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The Role of Influencer PR in Communicating Ethical Values in the Beauty Industry: A Comparative Study of Nano-Ambassadors at Tropic Skincare and Individual Beauty-Related Micro-Influencers

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Abstract

Ethics has become central to beauty brands' communication strategies, yet, existing research offers limited insight into how different influencer types convey ethical values and how their strategies shape consumer perceptions. This study addresses these gaps by comparing Tropic Skincare's ambassadors and independent micro-influencers. These two categories operating under distinct arrangements.

A mixed-methods approach was employed. Qualitative text analysis of 28 social media posts was conducted using NVivo, focusing on ethical messaging, sponsorship disclosure, and personal narrative strategies. A quantitative questionnaire survey (N=298) was analysed through SPSS to examine consumer perceptions of trust, authenticity, and purchase intention. The findings reveal clear strategic divergence. Ambassadors prioritize brand-aligned consistency and explicit disclosure, while micro-influencers emphasize personal storytelling and relational authenticity.

This study advances PR research by identifying trust as the central mechanism linking ethical communication to consumer outcomes, challenging conventional assumptions about the nano- and micro-difference. It offers practical guidance for brands on influencer selection, disclosure strategies, and content design to strengthen ethical messaging effectiveness.

Keywords: influencer PR, ethical branding, consumer perception, authenticity, trust, source credibility

1. Introduction

Driven by rising public concern for environmental sustainability and social responsibility (Rantatalo & Jonsson, 2013), the beauty industry has gradually shifted its focus towards ethical branding in recent years. Ethical branding has become a core PR priority (Fan, 2005). It requiring brands to communicate values such as cruelty-free practices and sustainable sourcing to appeal to increasingly value-driven consumers (Amalia & Darmawan, 2023). However, as consumers grow more skeptical of direct corporate messaging (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017), brands have increasingly turned to social media influencers as intermediaries.

Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, social media influencers are generally perceived as more accessible, authentic, and trustworthy (Ohanian, 1990). Public often finds influencers' opinions on brands more persuasive than direct brand messages (Fricke, 2018). Influencers are commonly classified by follower count. Nano-influencers typically have fewer than 10,000 followers, while micro-influencers hold between 10,000 and 100,000 (Euzéby *et al.*, 2025). Brands increasingly favour smaller-scale influencers, believing they can generate deeper trust and engagement (Conde & Casais, 2023).

The context of ethical branding introduces a particular challenge for influencer communication. Ethical value transmission requires influencers to credibly embody and articulate brand values such as authenticity,

transparency, and responsibility (Hunt, 2019; Molleda, 2010). For PR professionals, this raises critical questions about which types of influencers are most effective for ethical communication and what strategy yield stronger consumer trust.

Tropic Skincare, a UK-based beauty brand positioned around ethical values, provides an ideal case for investigating this question. The brand operates a direct-selling ambassador program, encouraging individuals to purchase a starter kit and promote vegan, cruelty-free products through personal social media accounts. This structure attracts many nano-influencers who want to try expand their portfolio on social media.

Besides, even though academic and practical interest in influencer marketing is growing, several gaps remain. First, while existing studies have examined the effectiveness of influencers by follower size (Conde & Casais, 2023; Schouten *et al.*, 2021), few have systematically compared partnered nano-influencers with independent micro-influencers. This comparison is crucial because the two types operate under fundamentally different constraints. Ambassadors are bound by brand alignment, but independent influencers enjoy greater narrative freedom. Second, although authenticity and trust have been identified as key mechanisms in influencer communication (Molleda, 2010; Woodroof *et al.*, 2020), existing research has not fully explored how these mechanisms operate differently when ethical values are the primary content. This distinction matters for PR practice, as ethical communication relies more and more heavily on perceived credibility than traditional endorsement. Third, consumer perceptions of nano-influencers and micro-influencers have been studied primarily in isolation. This leaves an under-explored gaps in their comparative impact on trust, authenticity, and purchase intention. Thus, professionals risk making uninformed decisions about influencer selection without a clear understanding of how ambassador and independent influencer strategies differ and how consumers respond to each. Potentially, it will further undermine the credibility of ethical campaigns.

Through a mixed-methods design combining qualitative text analysis and quantitative survey research, the study investigates three interrelated directions: 1) the strategic differences in ethical communication between the two influencer types; 2) their respective strengths and limitations; and 3) consumer responses to their messaging. By doing so, this study contributes to theoretical understanding of source credibility and authenticity in influencer PR, while offering practical guidance for professionals navigating ethical brand communication under nowadays increasing consumer skepticism.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ethical Branding and Corporate Communication

The rise of social media has fundamentally re-shaped PR practice, demanding a transition from traditional one-way communication toward more open, adaptive, and dialogic models. This shift requires organizations to embrace content democratization to meet evolving consumer expectations (Breakenridge, 2012). Social media has evolved into a participatory network that serves as the foundation for global online communication (Fricke, 2018). Brag (2019) argues that successful dialogue now depends on the synergy between social media platforms and audience engagement, however, this very interactivity simultaneously exposes brands to heightened consumer skepticism. Such paradox presents a new challenge that extends beyond deciding whether to adopt influencer strategies. PR professionals must learn to understand which influencers can most effectively communicate brand value and generate positive consumer perceptions.

