inconsistent behavior.

Origin and Why This Matters

The origin of this research is traced back to the key role that social media plays in our daily lives. Social media which has been originally defined as a way to communicate, has been having a pivotal role in our romantic relationships, professional networking, and even job recruitment (Fertig, 2017). Needless to say, it also has been significantly influential on how people make decisions about what to buy and whom to trust. In recent years, social media influencers have become key models in the world of marketing, thanks to their ability to reach and engage with large audiences. This growing trend highlights the need to understand what makes an influencer appear authentic and trustworthy to their followers and what results in gaining trust and losing it.

To explore this, this research focuses on the case of Sadaf Beauty, a popular influencer whose journey provides valuable insights into the dynamics of authenticity, trust, and distrust in influencer marketing.

Additionally, this research demonstrates the need to understand the role of external factors such as sociocultural movements in influencer marketing. We need to explore if real-world events have any influence in perceiving authenticity, maintaining and/or losing trust. By using the case of Sadaf Beauty and the Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, which gained significant attention, this research clarifies the role of external factors in the relationship between influencers and their followers.

This research is not only valuable for influencers and marketers but also offers significant benefits for ordinary people as media consumers. In a digital age where social media plays a crucial role in shaping opinions and influencing purchasing decisions, everyone tries to look trustworthy. That is why it can be challenging to determine who is genuine and who is not. By analyzing the case of Sadaf Beauty and identifying the key elements that contribute to authenticity and trust, this study provides media consumers with practical tools to critically evaluate the influencers they follow. Understanding the factors that build or erode trust can help consumers make more informed decisions about whom to believe. This can also foster a more transparent and trustworthy online environment. By empowering individuals with this knowledge, the research helps the audience navigate the complexities of social media and be more confident in their decision-making.

Apart from media consumers, this research aids ordinary people in their daily lives. By identifying the core dimensions of authenticity, trust, and distrust, people can shape more genuine meaningful relationships with their partners, family, friends, and colleagues, understanding how trust is shaped and what can deteriorate it. All these insights empower them to behave more

confidently in their daily interactions and make more informed decisions while encountering news articles, advertisements, and even interpersonal communications.

Research Questions and Answers

In this research, I tried to answer the following questions:

The first research question was *What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing?* The findings of this research suggests that the key dimensions of authenticity include origin, societal alignment, inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection. The first dimension emphasizes the origin. It highlights the value of producing genuine and original content. The second dimension involves alignment with societal expectations that means that influencers are expected to respect and follow cultural norms, such as dress codes, social etiquette, and cultural values. The third dimension is the expression of inner integrity which refers to how influencers demonstrate their personal values, beliefs, and principles in their actions, content, and interactions with their audience. The fourth dimension is individual interpretation, which emphasizes the subjective nature of authenticity as different audience members interpret and judge influencers' content and messages differently based on their personal beliefs, preferences, and experiences. Lastly, the intrapersonal connection dimension suggests the personal and emotional bond that individuals experience within themselves in response to an influencer's content or message.

The second research question was *what strategies do influencers employ to manage the contradiction inherent to their job and shape their followers' trust in the influencer-follower relationship?* The study suggests that the qualities attributed to Sadaf and considered the reasons for her success in gaining her followers' trust include perceived authenticity, perceived closeness, amiability, attractiveness, privilege, and being educative and/or informative. The findings also

suggest that the qualities attributed to Sadaf can be categorized into two main groups. Affective factors include perceived authenticity (followers believe Sadaf is genuine and sincere), perceived closeness (followers feel a personal connection to Sadaf), amiability (followers believe Sadaf is friendly, cute, funny, and approachable), and attractiveness (followers believe Sadaf is physically attractive). Cognitive factors include privilege (followers believe Sadaf has a luxurious lifestyle in San Francisco) and being educative and informative (Followers believe Sadaf provides valuable and informative content).

This study also showed that: firstly, while the combination of both affective and cognitive factors is found in Sadaf's content and helps her build the followers' trust, affective factors are more influential. Secondly, factors such as perceived authenticity, closeness, amiability, and attractiveness have a greater influence on building emotional connections with followers. Lastly, cognitive factors like privilege and being educative also play a role but are less significant compared to affective factors.

