



A Study on Consumer Sense-Making on Brand Authenticity with Reference to Fake Engagement on Instagram Tiruchirappalli

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Abstract:

The impact of fake engagement on consumer perception of brand authenticity has emerged as a significant concern in the digital marketing landscape, particularly on Instagram. This study examines how practices such as fake likes, comments, and followers influence consumers' perception of brand authenticity among users in Tiruchirappalli. It also explores the role of consumer sense-making in evaluating authenticity within a social media environment. A descriptive research design was adopted, and primary data were collected from 183 respondents using a structured questionnaire through purposive sampling. Various statistical tools, including percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability testing, chi-square analysis, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression, were employed to analyze the data. The findings indicate that consumers are highly aware of fake engagement practices and actively assess engagement metrics before forming opinions about brands. Increased levels of fake engagement were found to negatively impact trust and authenticity perception. Furthermore, consumer sense-making plays a crucial role in interpreting such cues and influencing brand evaluation. The study concludes that maintaining authentic engagement and ensuring transparency are essential for enhancing consumer trust and long-term brand credibility on Instagram.

Keywords: Fake Engagement, Brand Authenticity, Consumer Sense-Making, Instagram Marketing, Consumer Behaviour

1. Introduction

In today's digital world, social media platforms like Instagram play a major role in shaping how consumers view brands. People often rely on likes, comments, shares, and follower counts to judge whether a brand is popular and trustworthy. However, not all engagement seen on Instagram is genuine. Many brands use fake engagement practices such as buying followers or using automated interactions to appear more credible. This creates confusion among consumers and raises questions about how authenticity is perceived in an online environment. Consumer sense-making refers to the way individuals interpret and evaluate information before forming opinions or making decisions. On Instagram, consumers are constantly exposed to large amounts of content, making it important for them to analyze and filter what is real and what is not.

When fake engagement is present, consumers may either be misled or become more cautious in their judgement. This process of understanding and interpreting brand-related content plays a key role in shaping their perception of brand authenticity. This study focuses on examining how fake engagement on Instagram influences consumer sense-making

and, in turn, affects perceptions of brand authenticity, particularly in the context of Trichy. It aims to understand whether consumers are able to identify fake engagement and how it impacts their trust in brands. By exploring this relationship, the study contributes to a better understanding of consumer behavior in the digital space and highlights the importance of transparency for building authentic brand connections.

2. Statement of the Problem

The increasing use of social media platforms like Instagram has made engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and followers an important factor in judging brand popularity. However, the rise of fake engagement practices has made it difficult for consumers to identify whether a brand's online presence is genuine or manipulated. This creates confusion among consumers and affects how they understand and evaluate brand authenticity. While some consumers may question such engagement, others may still rely on these visible indicators without proper analysis. Therefore, this study focuses on examining how fake engagement influences consumer sense-making and how it impacts their perception of brand authenticity, particularly in the context of Trichy.

3. Objective of the Study

1. To study the presence of Fake Engagement on Instagram brand pages.
2. To analyze consumers awareness and Sense-Making processes toward Fake Engagement on Instagram.
3. To examine consumers perception of Brand Authenticity on Instagram.
4. To measure the level of influence Fake Engagement on Brand Authenticity on Instagram.
5. To assess the mediating role of Consumer Sense-Making in the relationship between Fake Engagement and Brand Authenticity on Instagram.

4. Need of the Study

The growing use of social media platforms like Instagram has changed the way consumers interact with brands. Today, many consumers depend on online engagement such as likes, comments, and followers to judge brand authenticity. However, the increasing presence of fake engagement creates confusion and makes it difficult for consumers to identify what is real. This study is needed to understand how consumers interpret such content and how it influences their trust and perception of brands.

This study is necessary because of:

1. To understand how fake engagement affects consumer perception of brand authenticity.
2. To analyze how consumers identify and interpret fake engagement on Instagram.
3. To study the role of consumer sense-making in decision-making.
4. To examine the level of awareness among consumers about fake engagement.

