

Anca BROASCĂ*
Meda MUCUNDORFEANU**
Delia Cristina BALABAN***

Between Autonomy and Control: Influencer-Marketers Relations and Campaign Development

Abstract

Social media influencers have complex advertising functions as content creators and managers of their social media channels. The present research investigates the interaction processes between marketers and social media influencers during the advertising campaign's development within the principal-agent theory's theoretical framework. This study contributes to the research on managing strategic influencer communication by extending existing knowledge with insights from influencers' perspectives. Our method consisted of in-depth interviews with seventeen social media influencers from a European country, which were thematically analyzed. Respondents evaluated marketers' simple, bureaucratic, and conservative control through long-term relationships with brands and influencers' perspectives of the relevance of influencer-brand fit. Results unveiled influencers' efforts to maintain creative autonomy, foster positive audience reception, and align with the brand's overarching advertising objectives.

Keywords: principal-agent theory; qualitative research; social media influencers; strategic communication

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing witnessed a surge in popularity, particularly among young demographics who prefer authentic content (Lee et al., 2022). The past decade has not only transformed the modes of communication employed by media channels but has also redefined the nature and modalities of viewer interaction with the content they consume (Ye et al., 2021). Social media influencers are enabled by platforms to create and share content and engage with their followers, providing avenues for creative individuals or those with a voice to establish themselves and cultivate audiences (Holiday et al., 2023). Influencers embedded in

* Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, anca.broasca@ubbcluj.ro,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2375-0136>

** Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, mucundorfeanu@fspac.ro,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8842-9551>

*** Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, balaban@fspac.ro,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3509-533X>, corresponding author

several advertising functions, such as brand endorsers and social media managers, make them complex actors in the advertising landscape (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), while creativity has always been a crucial element in the development of an influencer (Brooks et al., 2021). Furthermore, social media influencers aim to enlarge their community of followers and monetize their celebrity status (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

Borchers (2023) argues that influencer marketing campaigns differ from traditional advertising in the level of control marketers have over campaign development and outcomes. Marketers follow the so-called *letting go* paradigm at a declarative level by giving influencers creative freedom (Hoos, 2019). However, previous literature (Wellman et al., 2020) highlighted some limitations to this approach, particularly regarding the control that brands maintain over influencers. This creates tension between marketers, who aim to retain control over campaign development and implementation, and influencers, who seek to preserve their creative freedom in content creation and posting (McMullan et al., 2022). While previous research has largely focused on the marketers' perspective, there is a limited understanding of influencers' viewpoints on their professional relationships (Borchers, 2023).

This study contributes to the research on managing strategic influencer communication (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; McMullan et al., 2022) by extending existing knowledge with insights from influencers' perspectives. It specifically examines the interaction processes between marketers and social media influencers within the theoretical framework of agency theory (Bergen et al., 1992). The study aims to explore influencers' viewpoints on balancing creative autonomy with the need to effectively communicate the brand message as marketers require. Thus, this research seeks to advance the literature on developing influencer advertising campaigns by investigating the relationships among different advertising actors.

2. Theoretical Framework

A clear understanding of the objectives and underlying rationales of all actors involved is essential for analyzing the collaborative dynamics between influencers and marketers. Organizing influencer communication requires balancing formal contractual agreements with more flexible arrangements. In practice, literature often distinguishes between *influencer marketing* and *influencer relations* as two distinct approaches that require careful consideration in collaborations between marketers and influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021). While *influencer marketing* focuses on short-term, campaign-based partnerships aimed at achieving immediate, measurable outcomes through isolated collaborations, *influencer relations* emphasize building long-term, ongoing relationships that foster trust, authenticity, and sustained engagement (Young, 2016). Both approaches are essential and must be managed thoughtfully to ensure successful and balanced influencer-marketer collaborations.

2.1. The Agency Theory

In influencer marketing campaigns, influencers are expected to perform activities on behalf of marketers or brands. The agency theory effectively explains this relationship (Bergen et al., 1992), where influencers act as agents serving the interests of their clients—namely, marketers and brands—while still considering their own interests. The theory encompasses

key elements such as performance monitoring and evaluation, incentive structures, contractual agreements, agency selection, and governance of agents.

The principal-agent framework (Rees, 1985a; 1985b) further illustrates how influencers, acting on behalf of marketers, can create information asymmetries in their relationship. To address the risks posed by these asymmetries, marketers often seek strategies to exert control over influencers (Borchers, 2023). While delegating decision-making authority to the agent can increase efficiency for the principal, it also introduces risks due to the principal's incomplete knowledge of the agent's behavior, which the agent might leverage for personal gain.

An agency relationship arises whenever one party (the principal) relies on another party (the agent) to perform actions on their behalf. This framework applies to employment relationships, where the hiring firm or a manager acting on behalf of the owners is the principal, and the employee is the agent (Bergen et al., 1992). Similarly, in the case of hiring an influencer, the same norm holds true, with the marketer or brand serving as the principal and the influencer as the agent acting in the brand's interest to achieve desired outcomes.

A similar problematic is explored by Stoldt et al. (2019), who introduce the concept of structured flexibility to describe how intermediaries facilitate relationships between brands and influencers. While their study focuses on the travel and tourism industry, their findings align with the principal-agent perspective, illustrating how formalized yet adaptable agreements help balance brand control with influencer autonomy. Their work highlights ongoing tensions in influencer labor and governance, which are also relevant to the present study.