The third research question was *Factors Affecting the Loss of Followers' Trust: A case of an Iranian Beauty Influencer*. This study showed that the factors that lead influencers to lose their followers' trust include inconsistent authenticity (not being careful in expressing emotions and ideas, especially on very sensitive topics), poor boundary setting (failing to set clear boundaries on sensitive topics), misunderstanding the audience (not knowing the audience very well), advertising low-quality products (promoting poor quality brands involved in unethical practices) and decreased engagement (reducing activity and allocating more time to promotions).

The findings also indicate the critical aspect of the influencer-followers relationship: once influencers lose their followers' trust, it is very challenging for them to regain it compared to their initial efforts to present themselves as authentic to gain trust. Sadaf did her best to express herself

to her followers after losing their trust, but she still seems unsuccessful to convince them. This is because followers, once they feel betrayed, are more cautious and less likely to forgive and forget. This makes it a long and difficult process for influencers to prove their authenticity and reliability again.

Discussion of the Results

The Interplay Between All Three Articles

Examining the broader results across the three articles demonstrate that they are interconnected, and each study's results reinforces and validates the results of the other ones.

The result of the first articles suggest that authenticity is pivotal for building and maintaining trust between influencers and their followers. The results of the second and third articles, which employ a case study, affirm the findings of the first article, which uses a systematic literature review, and vice versa. Firstly, in the case studies, I discussed that alignment with the origin is one of the key components of authenticity and trust building. In Sadaf Beauty's performance, one of the main qualities demonstrated was her alignment with the origin, background, and culture of Iranians. This was one of the reasons why Iranian women trusted her. Below is a list of Sadaf's actions showing that her content is compatible with Iran's origin:

- She watches Persian movies and TV series and discusses them in her stories. She has mentioned several times that the main reason for her following Persian movies is to keep updated on the latest trends of the culture and create content that resonates more with her audience.
- She listens to Persian music and dances to Persian songs in her stories. Even, her husband produces Iranian podcasts and shares them on their Telegram channel for public audiences.

- She celebrates culture-oriented events and creates makeup tutorials for specific cultural occasions such as Yalda Night (also known as Shabe Yalda is an Iranian festival celebrated on the longest night of the year around December 20, 21) and Nowruz (is the Persian New Year, celebrated on the first day of spring, around March 21).
- She cooks Iranian plates, appetizers, and desserts, and creates tutorials on how to cook them on her Instagram and YouTube channel.
- She discusses Iranian beauty standards. In her tutorials, she promotes and uses beauty products that are appropriate for the skin color, hair color, and style of Iranian women. She emphasizes this fact repeatedly throughout her videos.

Additionally, Sadaf's content expresses her inner integrity. For example, she gives genuine product reviews based on the real results. Once she is not satisfied or happy with the result, she genuinely admits that the product is not worth the price, or it could not meet her expectations. She also transparently acknowledges if a video has been produced and shared with the aim of promoting a brand or service. She, moreover, explains why she is collaborating with this brand and how it aligns with her values.

Another equally important component of authenticity is individual interpretation. This component is also visible in Sadaf's content. She shares screenshots of her followers' responses to her stories and analyzes and replies to them. She tries to express that she is aware that different followers have different reactions to and understandings of her content. Although this dimension of authenticity merely relates to followers, her efforts to express her awareness of differences and respect these differences are valuable and make her relationship with followers more meaningful.

However, in the third article, I discussed that Sadaf lost her followers' trust after the Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran. Once again, the result of the third article is in agreement with

the two previous articles because, in the first and second articles, I argued that one of the key dimensions of authenticity and trust building is alignment with societal expectations. Nevertheless, Sadaf neglected this fact especially in the sensitive topics and in the socially and politically sensitive time. In socially and politically sensitive periods, addressing or acknowledging broader societal concerns can be crucial for maintaining a connection with the audience. This was the fact that Sadaf overlooked in her content production and led her to lose the trust of her followers.

During the Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, people especially women who have always been under systematic oppression and discrimination experienced high levels of grief and anger. That is why they were emotionally very sensitive. Apart from that, they experienced economic hardships because protesters closed their businesses to support the movement. Closing a business, even temporarily, meant losing revenue. For many, this loss was critical, as it impacted their ability to meet daily expenses and financial obligations. It put many people in a very economically hard situation. Sadaf was among the people who supported and promoted this action. She urgently and seriously encouraged everyone to avoid going to work because she believed that this collective action was a proper way to force the regime to take action. She herself stopped producing any content other than focusing on the movement and protest.