5. To provide insights for brands to maintain genuine and transparent communication.

5. Literature Review

Akhmetbayeva, A., Tiberghien, G., & Garkavenko, V. (2025). Prior studies define brand authenticity as consumers' perception of genuineness, credibility, continuity, and value alignment. Research conceptualizes it through dimensions such as continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness, linking it to trust and emotional connection. Most studies focus on products and industries, with limited attention to destination or city branding. Thus, the absence of a unified measurement model for city brand authenticity reveals a clear research gap.

Chergarova, V., Tomeo, M., Albatineh, E., Mutale, W., Scarpino, J. J., & Morgan, H. (2025). Existing literature indicates that AI has transformed content creation and dissemination on social media, enhancing efficiency while increasing risks. Studies reveal that AI-driven personalization and automation can amplify misinformation through user engagement and algorithmic reinforcement. Research highlights that misinformation spreads via both intentional and unintentional user actions, influenced by platform algorithms. Overall, scholars stress the importance of human oversight, ethical AI design, and digital literacy in effectively reducing misinformation.

Efimov, N. (2025). The study focuses on developing machine learning models to differentiate fake Instagram accounts from genuine users using metadata. Results show that tree-based models, especially XGBoost, outperform other techniques with high precision and F1-scores. Engagement-related features such as link presence, comment rate, and like rate emerge as key indicators of authenticity. Overall, the findings confirm the effectiveness of metadata-driven machine learning in detecting fake accounts on social media.

Rao, M., Younas, W., Farooq, M., Hassaan, M., & Zulfiqar, S. (2025). The study examines the impact of brand authenticity on consumer buying behavior within social media marketing. Prior literature highlights that authentic brand communication fosters trust, emotional bonding, and favorable brand attitudes. Findings indicate that higher perceived authenticity enhances consumer trust, engagement, and purchase intention on social media. Overall, the literature underscores the importance of transparent, consistent, and value-based brand communication in digital contexts.

Ποθητού (2024). The study explores how social media influencers' authenticity is constructed and perceived in digital spaces. Findings show that authenticity is built through consistent self-presentation, transparency, emotional storytelling, and value alignment with brands. It also reveals that excessive commercialization reduces perceived authenticity and audience trust. Overall, the literature highlights that influencer authenticity is strategically managed, balancing personal identity with professional branding.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive research design. It aims to analyse how consumers in Trichy city perceive brand authenticity on Instagram in the presence of fake engagement such as fake likes, comments, and followers. The study also examines the role of consumer sense-making in influencing brand trust and purchase intention.

6.2 Area of Study

The study is conducted in Trichy city, focusing on Instagram users who actively follow and interact with brand pages.

6.3 Sources of Data

a) Primary Data

Primary data is collected through a structured questionnaire from Instagram users in Trichy.

The questionnaire includes questions related to:

- [1] Demographic profile
- [2] Fake Engagement on Instagram
- [3] consumer awareness & sense making of fake engagement
- [4] Brand Authenticity Perception on Instagram
- [5] Influence of Fake Engagement on Brand Authenticity
- [6] Mediating Role of Consumer Sense- Making

b) Secondary Data

Secondary data is collected from:

Research journals, Websites, Books and articles, Previous research studies, Reports on social media marketing and fake engagement

6.4 Sample Size

The total sample size for the study is 183 respondents.

6.5 Sampling Technique

The study uses non-probability sampling technique

Purposive Sampling – respondents are selected based on specific criteria relevant to the study. Only Instagram users who actively follow brand pages, are aware of fake engagement, and have experience interacting with brand content are included. This method ensures that the data is collected from respondents who have adequate knowledge and experience related to the research topic.

6.6 Tools for Data Collection:

Data is collected using a **structured questionnaire** consisting of closed-ended and Likert scale questions to measure consumer perception and behaviour.

