A Thematic Analysis of Beauty Influencers Narrative Strategies on Instagram From the Audience's Perspective

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Abstract

Instagram has become a primary platform for beauty influencers to build connections with their audiences through engaging narrative strategies. This study examines the narrative techniques employed by beauty influencers on Instagram and explores how audiences respond to these elements. Using a thematic analysis approach, the study examines narrative elements such as story personalization, content authenticity, and value relevance. This study employs a qualitative approach to explore and understand the experiences of Instagram users who follow beauty influencers. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with three active followers of beauty influencers on Instagram. Through thematic analysis, the findings indicate that narrative elements such as coherence and fidelity are instrumental in shaping audience perceptions, fostering trust, and influencing purchase decisions related to promoted products. Narrative strategies that emphasize honesty, cultural relevance, and real experiences foster stronger emotional connections between influencers and their audiences. Moreover, visually driven narratives, such as before-and-after videos and product journey content, are particularly effective in building trust and enhancing the impact of digital marketing efforts. This research underscores the importance of a narrative approach in building emotional connections between brands, influencers, and audiences. By understanding the effective elements of narrative strategies, marketers can create campaigns that are more relevant, authentic, and impactful in the digital era.

Keywords: Narrative Strategy; Beauty Influencer; Instagram

Abstrak

Instagram telah menjadi platform utama bagi influencer kecantikan untuk membangun koneksi Instagram telah menjadi platform utama bagi influencer kecantikan untuk membangun koneksi dengan audiens mereka melalui strategi naratif yang menarik. Studi ini meneliti teknik naratif yang digunakan oleh influencer kecantikan di Instagram dan mengeksplorasi bagaimana audiens menanggapi elemen-elemen ini. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis tematik, studi ini meneliti elemen-elemen naratif seperti personalisasi cerita, keaslian konten, dan relevansi nilai. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk mengeksplorasi dan memahami pengalaman pengguna Instagram yang mengikuti influencer kecantikan. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan tiga pengikut aktif influencer kecantikan di Instagram. Melalui analisis tematik, temuan menunjukkan bahwa elemen naratif seperti koherensi dan kesetiaan berperan penting dalam membentuk persepsi audiens, menumbuhkan kepercayaan, dan memengaruhi keputusan pembelian terkait produk yang dipromosikan. Strategi naratif yang menekankan kejujuran, relevansi budaya, dan pengalaman nyata menumbuhkan hubungan emosional yang lebih kuat antara influencer dan audiens mereka. Selain itu, narasi yang digerakkan secara visual, seperti video sebelum dan sesudah dan konten perjalanan produk, sangat efektif dalam membangun kepercayaan dan meningkatkan dampak upaya pemasaran digital. Penelitian ini menggarisbawahi

pentingnya pendekatan naratif dalam membangun hubungan emosional antara merek, influencer, dan audiens. Dengan memahami elemen-elemen efektif dari strategi naratif, pemasar dapat menciptakan kampanye yang lebih relevan, autentik, dan berdampak di era digital.

Kata Kunci: Strategi Naratif; Influencer Kecantikan; Instagram

Introduction

Social media has fundamentally reshaped patterns of communication, positioning platforms like Instagram as strategic tools in digital marketing. The evolution of digital communication technologies has transformed Instagram into a visually immersive and interactive space where brands can engage directly with consumers (Latiff and Safiee, 2015). Its strong visual appeal and user-friendly features allow brands to connect with audiences in dynamic, emotionally resonant ways, influencing consumer behavior more effectively than traditional marketing channels (Casaló et al., 2020; Roselina et al., 2021).

Within this landscape, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have emerged as key mediators between brands and audiences, particularly in visually driven sectors like beauty and personal care. Beauty influencers frequently share content related to makeup, skincare, and hair care, crafting promotional narratives that blend product information with personal stories and aesthetic appeal. These narratives do more than advertise; they shape audience perceptions, foster emotional connections, and guide purchasing decisions (Zhou et al., 2021). According to Fisher's narrative paradigm (1984), narratives that exhibit coherence and fidelity logical consistency and truthfulness are more persuasive and engaging.