However, the situation became very complicated once she decided to start her activities again. The reasons she presented for her decisions seemed very unreasonable and unconvincing to her followers. She explained that she had recently bought a mansion and needed her job to pay the mortgage. Another reason was that she had some contracts with different brands so if she did not meet their expectations, she would face negative financial consequences. The contradiction was that she had previously encouraged others to quit their jobs as a form of protest, but then she quickly returned to her own business activities and abandoned the movement. This contradiction

between her actions and her earlier advocacy created a sense of betrayal among her followers. They felt that her personal financial needs were prioritized over the collective struggle. It resulted in widespread criticism and a loss of trust among her followers.

All in all, this research shows that once Sadaf content and activity align with the key dimensions of authenticity that I derived from the research in the first article, including origin, expressions of inner integrity, and expressions of awareness of individual interpretation, she attracts her followers' trust. On the other hand, when she overlooks one of the key dimensions of authenticity which in her case was alignment with societal expectations, she loses her authentic image and consequently, the trust of her followers. It proves that the results of the second and third articles confirms the findings of the first article.

Interconnected Nature of Authenticity and Trust

The first article emphasizes that authenticity in influencer marketing is a multifaceted concept including five key dimensions: origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection. Each of these dimensions contributes to the influencer's ability to present themselves as authentic that plays a pivotal role in gaining followers' trust. In other words, authenticity is pivotal in gaining trust.

The second article shows that perceived authenticity is one of the main qualities needed in trust building. In other words, there is a visible direct connection between perceived authenticity and trust building. This suggests that audiences are more likely to trust influencers who they perceive as genuine and sincere.

Dimensions of authenticity outlined in the first article serve as a foundation or basis for trust building. The case of Sadaf, as presented in the second and third article, exemplifies this dynamic. The investigation of Sadaf Beauty's content as a case study reveals a clear relationship

between the alignment of her content with the dimensions of authenticity and the trust she obtained from her followers. When Sadaf's actions, content, videos, stories, captions, live sessions, interactions with followers, comments, endorsements, collaborations, product reviews, personal anecdotes, and her overall online presence were consistent with the key dimensions of authenticity- origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection- she was successful in building and maintaining trust with her audience. Her followers resonated with her genuine content, which could foster a strong sense of connection and loyalty. However, the study also shows that when her content started to become incompatible with these authentic dimensions, she began to lose the trust she had previously built. This shift highlights the delicate balance between authenticity and content production, as any perceived inauthenticity can quickly erode the trust of even the most loyal followers.

Challenges in Maintaining Trust

The third article uncovers the delicate balance that influencers have to keep in order to maintain their followers' trust. It highlights the fact that the followers' trust is very delicate and can be broken easily. This article identifies critical factors leading to distrust including inconsistent authenticity, poor boundary setting, misunderstanding the audience, advertising low-quality products, and decreased engagement. This article also shows that any deviation from authentic behavior can lead to a swift loss of trust.

This once again highlights the interconnectedness between trust and authenticity. When followers detect a mismatch between an influencer's perceived authenticity and their actions, especially during critical moments, they may feel betrayed. This sense of betrayal occurs because

followers invest emotionally in influencers they trust. If that trust is broken, it can lead to disappointment, distrust, and emotional disconnection.

This finally validates that trust is not a static achievement but a dynamic, ongoing process that requires constant attention and effort. This suggests that trust is not an achievement that can be reached and put aside; trust needs ongoing nurturing and effort to be maintained. Influencers have to consistently engage with their audience and maintain genuineness, transparency, authenticity, and reliability in every interaction. As followers' expectations change and external factors such as sociopolitical movements come into play, influencers need to be very sensitive, adapt their content and ensure that what they share resonates with the values of their followers while still keeping the core values that originally built their trust.

Integrated Strategies for Success

The integrated knowledge of these three articles suggests some strategies to manage authenticity and trust effectively. These strategies include:

1. **Genuine Content Creation:** Influencers should produce genuine, original content that shows their values and aligns with cultural expectations. This consistency in authenticity fosters stronger emotional bonds with followers.
2. **Transparency:** Being transparent about collaborations and sponsorships can enhance credibility. Clearly disclosing paid partnerships helps in maintaining honesty and trustworthiness.
3. **Aligning with Societal Expectations:** Influencers should be aware of the societal and cultural norms of their audience and align their content with them. This involves respecting cultural values, dress codes, and social etiquette, which fosters a sense of respect and compatibility with followers.