6.7 Statistical Tools Used

The following statistical tools are used for analysis:

1. Percentage Analysis–To analyse demographic profile
2. Descriptive Statistics (Mean & Standard Deviation) – To understand consumer responses
3. CHI- Square Analysis – To examine differences between demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, usage) and consumer perception
4. Pearson Correlation: To examine the Fake Engagement and Brand Authenticity Perception on Instagram
5. Multiple Regression Analysis – To analyse the impact of fake engagement and sense-making on brand authenticity

6.8 Software Used

1. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences): Used for data entry, coding, and statistical analysis.
2. MS Excel: Used for data cleaning, tabulation, and graphical representation (charts, tables).

7.Result

7.1 Reliability Check

Table No:1

Table Name: Reliability check

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items

.849	30
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Note: A sample of 20 respondents was taken to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire.

7.2 Percentage Analysis

Table No:2

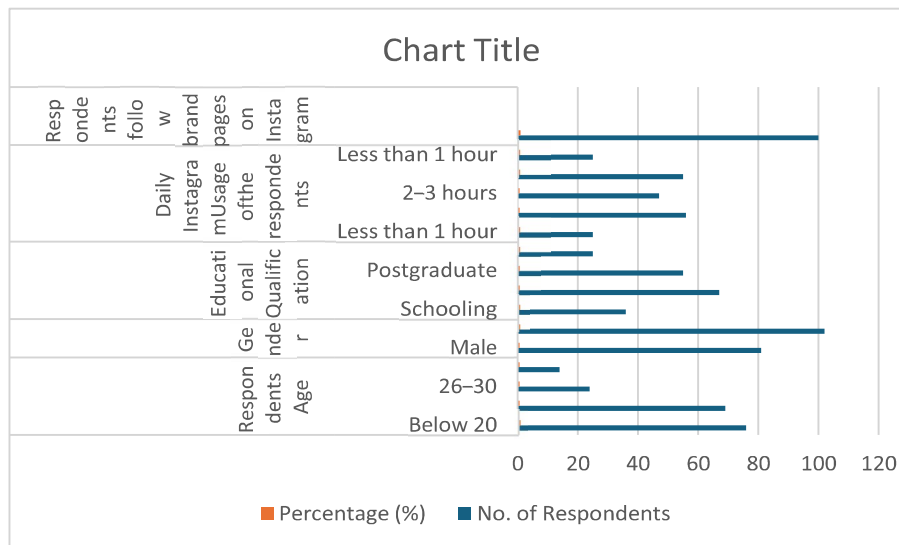
Table Name: Demographic Profile

Particulars		No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Respondents Age	Below 20	76	41.50%
	21–25	69	37.70%
	26–30	24	13.10%
	Above 30	14	7.70%
Gender	Male	81	44.30%
	Female	102	55.70%
Educational Qualification	Schooling	36	19.70%
	Undergraduate	67	36.60%
	Postgraduate	55	30.10%
	Professionals/Other	25	13.70%

Daily Instagram Usage of the respondents	Less than 1 hour	25	13.70%
	1–2 hours	56	30.60%
	2–3 hours	47	25.70%
	More than 3 hours	55	30.10%
	Less than 1 hour	25	13.70%
Respondents follow brand pages on Instagram	Yes	183	100%
	No	0	0

Figure no: 1

Demographic Profile



Interpretation:

The majority of respondents are young, with 41.5% below 20 years and 37.7% between 21–25 years, indicating strong youth participation. Female respondents (55.7%) slightly outnumber males. Most respondents are educated, with a higher proportion being undergraduates (36.6%) and postgraduates (30.1%). In terms of Instagram usage, a significant number of respondents spend 1–2 hours (30.6%) and more than 3 hours (30.1%) daily on the platform. Notably, all respondents (100%) follow brand pages on Instagram, showing complete engagement with brand-related content.

