Is authenticity the key? Managing micro-influencers in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper explores content marketing and micro-influencer research in Viet Nam, emphasizing authenticity in paid content creation and follower communication. It investigates how social media shapes content marketing and drives micro-influencer growth, aiming to broaden the definition of micro-influencers and explore authenticity strategies. In-depth interviews cover micro-influencers, brand marketers, and influencer marketing researchers. Findings suggest authenticity, consistency, micro-influencers-brand fit, and transparent collaborations are essential for success. Effective strategies include fit assessment, creative freedom, transparent disclosure, and fostering long-term partnerships. The study fills a research gap in managing authenticity in Vietnamese brand-micro-influencer collaborations. Providing actionable insights for brands and micro-influencers to build trust and deepen engagement. This study has novel focus: micro-influencers in Vietnam, emphasizing the role of authenticity in content and communication with followers. The qualitative approach limits generalizability. Larger samples in future studies are needed to validate findings in broader contexts.

Key Words: micro-influencer, social media marketing, authenticity, content marketing, Vietnam

Introduction

The Vietnamese e-commerce is growing rapidly from the $13.2 billion in 2020 to projected $52 billion in 2025 fueled by digital transformation, changes in consumer buying behaviour and the Covid-19 pandemic. From the 16-64 age group, 58.2% of Internet users purchase products or services online and are using social media, search engines, reviews, blogs, and videos to investigate brands (We Are Social, 2022). Notably, while only 33% trust advertising, 90% trust influencer recommendations (Anymind, 2022). Social media is the primary source for 62.6% of Vietnamese Internet users (aged 16-64) researching brands online. Surprisingly, Facebook has replaced YouTube as the leading platform, with TikTok rising to fourth in 2022 with monthly usage growing from 47.6% in 2021 to 75.6% in 2022 (We Are Social, 2022). With the rise of e-commerce, social media and influencer marketing, companies are interested in collaborating with influencers to promote their brands (Pittman & Abell, 2021).

While numerous studies cover social media and content marketing, gaps remain. Prior research often focused narrowly on specific concepts or platforms, overlooking broader trends across platforms like the fast growth rate of TikTok (Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021; Zwicker et al., 2024). Despite the growing significance of influencer marketing, research has primarily concentrated on foundational concepts, such as influencers' roles in communication strategies (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Literature on the authenticity of influencers also remains sparse, with limited exploration of different influencer types or specific markets like Vietnam (Audrezet et al., 2018; Bakker, 2018; Poyry et al., 2019). Understanding content marketing within the Vietnamese social media landscape, micro-influencers' characteristics and influencer authenticity management is essential for effective partnership strategies, particularly in rapidly evolving markets like Vietnam (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021).

This research is structured as follows: content marketing, micro-influencers, authenticity, and brand management are explained followed by details of the methodology and data collection process. Findings are then analyzed. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections contextualize results within existing literature.

Literature Review

Content Marketing

Already in 1895 the John Deere's Furrow Magazine pioneered content creation to increase customers' interest and foster long-lasting relationships with customers (Pulizzi, 2012). Definitions of content marketing vary. Pulizzi & Barrett (2009) described it as creating and distributing informative and/or attractive pieces of information across formats to acquire and/or keep customers. Rose & Pulizzi (2011) highlighted it as marketing strategy centering around producing valuable experiences that enrich communities, establish brand positioning, and inform consumers about products. Pulizzi (2012) further defined content marketing as developing and disseminating valuable and compelling content to lure, gain, and engage with well-defined and well-understood audience groups. Others e.g. (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Vollero & Palazzo, 2015) emphasized relevant, compelling and timely communication to build trust and profitability, while, Wang et al. (2017) argued for engaging and profitable customer relationships. CIM (2022) summarized all these features in their definition of content marketing as a marketing strategy of creating, distributing, and sharing valuable, helpful, compelling, relevant, and timely content for targeted customer with the goal to engage, develop and maintain trusted relationships with them for profitable actions and outcomes.

Content marketing shifts focus from selling culture to helping customers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Wang et al.,

2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Rose & Pullizzi (2011) extended the role of content marketing to reach the whole customer lifecycle. The relationship between content marketing and social media is clear as they share closely aligned business objectives both emphasizing storytelling over promotional communications (Rose & Pulizzi, 2011; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Moreover, content marketing is best utilized within social media environment where social media functions as a platform for content delivery and sharing (Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015).

In conclusion, content marketing prioritizes relationship-building over direct sales and focuses on understanding audience needs to boost brand performance and customer engagement. Moreover, content marketing and social media marketing are interconnected as content marketing utilizes social media environments to deliver and share content.

Influencer Marketing

Five reasons have contributed to the rise of influencer marketing: 1) consumer shift from offline to digital, 2) goal-driven online behavior making users less receptive to direct ads, 3) extensive social media use, 4) prolonged evaluation phases in purchasing processes, and 5) the creation of online interest groups, which influencers can target (Campbell & Farrell, 2020.) Thus, the need to understand the role of influencers is critical for businesses.