Brand performance must also be evaluated through social responsibility and ethical behaviors (Fan, 2005), positioning brand ethics as an integral component of the broader social system. Hunt (2019) reinforces this view, arguing that brand strategies should generate positive societal impact and resonate with consumer expectations. Nevertheless, most PR professionals engaged in strategic communication lack of formal ethical training and understanding (Parsons 2008), which weaken their capacity to design ethical communication strategies. Even the normative theories of ethical branding emphasize the importance of social responsibility, empirical evidence suggests that professionals are often ill-equipped to operationalize these ideals. This gap becomes particularly consequential in influencer communication. Ethical value transmission depends on a chain process from content design to behavioral performance, but little has been systematically defined regarding how this process varies across different influencer types.

2.2 Authenticity and Trust in Influencer Communication

Influencer communication operates on a foundation of perceived authenticity, which serves as a critical determinant of campaign success or failure (Molleda, 2010). Consumers today are increasingly skeptical of corporate messaging, making it more difficult for brands to resonate authentically and build reliable reputations (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Influencers, here, offer a distinct advantage that consumers tend to place greater trust in YouTube and Instagram influencers than in traditional advertising endorsers (Pratiwi *et al.*, no date).

Trust is attributed to the perceived reliability of influencer-generated content, which often carries reduced commercial bias and fosters a sense of peer recommendation. Yet, trust is neither automatic nor unconditional.

According to Persuasion Knowledge Model, when consumers perceive that a message has been deliberately crafted to shape their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, they are likely to interpret it as persuasion rather than "real" information (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020). While ethical positioning may enhance perceived authenticity, consumers remain alert to potential "greenwashing" if brand claims appear superficial or inconsistent with organizational actions (Rantatalo & Jonsson, 2023). Such perceptions can seriously damage existing brand reputation. Influencer PR becomes credible and sustainable only when ethical commitments are deeply and naturally integrated into organizational strategies.

2.3 Source Credibility and Influencer Effectiveness

McCracken's (1989) Image Transfer Theory posits that the characteristics of endorsers are readily transferred to the brands they represent. Consumers associate an influencer's traits, such as credibility or ethical stance, with the endorsed products and brands (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015). This transfer occurs because influencers serve as content creators and symbolic representatives. Consequently, it is essential to make a careful selection of influencers based on their alignment and value congruence with brands (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). The strategic importance of this selection is further amplified by the relational chain: PR professionals design and manage campaigns, influencers act as intermediaries to translate brand values into credible content, and consumers receive, interpret, and respond to these messages through engagement and purchasing behaviors (Breakenridge, 2012). Here, influencers function as mediating variables that affect brand assets across four dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015).

A significant theoretical debate emerges here regarding the relative influence of source credibility vs. consumer persuasion knowledge. For one thing, the source credibility literature (McCracken, 1989; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015) suggests that higher credibility leads to more favourable brand outcomes through image transfer. For another, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020) warns that even if the credibility improves, it does not protect influencers from consumer skepticism. Indeed, consumers who perceive persuasive intent may discount even credible sources.

2.4 Nano- vs. Micro-Influencers

The year 2019 marked a turning point in influencer marketing practices. Influencers began to assume more significant roles in brand strategies, sharing promotional content through their social media accounts in instead of traditional advertising model (Brag, 2019). This shift capitalized on the advantage of social media platforms to engage directly with active users without third-party intervention (Pratiwi *et al.*, no date). Compared to influencers with larger follower bases who often promote mainstream products, micro-influencers possess distinct advantages in communicating unique brand value through their niche appeal and high community interaction rates (Schouten *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, nano-influencers benefit from close audience relationships. Both micro- and nano-influencers generate credibility that enables their collaborations to produce value (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020) and positively influence brand assets by fostering brand-consumer relationships (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015).

Schouten *et al.* (2021) further argue that effectiveness depends on specific combinations of products and endorsers, suggesting that no single influencer type is universally superior. A larger follower base does not always represent the optimal choice, as it may cause promoted products to lose their uniqueness in consumers' eyes (De Veirman *et al.,* 2017).

2.5 Research Gaps

There is broad consensus that source credibility facilitates positive brand outcomes through image transfer, authenticity is critical for consumer trust but vulnerable to persuasion knowledge activation, and both nano- and micro-influencers offer credibility advantages over traditional endorsers. However, there is no agreement on whether nano- or micro-influencer is more effective for ethical brand communication, nor on how consumers reconcile source credibility perceptions with persuasion detection when ethical claims are involved.

