

# Beyond Followers and Engagement: Rethinking Employability in the Influencer Economy

## Abstract

The rapid expansion of influencer marketing has positioned Social Media Influencers (SMIs) as critical strategic actors within contemporary branding ecosystems. Despite the sector's sustained economic growth, firms continue to report high levels of dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and operational friction when selecting and managing influencers. This paradox points to a deeper structural issue: the absence of standardized frameworks for evaluating influencer employability.

This research introduces the concept of the *Influencer Employability Gap*, defined as the misalignment between how firms evaluate influencer value and how influencers construct their own professional viability. Drawing on survey data collected from firms and influencers, the study demonstrates that organizations increasingly prioritize professionalism, ethical conduct, sustainability, and relational reliability, while influencers predominantly frame employability around ethics, authenticity, personal branding, and value alignment.

The findings suggest that a central tension in influencer marketing lies not merely in performance metrics or audience measurement, but in divergent constructions of employability across market actors. This misalignment generates systemic inefficiencies, relational instability, and governance challenges within a largely unregulated digital professional environment.

By reframing influencer marketing as a problem of employability construction rather than promotional effectiveness, this study contributes to emerging debates on platform economies, human brands, and hybrid professional markets. The paper concludes by outlining managerial and structural implications for firms, influencers, and industry governance mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Influencer marketing, influencer employability, professionalization, signaling theory

## Introduction

The global advertising landscape has undergone a profound structural transformation, shifting from centralized broadcast models toward a decentralized, creator-led ecosystem. Within this evolving environment, influencer marketing has transitioned from an experimental promotional tactic to a strategic cornerstone for organizations ranging from multinational corporations to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are no longer peripheral marketing actors but increasingly function as independent strategic partners, with the global influencer marketing industry projected to reach approximately \$40.5 billion by 2026 (Mordor Intelligence, 2026).

Despite its rapid economic expansion, the influencer sector remains characterized by institutional ambiguity. Unlike traditional labor markets or established B2B procurement systems, influencer marketing operates within a largely unregulated professional environment, lacking standardized credentials, formalized evaluation criteria, or universal governance mechanisms. Consequently, while firms face growing economic pressure to integrate influencers into their branding strategies, the operational processes of selecting, managing, and sustaining influencer relationships present persistent managerial challenges.

A central difficulty arises during the selection and hiring process. In the absence of regulatory oversight or professional certification systems, firms have historically relied on readily observable quantitative indicators—most notably follower counts and engagement metrics—to assess influencer suitability (Hudders et al., 2021). However, such metrics have proven insufficient and, in many cases, misleading. Industry practices including the artificial inflation of audiences through bots and fake followers have produced what can be conceptualized as “phantom audiences,” eroding trust and undermining return on investment (Hudders et al., 2021).

As a result, firms increasingly confront a more complex evaluative problem: determining influencer employability. Beyond visibility metrics, organizations must assess attributes such as professionalism, ethical conduct, brand alignment, reliability, and the capacity to sustain long-term collaborative relationships. This evaluative shift introduces heightened uncertainty, particularly given that many influencers—especially within micro and nano tiers—operate as semi-professionals without formal training or established business infrastructures (Fernández-Gómez et al., 2024; McEnnis, 2023).

Following the hiring decision, firms encounter an additional structural tension rooted in influencers as human brands. Unlike traditional employees or contracted

spokespersons, influencers derive value from perceived authenticity, narrative autonomy, and audience trust (Kapitan et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2021). Managers therefore face a paradoxical governance challenge: excessive control may compromise authenticity and diminish persuasive effectiveness, while insufficient control exposes organizations to reputational, strategic, and communicative risks (Kapitan et al., 2022).

These tensions are compounded by difficulties in performance evaluation and accountability. The absence of standardized industry benchmarks complicates the specification of contractual deliverables and the assessment of influencer contributions. In environments where firms express strong interest in certification mechanisms to validate influencer ethics and authenticity, managerial decision-making often occurs under conditions of ambiguity and inconsistent performance criteria (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024).

Extant literature on influencer marketing predominantly emphasizes consumer-level phenomena, including persuasion mechanisms, credibility perceptions, and engagement dynamics (Schouten et al., 2021; Zniva et al., 2023). Comparatively limited attention has been devoted to the employer's operational perspective—specifically, how firms conceptualize, evaluate, and manage influencer employability within an unregulated professional market.

