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Trends in Marketing Communication: Strategic Influencer Marketing for Sustainable Presence

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Abstract

This article investigates contemporary trends in marketing communication by focusing on strategic influencer marketing as a communicative practice for sustaining brand presence in digital environments. Drawing on a communication studies perspective, the study analyzes how meanings, relationships, and credibility are co-constructed among brands, intermediaries, and audiences within platformized ecosystems. The research employs a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with three KOL specialists, one marketing agency officer, two café owners, and five micro and nano influencers, capturing the interaction between institutional actors and everyday content creators. The findings indicate that sustainable presence in influencer-based communication is shaped by three interrelated dynamics: discursive alignment between brand and influencer values, ongoing dialogic engagement with audiences, and flexible collaboration formats responsive to platform-specific cultures. Micro and nano influencers emerge as particularly salient in cultivating intimate, niche communities and reinforcing trust-based, peer-like communication with followers. The study argues that influencer marketing should be understood not merely as a promotional technique but as a relational communication strategy that integrates branding, mediated interpersonal interaction, and community building. These insights extend debates on digital marketing communication and offer implications for practitioners and scholars concerned with strategic, sustainable communication in platformized media environments

Keywords: *Influencer marketing; Marketing communication; Sustainable brand presence; Micro and nano influencers; Digital engagement*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed marketing communication, shifting promotional authority from traditional media institutions toward digitally networked actors who shape consumer perceptions through relational and participatory content (Dung & An, n.d.; Fauzi Eka et al., 2024; Haenlein et al., 2020; Michael & Susilo, 2023; Yordudom et al., 2026). Among these actors, influencers, key opinion leaders (KOLs), micro-influencers, and nano-influencers have become increasingly significant in mediating brand visibility, credibility, and audience engagement (Angelia & Susilo, 2023; Enke & Borchers, 2019; Shan et al., 2020; Srinarwati, 2023; Thehawijaya & Susilo, 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). In contemporary digital ecosystems, influence is no longer derived solely from celebrity status or mass reach; rather, it is also produced through perceived authenticity, conversational intimacy, and sustained community interaction (Schouten et al., 2020). This shift is especially evident in short-video platforms such as TikTok, where algorithmic distribution, entertainment value, and user-generated participation encourage highly personalized forms of communication. As a result, marketing communication has moved beyond one-way persuasion toward strategic relational engagement that relies on content co-creation, social trust, and platform-native storytelling.

In Indonesia, this transformation is particularly important because of the country's large, youthful, and highly connected digital population. Indonesia has become one of the largest social media markets in Southeast Asia, and TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential platforms shaping consumer attention, lifestyle trends, and purchase decisions (Nasution et al., 2023). The platform's popularity is not only associated with entertainment, but also with its role in shaping consumer discovery, brand awareness, and peer-based product evaluation. For cafés, small businesses, and lifestyle brands, TikTok offers an accessible channel to build visibility without depending entirely on conventional advertising budgets (Sumandiyar et al., 2023). This is especially relevant for micro and nano influencers, whose smaller but more engaged audiences often generate high levels of trust and relatability. Within this context, strategic influencer marketing becomes a critical communication practice for sustaining brand presence in a crowded and rapidly changing digital environment.

Influencer marketing has become one of the most discussed developments in digital marketing communication (Diawati et al., 2023; Herdiansyah & Maskan, 2025; Kusumawati & Raharjo, 2021). Unlike traditional advertising, which typically relies on brand-generated messages delivered through mass channels, influencer marketing depends on individuals who act as intermediaries between brands and audiences. These influencers may be celebrities, professional content creators, KOLs, or ordinary users with niche communities. Research has shown that the persuasive power of influencers often lies in their perceived authenticity, social proximity, and ability to create relatable content that appears less commercial than formal advertising (Herdiansyah & Maskan, 2025). In communication terms, influencers function as meaning-makers who translate brand messages into culturally resonant narratives that audiences are more likely to accept.

A major theme in the literature is the relationship between influencer credibility and audience trust. Credibility is commonly understood through

dimensions such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, all of which affect how audiences interpret sponsored messages (Indrasari et al., 2019). In digital settings, however, credibility is increasingly tied to perceived authenticity and transparency. Audiences are often aware that influencer content may be commercial, yet they still respond positively when messages are delivered in a style that feels consistent with the influencer's established identity. This suggests that successful influencer marketing depends not simply on exposure, but on the careful alignment between the influencer's persona, the brand's values, and the expectations of the target audience. When this alignment is weak, sponsored content may be interpreted as inauthentic or opportunistic, reducing its communicative effectiveness.