Building on this, Shen et al. (2024) examine the role of contractual structures in influencer marketing, further demonstrating how contract design impacts influencer behavior. Their study finds that participation-based contracts are more effective for high-quality products, while sales-based contracts work better for low-quality ones. However, for moderately rated products, neither contract yields optimal outcomes, highlighting inefficiencies in influencer marketing. These findings reinforce the principal-agent perspective, emphasizing the role of incentive structures in mitigating agency problems and aligning influencer actions with brand objectives.

Extending these discussions into the political domain, Borchers (2025) explores how political communicators perceive collaborations with influencers. While influencers are seen as valuable for informing, interacting with, and mobilizing voters, challenges arise in adapting influencer marketing strategies to political campaigns, particularly regarding message complexity and expectations that influencers should work for free. These insights further illustrate the broader implications of influencer governance and contract negotiations, demonstrating that influencer marketing extends beyond commercial contexts into political communication, where similar tensions between structure, autonomy, and agency emerge.

2.2. Marketers

The agency problem arises from several challenges that stem from imbalances in information between the principal and the agent, which can manifest throughout different stages of their relationship—during the selection process, after signing the contract, and throughout the collaboration (Bernhold & Wiesweg, 2022). Initially, before any contract is signed, the principal often has limited knowledge about the agent's true capabilities, intentions, or overall suitability for the task. The principal might choose an agent who is not the best fit for the role and who may not deliver optimal results. In the first stage of the collaboration, selecting

the right influencers is crucial. Studies based on interviews with industry professionals identify a wide range of selection criteria, including the fit between influencers and brands or marketed products, influencers' popularity, self-branding, reliability, audience composition, content tonality, and pricing for paid collaborations (Childers et al., 2019). Carefully selecting influencers based on these criteria can enhance the effectiveness of influencer campaigns (Lim et al., 2017).

Once the contract is signed and the working relationship begins, new challenges emerge. The principal may struggle to effectively observe or monitor the agent's efforts and behavior. This inability opens the door for opportunistic behavior, where the agent may act in their own self-interest rather than in the best interest of the principal. There is limited information available about the specifics of the cooperation process between marketers and influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021). According to Childers et al. (2019), legal departments of advertising agencies typically manage disclosure issues with influencers. However, a key challenge reported by marketers is the difficulty in measuring the outcomes of influencer collaborations (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). While some studies suggest that metrics such as impressions, reach, and engagement in the form of comments, likes, and shares are crucial for evaluating influencer performance (Childers et al., 2019), other important key performance indicators include brand awareness, sales, and traffic (Borchers & Enke, 2021). To better align evaluation methods, it is crucial to consider which steps influencers themselves deem most relevant.

Furthermore, over the course of the relationship, the agent's true motivations and priorities may only become apparent after a significant period has passed. Initially, the principal may believe that the agent is aligned with their goals, but as the relationship progresses, the agent's actions might reveal conflicting interests. In such cases, the principal may find it difficult, if not impossible, to influence or change the agent's behavior, especially when there is a high degree of dependency. This is particularly problematic when the principal relies heavily on the agent's specific skills, expertise, or access to resources, which limits the principal's ability to exert control (Picot et al., 1999).

These dynamics create a complex set of risks in principal-agent relationships, where information asymmetries and power imbalances can lead to undesired outcomes. To address these risks, marketers often feel the need to implement various forms of control to align the agent's behavior with their goals. Examining how influencers perceive these controls offers valuable insights into this relationship.

2.3. Strategies for Control in Marketer Practices

Research generally indicates that communication managers should avoid controlling influencers' behavior, as attempts to impose control may undermine the authenticity of influencers and, in turn, reduce the effectiveness of the campaign (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022; McMullan et al., 2022). However, Borchers (2023) contests this perspective by presenting various control mechanisms that communication managers have developed to regulate influencer behavior despite the prevailing paradigm advocating for reduced control. These techniques can be classified into three major categories: simple, bureaucratic, and coercive control. Simple control encompasses predetermined scripts that outline expected influencer behavior, the management of interaction, particularly in the comment section, and the use of approval processes. Technical control is applied through mechanisms such as nudg-

ing, where influencers are invited to participate in events and can choose from a preselected range of products to endorse. Bureaucratic control pertains to formal agreements, such as contracts and briefings. Lastly, concertive control includes feedback, the cultivation of long-term relationships, influencer selection, and ongoing performance evaluation.

McMullan et al. (2022) identified three pivotal considerations that marketers must effectively balance and manage within their relationships with influencers: control, timeframe, and value tension. Control tension pertains to the level of influence wielded by brand managers. It underscores the significance of entrusting influencers to create authentic content that resonates with their audience on the chosen platform. Effective influencer marketing results are often achieved when brands demonstrate trust in influencers' expertise, allowing them creative freedom (Haenlein et al., 2020; McMullan et al., 2022). Marketers should recognize that influencer marketing differs from traditional advertising. Unlike ads, where marketers dictate design and placement, influencer partnerships leverage the influencer's authority and creativity, leading to more authentic social media engagement (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020). Firms should embrace the creativity and engagement of influencers rather than controlling every aspect of the content they produce (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014; Lin et al., 2018).

