

AUTHENTICITY IN ACTION: HOW INFLUENCERS SHAPE CONSUMER TRUST IN LOCAL UMKM

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the digital economy, social media influencers hold a strategic role in shaping consumer perceptions of local products and brands. This paper aims to analyze how influencers employ authentic narratives to foster consumer trust in products offered by Indonesia's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Adopting a qualitative approach through case studies and observations of digital marketing campaigns involving selected local influencers, the study explores the communication strategies used to highlight the stories behind MSME products and examines how elements of locality and emotional proximity contribute to enhancing product credibility. Personal storytelling, the use of everyday language, and direct engagement with business owners are identified as key factors in constructing perceived authenticity that encourages trust and purchase decisions. Influencers act not merely as endorsers but as effective communication bridges between MSMEs and digital audiences, particularly among younger generations. This article underscores the importance of authentic narrative-based approaches in MSME marketing strategies and the need for stronger collaboration between small business actors and digital public figures in building credible and meaningful brand identities.

Keywords: authenticity, consumer trust, influencer, local narrative, MSME

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of marketing involving social media influencers (SMIs) has become an integral component of the digital ecosystem, giving rise to new forms of employment and enriching popular culture (Burgess et al., 2018). Influencers function not only as advertising agents but also as brand representatives capable of fulfilling the emotional desires of their audiences (Ki et al., 2020). In Indonesia, influencers play an increasingly vital role for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which often face challenges in promotion and limited resources.

Influencers can serve as communication bridges between MSMEs and digital audiences, particularly among younger generations who are well-acquainted with social media platforms (Latif et al., 2022). Within the framework of modern marketing, SMIs hold a crucial position not only as conveyors of commercial messages but also as trust builders between brands and consumers. Their presence offers strategic opportunities to foster emotional connections and trust toward local MSME products, which in turn contributes to the growth of the sector's economy.

Recent theoretical developments provide insights into how influencers exert their impact. The Social Media Influencer Theory (Lou & Yuan, 2019) highlights the importance of influencer characteristics such as expertise, credibility, and relatability in enhancing message effectiveness. Meanwhile, the Authenticity Influencer Theory (Audrezet et al., 2020) argues that consistency, transparency, and emotional connectedness with followers are key elements in fostering trust.

Influencers who are perceived as authentic and possess positive personal traits are thus more likely to deliver persuasive marketing messages.

Moreover, Trust Transfer Theory (Casaló et al., 2020) posits that the trust an audience places in an influencer can be "transferred" to the brand or product being promoted, including MSME products. However, challenges may arise when audiences begin to question the authenticity of influencer content, particularly in the context of paid partnerships. Research by Schouten (Schouten et al., 2020) found that approximately 62% of consumers tend to distrust recommendations from influencers perceived as inauthentic. This is supported by findings from (Audrezet et al., 2020) which demonstrate that perceptions of low authenticity can diminish the effectiveness of influencer communication.

Preliminary findings from this study reveal that certain influencers are consistently mentioned by respondents as trustworthy figures in promoting MSME products. This reflects how digital trust is cultivated within social communication networks involving digital public figures (Komunikasi Pembangunan et al., n.d.) and how close parasocial relationships influence public perceptions (Hudders et al., 2021).

While many studies have examined the effectiveness of influencer marketing, few have integrated the three central theoretical dimensions—namely influencer characteristics, influencer authenticity, and trust transfer—within the context of promoting local MSMEs. This study therefore aims to address this gap by investigating how perceptions of influencer authenticity underpin the trust transfer process from influencer to MSME brands, and how this process affects purchase intention.

Research Questions:

1. How do consumer perceptions of influencer authenticity affect trust transfer to MSME brands?
2. How do influencer characteristics influence trust transfer to MSME brands?
3. How is the trust transfer process formed in digital interactions between influencers, consumers, and MSMEs?

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the effect of influencer authenticity on trust transfer to MSME brands.
2. To analyze the effect of influencer characteristics on trust transfer to MSME brands.
3. To analyze the effect of trust transfer on the purchase intention of MSME products.