Addressing this gap, the present research introduces the concept of the Influencer Employability Gap, defined as the structural misalignment between how firms evaluate influencer value and how influencers construct their own professional viability. By integrating empirical evidence from both organizational and influencer perspectives, this study reframes influencer marketing as a problem of employability construction rather than solely a matter of promotional effectiveness. This reframing contributes to emerging discussions on platform economies, human brands, and non-standard professional markets. Furthermore, it offers managerial insights into how organizations may develop more coherent evaluative and governance frameworks within the evolving influencer ecosystem.

## **Theoretical Background**

Influencer marketing represents a distinctive market configuration characterized by high levels of uncertainty, relational complexity, and institutional ambiguity. Within this environment, firms must evaluate independent actors whose value creation mechanisms diverge significantly from those observed in traditional employment or supplier relationships. This structural condition renders influencer markets

particularly amenable to theoretical interpretations grounded in signaling theory, employability frameworks, and human brand conceptualizations.

Signaling theory provides a foundational lens for understanding decision-making processes under conditions of information asymmetry (Spence, 1973). In markets where one party possesses superior knowledge regarding its capabilities, intentions, or reliability, observable signals function as mechanisms through which uncertainty is mitigated. Within influencer marketing, firms operate in an environment where the true attributes of influencers—such as professionalism, ethical standards, reliability, and performance consistency—are not fully observable *ex ante*. Consequently, organizations rely on imperfect signals to guide selection and partnership decisions.

Historically, quantitative metrics including follower counts, engagement rates, and audience reach have served as dominant signals of influencer value (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021). These indicators offer apparent objectivity and comparability, thereby reducing cognitive effort during evaluation. However, the credibility of such signals has been increasingly undermined by practices involving artificial audience inflation, bot engagement, and algorithmic distortions. Prior research has documented the prevalence of fraudulent signaling mechanisms in influencer environments, highlighting how superficial visibility metrics may obscure underlying deficiencies in authenticity, credibility, or professional conduct (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021).

As the reliability of traditional signals erodes, firms are compelled to shift toward higher-order evaluative criteria. Attributes such as ethical positioning, sustainability orientation, reputation, professionalism, and brand congruence increasingly function as alternative signals of influencer quality. This transition reflects a broader reconfiguration of value construction processes within digital professional markets, where relational stability and reputational integrity become central determinants of perceived viability.

While signaling theory elucidates how firms interpret observable indicators, the concept of employability offers a complementary framework for understanding how professional viability is constructed and negotiated. Employability has traditionally been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing skills, competencies, adaptability, reputation, and perceived value within labor markets (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Contemporary interpretations emphasize not only human capital attributes but also social capital, personal agency, and identity-based resources that enhance an

individual's capacity to obtain and sustain professional opportunities (Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015).

However, influencer markets challenge conventional employability paradigms. Influencers operate outside traditional organizational employment structures, functioning instead as independent economic actors whose professional viability depends on hybrid dimensions that integrate performance capabilities, symbolic capital, relational trust, and identity coherence. Unlike standardized labor markets, influencer employability is not governed by formal credentials or universally recognized qualifications. Rather, it is constructed through dynamic interactions involving reputation systems, audience perceptions, ethical positioning, and market signaling processes (Abidin, 2021).

Within this context, employability extends beyond functional competencies to encompass relational and symbolic dimensions. Professional conduct, ethical credibility, adaptability, narrative coherence, and brand alignment emerge as critical determinants of sustained market viability. Yet, despite its implicit importance, influencer employability remains under-theorized within marketing scholarship, which has predominantly emphasized persuasion mechanisms, consumer engagement, and endorsement effectiveness (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The conceptualization of influencers as human brands further complicates these dynamics. Human brand theory posits that individuals may function as marketable entities whose economic value is intrinsically linked to identity, authenticity, and relational trust (Thomson, 2006; Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015). Influencers exemplify this phenomenon, deriving value from the commercialization of personal narratives, perceived authenticity, and symbolic self-representation (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Schouten et al., 2020).

Human brands differ fundamentally from conventional organizational actors. Their value propositions are inseparable from autonomy, authenticity, and identity expression. Consequently, managerial interventions, governance mechanisms, and performance controls commonly applied in traditional contractual relationships may produce unintended consequences. Excessive control risks undermining perceived authenticity, while insufficient control exposes firms to reputational and strategic risks (Audrezet et al., 2020; Kapitan et al., 2022).

