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The authenticity of influencers in communicating values. An analysis of Instagram profiles

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Abstract

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This article addresses the relationship between influencers' authenticity and their communication of values on social media. Authenticity, as one of the factors contributing to effectiveness, is understood in indexical terms as the consistency of actions with the influencer's identity and internal motivations, whilst taking into account its potentially performative and market-driven nature. The aim of the research was to determine how commercial collaboration affects the communication of values, how audiences assess influencers' authenticity, and how authenticity functions as a communication strategy. A content analysis was carried out on posts and stories (Instagram Stories) published on the Instagram platform by 20 influencers. The study was supplemented by a survey of 151 audience members. The results indicate that commercial collaboration influences the axiological dimension of messages—cognitive values dominate in promotional posts and Stories, and there is a greater absence of references to fundamental values, whilst non-commercial content favours the communication of hedonistic, aesthetic, vital and moral values, as well as the 'being' category. The survey reveals the audience's ambivalence towards the authenticity of influencers and a tendency to perceive social engagement as selective and potentially instrumental.

Keywords: influencer marketing, authenticity, values, axiology of communication, image

Influencer marketing is a marketing strategy in which authenticity is one of the most important factors in its effectiveness. In other words, an effective influencer is an authentic influencer. This article analyses the issue of authenticity in relation to influencers' communication of various values on social media. It is precisely the consistency between an influencer's values and their communication of them that serves as one of the criteria by which audiences assess authenticity.

The word 'authenticity' derives from the Greek word *authentikos* ('original', 'true'), meaning conformity with reality. The term *authentēs*, in turn, referred to 'perpetrators'—people who exercised power over themselves and others, as well as criminals, murderers and suicides (Hellich, 2020, pp. 79–91). Another concept relevant to the subject of this article is that of an influencer, who will be understood as 'a person who has an above-average influence on other people and the decisions they make'. An influencer is active on social media

platforms. Their community centres around a specific topic about which they are passionate. What counts is recognition, having an audience and influencing their decisions” (Stopczyńska, 2021, p. 140). Influencer marketing, in turn, is “a field of marketing based on the recognition and standing of those involved in promotion. An influencer may be a blogger, a vlogger, the owner of a popular social media account, or an expert in a given field sharing their opinion online” (White Press).

Influencers’ communications are therefore promotional and marketing in nature, but they also serve as a space for embedding values that effectively influence the audience. Value is understood here as: “any material or immaterial object, idea or institution, real or imaginary, towards which individuals or groups adopt an attitude of respect, attribute an important role in life to it, and feel compelled to strive to attain it” (Szczepański, 1972, pp. 97–98). The values communicated by influencers can serve as a point of reference for audiences when interpreting messages and assessing their sincerity. Authenticity is also closely linked to the value of truth. “Authenticity is the truth about a person in the sense of who they are in life and how they live; it is therefore the truth about a person who is actively experiencing and acting, and who chooses a course of action” (Raszkiewicz, 2018, pp. 39–61).

What, then, is the role of authenticity in influencer marketing, and what characteristics will an influencer considered to be authentic possess? The authors of the article ‘The persuasive power of social media influencers in brand credibility and purchase intention’ point to a key sociological definition, whereby a person experiences authenticity when they are true to themselves, and they expand on this idea in relation to social media research, where the foundation is the authenticity of one’s personality. “Followers perceive the passion and sincerity of influencers in content creation, as well as the strength of their internal intentions. [...] Influencers who create content driven by internal motivations, as opposed to those motivated by external or commercial incentives, are considered authentic” (Liu & Zheng, 2024). The literature indicates that the perceived authenticity of influencers depends particularly on their uniqueness (perceived originality in terms of independence, creativity and individuality) and consistency (true to themselves, perceived perseverance in striving for change). Research has also shown that influencers perceived as authentic have a stronger impact on purchase intent; however, authenticity does not influence non-purchase-related behaviour. Instead, it serves as an indicator of credibility and a signal that inspires trust.

Consumers want to learn from influencers who are not only authentic but also truthful (Andonopoulos, Lee, & Mathie, 2023; Balaji, Jiang, & Jha, 2021, pp. 293–304).

