



THE PERFORMANCE OF AUTHENTICITY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF PARASOCIAL BONDS: TWIN PILLARS OF INFLUENCER CULTURE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The rise of social media influencers marks a major reconfiguration of celebrity culture shaped by distinct socio technical dynamics. This literature study analyzes two interconnected pillars: the performativity of authenticity and the commodification of parasocial relationships. Authenticity is conceptualized not as an inherent trait but as a strategic performance. Influencers curate aesthetics, narratives, and language to signal relatability and sincerity. This staged authenticity functions as cultural capital that can be converted into economic value within the platform driven attention economy. At the same time, platforms transform traditionally one sided parasocial bonds into an illusion of reciprocal intimacy through interactive features. Perceived closeness strengthens affective trust, which is then monetized through sponsorships and affiliate marketing. Influencer culture is thus defined by a dual process: the continuous production of the self as an authentic commodity and the systematic conversion of emotionally charged connections into revenue. These dynamics reflect platform logics in which identity performance and social relationships operate as primary productive assets.

Keywords: influencer, celebrity culture, authenticity, parasocial relationship, commodification, social media, attention economy.

Introduction

The contemporary cultural landscape has undergone a seismic shift with the emergence of social media as the dominant public sphere. This change has not only influenced how people communicate but has fundamentally altered the ecology of attention, the economy of prestige, and the mechanisms of celebrity formation. In the traditional media environment, celebrity status was largely controlled by gatekeepers such as film studios, record labels, publishers, and television networks. Access to a mass audience required significant financial resources and the approval of these institutions. Social media has democratized the tools of content production and distribution, allowing individuals to build large, engaged audiences directly without the need for corporate intermediaries. This shift marks a transition from a celebrity culture based on achievement in specific fields like entertainment or sports toward a more fluid culture where attention itself can become the primary currency and achievement. The digital space has become a new stage where the performativity of identity and daily life can be curated, staged, and monetized. In this context, social media has developed into a highly potential online business promotion tool for digital economy players (Infante & Mardikaningsih, 2022).

In this new ecosystem, the figure known as the "influencer" has emerged as a central cultural actor. Unlike traditional celebrities, who are often idealized and viewed as existing in a distant realm, influencers are built upon the ideas of proximity and attainable authenticity. They often begin as "ordinary people" sharing specific interests, expertise, or simply aspects of their lives. Their appeal lies in the perception of a more intimate and authentic parasocial relationship with their followers. This relationship is cultivated through content that feels personal, direct interaction via comments and direct messages, and the measured disclosure of private life aspects. This process blurs the line between the public and private realms, transforming domestic experiences and daily routines into consumable commodities (Zailani et al., 2023). Life itself becomes the raw material for content production, and personality becomes a brand that must be managed and marketed. This is further reinforced by the importance of corporate image and brand awareness in shaping audience perceptions within a competitive market (Darmawan, 2019).

The celebrity culture produced by social media is characterized by the acceleration and intensification of attention cycles. While a traditional celebrity's career might span decades, an influencer's life cycle can be remarkably short, marked by fleeting trends and ever-changing algorithms. Platform logic that prioritizes engagement such as likes, comments, and shares creates a competitive attention economy where individuals must continuously produce new, compelling content to maintain their relevance. This pressure shapes a specific type of performativity, requiring constant visibility, ongoing self-disclosure, and careful impression management. In the attempt to appear both authentic and attractive, influencers develop distinct visual and narrative languages, often employing aesthetics that feel "raw" or "unfiltered" to build trust, while strategically adhering to conventions that make them easily recognizable and marketable (Ebben & Bull, 2023). Furthermore, an endorser's success in building audience engagement is heavily influenced by how they manage attitudes toward advertisements and brands to influence consumer purchase intentions (Darmawan et al., 2019).

