Authenticity and Monetization Practices of Thai Influencers on Instagram and TikTok

Nunnapan Puathanawat, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

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Abstract

The rise of social media culture has empowered internet-famous individuals, commonly referred to as influencers, to generate commercialized media content across various social media platforms. In particular, the emergence of social media culture is growing significantly, especially within the realm of online commerce. Using a social semiotic multimodal approach, this paper investigates the strategies employed by Thai social media influencers to curate engaging and transaction-oriented content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, presenting an image of authenticity and realness online. Additionally, this paper examines the practices of three prominent Thai influencers and how they collaborate with sponsored brands to balance promotional materials with their self-representation on social media. It aims to provide insights into understanding influencer practices and the conditions for managing business outcomes while maintaining audience engagement in Thailand's digital economy.

Keywords: Authenticity, Influencers, Instagram, TikTok

Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have enabled individuals to emerge as influencers, fundamentally transforming the digital economy by blending personal content with commercialized media (Abidin, 2016; Senft, 2013). This hybrid identity, where influencers merge authentic elements of their personal lives with paid endorsements, has become critical to building trust and engaging audiences (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Abidin, 2018b; Reade, 2020). The concept of authenticity, however, becomes more complex as influencers must navigate the fine line between authentic self-presentation and meeting business objectives (Khamis et al., 2017). Previous studies have examined the notion of authenticity in relation to the practices of taking selfies (e.g. Gannon & Prothero, 2016), sharing unfiltered images, showcasing behind-the-scenes moments, and narrating personal stories (e.g. Duffy & Wissinger 2017)—practices that cultivate a sense of "familiarity" and relatability between influencers and their followers (Abidin, 2017, p.7).

A growing body of research highlights concerns regarding the effectiveness of high-profile influencers in retaining this trust. For instance, Wies et al. (2023) found that some advertisers observed that highly popular influencers often struggle to sustain meaningful influence over their followers. This can be attributed to the perceived lack of authenticity as influencers become more commercialized, potentially distancing themselves from the relatable personas that initially attracted their audiences. This points to an emerging challenge within the influencer marketing industry—whether the pursuit of large followings and brand partnerships dilutes the authenticity that initially attracted audiences.

In Thailand, influencers have become pivotal in the online commerce space, drawing on local culture and personal narratives to engage followers. With the rapid expansion of social media, Thailand now ranks among the top for market penetration on platforms like TikTok, where over 49.3% of users are actively engaged (LexiconThai, 2023). Similarly, Instagram has seen significant growth in the country, with 19.1 million users, accounting for over 27% of the population (NapoleonCat, 2024).

 The total number of users in the country has risen to over 40.28 million, reflecting the scale of influence and engagement influencers have in Thailand (LexiconThai, 2023). Their ability to preserve a sense of authenticity while promoting products encompasses various uses of strategies such as promoting sponsored content of influencer partnerships with brands, affiliate marketing and highly curated influencer-generated content which are central to their success. This hybrid representation—where authenticity is both genuine and strategic—creates a blurred boundary between personal and commercial spheres, contributing to their nuanced online identities where transparency and relatability are important in maintaining busiesses on social media.

Despite the growing influence of social media on consumer behavior, significant gaps remain in understanding how influencers, particularly in Thailand navigate the complexities of their hybrid identities across social media platforms. This issue is particularly relevant considering that influencer marketing ad spending in Thailand is projected to reach US$68.78 million by 2024 (Taslaud, 2024). Additionally, recent data revealed that Thai influencers with 5,000 to 10,000 followers tend to achieve higher engagement rate, at around 4.3%, while those with larger followings have lower engagement rates, at 2.9% (Statista, 2023). Previous scholars, such as Abidin (2016) and Khamis et al. (2017), have investigated the tension between authenticity and monetization in influencer culture. More recently, Hofstetter and Gollnhofer

(2024) examined how content creators balance authentic self-representation with the demands of monetization, particularly on social media platforms. Given the increasing opportunities for monetization on social media, this paper aims to explore the strategies Thai influencers use to manage their dual roles as both authentic individuals and commercial entities. By employing a social semiotic multimodal approach, this study will analyze how influencers curate engaging content that balances personal narratives of authenticity with transactional objectives. By focusing on the hybrid nature of their online identities, this research seeks to provide new insights into the evolving dynamics of influencer culture within Thailand's rapidly expanding digital economy.