Influencers are individuals who share content on social media for monetary or non-monetary compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Pittman & Abell (2021) conceptualize them as curators where influencer endorsements can vary from single mentions to multi-campaign collaborations (Luoma-aho et al., 2019.) Influencers are also defined as third-party actors who have expertise in a specific area, have created a sizeable captive audience who pay attention to their content (Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). Influencers create value for brands through worthwhile social media content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The success of an influencer can be measured by followers, likes and invisible influencer characteristics like trust (Conde & Casais, 2023; Pittman & Abell, 2021; Seo et al., 2019). Influencers can, therefore, be categorized by number of followers, personal branding, concentration, engagement rates, monetary requirements for partnerships, and their expertise (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Table 1 outlines key characteristics of influencer classification.

Micro-influencers, with 10,000-100,000 followers, often have more localized and engaged audiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Waltenrath et al., 2022; Zwicker et al., 2024) with more persuasive power than mega-influencers (Park et al., 2021). Their income mainly comes from affiliate programs and brand partnerships. Known for high audience engagement and use of varied social media formats (e.g., TikTok reviews, Instagram Stories), micro-influencers are seen more authentic than larger-scale influencers. They can strongly influence purchasing decisions by followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Pittman & Abell, 2021; Zwicker et al., 2024).

Micro-influencers are attractive to brands as their followers consider them to be more authentic than mega-influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023; Park et al., 2021, Pittman & Abell, 2021; Waltenrath et al., 2022; Zwicker et al., 2024). Through branded content, micro-influencers can impact the opinions of their followers. For authentic communication, the matching of brands and micro-influencers is essential (Bakker, 2018: Poyry et al., 2019). If the followers question the authenticity of the micro-influencers, it can harm the reputation and image of both micro-influencers and the brands.

Micro-influencer marketing in Vietnam

35.65% of Vietnamese influencers are micro-influencers. In Vietnam, brands use them mostly to drive brand awareness. Top investment categories include food, family, education, fashion, and beauty. Popular platforms for micro-influencer campaigns are Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (Anymind, 2022.)

The authenticity of micro-influencers

The high level of authenticity attracts brands to work with micro-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, Pittman & Abell, 2021, Waltenrath et al., 2022). Although authenticity is commonly described as being real, true, or genuine (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), the concept has multilayered and sophisticated meanings (Poyry et al., 2019). Lee (2020), Modella (2010), as well as

Table 1. *Types of influencers (adapted from Conde & Casais, 2023, p.2)*

Type of influencer	Number of followers	Key characteristics
Celebrity influencer	Mass media coverage	Fame is outside of social media Distant from fans
Mega-influencer	> 1 million	Large reach
Macro/Meso-influencer	100,000 to 1 million	Large reach Higher engagement than mega-influencers
Micro-influencer	10,000 to 100,000	High-quality content High engagement with audiences Higher authenticity and intimacy than macro-influencers
Nano-influencer	< 10,000	Direct reach The strongest engagement rate
Virtual influencer	0 to > 1 million	Always online

Balaban & Szambolics (2022) studied authenticity in the public relations and communications context; Balaban & Szambolics (2022), Duffy (2017), Lee & Eastin (2021) as well as Morhart et al. (2015), linked authenticity to influencer marketing. Morhart et al. (2015) further extended authenticity to branding context whereas Becker et al. (2019) focused on authenticity in advertising. Authenticity includes three sub-categories: authenticity of source, authenticity of message, and authenticity of interaction (Lee, 2020). This study links authenticity to the realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, transparency, consistency, originality, uniqueness of a brand or human brand that can deliver meaningful values to consumers (Modella, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015; Duffy, 2017; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

Authenticity is a crucial factor that makes influencers succeed (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2021) and it is required for effective paid endorsements (Kaptian & Silvera, 2016). According to Audrezet et al. (2018), each micro-influencer needs to focus on authentic content when producing branded content. Micro-influencers can drive behavioral outcomes of their audiences when their content matches their true personality, value, and style. Intrinsically motivated behavior is also considered to be more authentic (Kapitan et al., 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

Authenticity can help micro-influencers establish intimate and long-term relationships with their followers. Social media platform affordances and features create opportunities to build close relationships by frequent updates, interactions, and engagements with their followers. When content is considered mostly genuine and authentic, micro-influencers can gain trust from their followers whenever they share their content (unpaid or paid) (Conde & Casais, 2023; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Lou, 2021). In paid content, authenticity can increase the persuasiveness and effectiveness of messages via transparent partnership (Balaban & Szambolics, 2021; Poyry et al., 2019; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). An authentic brand-micro-influencer partnership can help brands drive traffic to their platforms, improve brand awareness, increase purchase intentions, leads and conversion rates (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Poyry et al., 2019). Many brands have recognized the opinion leading power micro-influencers yield in their specific target segments. The next section explores the relationships between brands and micro-influencers.

Management of Collaborations with Micro-Influencers

Most consumers struggle to distinguish between unpaid and paid content (Wellman et al., 2020), particularly in Vietnam where identifying sponsored content is not compulsory (Vietnam Government, 2013). Furthermore, any unethical sponsored content, non-transparent endorsements or excessively positive/negative content can also damage brand trust and authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018; Balaban & Szambolics, 2021; Kapitan et al., 2021; Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022; Wellman et al., 2020). Brands should also avoid excessively controlling content as any 'fakeness of content' can result in negative brand perception. Furthermore, reduced micro-influencer-audience interaction can also reduce authenticity (Kapitan et al., 2021) though long-term partnerships enhance trust and brand image (Enke and Borchers, 2019.)

