



Authentic Communication Among Micro-Influencers: A Phenomenological Study in Commercialized Digital Spaces

Lu'lu Mutia

Telkom University, Indonesia

lulu22008@mail.unpad.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed the landscape of digital communication, creating new spaces where identity, authenticity, and influence intersect. Within this environment, micro-influencers—individuals with modest yet engaged followings—navigate complex expectations to remain authentic while engaging in commercial partnerships. However, little is known about how these individuals subjectively experience and interpret authenticity under commercialization pressures. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do micro-influencers make sense of authentic communication in the face of market demands? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research explores the lived experiences of eight micro-influencers across various content domains. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic interpretation supported by NVivo software. The findings reveal that authenticity is perceived as an evolving ethical commitment rather than a fixed attribute, shaped by emotional labor, strategic transparency, and intimate audience relationships. Participants reported internal conflicts and adaptive strategies to maintain credibility without compromising personal values. These insights offer a more nuanced understanding of authenticity as a dialogical process grounded in emotional and relational dynamics. This study significantly contributes to phenomenological communication research by deepening the conceptualization of authenticity within commercial digital spaces and provides practical implications for influencer-brand collaborations, emphasizing the need for ethical transparency and relational engagement to foster sustainable partnerships. The study contributes to the growing body of phenomenological communication research and suggests directions for ethical branding practices and future inquiries into digital identity construction.



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INTRODUCTION

In today's digitally saturated society, the rise of social media has fundamentally transformed how individuals present themselves, construct identity, and engage in interpersonal communication. Among the most prominent figures in this landscape are micro-influencers—individuals with modest yet highly engaged followings who serve as cultural intermediaries between brands and consumers. Micro-influencers are often perceived as more relatable and trustworthy than celebrity influencers due to their proximity to everyday experiences and authentic communication styles, making them powerful agents in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors.

This study asks: How do micro-influencers navigate the tension between maintaining authenticity and engaging in commercial collaborations within digital spaces? The phenomenon of micro-influencing has gained considerable relevance, particularly as it intersects with issues of digital authenticity, commercialization, and self-representation. As commercial partnerships become routine, micro-influencers face the challenge of preserving perceived sincerity amid monetized collaborations. This balancing act involves deep emotional and ethical negotiations related to identity, autonomy, and public visibility. The pressures to remain genuine—while adapting to the expectations of audiences, platforms, and sponsors—highlight broader questions about how individuals construct and perform the “authentic self” in mediated environments. Understanding this phenomenon requires more than surface-level analysis of social media trends or marketing metrics. It demands a closer examination of the lived

experiences of micro-influencers—their values, tensions, dilemmas, and self-perceptions—as they navigate competing demands of commerce and credibility. This calls for an interpretative exploration of meaning, anchored in the voices and perspectives of those directly involved in the phenomenon. In this context, phenomenology offers a powerful lens to investigate not only what micro-influencers do, but how they experience, interpret, and make sense of authenticity within the evolving ecosystem of digital influence.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals navigating complex sociocultural phenomena has become increasingly central in contemporary communication studies. Within this paradigm, the subjective narratives of micro-influencers—especially regarding how they negotiate personal authenticity amidst commercial pressures—offer critical insights into the emotional and ethical dynamics of digital self-presentation. These experiences are deeply contextual, shaped by evolving platform cultures, shifting audience expectations, and the influencers' own internal value systems.

However, despite the growing scholarly interest in influencer culture, much of the existing research has relied on quantitative approaches that prioritize metrics, audience analytics, or content typologies. While these studies provide valuable overviews of behavioral patterns and market trends, they fall short in capturing the nuanced emotional labor and moral reasoning that underpin influencers' communicative decisions. For instance, survey-based methods often neglect the internal conflicts that arise when personal expression collides with commercial obligations, while content analysis of influencer posts fails to access the meaning-making processes behind curated authenticity [Ayers, 2022] .

These methodological limitations underscore the inadequacy of previous research in fully uncovering the essence of authenticity as lived and interpreted by micro-influencers. Quantitative frameworks, though informative in scope, are often ill-equipped to address the rich, layered realities embedded in personal experience. Consequently, there remains a pressing need for qualitative investigations—particularly phenomenological approaches—that center the voices of participants and seek to illuminate the deeper meanings they ascribe to their actions, values, and identities within commercialized digital spaces.

