

How Does the Authenticity of Influencers on Xiaohongshu Affect GenZ's Trust in Beauty Brands in China?

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Abstract. In this study, we examine how authenticity of beauty influencers on Xiaohongshu influences Chinese Gen Z consumers' trust. Grounded on a five-dimensional authenticity framework and 20 in-depth interviews with Gen Z users, we discover that trust is accumulated in a hierarchical "Trust Pyramid" model: when foundation of Integrity and Transparency is missing, trust will instantly collapse; Expertise and Originality are the main pillars to build trust depth; Connectedness is the trust catalyst when the foundation is established. Furthermore, we discover that two behaviors of "pointing out shortcomings" and "long-term testing" are converted into trust signals for establishing long-term trust for Chinese influencers and brands.

Keywords: Influencer Authenticity, Gen Z, Consumer Trust, Trust Pyramid.

1. Introduction

In the digital era of China, consumers discover and evaluate beauty products through social commerce, and Xiaohongshu has gained prominence. With over 300 million monthly active users, the platform is highly active among Gen Z, who comprise nearly 60% of all interactions with beauty products online. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z trust influencer-generated content over traditional advertising and find authenticity in disclosure of product pros and cons, alignment of personal use and promotion, and a lack of hard-sell advertising. These aspects of authenticity resonate with a broader shift among Gen Z toward valuing authenticity over mere visibility — a shift documented in recent generational studies [1].

Hughes et al. found that influencer professionalism and the broader platform environment have a synergistic effect, jointly influencing consumer engagement [2]. This underscores the importance of contextual, platform-specific analysis when studying influencer marketing effectiveness. Moreover, relevant research on digital-era consumer trust shows that perceived authenticity, information transparency, and content quality significantly shape consumers' willingness to adopt product recommendations (e.g., via influencers) — yet the mechanics of how authenticity on a localized platform like Xiaohongshu translates into consumer trust remain under-explored.

Thus, despite growing attention to authenticity's importance in consumer decision-making, there is a lack of systematic and in-depth investigation in the specific context of Xiaohongshu. Given

generational shifts (toward authenticity) and empirical evidence from other social-media platforms that influencer credibility can positively influence purchase intention and brand loyalty [3,4], our study seeks to answer the fundamental question: How does authenticity of influencers on Xiaohongshu affect Chinese Gen Z consumers' trust in beauty products? Specifically, we decompose authenticity into five dimensions — Expertise, Connectedness, Originality, Integrity, and Transparency — to examine how influencers practice authenticity, how consumers perceive it, and how it converts into trust. Our goal is to provide both theoretical insight and practical recommendations for influencer marketing strategies in China.

2. Literature review

With the emergence of social media, influencer marketing has emerged as the primary way for brands to reach consumers. Marketers are employing influencers for product marketing, and the spending on influencer marketing is expected to increase [5]. Consumer trust in influencer content is facing great threats. Almost half of influencers are regarded as "inauthentic" and more than one-third of consumers believe influencers are not honest [6]. In this context, an "authenticity crisis" occurs and greatly hinders the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Both academia and industry begin to question the composition and mechanism of "authenticity".

The effectiveness of influencer marketing largely relies on consumers' trust. When consumers evaluate an influencer as authentic, their effectiveness, brand attitude and purchase intention will be greatly enhanced [5]. On the contrary, fake or commercialized content not only causes user drop-off, but also may spread negative word-of-mouth widely and hurt brand image [2]. Therefore, understanding and constructing authenticity is not only important for the effectiveness of an influencer's personal image, but also key for the success of a brand's long-term marketing.

In the past, researchers studied authenticity from single perspective, either consumer or influencer's own view, and few studies analyzed cognitive misalignment among multiple stakeholders (brands, marketing agencies as well as influencers) in a systematic way [6]. Duffek et al. [6] employed assemblage theory and argued that authenticity is not an intrinsic attribute of an influencer but a contextualized outcome co-created by influencer, brand, consumer and marketing agencies. They further deconstructed authenticity into five operational attributes: "Expertise, Connectedness, Originality, Integrity, and Transparency". The theoretical framework of this study offers a basis for further systematic study on authenticity.

Based on the above discussion and theoretical foundation, this literature review further systematically analyzes the construction mechanism of influencer authenticity and its impact on consumers' trust from the following five dimensions.

2.1. Expertise

Expertise denotes the knowledge and skills an influencer possesses in an industry [6]. Research indicates expertise reduces information asymmetry and is the basis for establishing market trust [6]. In the beauty field, influencer behaviors such as ingredient analysis, product usage, and comparative tests increase consumer trust in beauty product information [5]. For this reason, content on Xiaohongshu such as "professional review" receives approximately 50% more trust than daily sharing [5]. However, expertise can also be abused. As stated by Duffek et al. [6], some influencers manufacture a "false image of expertise" by forging credentials or misusing professional terms, which misleads consumers and lowers the authenticity of the entire market. Duffek et al. [3] point out that although brands and marketing agencies value expertise, consumers place more emphasis on

content "consistency" than obtaining formal qualifications of an expert. Therefore, expertise must be used in conjunction with other authenticity attributes.

