



The e-Marketplace of the Self: Understanding Influencer Representation of the Authentic Self

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I would like to respectfully acknowledge the Songhees, Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples on whose traditional territory this research was conducted.

Introduction – The Shaping of the Influencer ‘Self’

The e-marketplace of the self can be understood as the online forum in which influencers market their personality and lifestyle. In the e-marketplace of the self, audience trust represents the value of the influencer brand (Marópo, et al., 2020). In the marketplace, perceptions of inauthenticity can be harmful to brand profitability (Wellman et al., 2020, p. 74).

A problematic of the e-marketplace of the self is how to advertise to an audience while retaining an authentic credibility (Bishop & Arriaga, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). Preexisting literature struggles to understand how influencer content that is created to advertise brands and products can simultaneously reflect the interior ‘self’ (authenticity) of the content creator.

Influencers must navigate representing their interior ‘self’ while simultaneously being a representative of exterior sponsors. As such, his research project examines the ways in which influencers present and shape their ‘self’ to meet audience demand for authenticity while simultaneously integrating their own economic imperative for profitability.

Theoretical Orientation – Authenticity, Defining Sincerity to the Self in an Online Marketplace

Michel Foucault – Defining the ‘Self’

- Foucault’s work allows us to define ‘self’ through his analysis of the subject: a being “tied to his [or her] identity in the form of a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Foucault’s work illustrates how individuals are actively constructed through reflexive action on the self by the self.
- Foucault also analyzes how the individual creates a subject of themselves through their alignment with a ‘domain’ (Foucault, 1982, 778). For this project I examine the creation of the influencer’s subject, through the domain of ‘authenticity’.
- Foucault’s conceptualization of *Homo oeconomicus* entails the extension of economic considerations of profitability into the self-knowledge of the subject (Foucault 2008).

Webb Keane – Defining Authenticity

- Webb Keane allows us to define the authentic presentation of the ‘self’ through an analysis of sincerity (Keane, 2002).
- To Keane, sincerity is a modern value that entails the alignment of an interior ‘self’ with the exterior audience in public expression (Keane, 2002).
- Webb Keane’s interpretation thereby allows us to define **insincerity** as the manipulation of public expression to pervert the presentation of the subject’s interior ‘self’ to the exterior audience.

Understanding the Influencer

The influencer can be understood as an individual who acts as an intermediary between sponsors and their target audiences. Influencers use the repertoire they have built with their audience to advocate for brand sponsors (Bishop & Arriaga, 2021, p. 578; Wellman et al., 2020).

- Surveyed influencers felt more beholden to their audience, than to brand sponsors. This is contrary to traditional advertising agencies which explicitly work for corporations.
- Surveyed influencers often understood that inauthentic actions are detrimental to audience perception, and thereby self-marketability. This is reinforced by Wellman et al. (2020) who found that influencer marketing was directed by an ethic of authenticity, “a truth to the self and the audience” (p. 78).

Influencer marketing sees the individual extend economic analysis into their internal ‘self’ to articulate an online ‘self’ that produces a consumable brand for their followers. Interviewed influencers often reported finding their community niche. This community, and it’s trust in the influencer, can be sold to businesses as a ‘target audience’.

- The internal ‘self’ stands in contrast to the private ‘self’ which can be understood as the day-to-day life of the individual. While many influencers are transparent about their emotions or thoughts aspects of the private ‘self’, such as family life or partners, are not articulated if they are not in conjunction with the consumable brand. While, for example, having a partner does not necessarily change the internal ‘self’ it can change audience and corporate perceptions of the influencer brand.

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Methodology

To understand the construction of the influencer ‘self’ in the online marketplace I surveyed and interviewed 11 influencers. To find participants I searched through sites such as Collabstr, which are designed to connect influencers to prospective brands. For my study I define influencers as follows:

- The participant must have over 15,000 followers on a social media site (Instagram, YouTube, Tik Tok).
- The participant must present a significant portion of their ‘self’ online.
 - Posting a significant portion of their self online means the individual had to be a central aspect of their posted content.
 - Individuals, such as travel photographers, who were not present in their content were not selected.
- The participant must have made a career from their content.
 - Since many influencer have jobs besides influencing, I defined a career as accepting or working in some manner with brand sponsors.

Eight influencers completed a survey of 16 long answer questions. Another three influencers participated in interviews to elaborate on trends I noticed in the survey responses.

The questions posed to influencers were designed to analyze: (1) The amount of their life an influencer puts online, (2) Whether influencers felt pressure to conform to audience/sponsor demands, (3) Whether influencers feel the ‘self’ that they portray online is an authentic representation of their interior ‘self.’

All participants were compensated and anonymized to ensure they would not feel pressure to protect their brand. The information from polling influencers was then reinforced with preexisting literature regarding influencer authenticity and self-marketing.



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Selected Quotes from Survey Responses

“It’s really important for me to stay authentic and transparent with my audience. I will only do partnership with brands that I truly like and that I think my audience would like too. My job is to help them with fashion and put them on some good products so I won’t purposely bullshit them.”

- This quote reflects how influencer profitability is linked to their audience perception. This quote also demonstrates the importance of staying ‘authentic’ by aligning of the interior ‘self’ with the exterior audience in public expression.

“I pick and choose what I share publicly. I don’t share many of my friends and keep a lot of personal details private.”
- This quote demonstrates the selective exclusion of aspects of the private ‘self’.

“I am pretty picky with brands I work with. I have dropped brand deals that I found didn’t align with my personal ethics/beliefs. I’d say I turn down more brands than I accept.”
- This quote reflects how influencers are able to reconcile the tension between marketability and authenticity by being selective toward the brands they take as sponsors.

Findings – Selecting the Marketable Self

Preexisting literature tells us that authenticity of the ‘self’ is considered good practice among influencers (Bishop & Arriaga, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020; Whitmer, 2021). However, much of the preexisting literature still struggles to reconcile how content which is intentionally created to advertise products can claim any sincerity to the internal ‘self’.

My research offers insight into this problem. It appears that successful influencers have the liberty to be selective of the brands they promote. This allows influencers to select brands that they feel align with their internal ‘self’. This selection reconciles the tension between marketability and authenticity.

Interviewed influencers do seem to strive for an authentic portrayal of the ‘self’. To these individuals, authentic portrayal of the ‘self’ is successful when there is continuity between the online and internal ‘self’.

- Authenticity to influencers can be understood as the articulation of an element of the private ‘self’. Since this articulated element is consistent to the interior ‘self’ it is understood as authentic by the influencers.
- The articulated ‘self’ only discloses an aspect of the individual. However, influencers tend to understand this aspect as in alignment with their interior ‘self’. During an interview, one participant elaborated on this articulation as: if they met a follower on the street the follower should not find inconsistency in the online versus empirical interaction with the influencer.

The influencer is confronted with the tension of maintaining authenticity in the face of profitability. To reconcile this problem, many influencers employ a self-knowledge of themselves to articulate an online ‘self’ that is consistent with their interior ‘self’. This is an **articulation** of the self not a creation. Since this element is in alignment with their interior ‘self’, influencers manage to produce content they consider as sincere and authentic. On the other hand, aspects of the private ‘self’ that the individual does not desire sharing, such as where they live, or who their partner is, are selectively excluded from content to maintain the online personal brand.

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