In addressing the challenges of authenticity within influencer culture, existing responses have largely favored pragmatic, outcome-oriented strategies—such as implementing transparency labels, influencer marketing guidelines, or algorithm-based authenticity scoring. While these approaches offer practical solutions for brands and platforms, they tend to reduce authenticity to a measurable attribute, overlooking the subjective, affective, and relational dimensions that shape how authenticity is actually lived and communicated by micro-influencers.

Such frameworks inherently struggle to access the deeper meaning-making processes of individuals, especially in environments where personal identity, commercial engagement, and emotional labor intersect. As noted in prior research, analyses that rely on surveys, content audits, or third-party metrics often exclude the emotional tensions, value conflicts, and personal narratives that define the influencer experience [Pabian et al., 2021; Ayers, 2022] . These limitations result in partial or surface-level understandings that fail to capture the full essence of the phenomenon.

To fill this conceptual and methodological void, a phenomenological approach is needed—one that centers on the voices of micro-influencers themselves and seeks to understand how they interpret, navigate, and assign meaning to their communicative practices under the pressures of commercialization. By focusing on lived experience, this approach offers a more holistic and nuanced exploration of authenticity, one grounded not in abstract categories or market performance, but in the real, felt, and narrated worlds of the individuals behind the content.

Previous studies have explored authenticity in influencer culture primarily through psychological constructs, branding strategies, or audience perception models. While these works contribute to understanding digital identity and self-presentation, they often treat authenticity as an external trait rather than an internal, evolving experience. Research by Ayers (2022) and Suler (2016) has hinted at the emotional and ethical struggles influencers face, but such studies are limited in scope or depth. Few have examined the subjective world of micro-influencers from the perspective of their

lived realities. This study addresses that gap by investigating how these individuals experience and interpret authenticity in the face of increasing commercial pressures.

The research applies interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how micro-influencers assign meaning to their communication practices. IPA is chosen for its capacity to capture the richness of individual experiences and the meaning-making processes that emerge from them. This method enables the study to go beyond surface behaviors and uncover deeper themes related to identity, tension, and ethical negotiation. In doing so, it responds to the previously identified limitations of quantitative or observational methods. The approach offers a more holistic lens to answer how authenticity is understood and maintained in a complex digital environment.

This article is structured in six sections. The introduction outlines the problem and the relevance of phenomenological inquiry. The following section provides a detailed description of the study design, participant selection, and data collection procedures. The method of analysis, including coding and thematic interpretation, is then presented. Results are described through thematic narratives supported by direct participant quotes. Finally, the discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature, followed by a conclusion that summarizes the study's contributions and implications.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how micro-influencers experience and give meaning to the concept of authenticity in the context of digital commercialization. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was selected for its focus on understanding how individuals perceive and interpret their lived experiences, particularly in complex social environments such as the influencer economy. This approach enables the researcher to delve into the subjective consciousness of participants, uncovering the depth of their emotional and ethical negotiations. As a form of hermeneutic inquiry rooted in the philosophy of Heidegger, the design emphasizes the interpretative process involved in revealing the meanings that participants assign to their communicative choices and identities.

Participants

Participants consisted of micro-influencers actively engaged in content creation on social media platforms, primarily Instagram and TikTok. Purposive sampling was employed to select individuals who had experienced direct involvement in brand partnerships while maintaining a consistent communication style with their audiences. Inclusion criteria required participants to have fewer than 100,000 followers, have engaged in at least three paid collaborations within the past year, and be publicly known for advocating transparency or authenticity. Individuals were excluded if their accounts were managed by external agencies or if they had not participated in commercial collaborations. A total of eight participants (five women and three men), aged between 21 and 33 years (mean age = 26.4), contributed to this study. All participants had diverse content niches, including lifestyle, fashion, wellness, and educational content.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' reflections on their experiences navigating authenticity within commercial pressures. The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, either in-person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted between 50 and 75 minutes. A flexible interview guide was used, consisting of open-ended questions focused on values, identity construction, emotional challenges, and perceived audience relationships. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were taken during and after interviews to capture contextual insights and nonverbal cues. The setting was designed to be non-judgmental and conducive to open sharing.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which allowed for a detailed examination of how participants made sense of their experiences. The process began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain a holistic understanding. Meaning units were identified and annotated, followed by the development of emergent themes through iterative coding. Themes were clustered into superordinate categories based on conceptual similarities and differences. NVivo 12 software was used to support data organization and enhance the traceability of analytical steps. Through this methodical process, the essential meanings of authenticity and commercialization, as lived and interpreted by the participants, were uncovered.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities. All data were stored securely and treated with strict confidentiality in compliance with the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and national research ethics guidelines.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal the nuanced experiences and internal negotiations of micro-influencers as they strive to maintain authentic communication amid the growing demands of digital commercialism. The themes presented below emerged through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), supported by rich, direct quotations that illuminate the depth of participants' subjective realities.

