

# Performing Authenticity Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Influencer Marketing on TikTok and Douyin

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how cultural values shape the construction of authenticity in influencer marketing on TikTok in the United States and Douyin in China. While both platforms have grown into global centers of entertainment and commerce, existing research often treats them as equivalent or studies them in isolation. Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions of individualism versus collectivism and power distance, as well as broader literature on online authenticity and influencer marketing, this study analyzes how authenticity is embodied through influencer practices in two culturally distinct contexts. Case studies of TikTok's "Get Ready With Me" (GRWM) content and Douyin's beauty tutorials highlight divergent logics of authenticity: U.S. influencers emphasize relatability, imperfection, and transparency, while Chinese influencers foreground professionalism, credibility, and alignment with collective norms. The analysis demonstrates that authenticity in influencer marketing is not a fixed trait but a culturally contingent performance. These findings contribute to cross-cultural media and marketing scholarship and offer practical guidance for global brands, underscoring the necessity of adapting strategies of authenticity to distinct cultural environments.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Authenticity, Cultural Values, Parasocial Interaction, Social Media Marketing.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the last five years, in a post-pandemic world, social media platforms have transformed the global media landscape, reshaping how individuals communicate, consume, and express identity. Short-form video platforms in particular have emerged as dynamic social and commercial spaces. TikTok, launched internationally in 2017, has become one of the most downloaded apps worldwide and especially popular in the United States; while its Chinese counterpart Douyin, launched just a year earlier, has integrated deeply into everyday life in China, with hundreds of millions of active daily users [1]. For online audiences, these platforms evolved from mere sites of entertainment to arenas where aesthetic and lifestyle norms as well as consumer desires are produced and circulated. In this environment, influencers marketing has overtaken traditional advertising as one of the most influential strategies for global brand promotions, especially in highly visual industries such as beauty and lifestyle [2].

Authenticity has thus emerged as a critical concept in understanding the significance and success of influencer marketing, particularly on short-form video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and Douyin. Unlike conventional advertisements, which are often perceived as overly intrusive and manipulative, influencer content is persuasive precisely because it feels genuine and trustworthy. Authenticity, as a relational construct, transpires when audiences perceive influencers' self-presentation, storytelling, or expertise as sincere and credible [3, 4]. However, authenticity is not universal nor fixed standard; rather, it is shaped by cultural values and platform dynamics. Drawing on Hofstede's framework of individualism versus collectivism and power distance, scholars note that individualist cultures such as the U.S. often equate authenticity with unique self-expression and relatability, while collectivist, high power-distance cultures such as China tend to view authenticity in terms of professionalism and an alignment with group norms [5].

Despite the rapid growth of influence on marketing on both platforms, existing quantitative and qualitative research often treats them as equivalent spaces in comparison or examines them in

isolation. There is still limited comparative scholarship that examines how influenced marketing strategies vary across these two culturally distinct environments, particularly in relation to the embodiment of culturally-anchored authenticity. Similarly, while formats such as “Get Ready with Me” (GRWM) videos and livestream e-commerce have grown in both ecosystems, there is more exploration to be conducted regarding how their effectiveness may be shaped by cultural dimensions.

Therefore, this paper examines the role of collectivist values in China and individualist values in the United States in curating how online authenticity is embodied and performed in influencer marketing on TikTok and Douyin. To answer this question, the paper first develops a theoretical framework, drawing primarily on literature by Stump and Gong regarding Hofstede’s cultural dimensions of individualism versus collectivism and its implications for online authenticity. It then provides a comparative analysis of TikTok (U.S.) and Douyin (China), examining case studies such as Katie Fang’s viral GRWM on TikTok and Cheng Shi An’s instructional beauty content on Douyin, supported by recent empirical studies of both platforms. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations and implications for marketing, emphasizing the need to adapt strategies of authenticity to distinct platform logics and cultural dynamics.