4. Emotional Engagement: Fostering affective connections enhances trust. Followers are more likely to engage with influencers to whom they feel a personal connection. Influencers can adopt different strategies such as being vulnerable, opening up to their followers, showing empathy, narrating personal stories, using relatable language, creating engaging content, etc. to make an emotional connection with their followers.
5. Audience Awareness: Knowing the followers and understanding audience expectations, feelings, concerns, and preferences is crucial. This can be achieved through regular interaction, feedback collection, and analytics. Influencers have to align their content with followers' expectations in order to avoid misunderstanding that could lead to distrust.
6. Ethical Practices: Promoting high-quality, ethical products is essential. Influencers who prioritize their inner integrity in their endorsements over their financial desires are more likely to maintain their followers' trust.
7. Active Communication: Maintaining consistent engagement and open communication helps reinforce trust. When issues arise, being transparent about mistakes and addressing concerns can mitigate potential negative consequences.
8. Preventative Measures: Recognizing that regaining trust is more challenging than establishing it. Influencers should proactively manage their authenticity and use strategies to maintain their authentic and trustworthy image because once they lose their followers' trust, they may not be able to gain it again.

The strategies I propose integrate both cognitive and affective trust factors by emphasizing on reliability, transparency, ethical behavior, and emotional connection. Genuine content creation and ethical norm practices are connected to cognitive trust, while emotional engagement and transparency are related to affective trust.

Implications for Social Media Users: The Subjectivity of Authenticity

One of the interesting and critical implications of this study for us as social media users is the acknowledgment of subjectivity of authenticity. This study suggests that while authenticity can be predictable and characterized by observable patterns, it is still an affective factor and inherently subjective, so what someone finds inauthentic might be completely authentic to others. This decision is influenced by our cultural background, experiences, personal values, beliefs, etc. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that our perceptions are not generalizable but are deeply rooted in personal and contextual backgrounds,

The subjective nature of our assessment of authenticity might be also influenced by bias. It is important to acknowledge that sometimes our assessment of not only influencers but even our partners, friends, family, colleagues, etc. is influenced by deconstructive bias. While it is completely natural to be biased based on our past experiences, trying to separate our bias from our assessment and judgment of others based on their actions is remarkably invaluable.

Author's position

Being an Iranian woman researching the dynamics of influencer marketing allowed me to navigate this study with a sense of cultural and emotional proximity. My identity not only enriched my understanding of the subject but also placed me within the research itself as an observer who could empathize with both the influencer and her followers. This insider perspective granted me a nuanced view of the cultural expectations, societal norms, and political tensions that shape the lives of Iranian women.

Being an Iranian woman also meant that I carried certain assumptions into this research. However, I approached this challenge by employing rigorous academic methods to ensure

objectivity while acknowledging the role of my subjectivity. I recognized that my shared cultural background with the case study subject could both enhance my insight and demand critical self-reflection.

Ultimately, my position as an Iranian woman contributed to a richer, more layered analysis of how authenticity and trust operate within the socio-political and cultural context of influencer marketing. This research was both a professional endeavor and a deeply personal journey.

Implications for Ordinary People

In addition to the implications that this research has for influencers, brands and social media users, it can be significantly helpful to ordinary people in their daily life. Once they become aware of the key dimensions of authenticity, they can better decide about the credibility and authenticity of what they see on social media. In the world where misinformation and disinformation expand quickly, the capability of distinguishing what is trustworthy and what is misleading is crucial. This is also the case while being exposed to advertisements. People can make more informed and wise decisions while they are aware of how authenticity works and what strategies have been used to present a message authentic.

Suggestions for Future Research

Influencer marketing is a very broad field with many unexplored areas of research. While significant progress has been made in this field, we, researchers, have still a very long way to go to understand the multifaceted nature and complexities of this field. I categorize my suggestions for future research based on the methods and theories that may help future researchers explore the dynamics of influencer-audience relationships more deeply.

Comparative Studies

My review of the literature has revealed a lack of cross-cultural and cross-platform studies in influencer marketing, so researchers need to compare the dimensions of authenticity, trust, and distrust in influencer marketing across different cultures. For example, they can explore how these concepts differ in Western countries compared to Eastern countries.

They can also investigate whether these dimensions are similar across different platforms by conducting case studies on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and others to see if audiences perceive influencers' authenticity similarly across these platforms.

Longitudinal Studies

Literature review shows that researchers prefer not work on the evolution of influencer-follower relationships over time, so in the future they can conduct longitudinal studies to investigate how the influencer-followers' relationships are built and evolve over time, especially during critical times and sensitive situations.