As such, influencers' storytelling strategies can be powerful tools in shaping brand image and audience loyalty. Instagram's dominance in Indonesia's social media landscape further underscores its relevance. As of early 2024, the platform had reached 100.9 million users more than half of the country's internet population making it a critical arena for digital marketing. Its interactive, visual-centric features allow influencers to deploy narrative strategies that build authenticity and emotional resonance with their followers (Casaló et al., 2021; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Prior research has shown that authentic and emotionally engaging narratives increase audience engagement and brand trust (Audrezet et al., 2020; Brechman and Purvis, 2015).

However, existing research predominantly emphasizes technical metrics such as follower counts, likes, and engagement rates when evaluating influencer effectiveness (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). This has led to a critical gap in understanding how audiences interpret and experience the narratives shared by influencers. Few studies have explored the meaning-making processes audiences engage in when encountering these narratives particularly in terms of how coherence and fidelity affect their perceptions of authenticity, trust, and brand affiliation.

This study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from influencer-centered metrics to audience-centered interpretation. Understanding how audiences perceive and emotionally respond to influencer narratives offers vital insights into the mechanisms by which digital storytelling fosters brand loyalty and shapes consumer attitudes. Such an approach contributes to the broader discourse in narrative theory and digital marketing by integrating audience reception into the analysis of narrative effectiveness. Therefore, this study aims to explore how audiences interpret the narrative strategies used by beauty influencers on Instagram. It investigates whether elements such as narrative coherence and fidelity shape perceptions of authenticity, engagement, and brand trust. By employing a qualitative methodology and thematic analysis, this research

seeks to illuminate the role of audience interpretation in influencer marketing and provide a more nuanced understanding of the emotional dynamics underpinning digital brand communication.

The narrative paradigm, a communication approach introduced by Fisher (1984), employs storytelling as a medium to convey messages. Humans are seen as homo narrans storytelling beings emphasizing that symbolic interactions are rooted in stories that narrate human experiences, inviting others to participate in shared narratives aimed at creating a collective life story. Narratives possess the power to foster emotional engagement, convey complex messages that are often difficult to communicate through plain facts, and create immersive experiences that influence audience behavior (Fisher, 1984).

The delivery technique is pivotal in shaping audience understanding, attitudes, and behaviors when presenting a story or message. Bruner (1991) further advanced this concept by highlighting how narratives shape social realities through story structures that intuitively resonate with audiences (Brechman and Purvis, 2015). Fisher (1984) emphasized that the success of a narrative hinges on its coherence and fidelity. In the context of digital marketing, narratives are commonly utilized in advertisements, testimonials, and product promotions on social media. By incorporating storytelling elements in product or brand promotions, marketers can communicate using visual and audio elements that captivate audiences (Brechman and Purvis, 2015; Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012).

Green and Brock (2000) suggests that audiences can become fully immersed in a narrative, thus reducing resistance to the conveyed message. This theory highlights how audiences focus more on the emotional aspects of a story rather than its logical components. On social media platforms like Instagram, visual and audio elements play a crucial role in delivering narratives. Instagram users frequently utilize features such as Stories and Reels to promote products through engaging visual and auditory storytelling (Casaló et al., 2021). Furthermore, narrative-driven videos on Instagram have been shown to overcome cultural barriers by tailoring the story to align with local cultural values, thereby enhancing audience acceptance and engagement (Blazquez et al., 2021).

A notable example illustrating the success of this strategy is Nike's Just Do It campaign, which leveraged the stories of athletes to build profound emotional connections with a global audience (Brechman and Purvis, 2015). However, the primary challenge in implementing this strategy lies in maintaining authenticity and transparency, particularly in sponsored content, which, if poorly managed, can erode audience trust (Blazquez et al., 2021). By integrating engaging storytelling, cultural relevance, and suitable social media platforms, narrative strategies can greatly influence digital marketing success.