Integrating signaling theory, employability frameworks, and human brand conceptualizations reveals a structural tension within influencer marketing ecosystems. Firms evaluate influencers through signals associated with reliability,

governance, and risk mitigation, whereas influencers construct professional viability through identity-based, ethical, and authenticity-driven dimensions. This divergence generates systemic ambiguity in how employability is interpreted, evaluated, and enacted across market actors.

This structural condition gives rise to what this research conceptualizes as the Influencer Employability Gap, defined as the misalignment between organizational evaluation logics and influencer self-construction mechanisms within an unregulated digital professional market. Understanding this gap requires moving beyond traditional performance metrics to examine how credibility, value, and professional legitimacy are negotiated through signaling processes embedded in human brand economies.

### **Conceptual Framing: The Influencer Employability Gap**

The increasing institutionalization of influencer marketing has transformed Social Media Influencers (SMIs) into critical actors within contemporary branding ecosystems. Despite this evolution, the mechanisms through which influencer value is evaluated and negotiated remain structurally ambiguous. This ambiguity is rooted not merely in measurement difficulties or performance variability, but in a deeper conceptual divergence concerning the nature of influencer employability.

Employability, traditionally examined within organizational and labor market research, has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct reflecting an individual's capacity to obtain, maintain, and succeed in professional engagements (Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Contemporary perspectives emphasize that employability extends beyond technical competencies to encompass adaptability, reputation, social capital, and identity-based resources (Forrier et al., 2015). However, influencer markets challenge conventional employability paradigms by situating professional viability within an unregulated, platform-mediated environment characterized by fluid boundaries between personal identity and economic value creation.

Within influencer marketing ecosystems, employability emerges as a negotiated construct shaped by the interaction of multiple evaluative logics. Firms evaluate influencers through organizational lenses emphasizing reliability, professionalism, ethical conduct, brand congruence, and risk mitigation. Influencers, conversely, construct employability through identity-driven frameworks centered on authenticity, personal branding, ethical positioning, audience relationships, and symbolic self-coherence. These divergent constructions generate systemic tension in how value, credibility, and professional legitimacy are interpreted across market actors.

This research conceptualizes this structural divergence as the Influencer Employability Gap.

The Influencer Employability Gap is defined as the misalignment between organizational evaluation criteria and influencer self-construction mechanisms governing perceived professional viability within influencer marketing ecosystems. Rather than representing isolated perceptual discrepancies, this gap reflects a structural condition embedded within the institutional architecture of influencer markets.

Signaling theory provides a critical explanatory mechanism for understanding the emergence of this gap. In environments characterized by information asymmetry, signals function as proxies for unobservable attributes (Spence, 1973). However, when signals are interpreted through heterogeneous evaluative frameworks, their meaning becomes unstable. For firms, signals associated with employability emphasize governance-relevant attributes including professionalism, ethical reliability, consistency, and long-term relational stability. For influencers, signals derive meaning through identity-relevant attributes including authenticity, value alignment, narrative coherence, and audience trust.

Consequently, identical signals may generate divergent interpretations across actors. For instance, authenticity—widely regarded as a central influencer asset—may be perceived by firms as insufficient in the absence of professional discipline or contractual reliability. Similarly, professionalization efforts undertaken by influencers may be interpreted by audiences as diminishing authenticity, thereby generating tensions that reverberate across the employability construct itself (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The Influencer Employability Gap thus represents a structural feature of influencer markets rather than a transient coordination failure. It emerges from three interrelated dynamics. First, the absence of standardized institutional frameworks governing influencer evaluation generates variability in how employability signals are constructed and interpreted. Unlike traditional labor markets characterized by formal credentials and professional certifications, influencer markets rely on decentralized reputational and symbolic signals (Abidin, 2021).

Second, the hybrid nature of influencers as human brands introduces inherent tensions between professional governance and identity preservation. Human brand theory posits that individuals functioning as marketable entities derive value from perceived authenticity, autonomy, and narrative coherence (Thomson, 2006; Moulard

et al., 2015). Governance mechanisms designed to enhance reliability may therefore conflict with authenticity-driven value creation processes.

Third, the increasing professionalization of influencer markets amplifies discrepancies between short-term transactional engagements and long-term relational expectations. Firms increasingly conceptualize influencer partnerships as strategic assets requiring continuity, reliability, and governance compatibility. Influencers, however, may operate within project-based logics shaped by precarity, portfolio careers, and identity-centered motivations (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

Importantly, the Influencer Employability Gap reframes dominant interpretations of influencer marketing inefficiencies. Traditional explanations emphasize performance measurement challenges, credibility fluctuations, or persuasion variability. The present conceptualization suggests that many observed frictions may instead originate from misaligned employability constructions governing partner evaluation, governance expectations, and relational stability.