Grayson and Martinec distinguish between two types of authenticity—indexical (which describes something that is not considered a copy or imitation) and iconic (used to assess whether the physical appearance of an object resembles something stereotypical). In this article, authenticity will be viewed from an indexical perspective—a person perceived as authentic will undertake actions that reflect who they really are. A person is considered inauthentic, on the other hand, if their actions are seen as motivated by the fulfilment of social norms or commercial objectives (Zniv, Weitzl, & Lindmoser, 2023, pp. 1485–1514). Influencers' motivations for creating content can be internal (passion, self-development, identity-building, altruism, the need for artistic expression, the desire to challenge stereotypes or to find an escape from everyday life) and external (social—forming bonds with others; economic—material gain and the need for approval) (Urbaś, 2024, doctoral thesis). Motivations, in turn, are closely linked to values. Understood in the spirit of personalist ethics, they constitute a form of reasoning that influences a person and their personal choices (Drożdż, 2019, p. 104).

Given that authenticity is one of the factors contributing to marketing effectiveness, it is also worth noting that authenticity sometimes takes on performative characteristics; it is embedded in market reality and relies on the ability to present oneself, build a 'personal brand' and respond to market demands. Thus, authenticity becomes a product in its own right and is sometimes used as a strategy in image communication. This also involves a paradox, whereby the very efforts to be authentic can reduce the chances of actually achieving authenticity.

Research methodology

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the relationship between influencers' authenticity and their communication of values. The research questions are: (1) Does commercial collaboration change the way influencers communicate values? (2) Do audiences perceive influencers' communication of values as authentic? (3) How do influencers use authenticity as a communication strategy?

The method used was primarily content analysis, defined as “a research technique aimed at providing an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the explicit content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, in: Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004, p. 13). For the study, based on a comparison of two popularity rankings published in 2021 for the year 2020, 20 influencers were selected from five categories, determined on the basis of a typology based on motivation. The corpus consists of content published on Instagram: 1,704 Instagram Stories from 1–7 August 2022 and 103 feed posts from 1–7 August 2022 and 1–7 August 2023.

The categorisation framework for the entire study comprised eight categories;¹ however, those relevant to this article, in the case of posts, are:

- commercial nature (unsponsored post, sponsored post, sponsored post in the form of a simple product demonstration, sponsored post in the form of a competition for the audience, sponsored post incorporating storytelling, sponsored post as part of a social campaign),
- quality of the communicated value² : (transcendent value, aesthetic value, moral value, cognitive value, vital value, hedonistic value—psychological and physiological sensations),
- reference to fundamental values³ (being, having, love, dignity, truth, freedom, responsibility, justice, no reference to fundamental values).

In the case of Instagram Stories: commercial nature (commercial message, non-commercial message—lack of advertising labelling) and, as with posts, the quality of the communicated value and reference to fundamental values.

The values were operationalised on the basis of the Thesaurus—using this, synonyms, related values and contexts were identified for each value, which were treated as indicators during the research.⁴ In the coding procedure, the author paid particular attention to the keywords used by influencers and their behaviours evident in the analysed messages, drawing on concepts of

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1 The research described in this article was conducted for the purposes of the doctoral thesis *Promocyjno-marketingowa rola influencerów w komunikowaniu wartości i idei w mediach społecznościowych. Studium analityczno-badawcze profili na Instagramie* [The promotional and marketing role of influencers in communicating values and ideas on social media. An analytical and research study of Instagram profiles] defended at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow in 2024.

2 Based on Jadwiga Puzynina's typology. See Bulisz, 2014, p. 73.

3 The basic dichotomy according to Erich Fromm and the values based on the work of Michał Drożdż.

4 Online Dictionary of synonyms of the Polish language, entries: love, dignity, truth, freedom, justice, responsibility, <http://www.synonimy.net/> (access: 26.02.2024).

influence which assume that every behaviour has one or more values as its causal factor, or at least part of such a factor (Kloska, 1982, p. 121) .