The rise of micro and nano influencers has further complicated the field. While macro-influencers and celebrities provide scale, micro and nano influencers often deliver stronger engagement within smaller communities. These influencers are frequently seen as more approachable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy because their content is embedded in everyday experiences rather than aspirational celebrity culture. Studies suggest that smaller influencers can produce higher engagement rates and more meaningful interactions, particularly in niche markets where audiences seek recommendations from people they perceive as similar to themselves (Ramadan & Farah, 2020; Shan et al., 2020). This is highly relevant to cafés, local brands, and lifestyle businesses that depend on community-based visibility rather than mass-market saturation. In such cases, influence is less about broad reach and more about relational depth.

TikTok has intensified these dynamics by introducing a platform environment that privileges short, creative, and algorithmically amplified content. Unlike platforms that are more follower-driven, TikTok allows content to circulate widely through its recommendation system, making visibility partially independent of existing audience size. This creates opportunities for micro and nano influencers to achieve unexpected reach when their content resonates with platform users. The platform also encourages vernacular creativity, humor, trends, and participatory imitation through duets, stitches, and sound-based replication. As a result, brand communication on TikTok often requires adaptation to platform culture rather than simple content repurposing from other channels. Brands that succeed on TikTok tend to use native storytelling forms that blend entertainment, relatability, and subtle persuasion (Dung & An, n.d.; Haenlein et al., 2020). The platform therefore reconfigures influencer marketing as a more dynamic and participatory form of communication.

From a marketing communication perspective, this platform logic matters because it affects how messages are encoded, circulated, and interpreted. Communication on TikTok is not linear; instead, it unfolds through interaction among creators, audiences, algorithms, and trends. This means that marketing effectiveness depends on the ability to participate in platform-native discourse while retaining strategic brand coherence (Michael & Susilo, 2023). Influencers play a key role in this process because they translate commercial intentions into culturally legible content. Their success relies on the capacity to maintain authenticity while also satisfying campaign goals, a balance that requires skill, negotiation, and often long-term collaboration with brands or agencies. In this sense, influencer marketing

is best understood as a form of mediated collaboration shaped by both relational communication and platform affordances.

The concept of sustainable presence is also central to recent discussions in digital marketing communication. Sustainability in this context does not only refer to environmental or ethical concerns, but also to the ability of a brand to maintain relevance, visibility, and audience connection over time. Rather than seeking short-lived viral attention, sustainable presence emphasizes continuity, consistency, and trust-building across campaigns. This is particularly important in competitive consumer sectors such as food and beverage, where brands must remain visible in a saturated marketplace. In Indonesia, cafés and small businesses increasingly rely on digital promotion to sustain consumer interest, especially among younger urban audiences who discover new products through social media. TikTok is especially effective in this regard because its algorithmic structure and visual culture can rapidly generate local awareness, foot traffic, and online engagement.

Recent scholarship and practice reveal that social media has become deeply embedded in everyday consumer behavior (Maidiana & Hidayat, 2021; Nielsen, 2007; Ridwan et al., 2017). The country's large population of young, mobile-first users has made digital platforms central to brand discovery and peer communication. TikTok, in particular, has become a powerful site for lifestyle content, food reviews, travel recommendations, and informal product endorsements. In Indonesia, influencer collaboration is often shaped by localized communication styles that emphasize friendliness, familiarity, and social closeness. This cultural dimension is important because influencer effectiveness cannot be separated from the norms governing online interaction. Messages that appear overly scripted or excessively promotional may be rejected, whereas content that feels personal and conversational often performs better. This suggests that Indonesian influencer marketing is not simply a transfer of global practice, but a locally adapted communication form.

KOL specialists and marketing agencies play an important mediating role in this process. They are responsible for identifying suitable influencers, designing campaign strategies, and ensuring brand-message consistency across platforms. Their work involves balancing analytical concerns, such as audience fit and engagement metrics, with relational concerns, such as trust and content style. Café owners and other small business actors, meanwhile, often seek influencer partnerships as a way to build visibility without large advertising budgets. For them, influencer marketing is not only about sales conversion but also about creating a recognizable social presence that signals relevance and legitimacy. Micro and nano influencers are particularly valuable in this context because their endorsements may appear more genuine and locally grounded than celebrity promotions. Their content often aligns with everyday consumer practices, making them well suited to hospitality and lifestyle branding.