Monetization is the engine driving this ecosystem. The ability to convert followers into revenue has created a new, economically legitimate career path. Influencer business models are diverse, ranging from sponsorships and product placement to affiliate marketing, paid content creation, and the sale of merchandise or exclusive memberships. This dynamic weaves a symbiotic relationship between influencers, followers, and brands. Influencers act as trusted cultural intermediaries, brands gain access to curated and engaged audiences, while followers consume content that is simultaneously entertainment and advertising. This economic relationship further blurs the lines between organic and commercial content, raising questions about transparency, persuasion, and the nature of the parasocial relationship itself when financial incentives are embedded (Saruga & Duarte, 2024). Moreover, shopping lifestyles, sales promotions, and price perceptions are determining factors that significantly influence consumer impulsive buying behavior in the current digital marketing era (Gardi & Darmawan, 2022; Essardi et al., 2022).

This study seeks to understand the complexities of this significant cultural development. By using an approach focused on the subjective experiences and meanings assigned by actors within the social media

ecosystem, this study aims not only to map the characteristics of influencers and new celebrity culture but also to understand the internal logic that drives them. What compels individuals to turn themselves into marketable subjects? How do audiences experience and interpret these parasocial relationships? And how do platform structures and economic imperatives shape these new forms of fame and influence? These questions lead to the core of the ongoing cultural shift, where technology, economy, and human desire intersect to create new forms of cultural authority and social interaction. In this regard, ease of access to technology and the mastery of digital skills become fundamental foundations in bridging the gaps in educational and employment opportunities (Arifin & Darmawan, 2021).

One of the primary issues that emerges is the ambivalent nature of authenticity in influencer culture. Influencers succeed because they are perceived as more authentic, relatable, and real than traditional celebrities. However, this construction of authenticity is itself a carefully curated performance. A paradox arises where the effort to appear "real" and "unfiltered" actually requires strategic planning, editing, and sophisticated personal brand management. Content that looks spontaneous is often the result of professional production, and personal disclosure is a strategic tool to build intimacy. This problem creates a constant tension between self-presentation and the actual self, where the line between them is intentionally blurred. For the audience, this can create feelings of connection while simultaneously feeling manipulated believing while also being cynical. When authenticity becomes a commodity that can be produced and sold, its fundamental value as a measure of honesty and integrity becomes eroded, leading to a condition that some experts refer to as an "authenticity crisis." A competitive advantage in this increasingly complex business environment requires a combination of effective marketing strategies so that the value-added services remain tangible to the consumer (Darmawan & Grenier, 2021).

Another fundamental issue is the radical transformation in parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships, which traditionally describe a one-sided bond felt by an audience toward a distant media figure, have become far more complex and interactive in the context of social media. Influencers are not just observed; they are engaged in

conversation (Lotun et al., 2024). They respond to comments, host live Q&A sessions, and seemingly share their personal struggles. This interactivity strengthens the illusion of mutual relationships and friendship. The problem lies in the inherent commercial nature of these relationships. Emotional bonds built with careful attention are often leveraged for marketing and sales purposes. Followers are encouraged to "support" the influencer by purchasing promoted products, as if this act of consumption is a form of solidarity within a friendship. This dynamic raises ethical questions about the exploitation of the audience's feelings and trust, and about how capitalist logic permeates the intimate spheres of social relations and affection.

The cultural and economic influence of influencers has grown beyond the digital space to shape consumption trends, social norms, and even the career aspirations of the younger generation (Nair, 2024). Understanding the mechanisms behind this culture is important because influencers serve as opinion leaders and cultural guides in an increasingly fragmented society. They influence purchasing decisions, shape discourse on issues such as beauty, fitness, and lifestyle, and offer narrative scripts for identity and success. Without critical study, the normative impact of the values promoted by this ecosystem such as extreme individualism, personalized consumerism, and the measurement of self-worth through quantitative metrics like follower counts could be accepted without question. Analyzing these elements is an essential step toward building critical media literacy among the public, enabling individuals to navigate the social media landscape with a greater awareness of the forces shaping the content they consume and the desires they feel.