## **2. Individualism and TikTok**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

Stump & Gong’s quantitative, cross-national study regarding the impact of cultural dimensions on social media adoption explains that individualistic cultures, the U.S. being a prominent example of, places an emphasis on the “self”. Aaker & Maheswaran’s consumer persuasion research, as cited in Stump & Gong, explains that:

“Because of their prioritization and emphasis on personal needs, audiences of individualist cultures tend to prize autonomy, differentiation, and uniqueness...” [5].

Self-expression and this disclosure of personal choice underline individualist audiences’ perceptions of authenticity. Additionally, the U.S.’s lower power distance index (PDI) classifies its social media users as participating in a more individualistic – thus, democratic and autonomous – interaction sphere. There is also a tendency for individualism to manifest in attention-seeking and weak-tie networks on social media [5].

Online authenticity is thus constructed through a relational process in which uniqueness and honesty from an influencer (sender) translates into a perception of sincerity and connection by a consumer (receiver) [3]. Duffek et al.’s qualitative research synthesizes a holistic assessment of influencer authenticity by outlining five major properties, “expertise, connectedness, integrity, originality, and transparency”. The ambiguity of authenticity as a social construct is further clarified by the study’s examination of the construction as a relational assemblage [4]. Therefore, authenticity is directly tied to the very identity of influencers as personal brands by way of their digital content and interactive narrative self-disclosures.

These findings corroborate an individualist understanding of authenticity, where relatability and imperfection are valued alongside expertise. Though expertise is highlighted as a dominant qualifier, being knowledgeable in this context should not be equated with professionalism. Consumers explicitly stated that being authentic does not necessarily mean being an expert in the traditional sense, “[influencer] I’m just learning myself, let’s learn together.’ That’s very authentic” [4]. A “let’s learn together” ethos displays authenticity through quirks and vulnerability, signaling openness that strengthens consumer bonds, which resonates with individualism’s emphasis on the self rather than collective authority. This vulnerability further identifies with what Stump & Gong refers to as the individualistic manifestation of “attention-seeking”: posting bold, original, or imperfect content is authentic because this individuality acts as a marker of individuality and truthfulness [4,5]. Therefore, perceived authenticity from an influencer stems largely from relatability and imperfection. The four following dimensions of authenticity echo similar sentiments. Connectedness highlights the importance of interpersonal bonding and community-building with followers; integrity is received

through genuine passion and intrinsic motivation; originality is evaluated through unique storytelling and personal style, while transparency is required via openness about sponsorships and marketing intentions [4].

Additionally, Ünalımsı's et al. 's cross-sectional survey results highlight "perceived entertainment and informativeness" as effective variables in facilitating influencer authenticity [3]. The research evidences empirically that authenticity is produced when influencers embody and produce such content, leading to heightened trust and motivated consumer action [3].

The individualistic, relational nature of influencer marketing in the U.S. suggests that the consumers dictate authenticity based on whether certain content feels genuine to them, not on collective validation or institutional recognition. Online authenticity will therefore be conceptualized as a culturally inflected performance of individuality. This provides the framework for analysis to examine how U.S. TikTok influencers construct and perform relatable, original, and transparent authenticity in marketing practices.

## **2.2. TikTok (U.S): Individualistic Authentic performance and The Rise of Get-Ready-With-Me (GRWM) Content**

In Yang 's cross-cultural survey study on influencer video use for TikTok and Douyin, fashion and beauty are the top two shared categories between both countries' audiences [1]. Thus, an examination of popular beauty influencer content on TikTok in the U.S. will reveal the aforementioned authenticity cues.

Katie Fang, a Taiwanese fashion & beauty influencer, with over 6.4 million followers on TikTok serves as a prime case study of an embodiment of authenticity as individualist performance. A video titled "This is so sad", first uploaded in January of 2023, propelled the teenage girl into the viral spotlight, amassing over fifty million views and eight million likes to date [6].

