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DECODING AUTHENTICITY IN DIGITAL MARKETING: A NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF USER- GENERATED CONTENT, ALGORITHMIC CURATION, AND BRAND STORYTELLING ON @SCARLETOFFICIAL

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Abstract

This research explores the intersection of algorithmic curation and brand authenticity on Instagram, focusing on @scarlettoofficial. In a digital landscape governed by engagement-driven algorithms, brands face a tension between high-fidelity production and consumer demand for unvarnished authenticity. Utilizing a netnographic approach (July–September 2025) and grounded theory analysis, this study investigates how the strategic deployment of low-fidelity User-Generated Content (UGC) serves as a structural bridge to bypass algorithmic gatekeeping. Findings reveal that @scarlettoofficial navigates the "pseudo-individuality" trap by integrating raw, peer-driven visual assets into its marketing matrix. These low-fidelity markers—characterized by natural lighting and informal narratives—function as potent social proof, fostering deep discursive engagement that satisfies both algorithmic metrics and the psychological need for authenticity. This study contributes to digital communication theory by framing authenticity as a dynamic, algorithmically mediated social construction.

Keywords: Algorithmic Curation, Digital Marketing, Instagram, Netnography, User-Generated Content, Visual Authenticity

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi titik temu antara kurasi algoritmik dan autentisitas merek di Instagram, dengan fokus pada @scarlettoofficial. Dalam ekosistem digital yang dikendalikan algoritma, merek menghadapi ketegangan antara produksi high-fidelity dan permintaan konsumen akan kejujuran visual. Menggunakan pendekatan netnografi (Juli–September 2025) dan analisis grounded theory, studi ini menginvestigasi bagaimana penggunaan strategis User-Generated Content (UGC) low-fidelity berfungsi sebagai jembatan struktural untuk melampaui gatekeeping algoritmik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa @scarlettoofficial menavigasi jebakan "pseudo-individualitas" dengan mengintegrasikan aset visual berbasis pengguna ke dalam matriks pemasarannya. Penanda low-fidelity ini—ditandai dengan pencahayaan alami dan narasi informal—berfungsi sebagai social proof yang kuat, mendorong keterlibatan diskursif mendalam yang memenuhi metrik algoritma sekaligus kebutuhan psikologis akan autentisitas. Studi ini berkontribusi pada teori komunikasi digital dengan membingkai autentisitas sebagai konstruksi sosial dinamis yang dimediasi secara algoritmik.

Kata kunci: Autentisitas Visual, Instagram, Kurasi Algoritmik, Netnografi, Pemasaran Digital, User-Generated Content

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INTRODUCTION

The structural paradigm of marketing communication has undergone a radical, irreversible transformation over the past decade. The industry has shifted fundamentally from unidirectional corporate broadcasting—where brands dictated narratives to passive audiences—to multidirectional, interactive digital engagements characterized by collective meaning-making. Within this evolving media ecology, social networking platforms, most notably Instagram, have centralized themselves as the primary arenas for consumer-brand interactions. However, the maturation of these platforms has precipitated a critical juncture in digital marketing. The contemporary digital landscape is governed by complex, often opaque algorithmic architectures that prioritize engagement metrics, visual optimization, and user retention rates above all else.

Consequently, brands are frequently compelled to produce highly stylized, high-fidelity content designed specifically to satisfy machine-learning parameters rather than to forge genuine human connections (Alicia & Sugianto, 2024; Widjaja et al., 2025). This relentless pursuit of algorithmic visibility has inadvertently catalyzed a consumer crisis of trust. Hyper-polished marketing collateral is increasingly perceived by digital-native consumers as manufactured, superficial, and devoid of authentic value. In response to this pervasive skepticism, there has been a significant paradigm shift toward "authentic marketing," a strategy heavily reliant on the mobilization of User-Generated Content (UGC). UGC encompasses any form of content—visual, textual, or auditory—that is voluntarily created and disseminated by unpaid contributors, primarily consumers sharing their lived experiences. The integration of UGC into mainstream marketing strategies represents a deliberate attempt to reclaim the human element within a highly automated digital ecosystem. By showcasing unscripted consumer narratives, brands seek to establish social proof and foster parasocial relationships that transcend traditional transactional boundaries (Destianah & Nurhasanah, 2024).