Practically, this study is expected to offer strategic insights for MSME practitioners in establishing effective partnerships with influencers. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of influencers in trust-based marketing strategies for MSMEs in the digital era. Additionally, this research supports conclusions from systematic reviews indicating that the adoption of digital technology, including influencer-based promotion, is a critical component for the sustainability and competitiveness of MSMEs in Indonesia (Rahmawati et al., n.d.)

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative correlational method, chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of how influencer characteristics and authenticity affect consumer trust toward local MSME products. The research was conducted online between March and May 2025, targeting active university students aged 18 to 24 years from three major cities in West Java: Bandung, Bogor, and Sukabumi. Participants in the quantitative study were individuals who follow at least one influencer on social media and have previously purchased MSME products based on influencer recommendations. The target number of respondents is [insert number] individuals.

The quantitative instrument used in this study is a questionnaire consisting of 30 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The items were developed based on three key theoretical frameworks: the Social Media Influencer Theory (Casaló et al., 2020), the Authenticity Theory (Audrezet et al., 2020), and the Trust Transfer Theory (Casaló et al., 2020).

The measured dimensions include:

1. Influencer characteristics: expertise, trustworthiness, and parasocial interaction
2. Perceived authenticity: passion, originality, transparency, and consistency
3. Trust transfer variables: initial trust, brand trust, and purchase intention

The quantitative data were analyzed using construct validity tests, reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha), and multiple linear regression analysis to examine the relationships between variables.

The hypotheses of this study are as follows:

- H1: Influencer authenticity has a positive effect on consumer trust toward MSME products.
- H2: Influencer characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness, parasocial interaction) affect the trust transfer process toward MSME products.
- H3: The degree of trust transfer influences the purchase intention of MSME products.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Influence of Influencer Authenticity on Consumer Trust in MSME Products

In digital marketing, influencers play a significant role in increasing brand awareness, fostering trust between brands and consumers, and ultimately influencing purchase intentions. However, the effectiveness of an influencer is strongly tied to the level of authenticity they display on social media. In the context of influencer marketing, authenticity refers to the perceived honesty and transparency conveyed through the influencer's personality, communication, and interactions with their audience (Latif & Kuntoro, 2025). Consumers are more likely to appreciate influencers who present themselves genuinely—without exaggerated gimmicks—which in turn fosters trust and credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020)

Influencer authenticity also serves as a key factor in the transfer of trust from the influencer to the endorsed brand. When audiences perceive an influencer as authentic, their trust can be transferred to the brand or product being promoted. This aligns with the

Trust Transfer Theory (Casaló et al., 2020) which posits that trust developed in one entity can be extended to another entity that is closely associated with it. In this case, when an individual trusts an influencer, that trust can be transferred to the brand or product endorsed by the influencer, especially if there is a strong relational or associative connection between the influencer and the brand in the eyes of the follower.

This study aims to examine the influence of influencer authenticity on trust transfer in the context of local MSME product promotion. The study employs three indicators to measure influencer authenticity: continuity, credibility, and integrity. Meanwhile, trust transfer is measured using three indicators: initial trust, trust transfer, and perceived value.

The research investigates the extent to which influencer authenticity impacts brand promotion by enhancing consumer trust transfer toward MSME products. The results of the multiple linear regression analysis conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) show a significance value (p-value) of 0.001, which is less than the threshold of 0.05. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between influencer authenticity (X1) and trust transfer (Y) for MSME products. In other words, the more authentic an influencer appears, the higher the level of trust transferred to consumers regarding MSME products.