The literature also suggests that influencer marketing should be examined as a form of strategic communication rather than a purely transactional tool (Herdiansyah & Maskan, 2025; Kusumawati & Raharjo, 2021). Strategic communication involves purposive message design, audience segmentation, and long-term relationship management. In influencer campaigns, strategy includes deciding which influencer tier to use, how much creative freedom to allow, what

disclosure practices to follow, and how to maintain coherence across multiple posts or collaborations. When campaigns are built around sustained relationships rather than one-time sponsorships, they are more likely to produce durable brand associations. This is particularly relevant for sustainable presence, which depends on repeated visibility and audience familiarity over time. Consequently, influencer marketing success cannot be measured only through immediate conversions; it must also be assessed through relational outcomes such as credibility, recall, and community engagement (Herdiansyah & Maskan, 2025).

Despite the growing body of work on influencer marketing, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature still focuses on Western platforms and celebrity influencers, leaving room for more contextualized studies in Southeast Asia. Second, research often treats influencers as a homogeneous category, even though KOL specialists, agencies, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers occupy distinct positions within the communication ecosystem. Third, fewer studies have examined TikTok as a strategic environment for sustainable brand presence in local Indonesian markets. This gap is important because TikTok's algorithmic and participatory structure may alter how influence is produced and evaluated. Finally, more research is needed on how different stakeholders interpret the value of influencer marketing, especially in relation to long-term brand building rather than short-term visibility.

This study addresses these gaps by examining influencer marketing as a strategic communication practice within the Indonesian TikTok environment. By bringing together the perspectives of KOL specialists, a marketing agency officer, café owners, and micro/nano influencers, the study provides a multi-actor view of how influence is planned and experienced. It also contributes to communication scholarship by showing how sustainability in digital brand presence emerges from the interaction between authenticity, platform logic, and localized audience relationships. In doing so, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how marketing communication operates in contemporary social media ecosystems.

This study examines trends in marketing communication by focusing on strategic influencer marketing for sustainable presence, with particular attention to the Indonesian TikTok context. It draws on the perspectives of KOL specialists, marketing agency practitioners, café owners, and micro/nano influencers to understand how influence is planned, negotiated, and operationalized across different stakeholder positions. By doing so, the study contributes to communication scholarship in two ways. First, it explores influencer marketing as a communicative process rather than merely a promotional tactic. Second, it highlights how local digital culture in Indonesia shapes the meanings and outcomes of influencer collaboration, especially in relation to authenticity, trust, and audience engagement. In a media environment increasingly structured by platform algorithms and short-form visual storytelling, understanding these dynamics is essential for explaining how brands maintain relevance and continuity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine strategic influencer marketing for sustainable brand presence in the Indonesian TikTok context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study

sought to understand meanings, experiences, practices, and decision-making processes from the perspectives of multiple actors involved in influencer-based communication (Andrade, 2019; Sugiyono, 2018). Rather than measuring influence through numerical performance indicators alone, the study focused on how participants interpreted the role of influencers, how collaboration was planned, and how sustainable presence was constructed through social media interactions. The design was also suitable for capturing the nuanced relations among KOL specialists, a marketing agency officer, café owners, and micro/nano influencers, all of whom occupy different but interconnected positions within the digital marketing ecosystem.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven informants, consisting of three KOL specialists, one marketing agency officer, two café owners, and five micro and nano influencers. These informants were selected purposively because they had direct experience with influencer marketing practices and TikTok-based promotion. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant, and experience-based insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The selection also reflected the study's interest in obtaining a multi-perspective understanding of influencer marketing, not only from the side of content creators but also from intermediaries and brand owners.

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed from the study objectives and the literature on influencer marketing, digital communication, authenticity, and sustainable presence. The guide included open-ended questions about campaign planning, influencer selection, content style, audience engagement, perceived effectiveness, and challenges in maintaining long-term brand visibility (Bharadwaj et al., 1993; Ismaeel & Alsariera, 2023; Malhotra, 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Questions were flexible enough to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide examples from actual campaigns or collaborations. This approach enabled the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews.

