

WHEN AUTHENTICITY SIGNALING BACKFIRES: AN INVERTED RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- This conceptual study develops a new framework for consumer behaviour by examining the unintended negative consequences of excessive authenticity signalling by digital creators, such as influencers. While prior research has largely emphasised the positive role of digital creators, including influencers and micro-celebrities, in building trust, credibility, and purchase intentions, this study explores whether repetitive and exaggerated authenticity claims may elicit adverse consumer responses.

Methodology- This study adopts a conceptual approach and develops a research framework grounded in Trust-Commitment Theory and Signalling Theory. Drawing on these perspectives, the framework specifies the proposed relationships among authenticity signalling, authenticity fatigue, and consumer scepticism, and how these may erode trust through a series of theoretical propositions explaining how repeated signalling practices affect consumers' opinions over time. In addition, the study proposes a multidimensional conceptualisation of authenticity fatigue within signalling theory.

Findings- Grounded in Signalling Theory, which posits that greater signalling quantity can result in more favourable perceived outcomes, the proposed framework suggests that excessive authenticity signalling may paradoxically increase consumer scepticism and erode trust over time. Repeated exposure to authenticity-based persuasive messaging is also expected to generate authenticity fatigue, thereby weakening the persuasive value of authenticity cues, which may decrease online engagement, reduce the effectiveness of user-generated marketing, and potentially encourage negative electronic word of mouth. Collectively, these relationships indicate that authenticity may backfire when strategically overused in digital environments.

Conclusion- This study contributes to the influencer marketing and consumer psychology literature by reframing authenticity as a persuasive signal whose value and effectiveness are not unlimited; excessive exposure may erode its persuasive power and lead to fatigue. The study identifies several key relationships, including the potential for excessive authenticity signalling to increase consumer scepticism, thereby weakening trust in brand-endorsed claims. Additionally, repeated exposure to authenticity-based persuasive cues may lead to authenticity fatigue, thereby reducing the persuasive effectiveness of authenticity appeals. These relationships suggest that authenticity does not function as an unlimited persuasive resource, as its effectiveness may decline when used repeatedly or strategically. Finally, the study provides a foundation for future empirical research examining the boundary conditions under which authenticity strengthens persuasion or backfires.

Keywords: Consumer scepticism, authenticity fatigue, authenticity signalling, consumer trust, commitment-trust theory

JEL Codes: M31, M37, D91

1. INTRODUCTION

The fragmentation of meaning and identity in modern society makes it harder for people to tell what is genuine. As a result, authenticity has emerged as a key driver of meaningful consumption and consumer-brand relationships (Morhart et al., 2015), shaping how individuals evaluate products and brands. Within Web 2.0, self-presentation practices have become increasingly prominent in use between users of the digital spaces (Chatzopoulou & Navazhylova, 2022). This is especially relevant for Generation Z, born after 1995 (Rosenberg et al., 2025), who see authenticity as part of their identity (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). Their consumption behaviours are strongly influenced by digital environments, where online shopping and social media platforms play a central role in shaping preferences and purchase decisions (Ridwan et al., 2025). Consequently, making authenticity a critical determinant of consumer perception and brand positioning in digital markets (Beverland et al., 2008).

Within this context, the communication of authenticity narratives has evolved into a strategic tool used by both brands and digital creators to establish credibility and trust. Such narratives are frequently embedded in influencer marketing, celebrity endorsements, user-generated content (UGC), and brand-generated content (BGC) (Moulard et al., 2015; Audrezet et al., 2020). Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth

(eWOM) amplifies these signals among these native individuals (Liu et al., 2024). This phenomenon is often conceptualized as “authentic advertising” or “ad authenticity” (Um, 2022).

While prior research has predominantly emphasized the positive role of authenticity, limited attention has been given to its potential overuse and the unintended consequences that may arise in saturated digital environments. Existing studies have examined related phenomena such as over-endorsement and credibility dilution in influencer marketing (Cheah et al., 2024), yet they fall short of capturing the broader experiential and psychological impact of continuous exposure to authenticity-driven messaging. By addressing this gap, the present conceptual study introduces the notion of authenticity fatigue, defined as a state in which consumers become cognitively and affectively exhausted by persistent exposure to authenticity claims, leading to increased scepticism and diminished responsiveness to such signals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand authenticity typically refers to consumers' perceptions of a brand's identity and claims (Guèvremont, 2015). Which, highlights the importance of its approach that lies in their consistent alignment with consumers' values (Morhart et al., 2015). With the growth of digital platforms, and This is highly relevant to Generation Z, whose daily social media use increases their exposure to UGC and brand-related conversations (Twenge & Martin, 2020). These in-real-time online reviews and conversations of idea exchange and open peer-reviews and discussion on their opinion of both the brand and the product/service (Campagna et al., 2023), thereby, influencing the effectiveness the marketing campaigns effectiveness.

