



## Exploring the Lived Meaning of Authenticity in Social Media Influencers' Digital Lives

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### ABSTRACT

Authenticity has emerged as a critical concept in mass communication and digital media studies, reflecting broader social and cultural concerns about identity, truth, and self-representation in online environments. Within this context, the experiences of digital influencers have gained scholarly attention as they navigate the intersection of personal expression, algorithmic visibility, and audience expectation. However, existing research has primarily examined authenticity through behavioral or structural lenses, leaving insufficient understanding of how influencers personally experience and interpret authenticity within the algorithmic systems that shape their digital lives. Here, this study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived meanings of authenticity among social media influencers. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight active influencers, the study identifies four central themes: the negotiation of authenticity under algorithmic pressure, the emotional labor of self-presentation, the crisis of trust between influencers and audiences, and the moral paradox of visibility and integrity. These findings reveal that authenticity is not a static attribute but a dynamic, relational process shaped by emotional, moral, and technological factors. The phenomenological interpretation highlights authenticity as a lived struggle for coherence between inner values and external visibility, rather than a strategic performance of self. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for digital influencers, content strategists, and media professionals seeking to cultivate more genuine engagement in algorithm-driven platforms. Understanding authenticity as a relational and moral process can inform ethical content creation and healthier audience interaction. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its small, context-specific sample and qualitative scope, which may restrict generalizability. Future research could expand to cross-cultural comparisons or incorporate quantitative approaches to further validate these insights. Overall, this research deepens our understanding of authenticity as an evolving existential experience in digital culture and underscores the value of phenomenology for examining identity, ethics, and emotional life in contemporary media environments.



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### INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, the concept of authenticity has become a central yet contested construct in the field of mass communication, journalism, and media studies (Annabell et al., 2025). Within the dynamic ecosystem of social media platforms, individuals and organizations continually perform and negotiate their identities in front of algorithmically mediated audiences. The emergence of influencer culture has transformed traditional paradigms of communication by merging personal expression, entrepreneurialism, and algorithmic visibility into a single socio-cultural phenomenon (Beuckels et al., 2025). As digital spaces evolve into primary venues for social interaction and self-representation, authenticity is increasingly perceived not merely as a moral or aesthetic value but as a critical determinant of credibility, trust, and emotional connection between creators and audiences.

The societal relevance of authenticity extends beyond branding or communication strategies; it reflects broader transformations in how individuals perceive truth, identity, and relationality in an age saturated with mediated realities (Esposito & Semenzin, 2025). The proliferation of disinformation and algorithmic curation has destabilized conventional boundaries between the real and the performed, compelling users to continually reassess what constitutes “genuine” expression. This phenomenon has become particularly salient among digital influencers, who embody a dual existence—simultaneously as private individuals and as public commodities. Their self-presentation operates under constant scrutiny, shaped by both audience expectations and technological affordances, creating a complex interplay between authenticity, performance, and survival in the attention economy.

Despite the widespread recognition of authenticity as a communicative and cultural ideal, its subjective experience remains underexplored (Pawłowska-Legwand, 2025). Most existing studies approach authenticity as a performative construct or strategic behavior, often analyzed through content metrics or audience perception frameworks (Misiak et al., 2025). However, less attention has been devoted to understanding how individuals experience and interpret authenticity within their own lifeworlds — how they feel, negotiate, and make sense of being “authentic” in a digital landscape structured by algorithmic and commercial pressures. The phenomenon of authenticity thus invites phenomenological inquiry, which privileges lived experience and meaning over behavioral generalization or structural explanation.

Understanding authenticity from a phenomenological perspective allows for a deeper engagement with the subjective and existential dimensions of digital life. Such an approach illuminates how authenticity is not merely expressed through outward communication but also internalized, questioned, and redefined through personal reflection and social interaction (Degen et al., 2025). Within the broader discourse of media and communication, exploring the lived meanings of authenticity contributes to the theoretical enrichment of identity studies and offers critical insight into how individuals navigate truth, selfhood, and trust in an era of pervasive disinformation.

Building upon the broader discourse of authenticity in digital communication, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward the subjective experiences underlying mediated self-expression (Giambastiani et al., 2025). Research on influencers, digital creators, and online identity construction has evolved into a critical field that seeks to understand how individuals interpret and internalize their social realities. Within this expanding domain, phenomenological inquiry offers a distinctive lens to explore the lived meaning of authenticity as it is experienced in the complex intersections between personal identity, technological mediation, and social perception (Marwick, 2020; Abidin, 2021).