In terms of Xiaohongshu, influencers with high expertise (e.g., ingredient analysis, professional application methods) will greatly increase Gen Z consumers' trust in beauty products; whereas "pseudo-expertise" not only destroys trust in the individual but may also trigger doubts about the authenticity of the entire market.

2.2. Connectedness

Connectedness indicates the emotional connection between the influencer and the audience. According to the parasocial interaction theory, when the audience believes the influencer is a "reachable other," consumers are more likely to accept the influencer's recommendations [5]. Booth & Matic indicate that authenticity is increased when content shared by influencers shares more "everyday relevance" to the consumer, e.g., a student sharing affordable skincare. Munnukka et al. emphasize that Chinese Gen Z consumers place a particular emphasis on a sense of connection and prefer influencers with life backgrounds similar to their own. For example, an ordinary student sharing a "dormitory skincare routine" is more likely to be trusted than a celebrity recommendation. Duffek et al. [6] warn that connectedness can also be abused. Some influencers deliberately play the role of a "common person" to manipulate consumers into making judgments based on emotion. In this case, consumers will be misled and authenticity is destroyed.

Chinese Gen Z consumers trust influencers who share their life will; however, if the connection is not authentic or is manipulated, it will not only destroy trust but may also lead to active disengagement from consumers.

2.3. Originality

Originality denotes that influencers produce distinctive content by leveraging their personal stories and style. Duffek et al. [6] characterize originality as "the use of story telling and personal experience in presenting content in a way that is consistent with the influencer's style and positioning". Distinctive content not only attracts consumers' attention but also increases the influence influencer personal brand, and thus authenticity. In practice, however, being original often results in conflict with brand script control. According to Hughes et al. [5], brands desire tight control over marketing messages, which leads to content homogenization and a decrease in the influencers' distinctive voice. In addition, the advent of generative AI introduces new challenges to originality. Duffek et al. [6] conclude that if influencers disclose AI use, originality can be maintained; otherwise, it may be detected by audiences as "content copying," and decrease authenticity.

Original content is essential for building consumers, especially Zs authenticity. If influencers can incorporate brand communication into their distinctive narrative style, it will increase authenticity. Otherwise, if content is too scripted, or if influencers fail to disclose AI use, originality will decrease, and trust will diminish.

2.4. Integrity

Brand integrity denotes that influencers are driven by intrinsic motivation and focus on consumers interests. According to Duffek et al. [6], one of the most valuable attributes for consumers is integrity. Once an influencer is perceived as "mercenary," consumers immediately lose trust.

According to Wang et al., when asked what standard they use to evaluate the authenticity of beauty recommendations made by influencers, nearly 80% of Chinese respondents indicated that it is "integrity." Interestingly, Duffek et al. [6] put forward the counterintuitive phenomenon of "transparent opportunism": when influencers humoredly or self-deprecatingly admit the economic benefits of a collaboration, their authenticity may increase. However, if not used carefully, this strategy may decrease authenticity still.

Integrity is the most valuable dimension for Chinese Gen Z beauty consumers; if beauty influencers disclose product merit and demerit, it will increase consumer trust. A lack of integrity not only decreases personal credibility, but may lead to widespread distrust in the market.

2.5. Transparency

Transparency forces influencers to disclose their commercial collaborations, such that consumers can easily distinguish true sharing from commercial promotion. Dwivedi et al. emphasize that undisclosed sponsorship distorts market information, whereas clear labeling improves the accuracy of authenticity judgments. Choi & Rifon found that clear sponsorship labels can improve the accuracy of authenticity judgments by more than 50%. Nevertheless, transparency is still weak in practice. Li et al. found that fewer than 1/3 of collaborative posts on Xiaohongshu are clearly labeled as sponsorship. Most posts make vague statements (e.g., "Thanks for the brand support") or simply make no disclosure at all. Content draws consumers between advertisement and true sharing and makes them all of it. Duffek et al. [6] also emphasize that transparency is an important link for brands and influencers to co-build authenticity. If brands wish for influencers to provide genuine, balanced evaluations (including the deficiencies of the product), it will not only raise the authenticity of the influencer but also help to build the authenticity of the brand.

Transparent disclosure of collaboration and sponsorship will have a positive impact on consumer trust [2]. On the Xiaohongshu platform, posts that are clearly labeled as ads will make consumers perceive the influencer as more honest and authentic, whereas no disclosure will make consumers lose trust in the influencer and the entire ecosystem of Xiaohongshu.

