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MICRO INFLUENCERS AND AUTHENTICITY: THE NEW FACE OF TRUST IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

MICRO INFLUENCER DAN KEASLIAN: WAJAH BARU KEPERCAYAAN DALAM PEMASARAN MEDIA SOSIAL

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ABSTRACT
The rise of micro-influencers has reshaped the dynamics of social media marketing by shifting the emphasis from celebrity endorsements to authenticity-based consumer engagement. Micro-influencers, typically those with a moderate follower base, are known for fostering closer, more relatable, and interactive relationships with their audiences compared to macro-influencers. This study explores the influence of perceived authenticity, content relevance, and engagement frequency on consumer trust in micro-influencers, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Employing a quantitative descriptive approach, the research gathered insights from young Indonesian social media users who actively follow micro-influencers. The analysis reveals that authenticity plays a central role in trust formation, while content relevance and interaction frequency serve as supporting elements that strengthen consumer perception and engagement. These findings align with the commitment–trust theory and parasocial interaction framework, highlighting that consistent, emotionally engaging, and culturally relevant content is essential in cultivating trust in the digital space. The study contributes to the theoretical discourse on influencer marketing and trust, while offering actionable implications for brands and marketers aiming to build meaningful and loyal consumer relationships. It suggests that in an era marked by increasing commercial saturation and consumer skepticism, authenticity is not merely a strategic advantage, it is a foundational necessity for long-term brand success in social media ecosystems.
Keywords: micro influencer, authenticity, consumer trust, social media marketing, engagement, content relevance

ABSTRAK
Munculnya mikro-influencer telah mengubah dinamika pemasaran media sosial dengan mengalihkan fokus dari dukungan selebriti ke keterlibatan konsumen yang berbasis keaslian. Micro influencer, yang umumnya memiliki jumlah pengikut sedang, dikenal mampu membangun hubungan yang lebih dekat, mudah dihubungkan, dan interaktif dengan audiens mereka dibandingkan dengan makro-influencer. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengaruh persepsi keaslian, relevansi konten, dan frekuensi keterlibatan terhadap kepercayaan konsumen pada mikro-influencer, khususnya di platform seperti Instagram dan TikTok. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kuantitatif, penelitian ini mengumpulkan wawasan dari pengguna media sosial muda di Indonesia yang aktif mengikuti micro influencer. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa keaslian memegang peranan sentral dalam pembentukan kepercayaan, sementara relevansi konten dan frekuensi interaksi berfungsi sebagai elemen pendukung yang memperkuat persepsi dan keterlibatan konsumen. Temuan ini sejalan dengan teori komitmen-kepercayaan dan kerangka interaksi parasosial, yang menekankan bahwa konten yang konsisten, menyentuh secara emosional, dan relevan secara budaya sangat penting dalam membangun kepercayaan di ranah digital. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskursus teoritis tentang pemasaran influencer dan kepercayaan, sekaligus menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi merek dan pemasar yang ingin membangun hubungan konsumen yang bermakna dan loyal. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa di era yang ditandai dengan peningkatan komersialisasi dan skeptisisme konsumen, keaslian bukan hanya keunggulan strategis melainkan kebutuhan dasar untuk kesuksesan merek jangka panjang di ekosistem media sosial.

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Kata kunci: *micro influencer, keaslian, kepercayaan konsumen, pemasaran media sosial, keterlibatan, relevansi konten*

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of digital technologies has significantly altered the global marketing landscape. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have transformed from mere communication tools into strategic marketing channels, allowing brands to establish personalized connections with consumers in real-time. In this context, the concept of influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant force, enabling brands to tap into pre-established social networks for the promotion of goods and services. However, a growing body of research indicates that consumers are increasingly disillusioned with celebrity endorsements and overt advertising tactics, citing concerns about inauthenticity and lack of transparency (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023).