Literature Review

Understanding the Influencer Industry

The influencer industry in Thailand can be traced back to the emergence of Internet idols, especially among young Thai women, who gained popularity through early Internet forums and discussion boards in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Abidin & Limkangvanmongkol, 2018). These early influencers used platforms such as Pantip.com and Dek-D.com to build followings by sharing personal stories, beauty advice, and lifestyle content. Over time, the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and more recently, TikTok, allowed influencers to expand their reach and influence through visually appealing content consisting of various styles of posts such as still images, stories, short-form videos, and reels that attract people's attention online.

In this vein, Instagram has played a crucial role in the growth of the influencer industry, primarily due to its visual-centric design, which allows influencers to showcase their personalities through images and videos creatively. This platform has enabled influencers to present aesthetically appealing content, enabling them to engage with followers and build personal brands online (i.e. Hurley, 2019). Hund and McGuigan (2019) analyzed this dynamic by introducing the concept of "shoppability," where influencers utilize self-branding techniques to turn social media into an interactive marketplace. They argue that these practices create a unique form of economic capital on social media, where influencers construct branded personas using digital technology to connect with their audiences and market products (Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

Similarly, TikTok has emerged as a dominant platform by offering customizable, short-form videos that have become central to influencer culture. Its appeal lies in its user-friendly features, such as music, text overlays, filters, and transition effects, which allow influencers and content creators to produce engaging and viral content. Barta et al. (2023) stated that TikTok differentiates itself from other social media platforms by encouraging a more casual and spontaneous environment. They describe TikTok as a platform where everyday activities are more commonly shared, fostering a sense of closeness and informality between content creators and their audiences. This dynamic strengthens TikTok's role in the digital economy, where users enjoy humor and entertainment which enhance user engagement and create overall positive emotional experiences among users. They also highlighted that humorous media content serves as a persuasive tool in helping influencers to build credibility and capture their followers' attention more effectively than other platforms online (Barta et al., 2023).

In examining influencer marketing on TikTok, the platform has become a dominant player in Thailand's digital marketing landscape, particularly with its personalized content aimed at capturing the younger demographic, primarily between the ages of 18 to 24 (TBS Marketing, 2023). Findings indicated that TikTok especially attracts Gen Z and millennials (Influencer House, 2023), who are drawn to its unique combination of short-form videos and creative storytelling techniques that are seemingly fun and engaging. This focus on personalization and engaging content has enabled brands to build stronger connections with their target audiences which, in turns, facilitates positive relationships and fostering trust between brands and younger consumers. In addition, TikTok has introduced a range of business features that expand the platform's commercial potential. These include a shop tab, product showcases, and advertising options, which allow influencers and content creators to directly monetize their content through e-commerce (TikTok, 2024). These features enhance influencers' ability to engage in self-branding, promoting products and services while building personal brands. Putri et al. (2023) have noted how influencers on platforms like TikTok integrate business strategies with content creation, resulting in a more seamless blending of commerce and personal expression.

Authenticity Within Influencer Culture

In recent years, the representation of authenticity in influencer marketing has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly on platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube (García-Rapp, 2017; Hurley, 2019; Reade, 2020; Wies et al., 2023). Reade (2020), for instance, explored how young Australian fitness influencers cultivate an image of "raw" authenticity on Instagram by posting unedited images, sharing personal stories, and engaging in "real talk" on sensitive topics. The emphasis on unfiltered content, such as displaying loose skin or cellulite, is seen as a way to challenge societal beauty norms and signal truthfulness to their followers. Reade's study also highlighted how influencers use Instagram stories to document everyday activities, like spending time with family and friends, to create a sense of relatability and everydayness that enhance the perception of authenticity on social media (Reade, 2020).