Brands find it difficult to identify influencers to collaborate with when fraudulent influencers can also buy engagement bots to accumulate likes, comments, followers and fake engagement (Kim & Han, 2020): 98% of Vietnamese influencers have unqualified profiles with inactive or fake followers (YouNet Group, as cited in Brands Vietnam, 2019). Furthermore, brand-influencer mismatches can harm both reputations and reduce authenticity (Poyry et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022).

In 1980, Percy & Rossiter (as cited in Bakker, 2018, p. 82) introduced the VisCAP model to help brands find suitable endorsers. The VisCAP model (see Table 3), offers a framework for evaluating a message endorser's characteristics, including visibility, credibility, attractiveness, and power. This model also considers the source characteristics within the communication process (Bakker, 2018.) For a good fit between brands and endorsers, brand managers should consider a wide range of influencers characteristics. Bakker (2018) combined both quantitative and qualitative criteria under the "4 R's of reach, relevance, resonance, reputation" (see Table 4) to assess influencer market value and match brands for authentic collaboration.

Research Questions

This research aims to contribute to the fields of content marketing and micro-influencer management in the Vietnam. It examines the nature of content marketing in Vietnam and explores how micro-influencers manage authenticity through paid collaborations. This study seeks to understand the role of social media in shaping content marketing practices and driving the growth of micro-influencers in Vietnam. Moreover, it aims to broaden current definitions of micro-influencers, investigate their authenticity, and explore strategies for maintaining and enhancing authenticity in collaborations whilst addressing the need for further research highlighted in previous studies (Audrezet et al., 2018; Pittman & Abell, 2021).

The following research questions guide this study: (1) What is the nature of content marketing in Vietnam in the context of social media? (2) How do Vietnamese micro-influencers maintain their authentic voice when they produce paid content? and (3) How do brands manage collaborations with micro-influencers in Vietnam to maintain and increase authenticity?

Study Methodology

This study uses qualitative research by emphasizing the interconnectedness of context and phenomenon. The authenticity of micro-influencers is still very new field of study, particularly in Vietnamese context.

Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling to meet the following criteria:

1) All selected participants have knowledge or work in the field of influencer marketing, especially micro-influencer marketing

2) Participants were chosen from both business and academic backgrounds, including micro-influencers, marketing specialists/managers who use micro-influencer marketing, and researchers working in micro-influencer marketing field

3) Participants gender, socio-economic or other criteria was

Table 3. *The VisCAP model of characteristics to select influencers to match the communication objectives (Adapted from Bakker, 2018, p. 82)*

Communication Objective	Characteristic	Description
Brand Awareness	Visibility	Influencer's fame – how recognizable is the influencer
Brand Attitude	Credibility Expertise	Influencer's perceived knowledge of product category or whatever being endorsed
	Objectivity	Influencer's sincerity or trustworthiness in talking about product category or whatever being endorsed
	Attractiveness Likeability	Influencer is seen as personable or attractive
	Similarity	Followers consider influencer as personable and similar to them
Brand Purchase Intention	Power	Influencer's perceived ability to instill compliance with message

Table 4. *The 4 R's (Bakker, 2018)*

4R's	Type of Metric	Description
Reach	Quantitative	The number of followers
Relevance	Qualitative	The fit between influencer and the brand, e.g. personality, content, brand, target audience, etc.
Resonance	Qualitative	The average interaction between influencer and their followers,
Reputation	Qualitative	Can the influencer show their expertise in their field? Is the influencer trusted? Are there personality traits compatible with the brand?

not considered in the interviewee selection

Separate interview questions were created micro influencers, brand managers collaborating with micro influencers and academic researchers. The interview questions were divided into three major themes as below:

1) Content marketing & social media consumption in Vietnam

2) The authenticity of micro-influencers and their effects

3) Management of collaborations with micro-influencers

Eight micro-influencers, five marketing managers, three marketing executives, and two researchers were contacted through email resulting in twelve interviews: five micro-influencers, three marketing managers, two marketing executives and two researchers. The micro-influencers varied from one who had just started their micro-influencer career to one who will become a macro-influencer in the near future, five marketing executives and managers ranging from mid-level to senior managerial positions, and two researchers working in the field of influencer marketing. To respect the participants' privacy, random aliases were applied to identify interviewees (see Table 2). The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online. Thematic analysis was utilized for objective and systematic data interpretation (Bell et al., 2019).

Research Findings

The Impacts of Content Marketing & Social Media Consumption on Micro-Influencer Marketing in Vietnam

Platforms

All participants acknowledged the rapid evolution of social media in Vietnam. Adapting to new platforms and audience shifts were considered essential for both brands and influencers. Due to its diverse audience and high reach for campaigns Facebook was considered the most popular platform in Vietnam yet challenges from intense competition for visibility, strict ad policies, and performance measurement issues were acknowledged by MGR3. Using all social media channels was considered a waste of resources; platform choice should align with product type and target audience (MGR2, RES1).