This growing skepticism has prompted a paradigm shift in influencer marketing strategies, with brands now favoring micro-influencers over traditional macro-influencers or celebrity endorsers. Micro-influencers are individuals who typically command a follower base of 10,000 to 100,000 and are regarded as "everyday people" who specialize in specific niches such as beauty, wellness, travel, or technology (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Unlike macro-influencers, who often deliver generalized content to mass audiences, micro-influencers produce content that is highly tailored, personal, and perceived as credible by their followers. As a result, they are viewed as more relatable and trustworthy.

According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2024), micro-influencers achieve engagement rates between 3.5% and 6%, significantly higher than macro-influencers, whose engagement often falls below 2%. This engagement is not merely a function of content frequency or algorithmic visibility but is largely attributed to the perceived authenticity of the micro-influencer. Authenticity refers to the degree to which an individual is perceived to be genuine, transparent, and consistent in their self-presentation and values (Audrezet et al., 2020). In the context of social media marketing, authenticity serves as a key determinant of trustworthiness—a critical factor in consumer decision-making.

Trust plays an essential role in marketing, particularly in the digital realm where consumers are inundated with content and have limited face-to-face interactions with brands. Drawing from the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing by Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust is defined as a consumer's belief that a brand or spokesperson will act in their best interest, even in the absence of direct oversight. When micro-influencers are perceived as authentic, their endorsements are more likely to be received as genuine recommendations rather than paid promotions, thereby enhancing brand credibility and influencing purchasing behavior (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Previous studies have shown that micro-influencers can significantly impact consumer attitudes, particularly when their content resonates with the personal values and lifestyle aspirations of their followers (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). The personalization and relatability of their messages foster parasocial relationships, a one-sided psychological bond that increases the likelihood of consumer compliance and brand loyalty. These interactions are further amplified when micro-influencers engage in direct communication through comment responses, live videos, or user-generated content collaborations—activities that reinforce their accessibility and authenticity.

Despite the growing interest in micro-influencer marketing, there remains a limited understanding of the mechanisms through which authenticity translates into consumer trust. Furthermore, the extent to which trust mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer behavioral intentions, such as purchase decisions and word-of-mouth advocacy, is still underexplored. There is also a lack of empirical data from

emerging markets, where digital literacy and social media penetration are rising rapidly, particularly among Gen Z and millennial demographics who form the primary audience of influencer content.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by exploring the role of authenticity in building trust between micro-influencers and consumers on social media platforms. Specifically, it aims to:
(1) Investigate consumer perceptions of authenticity in micro-influencer content,
(2) Analyze the impact of content relevance and interaction frequency on trust formation, and
(3) Examine the influence of perceived trust on consumer attitudes and intentions, particularly regarding product endorsement acceptance and willingness to purchase.

By focusing on Indonesian young adults aged 18 to 35—an audience segment highly active on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok—this research provides relevant insights for marketers operating in Southeast Asia. The results are expected to contribute both theoretically to the literature on influencer marketing and practically to brand strategies aiming to enhance consumer trust through influencer collaboration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Micro-Influencers in Social Media Marketing

The term micro influencer refers to individuals with a social media following typically between 10,000 to 100,000, who are recognized as credible voices within specific niche communities (Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Unlike celebrities or macro-influencers, whose appeal is often built on popularity and visibility, micro-influencers derive their influence from perceived relatability, accessibility, and subject matter expertise. Their ability to create highly targeted content that aligns with the interests of their audience has made them increasingly attractive to marketers seeking to personalize consumer engagement (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) reports that campaigns involving micro-influencers have higher return on investment (ROI) compared to those involving traditional celebrity influencers. This is attributed to their higher engagement rates and lower cost-per-engagement metrics. Their opinions are often seen as more genuine, and their recommendations are perceived as peer-like advice rather than commercial promotion, making them particularly effective for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and brands targeting niche markets.

