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An exploratory study

Drivers &
Outcomes

Of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity
Of Social Media Influencers

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Drivers and Outcomes of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity of Social Media Influencers:
An exploratory study

Master Thesis
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Abstract

Despite the increasing relevance of Brand Authenticity (BA) in the marketing and branding literature, research in the context of human brands is still limited - especially with regard to Social Media Influencers (SMIs), who represent a newly recognized type of human brand. The underlying study fills this gap by developing a conceptual model on the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. Based on a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with millennials, along with selected secondary data, we propose that consumers' BA judgments of SMIs are highly subjective, context-, and goal-dependent processes. We find that consumers' BA perceptions are influenced by indexical, iconic, and existential drivers, which are moderated by their goals and level of scepticism towards SMIs and Influencer Marketing. Results also suggest that BA perceptions of SMIs lead to positive psychological and behavioural consumer outcomes that are reciprocated to the SMI in terms of trust, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and differentiation. Further, this study outlines practical implications for SMIs and practitioners of Influencer Marketing. For SMIs, we highlight the importance of actively engaging in the management of their BA perceptions in order to leverage on the identified benefits. For marketers, we recommend carefully choosing authentic SMIs to maximize the effectivity of their campaigns. Finally, we provide initial evidence for the loss of perceived authenticity among SMI brands, making BA of SMIs an increasingly important topic for future research.

Keywords: Human Brands; Brand Authenticity; Social Media Influencer; Influencer Marketing

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I. Introduction

In today's postmodern economy, characterised by an erosion of consumer trust, establishing *Brand Authenticity* (BA) has become "one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003, p. 21). Confronted with an over-commercialized marketplace full of fake, similar or meaningless market offerings, consumers are struggling to distinguish between what is real or fake (Boyle, 2004; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Arnould & Price, 2000). At the same time, the consumption of brands plays an essential role for consumers to express themselves and to construct their identities (Aaker, 1999; Von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis & Mühlbacher, 2017). Thus, consumers are increasingly looking for brands that are real, sincere, and genuine - they are increasingly seeking *authentic* brands (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Consumers' quest for authenticity is not limited to conventional brands (e.g. product brands), but also includes modern types of brands, such as human brands (Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015; Erz & Christensen, 2018). In this regard, *Social Media Influencers* (SMIs), who represent a new type of human brand, are gaining increasing relevance in the lives of today's social media affine consumers (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Erz & Christensen, 2018). SMIs are said to enjoy a high BA perception, due to their high degree of credibility and relatability (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Rushworth, 2017). At the same time, traditional advertising no longer meets consumer demands for authenticity (Brown & Hayes, 2008). With increasing pressure to deal with the new consumer realities, companies noticed SMIs' commercial potential and started to leverage on their BA perceptions. Thus, *Influencer Marketing* emerged and developed into one of the most promising marketing activities of today (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2018; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Backaler, 2018; Linqia, 2017).

With the rising importance of BA and growing popularity of SMIs comes the need to better understand the nature of consumers' BA perceptions of SMIs as well as the associated benefits. However, both, the notions of BA and human brands, are fairly new concepts within the branding literature. Only a few studies address the BA of human brands and those that do mostly focus on celebrities (e.g. Moulard et al., 2015; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016) or do not consider consumer perspectives (Audrezet, Caffier de Kerviler & Moulard, 2018). Against this

background, this study sheds light on how consumers form their BA perception of SMIs and how it impacts them. In particular, we address the following research question: *What are the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs?*

Our academic quest seeks to expand theoretical and managerial knowledge regarding BA, in the context of SMIs as human brands. The objective of this research lies in identifying the *drivers* consumers rely on when forming their BA perceptions of SMIs as well as in uncovering the psychological and behavioural consumer *outcomes*. Thereby, this study responds to calls by scholars to expand the notion of BA to various types of human brands (e.g. Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015; Moulard et al.,2015). Moreover, our findings provide practical implications for SMIs and practitioners of influencer marketing, aimed at dealing with the challenge of maintaining authenticity in today's over-commercialized world.