Interview data were gathered through direct online and offline communication depending on participant availability and preference. In the context of TikTok-based marketing, some participants were more comfortable discussing their experiences in short, informal exchanges, while others preferred longer, structured conversations. Each interview was recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the original meaning of the participants' responses. Field notes were also taken during and after each interview to capture contextual observations, such as emphasis, hesitation, and important non-verbal cues that contributed to interpretation. These notes were useful for supplementing the transcript data and supporting later stages of analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that is well suited for identifying recurring patterns, concepts, and meanings across qualitative interview transcripts. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to move systematically from raw interview material to more abstract categories related to strategic influencer marketing, sustainable presence, authenticity, platform use, and audience trust. The process involved several stages. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and familiarity with the data. This initial reading

helped the researcher identify general impressions and potential areas of significance. Second, meaningful segments of text were coded manually by assigning short labels to statements that reflected recurring ideas, experiences, or perspectives.

After initial coding, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. For example, codes related to "audience trust," "natural content style," and "personal recommendation" were clustered under a theme related to authenticity and relational credibility. Codes such as "long-term collaboration," "consistent posting," and "brand fit" were grouped under sustainable presence and strategic continuity. This process of organizing codes into categories made it possible to identify structural patterns across different types of informants. Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively, meaning that coding and interpretation occurred in cycles rather than as a single linear process. As a result, some themes were refined or merged as the analysis progressed.

The study followed an inductive-deductive logic. Inductively, themes emerged from the data themselves based on participants' narratives and examples. Deductively, the researcher also used concepts from the literature on influencer marketing and communication strategy to guide interpretation. This combination helped ensure that the analysis was both grounded in empirical material and informed by relevant theoretical discussions. The final thematic structure highlighted how influencer marketing in the Indonesian TikTok environment operates as a communication practice involving alignment, negotiation, and relational maintenance rather than only promotional exposure.

Data reduction was an essential part of the analysis process because interview transcripts contained a large amount of detailed and sometimes repetitive information (Dash et al., 2021). Following the logic of qualitative data reduction, irrelevant or tangential statements were excluded, while meaningful excerpts were retained and organized according to thematic relevance. Reduction did not mean oversimplifying the data; rather, it involved selecting information that directly contributed to answering the research questions. For instance, comments that merely repeated campaign descriptions were condensed, while statements that revealed how participants evaluated authenticity, audience response, or collaboration strategy were preserved for interpretation.

The reduction process also involved summarizing long interview responses into concise analytical notes without losing their essential meaning. This step helped the researcher compare statements across participant groups and identify similarities and differences between KOL specialists, agency representatives, café owners, and micro/nano influencers. By reducing the data in this way, the researcher was able to focus on core concepts such as trust, content relevance, platform adaptation, and continuity of engagement. Data reduction therefore supported the development of a coherent analytical framework and prevented the findings from becoming excessively descriptive.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several qualitative validation strategies were applied. First, the researcher used careful transcription and repeated reading to ensure that interpretations remained close to the original data. Second, the inclusion of informants from different stakeholder positions provided triangulation at the level of perspective, allowing the findings to

reflect multiple viewpoints on the same communication phenomenon. Third, analytic memos were maintained during coding to document interpretive decisions and ensure transparency throughout the research process. These procedures helped strengthen the reliability of the thematic interpretation.

Ethical considerations were central to the study because the interviews involved professional experiences, business practices, and personal reflections. Prior to data collection, all informants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of the interview data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview began. The consent process was conducted in a clear and respectful manner, ensuring that participants understood how their information would be used in academic publication.

To protect anonymity, the identities of all informants were concealed in the reporting of findings. Pseudonyms or categorical labels were used instead of real names, and any details that could directly identify a participant, brand, or specific business context were generalized or removed where necessary. For example, participants were referred to by role rather than by personal identity, such as KOL specialist, marketing agency officer, café owner, micro-influencer, or nano-influencer. This approach protected confidentiality while still allowing the reader to understand the structure of the sample and the relevance of each participant group. The anonymity procedure was especially important because some participants occupied visible professional positions within the digital marketing industry.

In addition, the researcher treated the interview materials as confidential academic data. Access to recordings and transcripts was limited to the research process, and sensitive information was handled carefully during analysis and writing. By emphasizing anonymity and informed consent, the study upheld basic ethical standards in qualitative social research and respected the professional rights of the informants.