Audience targeting, campaign goals, and expertise influenced platform selection. Instagram is the most favored among micro-influencers and marketing specialists for its diverse visual-based content formats, balanced audience demographics, and higher conversion rate (MGR4). Typically, influencers would drive traffic to branded e-commerce stores via profile links and live-streams (MGR4). Furthermore, Instagram allows influencers to create a more professional image of themselves (INFL1) whereas TikTok audiences are recognized as a younger segment where influencers need to foster a friendlier image of themselves (INFL1)

TikTok is gaining popularity among micro-influencers and marketing specialists because of the new opportunities for new target groups and sales generation with TikTok Shop. INFL4 also uses TikTok live streaming to sell their own branded products.

Content Formats

Brands prefer short video content like Reels or stories as this format engages audience and yields the highest ROI (MGR1 and MGR5). Video format is increasing in popularity in general as 'social media big names like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc. are all investing in short videos, from 15 seconds up to 2 minutes. They are introducing new features for their applications like story, video duet, live-streaming, etc.' (INFL3). The attractiveness of short video content is also recognized by the micro influencers (INFL3).

Measurement

But what type of promotion is considered to be the most successful content? Eight out of twelve interviewees emphasized metrics other than number of followers and reach: measurement should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative metrics include the number of followers, reach, click through rate (CTR), views, engagement rate, ROI, conversion rate, brand mentions, etc. Qualitative measurement that should be considered are the quality of content, followers' comments, etc. (RES1). According to MGR2 it is crucial to match every indicator to the right stage of the marketing funnel and customer journey. Overall, managers and micro influencers agree on a more holistic view: the follower numbers, and particularly the growth trend in the 'fanbase' is important together with the number of views and the overall engagement (INFL1).

Who are the micro-influencers in Vietnam?

Participants define 'influencer' as an individual who is recognized by brands, who utilizes the social media to create and distribute content to their target audience. Through high quality content micro-influencers are considered to be connected with their audiences with almost intimate relationship with their followers, i.e. a genuine two-way communication (RES1; RES2). INFL4 started their channel 'just for fun' in 2018, but during the Covid-19 pandemic they started improving content quality and following channel metrics. INFL3 is more direct with their approach: 'as an influencer, my job is to create content and spread them on my (social media) platform'. The managers of micro influencer collaborations prefer micro influencers simply as (content) creators whose role (paid or not) is 'to create exceptional content and building influence is a result of that process' (MGR3) and 'allow audiences to enjoy their works and their storytelling on a regular basis' (MGR5). The influencing power of content creators is based on their engaging work in social media (RES1). Overall, in Vietnam, micro-influencers are identified as content creators who have from 10,000 to 100,000 followers on social media, build intimate relationship with their followers, and have the ability to influence their audiences.

The Authenticity of Micro-Influencers and Their Effects

The micro-influencer marketing is gaining more popularity; seven out of twelve respondents noted that micro-influencers are more authentic and effective than larger influencers. RES1 also noted cost-efficiency and expanding reach. Collaborations are not solely follower-based; trust and connection matter more.

Table 2. *Participants' background information*

Name	Title	Details	Date	Length	Location
INFL1	Micro-influencer	12K followers	17.12.2022	75 min	Offline
INFL2	Micro-influencer	85K followers	20.22.2022	105 min	Online
INFL3	Micro-influencer	36K followers	17.12.2022	85 min	Online
INFL4	Micro-influencer	96K followers	22.12.2022	90 min	Online
INFL5	Micro-influencer	51K followers	18.12.2022	76 min	Online
MGR1	Marketing Director	In charge of campaigns and partnerships at an international group	21.12.2022	120 min	Offline
MGR2	Senior PR Manager	In charge of relationships with the public, celebrities, and influencers at a global brand	19.12.2022	97 min	Offline
MGR3	Influencer Manager	In charge of planning social media strategies and managing relationships with influencers at medium-size company	16.12.2022	98 min	Online
MGR4	Marketing Communication Specialist	In charge of recruiting and maintaining relationships with influencers at a small-size company	18.12.2022	72 min	Online
MGR5	Influencer Associate	In charge of recruiting and maintaining relationships with influencers at a medium-sized company	22.12.2022	86 min	Online
RES1	University Lecturer & Researcher	Conducts research on influencer marketing	19.12.2022	90 min	Online
RES2	Researcher	Conducts research on influencer marketing	21.12.2022	120 min	Online

INFL4 found recognition through strategic content focused on personal branding 'to stand out'. INFL5 stressed follower engagement over follower counts. MGR2 highlighted how close influencer-follower relationships help reach niche audiences and boost brand awareness. MGR4 and RES1 warned about influencers buying fake followers and advised focusing on follower growth trends and active engagement.

Definition of Authenticity

The influencers view authenticity as 'not being fake.... not lying, not cheating on my followers' as well as the need for transparency in communications with followers, even in paid collaborations (INFL1). Creating authenticity in an online environment is more difficult than in face-to-face meetings thus INFL2 also arranges small live meetings with their followers. Through this INFL2 received the highest compliment from followers of being the same person on-line as in the live event! Overall, the influencers agree that their audiences are smart and the only way to succeed as an influencer is to be original (INFL4) and 'true to yourself' (INFL5).