Three interrelated questions that this study addresses:

RQ1. How do nano-influencers that operating under formal brand partnerships and independent micro-influencers differ in their linguistic and communicative strategies when expressing ethical brand values?

RQ2. What are the respective strengths and limitations of these two influencer tiers, specifically in the context of ethical message transmission where authenticity pressures are particularly acute?

RQ3. How do consumer perceptions of trust, authenticity, and purchase intention differ when encountering ethical messaging from nano-influencer vs. independent micro-influencers?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative text analysis and quantitative survey research. Text analysis addresses how influencers communicate ethical values (RQ1, RQ2). The questionnaire survey examines consumer perceptions and purchase intentions (RQ3).

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

3.2.1 Text Analysis

Six influencers were purposefully selected, including three Tropic ambassadors and three independent micro-influencers. Full criteria are detailed in *Appendix A*. Three to five posts per influencer were collected from Instagram and YouTube and transcribed for analysis. The two-platform approach captures variation in ethical communication across media formats. Representative audience comments were included in *Appendix B* to contextualize engagement patterns.

Text analysis focused on identifying and comparing the frequency of ethical concepts appearing in the influencers' social media content (Carley, 1993). The analytical process followed four steps: coding, thematic identification, results presentation, and interpretation of findings in relation to research questions. All selected social media content, captions, and associated audience comments were converted into text files before being uploaded to NVivo (Janvrin & Fisher, 2021). Google Docs was used for initial transcription, and NVivo was employed for coding and categorization.

In the coding process, word frequency was applied to statistically assess the most frequently used keywords in each influencer type's content, highlighting recurring themes and emphasized messages (Carley, 1993). Comparative analysis was used to identify differences and similarities in narrative framing between ambassadors and independent influencers. NVivo's word cloud function was applied to visualize prominent words and concepts (Janvrin & Fisher, 2021).

3.2.2 Questionnaire Survey

Structured questionnaire surveys remain the most commonly used method to obtain survey data (de Vaus, 2016). Beauty consumers aged 18-36 was structured with closed questions. Participants selected answers from predefined multiple choice and Likert scale. The full questionnaire is attached in *Appendix C*. The questionnaire measured four constructs: trustworthiness, perceived authenticity, ethical value communication, and purchase intention. Reliability of these scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The target sample was 200-300 responses, collected anonymously via online communities.

The questionnaire analysis followed structured steps: survey design and data collection through Qualtrics, data preparation, statistical analysis using SPSS, and interpretation of results in relation to research questions (Fisher & Buglear, 2007). Initial data was used to code categorical and ordinal variables and create grouping variables for comparative tests.

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to summarize the demographic profile of participants and their social media usage behaviors. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha was performed to assess internal consistency of multi-item scales. Comparative analysis examined differences between influencer types across four perception dimensions: ethical value communication, sponsorship transparency, trustworthiness, and purchase intention. Correlation analysis further explored relationships between these dimensions. Multiple response analysis was included for multi-choice questions related to sources of purchase and preferred channels for discovering new products.

4. Findings

4.1 Text Analysis

4.1.1 Ambassador

Three UK-based Tropic Skincare ambassadors with fewer than 10,000 followers were selected, with 5 posts each (15 total). Their content was highly brand-aligned, focusing on product promotion and ethical messaging. The three are anonymized as Nano 1, Nano 2, and Nano 3.



Figure 1. Word Cloud of Tropic Skincare Ambassadors

The word cloud shows "@tropicskincare" as the most frequent term, serving as both brand reference and sponsorship disclosure. Terms like "organic," "natural," and "#veganskincare" closely tied to the brand's ethical values. Words such as "amazing," "confidence," and "credible" reflected personal usage feedback intended to enhance trustworthiness. Among them, the term "organic" appeared 4 times in one post by Nano 1. This uniformity reinforcing brand identity straightforward, but may trigger consumers' Persuasion Knowledge. Audiences may discount the content's authenticity when ethical language appears overly scripted (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020).

Engagement under ambassadors' posts was limited and generic. Comments like "you look fabulous," "slay," or emoji-only responses were common. Product-specific questions rarely appeared. Only one ambassador received requests for further beauty advice. This pattern suggests passive consumption. Followers may acknowledge the influencer's professionalism but do not necessarily translate that into purchase consideration. The absence of substantive dialogue represents a weakness of the ambassador model for ethical communication, as authentic trust-building typically requires reciprocal, content-rich interaction (Molleda, 2010).

4.1.2 Beauty-Related Micro-Influencer

Three micro-influencers with 10,000-100,000 followers, distinct personal styles, and consistent posting over three years were selected. They are anonymized as Micro 1, Micro 2, and Micro 3.