To answer the research question, this study is structured as follows: The first part of this study explores the theoretical background by synthesizing relevant literature from three research streams: Firstly, the evolution of marketing and branding is presented by explaining the paradigm shift from a goods- to a service-dominant logic, thereby emphasizing that brand value and identity result from co-creational activities among all stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Da Silveira, Lages & Simões, 2013). Furthermore, human brands, such as celebrities and SMIs, are introduced as newly recognized types of brands. The section finishes with the contemporary challenges in branding. Secondly, the concept of BA is presented as a growing theme in the branding literature. Research findings on the conceptualization, formation, and outcomes of BA are synthesized to highlight its importance for businesses, consumers and SMIs. A special focus is set on the drivers and outcomes of BA in the context of human brands. Thirdly, the practice of influencer marketing is introduced as having emerged as an opportunity to address the contemporary challenges in branding. This section outlines the evolution towards influencer marketing before turning to its opportunities and current challenges. The synthesis of literature reveals a relevant gap in the intersection of SMIs as human brands and BA, which gave rise to the research question explored in this study.

The second part covers the methodological considerations of this study. Since consumer *perceptions* are in the centre of investigations, we adopt a qualitative research

approach and take on an interpretivist stance to knowledge as well as a constructivist view to reality. The social media app *Instagram* has been chosen as the research context and millennials as the target group. Following an abductive reasoning, we explore the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs and enhance our understanding of the research matter. In order to ensure validity of results, data is collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups and secondary data, allowing for a triangulation of findings. The analysis of data follows a *Grounded Theory* approach, whereby data is iteratively coded through open, axial, and selective coding, until theoretical saturation is reached.

The third part introduces the findings by presenting our conceptual model of drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. We confirm that consumers' BA judgments of SMIs are highly subjective, context-, and goal-dependent. Consumers rely on indexical drivers (i.e. verifiable evidence), iconic drivers (i.e. a comparison of impressions and expectations) and existential drivers (i.e. sources of identification) when forming their BA perceptions. These drivers are moderated by consumers' goals and level of scepticism towards SMIs and influencer marketing. We also propose a variety of positive psychological (i.e. feelings, trust, credibility, relationship, loyalty, motivation) and behavioural (i.e. engagement, purchase intention, word-of-mouth) consumer outcomes. We further highlight that these consumer outcomes are reciprocated to the SMI in terms of trust, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), and differentiation. Finally, we find evidence for the rising consumer scepticism towards SMIs, implying that SMI's key advantage of authenticity is slowly eroding in the light of increasing commercialisation and over-utilisation of influencer marketing.

The last part presents the theoretical and managerial contributions. For SMIs, we highlight the importance of actively engaging in the management of their BA perceptions in order to leverage on the identified benefits. For marketers, we recommend carefully choosing authentic SMIs to maximize the effectivity of their influencer marketing campaigns. Finally, the limitations of this research and potential avenues for future research are outlined. For example, we suggest that future research should differentiate between different types of SMIs (e.g. food, fashion, photography) and different sizes (e.g. macro, micro). Moreover, instead of millennials, the BA perceptions of generation Z could be investigated in the future.

II. Literature Review

The following section presents the theoretical background for this study. It is structured along three overarching topics: The *Evolution of Branding*, *Brand Authenticity*, and *Influencer Marketing*. The synthesis reveals a relevant gap in the intersection of SMIs as human brand and BA, thereby raising a relevant research question explored in this study.

1. The Evolution of Branding

1.1 Developments in the Branding Logic

1.1.1 The Paradigm Shifts in Marketing and Branding

Originating from neo-classical economic theory in the beginning of the twentieth century, marketing followed the goods-dominant logic of economic exchange. This logic views units of output, embedded with value in the production process, as the central components of exchange. Its output-orientation suggests that the firm unilaterally produces value and that customers are operand resources, thus exogenous to value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Constantin & Lusch, 1994). With new technological developments and the emergence of service marketing in the mid-to-late 1990s, scholars have raised attention to the theoretical limitations of this logic, criticizing its predominantly managerial orientation as well as the narrow customer focus. Marketing research slowly shifted towards a new paradigm. Research by Vargo and Lusch (2004) greatly advanced this shift, noting that marketing is evolving towards a service-dominant logic. Contrary to the goods-dominant logic, it highlights a process orientation, the co-creation of value, and the importance of stakeholder relationships. It considers service to be the common denominator of exchange, thereby claiming that all economies can be regarded as service economies. Furthermore, it views all internal and external stakeholders as endogenous to the brand, meaning that value is co-created rather than unilaterally constructed by the firm. There is value-in-use and value-in-context, assuming that value is subjectively determined by the beneficiary and can change over time. The firm itself can only provide a value proposition. In a similar vein, Merz et al. (2009) argue that also