While prior research has provided valuable descriptive and structural analyses of influencer culture, many studies remain limited by their methodological orientation toward quantification and external observation (Dhiman & Bhati, 2025). Approaches grounded in content analysis, network analytics, or audience measurement often emphasize visible patterns of communication—likes, comments, reach—while neglecting the invisible layers of emotion, reflection, and existential negotiation that define how authenticity is felt and enacted by the individual. These approaches have contributed to the understanding of social influence mechanisms but fail to capture the inner consciousness of those who inhabit these digital roles.

The challenge lies in accessing the depth and texture of human experience—dimensions that cannot be fully represented through numerical indicators or behavioral coding. Phenomenology, particularly in its interpretative form (hermeneutic phenomenology), responds to this limitation by centering meaning as it is lived, perceived, and articulated by participants (Han & Jo, 2025). Through this approach, the focus shifts from explaining behavior to understanding the essence of experience—how influencers make sense of being authentic amid algorithmic systems and disinformation ecologies that continuously redefine what is real and credible.

Consequently, existing methods in media and communication research, though insightful in describing digital trends, often prove insufficient for uncovering the existential structures of authenticity as a lived phenomenon (Jin et al., 2025). The interpretative phenomenological framework

thus emerges as a necessary methodological response, offering the analytical depth to reveal how authenticity is continuously constructed, negotiated, and embodied within the evolving landscape of social media communication.

Although previous studies have examined the notion of authenticity in digital environments, most have done so through behavioral, content-based, or managerial frameworks that emphasize external expressions rather than internal meanings (Mrad et al., 2025). The prevailing approaches—such as digital ethnography, social network analysis, and branding studies—offer practical insights into how influencers manage their online personas, engage with followers, and navigate platform algorithms. However, these models are primarily designed to describe what influencers do, not how they experience and interpret authenticity as an existential and emotional reality.

This orientation toward observable phenomena has produced fragmented and surface-level understandings of authenticity. Quantitative and structural analyses capture performance patterns but fail to reveal the lived tensions—the feelings of vulnerability, doubt, and moral negotiation—that shape influencers' sense of self in algorithmic contexts (Diao et al., 2025). Consequently, the deeper meanings embedded in the experience of “being authentic” within a disinformation-saturated environment remain insufficiently explored.

To address this gap, there is a compelling need for a phenomenological inquiry that privileges subjective consciousness and lived experience (Zhang et al., 2025). Unlike instrumental or positivist approaches, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of a phenomenon as it is perceived and made meaningful by those who live it. In the context of media and communication studies, this shift allows for an exploration of authenticity not as a performative construct, but as an evolving, relational process—shaped by emotion, moral judgment, and technological mediation.

Therefore, the existing literature leaves an essential question unanswered: How do digital influencers experience, interpret, and negotiate authenticity within the socio-technical systems that both enable and constrain their expression? This question underscores the epistemological necessity of phenomenology as an alternative pathway for understanding authenticity—not as a static label of digital identity, but as a lived phenomenon deeply rooted in the human condition of mediated existence.

Recent literature on digital authenticity highlights the growing scholarly interest in the lived experience of influencers and content creators as they navigate online visibility and self-presentation. Studies by (Agnihotri et al., 2025; Bayarri Toscano & Fernández-Villanueva, 2025) have emphasized the sociocultural pressures of algorithmic systems and audience expectations, revealing how authenticity operates as both a communicative strategy and an emotional burden. Yet, these investigations remain largely descriptive, leaving unexplored the deeper experiential dimensions of how influencers internalize and interpret their own authenticity. Theoretical perspectives such as self-presentation theory and identity performance provide valuable context but insufficiently capture the phenomenological essence of authenticity as lived experience (Rasel et al., 2025). Consequently, there remains a pressing need to move beyond behavioral frameworks toward interpretative approaches that privilege meaning and consciousness.