The Indonesian beauty and personal care market offers a particularly compelling, high-stakes context for examining these dynamics. The sector is characterized by intense digital competition, hyper-accelerated trend cycles, and a highly engaged demographic of consumers who possess profound digital literacy. Among the most prominent entities in this space is Scarlett Whitening, a brand that has aggressively and successfully leveraged Instagram to secure a dominant market share. The brand's primary Instagram account, @scarlettofficial, operates as a sophisticated marketing matrix, continuously balancing polished corporate endorsements with granular, peer-driven testimonials. This dualistic approach provides a rich sociological site for investigating the interplay between hegemonic brand messaging, algorithmic compliance, and organic consumer expression.

Previous literature has indeed explored the @scarlettofficial ecosystem. Notably, Susanto (2025) conducted an in-depth semiotic analysis of the brand, identifying how low-fidelity aesthetics—such as natural lighting, shaky camera movements, and informal captions—serve as visual markers that construct a perception of brand authenticity, subsequently validated through audience interactions like emotional resonance and comparative cognition. However, while Susanto (2025) establishes the foundational *semiotics* of low-fidelity UGC, there remains a critical gap in understanding how this aesthetic strategy functions as a structural mechanism to bypass algorithmic gatekeeping and avoid the pitfalls of digital pseudo-individuality.

This current study seeks to decode the deeper mechanics of authenticity within digital marketing by conducting a rigorous, extended netnographic analysis of the @scarlettofficial Instagram ecosystem. Specifically, it aims to dissect how the brand operationalizes UGC and storytelling not just as aesthetic choices, but as strategic tools to navigate algorithmic constraints while maintaining perceived authenticity. By framing the analysis within the

context of critical media theory—specifically examining the risks of the Culture Industry and pseudo-individuality in curated digital spaces—this inquiry aspires to yield profound theoretical insights. The research answers the call to move beyond quantitative engagement metrics, providing a qualitative exploration of the socio-cultural and algorithmic implications of digital storytelling in contemporary consumer psychology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Algorithmic Architecture and Digital Visibility

The contemporary Instagram ecosystem is no longer a chronological repository of visual media; it is a highly sophisticated, algorithmically curated environment governed by predictive machine learning. Rahayuningrat et al. (2024) emphasize that Instagram's algorithm functions as a pervasive digital gatekeeper, determining the digital visibility of content based on complex predictive models of user behavior, dwell time, and interaction velocity. This algorithmic reality dictates that commercial entities must continuously adapt their content strategies to align with machine preferences to remain visible. However, as Jaiwant and Vazirani (2024) articulate, an over-reliance on algorithmic optimization often leads to the homogenization of content. When competing brands universally adopt identical visual tropes, audio trends, and engagement tactics to manipulate the algorithm, the digital space becomes saturated with indistinguishable marketing noise. This environment necessitates a strategic pivot towards content that inherently stimulates organic, deep-level user interaction—such as long-form comments, saves, and direct shares—which the algorithm interprets as high-value engagement, thereby rewarding the brand with broader reach.

Authenticity and Pseudo-Individuality in Digital Spaces

The concept of authenticity in digital marketing is fraught with philosophical and theoretical complexities. Drawing upon the critical media theories pioneered by the Frankfurt School, particularly the concepts of the Culture Industry and pseudo-individuality, the modern influencer marketing landscape can be viewed through a highly critical lens (Mohamed, 2025). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously posited that mass culture produces standardized commodities masquerading as unique entities to enforce conformity. Translated to the context of Instagram, when brands attempt to engineer "authenticity" through carefully scripted micro-influencer campaigns or meticulously curated "candid" aesthetics, they risk generating digital simulacra—content that mimics genuine human experience but is fundamentally driven by commercial imperatives.

Suryatini et al. (2025) argue that modern consumers, particularly Generation Z, are becoming increasingly adept at identifying this pseudo-individuality. Consequently, genuine authenticity cannot be easily manufactured in a boardroom; it must be sourced organically from the community. Brands that successfully project authenticity do so by relinquishing a degree of narrative control and allowing raw, peer-to-peer discourse to flourish within their digital domains. This creates a paradox for marketers: true control over brand image now requires the strategic surrender of that very control to the consumer base.