the branding logic has shifted towards a view that acknowledges that brand value is created in a continuous, social, and highly dynamic co-creational process between all stakeholders. To outline its co-evolution with marketing, the authors depict the branding evolution with four brand eras, ranging from the Individual Goods-focus Brand Era up to the Stakeholder-focus Brand Era. In the Individual Goods-Focus Brand era, brands solely served as identifiers and differentiators for goods while consumers remained passive as operand resources in the creation of brand value. In contrast, in the current Stakeholder-Focus Brand Era, brands are dynamic, social processes embedded in a brand ecosystem in which all stakeholders are operant resources and contribute to the construction of brand value.

Responding to the call by Merz et al. (2009) to better understand *how* brand value is co-created among multiple stakeholders, Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro (2013) present the organic view of the brand along with the brand-value co-creation model. They explain that brands are organic entities that emerge and develop in a space where multiple interactions and conversations occur between various internal (e.g. employees) and external stakeholders (e.g. consumers, shareholders, journalists). As a consequence, the authors highlight the inevitable loss of control by organizations. In fact, the brand could even develop "outside the strategic aims set by brand managers" (p. 677). Similarly, Kemming and Humborg (2010) recognize that power has moved away from companies towards other brand stakeholders. They call this the "democratization of branding" and conceptualize this phenomenon as the "technology-driven empowerment of consumers, such as the production of brand meaning by (micro) blogging, interaction in social networks or producing and disseminating brand advocacy" (p. 193).

In the new stakeholder-brand era, various scholars emphasize the need to advance important brand concepts by incorporating the process of co-creation. Besides the co-creation of brand value (e.g. Merz et al., 2009; Grönroos, 2012) and the co-creation of brand meaning (e.g. Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), especially the notion of brand identity co-creation is gaining attention. It has been examined in relation to conventional brands (e.g. corporate or product brands) and more recently to human brands (e.g. Da Silveira et al., 2013; Kornum, Gryd-Jones, Zagir & Brandis, 2016; Iglesias et al., 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Centeno & Wang, 2017). Brand identity gained relevance with the realization that brands represent potential relationship partners with human personality traits as well as resources for identity

construction (Kapferer, 2008; Merz et al., 2009). Early definitions describe brand identity as a unique set of brand associations that stem from attributes, benefits and attitudes (Aaker, 2002; Keller, 1993). As such, the identity of a brand has been widely recognized as an essential tool to manage and differentiate brands from competitors (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008). However, early work takes on an inside-out perspective to its creation, assuming that a brand's associations emerge unilaterally from managers' aspirations (Aaker, 2002; Kapferer, 2008). Only more recently, scholars re-conceptualize brand identity as "dynamic, reciprocal, and iterative in nature (Scott & Lane, 2002; p. 45): Brand identity develops not only through actions by brand managers but also through input by other market actors inside and outside the organization (Da Silveira et al., 2013; Gryd-Jones et al., 2016). These individuals contribute to the construction of brand identity by disseminating opinion, expectations, evaluations, and experiences with each other (Mumby & Clair, 1997). At the same time, they use the brand identity as a resource for constructing their own identities (Von Wallpach et al., 2017).

1.1.2 Drivers of the Paradigm Shift in Branding

According to Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo and Farquhar (2013), the democratization of branding has been driven by three developments that together form this multi-layered socio-technological phenomenon. The first driver is the democratization of internet technology, which enables the following two drivers. New technologies, in particular the internet, provide widespread access to affordable PCs, easy-to-use software, broadband and mobile telecommunications. These enable the creation of user-generated content (UGC) platforms, such as blogs, social networking sites, wikis and product review pages. All these platforms allow stakeholders to interact with each other, express their opinions and participate in brand-related discourses, thereby becoming active co-creators and agenda setters of brands (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

The second driver is the internet-based democratization of information, which presents digitally literate stakeholders new opportunities to access, create and disseminate information. Due to widespread internet connectivity, stakeholders can access a massive body of information quickly and at low costs, thereby overcoming information asymmetries that characterize traditional markets (Asmussen et al., 2013). For example, online infomediaries,

such as consumer opinion platforms, help consumers retrieve comparative information that give them the expertise and transparency for complex purchase decisions (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen & Schrader, 2006). At the same time, no special technical skills are needed to engage in information creation, whether posting a comment, creating an own blog or disseminating information to a wide audience (Asmussen et al., 2013). The idea of empowered consumers sharing their opinions one-to-many via UGC platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat has drawn attention to electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). It is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Essential to its diffusion is a modern type of key opinion leaders, the so-called Social Media Influencers, who share opinions, experiences and insights into their personal lives with a large follower base (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). While information from internal sources has always been valued more than traditional advertising, the positive effects of peer recommendations have been amplified through the technology-enabled democratization of information (De Veirman et al., 2017; Asmussen et al., 2013).