Brand managers agree with the requirement of authentic, genuine content, but they extend the requirement of authenticity to reach working relationships between micro-influencers and brand managers (MGR1; MGR4). MGR5 extends authenticity to consistency, and following the posting schedule the fans are expecting. MGR3 links 'authenticity, engagement and influence' closely together. Authenticity is the pre-requisite of 'high-quality collaborations' (MGR4) since the authenticity of the micro influencer also stretched through to consumer perceptions about collaborating brands (MGR2). Academic researchers emphasize authenticity throughout the influencer's total life-span (RES1). In other words, authenticity is a sophisticated concept that includes various features beyond sincerity, realness, truthfulness, honesty or genuineness. Figure 1 summarizes all of the features in the data that make up the concept of authenticity.

Beneficial Effects of Micro Influencers' Authenticity

Maintaining authenticity offers significant benefits for micro-influencers. Respondents mentioned three key benefits. Firstly, they can gain more followers. Four interviewees asserted that this is extremely important for micro-influencers

Figure 1. *Summary of authenticity features found in the data*

when they start their own brands. Inauthentic micro-influencers risk damage to their reputation and lower follower numbers (INFL3). Secondly, authenticity increases recognition by brands, leading to new partnerships (INFL5). Thirdly, it fosters tight-knit relationships with followers to 'mitigate risk in collaborations' (INF5). The research data also demonstrates two additional benefits of micro-influencers authenticity: authentic micro-influencers can help brands achieve their objectives (e.g. increased brand awareness and enhanced effectiveness/trust in messages), and to persuade followers to take behavioral actions. Authentic micro-influencers offer brands better-quality collaborations. There are 'studies which have proved that influencers are perceived as more honest and authentic if they disclose the partnership with the brands with their followers. They should be transparent when it comes to the reasons behind that partnership' (RES1).

Authentic micro-influencers can also be a 'trusted information source' for followers as followers view them as experts in their niche fields (INFL1). Table 5 summarizes the beneficial effects of micro-influencers' authenticity.

To maintain or increase the authenticity of micro-influencers, respondents stated three key measures, including 1) Being true and consistent to oneself; 2) Ensuring the fit and relevance between micro-influencers and brand; 3) Being transparent and honest with followers about the collaboration.

The Management of Collaborations with Micro-Influencers

Pre-collaboration Management

This study explored the micro-influencer management across pre-collaboration, collaboration and post-collaboration stages. At the pre-collaboration stage, collaborations are initiated by micro-influencers actively contacting the brand they want to work with (INFL1), brands directly approaching the influencers they would like to collaborate with (INFL3), or proposals made via agencies or micro-influencers' managers. The most suitable approach depends on the size of the company or the campaign: for example, INFL2 relies on their manager to source and negotiate collaborations and contracts. This is logical as INFL2 has 85.000 followers and relies on team support for content creation (a professional approach to micro influencer business). INFL5 started creating content as a part of an internship programme and currently maintains their channel with the approval of their employer.

Brand managers described multiple ways to contact micro-influencers, for example MGR4 has contacted micro-influencers directly through Instagram Direct Messaging to propose interviews with them. Smaller companies typically collaborate directly, while larger campaigns use agencies to manage workload (MGR3). MGR1 simply receives too many invitations to collaborate with influencers. Hence, they prefer to work through talent agencies to 'manage a network of different influencers'. Furthermore, through talent agencies the brand can 'utilize their influencer social listening tools to track the influencers' data and optimize our campaigns'.

Ensuring quality collaboration starts with selecting the right micro-influencers. All respondents emphasized audience fit as essential for maintaining authenticity (see Figure. 1). INFL1 has a strong stance in sustainability, follows vegan lifestyle with followers interested in sustainable lifestyle. Hence, INFL1 would only collaborate with organizations with equal environmental standards. Besides audience fit, INFL2 wants to maintain their image and seeks audience, style, content and image fit. MGR1 highlights the importance of 'match in platform, content, audience and personality fit'. They use the initial interviews to gauge the activity of the influencer and whether they are likely to be easy to collaborate with. MGR2 highlights that the audience is the first thing they look at whether the objective is awareness-raising or sales. In addition to evaluating the audience fit, MGR2 also mentions engagement rate between micro-influencers and their audience. Besides audience, MGR3 looks for value and emotion fit: 'we only look for micro influencers that genuinely love and have positive thoughts about our brand'. MGR3 also checks the performance and ROI of any past campaigns and if any current or past brand collaborations could pose a conflict of interest or confuse the audience. Table 6 compared how managers and micro-influencers rank potential collaborators to ensure the fit between brands and micro-influencers for authenticity.

Notably, both brands and micro-influencers want to build a business relationship before any collaboration.