2.6. Summary

Based on the five dimensions of Expertise, Connectedness, Originality, Integrity, and Transparency, the authenticity of influencer marketing can be systematically constructed and evaluated. These five attributes are not only correlated but also involve cognitive alignment/misalignment among different stakeholders [3]. Brands and influencers as well as marketing agencies need to co-build a sense of authenticity in content creation, partnership selection, and information disclosure, such that they can gain and sustain trust from Gen Z consumers. Future studies should extend this line of research and explore the interaction and relative importance of these dimensions on local platforms such as Xiaohongshu, providing more specific suggestions for influencer marketing practice.

3. Methodology

Based on the analysis of interview data, this study shows that the process of Gen Z consumers establishing trust in Xiaohongshu beauty influencers is an evaluative process which is multi-dimensional and careful. Besides, this study confirms the significance of the five dimensions of Expertise, Connectedness, Originality, Integrity and Transparency. The significance of these five dimensions orders well and this study calls it "Trust Pyramid" model. That is, compared with other

dimensions, Integrity and Transparency are more basic and certain while Expertise and Originality are more important and valued to construct more depth and height of trust and Connectedness is like the lubricant of emotion to increase the effect of trust.

(a)Its Exploratory Natures: The essence of this research is to answer the “how” and “why”—that is, how authenticity is perceived and converted into trust. Qualitative methods are good at answering the questions of “why” and “how” regarding people’s motivation, attitude, and decision-making process leading to their behavior, which is complementary to the quantitative methods that measure “how much” and “what”.

(b)Dealing with the Subjectivity and Situatedness of “Authenticity”: As reviewed in the literature review section, authenticity is not a personal trait but is negotiated by the audience in a certain context. Through in-depth interviews, we can immerse ourselves in the field of Gen Z consumers and learn how they evaluate and accept or reject influencers’ Expertise, Connectedness, etc. in the certain context of Xiaohongshu Beauty Content Ecological System.

(c)Covering Deep Cognitive Frameworks: Questionnaire might not be able to cover respondents’ spontaneous evaluation criteria they use, especially the ones that they have not been prompted. Through open-ended questions and follow-up probing, we might be able to discover the dimensions or indicators that Gen Z consumers use to evaluate authenticity, which might not have been covered by literature.

3.1. Participant selection criteria and sample composition

This study employs purposive sampling to ensure the sample provides information-rich cases relevant to the research question. Specific selection criteria are as follows:

Core Qualifications:

- (a). Aged between 18-26, belonging to the Gen Z demographic.
- (b). Active Xiaohongshu users, with a usage frequency of no less than 3 times per week.
- (c). Regularly and actively browse beauty-related content on Xiaohongshu.

Stratified Sampling Dimensions: To obtain diverse perspectives, participants were recruited based on two dimensions: "Beauty Consumption Sophistication" and "Content Interaction Depth," categorized into four ideal types, ultimately forming a diverse sample of 20 participants:

Beginners: Underdeveloped makeup skills, purchasing decisions are readily influenced, Standing for users in the starting phase of trust - b.

Full - fledged Consumers: Fixed consumption habits and some product - related knowledge, representing average users having critical thinking c.

Lovers and Experts: Have ample beauty knowledge or professional aptitudes, representing users with the greatest trust t.

Content Generators and Related Field Gurus: Including beauty influencers and persons from other relevant professional areas (e.g., Performing art spheres, new media, film - making), who can furnish “insider” insights from the angles of content production or professional p.

And this sampling structure offers two good points: For one thing, it takes in the general viewpoints of ordinary consumers, and what's more, it brings together in - depth outlooks from an expert's a. In this way, the research can attain a more well - rounded and multi - dimensional knowledge of the question we aim to probe i.

3.2. Interview protocol design: centered on the five-dimensional framework

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning a core protocol based on the research questions and literature review was used, but flexible probing and in-depth discussion were conducted based on respondents' answers during the actual interviews. The protocol was tightly centered on the five dimensions of "Expertise, Connectedness, Originality, Integrity, Transparency":

(a). Warm-up Session (approx. 5 minutes)

Understand the participant's Xiaohongshu usage habits (frequency, main purposes).

Types of beauty influencers they follow and how these have evolved.

The actual impact of influencer recommendations on their purchase decisions.

(b). Core Question Modules (2-3 core questions per dimension)

Expertise: "What details make you think an influencer is 'professional'?" / "Have you encountered moments that made you doubt an influencer's expertise? Please give an example."

Connectedness: "What kind of influencers make you feel 'similar to me' or 'relatable'?" / "What do you think about influencers who seem to be 'pretending to be ordinary'?"

Originality: "What kind of 'different' content feels authentic and credible to you?" / "Have you come across content that is clearly 'copied'? How did it make you feel?"

Integrity: "If an influencer proactively points out a product's shortcomings when recommending it, do you trust them more?" / "If you discovered that an influencer you liked hid a product issue, what would you think and do?"

