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Analysis of the Influence of Social Media Engagement, Ethical Branding, and Cultural Fit on Brand Authenticity Perception in the Food and Beverage Industry

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini dilakukan untuk mengevaluasi sejauh mana keterlibatan konsumen di media sosial, penerapan nilai-nilai etika dalam strategi merek, dan kesesuaian budaya memengaruhi persepsi keaslian merek dalam industri makanan dan minuman. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan metode survei yang melibatkan 200 responden. Partisipan dipilih berdasarkan kriteria tertentu, seperti berusia minimal 18 tahun, aktif menggunakan media sosial, mengikuti akun resmi merek makanan dan minuman dalam enam bulan terakhir, dan memiliki pengalaman membeli produk dari merek yang dipromosikan secara digital. Analisis parsial juga mengungkapkan bahwa keterlibatan media sosial, pencitraan merek yang etis, dan kesesuaian budaya masing-masing berkontribusi positif terhadap persepsi keaslian merek. Semakin tinggi keterlibatan konsumen di media sosial, semakin konsisten praktik etika yang diterapkan, dan semakin relevan nilai-nilai merek dengan budaya konsumen, semakin kuat citra autentik yang terbentuk. Temuan ini memperkaya wacana akademis di bidang pemasaran dan pencitraan merek, sekaligus memberikan panduan praktis bagi para pelaku bisnis dalam membangun strategi merek yang autentik, relevan, dan tangguh dalam persaingan industri makanan dan minuman yang semakin kompleks.

Kata kunci: keterlibatan media sosial, branding etis, kesesuaian budaya, persepsi keaslian merek

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to evaluate the extent to which consumer engagement on social media, the application of ethical values in brand strategy, and cultural fit influence perceptions of brand authenticity in the food and beverage industry. This study used a quantitative approach with a survey method involving 200 respondents. Participants were selected based on certain criteria, such as being at least 18 years old, actively using social media, following the official accounts of food and beverage brands in the past six months, and having experience purchasing products from brands promoted digitally. Partial analysis also revealed that social media engagement, ethical branding, and cultural fit each positively contribute to perceptions of brand authenticity. The higher the consumer engagement on social media, the more consistent the ethical practices implemented, and the more relevant the brand values are to the consumer's culture, the stronger the authentic image formed. These findings enrich the academic discourse in the field of marketing and branding, while also providing practical guidance for business actors in building authentic, relevant, and resilient brand strategies in the increasingly complex competition of the food and beverage industry.

Keywords: social media engagement, ethical branding, cultural fit, brand authenticity perception

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INTRODUCTION

With the rapid progress of digital technologies and changes brought about by globalization, the food and beverage sector faces complex, competitive challenges both nationally and internationally (Wulan et al., 2021). In response, businesses are starting to emphasize strategic investments geared toward building consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity. This is imperative, as modern consumers want brands that are aligned with their values and demand more than just a product (Maryoso et al., 2023). They want brands that are forthright, transparent, and demonstrate a strong sense of identity. In the case of food and beverage products, the purchase decisions are predominantly influenced by the perceived health of the product, environmental sustainability, and cultural values (Rukmana et al., 2024). Therefore, perceived authenticity can influence consumers' credibility and ethical perceptions of a business. Consumers brand loyal to, and willing to recommend, businesses whose products they perceive to be authentic (Dharta et al., 2024). Hence, for food and beverage businesses, building and preserving meaningful and long-lasting bonds with their customers hinges on a strong focus on perceived brand authenticity.

