

# HOW INFLUENCER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AUTHENTIC

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Cite as:

De Kerviler Gwarlann, BUTORI Raphaëlle (2022), HOW INFLUENCER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AUTHENTIC. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 51st, (107243)

Paper from the 51st Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 24-27, 2022



# HOW INFLUENCER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AUTHENTIC

## **Abstract**

Because of the size of their audience and the relationship nurtured with followers, influencers have become key elements in brands communication strategies. A central concept in influencer marketing is authenticity: individuals expect influencers to be authentic in their content, and they expect brands to be authentic in their values. In this research, we move away from a one-sided perspective of authenticity to study how *a relationship* between a brand and an influencer can be authentic. Through three studies, we identify two factors which signal that a relationship between a brand and an influencer is authentic: intrinsic motivations and transparency. However, the respective weights of these two drivers differ: for influencers, intrinsic motivations are central, whereas for brands, transparency exert the strongest influence. These findings reveal two potential distinct strategies when entering into a partnership: Influencer intrinsic authenticity and Brand open-book authenticity.

## **Key words**

Authenticity; Influencer Marketing; Brand-Influencer relationship

## **Track**

Digital Marketing and Social Media

## 1. Introduction

The rise of social media created new affordances for some individuals who gained attention for the content they post and obtain a form of social capital through their audience. At the same time, brands search for new communication tools to address a younger target resistant to traditional communication practices (Audrezet, De Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). Thus, partnerships between recognized brands and popular influencers can be mutually beneficial. However, such collaborations create new challenges in how influencers and brands are perceived by consumers. At a time when consumers search for meaningful consumption, marketers and influencers are pushed to project authenticity and to develop long-term authentic and trustworthy partnerships.

In recent years, authenticity has become a keyword in the influencer industry. Research indicates that consumers trust independent (or at least perceived as such) third parties more than corporations as influencers' messages are perceived as "one of the few forms of real, authentic communication" (Scott, 2015, p. 295), providing apparently genuine, personal recommendations. However, influencers are sometimes criticized for promoting counterfeits or products from drop shipping. Influencers' authenticity might also be challenged when they collaborate with brands if they showcase products they would not ordinarily be interested in, leading to a perception that their collaborations are inauthentic.

While research in psychology has largely examined relationship authenticity between two people (Lopez & Rice, 2006), the specific case of a brand-influencer relationship has been overlooked while we believe it is a unique relationship for a few reasons. First, the relationship presents a contractual dimension but goes beyond a purely commercial exchange as there needs to be a mutual fit for the collaboration to work. Second, the relationship involves a human entity (the influencer) and a non-human entity (the brand), which is humanized through the brand managers behind it. We aim to fill a research gap by investigating authenticity of a relationship between a brand and an influencer. The paper builds on the two dimensions of an authentic relationship: transparency and motivations. These two perspectives have been separately acknowledged as inducing authenticity but limited research investigated the distinct consequences of using either transparency or motivations or both, and no study examined whether these dimensions should be applied differently for the two partners in the relationship.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Influencer Marketing*

Freberg et al. (2011) defined influencers as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes public attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p.90). Marketers can leverage influencers' social and attention capital by incorporating brand information within their posts in return for rewards. Influencer marketing appears to be an effective and cost-efficient marketing tool, as it is often not perceived by consumers as advertising and guarantees a wide reach to highly engaged audiences. Brands may pursue a purely instrumental goal, selecting influencers who generate the highest return on investment and not be transparent with them so as to control the content shared. Influencer on their end may be motivated to collaborate with popular brands in order to enhance their recognition or to obtain personal rewards (e.g. free products, invitations to events or even monetary compensation). Moreover, in order to appear as fully independent in their choice of content, influencers may not disclose information and go into deceptive communication practices. At a time when authenticity is increasingly important, researchers have used oxymorons to highlight the tensions between realness and promotional logic of influencer practice, among them 'staged authenticity' and 'contrived authenticity' (Joo et al. 2019).