Transparency: "When an influencer clearly states 'This is a brand-sponsored promotion,' does it change your judgment of the content's authenticity?" / "What is your opinion on vague statements like 'Thanks for the brand support'?"

(c). Closing Session

Ask participants if they have any other important factors for judging influencer authenticity to add.

Thank them for their participation.

3.3. Data analysis and coding process

All interview recordings were transcribed into text with consent. Subsequently, we used "Thematic Analysis" to systematically code and analyze the text, following this process:

(a). Familiarization: Repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to become immersed and familiar with the content.

(b). Generating Initial Codes: Preliminary labeling of meaningful content segments in the text based on the research questions and interview protocol. This step employed both theory-driven coding (using the five dimensions as pre-set codes) and remained open to new concepts emerging from the data, conducting data-driven coding. For example, coding "she explains why this part should be done this way" as "Expertise - Explaining Principles," and coding "looks like standardized brand copy" as "Lack of Originality - Homogenization."

(c). Searching for Themes: Collating and aggregating similar initial codes to form more abstract themes. For example, aggregating codes like "Expertise - Explaining Principles," "Expertise - Methodological Transparency," "Expertise - Acknowledging Blind Spots" into the theme "Multiple Manifestations of Expertise: From Knowledge Transmission to Method Construction."

(d). Reviewing Themes: Checking if these themes work well in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, and cross-validating across different participants to ensure theme stability and representativeness. Simultaneously, examining the relationships between the five core dimensions

and attempting to construct an overall theoretical model (i.e., the “Trust Pyramid” model proposed later).

(e). Defining and Naming Themes: Precisely defining and naming each theme to clearly and accurately reflect the core content of the aggregated codes.

(f). Writing the Report: Organizing the analysis results into a coherent narrative and embedding abundant, anonymized participant quotes as evidence, ultimately presenting the research findings as shown below.

Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)	Gen Z's Trusting (Gen Z's Trusting)
1. Expertise	1.1 Professional Performance	1. Knowledge: Demonstrates explicit expertise using analogies like “being like a doctor” and “not being like a lawyer” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I know what I’m talking about”). 2. Professionalism: Displays the proper formal workplace (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 3. Credibility: Shows the ability to be trusted (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 4. Reliability: Shows the ability to be trusted (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”).	Focus on whether bloggers use their expertise to help others. If they do, they are more likely to be trusted.	Verify the reliability of sources, for instance, they cited by bloggers and check if their content matches their own data/insights.	Accurately identify bloggers’ competencies of expertise, including their professional background, their expertise, and their credibility.	From the perspective of content design, judge if bloggers accurately display bloggers’ past posts and if the content is credible, the blogger’s performance is high.			
2. Connectedness	2.1 Unprofessional Performance	1. Unprofessional: Displays unprofessional behavior, such as “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional.” 2. Unprofessional: Displays unprofessional behavior, such as “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional.” 3. Unprofessional: Displays unprofessional behavior, such as “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional.” 4. Unprofessional: Displays unprofessional behavior, such as “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional.”	Focus on whether bloggers use their expertise to help others. If they do, they are more likely to be trusted.	Verify the reliability of sources, for instance, they cited by bloggers and check if their content matches their own data/insights.	Accurately identify bloggers’ competencies of expertise, including their professional background, their expertise, and their credibility.	From the perspective of content design, judge if bloggers accurately display bloggers’ past posts and if the content is credible, the blogger’s performance is high.			
3. Originality	3.1 Effective Behavior	1. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 2. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 3. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 4. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”).	Focus on whether bloggers use their expertise to help others. If they do, they are more likely to be trusted.	Verify the reliability of sources, for instance, they cited by bloggers and check if their content matches their own data/insights.	Accurately identify bloggers’ competencies of expertise, including their professional background, their expertise, and their credibility.	From the perspective of content design, judge if bloggers accurately display bloggers’ past posts and if the content is credible, the blogger’s performance is high.			
4. Integrity	4.1 High Originality Performance	1. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 2. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 3. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 4. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”).	Focus on whether bloggers use their expertise to help others. If they do, they are more likely to be trusted.	Verify the reliability of sources, for instance, they cited by bloggers and check if their content matches their own data/insights.	Accurately identify bloggers’ competencies of expertise, including their professional background, their expertise, and their credibility.	From the perspective of content design, judge if bloggers accurately display bloggers’ past posts and if the content is credible, the blogger’s performance is high.			
5. Transparency	5.1 Low Originality Performance	1. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 2. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 3. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”). 4. Identity/Content: Matching: Focus on whether bloggers’ content is “effective” and “effective” (e.g., “I’m a doctor, I’m a lawyer, I’m a professional”).	Focus on whether bloggers use their expertise to help others. If they do, they are more likely to be trusted.	Verify the reliability of sources, for instance, they cited by bloggers and check if their content matches their own data/insights.	Accurately identify bloggers’ competencies of expertise, including their professional background, their expertise, and their credibility.	From the perspective of content design, judge if bloggers accurately display bloggers’ past posts and if the content is credible, the blogger’s performance is high.			

