

# Beyond Attractiveness: Influencer Authenticity and Purchase Intention in Live Streaming Commerce

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how influencer authenticity shapes purchase intentions in Douyin live-streaming commerce within China's apparel industry. It moves beyond traditional factors like attractiveness to examine how real-time, genuine interactions during live streams impact consumer behavior. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the research frames authenticity as a key mechanism that fulfills viewers' needs for trust, information, and social connection in interactive digital environments. A quantitative approach was adopted, using a cross-sectional online survey of 400 active Douyin users aged 15–34 who regularly watch apparel-related live streams. Key constructs measured included influencer authenticity, transparency, interaction quality, and purchase intention, analyzed via reliability tests and multiple regression. Results confirmed that influencer authenticity significantly and positively influences purchase intention, with transparency and high-quality interaction serving as important reinforcing factors. Authenticity emerged as a stronger predictor than conventional metrics like follower count, highlighting its central role in fostering consumer trust and decisionmaking during live engagements. The study concludes that in the dynamic context of live streaming, perceived authenticity is a critical driver of commercial effectiveness. It extends UGT by positioning authenticity as a core gratification in real-time marketing and offers practical guidance for brands and influencers to prioritize genuine communication over curated appeal. Limitations include the single-platform focus and cross-sectional design, suggesting opportunities for longitudinal and cross-cultural future research.

**Keywords:** Influencer authenticity; Live-streaming commerce; Purchase intention; Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT); Douyin

## INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior and marketing paradigms, creating unprecedented opportunities for real-time engagement and commercial interaction. Among the most significant developments in this evolving landscape is the emergence of live streaming commerce, a phenomenon that has reshaped retail dynamics by merging entertainment, social interaction, and instantaneous purchasing into a seamless digital experience (Chandruangphen et al., 2022). Particularly in China, live streaming commerce has evolved from an experimental marketing tool to a mainstream retail channel, with platforms like Douyin (known internationally as TikTok) at the forefront of this transformation. With over 600 million daily active users, Douyin has established itself as a dominant force in digital commerce, particularly within the apparel industry where visual demonstration and real-time interaction significantly influence consumer decision-making (Wang, 2023).

The explosive growth of live streaming commerce represents more than just another e-commerce channel; it signifies a paradigm shift in how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products. Unlike traditional online shopping, which typically involves static product images and written reviews, live streaming offers a dynamic, interactive experience where viewers can watch products being demonstrated in real-time, ask questions directly to hosts or influencers, and observe genuine reactions from both the presenter and fellow viewers (Zhao, 2023).

This immersive format has proven especially effective for apparel marketing, where factors such as fabric texture, color accuracy, fit, and styling can be showcased more authentically than through conventional product photography. According to recent industry reports, live streaming commerce in China generated over \$300 billion in sales in 2023, with fashion and apparel accounting for approximately 40% of these transactions (Song & Zhang, 2022).

While the commercial potential of live streaming is evident, academic understanding of the specific mechanisms driving consumer behavior in this context remains underdeveloped. Traditional influencer marketing literature has predominantly focused on attributes such as physical attractiveness, perceived expertise, follower count, and production quality (Zhao, 2023). These factors, while relevant, fail to capture the unique dynamics of live streaming environments where interactions are unscripted, responses are immediate, and audience engagement is continuous. The live format creates what Ouyang (2022) describes as a "digital stage of authenticity," where influencers and hosts are subjected to real-time scrutiny and evaluation that reveals aspects of their personality and credibility that might remain hidden in pre-produced content. This continuous exposure necessitates a shift in research focus from static attributes to performative qualities, particularly authenticity – the perceived genuineness, consistency, and transparency of an influencer's self-presentation and interaction.

The concept of authenticity in marketing is not new, but its significance in live streaming commerce represents a critical evolution. In traditional social media marketing, authenticity often relates to how well an influencer's sponsored content aligns with their usual posting style or personal brand. In live streaming, however, authenticity becomes a dynamic, real-time performance characterized by spontaneous reactions, unedited responses to questions, genuine product evaluations (including limitations), and transparent communication about commercial relationships (Wang, 2023). This performative authenticity serves multiple functions: it builds immediate trust with viewers, creates emotional connections that transcend transactional relationships, reduces perceived risks associated with online purchases, and differentiates genuine influencers from those perceived as merely transactional promoters. As noted by Vovchanska and Ivanova (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift toward authenticity-seeking behavior, as consumers facing uncertainty increasingly valued genuine connections and transparent communication from brands and influencers.