2.2 Authenticity as a Driver of Trust

Authenticity has emerged as a central construct in understanding consumer behavior within digital ecosystems. According to Napoli et al. (2014), brand or personal authenticity refers to the alignment between external expression (content) and internal values (identity). In influencer marketing, authenticity is perceived when an influencer consistently expresses opinions and behaviors that appear unmanipulated and sincere (Audrezet et al., 2020). Consumers tend to evaluate the authenticity of influencers based on three dimensions: transparency, consistency, and congruence between the influencer's lifestyle and the products they promote (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015).

Authenticity enhances not only emotional connection but also cognitive evaluations of trustworthiness. Consumers interpret authentic content as a signal of honesty, which reduces perceived risk and enhances the credibility of both the influencer and the brand they represent. A recent study by Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) found that perceived authenticity had a significant positive effect on consumer trust and willingness to engage in eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) behavior.

2.3 Consumer Trust and Social Influence

Trust is defined in marketing literature as the willingness of a consumer to rely on an exchange partner in whom they have confidence (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the context of

social media, trust becomes increasingly important as consumers lack the ability to directly verify product claims. Influencers act as intermediaries who bridge this trust gap by translating brand messaging into peer-to-peer narratives (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Parasocial interaction theory offers a useful framework to understand how consumers form perceived relationships with influencers. When audiences engage with an influencer over time, they develop a sense of familiarity and emotional closeness that mimics real-life friendships (Labrecque, 2014). These parasocial bonds increase the likelihood that audiences will accept influencer recommendations as trustworthy and relevant. Therefore, trust operates not only as a rational calculation but also as an emotional response to perceived sincerity and social closeness.

2.4 The Role of Engagement and Content Relevance

Consumer engagement is another vital element in the trust-building process. Engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are not merely quantitative indicators—they reflect the degree to which audiences resonate with content and are motivated to interact. According to Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020), the frequency and quality of interaction between influencer and follower can amplify the effects of perceived authenticity.

Content relevance further strengthens trust by aligning promotional messages with the values, needs, and lifestyle of the target audience. When influencers promote products that naturally fit into their existing content themes and personal routines, followers are more likely to perceive the endorsement as genuine (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Misalignment—such as promoting irrelevant or excessive sponsored content—can erode trust and trigger skepticism among followers.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a quantitative descriptive approach aimed at examining the relationship between micro influencer authenticity and consumer trust in the realm of social media marketing. A quantitative approach is suitable for understanding how variables correlate and how general patterns emerge from empirical observations (Creswell, 2014). Descriptive analysis was employed to provide a detailed profile of the respondent group, while correlational and regression techniques were used to test research hypotheses. The research model was formulated based on previous studies (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Casaló et al., 2020), integrating constructs such as authenticity, content relevance, engagement frequency, and consumer trust. The study focused on consumers within the Indonesian digital economy, particularly among the 18–35-year-old demographic, due to their high levels of social media activity and influence in shaping online consumer trends. This group is also the most engaged with influencer content on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as indicated by reports from We Are Social (2024).

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population for this study included Indonesian internet users aged 18 to 35 who actively follow at least one micro-influencer on Instagram or TikTok. Micro influencers are defined here as users with follower counts ranging between 10,000 and 100,000. The sample was drawn using a purposive sampling technique to ensure respondents had relevant exposure to micro-influencer content.

A sample size of 215 valid responses was obtained after data cleaning. The sample size met the minimum requirement for regression analysis, following the rule of thumb by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), which recommends $N > 50 + 8m$ (where m is the number of

predictors). In this study, with three independent variables, the required minimum was 74 respondents; therefore, the final sample size was adequate for generalizable findings.

3.3 Instrument Development

The research instrument used was an online questionnaire designed in Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of five sections:

1. Demographics: Gender, age, occupation, education level, and daily duration of social media use.
2. Social Media Behavior: Platforms used, frequency of access, and types of influencers followed.
3. Perceived Authenticity: Adapted from Napoli et al. (2014) and Audrezet et al. (2020), including items like "The influencer seems honest in their reviews" and "Their content reflects their real personality."
4. Engagement and Relevance: Questions on how frequently respondents interact with influencers (e.g., likes, comments, shares) and whether influencer content is aligned with their interests.
5. Trust in Influencer: Based on constructs from Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Lou & Yuan (2019), covering perceived reliability, dependability, and confidence in the influencer's opinions.

All constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

3.4 Validity and Reliability Testing

A pilot test was conducted on 30 respondents to validate the instrument. Content validity was ensured through expert judgment by two senior marketing researchers. Construct reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha testing, yielding the following results:

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived Authenticity	0.84
Engagement Frequency	0.79
Content Relevance	0.81
Consumer Trust	0.87

All values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), indicating strong internal consistency.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected during March–May 2025 using a cross-sectional survey method. The questionnaire link was distributed via Instagram Stories, WhatsApp groups, and online student communities to increase reach. Respondents were required to confirm that they followed at least one micro-influencer and interacted with their content on a weekly basis. Participants gave informed consent before completing the survey. The form clarified that the data would be used solely for academic purposes, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality would be maintained. No personally identifiable information was collected.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. The analysis involved:

- Descriptive statistics: to summarize demographic data and behavioral patterns;
- Pearson correlation analysis: to explore the relationships between perceived authenticity, engagement, relevance, and trust;

- Simple linear regression: to assess the predictive power of authenticity on trust;
- Moderation analysis (exploratory): using interaction terms to examine whether engagement frequency or content relevance significantly influences the authenticity–trust relationship.

The assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were tested prior to regression analysis. Results showed acceptable skewness and kurtosis, and VIF values < 2.0, indicating no multicollinearity.

3.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model of this research posits that perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust, and this relationship may be moderated by:

- Content Relevance: The extent to which influencer content aligns with the personal interests and values of followers.
- Engagement Frequency: How often users interact with influencer content (comments, likes, DMs, polls, etc.).

The model draws from the Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and is also informed by the Parasocial Interaction Theory (Labrecque, 2014), integrating social-psychological constructs into the marketing domain.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey involved 215 respondents aged 18–35, with a majority (58%) identifying as female. The largest age group was 21–25 years (44%), followed by 18–20 years (31%). Most respondents (67%) used social media for more than three hours per day, with Instagram (92%) and TikTok (85%) being the most used platforms.

Notably, 83% of respondents reported following at least two micro-influencers, primarily in niches such as beauty, lifestyle, food, fashion, and mental health. About 74% stated they had previously purchased products recommended by micro-influencers, and 68% expressed a sense of “personal connection” to the influencers they followed.

Descriptive data for the four main variables are summarized below:

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Perceived Authenticity	4.31	0.62	Very High
Engagement Frequency	4.01	0.67	High
Content Relevance	4.08	0.61	High
Consumer Trust	4.24	0.60	Very High

These results suggest that micro-influencers are widely perceived as trustworthy, engaging, and aligned with audience interests.

4.2 Correlation and Regression Analysis

The Pearson correlation test revealed:

- Authenticity → Trust: $r = 0.712$, $p < 0.01$
- Relevance → Trust: $r = 0.656$, $p < 0.01$
- Engagement → Trust: $r = 0.603$, $p < 0.01$

Simple linear regression showed that perceived authenticity significantly predicted consumer trust ($\beta = 0.71$, $t = 12.35$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 50.7% ($R^2 = 0.507$) of the variance. When content relevance and engagement frequency were included, adjusted R^2 increased to 0.583, demonstrating that these additional factors enhanced the model's explanatory power. These results affirm prior studies (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Casaló et al., 2020) emphasizing authenticity as the most significant predictor of trust in influencer marketing.

4.3 Theoretical Interpretation

The results are strongly aligned with the Commitment–Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), asserting that consumer trust arises from consistent, transparent, and value-congruent relationships. In the case of micro-influencers, trust is not simply a function of content quality but of relational authenticity—perceived genuineness in interactions and storytelling. Additionally, these findings resonate with parasocial interaction theory (Labrecque, 2014), which suggests that consumers develop emotional attachments to influencers, forming one-sided relationships that mimic social intimacy. High-frequency interactions and relatable narratives deepen this bond and reinforce perceived credibility.