Timeframe tension highlights the importance of fostering long-term relationships between brands and influencers, emphasizing mutual respect and investment in long-term performance metrics (McMullan et al., 2022). Influencer marketing involves a personal element that differs from traditional business-to-business transactions, such as ad purchases. It requires engagement with individuals who have significant social media followings (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Companies should approach influencers similarly to other key stakeholders, engaging meaningfully and valuing their input (McMullan et al., 2022).

Finally, value tension underlines the critical factors in selecting influencers to promote a brand, emphasizing the importance of alignment between the influencer's social media persona and the brand's products and services. This consideration goes beyond mere follower count, highlighting the need for a genuine fit between the influencer and the brand's objectives and audiences (McMullan et al., 2022). It is also crucial to understand the underlying motivations of each social media influencer, as not all are willing to create content solely in exchange for payment (Pang et al., 2016).

2.4. Social Media Influencers as Strategic Communicators

Social media influencers can be viewed as actors who have built extensive and meaningful connections with organizational stakeholders. Through their content creation, distribution, interaction, and personal presence on social media, they wield significant influence over these stakeholders, making them valuable intermediaries in brand communication strategies (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Influencers have emerged as significant stakeholders in strategic communication. Depending on the specific objectives, influencers can fulfill various roles for organizations, and their range of services in strategic communication often appear broader compared to those offered by traditional service providers (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

In the dynamic landscape of influencer marketing, influencers function as agents who bridge the gap between marketers or brands and consumers. Just as customers rely on suppliers to provide accurate product information and deliver the desired benefits (Bergen et al., 1992), consumers depend on influencers to offer trustworthy insights about products and serv-

ices. This relationship highlights that agency issues, such as trust and information asymmetry, extend beyond traditional business relationships and are also relevant in influencer-brand interactions. Campbell and Farrell (2020) identify five categories of social media influencers, which are not solely determined by follower count but also by factors such as authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital. These categories include nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers), micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers), macro-influencers (100,000–1 million followers), mega-influencers (more than 1 million followers), and celebrity influencers, gained fame through channels outside of social media.

Regardless of their audience sizes, influencers can determine followers to adopt specific behaviors toward brands. Creativity is at the center of influencers' activity beyond advertising. Marketers and brands can benefit from influencer creativity (Leung et al., 2022). Influencers need to enjoy creative freedom and not have their finished deliverables fully controlled by the brand. Imagine the creative brief of the campaigns requires too many details from the influencer, such as location or wardrobe information, requesting the influencer to film with a particular camera, but they use specific tools – e.g., a slight change in the tone of voice – to ensure that the content fits the brand persona. In that case, the influencer will lose their autonomy, so the influencer's public will perceive the content as inauthentic (McMullan et al., 2022). However, making the influencer brief less detailed is one of the hardest things for many brands because they do not want the influencers to shift the focus from their product or service to something else or to communicate incomplete campaign information (Borchers, 2023). This lack of control over the influencer content diminishes the brand's power. This leaves the influencer responsible to determine the success of the campaign, keeping their content more personal while endorsing the brand in an authentic way and not creating an advertisement of the brand with their face on it.

Audience perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness are central to shaping their behaviors in influencer marketing (Breves et al., 2019). When an influencer is perceived as credible, audiences are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward the influencer (Liljander et al., 2015), their sponsored content (Lou & Yuan, 2018), and the brands they promote (Munnukka et al., 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). This enhances engagement with content and boosts purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). Therefore, audience trust in the influencer is a key driver of the success of influencer marketing strategies, highlighting the essential role of credibility in fostering positive audience behaviors (Eisend & Tarahi, 2016). Research (Childers et al., 2019) shows that marketers also acknowledge the value of influencers who adopt a unique approach, as this helps them establish trust and credibility with both their current and potential audiences.

The perceived authenticity of influencers and brands significantly impacts the audience's further perceptions and behaviors. When influencers are seen as genuine, they develop stronger connections with their audiences, which in turn enhances audience attitudes toward the promoted brand and increases their likelihood of making a purchase (Ki et al., 2020). Authenticity has become a key factor in evaluating influencers and brands, and shape trust and loyalty (Moulard et al., 2021). Consumers, drawn to authenticity in their daily lives, are more likely to engage with influencers they perceive as genuine, fostering brand loyalty and purchase intention (Leigh et al., 2006; Tran & Strutton, 2014). Marketers understand that influencers who authentically demonstrate real-life usage of products or services enhance the credibility of the brand's message (Childers et al., 2019).

In instances where the influencer lacks authenticity, and the brand's influence appears to overshadow the creator's autonomy, the overall impact may not be favorable (Audrezet et al., 2020). This case is possible when the brand exerts greater control over the content. Hence, we asked the following research question:

RQ. How do social media influencers perceive their dynamic with marketers in balancing creative freedom and responding to marketers' control strategies?

3. Methodology

Given that our study aims to explore the dynamics of the relationship between social media influencers and brands, we applied in-depth interviews with $N=17$ social media influencers from (COUNTRY ANNONYMISED FOR REVIEW). In-depth interviews serve as a valuable methodological approach for eliciting individual perspectives. This qualitative method effectively prompts individuals to articulate personal feelings, opinions, and experiences, thereby facilitating an in-depth exploration of their subjective viewpoints (Tuchman, 2002). Moreover, similar methodological approaches were used to research social media influencers (e.g., Borchers, 2003; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou, 2022; Lou et al., 2023).