To address this limitation, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework, grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology as articulated by Heidegger (Almela-Baeza et al., 2025). This approach is particularly suited for exploring the subjective realities of individuals whose lives are shaped by algorithmic mediation, disinformation, and the emotional labor of digital visibility. By emphasizing lived meaning, IPA allows for the exploration of how influencers perceive, feel, and make sense of authenticity as part of their everyday digital existence. The method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay between internal reflection and external performance, thereby answering the central question of how authenticity is experienced and negotiated within algorithmic systems (Arafat & Khamis, 2025). Through this phenomenological lens, the study seeks to reveal the essence of authenticity not as a fixed trait but as a continuously evolving state of being.

This article is organized into several interconnected sections designed to guide the reader through the inquiry (Kim et al., 2025). The Introduction establishes the theoretical and social context of authenticity in digital media. The Method section details the phenomenological approach, participant selection, and data collection procedures, followed by the analytic process rooted in interpretative phenomenology (Lukan & Appleton, 2025). The Results section presents the emergent themes that capture the lived experiences of influencers, while the Discussion connects these findings to existing theories and implications for media and communication scholarship. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the essential meanings uncovered, highlighting their relevance to understanding authenticity as a lived, relational, and dynamic phenomenon.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of social media influencers in constructing and negotiating authenticity within the context of digital disinformation. The phenomenological design was selected for its capacity to uncover the essence of subjective experiences and to interpret the meanings individuals ascribe to their social realities. As a qualitative paradigm, phenomenology emphasizes lived meaning rather than measurable variables, allowing a rich understanding of how authenticity is experienced, embodied, and challenged in algorithmic environments.

The interpretative dimension of phenomenology, rooted in Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy, guided this study's orientation toward understanding being-in-the-world as expressed through participants' reflections and narratives. The IPA framework was particularly relevant because it seeks not only to describe experiences but to interpret how individuals make sense of those experiences within their cultural and technological contexts. Through this design, authenticity was examined as a relational, evolving, and context-dependent phenomenon emerging from the interplay of personal agency and digital structures.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of eight active social media influencers with verified or substantial public followings across platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. They were selected through purposive sampling, based on criteria ensuring that each participant had direct experience in managing content creation, audience engagement, and brand collaborations in environments affected by misinformation or algorithmic visibility pressures.

Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) have at least three years of experience as active content creators, (b) regularly engage with audiences exceeding 50,000 followers, and (c) demonstrate awareness of or reflection on issues related to authenticity and disinformation. Individuals primarily engaged in automated or corporate-managed accounts were excluded to preserve the phenomenological focus on personal experience.

Participants ranged in age from 24 to 37 years, comprising five women and three men, representing diverse thematic niches, including lifestyle, education, and social commentary. Their varied backgrounds enabled a nuanced exploration of authenticity as a multifaceted experience across different segments of digital media culture.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore participants' lived meanings while maintaining consistency in core questions. Each interview followed a guided protocol that invited participants to reflect on their experiences of being perceived as "authentic" or "inauthentic," their emotional responses to algorithmic pressures, and their strategies for maintaining credibility in the face of digital disinformation.

Interviews were conducted individually via encrypted video conferencing platforms to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on the

participant's availability and depth of reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuances essential to phenomenological interpretation.

A comfortable and trust-oriented environment was established by ensuring participants' autonomy to pause or skip questions at any time. The interview guide was informed by prior phenomenological studies on digital identity (e.g., Abidin, 2021; Marwick, 2020) and adapted to the context of influencer culture and media disinformation.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The process involved multiple stages to derive thematic and interpretative understanding from participants' lived experiences. Initially, all transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and holistic comprehension. Next, meaning units were identified within the text, capturing phrases and expressions that revealed significant insights about authenticity, identity, and emotional tension.

These meaning units were then coded and clustered into preliminary categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes representing the shared essence of participants' experiences. The analytic process incorporated hermeneutic interpretation, moving iteratively between the parts (individual statements) and the whole (overall meaning structure) to construct a coherent phenomenological narrative.

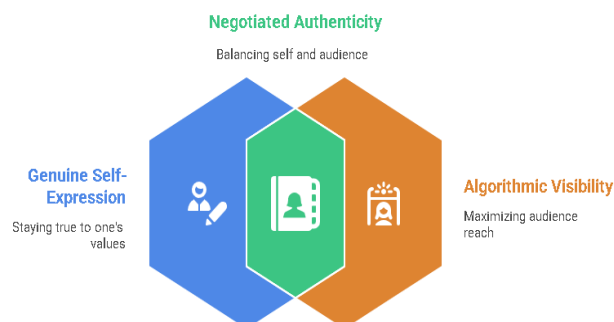
NVivo software was used to assist in data organization and coding; however, interpretative reasoning remained central to analysis. The culmination of this process was the identification of four major themes—negotiating authenticity, emotional labor, crisis of trust, and moral paradox—which encapsulated the experiential core of authenticity in the digital era.