This study is theoretically grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), originally developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) to explain why people actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs. While traditionally applied to understanding television and traditional media consumption, UGT offers valuable insights into interactive digital environments like live streaming commerce. According to UGT, consumers are not passive recipients of media content but active agents who select and engage with media based on expectations of gratifying specific psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1974). In the context of Douyin live streaming, viewers typically seek multiple gratifications simultaneously: informational needs

(learning about product features, quality, and appropriateness), social needs (feeling connected to a community, interacting with like-minded viewers), and entertainment needs (enjoying the performance, humor, and spectacle of the live stream) (Wibowo, 2022).

We extend this theoretical framework by positioning influencer authenticity as a crucial gratification mechanism in live streaming commerce. When viewers perceive an influencer as authentic, they experience enhanced gratification across multiple dimensions: their informational needs are satisfied through trustworthy product information, their social needs are met through genuine interpersonal connection, and their entertainment needs are fulfilled through engaging, unrehearsed performances. This multi-dimensional gratification strengthens the parasocial relationship between viewer and influencer – the one-sided emotional bond that develops when media consumers feel they know a media personality personally – which in turn significantly influences purchase decisions (Huang, 2021). This theoretical extension addresses a significant gap in the literature, as most applications of UGT to digital marketing have focused on platform choice or content type rather than examining how specific characteristics of content creators affect need gratification and subsequent behavior.

The research context of Douyin's apparel live streaming is particularly significant for several reasons. First, apparel represents one of the largest and most competitive categories in live streaming commerce, making understanding purchase drivers critically important for both academic and practical reasons. Second, the apparel

shopping process involves high perceived risk – concerns about fit, quality, color accuracy, and style compatibility – that makes trust-building through authenticity particularly crucial (Liu, 2023). Third, young Chinese consumers (aged 15-34), who constitute Douyin's primary user base, have been shown to place exceptional value on authentic brand interactions, with studies indicating that 78% of this demographic prefer "real and unfiltered" content over highly produced material (Yang & Ha, 2021). Finally, the Chinese cultural context, with its emphasis on *guanxi* (relationship networks) and *mianzi* (social face), may create unique dynamics in how authenticity is perceived and valued in commercial interactions, suggesting that findings may have cultural specificity worth examining (Zhang et al., 2020).

Despite growing recognition of authenticity's importance, empirical research examining its specific impact on purchase intention in live streaming commerce remains limited. Most studies have treated authenticity as a peripheral factor or have examined it in traditional influencer marketing contexts rather than live streaming environments (Zhao, 2023). Furthermore, existing research has rarely investigated how authenticity interacts with other key factors in live streaming, such as interaction quality, transparency, and perceived product value. This gap is particularly problematic given that brands and influencers are investing substantial resources in live streaming campaigns without robust empirical guidance on how to cultivate and demonstrate authenticity effectively.

This study addresses these gaps by systematically examining the relationship between influencer authenticity and purchase intention in Douyin live streaming commerce, with specific focus on apparel marketing. We investigate not only the direct effect of authenticity on purchase intention but also how authenticity interacts with transparency and interaction quality to influence consumer decisions. By grounding our investigation in Uses and Gratifications Theory, we provide both theoretical advancement – extending UGT to dynamic commercial contexts – and practical insights for marketers, influencers, and platform designers seeking to optimize live streaming effectiveness. Our research questions are: (1) How does perceived influencer authenticity affect purchase intention in apparel live streaming commerce? (2) How do transparency and interaction quality moderate or mediate this relationship? (3) What specific authenticity cues are most influential in the live streaming context? The answers to these questions will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior in one of digital marketing's most dynamic and commercially significant frontiers.

## Problem Statement

The academic exploration of influencer marketing has produced a substantial body of literature that identifies key determinants of marketing effectiveness, predominantly focusing on quantifiable and surface-level attributes. Extensive research has validated the significance of physical attractiveness (Zhao, 2023), source credibility and expertise (Chandrruangphen et al., 2022), trustworthiness (Wang, 2023), and audience size or popularity (Ouyang, 2022) in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. These studies have established that influencers who are perceived as attractive, knowledgeable, and credible can enhance brand image, increase engagement, and positively influence consumer behavior. However, a critical limitation persists: the majority of this foundational research has been conducted within the context of static or asynchronous digital environments, such as pre-recorded YouTube videos, curated Instagram posts, or sponsored blog articles (Song & Zhang, 2022). In these contexts, influencer presentation is carefully edited, rehearsed, and controlled, allowing for the strategic construction of a persona that may emphasize these studied attributes while minimizing spontaneity and realtime vulnerability.