The third driver is represented by the democratization of social capital. One manifestation is the ability to self-exhibit or represent oneself in front of organizations and other audiences through owned websites, blogs or profiles on networking sites. Halliday (2016) notes that Web 2.0 represents the focal point for individuals for self-fulfilment, as it offers resources for constructing their own identity projects. Another manifestation is the opportunity to build and maintain weak and strong ties within online community networks that go beyond geographical proximity (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). People who possess a joint interest or purpose can easily come together in these online networks to mobilize resources or form a worldwide brand or anti-brand community. Research within brand communities widely acknowledges the consumer empowerment resulting from a sense of belongingness through a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions. Wipperfürth (2005) introduces the term "brand hijack" and explains how brand communities have the power to seize control of a brand and take it away from its marketing professionals. This phenomenon is even more

accentuated in online brand community, since online consumers appear more active, participative, resistant, and communitarian than offline (Kozinets, 2001; 1999).

The evolving logic in branding along with the democratization of brand management have led to new power distributions and relationship realities between consumers, the brand and other stakeholders. Thus, Asmussen et al. (2013) have called for a new brand management paradigm that is able to deal with the new challenges faced by brand managers. These challenges will be further elaborated later in this paper.

1.2 The Emergence of Human Brands

While traditionally, brands have been related to organizations, products or services, today, researchers recognize that humans can also be brands (Thomson, 2006). Thomson (2006) defines human brands as "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts" (p. 104). Following this definition, human brands are regarded as commercially valuable entities that can be professionally managed, i.e. through third-party endorsements (Loroz & Braig, 2015). More recent research points at the limitations of this definition, claiming that the conceptualization of human brands goes beyond the pure operationalization of one-sided commercial interest. In line with the new branding logic, attention in the research of human brands has also shifted towards the idea that human brands are subject to co-creational dynamics among multiple stakeholders. Thereby, the literature focuses primarily on the co-creation of human brand identities (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2011; Von Wallpach et al., 2017; Erz & Christensen, 2018).

1.2.1 Celebrities as Human Brands

Centeno and Wang (2017) explain that celebrity human brand identities are co-created by the celebrity her/himself as well as other human actors (e.g. other celebrities, consumers, fans) and non-human actors (e.g. advertisers, commercial firms). These stakeholders engage in processes where experiences, perceptions and insights around the celebrity brand are exchanged. Thereby, their participation is motivated by various objectives:

First, celebrities form their brands through activities performed in public. These include appearances in TV shows, films and commercials or face-to-face encounters with other celebrities, companies or fans. Especially, with the rise of social media platforms, celebrities have found new ways to engage with their audience more easily and personally. Thereby, celebrities seek to maintain relevancy of their brand and improve resonance among their fanbase and commercial partners. In that way, they benefit socially, from increased influence and financially, by attracting more brand collaborations (Centeno and Wang, 2017).

Second, consumers see celebrity brands as integral parts of their lives, as they develop feelings of relatedness and emotional bonds with them (Khamis et al., 2017). Therefore, they feel legitimate to take part in the social discourse about the celebrity brand and express themselves by creating stories, sharing experiences and engaging in conversations with other audiences (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Erz & Christensen, 2018). These conversations are boosted on social media, where fans turn into "followers" who imbue the celebrity brand with their own media flows, such as likes, shares and comments (Khamis et al., 2017).

Third, another group of celebrity brand co-creators includes various types of firms. For example, brands collaborate commercially with celebrities to drive brand awareness, generate WOM, and positively influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Moreover, talent agencies and the press interact with the celebrity and with fans by publishing brand-related content, such as behind-the-scenes footages. Although much of these stakeholder interactions take place offline, Centeno and Wang (2017) highlight social media platforms as the main discursive outlets for celebrity brand co-creation. Considering the widely accessible nature of these UGC platforms, not only celebrities but also regular consumers have been found to actively construct their brand identities online, as elaborated in the next section.

