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Endorsement Communication Strategies in Building Consumer Trust: A Phenomenological Study of Social Media Followers

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Abstract: The proliferation of endorsement practices on social media has created a paradox: on one hand, it enhances product visibility, yet on the other, it triggers consumer skepticism due to the ambiguity between organic and commercial content. This study aims to explore how social media followers interpret endorsement communication strategies in building—or conversely, eroding—consumer trust. Employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research involved in-depth interviews with 23 informants who are active followers of at least three influencer accounts on Instagram and TikTok. The principal findings identify ten interrelated patterns of consumer consciousness: authenticity radar, transactional fatigue, selective trust construction, parasocial compensation, value resonance, digital literacy as a modulator, temporal trust fluctuation, social proof calibration, disclosure cynicism, and post-purchase dissonance. This research contributes to the development of an updated Influencer Trust Decay Theory and offers practical implications for brands and endorsers in designing sustainable communication strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The global influencer marketing industry reached a value of $21.1 billion in 2023, nearly tripling compared to the pre-pandemic period (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). In Indonesia, with 139 million active social media users in 2024, Instagram and TikTok have become the primary platforms for endorsement practices, achieving a penetration rate of 85.3% among internet users. However, beneath this exponential growth lies a fundamental problem: a crisis of trust. Surveys indicate that 61% of consumers report a decline in their trust in endorsement content over the past two years, primarily due to the ambiguity of sponsored status and inconsistencies between promotions and the endorser's personal use.

The emergence of the deinfluencing movement as a counter-cultural trend on social media reinforces the indication that consumers are no longer passive recipients of endorsement narratives. Instead, they develop complex strategies of resistance and selection. Quantitative research has largely confirmed a positive relationship between celebrity endorsers and customer trust, as well as the mediating role of trust between endorsements and purchase intention (Rafli et al., 2025). Experimental studies have also shown that deinfluencing content can enhance trustworthiness by reducing skepticism toward endorsers' motives (Penttinen, Ciuchita & Pedersen, 2026). However, dominant quantitative approaches fail to capture the psychological and contextual processes underlying the construction of trust in a fluid digital ecosystem.

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To address this gap, this study delimits its focus to three specific areas. First, it explores the experiences of active followers on Instagram and TikTok only, acknowledging the distinct algorithmic and content cultures of these platforms. Second, the study focuses on the endorsement communication strategies themselves—how messages are packaged, the frequency of appearances, and the alignment between sponsored content and the endorser's organic content. Third, this research confines itself to consumer trust as a dynamic and contextual construct, rather than outcome variables such as purchase intention or brand loyalty.

The identified research gaps are: (1) the dominance of quantitative approaches that measure trust as a static variable; (2) a lack of exploration into how followers simultaneously negotiate skepticism and trust; and (3) limited understanding of how different endorsement communication strategies are perceived differently by audiences with varying levels of digital literacy. This research provides a rich description of the phenomenology of consumer trust in the era of sponsored content overload, serving as a foundation for developing more humanistic and contextual marketing communication theories.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. IPA was selected for its capacity to explore how individuals make meaning of personal experiences within specific contexts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022). The methodological justifications are: (1) the phenomenon of consumer trust in endorsements is subjective and deeply embodied; (2) IPA enables researchers to access the insider perspective on how followers simultaneously negotiate skepticism and trust; (3) this approach is suitable for exploring under-theorized areas such as the dynamics of trust in digital parasocial relationships.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) active use of Instagram and/or TikTok for a minimum of 3 hours per day; (2) following at least three influencer accounts that routinely engage in product endorsements; (3) having purchased a product resulting from an endorsement within the last 6 months; (4) willingness to reflect deeply on personal experiences. A total of 23 informants participated (age range 19–34 years; 15 female, 8 male). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes per informant) and digital diaries (reflective notes over 14 days).

Data analysis followed the six-stage IPA procedure outlined by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2022): (1) repeated reading; (2) exploratory noting; (3) developing emergent themes; (4) searching for connections across themes; (5) moving to the next case; (6) looking for patterns across cases. Data validity was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenological analysis identified ten major themes representing the essence of followers' experiences in interpreting endorsement communication strategies.