This focus on "realness" is further developed through influencers' engagement in intimate and informal content, fostering a sense of closeness with their followers. Abidin (2018b) similarly argued that cultivating relatability is essential for influencers to maintain authenticity, given that all self-presentation on digital platforms is curated. Influencers often engage in direct messaging, sharing behind-the-scenes moments, or responding to comments as part of their strategy to appear "unmediated" and "unfiltered" (Abidin, 2018b). Scolere et al. (2018) expanded on this notion by examining how influencers construct different versions of themselves on social media, influenced by platform affordances, audience expectations, and their self-concept. This multifaceted approach to self-branding is central to how influencers build long-term relationships with their audiences.

The concept of authenticity on social media is further complicated by the increasing influence of platforms like TikTok. In exploring how influencers balance the pressures of monetization while maintaining authenticity, Hoffstetter and Gollnhofer (2024) highlight three critical strategies which included a) "transitioning from paid advertising to co-creation with brands"; b) "favoring improvised content over staged presentations"; c) "focusing on the growth of one's creator brand rather than being focused too much on their content" (Hoffstetter and Gollnhofer, 2024 p.434). These strategies reveal how content creators/influencers can balance monetization while maintaining credibility with their audiences.

In extending our understanding of influencer and internet celebrity culture, Sandel and Wang (2022) examined China's social media landscape by analyzing how wanghong (internet celebrities) engage with their audience and sell products across platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili. Their study revealed that wanghong develop a sense of intimacy with their followers through three primary strategies: (1) crafting a distinctive personal narrative, (2) incorporating personal stories into sales pitches, and (3) using the specific affordances of the platforms to engage and interact with their followers. These methods allow wanghong to establish a perception of authenticity and build long term positive relationships with their audiences. Thus, reinforcing their influence and commercial success (Sandel and Wang, 2022).

This paper will further unpack how prominent Thai social media influencers balance and manage online personas that drive commercial success and generate positive responses on social media. The analysis focuses on three popular influencers: @TaraP, @NinaK, and @MayyaT, each known for curating unique social media content and monetizing their fame by sharing aspects of their lifestyles and promoting products on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. In doing so, this paper examines the construction of their practices and the techniques each influencer uses to manage and balance authenticity with commercial interests. Through this analysis, the paper aims to understand how they navigate the tensions between maintaining a genuine persona and negotiating commercial objectives, offering insights into the broader dynamics of influencer culture in Thailand.

Methodology

This study employs a social semiotic multimodal analysis to investigate how Thai influencers utilize Instagram and TikTok to balance authenticity with commercial content, focusing on @TaraP, @NinaK, and @MayyaT. This selection criteria were based on their recognized extensive reach and substantial online presence where all of the selected influencers have a significant number of followers ranging from 140k to 6m on Instagram. In this analysis, both Instagram and TikTok are regarded as semiotic resources, following social semiotic theory, which interprets language and visual modes as tools for "social exchange of meanings" (Halliday, 1985 p.11). In understanding semiotic approach, as defined by Van Leeuwen (2005), are material, social, cultural, or technological tools that enable people to convey meaning, each offering distinct communicative affordances. Viewing Instagram and TikTok as semiotic resources allows this study to explore how these platforms' designs and features support influencers in communicating messages of authenticity and commerciality, emphasizing their potential for "making meaning" through curated content.

In this context, data was gathered from a purposive sample of influencers' posts over six months (January to June 2024), encompassing a range of content types, such as snapped shot images and short videos. This sample included content from both Instagram and TikTok, specifically focusing on posts that combined personal narratives with commercial promotions, particularly during high-sales periods. Metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and view counts were recorded to assess how the audience perceives and engages with authentic versus commercial content on each platform. TikTok, with its short-form video structure and creative editing options, allows influencers to create dynamic, relatable content that conveys spontaneity. Its unique algorithm and the use of features like trending sounds and challenges amplify engagement, presenting TikTok as a platform with high potential for fostering authenticity through informal, interactive content.

Using a social semiotic framework, this analysis centers on three areas: (1) visual representation of authenticity—examining how unfiltered images, casual settings, and raw video content on both Instagram and TikTok contribute to a sense of realness; (2) language and interaction strategies—where influencers connect with audiences using humor, personal anecdotes, trending audio, and direct replies to comments to foster relatability; and (3) integration of commercial content—analyzing how influencers use storytelling, co-creation with brands, and soft-selling techniques to present promotional materials without sacrificing authenticity. Posts were coded for authenticity cues, audience interaction patterns, and commercial strategies to understand how these influencers navigate their dual personas within a commercial landscape.