Inference:

The data suggests that young, educated, and active Instagram users form the primary audience, with high exposure to brand content. This indicates that Instagram is an effective platform for brand communication, and respondents are likely to be influenced by brand activities, including fake engagement practices.

7.3 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics of the respondents answer to questions are as follows

Table No: 3

Table Name: Descriptive statistics

S.No	Factors	N	Mean	Std. Dev
1	Age	183	1.87	.916
2	Gender	183	1.56	.498
3	Educational Qualification	183	2.38	.952
4	Daily Instagram Usage	183	2.72	1.040
5	Do you follow brand pages on Instagram?	183	1.000	.0000
6	I often see some brand posts getting very high likes.	183	4.126	.7707
7	I notice some brand posts getting many comments in a short time.	183	3.831	.8179
8	Some comments on brand posts look repeated.	183	3.923	.7298
9	Some comments on brand posts do not match the post content.	183	3.934	.8426

10	I feel some brands buy followers to look popular.	183	3.984	.8417
11	When a brand suddenly gains many followers, I feel doubtful.	183	4.191	.7424
12	I Know that fake likes and comments exist on Instagram.	183	3.995	.8154
13	I know that some brands use fake followers.	183	3.880	.7680
14	I try to check whether likes on a brand post are real	183	3.973	.8544
15	I read comments carefully to see if they are genuine.	183	3.907	.8032
16	I compare likes and comments before trusting a brand.	183	4.016	.8482
17	My past experience helps me spot fake engagement easily.	183	4.060	.8718
18	Brands with real engagement feel more trustworthy to me.	183	3.973	.8216
19	I trust brands that reply genuinely to customer comments.	183	3.765	.7297
20	Honest brand posts make me feel the brand is real.	183	4.044	.7762
21	Real interaction between brand and users builds my trust.	183	3.891	.7768
22	I feel closer to brands that show real engagement	183	3.896	.8803

23	Instagram engagement helps me decide if a brand is genuine.	183	3.956	.7902
24	LOW LEVEL OF FAKE ENGAGEMENT When fake engagement is very low, I still trust the brand.	183	4.071	.9020
25	Small amount of fake likes does it affect my view of the brand.	183	3.792	.7778
26	MODERATE LEVEL OF FAKE ENGAGEMENT When I notice some fake engagement, I feel confused about the brand.	183	4.011	.8770
27	Moderate fake engagement makes me think twice before trusting the brand.	183	3.962	.8077
28	HIGH LEVEL OF FAKE ENGAGEMENT High fake engagement makes me lose trust in a brand.	183	4.038	.8212
29	When fake likes and comments are very high, the brand looks fake to me.	183	4.158	.7928
30	Knowing about fake engagement helps me judge brands better.	183	3.913	.8471
31	I think carefully before trusting brands on Instagram.	183	3.874	.7987

32	Even if engagement is high, I use my own judgement.	183	3.869	.8735
33	My thinking helps me avoid getting fooled by fake engagement.	183	3.858	.8590
34	I can tell the difference between popular brands and real brands.	183	3.973	.8013
35	My final opinion about a brand depends on how I understand its engagement.	183	4.175	.7997
	Valid N (listwise)	183		

Interpretation

The descriptive analysis reveals that respondents have high awareness of fake engagement practices on Instagram and possess strong sense-making ability to evaluate brand authenticity. While low levels of fake engagement do not significantly affect trust, higher levels lead to confusion and reduced trust. Overall, consumers rely heavily on their own judgement and experience when forming perceptions about brand authenticity.

7.4 Chi-Square Test Analysis

Age and Daily Instagram usage.

Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no significant association between age and daily Instagram usage.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): There is a significant association between age and daily Instagram usage.