Figure 1. Interview report

4. Findings

Based on the analysis of interview data, this study shows that the process of Gen Z consumers establishing trust in Xiaohongshu beauty influencers is an evaluative process which is multi-dimensional and careful. Besides, this study confirms the significance of the five dimensions of Expertise, Connectedness, Originality, Integrity and Transparency. The significance of these five dimensions orders well and this study calls it “Trust Pyramid” model. That is, compared with other dimensions, Integrity and Transparency are more basic and certain while Expertise and Originality are more important and valued to construct more depth and height of trust and Connectedness is like the lubricant of emotion to increase the effect of trust.

4.1. Expertise

Gen Z's expectations for expertise have moved beyond basic factual accuracy to focus more on the influencer’s ability to translate professional knowledge into understandable, applicable wisdom for the user.

The study found that respondents generally rejected “pseudo-expertise” characterized by jargon-stuffing. They highly valued influencers who could perform “knowledge simplification.” For instance, translating complex ingredient principles into everyday analogies makes abstract concepts

concrete, as university student Xiao A said: “Some influencers are full of chemical terms I don't understand, just trying to sound sophisticated. But if she can throw in an analogy like 'this one's like pouring water into your skin, that one's like wearing a coat to shield against the wind,' I can tell it's clear and professional,” said one netizen. To be able to “simplify” knowledge is one of the signs of a true expert and a genuine heart for the masses. “Methodological transparency” is another way experts build trust. If skin type, location and temperature at the time of test, and primer used for test are all disclosed, then the conclusion is “reproducible”. When beauty Xiao D talked about her beauty experience from the perspective of a creator, he said, “when applying foundation, I will always tell my skin type, location, temperature at that time...and what primer I was using...so as to let followers feel if they can relate to my experience or not. This is a kind of responsibility,” said the creator. This way, users can feel that the method is “safe” and “responsible”. “The highest level of expertise is to establish a knowledge system. That is, to explain the logic of skincare or the aesthetics of makeup in a holistic way, rather than simply recommending products,” said the netizen.

When users feel that the experts are adding value to them like this, they will consider them reliable “consultants”. Any kinds of hype or outright mistakes will make users doubt their expertise and the trust will immediately disintegrate.

4.2. Connectedness

Not only do they look the same, but they also feel the same—this isn't what we mean by connectedness. Research indicates that mature users consume connectedness from influencers not only as recognition of their identity, but also as situational understanding and emotional resonance.

For beauty newbies, these identity tags can quickly make a connection. University student Xiao A said, “I personally really love influencers whose [title] is 'for students,' 'for yellow skin or black skin,' 'for puffy eyelids.’ When I see them say 'on a budget,' it feels so familiar.” This matching by identity tags helps to quickly establish a connection. For more mature users, they value “situational resonance” and “struggle resonance.” For example, office worker Xiao B's needs are more specific: “I now pay more attention to influencers similar to my skin type and age group, like 'combination/oily skin office workers,' '25+ Vitamin C routine.’ Content-wise, I value in-depth reviews and ingredient analysis more.” A respondent with a performing arts background offered a unique perspective, stating that resonance lies not in shared identity but in the “emotional undertone” being infectious: “For example, an influencer sharing an 'interview makeup' video conveys not just steps but a sense of 'believe in me, you can do it' confidence and strength. I trust her because I'm moved by that emotion.”

Successful connectedness can greatly generate trust, making users feel the influencer is “one of us” However, one of the most critical findings of this study is that “persona mismatch” is the most fatal strategy in building connectedness. Almost all respondents expressed aversion to this, noting that when an influencer's lifestyle clearly contradicts their recommendations, it creates a strong sense of hypocrisy. Xiao B's criticism was pointed: “When I see someone living in a luxury downtown apartment, using thousand-yuan creams, and saying 'this is great value,' our definitions of 'value' are not on the same planet.” Once the persona is seen through, it not only fails to build trust but triggers negative emotions, leading to user disengagement.

4.3. Originality

In an environment saturated with homogeneous content, originality is core for influencers to shed the "marketing parrot" image and earn a trust premium.

Respondents widely regarded “long-termism” content as the litmus test for authenticity. Project Manager Xiao I emphasized: “I particularly enjoy ‘long-term follow-up tests’ and ‘empty container diaries.’ For example, an influencer recording skin condition using a specific anti-aging serum for a month straight... content that requires time investment has a high cost of faking and is more convincing.” Such content is assigned high trust weight due to the significant time cost and low potential for deception. Additionally, possessing a strong personal style or unique content format is seen as high-level originality. Xiao E referred to this distinctiveness as “authorship”: “Just like films have a director's style, an influencer's content should have their strong personal stylistic imprint. This kind of strong personal expression cannot be copied, hence it feels Exceptionally real.” Thus, originality is a crucial force against internet content saturation and for building a personal brand pillar.

