



The Trust Layer: Live Streaming as a Brand Communication Channel in the Post-Influencer Marketing Era

Ilia Davydov

Independent Researcher, Twitch Partner, Kick Partner, USA.

Abstract

The trust crisis in traditional influencer marketing — rising ad fatigue, declining audience confidence in sponsored content, and shrinking organic engagement with pre-produced integrations — has created demand for alternative brand communication channels. This paper examines live streaming as one such channel, arguing that real-time delivery, the impossibility of post-broadcast editing, and the creator's accumulated parasocial capital produce qualitatively different conditions for brand endorsement than pre-produced content.

Drawing on a systematic review of literature on digital marketing trust, parasocial relationships, and brand association mechanisms, as well as observational analysis grounded in fifteen years of the author's practice in the live streaming industry, the paper proposes a trust transfer model specific to the live environment. The model identifies three interconnected components: accumulated parasocial capital, the structural transparency of real time, and the role of an engaged community as an amplifier of brand associations.

The empirical base includes Twitch and Kick platform data spanning 2009 to 2026, and a case study of independent game studio MehSoft, whose products found their primary audience through the author's live community. The findings indicate that live endorsement operates on a fundamentally different logic than placement within pre-produced content: brand association is built through trust in a person, not through the frequency of exposure to an advertising message.

Keywords: Live Streaming, Influencer Marketing, Brand Trust, Parasocial Interaction, Trust Transfer.

INTRODUCTION

The influencer marketing industry is facing a trust crisis. According to the Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Study, only 23% of consumers trust advertising messages from influencers — one of the lowest figures across all advertising formats [1]. A separate Nielsen study from 2023 found that 64% of consumers actively avoid advertising on digital platforms [2]. The market, meanwhile, continues to grow: according to Influencer Marketing Hub, it reached \$24 billion in 2024 [3]. The gap between investment volumes and trust levels points to a problem with the format, not the execution.

Any recorded video is the product of selection, editing, and advertiser approval — and audiences know it. The more professionally an integration is constructed, the more obvious its commercial nature becomes. Attempts to simulate authenticity through native formats only accelerate the development of immunity in viewers who have long learned to recognize the patterns of sponsored content.

In a live stream, the creator has no opportunity to revise what has been said or shown after the fact. This is not a technical detail — it is the condition that defines the nature of the trust audiences build toward live creators. Trust developed through years of observing a person's real behavior in an unscripted environment carries a different weight and different economic value than loyalty to a carefully produced media persona.

The question this paper examines is how the trust mechanisms specific to the live environment translate into brand associations — and what that means for the communications market as traditional influencer marketing loses effectiveness.

The author — an active partner on Twitch and Kick with more than fifteen years of continuous presence in the industry — has observed the evolution of trust mechanisms in real time across several technological cycles. Trust transfer in the live environment is not a theoretical construct for him, but an observable and partially measurable process.

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The aim of this paper is to identify the mechanisms that distinguish live endorsement from pre-produced sponsored content, propose a conceptual trust transfer model specific to the live environment, and articulate its implications for brand communication practice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology combines two components: a review of academic literature and observational analysis based on the author's data.

The literature review covers three areas. The first is trust theory in digital marketing; research on the mechanisms of brand trust formation in online environments and studies of source credibility — how the perceived reliability of a source influences consumer behavior [4, 5]. The second is parasocial relationships and brand associations: the foundational work of Horton and Wohl [6], its development in the context of streaming platforms [7, 8], and research showing how parasocial interaction leads to favorable brand evaluations and purchase intentions [9]. The third is the comparative effectiveness of content formats: studies of declining engagement in sponsored content and measurement of trust premium in native formats [10, 11].

The observational analysis draws on the author's platform data from 2009 to 2026. In this paper, the same data that described audience engagement in a previous study are interpreted differently — as characteristics of a communication channel. 699 million minutes watched on Twitch represent the total volume of brand exposure in the live environment. 7,931 unique chatters against an average concurrent audience of 12,272 constitute a verifiable audience actively engaged in communication. Fifteen years of continuous presence form the foundation of parasocial capital, which this paper treats as a key precondition for the trust transfer mechanism.

The second empirical element is the MehSoft studio case. The *Underground Man* series and *CHERNOBYL: The Untold Story* were released through Steam and found their primary audience through the author's live community rather than through standard promotion channels. This is an observable example of parasocial capital converting into purchasing behavior, and it is analyzed in that capacity throughout the paper.

The primary limitation is the observational design with data from a single creator. It is not possible to measure what share of MehSoft product purchases can be attributed to the live audience as distinct from other channels. The specificity of the Russian-language market limits direct generalization to a global context. At the same time, the combination of a long longitudinal horizon and a verifiable example of trust transferring to a commercial product makes this material significant for studying the mechanisms of live endorsement.

RESULTS

Why Pre-Produced Sponsored Content Loses Audience Trust

The problem with traditional influencer marketing is structural. When audiences encounter a sponsored integration, they activate what researchers call persuasion knowledge — the conscious recognition that the person in front of them is fulfilling a paid contract rather than sharing a genuine opinion. This mechanism triggers counterarguing and negative affective responses regardless of how organically the integration is constructed [10]. Sponsorship disclosure itself reduces the creator's perceived authenticity, and this effect grows stronger as the audience size increases.