The growth of social media enables users to feel connected and closer to others, including celebrities and their favorite brands. In the digital context, influencers serve as opinion leaders who possess the ability to shape audience views and decisions through social media. This concept is derived from Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step flow of communication theory as discussed in Hepp (2019) which highlights opinion leaders as intermediaries between mass media and audiences, filtering and disseminating relevant information. In the social media era, this role has become increasingly significant, as influencers not only rely on credibility but also foster direct relationships with their followers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Additionally, influencers are considered more authentic and trustworthy compared to traditional celebrities due to their accessibility and closeness to the audience, making their messages feel more personal (Casaló et al., 2020).

Key elements that make influencers effective as opinion leaders include credibility, appeal, and the relevance of the content they produce. Credibility encompassing expertise and trustworthiness is a critical factor in determining the extent to which audiences trust the messages delivered by influencers (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Furthermore, the visual and emotional appeal of their content strengthens their connection with audiences. Research indicates that narrative-driven content, such as sharing personal experiences, enhances engagement and solidifies their influence in shaping opinions and purchase decisions (Blazquez et al., 2021).

For example, beauty influencers on social media often share personal stories to demonstrate a product's effectiveness, fostering trust and building emotional bonds with their followers. Instagram has become one of the most impactful social media platforms in the realm of digital marketing. With over one billion active monthly users globally, it offers a variety of unique features such as Stories, Reels, and IGTV that enable users to craft engaging visual experiences for their audiences (Latiff and Safiee, 2015). Furthermore, Instagram's multimodality which integrates text, static images, audio, and video makes it an ideal platform for narrative-based marketing (Kozharinova and Manovich, 2024).

Originally designed as a photo-sharing application, Instagram has evolved into a multifunctional platform that supports diverse marketing objectives. Features like Stories and Reels allow brands to create dynamic, personalized experiences for users. According to Zhou, Barnes et al., (2021) these features enable brands to deliver more authentic and relevant content, providing consumers with a deeper and more engaging experience. Additionally, research by Casaló et al., (2020) reveals that Instagram boasts significantly higher user engagement rates compared to other social media platforms, making it highly effective in fostering emotional connections between brands and consumers.

Instagram is particularly popular among younger generations, especially Millennials and Gen Z, who prefer interactive and visually driven content. Jin and Ryu (2020) highlight that Instagram facilitates more personal connections between brands and consumers through its intense visual content, strengthening emotional bonds. Another distinctive feature lies in Instagram's ability to function as a complex visual narrative medium, enabling brands to build sustained storytelling. In essence, Instagram serves not merely as a platform but as a tool for creating narratives that emotionally connect brands with their audiences (Kozharinova and Manovich, 2024).

A crucial component of Instagram's marketing ecosystem is the presence of influencers, who can shape purchase decisions through genuine and trustworthy narratives (Casaló et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). According to Zhou et al., (2021) narrative strategies employed by influencers to communicate brand information can help overcome cultural barriers and enhance the acceptance of commercial content. However, Instagram also poses challenges, particularly in maintaining content authenticity amidst increasing commercialization. For instance, non-transparent sponsorship disclosures can diminish consumer trust in influencer content (Gil-Quintana and León, 2021).

Therefore, it is crucial for brands and influencers to craft honest and transparent narratives to sustain audience trust. By employing well-designed narrative strategies, brands can create content that is both relevant and compelling for their audiences. Social media has revolutionized how consumers receive and respond to marketing information, with Instagram emerging as one of the most influential platforms in fostering interactions between influencers and their audiences. Narrative strategies employed by influencers serve not only as communication tools but also as mechanisms to build trust and engagement with specific brands or product (Zhou et al., 2021).