Authenticity as a Personal Ethical Compass

Participants consistently articulated authenticity not merely as a performative trait, but as an inner ethical orientation that shapes their identity and digital behavior. The commitment to sincerity in communication was viewed as both a personal value and a strategic stance in navigating audience trust.

"I always remind myself that even if I collaborate with brands, I have to say what I truly feel. My followers can sense if I'm faking it, and that would break everything I've built." (Participant 3)

This theme revealed that authenticity was not perceived as fixed but constantly negotiated—an evolving interplay between internal values and external expectations.

The Tension Between Passion and Promotion

Several participants expressed emotional discomfort in balancing their original creative passions with the obligations of paid endorsements. The commercialization of their content often triggered internal conflict, particularly when brand demands clashed with their personal narratives.

"Sometimes the brief says I must sound excited about a product I don't use... I feel like I'm lying to my audience. It makes me question why I started doing this in the first place." (Participant 7)

This struggle underscores the fragility of authenticity when confronted by economic incentives, suggesting that commercialization can dilute the sense of ownership and sincerity in digital storytelling.

Strategic Transparency as a Communication Tool

Interestingly, some influencers adopted a strategy of openness, acknowledging their partnerships transparently to maintain credibility. Rather than hiding commercial motives, they framed sponsorships as necessary elements that enable the continuity of their creative work.

"I tell them honestly—yes, this is a paid ad, but I only pick brands I genuinely like. That way, I'm not pretending, and people respect that." (Participant 5)

Strategic transparency served as both a protective mechanism and a rhetorical strategy to reinforce perceived authenticity, indicating that audiences respond positively to vulnerability and truthfulness.

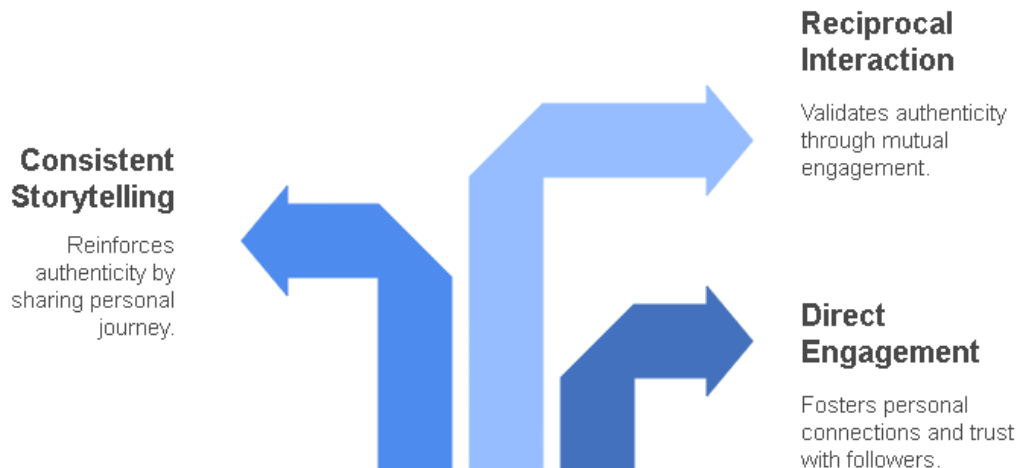
Audience Intimacy as a Foundation of Credibility

Many participants emphasized the intimate nature of their relationships with followers, which they actively nurtured through direct messages, live interactions, and storytelling. This intimacy was framed as central to sustaining authenticity, differentiating them from macro-influencers with impersonal, mass-appeal content.

"I know many of my followers by name. We've talked. They know my journey. So, if I change suddenly just to promote something, they will notice." (Participant 2)

This relational dimension not only strengthened trust but also positioned authenticity as a dialogic process—built over time and validated through consistent, reciprocal interaction.

How to maintain authenticity and credibility?



Emotional Labor in Performing the “Authentic Self”

Several participants described the emotional toll of having to remain "authentic" at all times. The pressure to appear genuine—even when experiencing burnout, anxiety, or creative stagnation—highlighted the performative demands embedded within authenticity itself.