From an academic perspective, the emergence of influencers and social media celebrity culture represents an extraordinary natural experiment in cultural evolution, the attention economy, and self-construction in the digital era (Kubler, 2023). It offers a window to observe how new technologies rapidly reshape social practices, human relationships, and concepts of value. Systematically examining these developments contributes to the fields of media studies, cultural sociology, and communication studies. Furthermore, because this realm is still relatively new and evolving rapidly, a solid literature review is necessary to map existing theories, identify knowledge gaps, and establish

a research agenda for the future. Such research can provide the conceptual foundation needed to evaluate the long-term impact of this cultural shift on society.

This study aims to conduct a critical literature review that analyzes the two main pillars supporting the influencer ecosystem and social media celebrity culture. Specifically, this review seeks to outline the mechanisms of the construction and performance of authenticity as the primary cultural capital of influencers, as well as to analyze the transformation and commodification of parasocial relationships within the logic of the digital platform attention economy. The expected theoretical contribution is a coherent synthesis that links performativity theory, parasocial studies, and the political economy of digital media to explain the appeal and operation of influencer culture. Practically, this study aims to provide an analytical framework for deconstructing the persuasive strategies used in influencer marketing, as well as to increase critical public awareness regarding the commercial dynamics embedded within seemingly intimate parasocial relationships on social media.

Method

This research utilizes a qualitative literature study method aimed at investigating and synthesizing theoretical understandings and empirical findings regarding influencers and celebrity culture on social media. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aligns with the explorative and interpretative nature of the research, which focuses on understanding the meanings, experiences, and social constructions behind the development of this culture (Flick, 2014). This type of literature study allows the researcher to trace key concepts such as authenticity and parasocial relationships across various disciplines, including media studies, sociology, and communication, and to build a coherent argument based on a critical synthesis of existing works. This method does not seek to measure variables quantitatively, but rather to uncover the complexities, tensions, and logic underlying the social space being studied.

The implementation procedure of this study follows the principles of a systematic literature review adapted for qualitative research. The initial stage involves formulating sharp guiding questions based on the problem statement. An extensive literature search is then conducted through

scientific databases such as Scopus, Communication & Mass Media Complete (CMMC), and Google Scholar. Search terms used include "social media influencer," "micro-celebrity," "authenticity performance," "parasocial interaction," "attention economy," and "personal branding." The primary inclusion criteria are peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters published within a relevant timeframe that discuss the cultural, social, or economic aspects of influencers and digital celebrity culture. Once the sources are gathered, a thematic content analysis is performed as described by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012). This process includes repeated in-depth reading, coding the text to identify emerging patterns and themes (such as "authenticity strategies," "commodification of intimacy," and "algorithmic logic"), and organizing these themes to construct an analytical narrative that answers the research questions. This analysis is interpretive and reflective, aiming to produce a synthesis that not only summarizes but also provides new critical and conceptual insights into the existing body of knowledge.

Result and Discussion

Performativity and Authenticity: The Cultural and Economic Foundation of Influencers

The concept of authenticity has become the highest cultural currency in the social media ecosystem, particularly in the construction and reception of influencer figures. Unlike traditional celebrities whose authority is often built on extraordinary talent, recognized achievements, or an aura of untouchability, an influencer's claim to attention and influence is rooted precisely in the perception that they are more "real," "approachable," and "just like us." However, this authenticity is not an innate trait or a simple natural state; it is a performance that is intentionally curated, staged, and managed. The performativity of authenticity refers to a series of strategies and practices in which individuals actively and continuously work to project a self-image that feels honest, coherent, and unfiltered, while actually following specific cultural scripts that make the performance recognizable and believable to the audience. This inherent contradiction is the foundation of an influencer's appeal: they must appear spontaneous yet professional, vulnerable yet controlled, ordinary yet aspirational.