Brand authenticity has multifaceted nature, however, the term is often used to express ‘true or genuine’ (Beverland, 2005; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Moreover, it is often perceived through sincere storytelling and commitments to tradition (Beverland, 2005). Becoming more important than price (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Which enhance “brand-related communication” process (Campagna et al., 2023). However, authenticity dimensions rather, a term that needs to be judged from multiple angles to judge its effectiveness in its perception (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Which can vary based on industry, gender, age, and personal values.

The concept of (brand) authenticity is rooted in signalling theory, which usually cited by scholars in the management sector from Spence's (1973) or Ross's (1977). While Berger & Heath (2007) approach the signalling theory application in the social sector, to focus on consumer behaviours in approaching products, hence, individuals need to present their identity in a unique manner, or a small group of individuals with the same interests when choosing products that reflect their identity.

Signaling theory provides a basis for communicating quality through signals, whether observable or not, with the goal of reducing miscommunication and information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2011). The social approach provides the fundamental framework for interpreting signals of uniqueness in products that align with the individual's need for uniqueness (Berger & Heath, 2007). When applied to consumer authenticity seeking, it contributes to how consumers might perceive a brand's claims of unobservable and judge their alignment with the observed quality presented in the real product. Moreover, signaling theory posits that, to improve the outcomes of conveyed signals, a firm can either increase the number of signals or enhance their observability (Connelly et al., 2011). Therefore, comes this study to investigate whether the increased number of authenticities signaling and in this case through digital endorsement, which will investigate the effect of signaling perception on young digital cosmetic consumers, based on the understanding studies of the literature on; Gen Z impulse purchasing behaviors, purchasing decision-making, and consumer quest for authenticity (e.g. Napoli et al. 2014; Um, 2022; Huh & Kim, 2024; Ridwan et al., 2025).

In the marketing world, consumer skepticism is used to describe a person being alerted by doubts and disbelief of the advertiser's claims or motives; it also categorizes certain customers of their psychological status as “cynical”, Which is defined by the literature as “Consumer Skepticism” (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Obermiller & Spangenberg (1998), define it as a disposition of established patterns of negative response towards advertisements' claims.

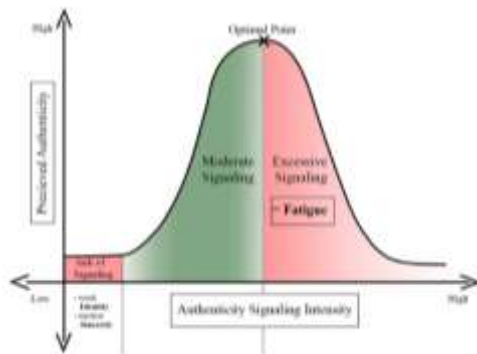
Having Gen Z grown up in algorithm-driven environments, has given them heightened awareness of social, environmental, and ethical issues (Dragolea et al., 2023). This awareness has further expanded into digital nativeness which increased their expectations toward brands, particularly in relation to social responsibility and sustainability initiatives (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). At the same time, it has also intensified their skepticism toward authenticity claims that are perceived as inconsistent, exaggerated, or misaligned with actual practices (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

In the fast-moving, widely available, and highly accessible product offerings in the beauty and cosmetics industry as McKinsey & Company (2025) described it as trend-based industry. Which consistent change of trends can question the credibility and sincerity behind the endorsed brand and with the rise USG claims are often repeated highlighting Gen Z consumer's skepticism via such term such as ‘over-hyped’, or ‘trap-hole’ views’ (e.g. Casaló et al., 2020; Campagna et al., 2023). Accordingly, excessive authenticity signaling may create a shift from positive perception of authentic claims toward doubt, and fatigue. Resulting in a lack of perceived credibility which can erode trust and damage the brand's image, especially when the endorsement appears overly commercial or strategically managed (Audrezet et al., 2020; Cheah et al., 2024), doubting the motive of the ad (Erkan & Evans, 2018), eroding trust, reduce brand-consumer engagement as a form of resistance of excessive endorsing deception. Accordingly, providing the conceptual basis for examining authenticity fatigue as a potential consequence of overexposure and signaling excessiveness.

Building on the commitment-trust theory, the key for successful marketing is the need for a consistent relationship of built trust between firms and consumers, which is referred to as ‘relationship marketing’ (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Considering the base success of influencer marketing, serving as ‘product-placement’ in promotional contents (Audrezet et al., 2020). The ‘parasocial’ relationship between the online person and the audience, in which it has a huge influence in converting positive emotions into authentic products, where it affects the

purchasing behavior of consumers (Taher et al., 2022). A positive relationship between both can encourage consumer imitation intention of their admired online person, (Taher et al., 2022). Therefore, building on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), effective implementation of brand authenticity signals is critical to the success of digital endorsement strategies, particularly when consumer trust is low and doubt is high.