Among the limitations of the study, it is worth noting the inability to interpret the actual values held by the influencers. The author focuses on values that are declared and those inferred from verbal and non-verbal behaviour. For a comprehensive interpretation of the authenticity of the influencers studied, it would be necessary to take into account the context of their entire activity, not just a short period. However, this goes beyond the scope of this article.

Research findings—content analysis

The results of the content analysis indicate that commercial collaboration alters, to some extent, the way in which influencers communicate values (Table 1) and this may also have implications for their authenticity.

Table 1. Commercial nature of posts versus the quality of the values communicated

Values	Non-sponsored post	Sponsored post with storytelling	Sponsored post in the form of a competition for followers	Sponsored post in the form of a simple product demonstration	Sponsored post
Cognitive value	5	7	0	1	8
Ethical value	26	1	1	1	3
Hedonic value	32	1	0	3	4
Transcendental value	1	0	0	0	0
Vitality value	10	2	0	0	2
Aesthetic value	13	1	0	0	1

Source: own analysis.

In non-sponsored posts, hedonistic value is most frequently communicated, whilst in sponsored posts, it is cognitive value. This shows that, on the one hand, advertising posts are increasingly conveying a value other than merely hedonistic; on the other hand, however, the reason for this may be an attempt to exploit these values for commercial purposes. Through its cognitive—informational—layer, the post is intended to encourage recipients to make a purchase, highlighting not only the pleasure associated with the advertised brand or product but also specific benefits. However, an excessive focus on highlighting the features of products or services, their functionality and the benefits they offer—even in an educational context—brings the format closer to traditional advertising. In such a situation, depending on the context of the influencer's previous content, their experience and knowledge, this may either enhance or diminish their authenticity. So, if a content creator who usually posts content centred on humour, fun and irony attempts, in isolated instances unrelated to their previous activities, to present themselves as an expert, their audience may perceive this as inauthentic. If, on the other hand, the products are carefully selected and the information conveyed about them is consistent with their existing image, this will reinforce their image as someone who knows what they are talking about, and is therefore authentic.

In sponsored posts, it is striking how rarely transcendent, vital and ethical values are communicated—influencers seldom use such collaborations to express them. Commercial messages therefore seem to convey a narrower spectrum of values.

In both commercial and non-commercial posts, love is the most frequently communicated core value. It appears in a wide variety of contexts—both as emotional attachment to people and as affection for objects or places.

The value 'be' appears more frequently in non-sponsored posts than in sponsored ones (47 to 13). However, the sample of sponsored posts is small, so the result offers limited scope for interpretation, similarly to the value "to have". The same applies to 'love' (22). Content relating to relationships and emotions is therefore more closely associated with organic content. Surprisingly, this also applies to messages related to possession, which intuitively might be expected to be more closely linked to advertisements.

Table 2. Commercial nature of posts versus core values

Values	Spon- sored post	Non-spon- sored post	Sponsored post with storytelling	Sponsored post in the form of a competi- tion for the audience	Sponsored post in the form of a sim- ple product demonstra- tion
Freedom	0	6	0	0	0
No reference to core values	14	51	11	0	3
To be	13	47	11	0	2
Love	3	22	2	0	1
Dignity	0	2	0	0	0
Responsibility	2	2	1	1	0
Justice	1	1	1	0	0
To have	6	38	1	1	4
True	0	2	0	0	0

Source: own analysis.

Cognitive values (knowledge, information, benefits and product features) predominate in sponsored posts, whilst hedonistic values (pleasure, emotions, depictions of everyday life) predominate in non-sponsored posts. This may suggest that in advertisements, influencers opt for more neutral, product-focused content and avoid referring to moral standards or greater emotionality.

In the case of Instagram Stories (Table 3), hedonistic values are present to a very similar extent in both types of content (46 stories from all 104 stories with commercial message in percentage terms is 44% and 679 with non-commercial message from all 1594 stories gives 42%). This means that, unlike posts, advertisements here rely to a greater extent on pleasure. However, these differences are minor. As with posts, cognitive values are more common in commercial content (39 from all 104, what gives 37.5% for commercial, and 536 from all 1594 what gives 33.6% non-commercial).