## RESULTS

### Negotiating Authenticity in the Algorithmic Sphere

Participants consistently described authenticity as a negotiated practice rather than a fixed attribute, shaped by the pressures of algorithmic visibility and audience engagement. Influencers perceived the algorithm as both an enabler and a constraint—rewarding visibility while distorting genuine self-expression. Many expressed the tension between “being true to oneself” and “being seen” within a system governed by metrics and virality.

#### The Authenticity-Visibility Paradox in Social Media



“Sometimes, I feel like I’m performing my own sincerity,” shared Participant 3. “If I post what I truly feel, it might get buried. But if I tailor it to what the algorithm likes, it feels fake. Either way, I lose a part of myself.”

The algorithmic logic imposed an invisible form of self-censorship, where authenticity was continually redefined through the interplay of technological affordances and self-presentation. Influencers articulated that authenticity became “algorithmically mediated,” no longer solely rooted in inner truth but also in strategic adaptability.

As Participant 6 explained, “Authenticity today is not just emotional honesty—it’s a form of survival in the feed.”

This analysis suggests that authenticity functions as a dynamic equilibrium between personal conviction and algorithmic compliance. Rather than depicting influencers as passive subjects of technology, the findings indicate that they actively engage in meaning-making, strategically negotiating visibility to preserve a sense of inner coherence. Authenticity, therefore, emerges as a dialogical process—an evolving alignment between moral self-understanding and digital optimization.

### **Emotional Tensions of Self-Representation**

A second major theme concerns the emotional labor underlying influencers’ self-representation. Participants described a deep sense of emotional fatigue arising from the pressure to appear authentic while managing audience expectations and brand demands. They oscillated between feelings of empowerment and exhaustion, often framing their public persona as both liberating and burdensome.

“People think authenticity is easy—it’s not,” stated Participant 2. “It’s emotionally draining to always share parts of yourself and still wonder if people believe you.”

Several participants described the paradox of performing vulnerability to maintain connection with followers, which blurred the line between genuine emotion and strategic display. Despite efforts to remain sincere, influencers admitted that their emotions were often curated for consumption.

“I cried on camera once,” recalled Participant 4, “and the engagement skyrocketed. That’s when I realized emotions had become content.”

Beyond individual emotion, these findings illuminate how digital authenticity is sustained through emotional regulation and narrative control. Influencers’ self-representations become affective performances that balance sincerity with self-protection. The emotional fatigue described by participants reflects the commodification of feeling, where authenticity operates as both a psychological burden and a marketable resource.

### **Crisis of Trust and Audience Expectations**

The third theme highlights the mutual crisis of trust between influencers and their audiences amid the broader landscape of digital disinformation. Participants described a pervasive skepticism—both from followers and within themselves—about what can still be considered “real.” Many felt their authenticity was constantly under scrutiny, while audiences demanded transparency that bordered on intrusion.

“The audience doesn’t just want to see you—they want to see through you,” said Participant 1. “If you don’t overshare, they think you’re hiding something. But if you do, they accuse you of being performative.”

The erosion of trust created a state of emotional ambivalence. Influencers experienced what they termed as “performative doubt”—the need to constantly reaffirm their sincerity while fearing disbelief. This ambivalence reflected the moral and communicative contradictions of authenticity in the digital age, where disinformation not only distorts facts but also destabilizes personal credibility.

“Even when I’m honest,” noted Participant 5, “people assume it’s staged. Authenticity has become a marketing term, not a feeling.”

Interpreting these accounts, the crisis of trust signifies more than interpersonal tension—it reflects a systemic erosion of epistemic confidence in digital culture. Influencers navigate a moral grey zone where credibility must be continuously performed. The authenticity economy thus operates through cycles of exposure and suspicion, making trust itself a contested social capital.