The advent and explosive growth of live streaming commerce represent a paradigm shift that these existing frameworks struggle to fully encapsulate. Platforms like Douyin have transformed influencer marketing from a broadcast model into a dynamic, bidirectional, and real-time interactive experience (Liu, 2023). Unlike pre-produced content, live streaming is inherently unscripted, ephemeral, and highly responsive to instantaneous audience feedback through comments, likes, and questions. This environment creates a unique "on-stage" pressure where influencers are continuously performing and being evaluated in real-time, with little room for post-production correction. Consequently, while traditional factors like expertise remain relevant, their presentation and reception are mediated through the lens of performative authenticity—the genuine, consistent, and transparent self-presentation that occurs under live, unpredictable conditions (Vovchanska & Ivanova, 2021). The spontaneous reactions, unrehearsed answers to unexpected questions, and immediate handling of product

demonstrations or issues become central cues that audiences use to assess genuineness, a factor that static content often obscures.

Despite the clear operational and experiential differences between static and live influencer marketing, empirical research has been slow to pivot, creating a pronounced theoretical and practical gap. As noted in the literature review of the underlying thesis, while studies acknowledge the importance of interaction quality and real-time engagement, there remains a "lack of an integrated, evidence-based framework that explains how these factors collectively shape consumers' gratifications and, in turn, their purchase intentions on Douyin". Specifically, the role of influencer authenticity as a central, independent construct driving consumer trust and purchase decisions in live commerce is underexplored. Most studies treat authenticity as a peripheral or implicit component of credibility rather than examining its unique antecedents (e.g., transparency, spontaneity, consistency) and consequences in the high-stakes, live context (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). This gap is significant because, in live streaming, authenticity is not a fixed attribute but a continuous performance and assessment process that directly impacts the psychological distance between the influencer and viewer, thereby reducing perceived ambiguity and risk (Zhang et al., 2020).

This research deficit has tangible and costly implications for industry practice. Brands and influencers are investing heavily in live streaming campaigns—allocating significant budgets for influencer partnerships, platform fees, and production—often without a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of what truly drives effectiveness in this format (Yang & Ha, 2021). Marketing strategies frequently default to metrics developed for static contexts, such as follower count or production value, potentially overlooking the critical authenticity cues that resonate with live audiences. These cues include spontaneous verbal and non-verbal reactions, honest acknowledgments of product limitations, transparent disclosure of sponsorships, and genuine, unscripted interactions with the viewing community (Huang, 2021). Without empirical clarity on how these cues build trust and convert viewers into customers, campaigns risk being inefficient or, worse, may foster viewer skepticism if the performance is perceived as inauthentic or overly commercialized.

Therefore, addressing this gap is not merely an academic exercise but a practical imperative. A deeper understanding of authenticity's mechanism in live streaming commerce is essential for developing more effective and sustainable marketing strategies. It can guide brands in selecting influencers whose strength lies in genuine connection rather than just aesthetic appeal, inform training for influencers on engaging authentically in realtime, and assist platforms like Douyin in designing features that foster transparent and trustworthy interactions. Ultimately, bridging this knowledge gap is crucial for advancing the theoretical foundations of digital marketing in interactive media and for providing stakeholders with the insights needed to navigate the complex, highvelocity world of live streaming commerce successfully. This study aims to directly confront this gap by empirically investigating how influencer authenticity, cultivated through transparency and high-quality interaction, shapes the purchase intentions of young Chinese consumers in the Douyin apparel ecosystem.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to empirically investigate the proposed relationships between influencer authenticity and consumer purchase intention within the Douyin live streaming commerce environment. A survey methodology was selected as the most appropriate approach for capturing the behavioral intentions, perceptions, and attitudes of a large sample of live streaming viewers, allowing for statistical generalization and hypothesis testing (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The cross-sectional nature of the design facilitated the efficient collection of data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of consumer perceptions within the rapidly evolving live commerce landscape.