Following Van Leeuwen's (2005) approach, the study also considers the visual grammar of Instagram and TikTok—those aesthetic and interaction patterns subtly reinforced by each platform, which shape user expectations of "authentic" content. Although limited to three influencers, this study provides insights into how Thai influencers utilize platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to balance self-presentation with commercial objectives, offering a nuanced understanding of authenticity management in Thailand's digital economy. To maintain participant anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout this article, and both Instagram and TikTok usernames of influencers have been concealed.

Analysis

Understanding Influencers' Approach to Capturing Authenticity

Each of the three influencers examined in this study plays a role in shaping our understanding of authenticity on social media, particularly through a semiotic approach that considers how meaning is constructed through their content. The first part of the analysis focuses on how each influencer uses unfiltered images and raw video content, together with the narratives of their storytelling and the commercial messaging to convey authenticity. By combining personal and promotional content, these influencers strategically employ "real" and relatable visuals, which enabled them to appeale to audiences while meeting commercial objectives. Through this lens, the analysis explores how their approaches shape our perceptions of genuine self-representation within the highly commercialized environment of social media.

The semiotic approach reveals that the construction of authenticity in influencers' Instagram and TikTok posts often involves showcasing aspects of their lifestyles that capture followers' attention. For example, influencer @NinaK presents herself as an entrepreneur on her Instagram profile, tagging her clothing brands directly on her profile page. Alongside these tags, she includes descriptors like "lifestyle," "travel blogger," "business," and "beauty," which signals her multifaceted online persona. This profile arrangement suggests that she projects a professional yet approachable identity, creating clear pathways for brand partnerships and potential customers. This highlights how influencers like @NinaK use semiotic resources to balance self-representation with commercial promotion, inviting followers to engage with both their personal and business endeavors. Semiotically, her Instagram profile serves as a curated "front page" where her professional aspirations blend with glimpses of her personal life. This aligns with the concept of "shoppability," where influencers utilize self-branding techniques to turn social media into an interactive marketplace for their followers and fans (Hund and McGuigan, 2019).

Similarly, on her TikTok profile, @NinaK uses the same branding as her Instagram, with 777.7k followers and over 32.9 million likes. She includes a Linktree that directs potential business contacts to her personal Line, Facebook, and Shopee page, where she sells her clothing products. Her TikTok content, which focuses on daily activities such as dining out, traveling, shopping, and participating in fun activities, allows her to build stronger connections with both brands and followers through personalized, engaging content. Notably, her videos often feature her housekeeper, P'Nun, adding a unique dynamic that extends beyond the usual influencer-friend interactions. This distinct choice invites viewers into a different layer of her life, portraying her as relatable and down-to-earth, as viewers frequently comment on her kindness and warmth—qualities that enhance her authentic appeal. Despite the inherently curated nature of self-representation on digital platforms, as noted by Abidin (2018b), @NinaK's approach demonstrates how carefully constructed content can maintain a sense of genuine connection and relatability across social media platforms.

The second influencer analyzed in this study is @TaraP, a well-known lifestyle and fashion icon in Thailand who frequently promotes various clothing brands. @TaraP's content largely centers on her personal relationships, daily routines, and lifestyle with her partner, capturing a significant following on social media. On Instagram, she has posted over 1,500 times, boasts 3 million followers, and follows over 1,000 accounts. Her profile includes personal details such as "Mother of Cyan" and provides a contact number and link to reach her manager for professional inquiries. This profile layout immediately communicates both her personal and professional identities, creating an approachable yet business-ready persona.

On TikTok, @TaraP has accumulated a large following with 2.9 million followers and over 104.2 million likes. Her TikTok profile mirrors her Instagram with the same personal tagline, "Mother of Cyan," which highlights her role as a mother and enhances her relatability. Both her Instagram and TikTok profiles provide links for brands to contact her, which solidifies her presence as a prominent influencer available for brand collaborations.