We developed an interview guide using a deductive approach. Following a step-by-step process, we formulated the interview questions for the main part of the interviews based on the concepts embedded in the research question. Initially, we reached out to more than 30 social media influencers with different communities of followers, according to Campbell and Farrell's (2020) classification. Theoretical saturation was reached. Seventeen influencers responded to our request, and we interviewed them. All influencers we addressed (aged 27 to 39) are active on Instagram, and some of them concurrently engaged on more than one platform, including YouTube, TikTok, or personal blogs. We interviewed twelve female and three male influencers. Most participants within our sample were not affiliated with an influencer marketing agency. However, each has amassed collaborative experience with various brands executing diverse social media campaigns. The interviews with influencers lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. We transcribed and analyzed the interviews using thematic analysis (Creswell, 2009). We followed a deductive approach based on the codes driven by the theoretical framework. Table 1 shows the structure of our sample.

Table 1. The structure of the sample

ID	Field	Influencer Type	Experience with Influencer Marketing (Years)	Age (Years)	Gender
ID_1	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	4 years	32	F
ID_2	Family	micro-influencer	4 years	32	F
ID_3	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	7 years	28	F
ID_4	Health	micro-influencer	12 years	33	F
ID_5	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	14 years	39	F
ID_6	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	2 years	34	F
ID_7	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	5 years	27	F
ID_8	Beauty and lifestyle	micro-influencer	4 years	22	F
ID_9	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	3 years	22	F
ID_10	Food	macro influencer	4 years	22	F
ID_11	Beauty	micro-influencer	4 years	24	F
ID_12	Books	micro-influencer	3 years	26	F
ID_13	Photography	micro-influencer	4 years	28	M
ID_14	Fitness	macro influencer	4 years	30	M
ID_15	Beauty	micro-influencer	4 years	32	F
ID_16	Beauty	Macro-influencer	10 years	33	F
ID_17	Lifestyle	Micro-influencer	8 years	30	F

First, we formulated interview questions grounded in principal-agent theory and control theory to explore influencers’ perspectives on control strategies (McMullan et al., 2022; Boerchers, 2023). Using a structured interview approach, we deductively examined types of control described in control theory: simple, bureaucratic, and concertive. Our thematic analysis addressed approval processes as a form of simple control, formal contractual agreements as bureaucratic control, and long-term relationships between influencers and marketers as concertive control, weaving these topics into a cohesive exploration of control strategies. We also investigated influencer-audience relationships through the lens of principal-agent theory, emphasizing their importance in influencer marketing. While engagement metrics are typically shared with brands, we aimed to uncover the less visible, qualitative dimensions of these relationships that often remain inaccessible to marketers.

After a training session with coauthors, one author conducted all interviews online, adhering to a structured interview guide and asking follow-up questions when necessary. Interviews were conducted in the native language of the authors and respondents, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the trained author. The same author performed line-by-line coding of transcripts, attributing responses to themes drawn from principal-agent and control theories. Finally, the coder and principal researchers collaboratively reviewed the coded attributions, resolved inconsistencies, and reached a consensus on how the identified themes align with theoretical frameworks to address the research question.

4. Findings

4.1. The Framework of the Collaboration with Influencers

The collaborations between influencers and brands are characterized by significant variability in fee negotiation, deliverables, and overall campaign structure. While some influencers actively negotiate fees and propose deliverables, others leave these aspects to the brand's discretion. The details of each collaboration vary considerably, reflecting diverse strategies and preferences. These nuanced differences contribute to the dynamic nature of influencer-brand collaborations in digital marketing. However, fees remain a sensitive aspect of the marketer-influencer relationship that is not transparent to the public. Regarding fees, one of the influencers pointed out:

When a brand contacts me for a paid collaboration, I usually ask them what their budget would be for my deliverables. I like to do this so that I avoid proposing a fee that can be smaller than brand's budget. (ID_4).

When influencers work with marketing agencies, the agency's role in facilitating and negotiating is highlighted. However, many of our respondents work directly with marketers and brands rather than with influencer agencies. Most influencer campaigns adopt a structured approach, with brands providing influencers detailed briefs outlining essential brand information, product details, tone of voice, and specific campaign requirements. However, the level of detail in these briefs varies significantly between brands and campaigns, reflecting the dynamic nature of influencer collaborations. On this note, one of the respondents argued:

I have received many types of briefs during my collaborations with brands. Some of them were large documents with multiple details, others were a short paragraph in the email. I like to work with a brief that is somewhere in between. (ID_6).

4.2. Simple Control

During our discussions, we explored how brands balance providing influencers with creative freedom while maintaining control through campaign briefs. When asked about the extent of creative freedom afforded by brands, most influencers acknowledged experiencing a degree of autonomy. Scholars framed the approval process of influencer-brand collaboration as a simple control strategy (Borchers, 2023). The control process results in control tensions. Respondents highlighted a range of approaches brands take to accommodate influencers' creative expression. Influencers choose whether to work with a brand or not in the process of developing the campaign. Some refuse to participate in campaigns because they do not feel they can collaborate transparently. In influencer campaigns, it is common for brands to request to preview content before it is published. This allows brands to suggest modifications if needed. While some contracts explicitly address this practice, not all do. In our interviews, influencers shared their perspectives on brands' requests to preview content and the feasibility of adjusting as requested. While some respondents mentioned feeling restricted if asked to make some adjustments to the content, other respondents argued that the level of freedom varies depending on the brand and campaign dynamics:

Responses to the query demonstrate a range of influencers' perspectives regarding sharing content with brands before posting. Most influencers are open to this practice, as one of the respondents stressed:

I think it is fair play to show the content to brands prior to posting; it is a matter of fairness and transparency for the three parties involved: the brand – the influencer – the consumer (ID_1).