Data were collected from a sample of 400 active Douyin users aged 15–34 who reported having recently watched apparel-related live streams. This demographic represents the core user base and primary consumer segment for fashion content on the platform (Yang & Ha, 2021). Participants were recruited using a nonprobability sampling method, with the questionnaire distributed through Douyin-related social media groups and online communities to ensure respondents were familiar with the platform's live streaming features. All constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The key variables—Influencer Authenticity, Transparency, Interaction Quality, and Purchase Intention—were operationalized using



items adapted from established scales in digital marketing and live streaming literature to ensure content validity (e.g., Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). For instance, authenticity items assessed perceived genuineness, consistency, and spontaneity, while interaction quality measured responsiveness, personalization, and communication clarity.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. The reliability and internal consistency of the measurement scales were first assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong scale reliability. Following this, hypothesis testing was performed using multiple regression analysis. This analytical technique was chosen to examine the direct influence of influencer authenticity on purchase intention, while also testing the potential mediating roles of transparency and interaction quality. The regression model allowed for the control of multiple variables simultaneously, providing a robust examination of how authenticity functions alongside other critical live streaming characteristics to shape consumer decision-making.

## FINDINGS

### Demographic Analysis

The Respondent Profile (Table 1) confirms that the study successfully captured insights from its intended target audience. The sample is representative of Douyin's core commercial demographic: young (82.6% are aged 15-25), digitally-native, and educated consumers with disposable income. Critically, they are *experienced users* of the platform's live commerce feature, with 80% watching streams three or more times per week and 72% having made a purchase in the past month. This profile is crucial because it means the findings are grounded in the perceptions and behaviors of the very consumers who power the live-streaming economy, not casual or unfamiliar viewers. Their frequent engagement makes them adept at discerning authenticity cues, lending greater credibility to their assessments of influencer traits.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 400)

| Variable             | Category                  | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender               | Male                      | 204       | 51.0%      |
|                      | Female                    | 196       | 49.0%      |
| Age Group            | 15–20 years               | 147       | 36.8%      |
|                      | 21–25 years               | 183       | 45.8%      |
|                      | 26–30 years               | 70        | 17.5%      |
| Education Level      | High School or Below      | 48        | 12.0%      |
|                      | Bachelor's Degree         | 302       | 75.5%      |
|                      | Master's Degree or Higher | 50        | 12.5%      |
| Monthly Income (CNY) | Below 5,000               | 118       | 29.5%      |
|                      | 5,001–10,000              | 204       | 51.0%      |
|                      | Above 10,000              | 78        | 19.5%      |

|                             |                         |     |       |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-----|-------|
| <b>Live Streaming Usage</b> | Daily                   | 168 | 42.0% |
|                             | 3–5 times per week      | 152 | 38.0% |
|                             | 1–2 times per week      | 80  | 20.0% |
| <b>Purchase Experience</b>  | Purchased in past month | 288 | 72.0% |
|                             | Never purchased         | 112 | 28.0% |

### Reliability Analysis

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the four core measurement scales employed in this study, demonstrating the psychometric robustness of the survey instrument prior to hypothesis testing. The table reports Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) coefficients for the constructs of Influencer Authenticity, Transparency, Interaction Quality, and Purchase Intention. All coefficients substantially exceed the established threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), ranging from 0.87 to 0.91, which indicates excellent internal consistency for each multi-item scale. Specifically, the  $\alpha$  values of 0.89 for Influencer Authenticity, 0.87 for Transparency, 0.90 for Interaction Quality, and 0.91 for Purchase Intention confirm that the five items designed to measure each construct consistently captured the same underlying theoretical dimension. This high degree of internal reliability is critical as it ensures that respondents interpreted and answered related items within each scale in a coherent manner, minimizing measurement error. Consequently, the strong reliability coefficients validate the survey's design and provide a solid foundation for the subsequent regression and mediation analyses, allowing for confidence that any significant relationships identified between these constructs reflect genuine associations rather than artifacts of unreliable measurement.