By conceptualizing employability as a relationally constructed market mechanism rather than an individual attribute, this framework contributes to emerging discussions on platform economies, human brands, and non-standard professional markets. Furthermore, it provides a theoretical foundation for examining how signaling processes mediate value negotiations between firms and influencers within structurally ambiguous institutional environments.

## **Methodology**

This research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional design aimed at examining how influencer employability is constructed and interpreted across key actors within influencer marketing ecosystems. Consistent with the study's conceptual objective, the methodological approach prioritizes the identification of perceptual structures and evaluative patterns rather than the estimation of causal relationships.

Data was collected from two independent but theoretically interconnected samples: firms engaged in influencer marketing activities and Social Media Influencers (SMIs). This dual-perspective design enables the examination of employability as a relationally constructed phenomenon shaped by heterogeneous evaluative frameworks.

The firm sample comprised organizations with prior experience in influencer collaborations. Respondents were individuals directly involved in marketing-related decision-making processes, ensuring that evaluations reflected operational, strategic, and governance considerations. The influencer sample consisted of active SMIs

operating across digital platforms, capturing actors engaged in content creation and brand partnerships.

Influencer employability was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct integrating performance-related, professional, ethical, relational, and identity-driven dimensions. Measurement instruments were developed based on established theoretical foundations, including employability literature (Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), human brand theory (Thomson, 2006), and influencer marketing research (Schouten et al., 2020). Scale items were adapted to reflect the contextual characteristics of influencer markets while preserving conceptual alignment across samples.

All constructs were measured using multi-item Likert-type scales. Instrument development followed standard psychometric procedures, including content validation, item refinement, and pretesting to ensure conceptual clarity and contextual relevance. Given the distinct actor perspectives, measurement adaptation was necessary to accommodate differences in evaluative logic while maintaining construct equivalence.

Data analysis focused on descriptive and comparative techniques aimed at identifying dominant evaluative dimensions, perceived strengths, and structural discrepancies across actor groups. This analytical strategy is consistent with the exploratory and theory-building orientation of the study. Importantly, statistical analysis is employed as an interpretive mechanism rather than as a confirmatory testing procedure. The objective is not to establish deterministic predictive models but to illuminate how employability constructions diverge across firms and influencers within an unregulated professional environment.

### **Empirical Evidence**

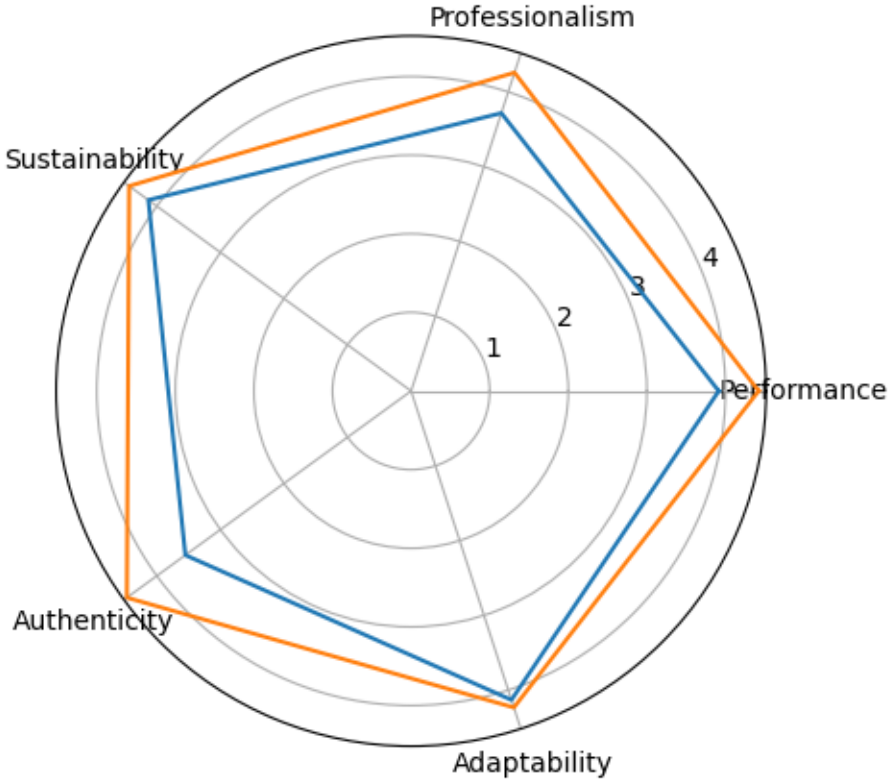
The comparative analysis reveals systematic differences in how influencer employability is evaluated by firms and constructed by influencers.