Table 5. *Summary of the beneficial effects of micro-influencers' authenticity found in the interviews*

	Beneficial effects of micro-influencers' authenticity
Towards micro-influencers	1) Gaining more followers and strengthening reputation 2) Being recognized by more brands 3) Reducing negative effects in collaborations by building tight-knit para-social relationships with followers
Towards brands	1) Achieving objectives 2) Gaining more high-quality collaborations and ensuring the quality of the collaborations
Towards followers	1) Being a reliable source of information for followers

The Management of Authenticity of Content in the Collaboration is Formed

The collaboration contracts between brands and micro-influencers included goals, number of posts, schedule, product or brand information, number of people reached, engagements, conversion rate, number of sales generated and after-collaboration requirements etc. However, since content creation is a creative job, it should not be restricted by KPIs as long as the content produced is 'the most optimized, effective, suitable and targeted with the brands, in terms of quality' (INFL3).

Clear and concise contacts are highlighted as 'super important part in a collaboration'' (MGR5). These contracts will stipulate the booking price for micro-influencers and the amount of content to be distributed. Contacts should also 'include the objectives and goals to be achieved, key performance indicators needed in this campaign, for example, 100K reach, 50K likes, or number of sales generated per livestream' (MGR5). INFL2 also supports detailed contacts to avoid 'gray area in the collaboration' and in best collaborations the brands provide 'clear objectives, deliverables, messages or expectations in this particular collaboration'. The interviews confirm that the contracts should be based on two-way communication.

The potential of misconduct like the violations of the contract, misconducts or lying about their performance was highlighted. Thus penalties for violating contract terms should be also included in the contract: 'Apart from agreement on content, messages, and products, it is vital to also include punishments, for example, if the micro-influencers do not post on schedule, or they collaborate with another competitor brand.' (MGR1). And 'issues that occurred to me when collaborating with micro-influencers can be that they do not read the contract, they do not send back the content product, or they fake the numbers, you name it. Based on the bad experiences that we had, we always include penalties if they violate the contract' (MGR4).

The next part of the interviews discussed freedom in content creation. To avoid crises, brands want to control content created by micro-influencers though all micro-influencers and three marketing executives assured that they wanted brands to trust influencers: give them freedom to create effective content, e.g., INFL5 highlighted how micro influencers can bring 'a fresh viewpoint while collaborating with brands'… provided that they have 'the freedom to express myself in my own unique way when I collaborate with brands.' MGR3 supports this argument as the micro-influencers understand their followers the best. 'The collaboration will be the most effective if the content is genuine and unscripted' (MGR3). RES2 understands both sides of influencer collaboration: 'the difficult thing is to keep a balance. There is a dilemma that companies want to control the influencers' content because they are afraid of misconduct, miscommunication, scandals' as too much control by the brands will reduce authenticity and effectiveness of the communication.

Transparency is a key to foster authentic micro-influencers in collaborations and disclosing brand partnerships enhances trustworthiness. The majority of micro-influencers hold a moral obligation towards their followers to disclose paid collaborations (INFL1). The authenticity of communications is enhanced if the brand featured in micro-influencers' channels is a true match, a product they would use without paid collaboration. 'Putting on the #advertising or labeling paid content has been made mandatory in many countries' (INFL1). All interviewees stressed the urgency of introducing advertising labeling in paid content for Vietnamese law.

Post-collaboration Management

Authentic, transparent partnerships benefit both parties (INFL3; INFL5). Micro-influencers can boost reputation and gain more partnerships, while brands expand reach, engagement, and sales: 'if the collaboration is authentic then more influencers want to work with us. Both brands and influencers can

Table 6. *Top 4 criteria in selection process to ensure the fit between brands and micro-influencers for authenticity*

Rank	Micro-influencers	Brands
1	Target audience fit	Target audience fit
2	Value fit	Content fit
3	Content fit	Value fit
4	Platform fit	ROI (e.g. conversion rate, sales, number of people reached or engaged, etc.)

gain more audiences, more followers, more engagements, more sales, and other effects. When you get better collaborations, you get better quality of content, you get better relationships, you get also contacts with other influencers' (MGR5).

Long-term partnerships are favored as one-off reviews may seem inauthentic (INFL5). Ongoing partnerships are preferred by brands as finding well matched influencers is challenging and time-consuming (MGR1). Long-term cost of the collaboration will be reduced with longitudinal collaborations (MGR1). Long-term collaborations with the same brand can also increase the micro-influencer and brand capital 'because it is more credible to stick to one brand and not change the partnership in every other week' (MGR3; MGR5). In other words, a 'win-win situation' (MGR3). Early successful collaborations build trust, leading to more creative freedom and integration in live events (RES1).

The Future of Micro-Influencer Marketing in Vietnam

Interviewees predicted four possible trends about the future micro-influencer marketing in Vietnam. Firstly, four respondents asserted that micro-influencers and nano-influencers would continue to rise as 'the follower base of micro-influencers and nano-influencers are already genuine and authentic with high engagement rates which can help brands to engage with new niche users' (MGR4).

Secondly, live-streaming and short-form videos will remain trending as 'a lot of brands and e-commerce platforms in Vietnam like Shopee, Lazada, Tiki, and newly TikTok Shop, are utilizing social media to live-stream with micro-influencers to foster the purchasing process, reduce touchpoints, increase credibility as audiences can get to know more about the product in real-time, as well as increase brand love through interactions in the live-streaming sessions' (INFL3). E-commerce platforms will expand the use of influencers, live-streaming, and affiliate programs, with more "snackable" video content as new features emerge (RES2).