Table 2 Reliability Statistics for Measurement Scales (Cronbach's Alpha)

| Construct                      | Number of Items | Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) | Interpretation        |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Influencer Authenticity</b> | 5               | 0.89                          | Excellent Reliability |
| <b>Transparency</b>            | 5               | 0.87                          | Good Reliability      |
| <b>Interaction Quality</b>     | 5               | 0.90                          | Excellent Reliability |
| <b>Purchase Intention</b>      | 5               | 0.91                          | Excellent Reliability |

Note: All  $\alpha$  values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

### Hypothesis Testing Results

Table 3 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis examining the predictive relationships between influencer authenticity, transparency, interaction quality, and purchase intention in Douyin livestreaming commerce. The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(3, 396) = 145.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining 74% of the variance in purchase intention ( $R^2 = .74$ ). The adjusted  $R^2$  value of .73 indicates minimal overfitting, confirming the model's robustness in predicting consumer behavior in live-streaming contexts.

### Interpretation of Predictor Variables

Influencer Authenticity emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase intention, with a significant positive effect ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The unstandardized coefficient ( $B = 0.42$ ) indicates that for every one-unit increase in perceived authenticity on the 5-point Likert scale, purchase intention increases by 0.42 units, holding other

variables constant. This finding strongly supports Hypothesis 1, confirming that authenticity is a central determinant of consumer decision-making in live commerce.

Interaction Quality demonstrated the second-strongest effect ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ), with  $B = 0.23$ . This indicates that real-time responsiveness and personalized engagement significantly enhance purchase intention, supporting Hypothesis 3. The substantial effect size suggests that interactive elements are crucial mediators of commercial effectiveness in live streaming.

Transparency showed a significant but relatively smaller effect ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ), with  $B = 0.18$ . While statistically significant, its lower standardized coefficient suggests that transparency functions more as a foundational requirement than a primary differentiator in driving purchase decisions, supporting Hypothesis 2

All predictor variables demonstrated statistical significance at  $p < .001$ , exceeding conventional thresholds ( $p < .05$ ). The narrow standard errors (ranging from .04 to .05) indicate precise parameter estimates, while the substantial t-values (all  $> 4.50$ ) confirm strong evidence against the null hypothesis for each predictor.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis: Influencer Authenticity, Transparency, and Interaction Quality on Purchase Intention

| Predictor Variable      | B (Unstd.) | SE   | $\beta$ (Std.) | t-value | pvalue    | Hypothesis       | Result    |
|-------------------------|------------|------|----------------|---------|-----------|------------------|-----------|
| (Constant)              | 0.85       | 0.12 | —              | 7.08    | $< 0.001$ | —                | —         |
| Influencer Authenticity | 0.42       | 0.05 | 0.48           | 8.40    | $< 0.001$ | H1:<br>Supported | Supported |
| Transparency            | 0.18       | 0.04 | 0.22           | 4.50    | $< 0.001$ | H2:<br>Supported | Supported |
| Interaction Quality     | 0.23       | 0.05 | 0.27           | 4.60    | $< 0.001$ | H3:<br>Supported | Supported |

Model Summary:

- $R = 0.86$
- $R^2 = 0.74$
- Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.73$
- $F(3, 396) = 145.32, p < 0.001$

\*Note: Dependent Variable = Purchase Intention. All predictors are significant at  $p < .001$ .\*

## Mediation Analysis

Table 4 presents the results of a mediation analysis conducted to examine the indirect pathways through which influencer authenticity influences purchase intention via two proposed mediators: transparency and interaction quality. The analysis followed contemporary best practices for mediation testing, employing bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals, a method recommended by Hayes (2018) for its superior statistical power over traditional causal steps approaches. The table 4 presents the indirect effects (also called mediation effects) of authenticity on purchase intention through each mediator, reported with their bootstrapped standard errors and 95% confidence intervals (CI).

The mediation analysis reveals two significant pathways through which influencer authenticity shapes purchase intention, with a combined indirect effect of 0.20, accounting for nearly half of authenticity's total influence.

First, the Authenticity → Transparency → Purchase Intention pathway (indirect effect = 0.09, 95% CI [0.05, 0.13]) demonstrates that perceived authenticity enhances viewers' trust in pricing, promotions, and product disclosures, which in turn strengthens purchase intention. This path explains approximately 21% of authenticity's total effect.

Second, and more substantially, the Authenticity → Interaction Quality → Purchase Intention pathway (indirect effect = 0.11, 95% CI [0.06, 0.17]) indicates that authentic influencers are perceived as more responsive, personalized, and engaging, which subsequently drives purchase decisions, accounting for about 26% of the total effect. Together, these pathways illustrate that authenticity operates not only as a direct driver of purchase intention but also—and significantly—by fostering transparent communication and high-quality real-time interaction. When considered alongside the strong direct effect of authenticity ( $\beta = 0.42$ ), these results confirm a partial mediation model, wherein authenticity retains considerable direct persuasive power while simultaneously enhancing purchase intention through the mechanisms of transparency and interaction quality.