Figure 2. Word Cloud of Beauty-related Micro-influencers

The most frequent word was "favourite," followed by "sensitive". These terms reflect micro-influencers' prioritization of personal narrative, which can reduce psychological distance with followers. "Sponsored," "recommend," and "subscribe" indicate engagement strategies. "Ingredient" and "fragrance-free" demonstrate attention to ethical product values. Unlike ambassadors, micro-influencers invested less in ethical vocabulary and more in conversational, consumer-oriented language. Based on Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990), this conversational style enhances trustworthiness by creating peer-level rather than brand-level communication, and lowers the perceived persuasive intent that activates consumer skepticism.

Engagement was substantially higher. Number of received comments ranged from 10 to nearly 500 per post. Followers actively shared usage experiences, creating co-created knowledge. This participatory dynamic reflects a distributed trust mechanism: credibility is built through both the influencer's words and visible community validation (Schouten *et al.*, 2021), and is aligning with the dialogic principles of symmetrical communication (Watkins, 2016).

4.1.3 Comparative and Theoretical Analysis

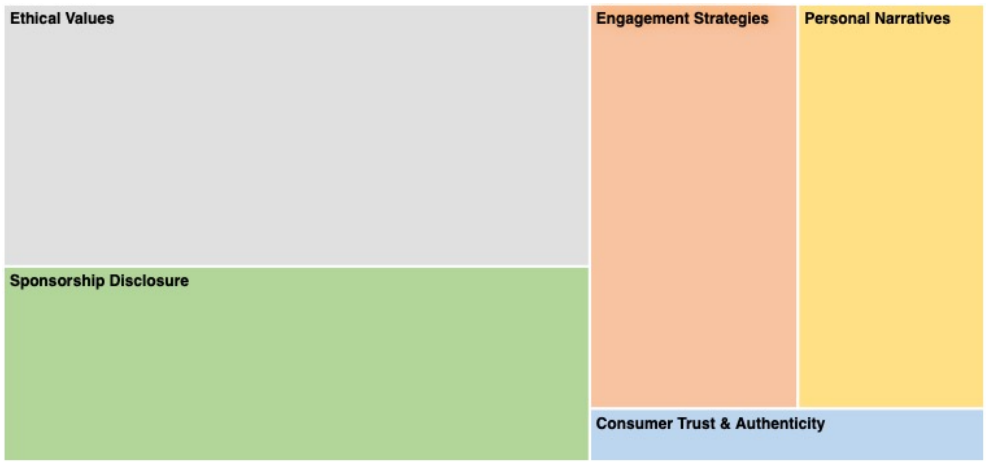


Figure 3. Treemap of 3 Tropic Skincare Ambassadors



Figure 4. Treemap of 3 Beauty-related Micro-influencers

The treemaps show nearly opposite content priorities. Ambassadors weighted ethical values significantly higher, but micro-influencers' performance paid more attention on consumer trust and authenticity. This reflects McCracken's (1989) Image Transfer Theory as ambassadors transfer trust from brand to self or products and micro-influencers build trust from personal to brand.

Ambassadors were more proactive in sponsorship disclosure, using clear "#ad" and "@tropicskincare" tags in compliance with UK advertising standards (The Advertising Standards Authority, The Committee of Advertising

Practise, and The Competition and Markets Authority, 2020). Micro-influencers used softer disclosure. This illustrates a potential authenticity trade-off. Rigorous disclosure may activate Persuasion Knowledge by signaling commercial intent while softer disclosure preserves more personal and credibility but risks transparency issues (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020). Ambassadors serve external stakeholders through accountability, whereas micro-influencers serve community stakeholders through relational intimacy (Freeman, 1984).

Ambassadors' storytelling revolved around brand identity. Micro-influencers, however, employed huge amount of personal narratives to enhance emotional resonance. This aligns with Relationship Management Theory that micro-influencers maintain dialogic intimacy with followers (Watkins, 2016) to encourage participatory co-creation.

Audience reactions differed markedly. Ambassadors' comments were generic and brand-focused. Micro-influencers' comments showed strong product-specific curiosity and purchase interest. Following the opinion leader concept (Park *et al.*, 2021), ambassadors act as official opinion leaders disseminating brand values, but micro-influencers act as individual opinion leaders facilitating "peer-to-peer" information circulation.

4.2 Questionnaire Survey

A total of 298 valid responses were collected via Qualtrics and analyzed using SPSS 25. The sample (see *Appendix D1* and *D2*) was mainly female (63.1%), aged 25-30 (50.7%). This demographic profile aligned with the beauty industry's core consumer segment. 92.6% followed beauty brands or influencers on social media, confirming sample suitability.

For the reliability of the results, an alpha value above 0.60 was indicated sufficient in exploratory studies (Hair *et al.*, 1998). All dimensions, including ethical value communication (a=0.739), sponsorship transparency (a=0.654), trustworthiness (a=0.693), and engagement and purchase intention (a=0.708) achieved acceptable good reliability levels (see *Appendix D3*). The overall result stood for the responses were consistently measured the intended underlying concepts across both influencer types. It supported the use of these constructs in the further analysis.