Original content directly translates to higher trust. On the contrary, “homogenized content” can lead to double distrust. Xiao A believes that if the content is homogenized, users will not only lose trust in the individual Internet celebrities but also in the “over-marketed” products, and will adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Xiao B believes that monotonous content will make her feel bored, especially if it's a new product launch, and one Internet celebrity after another reads the same lines, shoots the same scenes, and praises the same viewpoints. It's just like copying and pasting.

4.4. Integrity

Integrity scores the highest weight and zero tolerance among the five; all 20 participants considered that integrity is the bottom line that decides whether or not to survive in the trust relationship.

“Clearly point out the product’s bad sides” was recognized by all kinds of respondents as the most positive signal to gain users’ trust. This feature is viewed as strong evidence that this influencer is more likely to stand on “sharing” than “commercial interest”. Influencer Xiao A said: “There are influencers in my memory who are legendary! For example, if she says “this lipstick color is very beautiful, but it’s a bit drying, don’t use it if your lips are chapped”, I feel that she is really sharing her experience.” Influencer Xiao D made a pragmatic explanation: “This is basic! My firewall!” Point out flaws has two advantages:” make my followers trust me more, it is accurate filtering of users, it reduces the reputational risk.” From the view of narrative theory, it is more realistic to honestly admit the bad side than to play a perfect role.

But one of the most important findings is that if the influencer conceals the product’s bad side (especially the safety issue) is regarded as an “unpardonable betrayal”. The response from Xiao C was extremely firm: “This is a principle issue. I have no way to compromise. Personally, I think hiding the safety issue is the same as commercial fraud.” In this case, if the influencer hides the product’s bad side, it will cause the trust relationship to collapse immediately and irreversibly. Xiao B described the process of trust relationship breakdown: “I would unfollow her immediately. In addition, I would re-evaluate all products that she had recommended before. This feeling of insecurity will last for a long time.” In this case, it will trigger users’ retrospective questioning of all the influencer’s previous recommendations, and may induce users to warn others publicly.

4.5. Transparency

Generation Z thoroughly understands the need for influencers to go commercial; they require transparency, not merely “passion - motivated” content. Transparency is the basic deal for upholding a healthy “performer - audience r.”

Explicitly marking content as “ad” or “sponsored” is generally regarded as a professional ethic honoring users' right to know. Xiao F noted: “I fully grasp that influencers need to monetize, so clear labeling is basic professional v. When I come across the label, I adjust my expectations rather than rejecting it right o.” Therefore, advertising labels do not completely deny the value of the content; some users even recognize this kind of candor. Applying vague expressions such as “Thanks for the brand support” is often regarded as deceptive and unethical behavior. Influencer Xiao D clearly had a principle. “All business collaborations must be clearly marked. This is a fundamental principle and the minimum respect for fans and the brand.” The use of ambiguous language can directly lead to complete suspicion of the motives of Internet celebrities, and its destructive power far exceeds what most Internet celebrities predict.

4.6. The “trust pyramid” model

In a nutshell, the central finding of this research is that these five dimensions are not side - by - side but form an obvious, internally consistent “Trust Pyramid” m. This model not only describes the constituents of authenticity but also reveals an implicit, hierarchical decision - making logic adopted by Gen Z consumers when appraising influencers, going from foundational requirements to more ambitious aspirations, from rationally - based to emotionally - tinged.

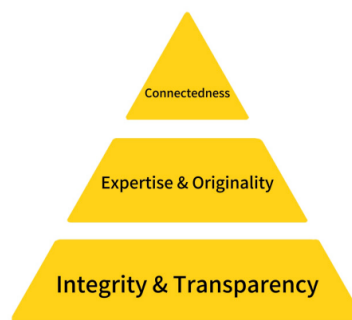


Figure 2. Probit model

(a). Foundation Tier: Integrity and Transparency are prerequisites for t. Their non - existence stops trust from e. These two elements together make up the absolute cornerstone of t., whose core lies in averting r. In the information-asymmetric beauty consumption landscape, Gen Z first needs to confirm if an influencer is “safe.” Here, “Integrity” answers the question: “Are your recommendations based on my best interests?” Concealing product issues, especially safety concerns, is seen as the most fundamental betrayal, directly touching the consumer's safety bottom line. “Transparency” answers the question: “Is your communication stance with me honest?” Vague collaboration labeling is seen as a violation of Consumers’ right to know and a deliberate manipulation of information.

