



Authenticity and Brand Sensemaking Process: A Narrative Analysis of Marketing Managers in Building Trust Through Long-Term Collaboration with Nano-Influencers

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Abstract: The strategic shift towards authenticity in digital marketing has prioritized nano-influencers to build sustainable brand trust. However, authenticity remains an ambiguous, fluid, and complex concept for marketing managers to navigate. This study aims to describe the managerial sensemaking process used to define and evaluate nano-influencer authenticity, as well as analyze the narrative strategies implemented in long-term collaborations to build brand trust. A descriptive qualitative research approach was used, through a multi-site case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with marketing managers, brand managers, and social media managers. Findings indicate that managerial sensemaking towards authenticity is a nuanced qualitative process that focuses on three key dimensions: value alignment, relatable content aesthetics, and perceived intrinsic motivation, rather than solely on quantitative metrics. Strategic implementation relies on managing long-term relational partnerships that provide creative autonomy. The impact of this adaptive management is reflected in increased message credibility and community loyalty. This study concludes that structured, relational, and sensemaking-based nano-influencer partnership management can significantly increase sustainable brand trust, while offering a best practice model for marketing practitioners.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Nano-Influencers, Authenticity, Brand Trust, Sensemaking Managerial.

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental shift in the digital marketing landscape has positioned influencer marketing as a pillar of modern brand communication strategies (Leung et al., 2022). In an era where consumers are increasingly weary of traditional advertising and demand transparency, companies are challenged to build more authentic and meaningful connections (Johnson, 2015). In this context, influencer marketing plays a strategic role as a trusted bridge connecting brands with audiences through personalized advocacy.

As the industry matures, the effectiveness of mega-influencers and celebrities, who have vast reach but often feel distant and commercialized, is

being questioned. Consumer skepticism toward sponsored content has prompted a significant strategic shift in marketing budget allocation (Bae, 2018). As a result, the industry's focus has shifted to the rise of nano-influencers. This category of content creators, who typically have smaller but highly segmented followings, are perceived to have higher engagement rates and, importantly, a purer perceived authenticity. (Nurg & Şenyapar, 2024).

Authenticity has become the new currency in the digital ecosystem and is a crucial factor in determining the direction and quality of marketing strategies. Authenticity is no longer just an operational buzzword, but a key strategic asset in shaping perceptions and building the foundation of long-term brand trust. A well-

designed brand will have no significant impact if it is not supported by trusted and authentic messengers (Hoffmann & Weithaler, 2015) .

However, various challenges arise in implementing strategies in the marketing environment. Authenticity is a fluid, subjective, and elusive concept (Do, 2025a) . The main challenge for marketing managers is no longer simply measuring quantitative metrics such as likes or shares, but rather qualitative challenges. How can they identify, evaluate, and validate true authenticity among thousands of nano-influencers (Samanta, 2025) . If not managed through the right managerial approach, mistakes in selecting influencer partners can directly impact brand credibility, hinder the achievement of communication standards, and weaken the brand's competitiveness in the market.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand innovative and adaptive managerial strategies in managing ambiguity (Duffek et al., 2025) . To date, most research on influencer marketing and authenticity has been dominated by the consumer perspective (how audiences perceive authenticity). From an academic perspective, this topic needs further investigation, given that the literature on managerial decision-making and interpretive processes in this context is still relatively limited. Many studies focus more on outcomes (ROI) or campaign design, while the cognitive and interpretive aspects of managers are often overlooked. Yet, managers' understanding is key to realizing the strategic objectives of such collaborations. (Jiang, 2025) .

This cognitive process of dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty in decision-making is theoretically known as sensemaking (Awati & Nikolova, 2022) . We know little about how marketing managers sensemake when navigating the complex nano-influencer landscape, or how they narrate (tell) the justification for their strategies—especially the decision to invest in long-term collaborations—to build trust.

This research aims to examine how marketing managers sense-make when interpreting the concept of authenticity in the nano-influencer selection process and how they construct strategic narratives to justify long-term collaborations as an effort to strengthen brand trust. The study focuses on the cognitive and interpretive processes managers engage in when facing ambiguity, as well as the narrative strategies used to rationalize collaborative

decisions in the dynamic context of digital marketing.

Through this approach, the study seeks to provide an in-depth description of the sensemaking dynamics that emerge in managerial practice, particularly regarding the definition, negotiation, and evaluation of authenticity. The analysis also highlights the narrative construction used by managers in designing long-term collaboration strategies with nano-influencers, who are seen as crucial instruments in building and maintaining brand trust. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance of managers' understanding of authenticity and strategic narratives as the foundation for successful long-term collaborations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Influencer Marketing and the Role of Nano-Influencers

Influencer marketing has rapidly evolved from simply collaborating with celebrities and mega-influencers to a more segmented and community-oriented strategy. Initially, the primary focus was on mass reach and visibility (Harrison, L. 2024). However, with increasing commercialization and audience saturation with content that felt overly scripted, the effectiveness and credibility of mega-influencers began to decline.