However, there are notable nuances in their viewpoints. Some influencers are willing to modify content upon brand request but emphasize the importance of limiting such alterations. The influencers believe that required modifications must be reasonable and within common sense and should not conflict with an authentic presentation of themselves and the brands. However, there are cases when influencers also ask the brand for approval when it is not requested to make sure that their content aligns with the brand's perspective before posting it.

Contractual terms also play a significant role, with some influencers willing to share content for approval if explicitly stated in the agreement. Additionally, influencers may discourage content pre-approval in situations where time constraints are tight or when engaged in barter agreements involving inexpensive products. According to previous literature (Borchers, 2023), formal contracts are part of bureaucratic control, and therefore, we addressed this topic in the following subsection.

4.3. Bureaucratic Control

Influencers expressed a wide range of opinions when discussing the ideal level of detail of formal agreements, including campaign briefs aiming to balance brand expectations with creative freedom. They believed briefs should provide conceptual ideas rather than strict guidelines to allow for artistic expression. This freedom of expression varies for many reasons, depending on each influencer. They consider it crucial to receive briefs that include product specifications. However, the creative direction should not be restrictive.

Influencers share different perspectives, stressing the industry's ongoing debate about the optimal balance between detailed guidance and creative freedom in influencer briefs and reflecting the diverse needs of influencers and brands in campaign collaborations. While some respondents favor detailed briefs, others preferred less detailed ones to maintain creative autonomy, expressing concerns that too much detail could stifle creativity. On this note, one of the respondents stressed:

I appreciate brands that give directions but also admit a certain freedom of expression so that the content can still be true to me. (ID_16).

Contracts are relevant for influencers to secure their payment. However, some respondents complained that brands do not always respect contracts, as many had unpleasant experiences. Some of these experiences are being paid late.

4.4. Concertive Control

In the case of long-term collaborations, a form of concertive control (Borchers, 2023), influencers value the mutual understanding built with brands. This often leads to arrangements where a predetermined set of deliverables allows for content promotion flexibility without needing pre-approval. On this note, one of the influencers highlighted the relevance of creating mutual understanding. Long-term relationships often result in reducing simple control strategies such as the approval process and are preferred by most influencers we interviewed as one of the respondents highlighted:

I appreciate brands that want a long-term collaboration from the start because to succeed, you need two to three collaborations at a minimum (ID_17).

For influencers, the decision to collaborate long-term is not transparent. Thus, some influencers we interviewed checked whether the brand wanted to continue the collaborations after delivering the results, while others refused to continue the collaboration if the communication had been broken during the other parts of the campaign. Influencers are sensitive to brand appreciation, as a respondent argued:

I appreciate it when a brand takes me seriously and trusts what I do (ID_17).

4.5. Influencers' Relationship with Brands

Influencers consider various factors when assessing and appreciating brand collaborations, including budget, transparency, communication, creative freedom, and a brand's willingness for long-term partnerships. Some emphasize the importance of developing a "business friendship," highlighting the interpersonal dynamics and clear communication as crucial for a successful collaboration. Many consider long-term brand collaborations more effective for their endorsement to have tangible results and reach the brand's marketing objectives for the campaign. Influencers highlight the importance of brands taking them seriously, being professional, giving briefs, and appreciating them.

4.6. Influencer-Brand Fit and Value Tension

Product quality is a key consideration for influencers, with many stressing its impact on their perception of a brand. Transparency about products and services is also valued, with an expectation for marketing strategies to be sensible, creative, and ethical, avoiding deceptive or aggressive tactics. Influencers often research a brand's reputation and test products before committing to a campaign. They prioritize aligning with the brand's values but also consider how the products fit into their lifestyle, emphasizing the importance of seamless integration and personal preference. One of the prospects stated that she becomes more invested in collaborations not because of the brand or product itself, but because of how she relates them to her personal life. This diligence underscores their commitment to authenticity, ensuring a genuine alignment between their brand and endorsed products. The potential value tension is highlighted by one of our respondents as follows:

If I don't know the product, I need to test it first for a couple of weeks. I cannot promote something that I have never used. However, it happened in the past to accept some collaborations right away, as they were products that I was already using and trusting (ID_16).

4.7. The Relationship with the Community of Followers

The influencers we interviewed primarily find intrinsic satisfaction in sharing information from their expertise with their followers. They emphasize the reciprocal engagement with followers as a motivating factor, with gratification coming from followers adopting their recommendations. Some liken the social media community to a "small village" and describe the nature of their relationship with the audiences as follows:

The idea of community does not refer to financial compensation. I am truly happy when I help people with my recommendations (ID_3).

This makes the influencers share content with a purpose centered on inspiring others. Further, giveaways and reduction codes are valuable for the relationship with followers. They often aim to engage their audience by curating attractive photos or videos and giving valuable insights across various domains of expertise and interest.

