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Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences

Doctoral School of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising

DOCTORAL THESIS

The role of authenticity for digital celebrities and consumers

SUMMARY

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Cluj-Napoca

2025

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In today's online landscape, digital celebrities are pivotal in creating a new environment for users to learn about products and services. They have emerged as influential figures who create and parrot content and have increased persuasive power (De Veirman et al., 2017). Because *influencers* consistently cultivate their online presence, audiences can easily understand what kind of content they can expect from each digital celebrity. How they shape, promote, and maintain their digital persona (*online persona*) gives users insights into the themes, interests, and values underlying the content they promote.

At a time when the digital environment is saturated with an abundance of content and information, digital celebrities or *influencers* serve as a filter. For this reason, social media users often turn to *influencers* as trusted sources, relying on their expertise, tastes and ratings. By leveraging the trust they have built up in their relationship with their audience, *influencers* can guide and influence the choices their followers make about brands, products or services. The development of *social media* has provided *influencers* with a platform to communicate in the 'post-advertising world', where consumers frequently avoid traditional media advertising (Serazio, 2012).

In recent years, the literature has emphasised the role of authenticity in the success of digital celebrities or *influencers* in *social media* (Audrezet et al., 2020; Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). In this paper, we thematise the role of authenticity in *branding* and *influencer marketing*. We start with a general approach to *social media* and its relationship with advertising. Then, we define *influencer marketing* and its role in the relationship with brands. Towards the end of the theoretical section, we focus on the central theme, namely authenticity. In this context, we will analyse what authenticity means for contemporary men and discuss the perception of authenticity of brands. The thesis is not related to authenticity in a philosophical sense but to the perceived authenticity of some online advertising actors.

The authenticity of *social media influencers* is mentioned in a broad context. Followers perceive them as celebrities, experts, and ordinary consumers who test new products and services and share their opinions on social networks (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Due to the constant effort to differentiate themselves from competitors and have a unique attribute (Hudders et al., 2021), *influencers* are themselves brands. Although the role of authenticity in contemporary society is frequently discussed, knowledge of the authenticity of digital celebrities is limited globally (Lehman et al., 2018). In our country, little research focuses on this phenomenon (e.g. Balaban & Szabolics, 2022).

For brands, understanding the authenticity of *social media* content creators is crucial for effective *influencer marketing* campaigns. Authentic *influencers* who align with a brand's values and resonate with target audiences can significantly improve brand perception and engagement. This paper can provide valuable insights into the characteristics and behaviours that contribute to *influencer* authenticity in our country with theoretical and practical implications (e.g. for brands, advertising and marketing experts, and digital celebrities)

Given the importance of online communication for advertising, this paper aims to highlight the relevance of *social media influencers'* authenticity to both consumers and brands that incorporate *influencer marketing* in their promotion strategies.

The first chapter of the paper examines social media's impact on everyday life and its role in modern marketing. *Social media* has transformed advertising, offering brands direct engagement with audiences through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and, more recently, TikTok.

The second chapter explores the evolving importance of *influencer marketing* as a key component of contemporary marketing strategies (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). It also highlights how *influencers* are perceived as trusted sources of advice and inspiration and play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour. The chapter addresses key factors that contribute to *influencer* marketing success, including authenticity, credibility and platform adaptability, while addressing challenges such as sponsored content transparency and consumer fatigue (Hudders et al., 2021).

The third chapter explores the concept of authenticity in *branding* and *influencer marketing*, emphasising its essential role in building consumer trust, credibility, and loyalty. Based on the literature discusses how brands leverage authenticity to strengthen their image and emotional connection with consumers while highlighting the challenges of maintaining authenticity as brands expand.

The fourth chapter of this paper discusses the mixed qualitative-quantitative methodological design that includes semi-structured interviews with *influencers* and an online questionnaire-based sociological survey with social media users. The methodology included semi-structured interviews with 21 digital celebrities mainly active on Instagram to explore the role of authenticity in their relationships with followers and brands. *Influencers* were contacted through *social media*, personal relationships or at events, and interviews were conducted face-

to-face, by phone or in writing between March 2021 and July 2022. The questionnaire was distributed to 400 social media users as part of the sociological survey, resulting in a final sample of 327 respondents.

The next two chapters present the research findings. The results of the interviews conducted with digital celebrities and the results of the sociological survey are analysed, through which we aimed to highlight the mirror perception of authenticity: *influencers'* self-perception and how users perceive *influencers'* authenticity, respectively. Beyond how authenticity is defined by these new advertising actors and their audiences, we discuss how the impact of *influencer marketing* is perceived through the lens of authenticity.

The last chapter contains general conclusions, perspectives on the study's results, an evaluation of the degree of fulfilment of the research objectives, and last but not least, a presentation of the Research's limitations and prospects for future Research.