Overall, the methodology combined purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and ethical safeguards to investigate strategic influencer marketing in the Indonesian TikTok context. This approach made it possible to capture the complexity of influencer communication from the viewpoint of multiple actors while preserving confidentiality and analytical rigor. The method was well aligned with the study's objective of understanding how sustainable brand presence is built through relational, contextual, and platform-specific communication practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic Alignment Between Influencer Identity and Brand Values

The findings indicate that strategic alignment between influencer identity and brand values constitutes a foundational element in the effectiveness of influencer marketing within the Indonesian TikTok context. Across the interviews, participants consistently emphasized that successful collaboration depends not merely on the popularity of the influencer, but on the extent to which the influencer's persona, communicative style, and audience composition correspond with the symbolic identity of the brand. In this sense, alignment functions as a communicative bridge that connects brand intention with audience perception. For café owners, in

particular, influencer selection was framed as a strategic decision shaped by the need to ensure that the creator could represent the café's atmosphere, lifestyle orientation, and social positioning in a way that appeared natural, relatable, and credible.

A recurring theme in the data was the centrality of authenticity. Informants repeatedly suggested that TikTok audiences are highly responsive to content that appears genuine, spontaneous, and consistent with the influencer's established identity. KOL specialists noted that audiences quickly detect promotional content that feels overly scripted or disconnected from the creator's everyday style. As one informant explained, "if the content does not match the influencer's usual character, the audience immediately feels it is advertising." This observation underscores the importance of preserving the influencer's authentic voice while integrating the brand message. Rather than forcing standard promotional language onto the creator, effective campaigns allow the brand to be translated into the influencer's own communicative repertoire. In this way, the brand becomes embedded within a familiar and trusted content style rather than appearing as an external insertion.

The data further reveal that strategic alignment contributes to message coherence and sustained brand recall. Several informants indicated that one-off sponsorships may generate temporary exposure, but long-term brand presence depends on repeated exposure through a consistent communicative frame. When influencers continuously present a brand in ways that are consistent with their own identity, audiences begin to associate the brand with a recognizable and trustworthy social meaning. A marketing agency officer stated that "the best collaboration is when the influencer already fits the brand before the campaign starts." This quotation reflects a broader understanding that campaign effectiveness is enhanced when the influencer-brand relationship is perceived as organic rather than engineered. Alignment, therefore, is not simply an aesthetic concern but a structural condition for continuity in audience engagement.

The discussion also highlights the ethical and relational dimensions of alignment. Participants described how influencers are evaluated not only on the basis of reach and engagement, but also on their perceived values, tone, and lifestyle orientation. Brands, particularly those seeking to build a local and community-based image, appear to prefer influencers whose public identity reflects sociocultural familiarity and everyday credibility (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). One café owner remarked that "we need someone whose followers trust them as a real person, not just a promoter." This statement illustrates how trust is constructed through the perceived congruence between the influencer's identity and the brand's values. If this congruence is weak, the collaboration may appear opportunistic and lose persuasive power. Thus, influencer-brand alignment operates simultaneously at the level of communication strategy and symbolic legitimacy (Angelia & Susilo, 2023).

Micro and nano influencers were especially salient in this regard because their identities were often perceived as more intimate, grounded, and community-oriented. Compared with larger influencers, their smaller follower bases tended to foster more direct interaction and greater perceived proximity to audiences. This made their endorsements appear more personal and less commercialized. Several participants suggested that these creators were particularly effective for cafés and

lifestyle businesses because they could embed brand messaging within everyday narratives of visiting, tasting, or sharing experiences. As one micro-influencer noted, “my audience follows me because they expect honest recommendations, so I only work with brands that feel close to my own style.” This reflects the broader communicative logic of micro and nano influencer marketing, in which relational authenticity often matters more than scale alone.

Importantly, the findings also show that alignment is negotiated rather than automatic. Successful collaborations were described as the outcome of dialogue between brand representatives and influencers, especially regarding content tone, visual framing, and messaging boundaries. Rather than imposing rigid scripts, many brands appeared to allow creative flexibility so that the influencer could adapt the campaign to their own style. This flexibility was described by several informants as necessary for maintaining authenticity. In practical terms, strategic alignment involves balancing brand consistency with influencer autonomy. The influencer does not merely transmit a pre-formed message; instead, they co-produce the meaning of the brand through their own content practices. This collaborative process is particularly important in TikTok environments, where audiences favor content that feels spontaneous, creative, and platform-native.