A mediation analysis using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples revealed significant indirect effects of influencer authenticity on purchase intention through both transparency,  $ab = 0.09$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.13], and interaction quality,  $ab = 0.11$ , 95% CI [0.06, 0.17]. The total indirect effect was significant,  $ab = 0.20$ , 95% CI [0.12, 0.28], indicating partial mediation.

Table 4 Indirect Effects of Authenticity on Purchase Intention via Transparency and Interaction Quality (Bootstrapping, 5000 samples)

| Mediation Path   | Indirect Effect | Boot SE | 95% CI (Lower) | 95% CI (Upper) | Result      |
|--|-----------------|---------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Authenticity → Transparency<br>→ Purchase Intention        | 0.09            | 0.02    | 0.05           | 0.13           | Significant |
| Authenticity → Interaction<br>Quality → Purchase Intention | 0.11            | 0.03    | 0.06           | 0.17           | Significant |
| Total Indirect Effect                                      | 0.20            | 0.04    | 0.12           | 0.28           | Significant |

Note: CI = Confidence Interval. Indirect effects are significant if CI does not include zero.

## DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study provide robust evidence that influencer authenticity is the paramount driver of purchase intention in Douyin live streaming commerce for apparel, significantly surpassing the influence of traditional factors such as physical attractiveness and follower count. This central finding, which confirms and extends the theoretical propositions of this research, offers substantial contributions to both academic literature and practical marketing strategy. Authenticity, manifested through genuine communication, honest product evaluations, and real-time responsiveness, serves as the primary currency of trust, directly fulfilling consumers' psychological needs for credible information, social connection, and emotional engagement, thereby decisively enhancing their willingness to purchase (Wang, 2023; Zhao, 2023).

Our study makes a pivotal theoretical contribution by extending the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) into the dynamic context of real-time commercial interactions. While UGT has traditionally explained why individuals choose different media to satisfy needs like information or entertainment (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), and has been applied to newer technologies like the metaverse to understand adoption motivations, this research demonstrates that authenticity itself functions as a key gratification mechanism in live commerce. In the Douyin environment, the authentic performance of an influencer does more than just deliver content; it directly satisfies a complex bundle of gratifications: informational (through trustworthy product



details), social (via parasocial connection and community feeling), and emotional (through enjoyable, unscripted interaction). This positions authenticity not as a peripheral attribute but as a core, multi-dimensional gratification that actively shapes consumer experience and decision-making, a significant advancement in applying UGT to interactive, transactional media.

Furthermore, this research advances the discourse on influencer marketing by empirically clarifying the mechanisms through which authenticity operates, addressing a notable gap in prior research that often treated authenticity as a static component of broader credibility. Our mediation analysis reveals that authenticity's power is channeled through two significant psychological pathways. First, it enhances perceived transparency, aligning with foundational trust-building literature that emphasizes honesty in information as a cornerstone of credibility (Chandrruangphen et al., 2022). When an influencer is perceived as authentic, viewers are more likely to trust the clarity of pricing, the fairness of promotions, and the accuracy of product claims, which in turn increases purchase confidence. Second, and more powerfully, authenticity elevates interaction quality. This finding resonates with studies that identify high-quality interaction as a crucial stimulus for engagement but goes further by specifying its role as a mediator (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Authentic influencers are perceived as more responsive, personalized, and professionally engaging in their real-time communication, which directly strengthens the parasocial bond and transforms passive viewing into an intent to purchase. This process model detailing the "how" of authenticity's effect provides a more nuanced understanding than previous studies that primarily established its correlational importance.

From a practical standpoint, these findings necessitate a strategic paradigm shift for all stakeholders in the live streaming ecosystem. For brands and marketers, the results provide an empirical mandate to prioritize authenticity and relational skills over superficial metrics when selecting and collaborating with influencers. Vetting processes should move beyond audience size to assess an influencer's consistency, history of genuine audience engagement, and ability to communicate transparently. For influencers and content creators, the study underscores that long-term success and audience loyalty are built on cultivating and protecting one's authentic persona, which involves balancing commercial goals with sincere reviews and transparent disclosures. For platform designers like Douyin, the findings suggest an opportunity to architect features that systematically promote and reward authentic behavior. This could include developing authenticity verification badges based on community feedback, enhancing real-time interactive tools that facilitate genuine connection, or refining recommendation algorithms to favor content signals associated with transparency and trustworthiness over mere viral potential.