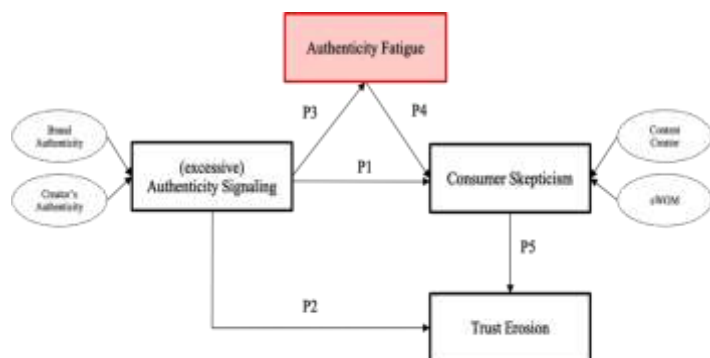
Despite its strategic importance, conveying authenticity signals in digital environments presents a growing challenge, where the increasing reliance on authenticity claims has introduced a critical tension. When such signals become excessive, they risk being perceived as performative or staged, thereby triggering scepticism among audiences (Zhu, 2025). Repeated exposure of Gen Z to such claims—especially when the brand-creator content fails to deliver meaningful substance—may gradually erode trust and reduce the persuasive power of authenticity as a communication strategy. Furthermore, authenticity fatigue may increase consumer scepticism and erode trust in both brands and digital content creators. As consumers become more doubtful toward exaggerated or repeatedly used authenticity claims, their responsiveness to digital endorsements may decline, reducing the effectiveness of authenticity as a marketing strategy. Therefore, consumer scepticism and trust erosion represent key outcomes of excessive authenticity signalling.



3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study aims to propose a conceptual research model for enhancing authenticity digital signalling by marketing managers' set of tactics to implement, where the purpose of the study is to help firms understand how to avoid consumers' weariness and fatigue of authenticity claims, by first setting a framework and base on theoretical well-investigation theories in the literature and link it to consumer's process of reaching distrust and scepticism,, based on contribution of previous peer-investigation. However, this study develops a path of investigation into consumer behaviour of when and how digital native consumers reach fatigue and burnout of excessive authenticity claims.

The conceptual model is developed through the integration of signalling theory and commitment-trust. These theories provide the foundation for explaining how authenticity signals are communicated, and interpreted by consumers when they become repetitive, exaggerated, or extreme. The proposed framework focuses on the relationships between excessive authenticity signalling, authenticity fatigue, consumer scepticism, and trust erosion. The study particularly emphasizes Generation Z consumers in digital environments, where influencer marketing, eWOM, and brand-creator collaborations shape consumer perceptions and responses.



4. FINDINGS

The conceptual findings suggest that authenticity remains valuable when it is perceived as consistent, credible, and aligned with actual brand or creator behaviour. However, when authenticity signals are used excessively, they may lose persuasive strength and become perceived as performative or strategically managed. This study proposes that excessive authenticity narratives may lead to authenticity fatigue through two subdimensions: intensity and repetition. Intensity refers to the strength, extremity, and emotional weight of authenticity cues, where exaggerated or emotionally charged claims may require greater cognitive evaluation and create weariness when perceived as overstated. Repetition refers to the continuous exposure to similar authenticity claims across digital platforms, where repeated narratives of honesty, transparency, uniqueness, or meaningful endorsement may reduce signal distinctiveness and contribute to cognitive and affective fatigue, especially in saturated digital markets such as cosmetics.

The graph was created to explain and visualize the research argument that authenticity signalling does not always increase perceived authenticity in a linear way. At low levels of signalling, consumers may not receive enough cues to evaluate the sincerity, identity, or credibility of the brand or digital creator, resulting in weak perceived authenticity. As signalling increases to a moderate level, authenticity cues become clearer, more credible, and more persuasive, reaching an optimal point where authenticity is more likely to be perceived as genuine and trustworthy. However, when signalling exceeds this optimal threshold, authenticity claims may become too intense or repeatedly emphasized, which can create authenticity fatigue and shift consumer perception from genuine authenticity toward performativity, scepticism, and trust erosion. Therefore, the graph supports the main conceptual argument of the study by showing that authenticity remains valuable, but only when it is communicated with balance, credibility, and moderation.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the conceptual findings suggest that authenticity remains an important factor in digital marketing when it is perceived as credible, consistent, and aligned with actual brand or creator behaviour. However, authenticity should not be treated as an unlimited persuasive strategy. When authenticity signals are used with excessive intensity or repeated too frequently, they may lose their persuasive value and become perceived as performative, strategic, or less genuine. Future studies are recommended to empirically test the proposed conceptual model and examine the relationship between excessive authenticity signalling, authenticity fatigue, consumer scepticism, and trust. Further research may also develop and validate measurement scales for authenticity fatigue and its proposed subdimensions, intensity and repetition. In addition, future studies could compare different generations, product categories, digital platforms, and types of endorsers to better understand when authenticity supports consumer trust and when it begins to backfire.

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