The Strategic Dynamics of User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-Generated Content has emerged as the definitive antidote to the prevailing skepticism surrounding corporate advertising. UGC operates as a highly potent digital manifestation of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), carrying an inherent psychological weight that professional marketing collateral fundamentally lacks. Tarigan et al. (2025) highlight that UGC leverages the established psychological principle of social proof;

prospective consumers are significantly more likely to trust the documented experiences and vulnerabilities of their peers over the polished assertions of the brand itself.

Furthermore, the utilization of UGC introduces what has been categorized as a "low-fidelity aesthetic" into the brand's visual repertoire. As explicitly identified by Susanto (2025), low-fidelity UGC is characterized by natural lighting, handheld camera movements, genuine unfiltered expressions, and informal language. Unlike studio-produced imagery, this lack of polish is precisely what signals trustworthiness to the contemporary consumer, acting as a visual rebellion against hyper-commercialization. By systematically integrating this low-fidelity UGC into their marketing matrices, brands can effectively crowdsource their storytelling, transforming their consumer base into a distributed, highly credible network of brand advocates (Sakinah et al., 2024; Hansdoko et al., 2025).

Storytelling, Visual Aesthetics, and Brand Image Construction

The role of visual communication and narrative storytelling on Instagram remains paramount, even amidst the shift towards raw authenticity. Sugiyarto & Maryami (2026) emphasize that the aesthetic cohesion of an Instagram feed significantly influences consumer purchasing power, brand recall, and overall brand perception. This presents a complex strategic conundrum for brand managers: how to integrate raw, unpolished, low-fidelity UGC without fracturing the overarching brand identity and alienating consumers who still desire aspirational content.

Farida (2023) suggests that successful integration requires a sophisticated curatorial approach, wherein the brand acts as a narrative facilitator rather than a strict dictator of content. The strategic juxtaposition of high-fidelity brand storytelling (e.g., professional campaigns, celebrity endorsements) with low-fidelity user testimonials creates a dynamic structural tension. This tension keeps the audience deeply engaged, satisfying both the psychological desire for aesthetic, aspirational pleasure and the pragmatic demand for authentic, peer-validated proof.

RESEARCH METHOD

To comprehensively investigate the integration of storytelling, algorithmic adaptation, and User-Generated Content on Instagram, this study employs a descriptive qualitative research methodology, specifically utilizing netnography. Pioneered by Robert Kozinets, netnography adapts traditional ethnographic participant-observation tactics to the specialized study of online communities, digital cultures, and platform-specific behaviors. This methodological lens is optimally suited for this inquiry, as it permits the rigorous, unobtrusive analysis of complex social interactions, algorithmic responses, symbolic meanings, and cultural texts as they naturally occur within the digital ecosystem of @scarlettofficial.

Temporal Scope, Purposive Sampling, and Inclusion Criteria

The research focused on a concentrated, highly active temporal scope, spanning from July 1, 2025, to September 30, 2025. This precise three-month timeframe was selected to capture a robust cross-section of the brand's marketing campaigns, new product launches, routine community engagements, and algorithmic fluctuations without the data becoming unwieldy or outdated. Data collection was executed through immersive, non-participatory observation within the @scarlettofficial Instagram account.

Given the massive volume of daily uploads and interactions generated by a macro-brand like Scarlett, capturing the entire dataset was neither feasible nor analytically rigorous. Therefore, a purposive sampling technique was deliberately employed to systematically distill the digital artifacts into a highly relevant corpus. The final sample of over 150 distinct posts and their associated comment ecosystems (totaling over 5,000 analyzed comments) was selected based on strict inclusion and exclusion criteria:

1. **Inclusion Criteria:**

- **Narrative and UGC Integration:** Posts that explicitly repurposed user-generated media, highlighted peer testimonials, or featured emotive brand storytelling (rather than simple product catalogs).
- **Discursive Density:** Posts that generated high volumes of text-heavy, multi-turn comment threads. The sampling prioritized interactions where users actively debated, shared personal experiences, or asked detailed questions, filtering out posts dominated merely by superficial emoji reactions or bot-like spam.
- **Format Diversity:** A proportional representation of high-velocity short-form videos (Reels), static Carousels, and pinned Story highlights to observe how different algorithmic formats influence the perception of authenticity.