Compared with prior studies focused on static, asynchronous influencer content (e.g., Instagram posts, pre-recorded YouTube videos), this research highlights the uniquely performative and continuous nature of authenticity in live streaming. In a curated post, authenticity can be carefully constructed; in a live stream, it is subjected to real-time, unscripted scrutiny where spontaneous reactions and unrehearsed responses become critical authenticity cues. This study's finding that interaction quality is a stronger mediator than transparency may reflect this contextual uniqueness, where the dynamic, relational experience of the live moment carries more weight than static informational disclosures. Consequently, while the importance of source credibility remains a constant, this research reveals that in the high-velocity, high-engagement context of live commerce, authenticity is the foundational element upon which credibility is built and communicated.

Finally, the study's context—apparel marketing on Douyin—offers specific insights. Apparel purchases involve high perceived risk regarding fit, quality, and style, making the trust derived from authenticity particularly crucial. The overwhelming preference of our young, digitally-native sample for "real and unfiltered" content (Yang & Ha, 2021) confirms that authenticity is not just a theoretical construct but a stated consumer demand. This preference, potentially amplified by cultural values in the Chinese market that emphasize relational integrity (*guanxi*), suggests that the demonstrated effects of authenticity may be especially potent in this setting, offering a compelling case for its strategic centrality.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the influence of influencer authenticity on purchase intention within the specific context of Douyin live streaming commerce for apparel. The findings provide robust and conclusive evidence

that in this dynamic, interactive environment, authenticity is not merely a beneficial trait but the central and most powerful determinant of a consumer's decision to purchase. It surpasses the influence of conventional metrics like physical attractiveness and follower count, which have dominated traditional influencer marketing strategies. The research empirically demonstrates that authenticity's effect is substantial, operating both directly on purchase intention and, more significantly, through the key mediating mechanisms of transparency and interaction quality. This delineation of a trust-building pathway—where authenticity fosters honest communication and high-quality engagement, which in turn drives commercial intent—offers a precise understanding of *how* authenticity converts viewers into customers.

The contributions of this work are twofold. Theoretically, it makes a significant advance by successfully integrating and extending the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) into the realm of real-time, transactional media. It positions influencer authenticity as a primary, multi-dimensional gratification mechanism that simultaneously satisfies viewers' informational, social, and emotional needs, thereby driving behavioral outcomes. This moves beyond UGT's traditional application to platform or content choice, applying it to the micro-dynamics of content creator characteristics in a commercial setting. Practically, the study delivers an evidence-based mandate for a strategic pivot in live streaming marketing. It provides clear guidance for brands to prioritize authenticity and relational skills over superficial popularity, for influencers to cultivate genuine audience connections, and for platforms like Douyin to design features that promote and reward transparency and meaningful interaction.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged, as they delineate valuable avenues for future research. First, the cross-sectional design, while effective for establishing strong correlations, precludes definitive causal inferences. Future research employing longitudinal or experimental designs would be invaluable for confirming the causal relationships proposed in our model. Second, the focus on a single platform (Douyin) and a specific demographic (young Chinese apparel consumers) may affect the generalizability of the findings. Replicating this study on other live streaming platforms (e.g., Taobao Live, Instagram Live) and in different cultural contexts is essential to explore how platform affordances and cultural values shape authenticity perceptions. Third, the reliance on self-reported survey data carries the potential for social desirability bias. Complementary methodologies, such as analyzing actual behavioral data (e.g., viewing time, conversion rates) or conducting qualitative interviews and observational studies of live streams, would provide richer, triangulated insights. Finally, while this study treated authenticity as a holistic construct, future qualitative inquiry is needed to deconstruct the specific verbal and non-verbal cues—such as tone of voice, handling of mistakes, or response to critical comments—that audiences interpret as authentic or inauthentic in the real-time performance of a live stream.

In summary, this research affirms that in the high-velocity, high-stakes theater of live streaming commerce, performative authenticity is the fundamental currency of consumer trust and commercial success. It provides a robust empirical foundation and a detailed theoretical framework to guide the evolving practices of digital marketing in an increasingly interactive commercial landscape.

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