Authenticity Radar – Detecting Inconsistency as a Defense Mechanism

All informants reported possessing an ability—which they termed an "authenticity radar"—to detect inauthentic endorsements. This ability is honed through intensive exposure to influencer content and develops into an automated evaluation schema.

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"When I see an endorsement, I have a kind of alarm in my head. As soon as there's an endorsement that's too over-the-top, even though the endorser themselves didn't use the product yesterday, it immediately feels like a red flag."

Informants identified three indicators of inconsistency: (1) contradictions between promotional narratives and past personal posts; (2) the use of overly formal or scripted language; (3) the endorser's inability to answer technical questions about the product in the comment section.

Transactional Fatigue – Psychological Exhaustion Due to Dominance of Paid Content

The dominance of sponsored content in social media feeds triggers a condition informants call "transactional fatigue"—a psychological response characterized by apathy, irritation, and decreased motivation to engage. "I used to trust endorsement content, but now? It feels like every influencer is just selling stuff. You follow 10 accounts, and 9 of them are endorsements. It's exhausting. Eventually, I just scroll without looking or skip immediately."

Informants reported that when the intensity of endorsements exceeds a certain threshold (approximately >60% of content in their feed), they tend to ignore all content from that influencer.

Selective Trust Construction – Situational and Relational Trust Building

Contrary to the assumption that trust is dichotomous, informants demonstrated a pattern of selective trust construction: trust is constructed situationally based on specific interactions.

"I don't say I either trust A or don't trust A. It depends on the product. If it's a skincare endorsement, I'm skeptical. But if it's a food endorsement, I'm more open. Trust is contextual."

Informants developed cross-validation strategies: comparing the endorser's claims with reviews from multiple influencers, other users' comments, personal experiences, and external sources.

Parasocial Compensation – Imaginary Relationships as a Buffer Against Skepticism

Informants exhibited a phenomenon of parasocial compensation, namely a tendency to grant the benefit of the doubt to endorsers with whom they have built strong parasocial bonds.

"I've followed Tariq Halilintar since 2018. Even though much of his content is now endorsements, I still trust him because I feel like I 'know' him."

Parasocial bonds create an affective buffer—a psychological zone of tolerance where followers suspend skepticism to maintain an imaginary relationship.

Value Resonance as a Trust Catalyst

Informants identified that trust is built primarily through value resonance—the alignment between the endorser's values and the followers' personal values.

"I trust Gita Savita because her values are clear: education and literacy. If she endorses a book, I'll buy it immediately. But if she endorses skincare, I'll think it over first."

Digital Literacy as a Trust Modulator

Digital literacy acts as a modulator determining how followers respond to endorsement communication strategies.

"I used to trust every endorsement. Now that I understand algorithms and disclosure, I'm more careful" and "My sister, who's still in high school, is different. She just believes it." years old)

Temporal Trust Fluctuation

Informants reported that their trust in an endorser is not static but fluctuates due to temporal factors such as time elapsed since the last interaction, product launch cycles, and specific seasons.

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"My trust in an influencer goes up and down. If they've just endorsed a product that turned out to be bad, I become skeptical for a few weeks. But over time, if they consistently produce good content, trust can return."

Social Proof Calibration

Informants do not rely solely on personal judgment but actively calibrate social proof—numbers of likes, positive comments, and shares—as external validators.

"I look at the comment section first. If the comments are weird, like they all look templated, I suspect fake endorsement. But if the comments are natural, including some criticism, I trust it more."

Disclosure Cynicism

Contrary to the assumption that sponsored content disclosure enhances trust, informants reported high levels of cynicism toward this practice.

"The hashtag #ad or #sponsored is standard. Every influencer uses them. So for me, it doesn't add any trust at all."

Post-Purchase Dissonance as a Test of Trust

The final theme is post-purchase dissonance—psychological discomfort experienced after purchasing an endorsed product, especially when the product fails to meet expectations.