4.2.1 Comparative Analysis

Table 1. Paired Samples Test

	Mean (nano)	Mean (micro)	t-value	df	p-value	Cohen's d
Ethical Value Communication	3.7472	3.7919	- 1.328	297	.185	.70573
Sponsorship Transparency	3.7729	3.7640	.268	297	.789	.69639
Trustworthiness	3.7685	3.7584	.304	297	.761	.71846
Engagement & Purchase Intention	3.8803	3.8691	.325	297	.746	.68474

Paired samples tests showed no statistically significant differences between ambassador and micro-influencer with none results reaching statistical significance at the conventional threshold ($p<0.05$) (Di Leo & Sardanelli, 2020). Mean differences were minimal.

This non-significant finding suggests influencer category alone is not a reliable predictor of consumer perceptions. Contradicting studies emphasizing distinct strengths by follower size (Conde & Casais, 2023; Wibawa *et al.*, 2021). However, the consistently high means indicate consumers viewed both types as credible. This supports Source Credibility Theory's argument that trust depends more on perceived expertise and authenticity than numerical reach (Ohanian, 1990). The non-significant quantitative results complement the qualitative findings. Strategic differences exist, but they do not translate into statistically different consumer perception scores. This suggests communication style and perceived authenticity matter more than influencer category itself.

4.2.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Nano-Influencers

	EVC	ST	TR	EPI
Ethical Value Communication	1	.668**	.613**	.573**
Sponsorship Transparency		1	.643**	.583**

Trustworthiness			1	.679**
Engagement & Purchase Intention				1
**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)				

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Micro-Influencers

	EVC	ST	TR	EPI
Ethical Value Communication	1	.666**	.655**	.653**
Sponsorship Transparency		1	.682**	.634**
Trustworthiness			1	.693**
Engagement & Purchase Intention				1
**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)				

All dimensions were positively and significantly correlated for both influencer types. The strongest relationship showed between trustworthiness and purchase intention. This confirms trust as the central mediating variable in influencer PR with a commercial purpose (McCracken, 1989; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015) and empirically supports Relationship Management Theory's emphasis on trust as the primary driver of behavioral outcomes (Watkins, 2016). Ethical value communication also correlated strongly with trustworthiness, reinforcing that credible ethical narratives are foundational to consumer trust (Fan, 2005; Hunt, 2019).

4.2.3 Multiple Response Analysis

Table 4. Sources of Purchase Intention

		Response		% of Cases
		N	%	
Sources	Clear sponsorship disclosure and transparency	130	17.0%	43.6%
	Long-term genuine usage experience (before/after, routines)	180	23.5%	60.4%
	Expertise and educational content (ingredients, mechanisms)	153	20.0%	51.3%
	Alignment with my personal values (ethical/sustainability)	94	12.3%	31.5%
	Authentic interaction with followers (replying, Q&A, livestream)	104	13.6%	34.9%
	Third-party endorsements (certifications, media, experts)	67	8.8%	22.5%
	Consistency in content and stance over time	37	4.8%	12.4%
Total		298	100.0%	256.7%

Long-term genuine usage experience was most frequently selected, followed by expertise/educational content and sponsorship transparency. Ethical alignment ranked lower. This finding resonates with the qualitative observation that micro-influencers' personal narratives effectively convey ethics through demonstrated routine. Consumers prefer tangible evidence over institutional validation, therefore, interpersonal authenticity outweighs third-party endorsements. This also aligns with the Persuasion Knowledge Model's prediction that organic, peer recommendations are more persuasive (Woodroof *et al.*, 2020).

Table 5. Content Preference

		Response		% of Cases
		N	%	
Content Preference	Demonstrated effects (swatches, application, comparisons)	144	20.5%	48.3%
	Clear use cases/tutorials (how-to, routines)	168	23.9%	56.4%
	Clear summary of ethical benefits/claims)	123	17.5%	41.3%

	Reasonable pricing/discount information	131	18.7%	44.0%
	Social proof (comment volume, reviews, user photos)	78	11.1%	26.2%
	Match with my skin type/needs	58	8.3%	19.5%
Total		298	100.0%	235.6%

Clear use cases/tutorials and demonstrated effects were most valued. Clear summary of ethical benefits was relevant but ranked lower. This suggests ethical values are most effective when embedded within practical, usage-oriented content (Theaker, 2020). This finding consistent with the two-way symmetrical communication model (Roberts-Bowman, 2020; Watkins, 2016).

5. Discussion

Two points of convergence emerge through the mixed-methods analysis. First, both methods confirm trustworthiness as the central mechanism in driving positive consumer responses, empirically supporting Relationship Management Theory. Second, both methods indicate that communication style and perceived authenticity matter more than influencer category itself, despite clear strategic differences revealed qualitatively.