The economic foundation of authenticity in influencer culture is immediately visible and can be analyzed concretely. In a highly dense attention economy, where millions of individuals compete for limited spotlight, perceived authenticity functions as a critical competitive differential (Marwick, 2013). It is symbolic capital that, according to sociological theory, can be strategically converted into economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Commercial brands, keenly aware of the declining effectiveness of traditional advertising and the growing consumer skepticism, actively seek and pay influencers who are perceived as authentic by their target audience segments (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). This belief is based on the assumption supported by marketing research that recommendations from a trusted figure who is considered "real" or parasocially close are far more persuasive and resistant to skepticism than corporate marketing messages that are clearly commercial in nature. Therefore, a successful performance of authenticity—the ability to maintain an image as an genuine and trustworthy self—directly influences an influencer's market value and bargaining power. Metrics such as engagement rate, which measure the extent to which an audience actively interacts with content through likes, comments, and shares, are often considered proxies or quantitative measures of the depth of that authentic relationship, which in turn becomes the basis for determining rates for sponsorship partnerships (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). This phenomenon is increasingly complex with the influence of big data, which has now become a fundamental element in mapping social behavior and consumption trends in digital spaces (Wahyudi, Kabalmay, & Amri, 2021).

Strategies of authenticity performance take various interconnected forms. One of the most common tactics is the "raw" or "imperfect" aesthetic. This can include the use of natural lighting, slightly shaky camera shots, minimal editing, or intentionally including "untidy" elements in the frame, such as clutter in the background or an appearance without makeup. This aesthetic deliberately rejects the production grandeur associated with mainstream media, creating a sense of intimacy and lack of filtration as if the audience is getting privileged access to a real moment. Similarly, strategic disclosure regarding personal vulnerability, failure, or struggles is used as a tool to build trust (Roesch, 2024). An influencer who

shares their experiences with diet failures, anxiety, or relationship conflicts does two things: they humanize themselves, and they create points of identification for followers who may be experiencing similar things. These disclosures, however, are almost always measured and curated, designed to create closeness without actually endangering the brand's appeal or revealing vulnerabilities that could damage their image.

The narrative framing of daily life as content is another aspect of this performance. Mundane domestic actions cooking dinner, grocery shopping, exercising are reframed as consumable episodes. This process transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, the personal into the public. The secret lies in how these activities are presented: with a storytelling style that feels familiar, commentary that seems directed at a friend, and a focus on small details that feel relatable. This performance creates the illusion that the audience is not consuming produced content, but is merely "peeking" into the life of an interesting person (Georgakopoulou, 2022). The influencer's real skill is their ability to consistently translate their life experience into a narrative that is engaging and on-brand, while maintaining the conversational and casual tone that is the hallmark of social media authenticity.

The language used is also a key component of this performance. Influencers often adopt a linguistic register that mimics conversation between friends. They use slang, abbreviations, and trending expressions, as well as frequent use of first and second-person pronouns ("I feel...", "You guys must know how..."). They ask direct questions to their audience in text or narration, creating a sense of ongoing dialogue even though the communication is largely one-sided. The rhetoric of "honesty" and "straightforwardness" is overemphasized, with phrases like "to be honest," "straight to the point," or "I want to tell you what really happened" serving as discourse markers that underscore claims of authenticity. In the midst of this dynamic, the use of language on social media also reflects the shift in digital literacy among the youth, where digital platforms simultaneously become spaces for the preservation and erosion of regional languages (Kurniawan, 2024; Kurniawan, Darmawan, & Khayru, 2021). All these linguistic choices are designed to narrow the psychological distance between the content creator and the consumer, reinforcing the fantasy of an equal, reciprocal relationship.

Algorithmic pressures of social media platforms shape and discipline performances of authenticity. Engagement-driven algorithms reward content that provokes strong emotional responses, whether awe, empathy, or even disagreement (Taylor, 2022). Influencers therefore must balance the desire to appear authentic with the need to produce content that fits platform logics, namely content that is “shareable” and “gets likes.” This can lead to the professionalization of authenticity performance, where teams of managers, editors, and data analysts help curate online personae to maximize reach and engagement. The result is what may be called “industrial authenticity,” a form of authenticity that is systematically produced, predictable, and follows certain formulas that have proven effective at retaining audience attention.