### *2.2 Brand-Influencer Relationship authenticity*

As per the perspective of Colucci and Pedroni (2021), we argue that authenticity in the case of influencer marketing is a shared responsibility and the result of the work of both, the brand and the influencer, engaged in the relationship. We build our conceptualization of authenticity perceptions on the framework of self-determination theorists, who highlight two components of authenticity: intrinsic motivation and transparency (Ryan & Ryan, 2019).

When authentic, a person is volitionally engaged and intrinsically motivated to behave in ways that are congruent with her or his values and interests (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are those that emanate from one's innate desires and passions, involving the "active engagement with tasks that [one] finds interesting" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 233). Kernis and Goldman (2006) highlight intrinsic motivation as an essential component of authenticity, as one is "acting in ways congruent with one's values, preferences, and needs," whereas inauthenticity entails "acting merely to please others or to

attain rewards or avoid punishments” (p. 302). This has also been applied to brands to show how extrinsically motivated brands are perceived as inauthentic (Cinelli and LeBoeuf, 2020).

Transparency is also a key component of authenticity. Reis and Patrick (1996) defined authentic relationships as involving a reciprocal process of self-disclosure, intimacy, and trust. Kernis and Goldman (2006) described three elements in authentic relationships: openness and truthfulness, letting others "see the real you," and being authentic and not "fake." Past research also applied the notion of transparency to brand, claiming that brands that are transparent, sincere and honest towards the consumer are perceived as more authentic (Napoli et al. 2014). Thus, we suggest that a Brand-Influencer relationship is perceived as authentic when it entails intrinsic motivations and transparency. As such we hypothesize:  
*H1: An intrinsically motivated brand-influencer relationship is perceived more authentic than one extrinsically motivated*

*H2: A more transparent brand-influencer relationship is perceived as more authentic*

We go one step further and recognize that consumers may have different expectations in terms of the degree of motivations and transparency that the brand on one side and the influencer on the other side should have in the relationship. In particular, because brands can be viewed as inherently business oriented, consumers may not expect a high degree of intrinsic motivations from brand managers but may expect a high degree of transparency in how they conduct their business. Brands may be perceived as having potentially things to conceal about their processes and consumers search for signs of compliance with promises and absence of deception. In contrast, because influencers may be inherently perceived as being passionate about their topic and activity, consumers may expect a high degree of intrinsic motivations in how they conduct their mission but may be more tolerant regarding the degree of transparency given the recognized promotional dimension of the influencer business. We thus suggest: *H3: A brand-influencer relationship is perceived more authentic when the brand is transparent than when the influencer is transparent*  
*H4: A brand-influencer relationship is perceived more authentic when the influencer is intrinsically motivated than when the brand is intrinsically motivated*

### **3. Methodology**

This research uses an experimental approach with three complementary studies, conducted with female respondents, aged 18 to 40 years old. We used a three-item semantic

differential scale for perceived authenticity of the brand-influencer relationship: *The relationship is: Real – Fake; Genuine – Phony; Authentic – Inauthentic* (Ewing et al., 2012)

### 3.1 Study 1

The goal of Study 1 is to test the differential effect of transparency and motivations of the partners on perceived authenticity of the relationship. We recruited 120 Prolific female panelists between 18 and 40 years old ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25.3$  years) who were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (Transparency: High vs. Low)  $\times$  2 (Motivations: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic) between-subject design (see Appendix). Respondents were confronted with a hypothetical collaboration between an influencer (given a generic name of “Lou”) and a brand (given a made-up name “La Roseraie”), then asked to evaluate the authenticity of their relationship. In the low transparency condition, the message stressed that the influencer and the brand shared limited, only publicly available information while in the high transparency condition the message stressed that they both were open to share rich information and to disclose personal data with each other openly so they better know each other. In line with the seminal work of Deci and Ryan on motivations, the message in the intrinsic motivation condition stressed a mutual crush and that the influencer and the brand found pleasure in and were excited about the collaboration in itself, while in the extrinsic motivation condition, the message stressed a mutual commercial interest, and that the influencer and the brand needed the collaboration as a mean to an end. A manipulation check confirmed that our manipulations of transparency and of motivations were successful such that respondents evaluated transparency and motivations as intended.