The two-minute long video, with no background music, features Fang teary-eyed and sniffing as she applies skincare and prepares herself for getting called into work [6]. This video embodies authenticity and individualism by primarily highlighting imperfection and vulnerability. The raw, unscripted, and emotional content departs from any sense of authority. Instead, it resonates with the ethos of relatability in authentic performance [4]. Fang performs her individuality by disclosing her usually private self publicly (e.g. crying from the stress of work). This maps into Hofstede's dimensions of individualism and Duffek's identifications where Fang's authenticity increases in credibility because it appears as a genuine glimpse into her unique "self" [5,4]. Additionally, the attention-seeking tendency of individualist social media performance, identified by previous research, is clearly illustrated [5]. Fang also blends perceived entertainment with perceived informativeness to reinforce her authenticity [3]. Even though emotional, this piece of content is still educational and entertaining in its own regard. It falls under the category of Get-Ready-With-Me (GRWM) skincare videos where she showcases the products she is using and how they are being used in the process.

Another factor behind Fang's virality is the humor and originality of her content, which generate hedonic enjoyment and emotional engagement. The concept of hedonism in originality and influencer authenticity is further expanded by Barta et al.:

"Originality has a direct effect on intention to follow the account and on intention to follow its advice original posts cause followers to enjoy a hedonic experience, and to develop perceptions that influencers are opinion leaders" [7].

Hedonic in this sense is not simply about pleasure or humor but about creating affective resonance that enhances perceptions of authenticity; it highlights a positive affective experience where viewers are engaged and entertained [7]. The emotional resonance derived from watching one shed a tear while doing skincare evokes strong feelings of sympathy and catharsis, resulting in a strong emotional pull that is hedonic. The rawness – lack of music and editing, common in other GRWM videos – facilitates engagement under the individualistic logic of uniqueness:

"Humor was found to be an alternative persuasion route in the TikTok context ... humor promotes hedonic experience ... which translates into higher influencing capacity" [7]

Originality, humor, and hedonic experience are prized because they emphasize the self through differentiation, not group conformity. As a result, Fang secured numerous brand collaborations with beauty labels that she initially used in her videos, such as Glow Recipe, Haus Labs and more [8]. She continues to produce GRWM content and is received with large success, as evidenced by her growing brand representation and public viewership.

Fang is one of many beauty and lifestyle influencers that utilize GRWM content in marketing. GRWM videos are labelled as “ultimate confessionals” where influencers openly share the intimate details of their daily lives, supporting the idea of individualistic authenticity rooted in self-disclosure, where “currency is charm, not expertise” [9]. Another example is Alix Earle, a beauty and lifestyle influencer with over 7.5 million followers on TikTok. Earle’s rise to fame is similar to that of Fang’s, where she balances “being both glamorous and self-deprecating, leaving viewers wanting to see more” [9]. Her “care-free, messy, party-girl” persona reveals a vulnerable and hedonistic, authenticity, challenging conventional norms through a relatable departure from socially-accepted expectations of self-presentation.

On a larger scale, the growing popularity of GRWM videos illustrates how an individualistic performance of authenticity aligns with brand marketing strategies to reinforce consumer engagement [9]. Brands are opting to collaborate with influencers in their respective categories to seamlessly integrate their products into “authentic” daily content. Other popular TikTok creators popularized by their GRWM content similarly achieve virality through sharing various intimate details about life (e.g., antidepressants, school suspensions, bullying at work) [9]. Though these influences span varying categories, the commonality is their ability to embody an individualistic authenticity that consumers reward with trust. Migkos et al. utilized statistical survey data to illustrate the importance of influences in curating trustworthiness:

“63% of consumers between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four place more trust in influencers’ messaging about a brand than in the brand’s own messaging about itself” [2].

Trust is transferred from the influencer’s self-narrative to brand endorsement. The interpersonal connectivity of popular TikTok influences evidence the diminishing favorability of polished advertising in marketing. Influencer marketing surpasses traditional methods in trust and return-on-investment for this very reason [2]. In fact, influenced advertisement engagement influenced by a direct positive impact on sales and customer loyalty due to its more subtly endearing nature:

“The effectiveness of influencer marketing lies in its ability to provide authentic, relatable content that resonates more than conventional digital ads, which are often perceived as intrusive” [2].