Taken together, the results suggest that strategic alignment between influencer identity and brand values is a key condition for sustainable digital presence. In the Indonesian TikTok environment, where users are exposed to a large volume of promotional content, alignment helps brands stand out by making their messages appear socially credible and culturally relevant (Angelia & Susilo, 2023; Ramadan & Farah, 2020). It supports audience trust, strengthens message coherence, and enables brands to build continuity across campaigns. More broadly, the findings demonstrate that influencer marketing should be understood not as a purely transactional advertising tool, but as a relational communication practice grounded in identity fit, value congruence, and negotiated authenticity.

The Role of Micro and Nano Influencers in Building Audience Trust and Engagement

Micro and nano influencers occupy a distinctive position in contemporary marketing communication because their influence is not primarily generated by scale, but by relational proximity, perceived authenticity, and contextual credibility. In contrast to macro-influencers or celebrities, whose appeal often depends on visibility and aspirational status, micro and nano influencers tend to cultivate trust through everyday interaction, niche expertise, and a more conversational relationship with followers. In the Indonesian TikTok environment, this distinction is especially important because users often respond more positively to content that feels personal, socially embedded, and experience-based. The role of these smaller influencers therefore extends beyond simple promotion; they operate as trust mediators whose communication style makes brand messages appear less transactional and more socially meaningful.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern can be explained through source credibility theory, parasocial interaction, and relational communication (Herdiensyah & Maskan, 2025). Source credibility theory suggests that persuasive communication becomes more effective when the audience perceives the

communicator as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and socially attractive. Micro and nano influencers often score highly on trustworthiness because their audiences view them as ordinary users rather than distant commercial figures. Their recommendations are frequently interpreted as peer-like suggestions rather than professional endorsements. In this sense, credibility is not only about expertise but also about perceived sincerity and consistency of self-presentation. This helps explain why even small-scale creators can generate substantial engagement and purchase intention when their content feels genuine and relevant.

Parasocial interaction further deepens this explanation. The theory argues that audiences form one-sided but emotionally meaningful relationships with media personalities through repeated exposure and perceived intimacy (Ramadan & Farah, 2020). On TikTok, where short-form video, direct address, and recurring storytelling create the impression of familiarity, micro and nano influencers can intensify parasocial bonds more easily than larger creators. Their smaller audience size often allows them to reply to comments, acknowledge followers, and maintain a more interactive presence. These small but repeated acts of communication strengthen the sense that followers “know” the influencer personally, even if the relationship is mediated and asymmetrical. This intimacy matters because trust is often produced not through formal persuasion, but through ongoing social recognition and emotional closeness.

A deeper theoretical reading also shows that trust in micro and nano influencers is linked to the logic of authenticity. Authenticity functions here as a social judgment rather than a fixed attribute. Audiences assess whether content feels consistent with the influencer’s habitual style, personal voice, and lived experience. When this consistency is visible, the influencer’s endorsement appears less like paid advertising and more like an extension of ordinary communication. This is especially significant in a platform like TikTok, where users are highly sensitive to promotional manipulation and often reward content that blends entertainment, lifestyle expression, and practical recommendation. Micro and nano influencers perform well because they can present branded content in a way that still seems embedded in genuine everyday practice. Their engagement is therefore not only quantitative, but interpretive: audiences actively read the content as trustworthy, relatable, and socially useful.

Engagement, in this framework, should also be understood more broadly than likes or views. The literature suggests that engagement is relational, dialogic, and behavioral. Micro and nano influencers often generate comments, shares, saves, and direct messages because followers feel that their voices matter in a smaller community setting. Their audiences are more likely to ask questions, seek recommendations, and participate in discussion because the influencer appears accessible. This conversational structure creates a feedback loop in which trust encourages engagement, and engagement further reinforces trust. As followers interact repeatedly with the creator, the influencer’s content becomes more familiar and more persuasive. For brands, this means that smaller influencers may produce stronger relational outcomes even when their follower counts are modest. Engagement becomes a sign of meaningful attention rather than passive exposure.

In the Indonesian context, this logic is particularly relevant for TikTok-based brand communication. Indonesian users frequently engage with food, café, lifestyle, and local-business content that is framed in informal, visually appealing, and socially recognizable ways. Micro and nano influencers are effective because they can localize brand messages and translate them into culturally familiar narratives. A café review, for instance, becomes more persuasive when delivered by a creator whose style feels close to the target audience's own social world. This local embeddedness enhances both trust and engagement because the audience perceives the recommendation as arising from ordinary experience rather than distant promotion. Theoretical work on digital influence increasingly recognizes that such niche credibility may outperform broad reach in building consumer action, especially in markets where community relevance matters more than celebrity visibility.