Lou and Yuan (2019) emphasize that the effectiveness of influencer content on social media heavily depends on the perceived informational value and trustworthiness of the content. Influencers who position themselves as credible sources through relatable and engaging narratives can foster trust, enhance brand awareness, and drive purchase intentions among audiences. Casaló et al., (2020) further highlight the significance of uniqueness and originality in shaping audience perceptions of influencers as opinion leaders on Instagram. Content perceived as highly original tends to drive greater audience engagement and yields more significant impacts on consumer behavior.

A narrative approach in marketing often focuses on the ability to transport or immerse the audience in a story, fostering an emotional connection with the conveyed message (Brechman and Purvis, 2015). This effect increases audience receptiveness to the messages influencers aim to deliver. Researchers have identified that narrative elements such as coherent story structures, strong visual components, and emotional relevance are critical to the success of narrative strategies in influencing audiences (Brechman and Purvis, 2015; Zhou et al., 2021). Additionally, well-crafted narratives help mitigate potential audience resistance to promotional content, especially when the content skillfully blends personal and commercial elements (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Zhou et al., (2021) asserted that narrative strategies incorporating brand attribute evaluation, brand inspiration, and self-identity construction play a crucial role in fostering trust and strengthening emotional connections between audiences and influencers. For instance, narratives that explicitly highlight influencers' personal experiences with specific products are often better received by audiences, as these experiences are perceived as authentic and relatable. Furthermore, visual elements on Instagram, such as aesthetic photos and videos, play a crucial role in supporting the narratives conveyed by influencers (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021).

In essence, audience perspectives on influencers' narrative strategies on Instagram are grounded in trust, authenticity, and the relevance of the content. Well-designed narrative strategies not only enhance positive audience perceptions of the promoted products but also strengthen the emotional bond between audiences and influencers (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). Thus, understanding the elements that constitute effective narratives becomes a vital step for brand owners and influencers in crafting successful marketing campaigns in the digital era.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore and understand the experiences of Instagram users who follow beauty influencers. A qualitative method allows researchers to delve into the deeper meanings of subjects' experiences, particularly within the context of complex social and cultural phenomena (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis was used as the primary framework to identify patterns or themes emerging from qualitative data through a flexible and structured approach Braun et al., (2017); Clarke and Braun (2017) This approach is deemed relevant as it facilitates uncovering audience insights and documenting their perceptions of narrative elements presented by influencers (Braun et al., 2017; Fisher, 1984). The study employed both primary and secondary data. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted virtually via Zoom with three purposively chosen informants. The selection criteria required informants to be active Instagram users, follow beauty influencers, and possess professional experience in the beauty industry. This approach was designed to capture Instagram users' perspectives on how they interpret the narrative content shared by influencers (Braun et al., 2017). Secondary data were gathered through a systematic literature review of Scopus-indexed journal publications. The findings highlight how

influencers' product endorsements on Instagram increase brand and product awareness among followers, ultimately enhancing trust in the promoted brand. This literature review also provided a foundation for identifying research gaps and formulating substantial interview questions. This systematic and flexible approach enabled the identification of patterns or themes emerging from the data (Braun et al., 2017; Byrne, 2022; Clarke and Braun, 2017). The identified themes were subsequently analyzed using Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm to evaluate the elements of coherence and fidelity within influencers' narrative strategies.

Result And Discussion

The study findings, derived from both literature review and in-depth interviews, reveal that influencers impact their followers both directly and indirectly. After processing the primary data, the research was organized into four main themes identified through thematic analysis. These themes offer a thorough insight into the role of narratives in shaping relationships among influencers, audiences, and brands.

1. Narrative Elements in Brand Perception

The findings indicate that narrative elements as defined by Fisher (1984), such as coherence the alignment of stories with the influencer's personal experiences and fidelity honesty and relevance of the story Significantly contribute to shaping audience perceptions of beauty influencers' promotional content on Instagram. These elements foster emotional connections between audiences and influencers, ultimately increasing trust in the promoted products.