This shift gave rise to a renewed focus on micro-influencers and, more recently, nano-influencers (typically with followers between 1,000 and 10,000). Nano-influencers are perceived as having a more intimate and authentic relationship with their communities because they often operate in a very specific niche and maintain a high level of personal connection with their audiences (Soto-Vásquez, A. D., & Jimenez, N. 2022). As a result, they generate significantly higher engagement rates and are considered more trustworthy sources of recommendations than famous figures.

For marketing management, nano-influencers offer the opportunity to achieve more genuine connections, but also pose operational challenges: managing collaborations with hundreds of dispersed individuals and ensuring the quality and consistency of messages (Ali, S. S. 2023). This challenge emphasizes that nano-influencer strategies cannot be measured by simple metrics; they require a managerial

approach that focuses on the quality of relationships and the values they convey.

Authenticity and Building Brand Trust

Authenticity has become a key social and economic asset in the digital economy. In a marketing context, authenticity refers to the audience's perception that a message, brand, or individual is sincere, honest, and driven by intrinsic values, rather than purely commercial motives (Fritz, K., Schoenmueller, V., & Bruhn, M. 2017). Perceived authenticity has consistently been shown to be a key predictor of purchase intent and positive word-of-mouth. Particularly in influencer marketing, authenticity is often associated with the influencer's credibility and expertise in a particular domain.

However, authenticity is an ambiguous concept and susceptible to the so-called commercialization paradox—the more an influencer or brand strives to appear authentic, the greater the risk that audiences will perceive it as paid manipulation. This dilemma places marketing managers in a dilemma. A challenging position: they must guarantee authenticity as a result, but have no direct control over the influencer's personal construction.

The relationship between authenticity and brand trust is hierarchical. Brand trust is defined as a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on the belief that the brand is competent and has good intentions (Afzal, H., et al., 2010). Authenticity successfully transferred through influencers serves as a strong emotional foundation, transforming consumer skepticism into sustained confidence. Therefore, a successful nano-influencer strategy must be designed not only to achieve reach, but fundamentally to build the long-term asset of trust.

Sensemaking Theory (Karl Weick)

Sensemaking theory explains how individuals in organizations cope with ambiguous, chaotic, or uncertain situations by creating plausible meaning (Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M., 2014). When faced with uncertainty (such as how to select truly authentic nano-influencers), managers actively seek cues from the environment, interpret them retrospectively, and construct cognitive maps to guide action.

Sensemaking theory is particularly relevant to this research because authenticity management

is a highly ambiguous situation. The process of selecting nano-influencers is not based solely on rational calculations, but rather on managers' subjective interpretations of qualitative cues (e.g., body language, content style, engagement history). Thus, sensemaking provides a lens for understanding managers' cognitive processes in defining and validating authenticity.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of understanding and describing the phenomenon in depth based on real-world conditions. This approach is deemed appropriate because the problem under study—namely, the managerial processes related to sensemaking and narrative construction in marketing strategies—is complex, contextual, and dynamic. Qualitative studies allow for the exploration of managerial aspects including influencer collaboration strategy, implementation, and evaluation from the perspective of key stakeholders. The research design used is a multi-site case study, focusing on companies actively implementing long-term collaboration strategies with nano-influencers (Jiang, 2025).

The suitability of using this multi-site case study is based on the need to compare and contrast the dynamics of sensemaking across various organizational contexts (different industries). Research subjects were selected through purposive sampling, which involves selecting informants based on criteria aligned with the research objectives. Key informants included Brand Managers, Digital Marketing Managers, and Social Media Managers who possess managerial authority and direct experience in designing, executing, and evaluating long-term collaboration programs with nano-influencers. Thus, this study focuses on relevant and authentic managerial perspectives on digital marketing practices (Galib, M., et al., 2022).

The research sites were purposively selected from several companies in Indonesia operating in digital marketing-based industries, such as beauty, F&B, and lifestyle. The sites were selected based on three main considerations: first, the companies had implemented digital marketing innovations, including the structured use of nano-influencers; second, the companies were recognized as market leaders or innovative brands with a strong track record in social media activities; and third, the companies had established partnerships with content creators,

making them relevant as representative case studies in digital marketing strategy management .

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and non-participant observation. The interviews aimed to gather information related to the sensemaking, planning, and evaluation processes of authenticity strategies. Document analysis was used to obtain secondary data, such as brand guidelines, campaign briefs, evaluation reports, and partnership documentation. Observations were conducted to observe interactions during campaign planning and evaluation meetings. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes three core stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification.

