

Authentically Growing an Influencer's Following

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Marketers increasingly employ influencer marketing tactics to promote brands via social media, and consumer perceptions of influencers remain important—the way a consumer perceives an influencer can affect the way a consumer receives influencer messages. The study explores consumer perceptions of influencer authenticity based on how an influencer asks for a consumer to follow him or her. Using an experiment, the study examines the attitudes and intentions of consumers based on whether an influencer wants to increase follower count to either achieve a certain number of followers or to benefit followers with the content the influencer shares. The results reveal that an influencer who encourages a consumer to follow based on the benefits the consumer will receive is perceived as more authentic and is more likely to be followed by the consumer. On the other hand, an influencer who encourages a consumer to follow so that the influencer can achieve a higher number of followers is perceived as less authentic.

Keywords: authenticity, influencer marketing, followers, TikTok

INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become an integral part of companies' marketing strategies (Lou & Yuan, 2019). According to the Influencer Marketing Hub 2023 Benchmark report, the number of global influencer marketing-related services/companies has exceeded 18,000 in 2023. The influencer marketing industry was predicted to soar to \$21.1 billion by the end of 2023 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). While influencer marketing is not a new subject, there is still need for more research in the area (Taylor, 2020). Influencer marketing studies have focused more on issues such as the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Booth & Matic, 2011; Martínez-López et al., 2020), ethicality (Ebert & Sindermann, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020), and the impact of a variety of factors on consumer perceptions of sponsored posts (Audrezet et al., 2020; Steils et al., 2021).

The way a follower feels and thinks about an influencer based on the influencer's organic content can affect the follower's receptivity to sponsored posts in the future (Martínez-López et al. 2020). Therefore, following sound strategy for both organic and sponsored content creation ensures a successful influencer marketing campaign overall. The current research examines consumers' perceived authenticity of an influencer based on one's organic content. Specifically, the study will examine whether an influencer's encouragement of consumers to follow him or her decreases the influencer's perceived authenticity. The research asks, how do mentions of reaching a specified amount of followers affect an influencer's perceived

authenticity? Further, how does the extent to which a consumer perceives that an influencer wants consumers to benefit from following him or her affect perceived authenticity?

BACKGROUND

Influencer Types Based on Followers

When choosing an influencer for a campaign, firms desire individuals who not only encompass the brand and fit with the promoted product but who also achieve a lucrative reach of consumers likely to purchase the brand and generate positive returns (Childers et al., 2018). Though followers and various engagement measures, such as “likes,” don’t necessarily equal sales, firms often rely on follower count to evaluate the number of consumers who presumably like the influencer to some degree and will see the influencer’s sponsored content (Haenlein et al., 2020; Primasiwi et al., 2021; Sobreira, 2023). Marketers and researchers categorize influencers based on follower count using several different groups. Mega influencers are typically defined as influencers with at least one million followers (Park et al., 2021). Mega influencers reach a high number of people on social media, bestowing every content piece with a sense of proliferation. Micro influencers are defined as influencers with follower numbers in the four- or five-digit range and maintain a niche of consumers who tend to be quite receptive to the influencer’s sponsored posts and advice (Alassani & Göretz, 2019).

There are many reasons as to why an influencer may want to gain more followers. From a functional standpoint, gaining a certain amount of followers on TikTok can allow influencers to take advantage of particular features. For instance, influencers with at least 1,000 followers can go live, and influencers with at least 10,000 followers can become eligible for Creator Fund benefits after meeting other qualifications (Whateley, 2023). Gaining a high number of followers typically signals that an influencer’s content provides enough value that consumers willingly award the influencer an exclusive spot in the group of voices they consume every day. Previous literature highlights benefits that stem from higher follower counts, such as engagement (to a certain extent), perceived trustworthiness and perceived friendliness (Primasiwi et al., 2021; Wies et al., 2023). Janssen et al. (2022) found that the likeability of an influencer and a consumer’s attitude toward a sponsored post increases with an influencer’s follower count. Further, the perceived credibility of an influencer mediated the relationship between having a higher number of followers and outcomes such as attitude toward the product and advertisement (Janssen et al., 2022). On the other hand, some studies show that a higher follower quantity does not necessarily correlate with positive outcomes. Myers (2021) found that influencers with higher likeability enjoyed high follower engagement but a lower follower count. Moreover, consumers may perceive an influencer with a high follower count to be “unreachable” (Myers, 2021). Overall, research suggests that there appears to be a point of diminished returns with regard to follower count and positive outcomes, but there are follower ranges that can lead to higher engagement levels and other positive outcomes (Wies et al., 2023).