Table No: 4

Table Name: Age and Daily Instagram usage

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	27.563 ^a	9	.001

Likelihood Ratio	32.201	9	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	11.881	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	183		

Interpretation

H0 is rejected H1 is accepted. $p = .001 < 0.05 \rightarrow$ significant \rightarrow age and daily Instagram usage are associated. The Chi-Square test shows a significant association between age and daily Instagram usage ($\chi^2 = 27.563, df = 9, p = .001$). This means that Instagram usage patterns differ across age groups, and age has a significant influence on how frequently people use Instagram.

7.5 Pearson Correlation

Fake Engagement and Brand Authenticity Perception on Instagram.

H0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant relationship between fake engagement and brand authenticity perception on Instagram.

H1 (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant relationship between fake engagement and brand authenticity perception on Instagram.

Table No: 5

Table Name: Fake Engagement and Brand Authenticity Perception on Instagram.

Correlations			
		Fake Engagement on Instagram	Brand Authenticity Perception on Instagram
Fake Engagement on Instagram	Pearson Correlation	1	.506
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000

	N	183	183
Brand Authenticity Perception on Instagram	Pearson Correlation	.506	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	183	183

Interpretation:

The Pearson correlation result shows that there is a moderate positive relationship between fake engagement and brand authenticity perception ($r = 0.506$). The significance value is $p = 0.000$, which is less than 0.05 . This indicates that the relationship is statistically significant, meaning fake engagement has a notable influence on how consumers perceive brand authenticity on Instagram. Since $p < 0.05 \rightarrow$ Reject H_0 and Accept H_1 . There is a significant relationship between fake engagement and brand authenticity perception.

7.6 Multiple Linear Regression

Fake engagement and consumer sense-making influence brand authenticity perception on Instagram.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): Fake engagement and consumer sense-making do not significantly influence brand authenticity perception on Instagram.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Fake engagement and consumer sense-making significantly influence brand authenticity perception on Instagram.

Table No:6

Table Name: Fake engagement and consumer sense-making influence brand authenticity perception on Instagram

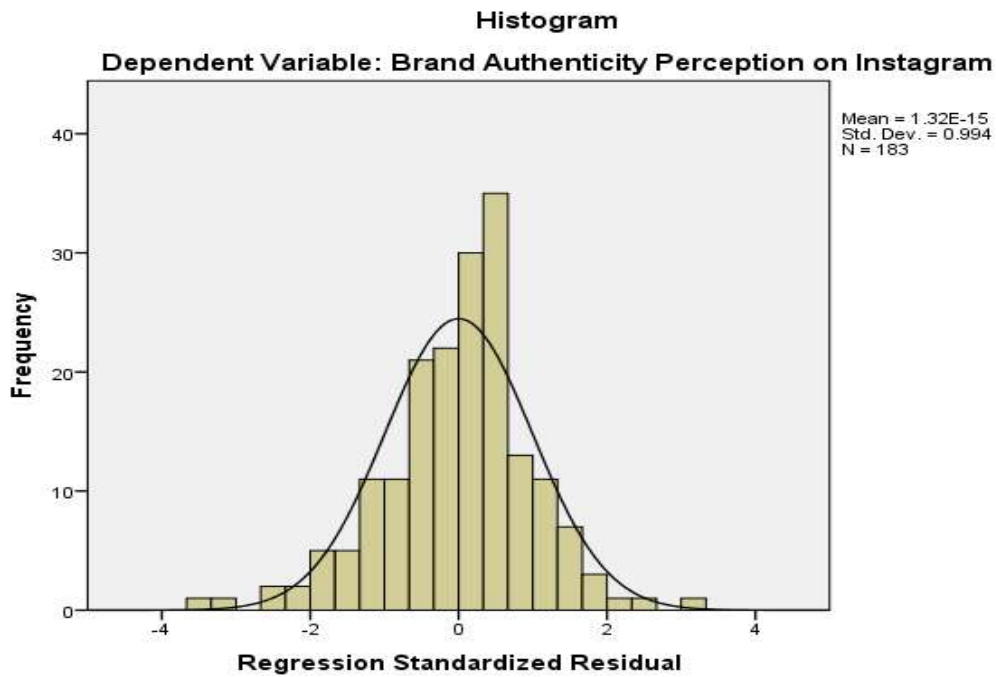
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate
1	.601 ^a	.361	.354	.358