The effect is more pronounced among large accounts. A study published in *Psychology & Marketing* in 2024 found that influencers with audiences exceeding 500,000 followers show a significant drop in engagement on sponsored posts compared to organic content. Among niche creators with audiences of around 15,000, no such drop is observed [11]. The determining factor is not audience size but the density of the parasocial bond: smaller, more stable communities have stronger bonds, and it is those bonds that offset the effect of sponsorship disclosure.

Edited video is by its nature the product of selection and post-production. Audiences perceive it as a managed representation rather than genuine human behavior. The more professional the production, the more visible this gap becomes — and the lower the trust in any brand message contained within it.

The Live Environment as a Different Communication Space

In a live stream, the creator has no opportunity to revise what was said after the broadcast. They respond to events in real time, make mistakes, change their position — and the audience watches this unfold over months and years. This is how trust forms: not through a carefully constructed image, but through long-term observation of how a person actually behaves.

Research confirms that parasocial interaction sequentially influences perceived source credibility, then brand trust, and ultimately purchase intention [9]. In the live context, this interaction develops through unscripted presence rather than deliberate self-presentation. With an average concurrent audience of 12,272 viewers and 7,931 unique chatters over 30 days, most of those present interact with the creator on a regular basis. This is not a one-time contact with an advertising message — it is a recurring experience embedded in a routine.

For brand communication, this means that audiences perceive endorsement in the live environment as the opinion of someone they know rather than the fulfillment

of a contract. Persuasion knowledge does not disappear, but accumulated parasocial capital offsets it — provided the creator has sufficient tenure on the platform and a dense audience relationship.

The MehSoft Case: Trust Transfer in Practice

MehSoft studio, led by the author, released original game titles — The Underground Man series and CHERNOBYL: The Untold Story — through Steam. Both products found their primary audience through the author's live community, bypassing standard indie game promotion channels: press releases, gaming media, targeted advertising.

This is an observable example of affective attitude transfer from a media persona to associated products — a mechanism documented in academic literature [9]. An audience built through fifteen years of live interaction converted trust in the creator into willingness to purchase a product he made, without additional persuasion through advertising formats.

Equally significant is what was absent from this case. There were no sponsored integrations triggering persuasion knowledge. There was no gap between the creator as a media persona and the creator as the product's owner. This distinguishes the case from the classic celebrity endorsement model, where endorser and brand exist as independent entities and trust transfer requires additional persuasion mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

The Trust Transfer Model in the Live Environment

The findings presented in the previous section allow for the formulation of a conceptual trust transfer model specific to the live environment. It consists of three interconnected components, each of which is a necessary condition — and insufficient without the other two.

Accumulated parasocial capital is the starting point. Trust transfer to a brand message or product occurs when the audience has a sustained history of interaction with the creator. Brief or one-time contact does not provide this foundation. This is why engagement data for niche creators in sponsored content differs fundamentally from data for large accounts with recently acquired audiences [11]: the former have accumulated parasocial capital, the latter have not.

The live format creates conditions in which audiences observe the creator in an unscripted environment over many hours and years. This observability determines the quality of the accumulated capital: trust forms through repeated experience rather than managed communication. Endorsement that occurs in this environment inherits the trust built through years of transparent presence.

The active audience of the live environment participates in discussing brand messages within the community in

real time. 7,931 unique chatters over 30 days represent an engaged group through which endorsement undergoes horizontal validation alongside the vertical signal from creator to audience.

Together, these three components explain why the MehSoft case worked without conventional promotional tools. The product was received not as an advertised commodity but as a natural extension of the work of someone the audience trusted — and that trust was collectively confirmed within the community.

The Limits of the Model

The model describes a mechanism that functions when all three components are present simultaneously. That same condition defines its limitations.

Trust transfer through the live environment depends fundamentally on time. A creator with a short platform tenure does not have sufficient parasocial capital to transfer trust to a brand message, and attempting live endorsement without that foundation will produce results comparable to a standard advertising integration. The model does not scale horizontally: it cannot be replicated quickly or applied simultaneously across many creators without losing the quality that distinguishes live endorsement from a pre-produced campaign.

The MehSoft case, for all its analytical value, captures a situation in which the creator is the owner of the product. This eliminates the gap between the media persona and the brand that in classic celebrity endorsement requires dedicated alignment mechanisms. For brands external to the creator, trust transfer will be partial — its extent depends on how naturally the product fits the context of the streams and how organically the audience perceives it as the creator's own choice.

Finally, the model rests on data from a single market with a distinct cultural profile. Russian-speaking CIS audiences show patterns of long-term loyalty to specific creators that may differ from audience behavior in other markets. Validating the model against material from other regions and linguistic contexts remains a task for future research.

CONCLUSION

The trust crisis in influencer marketing is a consequence of format constraints. Pre-produced content cannot guarantee the authenticity that audiences have learned to recognize and value. Live streaming creates a qualitatively different environment for brand communication, and for that reason it deserves a distinct place in brand communication strategy.

The three components of the proposed model — accumulated parasocial capital, real-time transparency, and community as amplifier — describe a mechanism through which trust in a creator converts into trust in a brand message. The MehSoft case demonstrates that this mechanism works in

practice: the studio's products found their audience through the live community without drawing on standard advertising channels.

The observational nature of the study and its reliance on data from a single creator in a specific linguistic context define the boundaries of its conclusions. Fifteen years of continuous industry presence and a verifiable example of trust transferring to a commercial product constitute a dataset with a longitudinal horizon unavailable within standard academic research.

Directions for future research include comparative analysis of live endorsement effectiveness across different markets, development of tools for measuring parasocial capital as a marketing metric, and examination of how the model operates when the creator is an external brand partner rather than a product owner.

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