Another significant motivation for influencers is a genuine passion for content creation, expressed through sharing lifestyle aspects or enjoying the creative process itself, as one of the respondents highlighted:

My followers trust me a lot, so I rarely find a collaboration that I feel perfectly comfortable with. “I cannot promote everything because my followers are educated, and they do not buy everything (ID_5).

Additionally, some influencers are driven by business goals. They use content creation to expand existing enterprises and attract offline clients via social media. Most of them integrate their brand advertisements with their usual content, strengthening their personal brand for potential monetization in the future, trying to be as natural as possible.

5. Discussion

Our examination of influencer-brand collaborations has unveiled a nuanced and multifaceted landscape shaped by several factors. In line with previous research (McMullan et al., 2022; Borchers, 2023), influencers emphasize creative freedom, brand alignment, and the balance between autonomy and brand control. While they cherish the opportunity for creative expression, they also recognize the importance of aligning with brand objectives and expectations. This acknowledgment reflects a sophisticated understanding among influencers of the need to strike a balance between maintaining their unique voice and effectively conveying the brand’s message. Moreover, our findings unveiled that influencers are not inherently opposed to the control strategies applied by marketers. On the contrary, they even find benefits in bureaucratic control (Borchers, 2023) through contracts and agreements with marketers and brands.

Influencers are intermediaries that deliver brand messages to their audiences. As previous literature pointed out (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), influencers’ relationships with their audiences are crucial to them. Therefore, while developing relationships with brands, they also consider the quality of their relationship with their audiences. The influencers we interviewed value reciprocal engagement with their followers, finding intrinsic satisfaction in sharing expertise and inspiring their followers. Their commitment to authenticity drives them to maintain genuine connections with their audience, emphasizing that long-term relationships with brands are key to maintaining credibility. The participants in our study consistently stressed that transparency and ethical alignment with brands were essential to their collaborations. They also underscored the importance of creative freedom, which allows them to deliver authentic and resonant content to their audience. This aligns with Borchers and Enke (2021), who identified authenticity as central to strategic influencer communication, as well as McMullan et al. (2022), who found that the best results are achieved when brands trust influencers to create content that resonates with their followers.

Moreover, our findings indicate that while influencers appreciate brand clarity in campaign briefs as forms of simple and bureaucratic control strategies (Borche, 2023), they re-

sist overly prescriptive instructions, which can undermine their ability to maintain authenticity. This need for balance between brand control and influencer creativity reflects the notion of “letting go” in strategic influencer collaborations (Borchers & Enke, 2021), where influencers expect a higher degree of autonomy. Similarly, Childers et al. (2018) noted that although agencies maintain some creative control over influencer content, content creators are expected to stay on message while still showcasing actual, authentic use of products. Our findings expand on this by highlighting that influencers view their creative freedom as critical to their role, particularly in long-term partnerships. Hence, like previous research (McMullan et al., 2022), we found evidence that fostering authentic communication while campaigning for brands represents a potential tension for the influencer-marketing relationship. An additional potential tension represents a poor fit with the brand that the influencers must avoid, according to their perspective.

The balance between creative freedom and brand control is crucial to influencer collaborations. While most participants report experiencing a degree of autonomy in their content creation, the extent of this freedom often varies by brand and campaign dynamics. Influencers typically prefer transparent collaborations and may decline participation in campaigns where they feel restricted.

When it comes to value alignment, participants in our study placed significant importance on ethical standards and the brand’s values before committing to partnerships. This is in line with McMullan et al. (2022), who found that value alignment plays a pivotal role in influencer-brand relationships. Our results expand this understanding by revealing that influencers are not only concerned with the brand’s external image but also with how the brand’s practices align with their personal ethics, further cementing authenticity as a cornerstone of successful collaborations.

Our findings show that influencers value a mix of monetary and non-monetary rewards, with access to exclusive experiences or events serving as a meaningful form of compensation that resonates with their personal and professional goals. This reflects Borchers’ findings that influencer compensation often goes beyond monetary payments and is adapted to the structural realities of influencer work. Childers et al. (2018), while noting the high costs of influencer collaborations, also emphasized the complexity of contracts, a point echoed by our respondents, who stressed the importance of clear and fair agreements.

Lastly, participants in our study advocated for long-term partnerships as a way to foster more substantial, more trusting relationships with brands and prefer marketers’ conservative control (Borchers, 2023) strategies. Consistent with previous literature advocating for brand managers to cultivate long-term relationships with influencers (McMullan et al., 2022), our findings suggest that long-term collaborations often cultivate mutual understanding and flexibility between influencers and brands, facilitating smoother collaboration. The influencers we interviewed believed this approach improved their content’s quality and allowed for a more natural integration of brand messaging. McMullan et al. (2022) also stressed the importance of building long-term relationships to manage timeframe tension and overall performance, aligning closely with our findings.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The main contribution of our paper lies in its exploration of influencers’ perspectives on their ideal and desired relationships with marketers, filling a significant gap in the existing literature. By examining the nuanced dynamics between influencers and brands, the study

provides valuable insights into the factors that influence collaboration success, including creative freedom, transparency, and mutual respect. Additionally, it highlights the importance of contractual agreements and the impact of communication on the longevity of partnerships. This research enhances understanding of influencer marketing practices and offers practical implications for marketers aiming to foster more effective and authentic collaborations with content creators. Ultimately, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on digital marketing by emphasizing the need for a more relational approach that prioritizes the influencer's voice and agency in the collaborative process.