The main objective of the thesis is to investigate the authenticity of digital celebrities and their impact on consumer behaviour through four research objectives. First, it explores how *influencers* understand and cultivate authenticity. Second, it examines factors influencing users' perceptions of *influencers'* authenticity, emphasising sincerity, honest recommendations, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. Third, it examines the relationship between perceived authenticity and consumer trust in content promoted by *influencers*. Finally, it assesses how digital celebrity authenticity influences purchase intentions and brand loyalty.

The originality of this thesis lies in investigating how *influencers* (digital celebrities) perceive their own authenticity in comparison with users' perceptions of the authenticity of professional content creators on *social media* platforms. Basically, a comparative mirror analysis is carried out. In addition, the study examines how *influencers* and users perceive the authenticity of brands in relation to the promotion carried out by these new actors.

Some clarifications are necessary. In this paper, the terms digital celebrities, content creators, and *influencers* refer to the same new advertising actors. As this is a relatively new concept in Romanian, certain terms in the text are used in English. By *influencer marketing*, we mean the promotion through these digital celebrities, the campaigns of this type having an advertising component. Thus, this thesis is part of communication sciences.

Influencer marketing has become an important brand resource in these times when traditional advertising has little relevance to young audiences. Young people are, day by day,

becoming less and less interested in traditional media such as television (Voorveld, 2019). Direct and aggressive advertisements make consumers feel uncomfortable and forced to buy, which decreases their willingness to purchase (Y. Liu, 2024). For this reason, brands have become present on at least one of the *social media* platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Communication on such platforms appeals to a broad but well-segmented audience and usually involves low costs (Voorveld, 2019).

Since most of the time, the contemporary man distributes and searches for information predominantly online; brands have needed to reorient themselves in terms of the channels to promote their products and services so that their message reaches consumers. As a result, one of the contemporary ways of promotion has emerged: *influencer marketing* (Boerman, 2020). *Influencer marketing* is a strategy that harnesses the persuasive power of key individuals or opinion leaders on social networks to increase awareness and a brand's image and influence their purchasing decisions (Scott, 2015). If a brand does not capitalise on working with social media *influencers* as an integral part of its strategy to effectively deliver messages to its target audience, then it would need to redefine its strategy and reconsider and evaluate its approach (Glucksman, 2017).

The way *influencer marketing* currently works places *the influencer* at the centre of the marketing universe (D. Brown & Fiorella, 2013), and *influencer marketing* is a better promotional tool because it has an element that other types of marketing do not have, namely the element of similarity: followers find themselves in what *influencers* share with them (Balaban & Racz, 2020). In order to maintain as close a relationship as possible with their followers, *influencers* need to seek to be as authentic as possible. To maintain the message's authenticity, professional content creator must be true to their values and continue publishing messages that align with their stand. However, inserting advertising into one's own content could compromise *the influencer's* authenticity in the eyes of their community of followers. *Influencers* are challenged here to strike a balance in the sense that they also put their stamp on their advertising content by making content that creates a link between the product they are promoting and their personal life (Audrezet et al., 2020).

This study explores *influencer* authenticity in the Romanian social networking landscape, emphasising its importance in shaping influencers' relationships with their followers and the brands they promote. Through qualitative interviews with the 21 *influencers* and a questionnaire answered by 327 *social media* users, the Research examined how *influencers*

perceive their authenticity, how they preserve this authenticity, and how consumers relate to *influencers'* authenticity.

The study's results confirm, as previous research shows, that authenticity is a central factor in *influencer* success. Marketing and advertising experts have emphasised that authenticity is necessary, and consumers value this quality (Balaban & Szabolics, 2022). Authenticity influences the relationship with followers, credibility in collaborations with brands, and also their own job satisfaction. According to the interview results, *influencers* view authenticity as staying true to their values, maintaining transparency in partnerships, and creating content that reflects their identity. These findings align with the results of other previous Research (e.g., Balaban & Szabolics, 2022). To maintain message authenticity, professional content creators must stay true to their values and publish messages that align with who they represent. However, introducing advertising in one's own content could compromise *the influencer's* authenticity in the eyes of his/her community of followers (Audrezet et al., 2020). As some interviewees stated, branding advertising may be a solution to counteract these potential adverse effects.

Moreover, balancing one's values and brand collaborations has emerged as a key determinant of authenticity. *Influencers* are challenged to strike a balance by putting their stamp on advertising content. Promoting products compatible with *the influencer's* persona is important to have what the literature calls *influencer-product fit* (Audrezet et al., 2020). These insights validate the hypothesis that self-perceived authenticity is strongly associated with content creation practices. Many *influencers* stated that they turned down collaborations with brands that did not align with their values, reinforcing that ethical decision-making plays a crucial role in maintaining credibility. This is important because, as regulators and consumers demand more evident branding of paid partnerships, brands and *influencers* must ensure that their collaborations are transparent and ethically fair (Mureşan, 2022). This finding aligns with the hypothesis that maintaining this balance positively influences *the influencers'* self-perception of authenticity.