Thirdly, the integration of affiliate programs with micro-influencer marketing is expected to grow, particularly with TikTok Shop's payment options promoting live sales (MGR3, INFL3).

Lastly, the rapid development of AI tools, including chatbots and AI-generated content, poses both opportunities and challenges. While AI can assist, it pressures micro-influencers to maintain authenticity and stand out (INFL4, MGR4).

Discussion

Content marketing leverages social media for content distribution (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015) highlighting the close link between content marketing and social media: both prioritize storytelling over direct promotion (Rose & Pulizzi, 2011; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Digital transformation is further reshaping content formats and platforms, pushing brands and influencers to adapt to engage target audiences and remain competitive (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015; Vollero & Palazzo, 2015). This shift has significantly influenced influencer marketing, such as the move to TikTok identifies in this study.

Our results confirm follower count as a basic influencer categorization metric, but other visible and invisible factors, like follower growth and audience engagement, are also crucial (Seo et al, 2019; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Pittman & Abell, 2021). The results confirm micro-influencers stand out for their af-

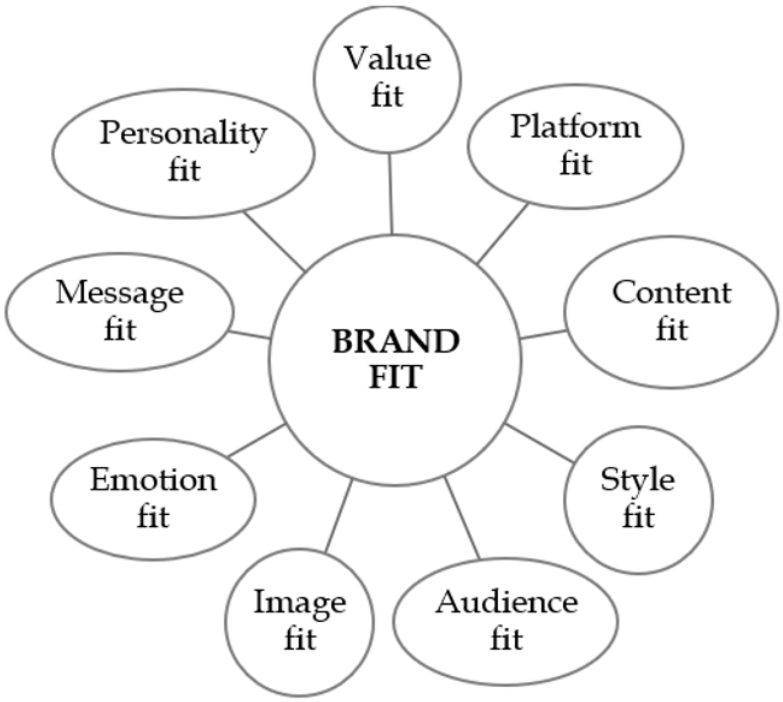

Figure 2. *Summary of the different meanings of brand fit found in this study*

fordability, varied content, niche audience reach, and, most notably, authenticity. Authenticity embodies realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, originality, uniqueness of a brand/human brand that can deliver meaningful values to audiences. The findings here extend the concept to include relevance, intimacy, the fit between content and online persona etc. (see Figure 1). Authenticity is vital for micro-influencers' success (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2021) and this study identifies three strategies to sustain authentic partnerships: 1) staying true and consistent, 2) ensuring brand-influencer fit, and 3) transparency with followers. The findings support multiple benefits of brands collaborating with authentic micro-influencers (Audrezet et al., 2018; Poyry et al., 2019) as all of the participants benefit: micro-influencers, brands and audiences.

The interviews underscore the importance of synergy between brands and micro-influencers, supporting Audrezet et al. (2018) and Bakker (2018). Evaluating fit requires both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Figure 2 illustrates key aspects of brand-micro-influencer fit.

The negative effects of mismatches between brands and micro-influencers are well-documented (Poyry et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022) and our study supports this. Authenticity is higher when micro-influencers are intrinsically motivated as audiences can interpret honesty, credibility, and authenticity through micro-influencers' sponsored content. Perceived inauthenticity, promotions for personal gain and any dishonesty or unethical behavior in sponsored collaborations can damage micro-influencers' authenticity which can lead to less followers, loss of trustworthiness or even destruction of the reputation or image.

Non-transparency in sponsored collaborations can also harm the authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018; Wellman et al., 2020; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022) leading followers to feel cheated and fostering skepticism towards the branded collaboration (Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). Our study extends this mistrust to impact also collaborating brands. This is particularly important in countries like Vietnam where there is no laws mandate the identification of paid collaborations.

Interviewees stressed the importance of clear contracts to ensure smooth collaboration, without restricting micro-influencers' creative freedom that is the key to their authentic connection with followers. Trust between parties is essential for success and particularly longitudinal collaborations foster brand managers' trust on the capabilities of the content creator. Trust provides mutual benefits, making collaboration more authentic and valuable for both sides.