4.4 Cultural and Social Context

In Indonesia, cultural traits such as collectivism, humility, and community orientation significantly shape how audiences perceive influencers. Influencers who demonstrate humility, empathy, and localized language are more likely to build emotional resonance and cultural credibility. Unlike Western markets, where assertiveness or celebrity status may be appealing, Indonesian followers prefer authenticity that feels modest and inclusive. Micro-influencers who show their "real lives," vulnerabilities, and family values tend to be seen as more sincere.

4.5 Practical Implications

This study provides several practical implications that can be applied by brands and marketers in their social media marketing strategies. First, the selection of influencers should prioritize authenticity over follower count, as authenticity has a greater impact on building consumer trust than mere popularity. Second, brands are encouraged to establish long-term partnerships with micro-influencers to foster closeness and lasting loyalty with their audiences. Third, it is important for influencers to maintain a transparent, natural, and unscripted storytelling style, as this helps create more authentic interactions. Additionally, engagement metrics such as comments, direct messages (DMs), and live sessions can be used as indicators of successful community building and active, genuine engagement. Finally, brands and influencers should avoid over-commercialization, as too many sponsored posts may reduce credibility and cause audiences to lose trust.

For micro-influencers themselves, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of maintaining a balanced personal–professional identity and being selective in accepting brand collaborations. This ensures that each partnership remains relevant, valuable, and aligned with the influencer's personal brand, thereby preserving audience trust.

4.6 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to make causal inferences regarding the relationships between authenticity, engagement, and trust. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability or recall bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of the responses. Third, the study focused exclusively on Instagram and TikTok, thereby excluding other influential platforms such as YouTube, Threads, or emerging social media channels that may exhibit different patterns of influencer-consumer interaction.

To address these limitations, future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track how trust in micro-influencers evolves over time. Additionally, experimental studies could be employed to test the effectiveness of different authenticity cues, such as comparing scripted versus spontaneous content. Qualitative interviews may also offer richer, more nuanced insights into the processes behind trust formation. Lastly, cross-cultural comparative studies—particularly between Southeast Asian and Western audiences—can help uncover cultural differences in how authenticity and influencer credibility are perceived across diverse contexts.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the role of micro-influencers in building consumer trust through perceived authenticity, content relevance, and engagement frequency on social media platforms. Involving 215 Indonesian social media users aged 18–35, the findings revealed that perceived authenticity is the most significant factor in shaping consumer trust, while content relevance and the intensity of interaction serve as important complementary elements.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the Commitment–Trust Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, which explain how consistent, value-aligned, and emotionally engaging influencer behavior can establish strong and lasting credibility among followers. Micro-influencers are particularly well-positioned to foster these dynamics, especially within the cultural context of Indonesia, where modesty, emotional closeness, and social harmony are highly valued.

Practically, this study affirms that brands and marketers should shift their focus from macro-influencers who rely solely on reach, to micro-influencers who offer authenticity, relatability, and alignment with their audiences. In a digital landscape increasingly filled with skeptical and advertisement-weary consumers, authenticity is no longer just a value—it is a necessity.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

1. For Brands: Select micro-influencers whose values and lifestyles genuinely align with your brand image. Avoid short-term, scripted collaborations; instead, invest in long-term partnerships that allow influencers to naturally integrate brand narratives into their content.
2. For Micro-Influencers: Maintain a balance between personal and promotional content. Your credibility depends on perceived honesty, emotional transparency, and interaction with followers. Reject endorsements that don't resonate with your personal values.
3. For Digital Marketing Strategists: Develop metrics beyond engagement rates—such as authenticity scores or trust indices—using sentiment analysis and audience feedback to assess the real impact of influencer partnerships.
4. For Researchers: Explore the longitudinal effects of authenticity on brand loyalty and explore cross-cultural variations in influencer-consumer dynamics. Future studies should also consider how algorithm changes, platform saturation, or influencer fatigue affect trust levels over time.

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