TikTok influencers foreground personal freedom (signature style, unscripted talk-to-camera) and self-expression (humor, quirks, narrative confession) signals that feel “real” in an individualist culture precisely because they showcase the autonomous self rather than deference to collective norms:

“Influencer marketing has surpassed traditional advertising methods...utilizing the authenticity of personal recommendations, interactive content, and storytelling from trusted online personalities” [2].

Influencer authenticity in marketing, in the United States, instead of formal expertise, is embodied by influencers through relatability, imperfection, storytelling, originality, and transparency. The greatest distinguisher between individualistic and collectivist authenticity in influencer marketing is how the concept of trust is created and received. In the U.S., influences are trusted because they embrace imperfection. In China, as the exploration will delineate next, influencers are trusted because they exhibit perfected expertise. Both approaches create authenticity through trust, but the very notion of trust differs.

### **3. Collectivism and Douyin**

#### **3.1. Theoretical Framework**

As a country with underlined by a history of Confucius ideology, China thrives under the moral governance of filial piety and social harmony. Stump & Gong’s delineation is as follows:

“Collectivistic cultures are characterized by emphasizing on communal goals and group conformity that should come before individual desires or pursuits in these societies” [5].

Thus, in social media spheres, online users from collectivist cultures act on a desire for belonging, often by following influencers who embody widely shared social values. Furthermore, as a culture with a much higher PDI in comparison to the U.S., social hierarchies are readily expected and widely accepted [5]. This plays an important role in dictating behaviors in online contexts. People tend to defer to authority, choosing to follow established directions to avoid challenging the status quo. Due to the fact that standing out through original and unconventional thinking is less encouraged, these cultures often produce less innovation-driven content. Instead, individuals are more comfortable being “told what to do” by relying on expert figures and trusted references groups in decision-making scenarios [5].

Similar to online authenticity in individualistic contexts like the U.S., online authenticity in collectivist cultures like China remains a relational construct. In Tate et al. ’s research exploring social media behaviors of foreign brands through in-depth interviews, they highlight the importance of “关系 (guanxi)”, which literally means “relationship” in Mandarin, in facilitating marketing practices [10]. Brands and influencers need to honor the authenticity of collectivist relationships by respecting social boundaries, such as avoiding intrusive communication or demands for personal disclosure, which manifests in “social and guanxi tie strength, and not demand[ing] more intimacy from customers than is appropriate” [10]. Since “guanxi” depends on reciprocity and mutual obligations, authenticity in collectivist Chinese contexts thus often mean showing care for the community while maintaining balance by not overstepping more intimate boundaries.

Authenticity online on Chinese social media platforms is therefore achieved primarily through collectivist norms that value professionalism and credibility, which are embodied by influencers through expert knowledge, consistent presentation, and community-oriented engagement. Liu ’s web-based questionnaire yielded that 89.8% of Gen Z Douyin users agreed that “the influencers’ expertise in their field makes consumers want to buy the products they recommend”, where “professionalism” and “credibility” are crucial for impacting consumption choices [11]. Additionally, Du et al. ’s study on how collectivism and virtual idol characteristics affect purchase intention via structural equation modeling yielded similarly substantial results [12]. Though “virtual idols” in this study refer to computer-generated personas, the structural similarities between virtual idols and human influencers (both act as media figures who trigger parasocial interaction (PSI) and drive purchase intentions, these findings can be extended as a theoretical lens to understand human influencer marketing on Chinese social media. Results identified that the key driver of PSI is an alignment with collectivist values and an exhibition of homophily [12]. In fact, “homophily exhibits the strongest positive association with PSI” relative to other factors because shared identities create a sense of mutual trust and familiarity [12]. Consequently, homophily, driven by “a desire to extend social affiliation”, acts as a strong indicator of online engagement and authenticity in collectivist contexts [12].