In support of H1 and H2, an ANOVA shows that both motivations ( $F(1, 116) = 24.63; p < .01$ ) and transparency ( $F(1, 116) = 36.21; p < .01$ ) exert significant main effects on perceived authenticity of the relationship. People in the High Transparency condition perceive the relationship as being more authentic ( $M = 4.32, SD = 1.49$ ) compared to those in the Low Transparency condition ( $M = 2.79, SD = 1.54$ ). In addition, people in the Intrinsic Motivation condition perceive the relationship as being more authentic ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.65$ ) than people in the Extrinsic Motivation condition ( $M = 2.93, SD = 1.50$ ). These results confirm our proposal that even in a contractually based relationship, psychological factors have an influence on perceived authenticity. It is interesting to note that transparency and motivations do not interact to influence the perceived authenticity of the relationship ( $F(1, 116) = .07; p = .79$ ), suggesting that they have distinct impacts and that one does not influence the other.

### 3.2 Study 2a and 2b

The goal of these two studies is to complement the first study by disentangling the effect of alignment/misalignment between the influencer and the brand in terms of transparency (Study 2a) and in terms of motivations (Study 2b). For that purpose, we continued with the relationship between Lou and La Roseraie and created 8 scenarios as follows (see Appendix):

- In the four scenarios of Study 2a, we vary the influencer transparency (High vs. Low) and the brand transparency (High vs. Low) in a  $2 \times 2$  between-subject design. In the High transparency condition for the influencer, Lou is presented as being fully open about her tastes and style as well as sharing openly her expectations. In the High transparency condition for La Roseraie, the brand is presented as sharing their vision and giving access to personal information. In the Low transparency conditions, Lou and La Roseraie are described as much more cautious, not giving access to personal or strategic information.
- In the four scenarios of Study 2b, we vary the influencer motivations (Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic) and the brand motivations (Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic) in a  $2 \times 2$  between-subject design. In the intrinsic motivations for the influencer, the scenario presents Lou as being fan of the brand and truly enjoying the collaboration in itself. In the Intrinsic motivations for La Roseraie, the scenario presents the brand as really interested in knowing more about the influencer and sharing its tastes. The extrinsic motivations conditions highlight the economic side of the partnership and the collaboration is described as a financial necessity for both the influencer and the brand.

We collected data from 324 Prolific female respondents: 162 for Study 2a ( $M_{age} = 26.1$  years) and 162 for Study 2b ( $M_{age} = 25.3$  years). For each study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the 4 conditions. Our manipulation of transparency and motivations was again successful. Corroborating H3, people confronted with the Transparent Brand perceive the relationship as more authentic ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) compared to those confronted with the Transparent Influencer ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ;  $t(78) = 3.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Confronted with the Intrinsically Motivated Influencer ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), respondents perceive the relationship as more authentic in comparison with people confronted with the Intrinsically Motivated Brand ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). However, this difference does not reach significance ( $t(78) = 1.14$ ,  $p = .26$ ), so we cannot confirm H4. Interestingly, we find an interaction effect,

such that when one of the partners is intrinsically motivated, then the effect of the motivation of the other partner on relationship authenticity is strengthened ( $F(1, 158) = 5.16; p = .02$ )<sup>1</sup>.

#### **4. Theoretical contribution**

The research herein offers evidence that motivations and transparency both concur to generate a perception that a brand-influencer relationship is authentic. A brand can be authentic not just in terms of how it addresses customers but also other stakeholders such as communication partners. In the same vein, an influencer can be authentic not only in its behaviors towards followers but also towards brands. A very interesting finding is that Influencer and Brand may pursue two distinct authenticity strategies when entering into a partnership: Influencer intrinsic authenticity and Brand open-book authenticity. Authentic influencers are those that are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically motivated. That is, they are driven by their inner desires and passions when they decide which brand to promote and how to work with them. Authentic brands are transparent with their partners, disclose information, explain their strategies and open the doors of their offices.