### **The Moral Paradox of Visibility and Integrity**

The final theme centers on the moral paradox experienced by influencers who navigate between the pursuit of visibility and the preservation of personal integrity. Participants articulated a

recurring internal conflict: visibility was necessary for professional survival, yet it often required compromises that conflicted with their ethical or personal values.

“To stay visible, you sometimes have to play along with trends you don’t believe in,” explained Participant 7. “I keep asking myself—am I still me, or just a product?”

Several participants framed this paradox as a form of moral fatigue, where the desire to remain authentic clashed with the systemic demands of the media economy. The line between self-expression and self-exploitation became increasingly blurred.

“Integrity doesn’t pay the bills,” said Participant 8 with resignation. “But losing it feels like losing your soul.”

Synthesizing these reflections, the findings reveal that influencers’ moral struggles stem from a deeper existential contradiction within digital capitalism—the need to maintain personal authenticity while adhering to external metrics of success. The pursuit of visibility becomes a moral negotiation where ethical boundaries are fluid and context-dependent. Authenticity, in this sense, is both a professional strategy and a moral stance, demanding continuous recalibration between integrity and survival.

Overall, these interpretative syntheses enhance analytical depth by framing authenticity not merely as individual sentiment but as a socio-technological construct—an ongoing negotiation among emotion, morality, and digital structure.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study reveals that authenticity in the digital age is experienced as a dynamic negotiation between personal integrity and algorithmic visibility (Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2025). Influencers do not perceive authenticity as a stable moral ideal but as a continuous process of emotional labor, adaptation, and self-reflection shaped by the pressures of digital disinformation and audience expectation. These findings directly respond to the central research question concerning how influencers interpret and negotiate authenticity within socio-technical systems that simultaneously enable and constrain their self-expression.

### **Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question**

The findings provide a rich and interpretative answer to the core research question by uncovering the lived meaning of authenticity as articulated by digital influencers. The phenomenological analysis shows that authenticity is neither entirely personal nor socially constructed—it exists within a tensional space where self-truth is constantly negotiated through interaction with algorithms, brands, and followers (Son & Park, 2025). This negotiation process highlights authenticity as relational rather than individual, emerging from the influencer’s ability to navigate emotional vulnerability and performative visibility simultaneously.

Moreover, the results demonstrate that influencers experience authenticity as a moral and existential burden, marked by internal conflict between the desire for self-expression and the necessity of remaining visible in a competitive media environment (Le et al., 2025). Unlike prior frameworks that define authenticity as strategic self-presentation, this study reveals it as a phenomenological struggle—a lived experience of balancing sincerity, credibility, and survival in an attention-driven economy (Mlambo et al., 2025). This conceptualization extends the theoretical understanding of authenticity by framing it not as an attribute but as a process of meaning-making rooted in lived experience.

Through this lens, the study contributes a unique interpretative perspective to communication and media studies: it positions authenticity as a felt experience of becoming rather than a performative output. This phenomenological insight enriches current debates in influencer culture by emphasizing how individuals perceive and sustain coherence between their inner values and the public personas mediated by algorithmic logics.

### **Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

The findings align with and extend prior theoretical discussions on digital authenticity while offering deeper insight into its subjective and existential dimensions. Consistent (González-Mohino et al., 2025), this study affirms that authenticity is performatively constructed under conditions of visibility and audience surveillance. However, unlike these descriptive accounts, the phenomenological interpretation presented here foregrounds the emotional and moral consciousness underlying these performances—how influencers feel authenticity as both liberating and constraining.

The results also support (Sabir et al., 2025) notion of self-branding as a performative negotiation but deepen it by demonstrating that influencers are acutely aware of their participation in performativity. This awareness produces what may be described as reflexive authenticity—a continuous self-dialogue where influencers question the sincerity of their own expressions. Similarly, the study’s findings complement (Aquino & Cabalquinto, 2025) observations on “digital intimacy,” showing that the influencer-audience relationship is emotionally reciprocal yet psychologically demanding.

By adopting Heidegger’s hermeneutic lens, the analysis situates authenticity within the broader phenomenology of being-in-the-world (Cabbuag & Abidin, 2025). It reveals how digital influencers, as modern communicative subjects, construct meaning through their embeddedness in algorithmic environments that simultaneously affirm and distort their sense of self (Lan et al., 2025). In doing so, this study bridges media phenomenology and communication ethics, offering a theoretical synthesis that acknowledges both structural forces and individual agency.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications for understanding authenticity as a lived phenomenon in the digital media landscape. From a theoretical standpoint, the results advance the discourse on identity and self-presentation by reframing authenticity as a relational and existential process, rather than a strategic construct or branding attribute. This shift challenges dominant perspectives in media studies that treat authenticity as a performative outcome and instead positions it as a dynamic interplay between individual consciousness, technological mediation, and social expectation.