Taken together, China’s collectivist, higher power-distance context breeds a form of authenticity in influencer marketing based on how well influencers embody socially sanctioned values, professional credibility, and a sense of group belonging. Collectivist cultures emphasize conformity and deference to authority, shaping audiences to seek guidance from trusted figures. The management of relational closeness is crucial for maintaining authentic ties with followers, with homophily (shared identity and values) being one of the strongest drivers of parasocial trust and purchase intentions. The following analysis will apply these concepts to concrete examples of influencer practices on Douyin, illustrating how authenticity is often performed through an alignment with collective norms and shared aspirational ideals.

### **3.2. Douyin (China): Community Embodiment and The Need for Professional Credibility**

The core conclusion drawn from Yang ’s survey is the divergence in how users engage with TikTok versus Douyin. The survey results indicated that though Chinese Douyin users, relative to U.S. TikTok users, followed less influencers, Douyin users yielded a higher average purchase

intention score of 10.81 (a statistically significant difference compared to the 10.39 of TikTok users) [1]. This usage and consumption pattern illustrates an alignment with collectivist cultural values: Users place deeper trust in a smaller circle of voices rather than spreading attention widely, where endorsements from trusted, relational figures then enhance purchase decisions. Consequently, similar to TikTok, examining the functional roles and influences of beauty and lifestyle influences on Douyin may yield how collectivist values shape marketing strategies.

One of the most popular content categories on Douyin (in terms of watch time and e-commerce sales) is beauty [1]. Chinese influencer Shi An Cheng's content serves as a prime example of a credible, instructional content acting as a "frand (friend-brand)" in collectivist culture [10]. Cheng has amassed over 22 million followers and over 1.6 hundred million likes, making her one of the most popular and competitive influencers on Douyin. From personal field observations of her content, Cheng is known for her highly polished, aspirational makeup and skincare routines, which resonate with audiences seeking both beauty ideals and practical guidance. Bao & Ran's research on marketing strategies of short beauty videos on Douyin highlights how Cheng's marketing method has "brought the functionality of content videos to the extreme" [13]. The key idea here is functionality – Cheng's style of presentation is extremely straightforward and practical. Her content mainly consists of "tutorial-style" videos where she clearly names the products to use and the methods of application. With masterful lighting, clean cuts, and clearly-worded subtitles, this form of content directly links to a form of online authenticity that comes not from imperfect quirks, but from performing as a credible expert figure who embodies trusted beauty standards in a collectivist context. In China's high PDI society, step-by-step beauty tutorials ("this is how you apply X product, this is the correct technique") fits the normative cultural script, as followers see Cheng as an authority figure they can defer to [5]. The instructional nature of her videos reinforces a hierarchy in marketing where the influencer acts as an expert, and the viewer is a learner. Cheng's credibility is further reinforced with netizen comments such as, "as long as it is recommended by sister Cheng, you can buy it without thinking about it" [13]. It is evident that this type of professionalism improves levels of trust among consumers and positively impacts purchase intention.

Additionally, the idea of homophily (shared values and identity) is reflected by Cheng's online appearance and influencing style. Cheng embodies widely shared Chinese beauty ideas – pale skin, soft glam, and a youthful face. Since homogeneity has been identified as a strong predictor of parasocial interaction, Douyin users seek an influencer that reflects collective aesthetic norms they already value [12]. Additionally, "friendly comments such as "so practical" and "you really know what we want" often appear in her videos", evidence how Cheng's professional sincerity creates a different form of relational intimacy [13]. The intimacy is not from displaying one's differences, but rather from Cheng's ability to reflect shared needs and respond to user feedback in a way that fulfilled community demands. Cheng's online authenticity is thus read through continuous alignment with group expectations.