#### **5. Managerial implications**

The results provide guidance for authenticity management when influencers engage in collaborations with brands. Influencers who are not intrinsically motivated when they enter into a partnership may fail in the long run as they adopt an overly commercial orientation and are not true to themselves. Influencers' role should be fulfilled around products and brands that fit their tastes and interests. For brands, transparent authenticity represents an opportunity to maintain trustworthy relationships and enhance the brand image. By providing access to internal information, not only managers allow influencers to better capture the meaning of the brand, but they also project a more authentic brand image. Finally, we also identify an interaction effect such that the intrinsic motivation of one partner strengthens the effect of the motivation of the other partner. As such, influencers should express openly their intrinsic motivations so that the brand managers also appreciate the collaboration in itself and take pleasure in sharing tastes, styles and values with the influencer.

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<sup>1</sup> We also replicated Study 1 findings and found that respondents in the High  $\times$  High Transparency condition perceive the relationship as being more authentic ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.43$ ) compared to those in the Low  $\times$  Low Transparency ( $M = 2.82, SD = 1.33; t(80) = 6.89, p < .01$ ), and that people in the Intrinsic Motivation condition perceive the relationship as being more authentic ( $M = 5.24, SD = 1.42$ ) than people in the Extrinsic Motivation condition ( $M = 2.54, SD = 1.13; t(80) = 9.50, p < .01$ ).



## 7. Limitations and future research

As we wanted to avoid biased answers if respondents recognized a brand or an influencer, we worked with fictional brand and influencers, while followers are often exposed to partnerships with well-known brands and familiar influencers. Future research could be conducted in collaboration with an agency to test real partnerships with brands. It might be that even if a popular brand is not transparent, followers believe that the influencer knows the brand sufficiently well that there is no need for information disclosure. It might also be that if the influencer is not intrinsically motivated but collaborates with a brand because followers love it, then the influencer is still considered authentic. Moreover, we examined a one-time collaboration, while it might be interesting to investigate how the relationship is perceived over time. Also, if an influencer is constantly changing partners, then followers might question his/her intrinsic motivations for each brand promoted.

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## Appendix

### Scenario Study 1

	<b>Transparency HIGH</b>	<b>Transparency LOW</b>
<b>Intrinsic Motivations</b>	Hello, Today, i am very happy to tell you how i developed a partnership with my favorite brand La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party and from the start I felt a common crush ... so that after some talks, we really wanted to work together and had plenty of ideas for a nice collaboration! A true happiness for me who is a big fan of the brand for many years. We started rapidly and the interactions have been intimate. We have exchanged at length in full transparency and a strong mutual trust with La Roseraie. I had access to their offices, laboratory and factory as well as all internal documents to discover the essence and DNA of La Roseraie. On my side, I was always able to show my real face during our interactions. I felt that I could really open myself without filters.	Hello, Today, i am very happy to tell you how i developed a partnership with my favorite brand La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party and from the start I felt a common crush ... so that after some talks, we really wanted to work together and had plenty of ideas for a nice collaboration! A true happiness for me who is a big fan of the brand for many years. We started rapidly and the interactions have been purely professional. We briefly exchanged a few fact-based useful pieces of information. The brand directed me to their website so that i know their products. They gave me some official documents detailing the history and mission of the brand. However, I did not access their office nor laboratory because information and fabrication process are confidential. On my side, I showed the face of the influencer that the brand was expecting during our interactions but I never opened myself.
<b>Extrinsic Motivations</b>	Hello, Today, i am very happy to tell you how i developed a new partnership with La Roseraie. It is a recent brand which needs partnerships to be known. I met the brand manager during a professional event because i needed to find collaborations. Without collaborations, it is difficult to live off being an influencer. Thus, I was reassured we could agree on working together, even if I am not a big fan of the brand. We started rapidly and the interactions have been intimate. We have exchanged at length in full transparency and a strong mutual trust with La Roseraie. I had access to their offices, laboratory and factory as well as all internal documents to discover the essence and DNA of La Roseraie. On my side, I was always able to show my real face during our interactions. I felt that I could really be myself without filters.	Hello, Today, i am very happy to tell you how i developed a new partnership with La Roseraie. It is a recent brand which needs partnerships to be known. I met the brand manager during a professional event because i needed to find collaborations. Without collaborations, it is difficult to live off being an influencer. Thus, I was reassured we could agree on working together, even if I am not a big fan of the brand. We started rapidly and the interactions have been professional. We briefly exchanged a few fact-based useful pieces of information. The brand directed me to their website so that i know their products. They gave me official documents detailing the history and mission of the brand. However, I did not access their office nor laboratory because information and fabrication process are confidential. On my side, I showed the face of the influencer that the brand was expecting during our interactions but I never opened myself.