The most important implication is that micro and nano influencers transform marketing communication from mass persuasion into relational trust-building. Their value lies in their ability to make brand communication feel socially grounded, emotionally accessible, and culturally resonant. Rather than relying on persuasive force, they rely on credibility accumulated through interaction, familiarity, and consistency. In this sense, trust and engagement are not separate outcomes but mutually reinforcing processes. Trust motivates attention and participation, while engagement deepens the audience's sense of connection and belief in the influencer's recommendations. For strategic influencer marketing, especially in the Indonesian TikTok setting, this means that smaller influencers are not secondary actors; they are central agents in producing sustainable audience relationships and long-term brand relevance.

TikTok as a Platform for Sustained Digital Brand Presence in Indonesia

TikTok's unique architecture fundamentally reshapes how brands achieve sustained presence in Indonesia, moving beyond transient virality toward embedded relational ecosystems. Reflecting on platform affordances theory, TikTok's For You Page (FYP) algorithm privileges content resonance over follower scale, enabling even micro-brands and nano-influencers to maintain visibility through consistent cultural relevance. This creates a reflective tension: brands must surrender partial control to algorithmic unpredictability while cultivating authenticity that sustains long-term algorithmic favor. In Indonesia's hyper-local digital culture, where youth prioritize relatable, Bahasa-infused narratives, TikTok becomes a mirror for cultural identity formation, embedding brands within everyday conversations rather than interrupting them.

Theoretically, this aligns with networked publics theory (Provan & Kenis, 2008), where TikTok fosters persistent, searchable brand communities through duets, stitches, and challenges that transform passive viewers into active co-creators. For Indonesian cafés and lifestyle brands, sustained presence emerges not from polished ads but from participatory loops—user-generated reviews, trend adaptations, and comment-driven storytelling—that build social proof over time. This implicates a strategic shift: brands must invest in relational maintenance rather than campaign bursts, recognizing that TikTok's intimacy rewards consistency (3-5 posts/week) with compounding engagement. The platform's vernacular—quick

hooks, trending sounds, local slang—demands cultural adaptation, turning global algorithms into localized cultural amplifiers.

Critically, sustainability requires navigating platform power asymmetries. While TikTok democratizes access for Indonesian MSMEs, its opaque metrics risk commodifying creators, pressuring brands toward short-term optimization over genuine community-building. Reflectively, this challenges two-step flow models: influencers don't merely relay messages but co-evolve brand meanings through algorithmic negotiation. For practitioners, implications are profound—prioritize micro-influencer partnerships for trust depth, embrace UGC for organic amplification, and monitor engagement as relational capital rather than vanity metrics. In Indonesia's TikTok ecosystem, sustained presence reflects a communicative virtue: brands thrive not by dominating attention, but by becoming culturally indispensable participants in youth-driven digital lifeworlds.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that strategic influencer marketing on TikTok represents a transformative communicative practice for achieving sustainable brand presence in the Indonesian digital landscape. Through qualitative analysis of perspectives from KOL specialists, marketing agency officers, café owners, and micro/nano influencers, three core dynamics emerged: the necessity of aligning influencer identity with brand values to foster authenticity; the superior trust-building capacity of micro and nano influencers through relational proximity and parasocial interaction; and TikTok's platform affordances that enable sustained visibility via algorithmic resonance and participatory culture.

These findings extend communication theory by reframing influencer marketing not as transactional promotion, but as relational meaning-making embedded in platform-specific ecologies. In Indonesia's youth-dominated TikTok environment, where cultural familiarity and conversational intimacy drive engagement, smaller influencers prove particularly effective for niche brands like cafés, converting everyday content into enduring social capital.

Practically, the study offers actionable implications for Indonesian marketers: prioritize value-congruent partnerships, invest in consistent micro-influencer collaborations, and adapt to TikTok's vernacular storytelling. Future research should explore longitudinal engagement metrics and cross-platform comparisons to further validate these relational strategies. Ultimately, sustainable digital presence demands communicative authenticity—transforming brands from advertisers into trusted participants in Indonesia's vibrant digital communities.

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