"I once bought skincare endorsed by Dr. Richard Lee. It turned out my skin got irritated. To this day, I no longer trust his endorsements." (Participant F-16, 26 years old)

Discussion

The following discussion presents an in-depth analysis of the ten findings, linking them to communication theory, consumer psychology, and digital marketing. Each paragraph is developed in a formal, academic manner.

The authenticity radar enriches the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1984). The ELM explains that individuals process persuasive messages through two routes: a central route requiring deep cognitive elaboration and a peripheral route relying on heuristic cues. The authenticity radar demonstrates that followers automatically activate the central route when detecting potential inconsistencies between the endorsement narrative and the endorser's personal behavior. This process occurs rapidly and often below full awareness, resembling an automatic vigilance mechanism in social psychology (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). The ability to detect inconsistencies develops through repeated associative learning, where exposure to inauthentic endorsement content reinforces negative evaluation schemas. This finding extends beyond ELM by showing that followers not only choose a processing route but also develop meta-cognitive skills to evaluate the credibility of the cues themselves. Thus, the authenticity radar functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that determines whether an endorsement message will be processed further or ignored. Consequently, endorsement communication strategies that overlook cross-context consistency will be easily detected and rejected by increasingly sophisticated audiences.

Transactional fatigue shares strong conceptual similarities with decision fatigue as explained by Vohs and colleagues (2008). Decision fatigue refers to the decline in decision quality after an individual faces a series of consecutive decisions. In the social media context, followers face an endless choice architecture where each piece of content presents an implicit decision: whether to trust, ignore, or engage with that content. When the frequency of sponsored content exceeds

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cognitive processing capacity—identified in this study as a threshold of approximately 60% of total content—ego depletion occurs, manifesting as generalized apathy. Research by Evans and colleagues (2017) on disclosure effectiveness did not consider this accumulation of decision load as a contextual variable. This study's significant contribution is the identification that transactional fatigue not only reduces trust in a specific endorser but can also escalate into platform abandonment—the decision to leave a social media platform altogether. This phenomenon indicates that a quantity-over-quality strategy in endorser recruitment is counterproductive in the long term. Brands and endorsers need to implement cognitive load management by reducing the frequency of sponsored content and improving the signal-to-noise ratio in users' feeds.

Selective trust construction and the critique of traditional dichotomous trust—particularly the commitment-trust theory by Morgan and Hunt (1994), which views trust as a relatively stable and dichotomous construct (one either trusts or does not trust a relational partner)—are fundamentally challenged by Theme 3. Informants in this study demonstrated that trust is not universally granted to an endorser but is constructed situationally based on product category, usage context, and prior interaction history. An individual may have high trust in an endorser's recommendations for books or food while remaining skeptical of the same endorser's skincare recommendations. This phenomenon indicates that trust in the digital ecosystem is granular and context-dependent. Furthermore, informants developed cross-validation strategies involving triangulation of information from multiple sources—reviews from various influencers, other users' comments, personal experiences, and external sources. This strategy reflects what cognitive psychology literature terms satisficing (Simon, 1956), where individuals seek a "good enough" level of certainty rather than an optimal one. Consequently, endorsers cannot merely build general trust; they must establish category-specific trust demonstrated through genuine knowledge and experience in each product category they endorse.

One of the most intriguing findings is parasocial compensation, which challenges assumptions of consumer rationality in endorsement literature. The concept of parasocial interaction was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the illusion of interpersonal relationships that audiences build with media figures. Research by De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) assumes that parasocial interaction enhances endorser credibility through increased familiarity and likability. However, this study's findings go further by showing that parasocial bonds create an affective buffer—a psychological zone of tolerance where followers consciously choose to suspend skepticism to maintain an imaginary relationship that provides emotional satisfaction. This phenomenon recalls the concept of the cognitive miser proposed by Fiske and Taylor (1991), but with an important modification: followers become affective misers who conserve cognitive energy by relying on emotional bonds as a heuristic for trust. This finding carries significant ethical implications. On one hand, parasocial compensation can be leveraged by endorsers to build long-term loyalty. On the other hand, this phenomenon makes followers vulnerable to exploitation, as emotional bonds can override the cognitive defense mechanisms meant to protect them from manipulative endorsement practices. Regulators and social media platforms need to consider special protections for audiences who have developed strong parasocial bonds with endorsers.