Our study has theoretical implications for the agency theory (Bergen et al., 1992) in the context of influencer marketing as it reaffirms previous findings (Haenlein et al., 2020; McMullan et al., 2022) on the pivotal role of transparency and authenticity within influencer marketing, which comes across when brands trust influencers and give them freedom to create content that resonates with their audience on the chosen platform. Influencers and brands recognize the critical role of genuine, transparent partnerships in establishing trust and credibility with their audience. Moreover, we delved into the nuances of crafting influencer briefs, revealing the delicate balancing act required to preserve influencers' creative autonomy while effectively communicating brand messaging. We found that detailed brand information in such briefs is indispensable, providing influencers with the necessary context to align their content with brand objectives. At the same time, our research emphasized the importance of allowing influencers the freedom to incorporate personal content details, ensuring that their unique voice remains intact.

Our study also highlights the role of social media influencers as intermediaries in content distribution. They do more than promote brands; they act as a bridge between companies and audiences, shaping marketing messages authentically and engagingly. This requires them to balance brand expectations with the needs of their followers, influencing how consumers perceive and interact with brands. Our findings show that the level of creative freedom influencers receive affects their ability to serve as effective intermediaries. When given more autonomy, they create genuine content and build trust with their audience, while too much brand control can reduce authenticity. This perspective adds to agency theory by showing that influencers must meet brands' and followers' demands, making them key players in today's digital marketing landscape.

5.2. Practical Implications

Our research has practical implications for marketers and brands. It highlights the diverse strategies employed by influencers, marketers, and brands in navigating collaborations. By acknowledging and addressing these intricacies, marketers, and influencers can cultivate more fruitful partnerships in the dynamic landscape of digital marketing. Based on our findings, we recommend that marketers develop long-term partnerships with influencers and apply simple and bureaucratic control strategies such as approvals, detailed briefs, and agreements while considering influencers' perspectives of authentic communication.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined how influencers navigate the balance between creative freedom and marketer control strategies in their collaborations. Our findings reveal that while influencers highly value autonomy in content creation, they also recognize the necessity of align-

ing with brand objectives to maintain successful partnerships. This balance is shaped by long-term collaborations, transparency, and ethical alignment, which contribute to mutual trust and flexibility between influencers and brands. Ultimately, influencer-brand relationships are defined by a continuous negotiation between creative independence and strategic brand messaging, highlighting the complexities of these collaborations.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research Perspectives

We are aware of the limitations of our study, which was conducted on a small sample, mainly including micro-influencers. Therefore, future research should continue to explore the relationship between influencers, marketers, and brands by using a larger and more diverse sample and applying a mixed-methodological approach.

The interview grid did not address the outcomes of an influencer campaign, which limits the ability to assess the effectiveness of campaign control, key performance indicators, and the influencers' contributions. Future research on the collaboration between influencers and marketers should also examine the marketers' perspectives to highlight common and divergent approaches toward influencer marketing. Comparative studies encompassing different countries are needed to reflect on cultural specificities in the marketer-influencer relationship.

References

- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 557–569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>
- Bergen, M., Dutta, S., & Walker, O.C. (1992). Agency relationships in marketing: A review of the implications and applications of agency and related theories. *Journal of Marketing*, 56(3), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1252293>
- Bernhold, T., & Wiesweg, N. (2021). Principal-agent theory. In V. Danivska, & R. Appel-Meulenbroek (Eds.), *A handbook of management theories and models for office environments and services* (pp. 117–128). Routledge.
- Borchers, N. S. (2025). How social media influencers support political parties in achieving campaign objectives, according to political communicators in Germany. *Public Relations Review*, 51(1), 102532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2024.102532>
- Borchers, N. S. (2023). To eat the cake and have it, too: How marketers control influencer conduct within a paradigm of letting Go. *Social Media+ Society*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231167336>
- Borchers, N. S., & Enke, N. (2021). Managing strategic influencer communication: A systematic overview on emerging planning, organization, and evaluation routines. *Public Relations Review*, 47(3), 102041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102041>
- Brooks, G., Drenten, J., & Piskorski, M. J. (2021). Influencer Celebification: How Social Media Influencers Acquire Celebrity Capital. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(5), 528–547. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1977737>
- Breves, P. L., Liebers, N., Abt, M., & Kunze, A. (2019). The perceived fit between Instagram influencers and the endorsed brand: How influencer-brand fit affects source credibility and persuasive effectiveness. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 59(4), 440–454. <https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-2019-030>
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J.R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 469–479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.003>