The perception of a brand's authenticity largely hinges on how brands engage with their consumers on social media platforms (Hasnas et al., 2021). Nowadays, social media interactions are not limited to one-way communication, and it is possible to strengthen brand-consumer relationships (Karyono et al., 2024). Consumers provide social media engagement through likes, comments, shares, and participation in digital campaigns, which brands can leverage to highlight their identities, values, and transparency (Ali et al., 2019; Agustina et al., 2018). Within the food and beverage industries, social media interactions help consumers understand the ingredients' origins, how products are made, and the brand's stance on issues related to environmental and climate-sustainability (Astri & Apramilda, 2025). Authentic and consistent interactions can lead consumers to the impression that the brand genuinely cares about and shares their values. Most consumers can sense when interactions are mostly promotional and provide little to no value, leading to a sense of poor engagement (Siahaan et al., 2023).

Different ethical perspectives on branding and their associated strategies combined with social media interactions can contribute to a brand's perceived authenticity (Irdiana & Suhermin, 2019). Branding can be considered ethical when a brand engages in a socially responsible and sustainable manner and puts the well-being of its consumers, communities, and the environment at the forefront (Jasella et al., 2020; Susilowati et al., 2025). This perspective is especially true in the food and beverage industry which may have socially responsible and sustainable business practices such as natural ingredient use, eco-friendly production practices, and support for farmers and workers. Branding is perceived as honest and consistent when they implement these values and practices. On the other hand, in the absence of social and environmental responsibility, perceived trust in the brand can be lost (Harahap et al., 2025). For instance, the use of harmful ingredients, exploitation of cheap labor, and other unsavory practices

will destroy the social responsibility brand image. Today, and especially younger consumers, are conscious and selective about their purchases with a close eye on their social and environmental implications, not just their quality.

Cultural fit significantly influences how consumers view a brand's authenticity, particularly in the food and beverage sector (Sudarmaji et al., 2024). This fit occurs when a brand's values, identity, and communication align with the culture and expectations of consumers in a specific area. Brands demonstrate cultural fit when they alter product flavors, adjust packaging, and change marketing stories to align with the local culture. For instance, global food chains that adjust their offerings to local tastes are more likely to be embraced and viewed as genuine. The deeper a brand's reflection of a consumer's cultural values, the stronger the emotional bond that consumers forge, solidifying the brand's authenticity (Hendratni, 2024). The opposite can be said for those brands that lack the cultural connection, as they become less relevant and hence, less trustworthy. Addressing cultural fit should be a priority for food and beverage brands wishing to cultivate authentic perceptions in an increasingly diverse and dynamic marketplace.

Given these circumstances, this research seeks to understand how social media interaction, ethical branding strategies, and cultural fit impacts perceptions of brand authenticity in the food and beverage industry. Potentially, this research covers a theoretical gap in the brand management, marketing communication, and consumer behavior disciplines, especially on the consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to provide guidance for food and beverage industry players in developing more relevant, sustainable, and value-driven branding strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a survey method to investigate the extent to which social media engagement, ethical branding, and cultural fit influence brand authenticity perception in the food and beverage sector. The target of this study were consumers who had interacted with food and beverage brands through social media and had experience consuming their products. The number of respondents was set at 200 people, selected using a purposive sampling technique. The selection criteria included: (1) being at least 18 years old, (2) active on social media, (3) having followed or viewed content from the official accounts of food and beverage brands in the last six months, and (4) having purchased products from brands they encountered on social media. The instrument used was a closed-ended questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item validity was tested using item-total correlation analysis, and was declared valid if the correlation value was > 0.30 and significance < 0.05. Instrument reliability was analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha method, with a minimum value of 0.70 as the eligibility limit. Before conducting the regression test, the data was first analyzed using the classical assumption test which includes normality, heteroscedasticity, and

multicollinearity, with tolerance criteria > 0.10 and VIF value < 10 to avoid correlation problems between independent variables.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the validity test results, all items in the variables of social media engagement, ethical branding, cultural fit, and brand authenticity perception were proven valid, as indicated by item-total correlation values exceeding 0.30 and significance values below 0.05. Meanwhile, reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha showed that all variables had values above 0.70, indicating an adequate level of internal consistency in the instrument. Normality testing using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov method yielded a significance value above 0.05, indicating a normal distribution of the data. To test for heteroscedasticity, the Glejser approach was used, and the results showed no signs of discrepancy in residual variance because the significance value of each independent variable was above 0.05. In addition, all independent variables had VIF values below 10 and tolerance values above 0.10. This indicates that there are no interfering multicollinearity relationships. Therefore, the data in this study are valid and fulfill the criteria for multiple linear regression analysis.