While many studies examine outcomes of follower counts, the marketing literature remains void of research on consumer perceptions of influencers who ask for followers. Some TikTok influencers encourage consumers to follow them, but the way in which some influencers ask for the follow can differ. For instance, some influencers encourage consumers to follow in order to see more content that consumers might enjoy. Other influencers state that they desire a higher number of followers in order to reach a certain benchmark. The current study proposes that while influencer excitement over gaining followers can be healthy, influencers who integrate personal goals to achieve a certain number of followers into their content risk lowering their perceived authenticity. However, reframing the encouragement for more consumers to follow an account as an action that benefits the consumer may mitigate negative effects on an influencer’s perceived authenticity.

Authenticity in Influencers

The marketing literature comprises a multitude of recent work studying the relationships between a social media influencer’s actions and his or her perceived authenticity by consumers. Much of the work examines the strategy of one’s sponsored content on social media platforms, including issues such as

perceived fit between the influencer and the promoted brand, sponsorship transparency, and the interaction between follower count and sponsorship disclosure (Audrezet et al., 2020; Steils et al., 2021). Authenticity remains a mechanism through which influencers can increase a consumer's willingness to pay for a promoted product (Kapitan et al., 2022). Chen et al. (2023) found that consumers are increasingly becoming comfortable and welcoming of sponsored posts so much that authenticity is easily perceived if a consumer likes the influencer and wants the influencer to support themselves by partnering with brands.

Influencers exude authenticity through tactics like directly addressing their audience and showing their everyday lives in content (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Their authenticity can also be seen through their uniqueness, expertise, sincerity and consistency (Ardley et al., 2022; Balaban and Szabolics, 2022; Zniva et al., 2023). High perceived authenticity of an influencer positively affects a consumer's perceived authenticity of, attitude toward, and purchase intention of the brand being promoted (Zniva et al., 2023). Follower quantity has been found to affect authenticity perceptions as well. Consumers tend to perceive micro influencers, or influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, to be more authentic than mega influencers, or influencers with at least one million followers (Park et al., 2021).

Self-Determination Theory

The proposed relationships of the research rest on the assumptions of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory asserts that intrinsically motivated individuals who are passion-driven and engage in activities for their own sake embody a high degree of authenticity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For instance, a perceivably authentic influencer would create content to inform, entertain, inspire or provide any other type of value simply because one enjoys the process. Individuals motivated by external factors, such as money or fame, are perceived to be less authentic. One could argue that an influencer who primarily creates content to gain more followers and engagement levels would be extrinsically motivated and seen as less authentic.

Several studies have based authenticity-related studies on self-determination theory, including Moulard et al.'s (2016) research on *true-to-self authenticity*, which is defined as the extent to which one prioritizes passion for a craft over profit-hungry motives. Ilicic and Webster (2016) examined celebrity authenticity by approaching the concept as when a celebrity is being true to oneself. Expanding on the work of Moulard et al. (2015), Ilicic and Webster (2016) developed a celebrity authenticity scale to examine a celebrity's specific actions of authenticity, including whether a celebrity acts according to one's values regardless of what others think and regardless of the situation. The current study argues that consumers on social media can perceive an influencer to possess true-to-self authenticity based on his or her motives expressed through content.

Consumers are more likely to follow influencers who authentically exude passion and provide advice on a topic in one's content rather than influencers who wish to simply gain more followers (Haenlein et al., 2020). An influencer asking for followers in order to benefit oneself (e.g., "*Let's make it to 1 million followers*") could be a cue that the influencer is extrinsically motivated and only cares about growing his or her followers. On the other hand, an influencer that encourages consumers to follow one's account for the consumer's benefit (e.g., "*Follow for more content like this*") might be perceived as more intrinsically motivated, leading to higher perceptions of authenticity. The way influencers frame their messages geared toward building their followings may influence whether they are perceived as authentic. Thus, the study proposes the following relationships (shown in Figure 1):