ANOVA Table

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Y * X1	Between Groups	3907.509	25	156.300	5.232	<.001
	Linearity	3447.522	1	3447.522	115.404	<.001
	Deviation from Linearity	459.987	24	19.166	.642	.891
	Within Groups	2598.987	87	29.873		
	Total	6506.496	112			

Gambar 3.1 Anova Tabel

Sumber : SPSS

These findings are consistent with the Authenticity Influencer Theory (Audrezet et al., 2020), which posits that consistency, transparency, and emotional connectedness between influencers and their followers are key factors in building trust. In the context of MSMEs, consumers tend to be more selective, as local products often lack strong branding and market reputation. Therefore, when an influencer demonstrates authentic commitment—such as sharing personal experiences with the product, providing honest reviews, or showing long-term support—consumers are more likely to trust the recommendation. This is further supported by a study by Schouten (Schouten et al., 2020), which found that 62% of consumers are skeptical toward influencers perceived as inauthentic.

The implication is that MSME actors should seek collaborations with influencers who demonstrate a high degree of authenticity, reflected in their continuity, credibility, and integrity in delivering promotional messages. Additionally, influencers should exhibit a strong brand congruence with the MSME products they endorse, ensuring that the message appears natural and not forced.

2. The Influence of Influencer Characteristics on Trust Transfer to MSME Products

The characteristics of influencers (X2) in this study were measured using indicators such as expertise, trustworthiness, relatability, parasocial interaction, and self-disclosure. Meanwhile, the dependent variable (Y)—trust transfer—was measured using indicators including initial trust, trust transfer, and perceived value.

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.280	2.848		.449	.654
	X1	.399	.113	.348	3.545	<.001
	X2	.539	.111	.477	4.862	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Y

Gambar 3.2 Koefisien Regresi

Sumber : SPSS

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis show a significant p-value of 0.001, which is less than the 0.05 threshold. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between influencer characteristics and trust transfer toward MSME products. In other words, when an influencer possesses strong characteristics—such as demonstrated expertise in their field, high trustworthiness, genuine relatability with their audience, and transparent self-disclosure on social media—consumer trust in the MSME products endorsed by the influencer tends to increase.

These findings support the relationship between the Social Media Influencer Theory (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and Trust Transfer Theory (Casaló et al., 2020). According to the expertise dimension, influencers who have in-depth knowledge of the MSME products they review or promote are more likely to be trusted than those lacking relevant background or credibility. Influencers with high trustworthiness—evidenced by a positive digital track record and avoidance of exaggerated or misleading promotions—are also more likely to earn consumer trust.

Furthermore, the relatability of influencers plays a crucial role in building emotional connections, particularly when influencers use local language or share personal stories that resonate with their audience. The trust transfer process unfolds when the trust vested in the influencer “migrates” to the MSME product they endorse.

This study reveals that trust transfer in the MSME context is a dynamic process consisting of three stages:

- a. Initial Engagement: The influencer builds rapport with the audience through relevant and authentic content.
- b. Product Exposure: When the influencer introduces the MSME product, consumers begin to evaluate the recommendation based on their trust in the influencer.
- c. Purchase Decision: If consumers perceive the influencer as honest and the product as meeting expectations, trust transfer is successfully realized, leading to a purchase.

Additionally, the coefficient of determination (R^2) test showed that 61.3% of the variance in the dependent variable (trust transfer to MSME products) can be explained by the independent variables (influencer authenticity and influencer characteristics). The

remaining 38.7% is attributed to other factors not examined in this study, such as product quality, price, or external promotions.

Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.783 ^a	.613	.606	4.78436

a. Predictors: (Constant), X2, X1
 b. Dependent Variable: Y

Gambar 3.3 Koefisien Determinasi
 Sumber : SPSS

3. The Influence of Trust Transfer on Purchase Intention for MSME Products

Regression analysis also indicates that trust transfer significantly influences consumer purchase intention, as shown by a p-value of 0.001 (< 0.05). This emphasizes that when consumers trust an influencer and that trust is transferred to the endorsed product, their purchase intention increases significantly. In today’s competitive digital marketing landscape, trust is a crucial asset—arguably more valuable than mere visibility.