That is, strategic differences exist, as ambassadors emphasize ethical values and disclosure and micro-influencers prioritize personal narrative and engagement. The result suggests multiple communication pathways can achieve similar consumer outcomes. Neither influencer type is inherently superior. It challenges the binary nano vs. micro framing that rooted in researcher and professional discourse and points toward a more strategy-focused approach.

5.1 Qualitative Findings

For RQ1, the text analysis indicated that ambassadors frequently disclosed brand partnerships and used standardized, brand-oriented language to emphasize ethical attributes, but micro-influencers, used conversational, first-person narratives to showcase personal experience over brand messaging. This strategic difference reflects two parallel trust-building pathways. Ambassadors operate through institutional legitimacy. Micro-influencers operate through relational distance.

These findings extend Fan's (2005) ethical branding framework, which identifies traits including honesty, responsibility, and accountability. The study introduces a moderating relationship between ethical values, communication strategies, and consumer perception.

For RQ2, the findings illuminate the respective strengths and limitations of each influencer type. Ambassadors excel at disseminating ethical information but face a credibility or authenticity trade-off. Micro-influencers, though less effective at conveying specific brand ethical claims, can achieve higher-quality engagement. This aligns with the Hunt-Vitell theory's observation that ethical branding is constrained by both deontology and teleology (Hunt, 2019). The findings also uncover an observable path of finding a balanced combination between normative alignment and performative rendering.

These findings also challenge the classic influencer typology that assumes a direct relationship between follower size and credibility (Conde & Casais, 2023; Fricke, 2018). Follower base is merely a prerequisite for gaining consumer attention, but the decisive factor is actually whether the narrative is brand-dominated or individually.

5.2 Quantitative Finding

For RQ3, as trustworthiness consistently showed the strongest relationship with purchase intention, it validates McCracken's (1989) Image Transfer Theory and extends it. Traditional image transfer assumes a one-way model from endorser to consumer, but the findings confirm the two-way communication model has emerged. Consumers co-create meaning through interactive engagement with influencers and other consumers. In the beauty industry, when ethical values are integrated into practical demonstrations, consumers are more likely to perceive authenticity and form stronger brand preference.

Besides, this study found that consumer perceptions did not differ significantly between two influencer types across any dimension. This supports Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Theory argument that trust and persuasiveness depend more on perceived expertise and authenticity.

The analysis further reinforced the primacy of authenticity. This stands together with Euzéby *et al.*'s (2025) view that transparency is considered honest only when combined with educational and practical content in personalized language. Consumers can distinguish between honest proactive disclosure and perceived commercial manipulation.

5.3 Theoretical Contribution

This study extends Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) by demonstrating that credibility in influencer strategies is not limited to expertise. Authenticity emerges as another critical dimension that in shaping consumer trust. Consumer trust is strongest when influencers' expertise and personalization are balanced. When brands exert excessive control over influencers' personal narratives, perceived authenticity decreases.

The findings further enrich existing studies on authenticity. While existing research often frames authenticity as a stylistic or communicative quality, this study shows that authenticity is structurally conditioned by the presence or absence of sponsorship. Communication strategies must be actively constructed to avoid perceptions of commercialization.

The study advances McCracken's (1989) Image Transfer Theory by pointing toward a co-creation environment. Brands need to support interactive dialogue between influencers and consumers. This implies that ethical communication must consider the dimension of engagement.

5.4 Practical Contribution

Effective ethical communication requires structured collaborative guidance. To maintain brand image and reputation, brands can reference to the findings to ensure their alignment between brand values and influencer identities.

For PR professionals managing influencer strategies, this study suggests a careful balance between brand partnerships and influencer narratives. Strategies should combine corporate context with personal expression, allowing influencers to incorporate individual style into official ethical claims. In terms of endorsers training, PR professionals should provide clear product information and ethical background without prescribing specific language, leaving the space for individual to shape the narrative.

Influencers should focus on reducing perceptions of commercialization in order to build long-term consumer trust and engagement. Transparent sponsorship disclosure is essential for sustaining reputation regardless of influencer type. It is most effective when combined with practical or educational content. Consumers, on the other hand, can also view this study as guidance for identifying brand strategy before future consumption.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how partnered nano-influencers and independent micro-influencers differ in communicating ethical brand values, and how these differences affect consumer perceptions of trust, authenticity, and purchase intention.

The two influencer types employ divergent communication strategies. Partnered nano-influencers rely on structured brand messaging, particularly through explicit sponsorship disclosure. This achieves consistency and regulatory compliance, but such uniformity risks appearing scripted, potentially activating consumers' persuasion knowledge and reducing perceived authenticity. Independent micro-influencers, by contrast, invest in personal storytelling and conversational language, creating stronger perceived authenticity through peer-to-pear communication. A fundamental trade-off in ethical communication.

Follower base alone does not drive consumer evaluation. The quantitative analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between ambassador and micro-influencer scores across any measured dimension. Instead, characteristics such as authenticity and demonstrative expertise emerged as decisive factors affecting purchase intention. Micro-influencers hold relative strength in personal narrative, and ambassadors' advantages lie in disclosure and stakeholder accountability.