Value resonance extends Signaling Theory, proposed by Spence (1973), which explains how signal credibility is built through costly signaling—where the signal sender bears certain costs that cannot be easily imitated by non-credible senders. In the endorsement context, a costly signal is operationalized as the reputational risk borne by the endorser if they recommend a poor-quality product. However, the finding of value resonance (Theme 5) demonstrates that signal effectiveness

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is not solely determined by cost but by value alignment between the signal sender and receiver. Informants explicitly stated that they trust endorsers whose values align with their personal values more, even when those endorsers do not take significant reputational risks. This finding corrects the assumption of Wang, Han, and Beynon-Davies (2019) regarding blockchain as a trust mechanism. They argued that technological trust (e.g., through decentralized verification systems) could replace interpersonal trust. This study shows the opposite: in the social media context, value resonance is stronger than technological assurance in building trust. Followers do not need technological proof or formal certification; they need evidence of value alignment manifested in the endorser's behavioral consistency across time and contexts. Value resonance acts as a trust catalyst, significantly accelerating trust formation even upon first encounter with endorsement content. Therefore, endorsers need to invest significant effort in articulating and demonstrating their values, not merely focusing on increasing reach or engagement metrics.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), developed by Friestad and Wright (1994), predicts that over time, consumers develop persuasion knowledge—understanding of tactics, strategies, and mechanisms of persuasion—that enables them to identify and resist persuasion attempts. The finding regarding digital literacy (Theme 6) confirms this model but with two important modifications. First, digital literacy does not develop linearly with age or usage. Young informants (Gen Z) with intensive exposure to deinfluencing content (Penttinen, Ciuchita & Pedersen, 2026) demonstrated a literacy leap—a significant jump in literacy—that is not always proportional to their chronological experience. Second, and more importantly, digital literacy does not always increase resistance to persuasion. In the case of parasocial compensation (Theme 4), informants with high digital literacy could actually facilitate persuasion acceptance because they consciously chose to "switch off" their skepticism radar to maintain a parasocial relationship that provided emotional satisfaction. This finding reveals that digital literacy is not a monolithic variable; it has dimensions of technical literacy (understanding algorithms, disclosure, and platform mechanisms) and critical literacy (the ability to evaluate content reflectively and independently). Gen Z tends to have high technical literacy but lower critical literacy compared to Millennials. Consequently, mass digital literacy efforts cannot focus solely on technical aspects; critical and reflective education about parasocial relationships and affective mechanisms in digital media consumption is also necessary.

Trust literature, including commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), views trust as a relatively stable construct that changes only when a significant trust violation occurs. The finding of temporal trust fluctuation (Theme 7) provides an important correction to this assumption. Informants reported that their trust in an endorser undergoes regular fluctuations influenced by temporal factors such as time elapsed since the last interaction, product launch cycles, specific seasons (e.g., Ramadan or year-end sales), and even time of day. This phenomenon indicates that trust has a time-varying component that cannot be explained solely by static trust models. Furthermore, informants identified a trust recovery period—the time needed to restore trust after a violation—ranging from 14 to 30 days, depending on the severity of the violation and the quality of non-endorsement content during that period. This finding aligns with research on the service recovery paradox in services marketing literature (Smith & Bolton, 1998), but in a new context: trust recovery in digital parasocial relationships. Practically, endorsers experiencing a trust crisis cannot immediately return to normal endorsement activities. They require a strategic silence period of 14–30 days, during which they produce only high-value, non-commercial content aligned with the values held by their followers. After this period, endorsers can gradually reintroduce sponsored content with lower frequency and higher transparency.