Table No: 7

Table Name: Coefficients

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.254	.267		4.695	.000
	Fake Engagement on Instagram	.322	.068	.324	4.745	.000
	consumer awareness & sense making of fake engagement	.347	.064	.372	5.451	.000

Figure No: 2



Interpretation

The multiple linear regression analysis reveals that fake engagement and consumer awareness & sense-making significantly influence brand authenticity perception on Instagram. The model explains 36.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.361$), indicating a moderate level of prediction. Both fake engagement ($\beta = 0.324$, $p = 0.000$) and consumer sense-making ($\beta = 0.372$, $p = 0.000$) show a positive and statistically significant impact. Among the two, consumer sense-making has a stronger influence. H_0 is rejected H_1 is accepted.

8. Findings and Discussion

8.1 Findings for Cronbach Alpha:

The study reveals that the reliability of the questionnaire is high, as indicated by the Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.849, confirming strong internal consistency of the scale.

8.2 Findings for Demographic Profile:

1. The demographic analysis shows that the majority of respondents are young and active Instagram users, with a higher proportion of females. Most respondents are well educated and spend a considerable amount of time on Instagram, indicating high exposure to brand-related content.
2. The fact that all respondents follow brand pages highlights their continuous interaction with brands on social media.

8.3 Findings from Descriptive Statistics:

1. The respondents show a high level of awareness about fake engagement practices such as fake likes, comments, and followers on Instagram.
2. The mean values indicate that respondents have a strong ability to identify and evaluate fake engagement using their own judgement and experience.
3. Respondents feel that authentic engagement increases trust, while fake engagement negatively affects brand perception.
4. Low levels of fake engagement do not greatly affect trust, but moderate and high levels create confusion and reduce trust towards the brand.
5. Overall, consumers rely more on personal evaluation and sense-making rather than just engagement metrics while judging brand authenticity.

8.4 Findings from Chi-Square:

1. The analysis shows that there is a significant association between age and daily Instagram usage ($p < 0.05$).
2. This indicates that different age groups use Instagram differently, and usage time varies based on age.
3. Hence, age plays an important role in influencing Instagram usage behaviour among respondents.

8.5 Findings from Pearson Correlation:

1. The analysis shows that there is a significant relationship between fake engagement and brand authenticity perception ($p < 0.05$).
2. The correlation value ($r = 0.506$) indicates a moderate relationship between the variables.
3. This means that fake engagement has a noticeable influence on how consumers perceive brand authenticity on Instagram.

8.6 Findings Multiple Linear Regression:

1. The analysis shows that fake engagement and consumer sense-making have a significant impact on brand authenticity perception ($p < 0.05$).
2. The model explains 36.1% of the variation, indicating a moderate level of influence.
3. Among the variables, consumer sense-making has a stronger influence than fake engagement on brand authenticity perception.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that fake engagement has a significant influence on consumer perception of brand authenticity on Instagram. As consumers become more aware of artificial engagement practices, they tend to critically analyze brand activities before forming trust. Although minor levels of fake engagement may not strongly affect perception, higher levels significantly reduce credibility and trust in brands. Consumer sense-making plays a crucial role in this process, as individuals actively interpret and evaluate engagement signals to determine authenticity. The findings emphasize that consumers are not passive recipients but informed evaluators who rely on their experience and judgement. Therefore, it is essential for brands to focus on genuine engagement strategies and maintain transparency in their communication. Authentic interactions with users can enhance trust, strengthen brand credibility, and ensure long-term success in the digital marketing environment.

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