The *influencer marketing* experience of the content creators interviewed was also found to reinforce authenticity. *Influencers* with longer careers emphasised that they have improved their content and how they relate to collaborations, opting for brands that reflect their personality, principles and values. This supports the idea that *influencers* develop a clearer

sense of their online identity as they gain experience, which enables them to make strategic decisions.

Another key insight from the study is the role of the relationship with followers in reinforcing authenticity. Frequent and meaningful interactions with their followers were perceived as essential for maintaining trust and an authentic online presence. This insight reinforces the hypothesis that frequency of interactions and responsiveness are essential components of *influencer* authenticity.

The consumer survey validated the results of the qualitative Research, mirroring consumer perspectives. The perceived authenticity of digital celebrities significantly influences consumer attitudes, willingness to follow digital influencers, and likelihood to purchase promoted products. *Influencers* perceived as honest and sincere have a positive effect on audiences. The study also found that honesty increased followers' trust and engagement but did not always translate into direct product purchases. Instead, transparency in promoting brands is a key driver of consumer trust.

The present research findings highlight the central role of authenticity in *influencer marketing*, both from the perspective of digital celebrities and their followers. *Influencers* perceive authenticity as a key factor in maintaining credibility, engaging their audience, and promoting trust. They emphasise aligning brand partnerships with personal values, ensuring transparency in sponsored content, and maintaining a consistent personal brand. Frequent interaction with followers was also seen as key to maintaining authenticity, reinforcing the importance of engagement in creating lasting connections.

From a user perspective, the findings indicate that consumers are more likely to trust and engage with *influencers* they perceive as authentic. Authenticity positively impacts attitude towards *influencers*, intention to follow them on *social media* and even purchase decisions. Key factors influencing this perception include honesty, expertise, and transparency in recommendations. However, users also criticise *influencers* who appear too profit-oriented or disingenuous. While authenticity strengthens the relationships between *influencers* and their audiences, the study also reveals challenges such as balancing commercial collaborations with promoting personal content and managing control.

Four objectives were outlined at the beginning of this study. The results of the qualitative interview and the questionnaire-based sociological survey helped to validate and

deepen the understanding of these objectives by providing detailed insights into how *influencers* perceive and preserve authenticity and how it influences consumer attitudes and behaviour.

Authenticity remains a point of reference in *influencer marketing* because, as the results of this study and others before it show, it can influence *influencers'* self-perception and the trust of their community. This study has shown that authenticity is not a static characteristic but, on the contrary, a dynamic process influenced by content creation practices, *influencers'* collaborations with brands, their relationship with their followers, and the possibilities offered by the platforms they use.

Influencers who successfully integrate their values into their *branding*, maintain transparency when posting advertising content, and cultivate fundamental interactions with their followers tend to enjoy greater credibility and long-term success. From a strategic perspective, brands and marketers should prioritise working with *influencers* who demonstrate consistent authenticity, as they directly influence audience engagement and buying behaviour. In addition, *influencers* should keep in mind that their identity is evolving, and it is necessary to maintain a balance between commercial collaborations and their values to stay relevant while maintaining the trust of their followers.

Social networks continue to evolve so that authenticity will remain a key differentiator in *influencer marketing*. By understanding the challenges and complexities associated with maintaining *influencer* authenticity, brands, marketers, and researchers can contribute to a more transparent, ethical, and sustainable digital ecosystem.

The thesis has theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical point of view, the paper contributes to developing the *influencer* authenticity model (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022) by adding additional dimensions and nuancing the dimensions emphasised in the aforementioned paper. Specifically, concerning the source authenticity dimension, the congruence between the online and offline personality of the digital celebrity has been emphasised. Concerning message authenticity, sponsorship transparency is a central element of the results of the present study. Empathy is the emphasised dimension in terms of authenticity of interaction with followers. The paper tests the model proposed by J. Lee & Eastin (2021) in the context of Romanian respondents, successfully replicating this study.

The practical implications of the paper are addressed to communication, marketing and advertising experts, brands, *influencers* and last but not least, decision-makers in the implementation and monitoring of advertising branding. Experts must include content creators perceived by the public as authentic in their campaigns. Their evaluation should go beyond the number of followers, considering the quality of audience interaction. The same recommendation can be made based on the results of this study for brands that promote themselves in this way. For *influencers*, authenticity and credibility are genuine elements of professional capital that need attention. The association with brands that promote values compatible with the *influencers* chosen for promotion, the transparency of the sponsored content, and the consistency of the online presentation are just a few factors to consider. As decision-makers, we must monitor the branding of advertising.

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