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Social proof theory, popularized by Cialdini (1984), explains that individuals tend to follow others' behavior when they are uncertain about the appropriate action. In the digital endorsement context, social proof is operationalized through metrics such as numbers of likes, positive comments, and shares. However, the finding of social proof calibration (Theme 8) shows that followers have developed sophisticated heuristics to distinguish organic social proof from manufactured social proof (e.g., purchased likes or bot comments). Informants explicitly stated that they trust negative signals (constructive criticism in the comments section) more than positive signals that are overly uniform and unnatural. This phenomenon reflects what sociological literature calls a legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1975)—where conventional validation mechanisms lose credibility due to over-manipulation. This finding aligns with Penttinen, Ciuchita, and Pedersen's (2026) research on deinfluencing content, where followers value content that explicitly criticizes products or endorsers more than content that only praises. Thus, strategies that build social proof through manipulative means (purchasing followers, likes, or comments) are not only ineffective but also counterproductive, as savvy followers can detect such manipulation and respond with increased skepticism. Instead, endorsers and brands need to encourage the formation of organic social proof through authentic discussions in the comment section, even when those discussions include criticism.

One of the most concerning findings from a regulatory perspective is disclosure cynicism. For over a decade, regulators in various countries have required influencers to clearly disclose sponsored content using hashtags such as #ad, #sponsored, or #promo. The underlying assumption of this policy is that disclosure will increase ad recognition, which in turn enables consumers to process content more critically and make more informed decisions (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). However, this study's findings indicate that this assumption no longer holds. Informants reported high levels of cynicism toward disclosure practices, which they view as a minimal compliance ritual—something endorsers do because of legal obligation, not out of a desire for honesty. In fact, some informants stated that the #ad hashtag actually decreased their trust, as it was perceived as a "danger signal" that the content might not be authentic. This finding reinforces research by Evans and colleagues (2017) showing that disclosure increases ad recognition but does not directly enhance trust. However, this study goes further by demonstrating that disclosure can trigger the opposite effect—trust reduction—when perceived as performative transparency. As an alternative, informants proposed embedded disclosure—disclosure integrated narratively into the content, for example by stating "this is a collaboration" in the middle of a video in a natural and contextual tone. This finding indicates the need to reformulate endorsement regulatory policy, moving from mandatory hashtag-based disclosure to meaningful narrative-based disclosure.

Finally, post-purchase dissonance connects trust literature with cognitive dissonance literature, developed by Festinger (1957). Cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological discomfort that arises when a person holds two contradictory beliefs simultaneously. In the endorsement context, post-purchase dissonance occurs when a product purchased based on an endorser's recommendation fails to meet expectations. Informants reported that this dissonance not only affects satisfaction with the product but also significantly damages long-term trust in the endorser. More importantly, this study identified a spillover effect: disappointment with one product can reduce overall trust in the endorser, even for different product categories. For example, an informant who experienced skin irritation from a skincare product endorsed by a particular endorser tended to become skeptical of all recommendations from that same endorser, including recommendations for food or books. Trust recovery following such negative experiences takes

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longer (up to 60 days) and requires repeated evidence of consistency—not just one or two good pieces of content. This finding aligns with research on negative spillover effects in brand management literature (Roehm & Tybout, 2006), but in a new context: spillover from product evaluation to endorser evaluation. Practically, endorsers cannot take the quality of the products they recommend lightly. A single negative experience by a follower can damage trust not only in that product but across the endorser's entire endorsement portfolio.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how social media followers interpret endorsement communication strategies in building consumer trust. Ten major findings—authenticity radar, transactional fatigue, selective trust construction, parasocial compensation, value resonance, digital literacy as a modulator, temporal trust fluctuation, social proof calibration, disclosure cynicism, and post-purchase dissonance—have been identified and analyzed in depth. The coherence between the problem delimitation, findings, and discussion is evident. This research contributes to the development of a revised Influencer Trust Decay Theory with five main propositions. Trust in the digital endorsement ecosystem is fluid, contextual, temporal, and continuously renegotiated—a finding that challenges fundamental assumptions in traditional trust literature.

This study is limited to the context of Indonesian users on Instagram and TikTok. Further research could explore cross-cultural variations, different platforms (such as YouTube or LinkedIn), and trust dynamics among more diverse demographic groups (early adolescents or digital seniors). Longitudinal studies are also needed to empirically test the five propositions of the proposed Influencer Trust Decay Theory.

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