Beyond direct content production, Cheng frequently encourages followers to attend her live-stream sessions, which is highlighted as a key marketing strategy for influencers on Chinese social media platforms like Douyin, in contrast to Western platforms where casual self-presentation is more dominant. In fact, Liu's finds that "85.02% of people said they had watched Doyin live streams and 78.41% had watched influencer e-commerce type live streams on Douyin" [11]. In personal observations of her live steams, Cheng's calm, elegant presentation creates a socially harmonious space where she continues to inform audiences about the effectiveness of specific products. Additionally, since collectivist contexts seek group affirmation above all, users often follow trending influences endorsed by the majority; thus, Cheng's high ranking on the Douyin recommendation algorithm also aids in her marketing influence. Liu further illustrates this point with statistical evidence:

"44.93% of respondents said they would learn about influencers from the Douyin bandwagon ranking and watch their e-commerce live streams, which indicates that the ranking of the bandwagon ranking has more influence on influencers..." [11].

Douyin's influencer authenticity is therefore rooted beyond just the influencer's content itself, but in general communal alignment through group-based trust. Cheng's high viewership encourages more individuals to follow her content because there is a pre-established community that has affirmed her credible authenticity. Thus, Cheng's success as an influencer on Douyin comes from collectivist users' desire for a sense of affiliation and shared experience. Beauty influencers like Cheng Shi'an are identified as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) who can empower brands in reverse — sometimes having more influence than celebrities in shaping consumption [13].

Conclusively, a successful embodiment of influencer authenticity in a collectivist context relies on functionality, professionalism, and sincerity, aligning with group needs rather than spotlighting individuality. Chinese Douyin audiences value trustworthy experts, reflecting a psychological preference for authority figures in high power-distance cultures. Useful, community-oriented advice, consistent with research findings that underscore an embodiment of professionalism, credibility, and homophily are thus keys to authenticity in influencer marketing.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research set out to explore how authenticity in influencer marketing is shaped by cultural values of individualism and collectivism, comparing the practices of example prominent beauty and lifestyle influencers on TikTok in the United States and on Douyin in China. By situating influencer content within different cultural logics, it highlights how marketing authenticity is not universal but culturally constructed.

The analysis suggests differences in core use orientation significantly impact how authenticity is embodied in beauty and lifestyle influences. TikTok functions within a highly individualistic context, where authenticity is performed through originality, casual relatability, humor, and imperfection. Visuals often center on spontaneous individual performances and playful editing, which signals personalized, genuine self-expression. Douyin, by contrast, is far more consumption-driven and influencer-led. Chinese users often consume content for information and product discovery and show higher purchase intention when persuaded by credible figures. Here, authenticity is understood through professionalism, credibility, and alignment with shared norms. Aspirational polish, structured tutorials, and refined aesthetics are markers of sincerity and trustworthiness, reflecting collectivist and high power-distance values that prioritize harmony and expertise.

From this comparison, several implications emerge. For global beauty & lifestyle brands, success on TikTok requires collaborating with influencers who embody self-expression, transparency, and relatability, often through formats like GRWM or everyday storytelling. On Douyin, businesses should prioritize partnerships with professional, high-status influencers who can deliver structured beauty demonstrations and create communally sensitive livestream environments. Across both contexts, brands must recognize that “authenticity” is not a fixed attribute, but a relational performance shaped by platform affordances and cultural expectations.

At the same time, it is important to note that these cultural patterns are not static nor absolute. Generational shifts — particularly among Gen Z — are complicating traditional cultural scripts, as younger Chinese audiences increasingly embrace forms of individualistic self-expression online, just as U.S. and international users may also respond to polished, professional content in certain contexts. These exceptions underscore that cultural frameworks are influential in commercial contexts but not fully deterministic, and that authenticity remains a fluid and contested performance across platforms.

The broader significance of this research lies in showing that authenticity in influencer marketing is a socially and culturally contingent construct. By examining TikTok and Douyin side by side, this study underscores that global brands must adapt their visual and messaging strategies to different cultural frameworks. This insight not only contributes to the literature on media, culture, and marketing, but also offers practical guidance for brands seeking to communicate a changing definition of authenticity across diverse digital audiences.

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