Trustworthiness, besides, emerged as the strongest predictor of engagement and purchase intention. Ethical claims are most persuasive when combining with practical, usage-oriented content.

7. Limitations and Future Research

7.1 Limitations

The study is confined to the beauty industry, with a specific focus on Tropic Skincare's ambassador program and a small number of independent micro-influencers. This narrow selection limits insight on other sectors where ethical values matters but may be communicated differently, such as fashion, food, or technology. The findings in this research should be treated as context-specific, with replication needed across industries.

The qualitative sample size of six influencers may not capture the full diversity of communication strategies within each influencer tier. This limitation is partially mitigated by the survey data, but the qualitative findings remain not exhaustive.

The design captures consumer perceptions at a single point in time, which may not reflect how trust and authenticity evaluations evolve as influencer-audience relationships develop over time.

7.2 Future Research

Cross-industry comparisons could prove whether certain ethical narratives are more effective with specific influencer types in specific sectors. For example, whether the practical demonstration preference observed here holds equally in fashion or food contexts. Such research would help refine influencer typologies within broader PR practice.

Interviews with PR professionals who manage influencer strategies could provide deeper insight into the strategic decision-making processes behind influencer selection, content guidance, and disclosure policies.

Cross-cultural research is also needed. This study was conducted within an English-speaking context, but cultural expectations around transparency, sponsorship disclosure, and ethical branding may vary significantly across markets. Brands developing global PR strategies would benefit from understanding these variations.

Future research could also incorporate larger influencer categories, including macro-influencers and celebrity endorsers, to investigate whether the trade-off model shifts with follower base and visibility. This would help determine whether the "non-significant" nano-micro distinction observed here still keeps when compared against more distant influencer tiers.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Manuscript Preparation Process

During the preparation of this work authors used DeepSeek, ChatGPT in order to improve academic language, sentence structure, and word choice. After using the tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and fully responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Appendix

A. Influencer Sample Information

Influencer	Platform	Followers	Content Focus	Time Range	Comments
estherdaze	YouTube	21.9K	Product Ranking, Product Reviews	2024-2025	273
					29
					214
MahnoorMtl	YouTube	30K	Items Sharing, Discount Disclosure, Beauty Tips	2022-2024	21
					38
					482
					21
					47
dr.ree.adel	Instagram	65K	Recommendation, Brand Collaboration	2025	18
					14
					29
					22
					28
chelseymurphy	Instagram	2531	Tropic Skincare Products	2025	1
					2
					/
					10
					14
inmycleangirlera_hannah	Instagram	2710		2024-2025	2
					3
					6
					/
					/
theglamglowedit	Instagram	1692		2025	4
					2
					/
					6
					10