These two dimensions have a “zero-tolerance” effect. As respondents Xiao C and Xiao J noted, once problems are detected here, trust “completely shatters” and is “irreparable.” Therefore, they are the “license to be trusted” that grants an influencer the qualification to be considered by Gen Z. If the foundation is weak, no matter how dazzling the upper-layer expert content or how moving the emotional connection, the entire structure of trust cannot be built, or may even collapse entirely. An influencer lacking integrity or transparency will have their “expertise” viewed as a tool for deception and their “originality” as packaging for fraud. As makeup artist Xiao J pointed out, “expert”

recommendations lacking integrity have zero credibility. Thus, a solid foundation is the prerequisite for the value of the pillar layer to be interpreted positively.

(b) Pillar Layer (Core): Expertise and Originality. These two factors directly determine the depth and height of trust, and they are also the key to the core value that influencers can provide. Once Gen Z confirms that an influencer is worthy of basic trust, their focus shifts to "whether this person is valuable" — and these two pillars are exactly what decide how deep and how high that trust can go.

Concretely, "Expertise" offers "practical value." Take for instance, via trustworthy knowledge and practical methods, it assists consumers in reducing decision - making uncertainty and lowering trial - and - error costs; in this regard, it functions as the "rational pillar" of t. Meanwhile, "Originality" provides "memorable value." Nowadays, there's an overwhelming amount of content everywhere., and originality makes influencers stand out from the swarm of information and become an irreplaceable source. What's more, originality further indicates if an influencer is capable of independent thinking and creative content creation — this is the "charismatic pillar" of t.

Basically, these two pillars resolve a crucial query: "Why should I listen to you?" This is not something that can be easily achieved. It requires a long-term investment of time and gradual accumulation, and then a core competitiveness will be formed, acting as the "core backbone" of an influencer's personal b. The tougher these two "pillars" are, the greater the trust level an influencer can retain, and their potential influence will, of course, be g.

(c) Connection Layer (Catalyst): Co. Its main task is to act as an emotional catalyst, facilitating trust to form more rapidly and with greater depth, however, its working depends on the stability of the Foundation Layer and Pillar La. Connectedness is at the peak of the entire trust pyramid; it can't generate trust a., and it is a highly effective "emotional catalyst", which enables the trust already formed at the foundation layer and the pillar layer to grow at a faster rate, plunge deeper, and become more r.

If an influencer combines honesty with transparency, while being both proficient and one - of - a - kind, connectedness has the ability to transform that more rational form of trust into a "preference" with an affectionate and warm touch. This makes users think the influencer isn't just a "knowledgeable expert" but more like an "understanding friend", and that then significantly improves users' stickiness and loyalty to the influencer. However, the catalytic effect of correlation relies entirely on the stability of the lower layer. Attempting to forcibly create relevance(for example, "feigning normalcy" on a weak foundation (e.g., lacking rectitude) and hollow buttresses (e.g., lacking expertise) will backfire as expected. As the general feedback from respondents, this "false connection" brings to light and magnifies the influencer's inauthenticity, hastening the breakdown of trust.

The model unveils Gen Z's intricate trust decision - making logic: First, rely on Integrity and Transparency to judge whether an influencer is "s." Next, utilize Expertise and Originality to assess whether they are "v." Lastly, via Connectedness, sensing whether they are "pertinent to m." Only influencers passing these three levels of appraisal can win the long - term and firm trust of Gen Z.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Discussion

Not only do the results of this study verify the feasibility and validity of applying the five-dimensional authenticity framework proposed by Duffek et al. [6] in the realm of Xiaohongshu

beauty marketing, but they also further extend this framework based on the perspective of Gen Z consumers and reveal the intrinsic and hierarchical dynamic relationship among the five dimensions.

Firstly, our research not only further confirms the independence of the five dimensions and their significant impact on consumer trust but, more importantly, the innovative contribution of this study lies in the fact that the five dimensions are not parallel as assumed by Duffek et al. [6]. However, our study further advances this logic: if an influencer is highly expert and original but found lacking in Integrity and Transparency (e.g. hiding issues, vague labels), consumers will definitely not hesitate to withdraw trust based on the "zero-tolerance" logic. That is, in the Gen Z trust system, the moral dimension prevails over the competence dimension.

Secondly, this study further refines the construction mechanism of "Connectedness". Literature often simply treats connectedness as "similarity". Our research further reveals that for increasingly savvy and diverse Gen Z, the essence of connectedness is "value relevance" and "emotional resonance". In particular, we further deeply reveal the fatality of the "faking ordinary" strategy. This is essentially a typical manifestation of the "false connection" warned by Duffek et al. [6]. When the real life of an influencer creates a big gap with her/his crafted "ordinary" image, it not only fails to construct connection but, when being regarded as a "performance" and "deceit", will evoke strong trust backlash. This supports Duffek et al.'s [6] view that authenticity is negotiated but will incur severe consequences when this construction is judged "inauthentic" by consumers.