The inherent tensions in this project often become visible, which can actually strengthen perceptions of authenticity if handled cleverly (Davis, 2012). When an influencer openly acknowledges the performative nature of what they do for example, joking about how many takes were needed to get the perfect “spontaneous” photo, or admitting the pressure to constantly produce content they engage in a meta-performance of authenticity. By revealing the behind-the-scenes mechanisms, they appear more transparent and, therefore, more trustworthy. This strategy is a sophisticated way to manage audience expectations and assimilate potential criticisms of inauthenticity. It suggests that contemporary audiences may not demand naive authenticity so much as appreciate a savvy acknowledgment of the game itself, so long as they believe the core of the persona remains “real.” However, this openness remains under threat from the widespread spread of disinformation, where informational integrity is often sacrificed for a compelling narrative (Sinambela, 2022; Rojak, 2023).

The cultural consequences of this authenticity economy are far-reaching. The social value placed on appearing authentic can lead to an overvaluation of personal experience and subjective narratives, which sometimes sidelines expertise or evidence-based knowledge (Hart et al., 2020). Furthermore, the constant pressure to showcase one’s “authentic” life can lead to self-exploitation, where personal boundaries are continually compromised for content production. For audiences, sustained exposure to curated performances of authenticity can blur their

ability to distinguish between strategic presentation and reality, potentially distorting their expectations about their own lives and human relationships. The market for authenticity can also drive homogenization, as individuals feel compelled to align their self-presentation with prevailing authenticity conventions to be recognizable and accepted, thereby reducing the very differences they claim.

The shift from expertise-based authority toward perceived authenticity-based authority is a significant change (Baghel, 2024). An influencer does not need to be a trained chef to have authority in food matters; they only need to be perceived as authentically enthusiastic and “relatable” in their culinary explorations. This authority is affective and personal, not cognitive and institutional. It empowers new voices that previously lacked access to traditional media channels, but also creates an environment where personal appeal and storytelling ability can overshadow depth of knowledge or accountability. Therefore, more inclusive public communication policies with a multicultural approach are needed to ensure that interactions in the digital era maintain diversity of social values without falling into individualistic bias (Mardikaningsih, Darmawan, & Hariani, 2024). The economic foundation of this authority makes it inherently fragile, as it depends on the continuous maintenance of a trust relationship with audiences, which can quickly collapse if the performance of authenticity is perceived as failed or insincere.

In the attention economy, authenticity is ultimately a contested commodity. It is claimed, performed, and sold. Its value is unstable, as what is considered authentic by a community or at a particular moment can change rapidly, influenced by cultural trends, audience fatigue with certain formulas, or the unveiling of contradictions in an influencer’s performance (Schultz, 2023). This non-fixed nature is precisely what makes it so central to the dynamics of influencer culture: it is a always-moving target, an ideal that must be continually reaffirmed through relentless performance. The need to constantly prove one’s authenticity is the engine driving constant content production and the evolution of self-presentation strategies.

Authenticity in the influencer context is not an essence or intrinsic truth, but a complex, multidimensional performance that becomes the cultural and economic foundation of their influence (Ebben & Bull,

2023). This performance involves aesthetic, narrative, and linguistic strategies designed to project honesty, closeness, and accessibility. It is directly tied to the logic of the attention economy and social media platform monetization, where perceptions of authenticity are converted into economic capital through sponsorships and engagement. However, this performance is full of tensions and contradictions, shaped by algorithms, and vulnerable to cultural fatigue. Understanding influencers requires recognition that their authority is built not on traditional talent or easily measurable achievements, but on their skilled ability to perform themselves as authentic subjects in an economy where curated self-experience has become the most valuable commodity. This performativity opens the way for new forms of influence while raising profound questions about the nature of trust, relationships, and the self in digital culture.