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis indicate that the model used in this study is significant overall. The calculated F-value exceeding the F-table coupled with a significance level of less than 0.05 serves a justification for the conclusive statement. This is the case with the variables of social media engagement, ethical branding, and cultural fit. It shows the variables estimated meaningful impact on brand authenticity perception in the food and beverage. Additionally, the F-statistics serves a justification on the acceptance of the null hypothesis. The value of R-squared of 0.72 indicates that 72% of the perception of brand authenticity is explained by the three variables, whereas the remaining other variables that are not considered in the study would explain the rest. Furthermore, the results of the t-test confirms that each variable individually has a considerably positive impact on the other with the t-statistic exceeding t-table and level sign < 0.05. The perception of brand authenticity in the food and beverage industry is linearly positively correlated with the levels of consumer engagement on social media, the branding is ethical, and the cultural fit is more closely observed.

Study results show that social media consumer engagement shapes perceptions of brand authenticity in the food and beverage industry. More consumer interactions about the brand, via comments, likes, post shares, and digital campaign participation, strengthen perceptions of the brand as authentic. Transparent brand communication regarding the raw materials used and production processes and sustainability and eco-friendly initiatives can create honest brand perceptions. Prompt responses to consumer queries and feedback create engaging and promotional perceptions of the brand. However, one-sided brand promotions can lead to perceptions of insincerity, as the brand only aims for profit.

Younger generations, particularly millennials and Gen Z respondents, prioritize engagement and social cause alignment. Thus, social engagement not only increases visibility but is also integral to the formation of authenticity perceptions.

Building a brand around ethics significantly impacts how consumers view a brand's authenticity in the food and beverage industry. Consumers want honesty, and it spans the entire value chain, and the social and environmental impacts of businesses. Ethically and socially honest and aligned brands result in loyalty. For instance, brands and products supporting local farmers, organic certified, and eco-friendly garner trust and authenticity in the eyes of consumers. Ethically dishonest brands, laden with issues like exploitation of staff or the use of unhealthy ingredients, destroy the trust and loyalty of consumers. These findings indicate that ethics should not be treated as an afterthought in a marketing plan but should be an indispensable foundational aspect of honest and reliable brand building. Ethically honest brands, with the building trust, foster loyalty and a strong emotional bond with consumers.

Alongside social media interaction, ethical branding, and other elements, this research indicates that within the food and beverage industry, cultural fit positively influences perceived brand authenticity. This is especially important for the food industry, as food is a representation of a community's culture. A brand's ability to modify its offering, be it through taste, packaging, or marketing storytelling, to align with local traditions and preferences will help consumers to form an emotional bond and appreciate the brand as part of their cultural community. If the product feels foreign or irrelevant to the local cultural context, this emotional connection can be disrupted, and perceptions of authenticity decline. Therefore, a brand's ability to build strong cultural connections can be a crucial strategy for shaping perceptions of authenticity in consumers' minds. These findings confirm that authenticity depends not only on what a brand claims, but also on the extent to which consumers perceive the brand truly "makes sense" within their cultural context.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that engagement through social media, the application of ethical principles in branding, and cultural fit have a positive and significant influence on the perception of brand authenticity in the food and beverage industry. From a practical perspective, companies need to optimize their digital communication strategies by presenting honest and relevant content, conducting business operations ethically and responsibly, and adapting their brand approach to the cultural characteristics of their target market. By implementing these three strategies in an integrated manner, brands have a greater opportunity to build a strong perception of authenticity, increase customer trust, and maintain sustainable competitiveness in an ever-evolving market.

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