Stories that align with the influencer's personal experiences create a stronger bond of trust between influencers and their audiences. For instance, Informant AD highlighted:

> I like journey content, like when they've tried the product for a month and then share their experience (Interview, April 26, 2025).

Additionally, narratives containing coherence and fidelity were also emphasized by the other two informants:

> Soft-selling makes followers curious and want to try the product. If it feels too scripted or like hard selling, I trust it less (Interview, April 26, 2025).

> They show the difference, like before and after using the product (Interview, April 26, 2025).

Narratives demonstrating the product usage journey allow audiences to understand the tangible impact of the product, fostering a sense of relevance and emotional closeness. As Fisher (1984) asserts, coherent and high-fidelity narratives are more likely to positively influence audiences. Moreover, cultural relevance also plays a significant role. Narratives emphasizing uniquely Indonesian beauty practices, such as local skincare treatments, resonate more strongly with audiences compared to generic narratives. Supporting this, Zhou et al., (2021) noted that culturally grounded narratives enhance audience acceptance of promotional content. In this study, coherence and fidelity serve as foundations for creating strong emotional connections between influencers and audiences. These findings show that audiences are more attracted to narratives reflecting their own experiences or needs. In the Indonesian context, where beauty standards often emphasize fair skin, narratives highlighting diversity offer a more inclusive and relevant strategy.

Conversely, narratives lacking fidelity, such as excessive promotion or irrelevant stories, may diminish the influencer's credibility in the audience's eyes. Additionally, incorporating local experiential narratives, such as promoting products suitable for tropical skin needs, strengthens audience trust in the influencer's message. This is

supported by Ooi et al., (2023) who demonstrated that cultural relevance significantly enhances the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies. In conclusion, the combination of coherent and culturally relevant narratives, underpinned by fidelity, not only improves audience perceptions of products but also builds stronger emotional bonds between influencers and their followers. These insights highlight the importance of aligning narratives with audience values and experiences to achieve greater marketing success in digital platforms like Instagram.

2. Influencer Credibility and Relevance

Influencer credibility has been recognized as a pivotal factor in shaping audience trust in promotional material. Influencers who provide reviews based on personal experiences and maintain transparency are perceived as significantly more trustworthy. This approach is further strengthened by soft-selling narratives, where content does not overtly emphasize commercial aspects. Based on SK interview result.

I prefer content that doesn't feel like we're being sold something (Interview, April 26, 2025).

Soft-selling narratives, which subtly downplay overt commercialization, create the impression that influencers genuinely care about their audience's experiences. This perception is further reinforced through visual elements, such as structured review videos and before-and-after photos. Another participant emphasized:

I don't like influencers who promote several products in a single day. It makes followers lose trust (Interview, April 26, 2025).

This sentiment aligns with findings from Lou and Yuan (2019) who highlight that influencer credibility, encompassing honesty and appeal, significantly impacts consumer purchase intentions. In this context, influencer narratives function not merely as promotional tools but as mediums for fostering deeper trust. For example, one informant expressed greater trust in influencers who recommend products tailored to the unique needs of Indonesian skin:

I trust influencers who say beauty doesn't have to mean fair skin. I believe in products suitable for Indonesian skin (Interview, April 26, 2025).

In her interview, Informant noted that influencers demonstrate strong credibility when their relevance to followers, cultural values, and societal realities is high. Influencers with greater relevance are more effective in cultivating emotional connections with their audiences. Content relevance also plays a critical role in establishing an influencer's credibility in the eyes of the audience. In summary, credibility and relevance emerge as the cornerstones of effective influencer marketing. By focusing on authentic personal experiences, cultural alignment, and subtle yet engaging narratives, influencers can foster deeper trust and stronger emotional bonds with their audiences.

3. Engaging Content Narratives

Effective narratives capitalize on elements of personalization and authentic experiences to foster emotional engagement. Audiences respond more positively to narratives that provide tangible evidence, such as before-and-after visuals or honest, experience-based product reviews. Informant MA emphasized the importance of visuals in storytelling:

They show the difference, like before and after using the product (MA).