1.2.2 Social Media Influencers as Human Brands

With the rise of the internet, scholars have been increasingly interested in consumers' online self-representations on UGC platforms (e.g. Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). In this regard, they find that the web offers plenty of opportunities for personal-branding, which involves "individuals developing a distinctive public image for

commercial gain and/or cultural capital" (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 191). Social media allows ordinary users to share personal narratives and content among a large following, enabling the development of a unique selling point or public identity (Labrecque et al., 2011; Khamis et al., 2017). Thereby, the ultimate goal is to attain celebrity status and commercially collaborate with companies. Essential to personal-branding are the actively engaging followers, who contribute to the SMI brand identity through likes, shares and comments (Khamis et al., 2017).

The idea that technology empowered consumers can turn into brands through practices on UGC platforms has also been discussed in the work on identity transformation of consumers by Erz and Christensen (2018). The authors show that consumers can become brands themselves through the professionalization of blogging. They demonstrate how bloggers can be understood as human brands from a brand-as-process perspective, as they actively negotiate, adapt and re-interpret their brand identity. This takes place within the blogosphere, which represents a multi-stakeholder system with its own actors, dynamics and logics. Similar to the celebrity brand co-creation network depicted by Centeno and Wang (2017), this system consists of human stakeholders (i.e. other bloggers, blog readers) and non-human actors (i.e. sponsoring brands). Although so far, research within the co-creation of human brands is limited to celebrities (Centeno & Wang, 2017) and fashion bloggers (Erz & Christensen, 2018), similar co-creational dynamics are expected to occur in the context of other influential personae and on other digital media platforms (Centeno & Wang, 2017). Thus, a growing body of literature within branding acknowledges that not only conventional brands, but also human brand identities are subject to co-creational dynamics.

1.3 Contemporary Challenges in Branding

The democratization of brand management has led to new consumer realities that represent significant contemporary challenges in brand management. First, consumer power has strongly increased, as consumers take on a more pro-active and co-creative role in branding. Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) describe how different social power bases have changed as compared to the pre-internet age: For example, reward and coercive power of consumers have increased through the growing ability to spread experiences and opinions about organizations to a large

audience through social media, wikis or blogs. Expert power of organizations has decreased through reduced information asymmetries and increased market transparency. Consumers' legitimate power to influence prices and products has been strengthened by the possibility to actively engage in the value chain, e.g. through community shopping websites, open innovation, and options of product personalisation (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Ind, Iglesias & Markovic, 2017). The more democratic form of power sharing implies an inherent loss of control within brand management. Asmussen et al. (2013) term this new reality "the democratization challenge", where the key challenge is to balance between guiding a brand and being guided as a brand. They suggest moving away from the company-control-centric paradigm towards a more stakeholder-integrating management perspective. Similarly, Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) emphasize the need to cooperate and build up trust with all stakeholders. Instead of engaging in defensive strategies, companies should give up their traditional paradigm of push-marketing and leverage on the co-creational contributions of their empowered consumers.

Second, consumers have become more sceptical about traditional brand-driven advertising, making it more difficult to find brands as resources for personal identity projects (Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). Informed consumers are no longer willing to accept insincere brand behaviour and seek to buy something real from someone genuine (Holt, 2002). However, postmodern markets are strongly over-commercialised and characterised by an abundance of fake, similar or meaningless market offerings. Therefore, consumers struggle to distinguish between what is real and fake (Boyle, 2004; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Arnould & Price, 2000). Moreover, Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster and Güldenberg (2013) explain how corporate dissonance, a missing link between an organization's stated goals and its achievements, contributes to this lack of trust. Consequently, the demand for sincerely executed branding goals as well as trustworthy and honest brand-customer relationships is rising (Burnett & Hutton, 2007; Morhart et al., 2015). Conveying trust in online advertising has been especially challenging for marketers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In this regard, establishing BA has been mentioned as a potential approach to regain brand trust and overcome consumer scepticism (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Schallehn, Burmann & Riley, 2014; Beverland 2005; Eggers

et al., 2013). Schallehn et al. (2014) reason that brands perceived as authentic are clear about what they stand for and thus are seen as likely to fulfil their brand promise.