The content on @TaraP's TikTok focuses on her everyday life and outgoing persona, featuring lighthearted and fun moments with her husband and son. Through these playful, engaging interactions, often characterized by teasing and humor, she invites her followers into her family life, creating a warm, personal narrative that resonates with her audience. By sharing her daily routines and family updates in a storytelling format, @TaraP not only promotes authenticity but also fosters a sense of familiarity and closeness with her followers. Her approach effectively combines personal narratives with a strategic online presence, allowing her to maintain high engagement and popularity across platforms.

The third influencer examined is @MayyaT, a prominent Thai content creator who first gained fame as a YouTuber, amassing over 16 million subscribers. Since then, @MayyaT has established herself as a leading influencer and content creator in Thailand. Her Instagram profile reflects her substantial online presence, with over 6.1 million followers, more than 1,500 posts, and following over 600 accounts. Her profile includes her name, her manager's contact number, and a Line ID for professional inquiries, along with a link to her YouTube channel, where she has further expanded her reach with over 17.1 million subscribers.

On TikTok, @MayyaT continues to maintain a significant following with 11.3 million followers and over 169.9 million likes. While she doesn't provide a direct contact link for her manager on TikTok, she includes links to her Instagram profile and YouTube channel, directing followers and potential brand partners to her content across multiple platforms. This

cross-platform linkage not only strengthens her online presence but also offers her audience seamless access to her varied content, which reinforces her brand and maximizing engagement across her channels.

In this lens, @MayyaT's use of profile links and multi-platform connectivity functions as a strategic sign system, guiding her followers through a curated digital identity that emphasizes accessibility and interconnectedness. Her Instagram and TikTok profiles serve as gateways in leading to her other content, such as her YouTube channel, thus creating a cohesive, layered identity across social media. This interconnectedness signifies her role not just as a content creator but as an accessible public figure whose content spans various aspects of entertainment and lifestyle. By embedding links that direct her audience across platforms, @MayyaT reinforces her professional image while maintaining a sense of approachability, making her an attractive partner for brands seeking high engagement and influence across Thailand's digital landscape.

Balancing Perceived Authenticity With Brand Collaborations on Instagram and TikTok

In examining @NinaK' TikTok and Instagram content, it's evident that she constructs a sense of perceived authenticity while fostering engagement. In one instance, her 1.37-minute TikTok video, which she also cross-posted to Instagram, invites viewers into a playful, personal interaction with her housekeeper, P'Nun. The video opens with @NinaK asking P'Nun to help her dress up as a rockstar, inspired by Blackpink's Lisa. P'Nun responds casually, saying, "I'll help you look like a rockstar," setting a lighthearted tone that resonates with followers. The video garnered significant engagement on TikTok, with comments like "you are so kind" and "a sincere rockstar," underscoring her appeal as both genuine and relatable.

At one point in the video, the phrase "เป็นทุกอย่างให้เธอแล้ว" (meaning "I can be everything for you") is used, symbolizing loyalty and warmth within their relationship. This phrase enhances the semiotic depth of the video, representing a close, multifaceted connection that draws viewers in and invites them to feel part of this shared bond. Through such interactions, @NinaK combines glimpses of her daily life with relatable, lighthearted moments, presenting her lifestyle as both aspirational and accessible.

Throughout her content, @NinaK effectively balances luxury with relatability. While her posts frequently showcase a glamorous lifestyle—highlighting travel, fine dining, and high-end products—she consistently incorporates personal relationships with her housekeeper and close friends, grounding her persona and creating a sense of familiarity. This dual approach aligns with Sandel and Wang's (2022) observation that influencers often integrate personal stories into their online personas to cultivate authenticity. By embedding cues of loyalty, friendship, and everyday interactions, @NinaK skillfully merges aspirational content with personal narratives, which fosters a relatable image that resonates with her followers across Instagram and TikTok.