## Scenario Study 2a

	<b>Transparency Influencer HIGH</b>	<b>Transparency Influencer LOW</b>
<b>Trans- parency Brand HIGH</b>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party. Since our first interactions, i really played the game and shared openly my expectations. I opened my personal photo files and my posts, I explained my approach, my tastes and my style. I opened myself and I showed my real face without filter.</p> <p>La Roseraie truly disclosed itself and honestly explained to me its processes and objectives. They open their doors and gave me access to their office, its factory and all internal document so that i could discover the essence and DNA of La Roseraie..</p>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party. Since the beginning of our interactions, I was cautious not to say too much about my expectations. I did not give any personal information and I showed the face of the influencer that the brand was expecting during our interactions. I never really opened myself.</p> <p>However, La Roseraie truly disclosed itself and honestly explained to me its processes and objectives. They open their doors and gave me access to their office, its factory and all internal document so that i could discover the essence and DNA of La Roseraie.</p>
<b>Trans- parency Brand LOW</b>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party. Since our first interactions, i really played the game and shared openly my expectations. I opened my personal photo files and my posts, I explained my approach, my tastes and my style. I opened myself and I can say that I showed my real face without filter.</p> <p>However, the brand did not disclose itself and did not explain its objectives. They directed me to their website so that I know the products and gave me some documents. I did not have access to their offices or their laboratory, because information is confidential.</p>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party. Since the beginning of our interactions, I was very cautious not to say too much about my expectations. I did not give any personal information and I showed the face of the influencer that the brand was expecting during our interactions. I never really opened myself.</p> <p>Also, the brand did not disclose itself and did not explain its objectives. They directed me to their website so that I know the products and gave me some documents. I did not have access to their offices or their laboratory, because information is confidential.</p>

## Scenario Study 2b

	<b>Motivations Influencer HIGH</b>	<b>Motivations Influencer LOW</b>
<b>Motivations Brand HIGH</b>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party. La Roseraie only works with influencers that correspond them well. they followed me for a long time and know well my tastes and my approach. They really liked it and it was coherent with the brand DNA.</p> <p>Also for me, it is exactly the brand i want to work with because i love their values and style. What is important to me is to collaborate with brands that I love. I need to have a crush to make it work.</p>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party. La Roseraie only works with influencers that correspond them well. they followed me for a long time and know well my tastes and my approach. They really liked it and it was coherent with the brand DNA.</p> <p>However, on my side, i do not want to know if i like a brand or not, if i like their style and all that...what is important to me it that the collaboration is financially interesting and grows my community. It is just business after all.</p>
<b>Motivations Brand LOW</b>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-). I met the brand manager at a party.</p> <p>It seemed that La Roseraie was not willing to know whether they appreciated my style, my values, and all...I had the feeling that what was important for the brand was that the collaboration was financially interesting and that it gives them access to my community. For La Roseraie it is just business after all.</p> <p>However for me, it is exactly the brand i want to work with because i love their values and style. What is important to me is to collaborate with brands that I love. I need to have a crush to make it work.</p>	<p>Hello, Today i will tell you how i developed a partnership with La Roseraie :-).I met the brand manager at a party.</p> <p>It seemed that La Roseraie was not willing to know whether they appreciated my style, my values, and all...I had the feeling that what was important for the brand was that the collaboration was financially interesting and that it gives them access to my community. For La Roseraie it is just business after all.</p> <p>On my side, i do not want to know if i like a brand or not, if i like their style and all that...what is important to me it that the collaboration is financially interesting and grows my community. It is just business after all.</p>