Transformation and Commodification of Parasocial Relationships in the Social Media Era

Parasocial relationships, a one-sided bond perceived by audience members toward a media figure, have undergone a profound qualitative transformation in the social media ecosystem (Lotun et al., 2024). In classical theory, this relationship is characterized by clear distance and inequality; celebrities are on stage, distant and untouchable, while audiences admire from afar. Social media has structurally altered this dynamic by introducing the possibility of interactivity that previously did not exist. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube not only allow followers to observe but also to comment, like, share, and sometimes even receive direct responses from the figures they follow. Although the scale remains vastly uneven, this possibility of response psychologically shifts the nature of the relationship from purely observational to one that feels interactive and potentially reciprocal. This illusion of access and dialogue is a central design feature exploited by influencers to deepen bonds with their audiences, creating a sense of closeness and intimacy far stronger than what was possible in the broadcast media era. This shift in communication patterns fundamentally redefines how social interaction occurs in digital society, where virtual community dynamics continue to evolve in tandem with technological flows (Darmawan, 2021).

The platform logic underlying social media actively encourages and intensifies parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers. Algorithms are designed to prioritize content that generates high-level engagement, often measured through likes, comments, watch time, and shares, thereby creating a competitive attention economy (Gillespie, 2014). Content that appears to trigger conversation or strong emotional responses gains greater visibility in users' news feeds, a mechanism that transforms engagement into the primary currency of the platform ecosystem (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Thus, influencers are systematically motivated to design their content to elicit optimal parasocial responses, developing communication strategies that simulate interpersonal interaction (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). They pose direct questions to audiences in captions or videos, solicit opinions, run polls, or create challenges that encourage participation tactics that transform followers from passive consumers into active participants in an ongoing social narrative. This participation simultaneously provides highly valuable engagement data to platforms, which are then used to refine algorithms and increase the reach of that influencer's content. This mutually beneficial feedback loop creates an integrated media ecosystem in which the perceived intensity of parasocial relationships directly correlates with an influencer's economic success and cultural visibility, thereby further blurring the boundary between authentic relationships and performance strategies designed for platforms. In the context of education, the role of social media has now also become critically crucial as a means for broader and faster distribution and dissemination of educational publications to the public (Darmawan & Fajar, 2024).

The commodification of parasocial relationships is the most critical development. The emotional bonds built through the illusion of intimacy and interactivity are no longer merely a side effect of media consumption but have become productive assets actively monetized (Stever, 2024). When an influencer promotes a product, they are not simply selling an item; they are leveraging the trust and feelings of closeness they have cultivated. Their recommendations are framed not as cold corporate ads but as sincere advice from a "friend" who simply wants to share a great discovery. This form of persuasion is extremely powerful because it exploits social heuristics: people tend to trust recommendations from individuals

they know and like. In this context, the intimately felt parasocial relationship becomes a channel for commercial messages, and the act of consumption is positioned as a form of support and solidarity with the admired figure. Followers are invited to “support” the influencer’s career by purchasing the products they sponsor, thereby blurring the line between expressions of affection and economic transactions. This underscores how the formation of individual identity and social perception is heavily influenced by constant interaction on social media in the digitally connected, all-encompassing world (Darmawan & de Jesus Isaac, 2022).

This form of commodification has become increasingly subtle with the emergence of affiliate links and exclusive discount codes. When followers use an influencer’s unique link or code to make a purchase, they feel they are gaining an exclusive benefit (a discount) while simultaneously providing the influencer with a direct financial commission (Nilsson et al., 2023). This transaction wraps commercial dynamics in the rhetoric of shared benefit and privileged access. Followers feel like part of an inner circle receiving special offers thanks to their relationship with the influencer, while the influencer reinforces follower loyalty and generates income. This dynamic transforms parasocial relationships into a personalized economic distribution and production mechanism, where affective bonds are efficiently directed toward shopping channels. This process also influences how values, attitudes, and behaviors of young generations are shaped through consumption of popular digital content (Kurniawan & Khayru, 2021).