Third, consumers increasingly fail to distinguish between brands (Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). Responding to the increasing homogenization of the marketplace and rising brand competition, companies have significantly intensified their communication efforts (Kotler & Keller, 2011). The high brand parity perception can be traced back to an increasing number of brand messages and touch points in the media. The inflation of communication does not only create immense pressure, but consumers are also unable to absorb all the information due to cognitive capacity restrictions (Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). This has been exacerbated by the widespread use of UGC platforms, where consumers are additionally exposed to unfiltered information from their peers (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Burmann and Arnhold (2008) explain that brands appear to have suffered a loss of their uniqueness and authenticity. In fact, authenticity has shown to serve as evidence of quality and differentiation for consumers (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016; Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). Brand practitioners often promote BA as a key source of competitive advantage, especially in times of erosion of trust (Eggers et al., 2013). Thus, the authors posit that companies should follow an identity-based approach to brand management, which takes into account the perspectives of internal and external stakeholders. The ultimate benefit is to collectively build the necessary trust and authenticity of the brand, which forms the foundation for competitive differentiation (Schallehn et al., 2014; Burmann & Arnhold, 2008).

The new consumer realities represent significant challenges for contemporary brand management that could ultimately erode the competitive advantage of a company. Therefore, an emerging stream of research within the new branding era emphasizes not only the need to adopt a dynamic stakeholder-integrating perspective but it also highlights the importance of creating and maintaining BA as a way to establish trust, loyalty and differentiation in today's postmodern economy.

2. Brand Authenticity

2.1 Theoretical Origin and Definition of Brand Authenticity

The term authenticity derives from the Latin word *authenticus* and the Greek word *authentikos*, where it carries connotations of trustworthiness, not imaginary, false or imitation, and conforming to an original (Cappannelli & Cappannelli, 2004). Authenticity has been a general preoccupation in modern western culture, which is why its theoretical origin shows connections to various research disciplines where considerable consensus exists (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer & Heinrich, 2012):

Within the field of philosophy, researchers closely connect authenticity with moral behaviour. An authentic individual is often described as being sincere and self-reliant, assuming responsibility for their actions, and remaining true to self rather than conforming to external pressures (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Sociologists observe that authenticity is a socially constructed phenomenon. They describe authentic experiences as being original, credible, sincere and genuine (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). In anthropology, authenticity is often associated with the preservation of cultural norms, beliefs and values. Authentic experiences are characterised as natural and the opposite of being fake (Gable & Handler, 1996). Within psychology, researchers state that authentic individuals own a strong and unique inner reality. They are mainly driven by personal identity and remain true to their essence even in face of external pressures and social conformity (Smelser & Baltes, 2011; Guignon, 2004). Synthesizing the conceptualizations of these research disciplines, Bruhn et al. (2012) note that the concept of authenticity has been related to terms such as stability, endurance, consistency, particularity, individuality, trustfulness, credibility, keeping promises, genuineness, and realness. Furthermore, there appears to be consensus that authenticity includes being "true to oneself" as well as being intrinsically motivated by one's actual thoughts and feelings (Moulard et al., 2016).

In business research, both academics and practitioners increasingly acknowledge the essential role of authenticity within consumer behaviour and branding (e.g. Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte & Beverland, 2016; Rose & Wood, 2005). Early research already acknowledged authenticity as a core component of

successful brands as it forms part of a unique brand identity, essential for creating brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2001; Keller, 1993). Also Alexander (2007) notes that authenticity has become an important dimension of brand identity, as marketers seek to create stronger brands. Brown et al. (2003) even claim that BA represents one of the "cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (p. 21). Similarly, Gilmore and Pine (2007) acknowledge that "authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion, just as quality overtook cost, and cost overtook availability" (p. 5). Despite the growing importance of BA, Akbar and Wymer (2017), amongst others, explain that there exists no clear unifying definition yet, which has resulted in the existence of multiple meanings. In fact, the authors note that most definitions refer to a variety of brand-related attributes, items or dimensions, that constitute the construct of BA. Furthermore, these constructs have been developed in different cultural contexts and from different perspectives (e.g. consumer or corporate perspective). Given the lack of a commonly accepted definition of BA within the business literature, we avoid using a general definition and rely on the most appropriate BA construct for the purpose of this research.