2. **Exclusion Criteria:** Purely transactional posts (e.g., flash sale posters, giveaway announcements requiring users to "tag 3 friends") and heavily scripted macro-influencer endorsements were strictly excluded. These artifacts generally elicit superficial algorithmic engagement rather than organic communal meaning-making, and thus fell outside the scope of authentic storytelling investigation.

Data Analysis via Grounded Theory and Coding Trajectory

The analytical framework was heavily informed by Grounded Theory principles, allowing theoretical insights regarding authenticity and algorithms to emerge organically from the empirical data rather than imposing rigid pre-existing hypotheses. The analytical process followed a systematic, continuous comparative method involving three stages:

1. **Open Coding:** The initial phase involved fracturing the collected data—images, captions, video pacing, and user comments—into discrete analytical units. Content was broadly categorized into initial themes such as "aesthetic fidelity," "narrative vulnerability," "peer endorsement format," and "algorithmic hooks."
2. **Axial Coding:** In this stage, complex connections between the initial categories were established. The researcher examined the structural relationships between the aesthetic style of the content and the community's response. This involved analyzing how low-fidelity visual markers systematically generated deeper levels of conversational trust compared to high-fidelity posts.
3. **Selective Coding:** The final phase involved synthesizing the axial categories into overarching theoretical constructs to establish the core phenomenon.

To illustrate the transitional mechanics between these three analytical stages, **Table 1** delineates a concrete coding matrix. This matrix demonstrates exactly how raw digital artifacts (visuals and texts) were systematically abstracted, categorized, and conceptually linked to formulate the core theoretical phenomenon of this study.

Table 1. Grounded Theory Coding: The Trajectory from Raw Data to Core Phenomenon

Raw Digital Artifact (Post / Comment)	Open Coding (Initial Abstraction)	Axial Coding (Category Linkage)	Selective Coding (Core Phenomenon)
<p>Visual/Caption Data: A slightly blurry, poorly lit mirror selfie of a user holding a serum. Caption reads: "No filter, just bare skin. Finally brave enough to post this after 2 months of consistency. Thanks @scarlettofficial."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unpolished visual presentation - Expression of personal vulnerability - Non-professional language 	<p>Low-Fidelity Aesthetic as Truth Marker</p> <p>(Connecting visual imperfection with perceived psychological honesty).</p>	<p>Algorithmic Authenticity Negotiation</p> <p>(The overarching process where the brand utilizes raw, imperfect consumer realities to bypass corporate skepticism, establishing a communal truth that simultaneously satisfies the algorithm's demand for deep engagement).</p>
<p>Comment Thread Data:</p> <p>User A: "Did your skin purge at first? Mine is breaking out right now 🤔"</p> <p>User B (Reply): "Yeah, it stung for the first week. Just use a very thin layer every 2 days. It gets better!"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peer-to-peer inquiry - Admission of negative side effects (purging) - Organic user-to-user education 	<p>Horizontal Social Proof & Communal Validation</p> <p>(Linking the absence of brand intervention with high peer trust and organic problem-solving).</p>	<p>[Same Core Phenomenon as above]</p>
<p>Video Format Data: A fast-paced Reel using trending TikTok audio, featuring quick cuts of a user unboxing the product in a cramped, messy bedroom.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leveraging algorithmic audio trends - Domestic, relatable environmental setting - High-velocity pacing 	<p>Strategic Aesthetic Disruption</p> <p>(Juxtaposing algorithmic compliance/trends with intimate, uncensored domestic realities).</p>	<p>[Same Core Phenomenon as above]</p>

Through this rigorous coding trajectory, it became evident that the categories of *Low-Fidelity Aesthetics*, *Strategic Aesthetic Disruption*, and *Horizontal Social Proof* do not exist in isolation. They dynamically interact through the axial coding phase to form the core selective concept: **Algorithmic Authenticity Negotiation**. Triangulation was achieved by continuously cross-referencing these visual markers with the depth of textual captions and

the intensity of user interaction metrics, ensuring the validity, depth, and reliability of the theoretical findings.

RESULTS

The rigorous netnographic immersion into the @scarlettofficial digital ecosystem between July and September 2025 yielded profound insights into the brand's strategic negotiation of authenticity within an algorithmic paradigm. The findings reveal a highly sophisticated marketing architecture that deliberately oscillates between polished corporate narratives and raw consumer realities to manipulate both machine learning and human psychology.