From the organizational perspective, employability evaluations exhibit moderate assessments of performance-related dimensions. Performance ( $M = 3.91$ ) and professionalism ( $M = 3.72$ ) receive comparatively lower ratings relative to sustainability ( $M = 4.13$ ) and adaptability ( $M = 4.13$ ). Authenticity emerges as the lowest-rated dimension ( $M = 3.55$ ), suggesting persistent managerial caution regarding influencer credibility and consistency.

In contrast, influencers report uniformly high self-perceptions across employability dimensions. Authenticity ( $M = 4.47$ ), sustainability ( $M = 4.44$ ), performance ( $M = 4.42$ ),

adaptability (M = 4.23), and professionalism (M = 4.26) reflect a viability logic predominantly anchored in identity coherence, ethical self-positioning, and symbolic capital.

Juxtaposing these profiles reveals the structural asymmetries underlying the Influencer Employability Gap. Firms express comparatively lower confidence in professionalism, performance, and authenticity, whereas influencers perceive strong competencies and legitimacy in these domains. The most pronounced divergence emerges within the authenticity dimension, where influencers strongly endorse authenticity as a core employability asset while firms maintain comparatively cautious evaluations.



**Figure 1.** Signaling Asymmetries in Influencer Employability Evaluations

The radar profile visualization further illustrates that employability is not contested in terms of absolute value but constructed through heterogeneous evaluative frameworks. Sustainability represents a zone of relative alignment, whereas professionalism, performance, and authenticity reveal perceptual discrepancies between actors.

These findings suggest that many operational tensions observed in influencer collaborations may originate not from isolated performance deficiencies but from

divergent constructions of employability signals governing value, credibility, and governance expectations.

### **Managerial Implications**

The findings of this research generate several important implications for organizations operating within influencer marketing ecosystems. Most critically, the results suggest that many of the difficulties firms encounter in influencer collaborations originate not primarily from executional failures, but from structural misalignments embedded within evaluation, selection, and governance processes.

The first implication concerns the limitations of traditional influencer evaluation models. Firms have historically relied on visibility-oriented indicators, such as reach and engagement metrics, as proxies for influencer value. However, the empirical patterns observed here indicate that organizations assign comparatively lower evaluations to dimensions associated with professionalism, performance reliability, and authenticity. These dimensions, while less visible than audience metrics, appear to be central drivers of managerial confidence and collaboration stability. This discrepancy suggests that influencer assessment frameworks may be systematically incomplete. Evaluating influencers exclusively through audience signals fails to capture governance-relevant attributes that shape relational risk. Consequently, influencer selection should be reconceptualized as a hiring decision rather than a media placement decision, requiring evaluation mechanisms capable of identifying employability signals alongside communication potential.

A second implication emerges from the role of employability as an implicit governance logic. Although firms rarely frame influencer decisions using employability terminology, the results reveal that professionalism, adaptability, ethical positioning, and authenticity function as central evaluative dimensions. Lower firm evaluations of professionalism and authenticity indicate persistent uncertainty regarding influencer conduct, reliability, and credibility. Importantly, this uncertainty reflects not merely performance variability but signaling ambiguity. Influencers may perceive themselves as highly professional and authentic, yet firms lack standardized mechanisms to distinguish credible professional signals from symbolic self-presentation. Managers may therefore benefit from adopting governance frameworks explicitly grounded in employability constructs, incorporating criteria related to professional discipline, operational reliability, reputational stability, and adaptive capability. Such frameworks reduce relational ambiguity by aligning influencer evaluation with established principles used in partner selection and contractor governance.

The findings also illuminate a persistent tension surrounding authenticity, one of the most conceptually complex dimensions in influencer collaborations. Influencers strongly position authenticity as a core professional asset, whereas firms express comparatively cautious evaluations. This divergence reveals a managerial paradox: influencer value creation is intrinsically tied to authenticity, yet authenticity resists direct managerial control. Excessive monitoring or rigid creative prescriptions may undermine the credibility that firms seek to leverage, while insufficient governance may expose brands to reputational vulnerabilities. The results suggest that authenticity should not be treated as a controllable attribute but rather as a governable condition. Firms may achieve greater stability by privileging value-aligned partner selection, principle-based content guidelines, and relational governance mechanisms instead of output-level control structures.