Conclusions

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes contributions to literature in five ways. First, it affirms the strong link between content marketing and social media within Vietnam's micro-influencer context.

Changes in content marketing or platforms impact influencer marketing and challenges both brands and influencers to adapt. Short-form videos offered by e.g. Instagram, TikTok are preferred by micro-influencer, their followers, and brands. The professionalism of both, the micro-influencers and collaborating brands was also evident. Surprisingly, quantitative metrics are not viewed as key quality indicators as both parties emphasized the use of both quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure the success of campaigns. As this study focuses on Vietnamese market, findings might not be applicable for other countries.

Second, authenticity was found to be a multi-level concept including more features than the realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, transparency, consistency, originality as suggested by e.g. Modella (2010), Morhart et al. (2015), Duffy (2017), Lee & Eastin (2021) as well as Balaban & Szambolics (2022). The different features contributing towards authentic micro-influencer communication in Vietnam were identified in Figure 1. Our results suggest three keyways that micro-influencers can follow for enhanced authenticity when producing paid content: 1) being true and consistent; 2) ensuring brand-micro-influencer fit; 3) transparency with followers.

Third, the study highlights the importance of managing brand-micro-influencer collaborations, supporting Bakker's (2018) emphasis on fit for maintaining authenticity. This is particularly important for planning paid partnerships.

Fourth, this study aligns with the VisCAP model (Percy & Rossiter, 1980, cited in Bakker, 2018) and Bakker's (2018) "4 R's" framework, showing that ethical conduct from the outset is vital. Target audience can use the consistency of content to gauge credibility, honesty, and authenticity of micro-influencers. Inconsistent content and unethical behaviour will be interpreted as inauthenticity. This finding is consistent with Wellman et al. (2020) and Kapital et al. (2021). The study findings imply that inauthenticity can lead to misconducts where both parties suffer. Hence, clear contracts ensure successful brand-micro-influencer collaborations.

Fifth, the findings support Audrezet et al. (2018), Wellman et al. (2018), and Sundermann & Munnukka (2022) on the need for clear disclosure of commercial collaborations to protect authenticity. Notably, although Vietnamese law does not require #advertising- or #sponsored- identification for paid social media content, some micro-influencers view clear disclosure of collaborations as professionalism.

Sixth, creative freedom enhances authenticity and communication effectiveness, echoing Kapitan et al. (2021). Enke & Borchers (2019) suggest long-term partnerships improve brand image; this study adds that such partnerships enhance perceived authenticity for both sides in the collaboration.

Finally, the study identifies four trends in Vietnam: 1) continued growth of micro- and nano-influencers, 2) increased use of live-streaming and short-form videos, 3) integration of influencer and affiliate marketing, and 4) rising use of AI in marketing.

Managerial Implications

First, as fake engagement and followers are major concerns in influencer marketing (YouNetGroup, 2019), the study stressed the importance of assessing micro-influencers beyond quantitative metrics. Evaluating brand fit should include audience characteristics, growth, engagement, content style, communication approach, and micro-influencer image. Personality, professionalism, and past collaborations should also be considered.

Second, transparent disclosure of collaborations enhances au-

thenticity (Audrezet, 2018; Wellman et al., 2020). Brands and micro-influencers must explain partnerships clearly, especially in countries like Vietnam where no disclosure laws exist. Although there are many professional micro-influencers, routinely disclosing all paid partnerships, brands should include such requirement in contracts to enhance brand trust, credibility and awareness.

Third, contracts should benefit both sides and outline sponsorship details, objectives, target audiences, KPIs, content style, and penalties for breaches. Clear instructions ensure smooth collaborations and help micro-influencers decide on participation

Fourth, while brands may want control over content, excessive oversight can reduce authenticity and credibility (Martinet-Lopez et al., 2020; Kapitan et al., 2021). The key is balancing control and creativity—providing clear guidelines without stifling creative input. Brands should respect micro-influencers' expertise in creating engaging, authentic, creative content tailored to their audience. Micro-influencers must prioritize content quality and demonstrate alignment with brand values.

Trust-based, close relationships between brands and micro-influencers established at the beginning of the collaboration reduces fear of misconduct. Long-term collaborations appear more authentic and trustworthy, therefore, brands should consider contracting endorsers as brand ambassadors. Although finding the right match is time-consuming, these partnerships benefit both sides. Once a long-term partnership is established, brands can gain valuable customer feedback through their collaborators and in return help micro-influencers hone their communication with followers.

Limitations and Future Research

The major limitation of this research is its small sample size. Although the study used purposive sampling with interviewees chosen from all influencer marketing stakeholder types, it lacks audiences' perspective. A large-scale quantitative study to gauge audience reactions could prove valuable. The study findings are based on Vietnamese context, hence the findings cannot be automatically generalized to other regions.

This study highlights the importance of brand fit, transparency, creative freedom, and long-term partnerships for enhancing authenticity in brand-micro-influencer collaborations. Future research could consider separate investigation for the different meanings of brand fit, the importance of transparent disclosure in paid partnerships, and how freedom in content creation as

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