Algorithmic Adaptation vs. Authentic Storytelling

The empirical data clearly illustrates that @scarlettofficial operates with an acute awareness of algorithmic imperatives. A significant portion of the brand's internally produced content utilizes high-velocity editing, strategically deployed trending audio tracks, and visually arresting, highly saturated color palettes. These elements are designed explicitly to capture user attention within the critical first three seconds of a scroll—classic tactics for appeasing the Instagram algorithm and preventing user drop-off.

However, the research identified that this high-fidelity, algorithm-baiting content is consistently anchored by deep narrative storytelling. Rather than merely presenting a product against a sterile background, the brand constructs aspirational narratives centered around self-care, personal confidence, and lifestyle transformation. Yet, recognizing that algorithmic perfection inevitably breeds consumer skepticism (the pseudo-individuality trap), the brand strategically interrupts its own polished feed with what this study terms "calculated aesthetic disruption." By injecting raw UGC into a polished feed, the brand deliberately breaks the visual monotony, forcing the scrolling user to pause and engage with content that looks distinctly human rather than corporate.

Typologies of Authentic UGC on @scarlettofficial

Building upon the aesthetic markers of low-fidelity content identified by Susanto (2025), this study categorized the functional deployment of UGC by @scarlettofficial into three distinct, highly structured typologies, each serving specific psychological and algorithmic functions:

1. **The Transformative Testimonial (The "Before-and-After" Narrative):** This represents the most prevalent and potent form of UGC. Followers submit raw, unedited photographs or videos detailing their dermatological journeys over weeks or months. By republishing these images—often deliberately retaining the low-resolution quality, poor lighting, and unstyled backgrounds of the original user's camera—the brand provides incontrovertible visual proof of efficacy. The low-fidelity aesthetic here is weaponized as a marker of undeniable, unmanipulated truth, effectively disarming consumer skepticism.
2. **The Experiential Unboxing and Sensory Review:** Users frequently document their immediate, unfiltered reactions to receiving, opening, and smelling the products. These videos, almost exclusively shot in intimate domestic settings (bedrooms,

cramped bathrooms), strip away the glamour of the professional studio. They situate the product squarely within the mundane reality of the consumer's daily life, fostering a profound sense of relatability and parasocial connection that high-budget commercials cannot replicate.

3. **Peer-to-Peer Educational Discourse:** The brand frequently highlights specific user comments, DMs (Direct Messages), or micro-reviews where everyday consumers explain how they uniquely integrate specific Scarlett products into their idiosyncratic routines (e.g., "layering" lotions for specific scents). By elevating the voices of ordinary users to the status of "expert educators," the brand decentralizes its corporate authority, empowers the community, and organically generates high-retention educational content that the algorithm favors.

Community Resonance and the Bypassing of Algorithmic Gatekeeping

The deep analysis of the comment sections reveals a stark, fascinating contrast in audience behavior depending on the origin of the content. While highly produced celebrity endorsements or influencer collaborations generate massive volumes of superficial engagement (e.g., thousands of likes and generic emoji comments like 🍷 or 😊), the UGC-driven posts foster entirely different, deeply discursive interactions.

On low-fidelity UGC posts, users actively tag peers with specific intent, ask highly detailed questions about product application ("Did it sting when you applied it to active acne?"), and, crucially, share their own supplementary experiences within the comment threads ("I had the exact same result after 3 weeks!"). This indicates that UGC successfully bypasses the cognitive defenses consumers typically erect against advertising. More importantly, from an algorithmic standpoint, these long-form comments, nested replies, and active tagging are weighted far heavier by Instagram's algorithm than mere "likes." Therefore, the UGC functions as robust social proof, where the community itself validates the brand's claims, significantly mitigating the risks of perceived pseudo-individuality, while simultaneously "hacking" the algorithm to grant the post massive organic reach.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this netnographic study underscore the intricate, often paradoxical complexities of modern digital marketing, wherein the pursuit of authenticity operates simultaneously as a philosophical ideal, a cultural demand, a highly calculated algorithmic strategy, and a mechanism of affective extraction. While the observations align with Destianah and Nurhasanah (2024) and Sakinah et al. (2024) in demonstrating that Brand Equity and Brand Trust are invariably fortified when professional marketing is supplemented with authentic, peer-validated user experiences, this study argues that such perspectives often remain trapped in a utopian functionalism. Previous research, notably Susanto (2025), correctly identified the semiotic presence of "low-fidelity aesthetics" in User-Generated Content (UGC) but romantically interpreted these markers as genuine instruments of democratic communication and collective meaning-making. By applying the critical media theory of the Frankfurt School—specifically the works of Adorno and Horkheimer—this study radically departs from that optimistic premise, exposing UGC not