- Campbell, C., & Grimm, P.E. (2019). The challenges native advertising poses: Exploring potential federal trade commission responses and identifying research needs. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 38(1), 110–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915618818576>
- Childers, C. C., Lemon, L. L., & Hoy, M. G. (2019). #Sponsored #ad: Agency perspective on influencer marketing campaigns. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 40(3), 258–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2018.1521113>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>
- Eisend, M., & Tarrahi, F. (2016). The effectiveness of advertising: A meta-meta-analysis of advertising inputs and outcomes. *Journal of Advertising*, 45(4), 519–531. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/00913367.2016.1185981>
- Enke, N., & Borchers, N.S. (2019). Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1620234>
- Haenlein, M., Anadol, E., Farnsworth, T., Hugo, H., Hunichen, J., & Welte, D. (2020). Navigating the new era of influencer marketing: How to be successful on Instagram, TikTok, & Co. *California Management Review*, 63(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125620958166>
- Holiday, S., Hayes, J.L., Park, H., Lyu, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2023). A multimodal emotion perspective on social media influencer marketing: The effectiveness of influencer emotions, network size, and branding on consumer brand engagement using facial expression and linguistic analysis. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 58(4), 414–439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10949968231171104>
- Hoos, B. (2019). Four things we can learn about influencer marketing from Nike and Apple. *Forbes Agency Council*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/06/14/fourthings-we-can-learn-about-influencer-marketing-from-nikeand-apple/?sh=230b98263628>
- Ki, C.-W. (chloe), Cuevas, L.M., Chong, S.M., & Lim, H. (2020). Influencer marketing: Social media influencers as human brands attaching to followers and yielding positive marketing results by fulfilling needs. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 55, 102133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102133>
- Lee, J. A., Sudarshan, S., Sussman, K.L., Bright, L.F., & Eastin, M.S. (2022). Why are Consumers Following Social Media Influencers on Instagram? Exploration of Consumers' Motives for Following Influencers and the Role of Materialism. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(1), 78–100. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/02650487.2021.1964226>
- Leigh, T. W., Peters, C., & Shelton, J. (2006). The consumer quest for authenticity: The multiplicity of meanings within the MG subculture of consumption. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34(4), 481–493. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0092070306288403>
- Leung, F. F., Gu, F. F., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022). Online influencer marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50(2), 226–251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-021-00829-4>
- Liljander, V., Gummerus, J., & Söderlund, M. (2015). Young consumers' responses to suspected covert and overt blog marketing. *Internet Research*, 25(4), 610–632. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IntR-02-2014-0041>
- Lim, X. J., Radzol, A. R.b. M., Cheah, J.-H., & Wong, M.V. (2017). The impact of social media influencers on purchase intention and the mediation effect of customer attitude. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 7(2), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.14707/ajbr.170035>
- Lou, C. (2022). Social media influencers and followers: Theorization of a trans-parasocial relation and explication of its implications for influencer advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 51(1), 4–21. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/00913367.2021.1880345>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>

- Lou, C., Kiew, S. T. J., Chen, T., Lee, T. Y. M., Ong, J. E. C., & Phua, Z. (2022). Authentically Fake? How Consumers Respond to the Influence of Virtual Influencers. *Journal of Advertising*, 52(4), 540–557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2022.2149641>
- McMullan, K., Laurell, C., & Pitt, L. (2022). Managing the tensions in marketer-influencer relationships. *Business Horizons*, 65(5), 559–566. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.09.003>
- Moulard, J. G., Raggio, R. D. & Folse, J. A. G. (2021). Disentangling the meanings of brand authenticity: The entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 49(1), 96–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-020-00735-1>
- Munnukka, J., Uusitalo, O., & Toivonen, H. (2016). Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 33(3), 182–192. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-11-2014-1221>
- Pang, A., Yingzhi Tan, E., Song-Qi Lim, R., Yue-Ming Kwan, T., & Bhardwaj Lakhanpal, P. (2016). Building effective relations with social media influencers in Singapore. *Media Asia*, 43(1), 56–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2016.1177962>
- Picot, A., Dietl, H., & Franck, E. (1999). *Organisation - Eine ökonomische Perspektive*. Stuttgart, Germany: Schäffer-Poeschel.
- Rees, R. (1985a). The theory of principal and agent part 1. *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 37(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8586.1985.tb00179.x>
- Rees, R. (1985b). The theory of principal and agent part 1. *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 37(2), 75–97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8586.1985.tb00185.x>
- Tuchman, G. (2002). Media institutions. Qualitative methods in the study of news. In Jensen, K. B., & N. W. Jankowski (Eds.). *A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research* (pp. 79-92). London and New York: Routledge.
- Shen, B., Cheng, M., He, R., & Yang, M. (2024). Selling through social media influencers in influencer marketing: participation-based contract versus sales-based contract. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 24(2), 1095–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-022-09600-5>
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 101742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011>
- Stoldt, R., Wellman, M., Ekdale, B., & Tully, M. (2019). Professionalizing and profiting: The rise of intermediaries in the social media influencer industry. *Social Media + Society*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119832587>
- Tran, G. A., & Strutton, D. (2014). Has reality television come of age as a promotional platform? Modeling the endorsement effectiveness of celebrealty and reality stars: Celebrealty and reality stars. *Psychology & Marketing*, 31(4), 294–305. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20695>
- Uzunoglu, E., & Misci Kip, S. (2014). Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement. *International Journal of Information Management*, 34(5), 592–602. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2014.04.007>
- Weismueller, J., Harrigan, P., Wang, S., & Soutar, G.N. (2020). Influencer endorsements: How advertising disclosure and source credibility affect consumer purchase intention on social media. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 28(4), 160–170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2020.03.002>
- Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M., & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 35(2), 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078>
- Ye, G., Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business: A Bibliometric Analysis and Managerial Implications. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(2), 160–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1857888>
- Young, T. (2016). *Influencer marketing versus influencer relations: Which one is best for your business?*. Retrieved from: <http://www.prwarrior.com/2016/10/influencer-marketing/>.
- Zhao, H. (2005). Incentive-based compensation to advertising agencies: A principal-agent approach. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 22(3), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2004.10.002>