The language and performance used in commercial content are carefully curated to maintain the illusion of an authentic relationship. Influencers often use phrases like “because you asked,” “I’ll try this first for you,” or “I’ll tell you right away” to frame product promotions as responses to audience demand or as generous acts of sharing (Arnesson, 2022). They may showcase products within contexts of their everyday, relatable lives—for example, using a new skin care product in their “usual” nightly routine or cooking with sponsored kitchenware for a “simple dinner.” These strategies embed commercial messages into the flow of ordinary “authentic” content, making advertisements harder to distinguish from organic content and leveraging trust built through ongoing authenticity performance. The use of language in such content

also reflects the duality of social media as a space that both preserves and erodes regional languages for young generations (Kurniawan, 2024).

The pressure to continuously maintain and monetize these parasocial relationships has significant implications for influencers' psychological well-being. They must remain constantly in a mode of availability and openness, as audiences expect consistent access to their lives (Zabukovec & Faganel, 2024). The boundary between private self and public self becomes increasingly thin, and the need to constantly "give" to audiences can lead to emotional exhaustion and feelings of being drained. Parasocial relationships, although one-sided, demand real emotional labor from the influencer, who must project openness, gratitude, and sincere engagement. When their income depends on maintaining these relationships, they may feel unable to take breaks or shift their content direction, fearing they will damage the hard-earned bonds they have built and, ultimately, undermine their livelihood.

On the audience side, the commodification of parasocial relationships can generate feelings of ambivalence and, in some cases, exploitation (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Many followers consciously enjoy the content and feel connected to their favorite influencers, gaining entertainment, inspiration, or a sense of community belonging. However, when the line between content and advertising becomes too blurred, or when the frequency of product promotions is perceived as excessive, feelings of disappointment and cynicism can arise. Audiences may feel that the relationship they considered authentic is actually instrumental and motivated by financial gain. The revelation that a post that feels personal and spontaneous is actually a tightly orchestrated paid advertisement can be perceived as a betrayal of trust. This tension is a vulnerable point in the influencer economy, because their business model depends on the continuation of the illusion of a non-transactional relationship. Amidst this vulnerability, the spread of disinformation and hoaxes further threatens the digital public sphere and demands audience vigilance in filtering information (Sinambela, 2022).

Social media platforms themselves are the primary beneficiaries of this commodification of parasocial relationships. They provide the infrastructure that enables these relationships to be built, maintained, and monetized, while taking a share of the revenue streams generated through

platform advertising and, in some cases, through revenue sharing (Rosamond, 2023). Platform interface design with like buttons, comment sections, and notifications is explicitly designed to stimulate and measure parasocial engagement. The data generated from these interactions is a highly valuable commodity for platforms, used to refine algorithms and sell more targeted advertising. Thus, parasocial relationships are not only exploited by influencers and brands but also serve as the fundamental fuel for the business model of social media platforms themselves. Therefore, mastery of digital skills and access to technology become essential prerequisites for every individual to bridge opportunity gaps more inclusively in the 4.0 technology era (Arifin & Darmawan, 2021).

This commodification also reshapes the concept of community in the digital context (Wai, 2024). Followers of an influencer are often referred to as a “community,” a term that implies reciprocal bonds and shared values. In practice, this “community” often functions as a curated consumer base. Interaction within it may be facilitated by the influencer (for example, in comment sections or exclusive groups) and often centers on discussion of recommended products, promoted lifestyles, or support for the influencer’s career. Although followers may form horizontal relationships among themselves, the underlying structure remains hierarchical and centered on the influencer figure as leader and curator. The concept of community, thus, is used as an effective marketing tool, because it leverages the human desire for a sense of belonging and positions consumption as a communal activity. In this regard, public communication policies that prioritize a multicultural approach are urgently needed to maintain healthy and inclusive social interaction in the digital era (Mardikaningsih, Darmawan, & Hariani, 2024).