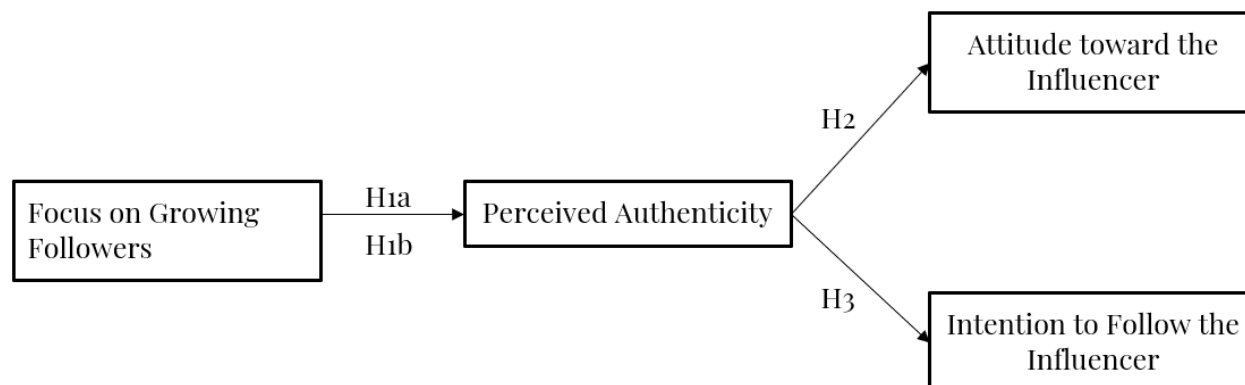
H1a: *Focusing on an influencer's benefit when encouraging more consumers to follow one's social media account in a post will negatively affect an influencer's perceived authenticity.*

H1b: *Focusing on follower benefits when encouraging more consumers to follow one's social media account in a post will positively affect an influencer's perceived authenticity.*

H2: An influencer’s perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between an influencer’s message and a consumer’s attitude toward the influencer, meaning that consumers will have a more positive attitude toward an influencer with high perceived authenticity.

H3: An influencer’s perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between an influencer’s message and a consumer’s intention to follow an influencer, meaning that consumers will have a greater intention to follow an influencer with high perceived authenticity.

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHODOLOGY

The authors tested the proposed relationships in the conceptual framework by conducting an experiment with three conditions. Each condition contained a TikTok video created by a fictitious influencer named James. A fictitious influencer was used to mitigate bias that may be presented with a real influencer. The authors chose to model the fictitious posts in a TikTok format, as TikTok has now surpassed Instagram as the top platform for influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). Each post included a video of James speaking on screen, but James’ script differed across conditions. In the Influencer Benefit condition, James encouraged consumers to follow the influencer solely for his benefit (i.e., “Let’s see how high we can get my numbers.”). In the Follower Benefit condition, James encouraged consumers to follow the influencer for both the influencer and the consumer’s benefit (i.e., “I want to share with you the things that I’m passionate about and that I think can help you in your own life.”). The third condition served as the control in which James addressed consumers without encouraging followership (i.e., “I hope everyone has an awesome day.”). Figure 2 shows a screenshot from one of the conditions, and Appendix 1 contains the influencer script for each condition.

FIGURE 2
A SCREENSHOT OF A TIKTOK POST OF THE INFLUENCER SPEAKING



After viewing one of the three conditions, each participant answered questions measuring perceived authenticity of the influencer, attitude toward the influencer, intention to follow the influencer, and manipulation checks. The measures for authenticity were adapted from Ilicic and Webster (2016), attitude toward the influencer items were adapted from Silvera and Austad (2004) and intention to follow the influencer items were adapted from Belanche et al. (2021). The study also included manipulation checks and questions pertaining to demographics, such as age, gender, income and education. All measures used seven-point Likert scales anchored by strongly agree to strongly disagree. Appendix 2 contains the items from each measure.

Analysis and Results

The sample contained 159 participants, with 51% identifying as female. The mean age of the sample was 34 years, and every participant followed at least one social media influencer. All of the participants were students pursuing a Master of Business Administration in the United States. The manipulation check, with means displayed in Table 1, shows that participants in each condition interpreted the influencer's message accordingly. More specifically, there is a significant difference among the Influencer Benefit condition, the Follower Benefit condition and the control condition ($p < 0.001$, partial eta squared = .121). The higher the manipulation check means, the more participants perceived James as solely being driven to grow his number of followers to benefit himself.