Through a longitudinal study, researchers can also examine the impact of maintaining high levels of authenticity over a long time on the influencers' careers and success.

Psychological and Sociological Perspectives

With a psychological perspective, researchers may investigate the level of psychological well-being including depression, stress level, mental health, etc. of influencers who strive to keep their authenticity and look trustworthy to their followers.

They can also explore how followers' perception of trust and authenticity influence their behavior, loyalty, engagement, and purchasing decisions. They should investigate if there is any statistically significant correlation between perceived authenticity and follower loyalty. Through this analysis, they can examine how genuine interactions and transparent content foster a dedicated and engaged audience. I suggest that scholars work on this area because I could not find any

research that exclusively has worked on the psychological well-being of influencers while trying to present themselves authentic.

Crisis Management

In my review, I saw the lack of evidence for how influencers manage crisis. Therefore, researchers can conduct a study to investigate how successful influencers respond to critical situations and controversies. This can include both immediate strategies and/or long-term steps they take to recover and address the situation. They should consider factors such as tone, content, timeline, density of response, and the channels and methods they use to disseminate the message.

They can also explore the role and level of transparency in crisis management. They can see if being completely transparent helps recover the problematic situation or if discretion transparency is needed to keep or regain the trust of followers. Finally, by highlighting successful transparency practices, their study can offer guidelines for influencers on how to maintain trust and authenticity, even in the face of significant challenges.

Ethical Considerations

One of the fields that need a significant amount of attention from researchers is the ethical considerations of the relationship between influencers and their audience. Researchers can develop a guideline to ensure the ethics in this marketing field. For example, they can establish best practices for transparency and require influencers to clearly disclose sponsored content and partnerships by labeling the ad posts as advertisements or collaborations to help audiences understand when they are being marketed.

Additionally, they can investigate the impact of influencer marketing on vulnerable populations, such as adolescents, teenagers, minority and marginalized communities, and

individuals with mental health issues to ensure that ethics is respected, and financial desire is not prioritized over the mental health and psychological well-being of vulnerable groups.

Finally, guidelines should address issues of authenticity and address influencers to promote products they genuinely use and believe in, rather than accepting offers for financial gain.

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

S-04-21-6654

Titre du projet / Project Title

Re-examining influencer marketers' multi-factor model of trust: the case of Iranian influencer Sadaf Beauty

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Renouvelé / Renewed

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16/01/2025

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

**Chercheur /
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Département de communication / Department of Communication

Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout événement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completed four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Coordonateur / COORDINATOR

Coordonnateur de l'éthique / Ethics Coordinator

Pour/For **Barbara GRAVES** Président(e) du/ Chair of the **Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences sociales et humanités / Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board**

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project title: Re-examining influencer marketers' multi-factor model of trust: the case of Iranian influencer Sadaf Beauty

Researcher: Maryam Amini, University of Ottawa.

Preliminary matters: Before the interview begins, I will give the interviewee the informed consent form and discuss its contents. I will ask the interviewee for any questions and then answer them. Once the interviewee has consented to the interview and signed the form, I will begin recording.

Note of questions: Note that the interviews are semi-structured. The questions I list below will serve as prompts, and I may follow up with additional questions exploring related themes, as a function of the interviewee's responses.

Demographic questions:

How old are you?

Where do you live?

What is your gender?

Opening questions:

How much time do you spend on Instagram?

What on Instagram is interesting for you?

Are you interested in makeup? Do you regularly use makeup?

Do you often buy makeup or beauty products?

Do you buy makeup or beauty products which you hear about on Instagram?

Questions about Sadaf and based on the themes that I already extracted in the first part of the analysis (examples are my predictions and might change after the first part of the analysis):

How long have you been following Sadaf Beauty?

Are you following her consistently and watching all her posts and stories?

Do you think she is posting enough videos and stories, or would you like her to post more?

Do you trust the information that she gives?

Have you ever bought anything she suggested?

Do you find her posts informative?

Would you consider her an expert in cosmetics?

How do you feel about her personality and characteristics? (The first characteristics that comes to your mind about her)

What makes you follow her? What do you like the most in her?

What is your feeling when you watch her posts and videos?

Do you feel close to her, like a friend?

Do you think she is a normal person like you?

Do you think you are experiencing new things with her?

Do you feel that she is different from other influencers? If yes, what is the difference about her?

Why do you think she has a lot of followers?