The transformation of parasocial relationships on social media ultimately reflects the broader capitalist logic that permeates the social and intimate realms (Duffy et al., 2021). Affective bonds, trust, and the desire for connection are engineered and directed for economic ends. This raises profound ethical questions about the boundary between persuasion and manipulation in an environment where the dividing line between entertainment, socialization, and advertising is intentionally blurred. It also challenges traditional understandings of consumer autonomy, as purchasing decisions are increasingly driven by carefully managed

emotional bonds rather than by rational evaluation of product features. Parasocial relationships have undergone a profound transformation from the classical observational form into an interactive and commodified form active within the social media ecosystem. Platforms, through their design, facilitate the illusion of dialogue and access, which influencers exploit to build deeper emotional bonds with their audiences. Ultimately, the commodification of parasocial relationships demonstrates how market logic has penetrated the most intimate realms of human relationships in contemporary digital culture, transforming affective bonds into engines for the production of economic value.

Conclusion

This literature review has revealed that the cultural construction of influencer celebrity on social media is supported by two interrelated and paradoxically charged pillars: the performativity of authenticity and the commodification of parasocial relationships. Analysis shows that authenticity, which forms the basis of an influencer's claim to influence, is not a natural state but rather a strategic performance involving careful aesthetic, narrative, and linguistic curation. This performance is designed to project honesty, relatability, and accessibility, while simultaneously being directly converted into economic capital within the logic of platform attention and monetization. Simultaneously, parasocial relationships which have traditionally been one-sided and observational have been transformed by the interactive architecture of social media into an illusion of reciprocity. It is this illusion of intimacy that is then commodified, where laboriously built affective bonds and trust are utilized as persuasive channels for commercial messages. These two processes the performance of authenticity and the commodification of parasocial relationships mutually reinforce one another and are products of a specific configuration between platform technology, economic imperatives, and the human desire for connection and recognition. Thus, influencer culture represents a cultural form in which curated self-presentation and seemingly intimate social relationships become the primary productive assets in a digital economy.

The findings of this study carry important implications for various stakeholders. For researchers in the fields of media and cultural studies,

this study underscores the need for a theoretical approach that integrates the political economy of media perspective with a micro-analysis of representation and interaction practices. This requires a framework capable of capturing how platform logic and monetization profoundly shape seemingly personal realms such as self-presentation and parasocial relationships. For regulators and policymakers, the primary implication is the need for clearer and stricter regulations regarding transparency in influencer marketing. The intentionally blurred boundaries between organic and commercial content have the potential to mislead consumers, particularly younger audiences. Policies mandating clear and unambiguous disclosure of sponsored partnerships are an essential step in protecting consumers within an increasingly personalized and persuasive media environment. For educators and media literacy practitioners, this study highlights the urgency of developing curricula that teach critical skills in deconstructing online authenticity performances and understanding the mechanisms of the commodification of parasocial relationships. Society needs to be equipped with analytical tools to navigate the social media landscape with an awareness of the economic forces shaping the content and relationships they experience.

Based on these findings and implications, several suggestions can be proposed. First, for the academic community, it is suggested to conduct more longitudinal and digital ethnographic research that follows the experiences of influencers and their followers over time, in order to understand the long-term impact of performative pressures and commodification on identity and psychological well-being. Second, for the social media platforms themselves, although driven by economic incentives, there is a responsibility to redesign features that encourage transparency, such as making "paid content" labels more prominent and unalterable by content creators, as well as providing better tools for users to filter or manage their exposure to commercial content. Third, for non-profit organizations and consumer advocacy groups, it is suggested to develop public awareness campaigns that popularize critical concepts such as "influencer emotional labor" and "commodification of intimacy," to build community resilience against more subtle persuasive tactics. Fourth, for influencers and industry professionals, it is suggested to adopt a code of ethical practice that places transparency and the maintenance

of healthy boundaries as core values, which ultimately can build more sustainable long-term trust rather than aggressive short-term commodification strategies.

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