B. Screenshots of Audience Engagement

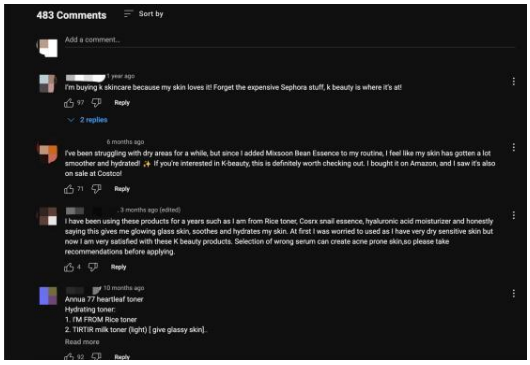


Figure B1. Comments on Micro Influencer's Social Media Contents

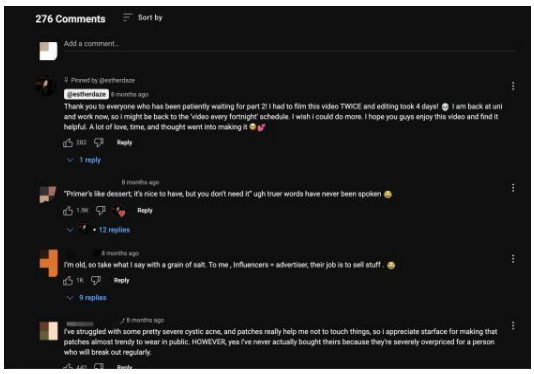


Figure B2. Comments on Micro Influencer's Social Media Contents

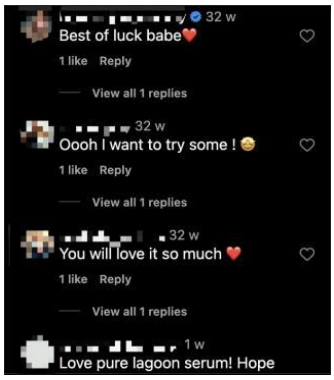


Figure B3. Comments on Ambassador's Social Media Contents

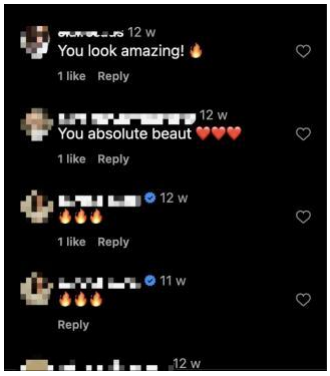


Figure B4. Comments on Ambassador's Social Media Contents

C. Questionnaire

Informed Consent Statement

You are invited to participate in a research study about how micro-influencers communicate ethical product values in beauty brands and how this affects consumer perceptions and trust. Participation is completely voluntary. The survey is anonymous; no personally identifying information will be collected. All responses will be kept confidential and used solely for academic research. You have the right to withdraw at any time before submitting your answers. By clicking "Agree" below, you confirm that you have read and understood the above, are 18 years or older, and consent to participate in this study.

- ○ Agree and Proceed
- ○ Do Not Agree

Section 1 - Demographics

What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Non-binary / third gender
- ○ Prefer not to say

What is your age?

- ○ 18-24
- ○ 25-30
- ○ 31-36

Do you follow any beauty influencers on social media?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Section 2 - Nano Influencer (fewer than 10,000 followers)

Nano influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers) clearly communicate brands'/products' ethical claims (e.g., cruelty-free, vegan, sustainability).

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Nano influencers often provide evidence or details (e.g., certifications, ingredients, packaging) to support ethical claims.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

The ethical values communicated by nano influencers feel relevant and meaningful to me.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Nano influencers clearly disclose sponsorships or partnerships (e.g., #ad, #gifted).

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Sponsorship disclosures by nano influencers are timely and prominent.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Even with disclosure, I can judge that nano influencer content is not overly biased by brands.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I believe nano influencers' evaluations are honest and truthful.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Nano influencers have knowledge /experience in the product category.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Nano influencers' recommendations are generally unbiased and user-oriented.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I am willing to interact (like/comment/save/share) with nano influencers' beauty content.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I am likely to follow or keep watching nano influencers' accounts.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I am willing to try or purchase products recommended by nano influencers.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Section 3 - Micro Influencer (10,000–100,000 followers)

Micro influencers (10,000–100,000 followers) clearly communicate brands'/products' ethical claims (e.g., cruelty-free, vegan, sustainability).

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Micro influencers often provide evidence or details (e.g., certifications, ingredients, packaging) to support ethical claims.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

The ethical values communicated by micro influencers feel relevant and meaningful to me.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Micro influencers clearly disclose sponsorships or partnerships (e.g., #ad, #gifted).

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Sponsorship disclosures by micro influencers are timely and prominent.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Even with disclosure, I can judge that micro influencer content is not overly biased by brands.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I believe micro influencers' evaluations are honest and truthful.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Micro influencers have knowledge/experience in the product category.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Micro influencers' recommendations are generally unbiased and user-oriented.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I am willing to interact (like/comment/save/share) with micro influencers' beauty content.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I am likely to follow or keep watching micro influencers' accounts.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

I am willing to try or purchase products recommended by micro influencers.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Section 4 - Trust Sources & Engagement Drivers

Which factors most increase your trust in a beauty influencer's recommendation? (select all that apply.)

- ☐ Clear sponsorship disclosure and transparency
- ☐ Long-term genuine usage experience (before/after, routines)
- ☐ Expertise and educational content (ingredients, mechanisms)
- ☐ Alignment with my personal values (ethical/sustainability)
- ☐ Authentic interaction with followers (replying, Q&A, livestream)
- ☐ Third-party endorsements (certifications, media, experts)
- ☐ Consistency in content and stance over time

Which factors most increase your likelihood to engage with or consider purchasing a product from a beauty influencer? (select all that apply.)

- ☐ Demonstrated effects (swatches, application, comparisons)
- ☐ Clear use cases/tutorials (how-to, routines)
- ☐ Clear summary of ethical benefits/claims
- ☐ Reasonable pricing/discount information
- ☐ Social proof (comment volume, reviews, user photos)
- ☐ Match with my skin type/needs

D. Supplementary Statistical Tables

Table D1. Demographic Profile (Note: percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.)

		N	%
Age	18-24	109	36.6%
	25-30	151	50.7%
	31-36	38	12.8%
Gender	Female	188	63.1%
	Male	96	32.2%
	Non-binary / Other	11	3.7%
	Prefer not to say	3	1.0%

Table D2. Social Media Usage

		N	%
Brands'/Influencers' Follow Rate on Social Media	Yes	276	92.6%
	No	22	7.4%

Table D3. Reliability

	Items	Cronbach's α (Nano)	Cronbach's α (Micro)
Ethical Value Communication	3	.709	.739
Sponsorship Transparency	3	.638	.654
Trustworthiness	3	.678	.693
Engagement & Purchase Intention	3	.673	.708
Total	12	.882	.896

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