Similarly, informant AD highlighted her preference for journey-style content:

I enjoy journey content, like when they've tried the product for a month and then shared their experiences (AD).

These insights demonstrate that influencer narratives featuring timelines or sustained product reviews capture audience interest by instilling trust in the influencer's authentic use of the product. This sense of authenticity, as conveyed through journey-style content, reinforces belief in the product's real results. Green and Brock (2000) highlighted that audiences deeply engaged in a narrative are more susceptible to the message's influence. Social media platforms such as Instagram provide an optimal space for showcasing these narrative elements through visual features like Stories and Reels.

Audrezet et al., (2020) further suggest that narratives combining visual and emotional elements are particularly effective in forging connections with audiences. By emphasizing real-life experiences, influencers not only enhance the appeal of their content but also bolster their credibility in the eyes of their followers. Research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) indicates that audiences trust influencers with whom they share an emotional connection more than traditional celebrities. This emphasizes the importance of source credibility in building trust and enhancing the impact of marketing narratives. Compelling narratives often integrate strong visual and emotional components.

This study found that the use of before-and-after videos and journey-based product reviews significantly heightens audience engagement with the conveyed message. Brechman and Purvis (2015) highlight the concept of narrative transportation, wherein individuals become absorbed in a story, leading to heightened audience engagement. In such states, audiences focus their attention, emotions, and imagination on the events within the narrative. This immersive experience, facilitated by well-crafted narratives, proves critical in enhancing the appeal and effectiveness of influencer-driven marketing on platforms like Instagram.

4. Audience Decision-Making and Trust

Influencer narrative strategies have been proven to have a substantial impact on audience purchase decisions. Narratives that resonate with the audience's personal needs are generally more effective in stimulating purchase intentions. However, validation from additional sources frequently serves as a complementary factor in the decision-making process. In this study, trust is frequently built through a combination of relatable narratives and influencer credibility. For example, as result by informant shared:

When I see a promo on Instagram and the reviews are good, I'm immediately interested in checking it out (Interview, April 26, 2025).

However, purchase decisions are not always immediate. SK noted that she often compares reviews from multiple influencers before making a decision:

If it's a new product, I'll definitely check reviews from several other influencers first before buying (Interview, April 26, 2025).

This reliance on multiple sources reflects modern audience behavior, which tends to be skeptical of single-source promotions. Lou and Yuan (2019) support this finding, emphasizing that audiences often validate information before committing to a purchase. Soft‑selling strategies, which prioritize personal narratives over direct promotion, have proven more effective in fostering trust and emotional engagement with audiences. The practice of validating information from multiple sources also indicates that hard-selling tactics, such as heavy discounts and overt promotional techniques, may be less effective if product reviews lack credibility. According to the participants, they are more likely to cross-check reviews than be swayed by hard-selling approaches.

Narratives that rely on relatable elements, demonstrating honesty and fostering emotional connections, are more likely to build audience trust and engagement. These factors significantly influence purchase intentions (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017;

Dalangin et al., 2021). By emphasizing authenticity and emotional resonance, soft-selling strategies provide a more sustainable and impactful approach to influencer-driven marketing. In conclusion, influencer narratives that combine relevance, transparency, and relatability are critical in shaping audience trust and purchase decisions. The modern audience's tendency to seek validation highlights the importance of multi-layered strategies that integrate both authentic storytelling and credible endorsements to drive impactful engagement and consumer action.

Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how Instagram audiences perceive and interpret the narrative strategies employed by beauty influencers. Through thematic analysis, it was found that narrative elements particularly coherence and fidelity play a central role in shaping audience perceptions, building trust, and influencing purchase intentions. Honesty, cultural relevance, and personal experiences emerged as critical elements in enhancing emotional connections between influencers and their followers. Additionally, the use of visually compelling formats such as before-and-after transformations and product journey stories proved to be effective in increasing credibility and engagement.

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