From a social and cultural perspective, the findings illuminate how the experience of authenticity is deeply intertwined with broader issues of trust, emotional labor, and moral negotiation in digital communication (Akiba et al., 2025). The influencers’ experiences reflect the growing cultural paradox of seeking genuine connection in spaces structured by metrics and algorithms. For practitioners—particularly digital communicators, educators, and media strategists—these insights underscore the importance of cultivating ethical awareness and emotional resilience when engaging with algorithmic systems that shape online identity. On a broader societal level, this phenomenological understanding of authenticity offers valuable insight into how individuals can reclaim self-agency and integrity within increasingly automated communication environments.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this research provides significant interpretative insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study’s phenomenological design, by nature, focuses on depth rather than breadth; thus, its findings reflect the lived experiences of a specific group of influencers and are not intended for statistical generalization. The purposive sampling approach prioritized participants who could articulate reflective accounts of authenticity, which may have excluded other influencer populations—such as micro-influencers or those less self-aware of their communicative practices.

Additionally, the interpretative process inherent in phenomenological analysis involves the researcher’s engagement with the data, which may shape meaning through the act of interpretation. Although rigorous strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and audit trails were employed to enhance credibility, the possibility of interpretative bias cannot be entirely eliminated. Future studies could address these limitations by incorporating comparative phenomenological approaches across different cultural or platform-specific contexts to expand the scope of understanding.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Building on these findings, future research should continue to explore authenticity as a lived, evolving, and relational construct within emerging digital ecologies. Comparative studies could investigate how authenticity is experienced across various sociocultural or linguistic settings, thereby expanding the phenomenological understanding of digital identity beyond Western or influencer-centric frameworks. Moreover, interdisciplinary integration with communication ethics, digital psychology, and cultural sociology could enrich the exploration of how authenticity functions as both a moral orientation and a psychological need in networked life.

Longitudinal phenomenological studies may also be valuable for examining how influencers' experiences of authenticity transform over time as social platforms evolve and societal expectations shift. Finally, future research might explore how ordinary social media users—not only professional influencers—navigate authenticity amid misinformation and algorithmic manipulation, thus deepening our comprehension of authenticity as a universal human concern within mediated communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how digital influencers experience and interpret authenticity within the algorithmic and disinformation-driven landscape of social media. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed authenticity as a dynamic process of negotiation between self-expression, emotional labor, and technological mediation. The findings highlight that authenticity is not a fixed attribute but an evolving relational experience shaped by moral reflection and socio-technical pressures. By uncovering the lived meanings behind influencers' experiences, this study extends existing theories of digital identity and addresses the limitations of prior research that treated authenticity primarily as a performative or strategic construct.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study carries broader implications for understanding the moral and emotional dynamics of digital life in an era of pervasive algorithmic mediation. It highlights the need for social media platforms and policymakers to recognize the ethical costs of visibility-driven systems and to design environments that encourage genuine rather than performative engagement. For practitioners—particularly digital marketers, brand managers, and content strategists—the insights emphasize the importance of fostering transparent and value-based communication to rebuild audience trust and mitigate emotional exhaustion among influencers.

From an academic perspective, this research opens pathways for integrating phenomenological inquiry with digital ethics and media psychology, bridging subjective lived experience with structural analyses of power and technology. Future studies should further explore how authenticity evolves across different cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts, and how emerging technologies such as AI-generated content and virtual influencers reshape the boundaries of human authenticity. Longitudinal or mixed-method designs could also deepen understanding of how these negotiations unfold over time. In sum, this study underscores that authenticity in digital culture is not merely a personal aspiration but a moral and systemic challenge—one that demands interdisciplinary attention to sustain ethical and emotionally sustainable modes of online selfhood.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article. All authors have contributed equally to the research design, data interpretation, and manuscript preparation. The study was conducted independently, and the funding organization had no influence on the research outcomes, analysis, or conclusions presented in this paper.

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