"There are days when I'm not okay, but I still have to smile and be 'me' online. That version of me is expected. It's exhausting sometimes." (Participant 6)

This theme illustrates that authenticity, while often idealized, can become a burden—requiring continuous self-curation that borders on emotional labor.

The lived experiences of micro-influencers demonstrate that authenticity is not a static attribute but a dynamic, emotionally charged negotiation. It is shaped by ethical values, strategic choices, relational intimacy, and commercial pressures. The interplay between personal truth and economic survival defines the core tension in how influencers communicate in the digital marketplace.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that micro-influencers experience authenticity not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic, ongoing negotiation shaped by ethical values, emotional labor, and relational intimacy. This essential meaning addresses the central research question by illuminating how influencers make sense of their communication practices while navigating the dual demands of personal integrity and commercial collaboration.

The study contributes to answering the core inquiry—how authenticity is experienced and maintained under commercialization pressures—by showing that micro-influencers consciously engage in internal dialogues and emotional labor to preserve their sense of self. Rather than adopting rigid strategies, they employ flexible, reflective practices such as strategic transparency, selective endorsement, and audience intimacy to align their personal values with their professional roles. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of authenticity as a lived phenomenon that is negotiated

moment-to-moment, rooted in relational and affective contexts rather than algorithmic performance or marketing frameworks.

The results align with prior research that identifies authenticity as a key value in digital self-presentation, yet expand upon them by foregrounding the emotional and ethical dimensions of this experience [Ayers, 2022]. Unlike studies that treat authenticity as an outcome or brand attribute, this research reinforces the interpretative nature of authenticity as theorized in phenomenological and narrative frameworks [Suler, 2016; Al-Ghazzi, 2019]. Moreover, the study complements Suler's concept of the "online disinhibition effect" by illustrating how micro-influencers counterbalance that tendency through intentional vulnerability and audience dialogue. In doing so, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how communicative authenticity is constructed not only in content, but also in the subjective experiences of digital creators operating within commodified spaces.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for both academic inquiry and practical engagement with influencer culture. From a sociocultural perspective, they shed light on how micro-influencers operate as moral agents navigating the blurred boundaries between personal expression and market-driven content. Their narratives reflect broader tensions in contemporary digital life, where authenticity is not simply performed but deeply felt and negotiated. Professionally, these insights suggest the need for brands, marketing agencies, and platform designers to consider the emotional and ethical dimensions of content creation, particularly in shaping partnerships that respect and preserve the voice of the influencer. Moreover, this study invites a rethinking of authenticity as a dialogical and affective practice, one that resonates across other digital professions involving public identity, emotional labor, and relational credibility.

Study Limitations

This research is limited by its small, purposively selected sample size, which focuses exclusively on micro-influencers operating in lifestyle and creative niches. While the phenomenological approach prioritizes depth over breadth, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of influencers in other domains, such as politics or activism, or those with significantly larger followings. Additionally, the interpretative nature of the analysis, while methodologically appropriate, means that the themes identified are shaped by the co-construction of meaning between the participants and the analytical framework. These limitations do not diminish the value of the study but rather contextualize its scope, offering a focused but partial glimpse into a complex and evolving phenomenon.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring how different influencer tiers (e.g., nano or macro) negotiate authenticity across various cultural and geographic contexts. Comparative studies may also illuminate how gender, race, or economic background further shape the experience and performance of authenticity in commercialized spaces. Moreover, longitudinal designs could track how influencers' perceptions evolve over time, particularly in response to platform changes or audience dynamics. There is also potential to integrate multimodal approaches, combining phenomenological interviews with digital ethnography, to explore how narratives of authenticity are expressed both in speech and online behavior. Collectively, these avenues offer fertile ground for expanding the theoretical and practical understanding of authenticity in mediated communication.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how micro-influencers experience and maintain authentic communication under the growing pressures of commercialization in digital spaces. By employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered that authenticity is not a static attribute but a continuous, reflective process shaped by emotional labor, personal values, and audience relationships. The findings provide a deeper understanding of authenticity as lived and interpreted, offering a perspective often overlooked in prior research dominated by quantitative or branding frameworks. This study contributes to filling that gap by centering the voices of micro-influencers and revealing the

ethical and relational complexities embedded in their communicative practices. These insights may inform future influencer-brand collaborations, platform policies, and digital media education that prioritize ethical alignment and identity integrity. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring comparative experiences across influencer tiers, cultural contexts, or using multimodal methods to capture authenticity in evolving media landscapes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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