as a democratization of brand narratives, but as a far more insidious mutation of the Culture Industry.

The Radical Illusion of Emancipation and Commodification

When viewed through this critical lens, the strategic deployment of UGC by @scarlettofficial presents a fascinating sociological paradox. On one hand, UGC appears inherently democratic, originating from the consumer and purportedly shifting power away from the brand to establish a horizontal "social construction of authenticity" (Susanto, 2025). However, this shift in power is a structural illusion. The Culture Industry does not simply vanish when consumers generate content; rather, it evolves to colonize the intimate lifeworld of the user.

What is celebrated as "emotional resonance" and "authentic participation" is, in reality, the sophisticated co-optation of consumer vulnerability. The brand systematically harvests genuine human experiences, private insecurities, and aesthetic labor, repackaging them as high-performing marketing assets. When @scarlettofficial curates and amplifies raw "before-and-after" acne journeys or unscripted bedroom unboxings, it merely outsources its production costs to the consumer base, transforming unpaid digital labor into marketing capital. This dynamic does not liberate the consumer; it completely subsumes their personal identity into the capitalist machinery of the brand. The "rawness" is no longer an act of rebellion against polished corporate advertising; it has been entirely domesticated as a standardized aesthetic required to generate surplus value.

Pseudo-Individuality and the Commodification of the "Aura"

This dynamic raises critical theoretical questions about pseudo-individuality in the digital age. Adorno and Horkheimer's concept posits that mass culture provides the illusion of free choice and uniqueness to mask underlying conformity. The deployment of UGC perfectly epitomizes this concept: the brand presents hundreds of distinct, highly personal user stories, creating a façade of diverse, individualized realities. Yet, these narratives are rigorously filtered and curated to serve a singular, homogenized commercial teleology—the consumption of Scarlett products.

The critical failure of contemporary digital marketing analysis is the assumption that because a video looks amateurish, it escapes commercial logic. By leaning heavily into low-fidelity aesthetics, the brand attempts to synthesize and preserve what Walter Benjamin termed the "aura"—the unique, authentic presence of an original human experience—thereby preventing it from feeling entirely manufactured by the Culture Industry (Mohamed, 2025). However, the moment a deeply personal testimony is hijacked by @scarlettofficial's corporate feed and amplified to millions for profit, its aura is instantly annihilated. It becomes a manufactured simulacrum of authenticity. The rawness itself is the product. The audience is not engaging with a fellow human being; they are engaging with a highly optimized corporate asset wearing the mask of a peer.

Algorithmic Hegemony and Affective Exploitation

Moving beyond horizontal community interaction, this study uncovers the structural tyranny of the platform itself. UGC serves as a functional bridge over the algorithmic moat

precisely because algorithms blindly prioritize engagement velocity and emotional depth (Widjaja et al., 2025). Because UGC inherently provokes more meaningful, text-heavy, multi-turn interactions compared to the passive consumption of slick advertisements, it organically and rapidly boosts the brand's algorithmic ranking.

Consequently, authenticity is stripped of its moral imperative and reduced to an algorithmic currency. A structural, algorithmic necessity for survival has emerged. The brand does not champion low-fidelity UGC because it values democratic participation; it champions it because the algorithm demands affective extraction to maintain digital visibility. The strategic interplay between high-fidelity storytelling (the aspirational narrative) and low-fidelity UGC (the empirical validation) creates a self-sustaining marketing loop.

This participatory model seamlessly aligns with, and simultaneously exploits, the evolving psychological expectations of digital natives. As Kwik et al. (2023), Hansdoko et al. (2025), and Trisсетianto & Ali (2023) observe, Generation Z and Millennial cohorts exhibit a high degree of advertising literacy, demanding active involvement in the co-creation of brand meaning and rejecting hegemonic monologues in favor of peer-to-peer dialogues. By acting as a curator of consumer stories, @scarlettofficial effectively repositions itself as a trusted facilitator of a broader community discourse regarding self-care and realistic beauty standards.