Table 3. Commerciality of Instagram Stories versus the quality of the values communicated

Values	Commercial message	Non-commercial message; no advertising label
Hedonistic value	46	679
Transcendent value	0	10
Moral value	8	76
Aesthetic value	8	200
Cognitive value	39	536
Vital value	4	95

Source: own analysis.

The low proportion of transcendent values is striking—only 10 appeared in non-commercial content, and not a single one in adverts. These values are therefore not used in commercial contexts, but they did not appear in Stories on other topics either. This may indicate not only specific choices made by influencers, but also the affordances of Instagram itself, where short, visual formats dominate, and values requiring reflection and deeper narrative are more difficult to communicate. It may also influence the perception of creators' authenticity, regardless of their intentions.

In both types of Stories, the majority of content was classified under the category 'no reference to core values' (commercial—92.4%, non-commercial—90.5%). This aligns with the analysis of the nature of values, which revealed a dominance of hedonistic and cognitive values. This can be linked to the fact that Instagram Stories serve as a form of communication focused on everyday activities and products, rather than on deeper meanings. It is also worth noting that unambiguous messages about moral, ethical or transcendent values have great potential to polarise the audience, which creators consciously seek to avoid by focusing on more neutral content so as not to lose some of their followers. At the same time, such caution will be viewed negatively by some audiences—distancing oneself from, for example, statements on important social issues is often criticised in comments, sparks much debate and undermines perceptions of authenticity. This is because it is precisely those brands and individuals who 'swim against the tide' who are perceived

as intrinsically motivated and therefore authentic, as their uniqueness is defined by independence and individuality (Zniv, Weitzl, & Lindmoser, 2023).

Table 4. The commercial nature of Instagram Stories and references to core values

Values	Commercial message	Non-commercial message; no advertising label
To be	20	737
To have	85	861
Love	7	81
Dignity	0	15
Truth	0	12
Freedom	0	18
Responsibility	1	20
Justice	0	6
No reference to core values	97	1446

Source: own research.

A significant difference emerges in the ‘being’ category, where 19% of commercial posts referred to it, compared with as many as 46.1% of non-commercial posts. ‘Having’, on the other hand, accounted for 81% of commercial posts and 53.9% of non-commercial posts.

To summarise the analysis of both Instagram Stories and feed posts, it is worth noting that non-commercial content features a high proportion of aesthetic, vital, moral and hedonistic values, as well as the ‘being’ category, whilst commercial content emphasises cognitive values and the ‘having’ category. Influencers’ portrayal of their everyday lives, relationships and emotions forms the basis of authenticity, and it is non-commercial posts in particular that provide this opportunity. Commercial content appears to alter the nature of the message, shifting the emphasis from the emotional to the informational. It makes the content more professional, which may result in it being perceived as less natural. Furthermore, the range of values

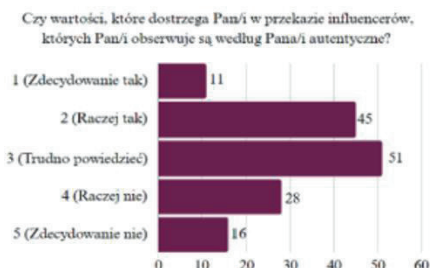
communicated is narrower, and expression may be restricted, which can also diminish the impression of authenticity among the audience. Although the literature suggests that consumers do not expect influencers to avoid commercial collaborations, in particular appreciate those who approach such partnerships with caution. It is also important to create content in such a way that certain products appear in posts about everyday life, even outside of advertising campaigns. For consumers, this serves as evidence of the influencer's intrinsic motivations and the sincerity of their opinions, as well as proof that the advertising reflects their genuine beliefs and values (Duffek, Eisingerich, Merlo, & Lee, 2025, pp. 21–46).