TABLE 1
STUDY MANIPULATION CHECKS

Manipulated Condition	Conditions	Mean	N	SD	F	Sig
Focus on Growing Followers	Encourage to Follow—Influencer Benefit	6.04	53	1.09	10.69	<.001
	Control	5.16	53	0.96		
	Encourage to Follow—Follower Benefit	5.68	53	0.91		

A mean comparison across the three conditions, displayed in Table 2, shows that participants reported more perceived authenticity, a more positive attitude and a higher intent to follow the influencer in the Follower Benefit condition compared to the Influencer Benefit condition. Though the means comparison significance for intent to follow the influencer was not as strong as the significance for perceived authenticity and attitude toward the influencer, the mean for the Encourage to Follow—Follower Benefit condition was higher than the Encourage to Follow—Influencer Benefit condition, aligning with the authors' expectations.

TABLE 2
PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY, ATTITUDE TOWARD INFLUENCER AND INTENT TO FOLLOW INFLUENCER MEANS FOR EACH CONDITION

Dependent Variable	Conditions	Mean	N	SD	F	Sig
Perceived Authenticity	Encourage to Follow—Influencer Benefit	3.4009	53	1.02	8.71	<0.001
	Control	4.0755	53	0.93		
	Encourage to Follow—Follower Benefit	4.0337	53	0.83		
Attitude toward Influencer	Encourage to Follow—Influencer Benefit	3.6038	53	0.93	17.94	<0.001
	Control	4.5337	53	0.99		
	Encourage to Follow—Follower Benefit	4.5613	53	0.87		
Intent to Follow Influencer	Encourage to Follow—Influencer Benefit	1.8553	53	1.10	3.72	0.087
	Control	2.0818	53	1.33		
	Encourage to Follow—Follower Benefit	2.3936	53	1.23		

The authors tested for the mediating role of perceived authenticity in the relationship between an influencer’s focus on growing followers and attitude toward an influencer and intent to follow (shown in Figure 3) using Model 4 of the SPSS PROCESS macro. Five thousand bootstrap samples were adopted to examine the mediation effects (Hayes, 2013). Findings, displayed in Table 3, suggest that an influencer’s perceived authenticity fully mediates the relationship between a focus on growing followers and one’s attitude toward an influencer ($\beta = 0.68$; $p < .000$; $R \text{ squared} = .3745$). In other words, the more consumers perceive that an influencer is motivated to create content in order to grow one’s follower count, the less authentic consumers perceive the influencer to act. On the other hand, when consumers perceive a higher amount of authenticity from the influencer, they also develop a more positive attitude toward the influencer. Therefore, H1a, H1b and H2 are supported.

TABLE 3
PROCESS RESULTS TESTING FOR MEDIATION

Mediating Variable: Perceived Authenticity						
Path	β	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Focus on Growing Followers \rightarrow Perceived Authenticity \rightarrow Attitude toward Influencer	0.68	0.06	9.4	0.00	0.5043	0.7722
Focus on Growing Followers \rightarrow Perceived Authenticity \rightarrow Intent to Follow	0.43	0.09	4.54	0.00	0.2442	0.6193

FIGURE 3
FULL MEDIATION FOR ATTITUDE TOWARD AN INFLUENCER



The authors also tested for mediation in the relationship between an influencer’s focus on growing followers and intent to follow an influencer (shown in Figure 4) using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro on SPSS. Similar to the first test for mediation, findings suggest that an influencer’s perceived authenticity fully mediates the relationship between a focus on growing followers and one’s intent to follow an influencer ($\beta = 0.43$; $p < .000$; $R \text{ squared} = .1460$). When consumers perceive an influencer to be highly motivated to create content in order to grow one’s follower count, the consumers perceive a lower amount of authenticity. When perceived authenticity is high, there is a higher likelihood that consumers will follow an influencer. Therefore, H3 is supported.

FIGURE 4
FULL MEDIATION FOR INTENT TO FOLLOW AN INFLUENCER



DISCUSSION

Authenticity remains a powerful element of one’s social media content. The current research examines the way in which TikTok influencers ask for consumers to follow them. Consumers perceive influencers to be more authentic—in other words, more intrinsically motivated—when influencers emphasize that consumers will benefit from the influencer’s content should they follow the influencer. Influencers who focus only on reaching a certain follower count are perceived as less authentic. Further, consumers form a more positive attitude toward perceivably authentic influencers, and consumers are also more likely to follow authentic influencers.