Yet, rather than truly empowering these cohorts, this model subtly forces them into a continuous cycle of self-commodification. Users are conditioned to believe that by sharing their unfiltered realities, they are engaging in horizontal dialogue, when in fact, they are feeding the hegemonic apparatus of both the brand and the Meta algorithm. Ultimately, @scarlettofficial's strategic oscillation between high-fidelity aspiration and low-fidelity reality is not a testament to brand transparency. It is a brilliant, highly calculated deployment of the Culture Industry's latest mechanism: the weaponization of the authentic self to sustain corporate hegemony in an era of digital skepticism.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study elucidates the indispensable, deeply nuanced, and multifaceted roles of User-Generated Content (UGC), structural algorithmic adaptation, and corporate storytelling within the contemporary, machine-governed landscape of digital marketing. Through a rigorous netnographic examination of the @scarlettofficial Instagram ecosystem, this inquiry demonstrates that successful digital communication has moved far beyond the superficial optimization of visual aesthetics or traditional, unidirectional corporate monologues. Instead, surviving platform-based gatekeeping demands a highly calculated alignment of peer-driven social validation, strategic low-fidelity disruption, and strict algorithmic compliance.

By systematically embedding raw, structurally unpolished consumer testimonials into its promotional matrix, the brand successfully bypasses the cognitive and defensive barriers that digital-native consumers erect against hyper-perfected corporate advertising. However, when unpacked through the critical media theory of the Frankfurt School, this strategic juxtaposition of high-fidelity brand aspiration and low-fidelity consumer reality reveals a deeper systemic paradox. What appears on the surface to be a democratic,

emancipatory expansion of horizontal consumer power is, in its architectural essence, a highly sophisticated mutation of the Culture Industry. The authentic "aura" of real human vulnerability and skin health progression is effectively harvested, filtered, and commodified by corporate gatekeepers. Rather than truly breaking away from the traps of digital pseudo-individuality, these raw user narratives are structurally domesticated to serve a unified commercial teleology while feeding the platform's relentless demand for text-heavy, high-retention engagement metrics. Ultimately, unvarnished human experience remains the most potent currency in digital spaces, but it operates under the structural tyranny of an algorithmic ecosystem that forces consumers into a continuous cycle of self-commodification.

Managerial Implications

For digital marketing practitioners, brand strategists, and community managers, this research underscores the structural necessity of decentralizing traditional content production. To survive in an ecosystem dictated by engagement-driven machine learning, commercial entities must consciously relinquish a degree of strict narrative control. Surrendering corporate polish in favor of raw, user-driven, low-fidelity content is the mandatory price for earning both consumer trust and algorithmic visibility. Consequently, corporate marketing budgets must undergo a strategic reallocation. Capital traditionally reserved for high-production studio shoots or heavily scripted macro-influencer campaigns should be diverted toward community-building initiatives, reactive community management, and organic UGC harvesting infrastructure. Managers must learn to treat the raw, imperfect domestic spaces of their everyday users not as design flaws, but as essential visual truth markers that drive algorithmic visibility and cultural relevance.

Future Research Directions

While this study provides a profound qualitative and critical deconstruction of digital authenticity, future academic inquiries should look toward expanding these findings through diverse methodological lenses. Scholars should employ mixed-method approaches or structured A/B testing to empirically quantify the exact impact of varying degrees of UGC aesthetic fidelity (e.g., highly stylized UGC versus completely raw, unedited mobile uploads) on specific consumer conversion rates, brand equity dimensions, and long-term return on investment (ROI).

Furthermore, the theoretical framework developed here would be heavily enriched by comparative netnographic investigations executed across distinct cultural environments, alternative product sectors (such as luxury assets or hyper-commodified fast-moving goods), and structurally diverse platform architectures like TikTok, YouTube, or X. Such cross-platform examinations are vital to determining whether the mechanisms of algorithmic authenticity negotiation discovered within the skincare market function uniformly across the broader, rapidly evolving paradigms of contemporary human communication.

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