This model was chosen because of its iterative nature and allows researchers to continuously return to the raw data (verification) to ensure valid and reliable findings. In the data reduction stage, researchers select, simplify, and organize the raw data to focus on information relevant to the research questions. The reduced data is then presented in the form of descriptive narratives, matrices, or conceptual maps to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships between categories. The final stage is conclusion drawing, which is carried out repeatedly and continuously verified to maintain the validity and reliability of the findings (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research findings on marketing managers' sensemaking processes and strategic narratives in managing nano-influencer collaborations suggest that strategic success lies not in the sheer volume of metrics, but rather in a careful managerial process for managing ambiguity surrounding authenticity and trust. The research findings can be summarized into five key findings:

Managerial Sensemaking Process in Defining Authenticity

The research findings demonstrate that strategic planning for nano-influencer selection is not a rigid administrative process, but rather a profound cognitive sensemaking process. The marketing managers who participated in this study faced fundamental ambiguity in defining the concept of authenticity. Unlike quantitative

metrics such as follower count or engagement rate, which can be precisely measured, authenticity is a subjective and contextual qualitative attribute. Consequently, managers cannot rely on a simple checklist to validate an influencer.

The sensemaking process manifests itself in managers' active search for qualitative clues to reduce uncertainty. Analysis of the interview data identified three key dimensions managers use to define authenticity. First, Value Alignment, where managers analyze influencers' digital track records to ensure their previous content aligns with the brand's core values. Second, Relatable Content Aesthetics, where managers analyze influencers' digital track records to ensure their previous content aligns with the brand's core values. Second, Relatable Content Aesthetics, where managers consciously avoid creators with overly polished production quality and prefer content that feels personal, honest, and genuine, like a friend's recommendation. Third, Perceived Intrinsic Motivation, which is the manager's belief that the influencer has a genuine interest in the product category, rather than being driven solely by financial rewards. Theoretically, these findings align closely with the sensemaking framework popularized by Karl Weick (Weick, KE, 1995).

Managers are faced with an ambiguous environment (a noisy nano-influencer landscape) and retrospectively (looking at past content) try to create a plausible story about who the influencer is. They actively select cues, interpret them through the lens of brand values, and then act (select or reject). This confirms that sensemaking is a cognitive process that precedes the strategic planning stage. They actively select cues, interpret them through the lens of brand values, and then act (select or reject). This demonstrates that planning in modern influencer marketing is an interpretive process, not simply a transactional one. (Patel et al., 2020a) .

Implementation Strategy: Relationship Management as the Core of Long-Term Collaboration

The implementation of the nano-influencer strategy in the companies studied has been strategically directed to shift from a transactional model (short-term campaigns) to a relational model (long-term partnerships). Field findings indicate that in this long-term model, the role of marketing managers fundamentally shifts. They

no longer act as rigid supervisors, but rather as relationship facilitators. The success of the implementation is not measured by how obediently influencers follow the script, but rather by how well managers can foster trust-based relationships. In practice, this relationship management is realized through the granting of significant creative autonomy.

Managers explained that they consciously provided looser briefs, focusing on the campaign's key values and objectives, but left the storytelling execution to nano-influencers. This move was based on the managerial understanding that the authenticity they had identified in the planning stage could only be maintained if influencers were allowed to speak in their own voices (Silva et al., 2023). Attempts to over-control content were seen as a major detriment to authenticity. (Do, 2025b)

From a management perspective, this practice reflects a mature actuating function. Managers not only organize resources (budget and influencers) but also actively motivate their partners by providing trust. This synergy is crucial; managers drive strategy by relinquishing some control, which in turn allows influencers to mobilize their audiences more effectively (Amini, 2025). This suggests that in the context of authentic marketing, implementation management is closer to the art of diplomacy than traditional project management (Saner et al., 2000).

Constructing Internal Narratives to Justify Strategic Investments

A significant finding of this study is the conscious narrative construction process managers employ to justify investments in these long-term strategies to internal stakeholders. Marketing managers face an internal challenge: how to demonstrate the value of a strategy whose primary outcome (trust) is qualitative and long-term, to senior management, who often demand quantitative and short-term ROI (Return on Investment) data.

Narrative analysis of internal documents (strategy proposals) and interview data shows that managers actively construct a counter-narrative. Rather than focusing on ephemeral reach or impression metrics, the narrative centered on brand asset building. Managers narrated these long-term collaborations as capital investments to

build brand trust, an intangible asset crucial for future sustainability and profitability.

This narrative construction serves a vital managerial function. It aims not only to secure budgets but also to align expectations across the organization (Seal & Mattimoe, 2016). By framing this strategy as asset building, managers proactively manage senior management's expectations, asking them to be patient and view the program as a marathon, not a sprint. This demonstrates that modern marketing managers must possess dual competencies: as external managers (managing influencers) and as internal storytellers. (Jauhola, 2022).