Influencers build a sense of authenticity by documenting their everyday lives. The 'Stories' format on Instagram is particularly conducive to spontaneous posts. Authenticity can also be used instrumentally and, to some extent, strategically—influencers realise that portraying a perfect life no longer yields the desired results, so they will strive to show imperfect moments, which may also be part of a script. At the same time, however, the audience's awareness of superficial authenticity is growing—younger groups are already sensitive to it, and as many as 37% of women and 31% of men do not believe in slogans such as 'you are beautiful just as you are' (Mizierska, 2025).

Research findings—survey

The content analysis described above was supplemented by a survey of influencers' audiences. This provides insight into the audience's perspective and allows us to examine how they perceive the authenticity of influencers when communicating values. A total of 151 respondents completed the questionnaire. It was shared on social media, particularly in thematic groups for people interested in social media and influencers, between 7 June and 27 July 2023, using the snowball sampling method. Social media users were evaluating the authenticity of influencers generally as a group of online creators, not only audiences of 20 influencers whose activity was the subject of the content analysis.

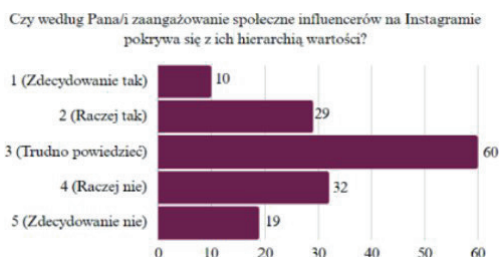
Figure 1. Authenticity of values perceived by audiences in influencers’ messages



Source: own research.

Most respondents selected the most balanced response (Fig. 1), but when the responses closer to ‘definitely yes’ (11 + 45) and those closer to ‘definitely no’ (28 + 16) are totalled, it appears that a greater number of respondents consider the values conveyed by influencers to be authentic.

Figure 2. Correlation between influencers’ value hierarchies and their social engagement, according to respondents



Source: own research.

Similarly, in the question assessing the correlation between influencers’ value hierarchy (Fig. 2) and their social engagement, there is a tendency to select the most balanced response (60 responses); however, when the responses close to ‘definitely yes’ and ‘definitely no’ are combined, it is noticeable that more respondents (51 in total) assess influencers’ social engagement without reference to their hierarchy of values, whilst 39 of them believe that the two

overlap. This can be interpreted as an indication of perceived selectivity in the communication of values and the perception of pro-social actions as the instrumental use of values as an image-building strategy.

What accounts for this ambivalence and the audience's difficulty in unequivocally assessing the authenticity of the communicated values? This may be linked to the very high proportion of the 'no reference to core values' category in influencers' messages—consistent, more axiologically profound messages would allow for a more unequivocal assessment. On the other hand, the survey results suggest that authenticity is not a clear-cut trait, but rather a whole spectrum of behaviours and the possibility for an influencer to be more or less authentic depending on the context, topic or form of communication.

Summary

Influencers' authenticity is closely linked to the values they communicate. Consistency between their statements and their observed behaviour (including engaging in commercial collaborations), the integrity of their attitudes over time, and the originality of their message are important criteria in how audiences assess authenticity.

Content analysis has shown that advertising content resulting from influencers' collaborations with brands, or self-promotional content from their own brands, alters the axiological dimension. As for the quality of the values communicated, cognitive values dominate here and are also characterised by a frequent lack of reference to fundamental values. Informative content, rich in knowledge—for example, about products—may be perceived as more formalised and less authentic. Non-commercial content, on the other hand, tends to promote hedonistic, aesthetic, vital and moral values, and more frequently refers to the 'being' category. It therefore seems to serve more effectively in building authenticity, understood as the consistency between an influencer's messages and their identity.

Instagram Stories, as an ephemeral format focused on immediacy and showcasing everyday life, contains few references to fundamental values, which may stem, amongst other things, from the difficulty in communicating values that require longer reflection and analysis.

The authenticity of influencers in communicating values is inextricably linked to the way in which they portray everyday life, because communicating values is not merely about declaring them but also about consistently conveying them through various behaviours—spontaneous content, emotions, relationships and knowledge. Authenticity is not a trait that can be unequivocally and definitively attributed to influencers, but rather a process dependent on many contexts.

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