Thirdly, this study further reinforces the core position of Originality in the algorithm-driven content ecosystem. Our research finds that homogenized content not only bores users but also makes them more alert to the "marketing assembly line" and therefore trigger negative product impressions. This is consistent with Hughes et al.'s [5] concern about brand control causing content homogenization. Furthermore, our research also finds that "long-termism" content (e.g. empty container diaries) has become a new, powerful signal of originality and a currency of trust due to its high cost of fabrication. This provides a strong empirical basis for influencers to fight for their creative freedom and show their personal style in commercial collaborations.

Duffek et al. [6] have an intriguing concept of "transparent opportunism". In our research, this is reflected in the fact that Gen Z is more tolerant (or even respectful) of influencers who are clearly marked ads. They do not reject commercialization, but they reject deception. Only when influencers maintain the "Transparency" contract, can they enjoy the space for "Integrity" expression (e.g. discovering flaws) in the commercial context. This interesting consumer mentality demonstrates that in China, straightforward commercialization is more likely to gain long-term trust than "pure sharing" in disguise.

5.2. Conclusion

This study attempts to examine how the authenticity of influencers on Xiaohongshu influences Chinese Gen Z consumers' trust in beauty products. Based on in-depth interviews with ten respondents from different cities and families, the study draws the following four conclusions.

First, the level structure of authenticity exists. In terms of how Chinese Gen Z understand the authenticity of beauty influencers, there appears an explicit "Trust Pyramid" structure. Among them, Integrity and Transparency are the soil of trust, Expertise and Originality are the supports of trust, and Connectedness is the fuel of trust. This level structure of authenticity offers a new theoretical model to explain the trust decision-making logic of Gen Z.

Second, authenticity is observable behaviors. Trust does not emerge from a vacuum, but from a sequence of observable behaviors displayed by the beauty influencer. That is, pointing out shortcomings for practice of Integrity, empty container diaries for embodiment of Originality,

methodological transparency for display of Expertise, and clear labeling for practice of Transparency. These behaviors are the objective basis for Gen Z to make judgments on the authenticity of beauty influencers.

Finally, trust consumes time but spreads instant. Influencers need to accumulate their credibility points in a long-term and consistent way across the five behaviors, but one serious failure in either practice of Integrity or practice of Transparency would lead to instantaneous overall accumulation of depletion in trust assets and instant widespread negative word-of-mouth.

In sum, within the scope of study in this paper, the authenticity of beauty influencers on Xiaohongshu is a system formed by multi-dimensional and multi-layered behavioral signals. The Chinese Gen Z consumers are active and shrewd decoders who use a sophisticated evaluation mechanism to turn these behavioral signals into different levels of trust. For influencers and brands, only by systematic and sincere investment can they continue to win across all the five layers of the "Trust Pyramid".

5.3. Theoretical contribution and practical implications

The main theoretical contribution of this study is the extension and development of authenticity framework of Duffek et al. [6]. Through the "Trust Pyramid" model, we show the non-parallel relationships and internal logic among the five dimensions, which provides a more fine-grained analytical tool for further authenticity research in specific context (such as social commerce, Gen Z consumption).

For Beauty Influencers/MCNs. They should give up the thinking of short cut traffic and adopt a "trust asset management" model to win the long term. Specifically, they should take Integrity and Transparency as the bottom red lines that never can be broken; they should improve Expertise and Originality by going deep into vertical fields and being persistent with long termism production; they should share sincerely, avoid fake personae and make emotional resonance with fans.

For Brands. When brands select influencers as their partners, they should not be limited in evaluating influencers by the number of followers. Specifically, they should focus on the reputation of influencers in aspects of Integrity, Transparency and Expertise, and respect and support influencers' originality and honest reviews. Brands should cooperate with influencers to produce marketing information that is "right and effective" --- and we call this win-win-win for brands, influencers and consumers.

For Platform (XHS). Xiamohongshu should improve its algorithms and rules. Specifically, it should recommend and reward those influencers or contents that are better in aspects of Integrity, Transparency, Expertise and Originality, and punish harder those behaviors like vague labeling, and it can improve credibility of contents on Xiamohongshu and the community environment.

5.4. Limitations and future research directions

This study also has the following limitations. First, although the sample is diverse, the characteristics of the sample limit the applicability of the study's conclusions. Future research may examine the validity of the study's conclusions in large-scale quantitativestudies. Second, the respondents were from first- and second-tier cities; future research may have more respondents from lower-tier cities.

Future research may extend this study in the following directions. Use longitudinal tracking to extend the relationship between dynamic changes in influencer authenticity and changes in

consumer trust; Extend this study's research model to other consumer categories (such as apparel, maternal and child products, digital goods) for testing generalization.

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