Qualitative Evaluation Model: Measuring Ambiguity of Authenticity and Trustworthiness

Nano-influencer partnership evaluation is a vital element in the management cycle implemented by the companies studied, in line with the controlling function. However, field findings indicate that standard evaluation models focused on quantitative metrics (such as likes, shares, or click-through rates) are considered inadequate for measuring the long-term success of authenticity strategies. These metrics only measure surface performance, not the core impact of trust.

Instead, managers employ a reflective and ongoing qualitative evaluation model. The key indicator analyzed in depth isn't the number of comments, but rather the quality and sentiment of those comments. Managers manually or with the help of simple tools perform sentiment analysis to track whether audiences respond with trust (e.g., "I bought this because of your recommendation") or skepticism (e.g., "Is this another ad?"). Additionally, they track the increase in User-Generated Content (UGC) inspired by nano-influencers as evidence that the message has been internalized.

This evaluation approach is not seen as a judgmental tool to halt collaboration, but rather as a means for continuous process improvement (Mittman, 2004). Qualitative feedback from the audience is used as direct input for feedback sessions with nano-influencers, allowing for real-time adjustments to the content strategy. This reflects an adaptive management culture, where evaluation serves as a radar to navigate relationships and ensure the strategy remains on track with authenticity (Mittal, 2025).

Managerial Impact: Building Brand Trust through Consistency

This long-term nano-influencer collaboration management strategy has been shown to have a significant impact on building brand trust, based on managerial perceptions and qualitative data analysis. The primary impact reported by all informants was increased brand message credibility. When a message (e.g., product benefits) is delivered consistently and repeatedly over time by a trusted individual (nano-influencer), it successfully overcomes consumer skepticism that typically arises from traditional advertising.

Furthermore, a long-term impact observed is increased community loyalty. Nano-influencer audiences no longer view their favorite creators as walking billboards, but as genuine brand advocates. This, according to managers, directly contributes to increased brand equity and, in some reported cases, has shown a positive correlation with increased sales conversions and customer lifetime value (CLV) within that audience segment.

This success was not a fluke, but rather the result of a disciplined and integrated management cycle. It began with a careful sensemaking process in planning (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), was executed through flexible relationship management, supported by a strong internal narrative, and refined through ongoing qualitative evaluation (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). These findings demonstrate that authenticity is not something that can be bought or faked, but rather something that must be managed professionally and strategically to provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Patel et al., 2020b).

CONCLUSION

Based on research findings regarding the strategic management of nano-influencer collaboration to build brand trust, it can be concluded that the applied managerial process is complex, adaptive, and heavily dependent on qualitative interpretation. This systematic and relational strategy has made a significant contribution to the development of an intangible brand asset, namely trust. This study aims to describe the sensemaking process and narrative analysis used by managers, and their impact on marketing strategy.

The findings of this study answer the problem formulation by showing that the success of nano-

influencer management does not lie in transactional execution, but rather in the synergy between managers' sensemaking of authenticity and their ability to build strategic narratives to support long-term investment.

Key findings from this study indicate that:

1. Nano-influencer planning and selection is a cognitive sensemaking process, where managers interpret authenticity through qualitative dimensions such as value alignment, relatable content aesthetics, and perceived intrinsic motivation.
2. Strategy implementation focuses on long-term relationship management that gives influencers autonomy and creative freedom to maintain the authenticity of their voice.
3. Managers consciously construct an internal strategic narrative that justifies long-term investments by framing them as a brand asset-building process (trust), rather than as a short-term promotional expense.
4. Performance evaluation is shifting from quantitative metrics (such as number of likes) to in-depth qualitative analysis, focusing on audience sentiment and the quality of dialogue to measure levels of trust.
5. The proven managerial impact is increased brand message credibility and community loyalty, achieved through authentic consistency from trusted sources.

These findings comprehensively demonstrate that strategic success in the companies studied is inseparable from the integrated and consistent implementation of core management functions—planning, implementation, and monitoring—with evolved interpretations for the digital context. Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating the sensemaking and narrative frameworks into digital marketing strategic management. The planning function transforms into cognitive sensemaking, implementation is carried out through flexible relationship management, and monitoring is realized through continuous qualitative evaluation. The key lies in the integration of these three functions, which creates a dynamic strategic learning cycle.

The nano-influencer management practices identified in this study can serve as a model or best practice for brand managers and other marketing practitioners seeking to develop contextual, adaptive, and trust-driven marketing systems. Policymakers are encouraged to adopt qualitative evaluation metrics to complement quantitative

metrics to gain a more holistic picture of brand health.

For further research, it is recommended to conduct quantitative or mixed-method studies to statistically measure the impact of this long-term relationship strategy on brand trust and customer lifetime value. Furthermore, cross-industry comparative research can enrich our understanding of how industry context influences the sensemaking process and authenticity management.

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