The research does not suggest that an influencer’s innate desire for many followers is inherently negative. Given that platforms like TikTok can unlock certain features for influencers with higher follower counts, as well as the positive perceptual outcomes from which highly followed influencers can benefit, one could argue that an influencer aiming for a high reach and follower count is to be expected. The results suggest that influencers should consider that the relationship between an influencer and a follower remains mutual, and influencers should consider a consumer’s motivation for following someone on TikTok. Consumers wish to know the value that they will receive from choosing to follow a specific person on social media, and influencers can emphasize such value when asking for the follow in their content. The study contributes to the marketing literature on influencer authenticity, which usually examines one’s authenticity in sponsored posts. The results of the study show that influencer authenticity also matters in organic content and can affect a consumer’s attitude and following intention.

Managerially, the authors acknowledge that some marketers may recognize follower count as a vanity metric—a number that does not necessarily translate into sales. Though gaining followers does not necessarily translate into higher revenue, studies such as Steils et al. (2021) and Zniva et al. (2023) emphasize the beneficial outcomes of gaining followers. A higher number of followers can attract brands that desire a high reach through influencer marketing. Influencers who wish to increase their follower counts can still ask for the follow without sacrificing their perceived authenticity. Managers of influencer marketing can apply the study results in practice through content strategy. Gaining followers remains an important step to broadening one’s reach and influence via social media.

Future Research and Limitations

The authors employed a fictitious influencer with a generic message in the experimental conditions to mitigate bias surrounding specific influencers and interests, but the use of such could also be noted as a limitation. Though intent-to-follow means were higher for the control and Follower Benefit condition, as predicted, the means could be interpreted as participants disagreeing to follow the influencer. James, the influencer used in the condition, did not speak on a particular topic regarding his content in order to mitigate bias regarding the interests of the participants. In doing so, James’ generic script could have simultaneously

discouraged participants from desiring to follow James. Future studies could focus on a particular topic and assess participant interest in the topic as a control.

Future research on organic content strategy for influencers spans several facets. First, the same study could be applied on different social media platforms given that each platform bears different characteristics, capabilities and audience demographics. Next, authenticity could be examined in other actions and content pieces that influencers create. For instance, one could study the way in which influencers interact with consumers via captions and other post elements, such as content format (images, text, video etc.), sound, and setting/background. As well, one could examine how the use of slang and dialect in organic content affect authenticity (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021). Moreover, one could study how the character development of an influencer through one's organic posts over time eventually affects the perceived authenticity of a sponsored post.

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APPENDIX 1: VIDEO SCRIPTS FROM EACH EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION

Condition #1: Encourage to Follow—Influencer Benefit

“Hey everyone, I’m so close to hitting 100k followers, but I need your help to get there. If you want to help me out, please follow me and share my page with your friends. Let’s see how high we can get my numbers.”

Condition #2: Encourage to Follow—Follower Benefit

“Hey guys, thank you so much for being a part of my journey, and I really appreciate each and every one of you. I want to share with you the things that I’m passionate about and that I think can help you in your own life. If you resonate with what I’m saying, please give me a follow, and let’s stay connected.”

Condition #3: Control

“Hey guys, thank you so much for being a part of my journey, and I really appreciate each and every one of you. I want to share with you the things that I’m passionate about and that I think can help you in your own life. I hope everyone has an awesome day.”

APPENDIX 2: SCALE ITEMS

Intention to Follow the Influencer

I have the intention to follow James’ TikTok account in the near future.

I predict that I will follow James’ TikTok account.

I will probably look for new content published on James’ TikTok account.

Attitude toward the Influencer

I think that James is interesting.

I think that James is pleasant.

I think that James is likeable.

I have a favorable opinion about James.

Perceived Authenticity of the Influencer

James is likely to be open and honest in close relationships with others.

James is likely to place a good deal of importance on people understanding who he truly is.

People can count on James being who he is regardless of the situation.

James is likely to act in a manner that is consistent with his held values, even if others criticize or reject him for doing so.

Manipulation Check

James cares about growing the number of followers he has.

James is driven by growing his followers.

James does not care much about growing his followers.