In addition to cultivating a consistent online persona across Instagram and TikTok, influencer like @TaraP exemplifies the successful integration of personal branding with promotional content. She presents herself as an independent and successful woman who promotes a wide array of products, from clothing and beauty items to food and personal care products. Each of her TikTok videos garners significant viewership, with numbers ranging from 400,000 to over 10 million views per video. In one example, she engages in a product review for the

L'Oreal brand, in which she opens her narrative by introducing the latest L'Oreal lipstick shades, then proceeds to demonstrate the colors while sharing her preferences. This approach underscores TikTok's unique platform dynamics, which Barta et al. (2023) describe as fostering casual, spontaneous content that distinguishes it from other social media platforms.

In another TikTok video, @TaraP similarly promotes a beauty product, in which she incorporates an affiliate link for followers to make direct purchases. Here, she blends personal anecdotes about using the product with a casual call to action, creating a relatable and engaging narrative. Her strategy reflects how influencers use personal storytelling to connect with followers, making the promotional content feel less commercialized and more authentic. Through these narratives, she establishes a sense of connection with her audience that is both entertaining and engaging. In another video, @TaraP promotes the Dutchie yoghurt brand in which she begins by introducing the product and discussing the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Appearing alongside her son, she speaks about the product's benefits and integrates the commercial content naturally into her narrative. Although the video is similar to other promotional content in its structure, her consistent and authentic online persona allows her to come across as genuine. By openly sharing her experience and including a personal touch, she conveys a sense of realness that resonates with her followers, thus, enhancing the perceived authenticity of her collaboration with brand partnership.

In examining the third influencer, @MayyaT stands out with the highest follower count and viewership among the selected influencers. Her content on both Instagram and TikTok reveals a preference for producing high-quality, curated videos that go beyond the typical unfiltered or unedited aesthetic often associated with authenticity. For instance, in one of the analyzed videos promoting Nescafe, she opens with large text reading "Nescafe Limited Edition," in which she immediately highlights the brand and emphasizing the new product. Throughout the video, she maintains focus on the product, narrating, "Here it is, Nescafe Honey Lemon Limited Edition, with only 1,000,000 units produced across the country." She further mentions the product's exclusive availability at 7-Eleven stores in Thailand, which integrated branded messaging throughout the video.

In contrast, her Instagram profile showcases aspects of her lifestyle, such as travel, work, and leisure activities, capturing images of herself on vacations or outings without a strong focus on promotional content. While previous scholars have emphasized the importance of unfiltered content in creating authenticity, @MayyaT approach demonstrates how influencers can also capture attention with highly polished, visually engaging content. This approach likely aligns with her ability to build and maintain close relationships with fans and followers, which fosters long-term engagement and loyalty through a consistent and visually appealing online persona (Scolere et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This analysis highlights the ways in which each influencer—@NinaK, @TaraP, and @MayyaT—navigates the interplay between authenticity and brand collaborations on social media, particularly on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. In using a semiotic approach, the study reveals that authenticity is crafted through a combination of unfiltered personal moments and curated commercial content, each element functioning as a semiotic resource to communicate a multifaceted online identity.

For @NinaK, authenticity is conveyed by integrating casual, relatable interactions, such as her friendly exchanges with her housekeeper, that underscore loyalty and intimacy, which allows her to build a sense of realness amidst aspirational content. @TaraP achieves a similar balance by blending brand promotions with lifestyle content, creating narratives that incorporate her son and everyday experiences, thereby fostering an approachable yet aspirational image. In contrast, @MayyaT adopts a more polished aesthetic with high-quality visuals, demonstrating that authenticity on social media can also encompass professionally produced, visually engaging content that maintains follower interest and loyalty.

These findings highlight the evolving nature of authenticity on digital platforms, where influencers use various strategies to balance personal storytelling with brand partnerships. While traditional views of authenticity emphasize raw, unfiltered content, this study shows that a diverse approach—including polished, curated posts—can still foster perceived authenticity if it aligns with the influencer's established persona. By consistently intertwining personal and commercial elements, these influencers successfully maintain follower engagement, trust, and relatability within Thailand's digital landscape. This nuanced understanding of authenticity suggests that social media users value the cohesive portrayal of an influencer's identity over the rawness of each individual post, broadening our perspective on what constitutes genuine self-representation in highly commercialized spaces in Thailand.

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