Another implication concerns the structural dynamics of influencer professionalization. Influencers report high self-perceptions of professionalism, yet firms maintain comparatively moderate evaluations. This discrepancy indicates that professionalization processes within influencer markets remain largely self-regulated and unevenly standardized. Without institutional certification systems or widely accepted professional benchmarks, employability signals are interpreted inconsistently across actors. For firms, this implies that influencer markets resemble partially institutionalized labor environments characterized by high variability in norms, expectations, and performance reliability. Organizations should therefore avoid assuming homogeneous professional standards and instead implement explicit onboarding, expectation alignment, and governance mechanisms analogous to those used with independent contractors or strategic partners.

Finally, the persistent signaling asymmetries observed across actor groups highlight the strategic importance of credible employability signaling systems. Certification mechanisms, professional accreditation structures, standardized evaluation frameworks, and reputation-based governance infrastructures may serve as stabilizing institutions capable of reducing relational uncertainty. For organizations, engagement with such mechanisms represents not merely an operational improvement but a strategic risk-reduction strategy. More broadly, these mechanisms may facilitate the transition of influencer marketing from a credibility-fragile domain toward a more predictable and governable professional ecosystem.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This research contributes to the emerging literature on influencer marketing by advancing a structural and governance-oriented perspective on influencer

relationships. While prior studies have predominantly examined influencer effectiveness through consumer response mechanisms, this study shifts attention toward the organizational evaluation logic governing influencer selection and collaboration.

First, the findings extend Signaling Theory into influencer marketing contexts by demonstrating that influencer ecosystems operate as signaling-intensive professional markets. The results reveal systematic asymmetries between influencer self-perceived employability and firm evaluations, suggesting that many managerial tensions may be rooted in signaling ambiguity rather than performance variability. By conceptualizing influencer attributes as employability signals rather than merely symbolic or communicative cues, this research broadens the theoretical understanding of how credibility and professional viability are constructed in decentralized digital labor environments.

Second, this study contributes to Employability Theory by situating employability within hybrid market structures characterized by blurred boundaries between labor, branding, and entrepreneurship. Influencers function simultaneously as economic agents, human brands, and semi-autonomous partners, thereby challenging traditional employability frameworks grounded in organizational employment settings. The present findings suggest that employability in influencer markets is relationally constructed and interpreted through heterogeneous evaluative logics, highlighting the need to reconsider employability as a market-mediated rather than purely individual construct.

Third, the research advances Human Brand Theory by introducing governance dynamics into the analysis of authenticity and professional viability. The observed divergence between influencer authenticity self-perceptions and firm evaluations reveals authenticity as a contested employability dimension shaped by signaling, risk assessment, and managerial control tensions. This perspective reframes authenticity from a purely consumer-perception construct toward a governance-relevant organizational concern.

Collectively, these contributions position influencer marketing as a partially institutionalized professional domain governed by signaling processes, relational uncertainty, and heterogeneous constructions of value. This framing offers a foundation for future research examining governance mechanisms, institutional stabilization processes, and professionalization dynamics within creator-driven economies.

## **Conclusion**

Influencer marketing has become a central strategic instrument for contemporary brands, yet firms continue to encounter persistent instability and governance challenges in influencer collaborations. This research argues that many of these tensions stem not from isolated performance deficiencies but from structural misalignments embedded within how influencer employability is constructed, signaled, and evaluated across market actors. By integrating Signaling Theory, Employability Theory, and Human Brand Theory, the study conceptualizes influencer ecosystems as signaling-intensive professional markets characterized by heterogeneous evaluative logics. The findings reveal systematic divergences between influencer self-perceived employability and firm evaluations, particularly in dimensions associated with professionalism, performance reliability, and authenticity, thereby substantiating the existence of an Influencer Employability Gap. These discrepancies suggest that managerial difficulties frequently attributed to executional failures may instead reflect signaling ambiguity and relational uncertainty inherent to partially institutionalized creator markets. Collectively, this research advances the understanding of influencer marketing beyond persuasion effectiveness, positioning influencer relationships as complex governance structures whose stability depends on credible employability signals and more coherent evaluative frameworks.

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