This finding is consistent with Trust Transfer Theory, which suggests that trust in a source (i.e., the influencer) can be transferred to a related brand or object. Latif and Kuntoro (Latif & Kuntoro, 2025) reinforce this notion by showing that interactions with digital public figures go beyond symbolism, influencing actual consumer behavior. Similarly, Yuniati (Yuniati et al., n.d.) found that positive influencer reviews significantly affect purchase decisions, particularly for local products.

For MSMEs, this means that partnering with influencers is not merely about expanding reach, but about building trust. Trust must be cultivated—by selecting influencers who are credible, whose communication style aligns with the brand, and whose values resonate with the identity of the MSME. Superficial or transactional collaborations are not enough; an approach centered on relational alignment, empathy, and value congruence is necessary to create effective trust transfer and stimulate purchase intent.

Moreover, trust transfer depends heavily on post-purchase experiences. The trust that influencers instill must be reinforced by product quality and service delivery. If the actual customer experience fails to align with the influencer's promises, trust may erode, damaging the brand’s reputation. Therefore, effective trust transfer is not limited to initial messaging—it also requires alignment between expectation and reality, creating a sustainable cycle of trust.

4. Respondent Preferences and Implications for MSMEs

Beyond quantitative data, this study also included an open-ended question to explore which influencers respondents admired and followed. These qualitative findings offer valuable insights into how trust is manifested and to whom it is given. Tasya Farasya, Rachel Vennya, and Fadil Jaidi were among the top names mentioned. These public figures are widely known in the digital space for content related to beauty, lifestyle, and a strong, relatable personal brand.

They are not seen merely as product promoters but as individuals who appear "real" in the everyday lives of their followers. Other frequently mentioned names included Jerome Polin, Maudy Ayunda, Awkarin, Kevin Anggara, and Dr. Tirta, reflecting diverse interests from education and activism to lifestyle and personality-driven content. These figures are considered credible and culturally relevant by younger audiences, who are also the primary targets of many digital MSMEs.

Interestingly, the responses also included local micro-influencers and community figures such as Tanboykun, Roti Kukus Bager Thailand, Laurent from Sukabumi Foodies, and Mamang Asep TV. This suggests that for many young consumers, geographic and cultural proximity is just as important as follower count or celebrity status.

In an increasingly connected era, local relevance can be a unique selling point that differentiates a brand. These findings highlight that trust is not solely a function of popularity, but also of shared values, cultural proximity, and emotional bonds. Therefore, MSMEs must be strategic in selecting influencers for collaboration—not merely choosing those who are "viral", but rather those whose identity and messaging align with the values and ethos of the MSME.

These respondent preferences reflect a highly segmented digital market, where authenticity, relevance, and effective communication styles matter greatly. By understanding these preferences, MSMEs can craft marketing strategies that are more grounded in their audience's social context, rather than blindly following trends. Ultimately, in digital communication, trust is something built through relationships—not something that can be bought outright.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that authenticity and key influencer characteristics—such as expertise, trustworthiness, and parasocial interaction—play a significant role in the trust transfer process toward MSME products. The successful transfer of trust from influencers to MSMEs also significantly increases purchase intention among young consumers. These findings directly address the central research question, namely how the character and authenticity of influencers can shape consumer confidence and drive purchase decisions in the digital marketing landscape of MSMEs.

Practically, this suggests that MSME practitioners should exercise greater care in selecting influencers—not merely based on popularity, but on genuine authenticity, credibility, and the ability to form emotional connections with their audiences. Influencers who communicate honestly, consistently, and transparently tend to be more successful in fostering positive brand perception and building consumer loyalty toward local products.

For future research, it is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative strategies for a more comprehensive understanding of trust dynamics. Additionally, expanding the demographic scope to include older generations or communities beyond Java Island could yield richer, more generalizable insights.

Other potential areas for exploration include the influence of content type, specific social media platforms, and exposure duration on the trust transfer process. For scholars and practitioners in communication and marketing, this study underscores the importance of building

trust-based collaborations and authentic storytelling in digital campaigns—particularly as MSMEs seek to position themselves competitively in the increasingly crowded and complex digital economy.

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