2.2 Brand Authenticity as a Multidimensional Construct

Taking into account the lack of a general definition of BA, an investigation into the various BA constructs and their dimensions found in the literature is essential to provide a holistic understanding of current conceptualizations. Eggers and colleagues (2013) build on early qualitative work on BA by Burmann and Schallehn (2008; 2010) and were first to operationalize BA as a holistic, multi-dimensional construct in a quantitative study. Taking on a corporate perspective to BA, the authors validate that BA is captured by three dimensions, namely brand consistency, customer orientation and congruency. Brand consistency implies that company stakeholders experience the brand consistently at all touchpoints. Following a brand customer orientation means understanding and satisfying the needs of customers. Brand congruency stands for a high degree of commitment to brand values by employees.

Responding to the call by Eggers et al. (2013) for an objective measure of BA that includes the perceptions of consumers, Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland and Farrelly (2014) develop a consumer-based BA scale. They find three interrelated first-order factors labelled

quality commitment, sincerity and heritage. Quality commitment reflects a firm's continuous promise to maintain the exact standards of their products or better. Sincerity is reflected in the idea that brand owners act with integrity and are driven by intrinsic motivation rather than by economic interest. Heritage includes a brand's sense of history and connection with traditional cultures, regions and beliefs. Acknowledging the similarity of the dimensions to those applied by Eggers et al. (2013), the authors note that the conceptualization of BA through quality commitment, heritage and sincerity is relevant from both perspectives, corporate as well as consumer.

Another holistic conceptualization of BA that has been qualitatively investigated as well as quantitatively validated was introduced by Bruhn et al. in 2012. By researching consumers' understanding of BA, the authors identify BA as a four-dimensional construct manifested in terms of being stable and consistent (i.e. continuity), being creative, original and/or innovative (i.e. originality), keeping promises and/ or being reliable (i.e. reliability) and being genuine, natural and unaffected (i.e. naturalness). The authors emphasize that the BA construct exhibits discriminant validity from other branding concepts, such as brand image, brand involvement and brand satisfaction.

So far, research on BA had primarily been done within the context of consumer goods and within a single cultural context. The study by Morhart et al. (2015) responds to these limitations noted in the work by Napoli et al. (2014). Compared to previous research, the BA framework by Morhart et al. (2015) involves a wide range of product and service brands and examines the scale performance in different cultural contexts. Their four-dimensional scale of perceived BA includes the factors of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism *(see Appendix 1)*. Continuity represents the brand's timelessness, historicity and its ability to transcend trends. Credibility implies transparency and honesty towards the consumer as well as fulfilling brand claims. Integrity refers to the moral purity and responsibility of the brand, reflected in its intrinsic motivation and adherence to good values. Symbolism is a brand's potential to serve as a resource for identity construction. The authors conclude by describing perceived BA as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful towards itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity), and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)" (p. 203).

In trying to find common ground among the conceptualizations of BA to this date, Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn (2017) note that while the measurement scales by Bruhn et al. (2012), Napoli et al. (2014), and Morhart et al. (2015) display some deviations, substantial similarities are evident in that they all cover aspects of consistency (i.e. continuity, heritage), honesty (i.e. reliability, quality commitment, credibility) and genuineness (i.e. naturalness, sincerity, integrity). Only Morhart et al. (2015) found empirical evidence for symbolism as being another key component of perceived BA.

2.3 Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity

2.3.1 Formation of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity

There is widespread agreement among various research disciplines that authenticity is not a fixed and stable attribute but should primarily be understood as being highly subjective and changeable (e.g. Fritz et al., 2017; Napoli et al., 2016). Within branding, BA is considered a "rationally created characteristic informing an individual's subjective perceptions" of a brand rather than a characteristic inherent to an objective reality (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 568). In this regard, the formation of BA perceptions varies among consumers. Authenticity attribution as a perceptual process has been widely acknowledged, which is why the notion of perceived BA has been in the centre of investigations within BA research (e.g. Bruhn et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2014, 2016; Morhart et al., 2015; Fritz et al., 2017).

Grayson and Martinec (2004) have contributed to a better understanding of the formation of customer perceived BA by introducing a framework that illustrates how consumers make authenticity judgments. They explain how consumers rely on different cues to assess different kinds of authenticity and how this influences some benefits that authenticity produces. More specifically, the authors distinguish between two types of authenticity: indexical and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity follows an objectivist perspective, which assumes an evidence-based reality. It refers to the idea that something is not a copy or an imitation, but the "original". Indexical cues "represent a factual or spatio-temporal link with something" (p. 298), which means they are fact-based and verifiable. With regard to market offerings, consumers use objective sources of brand information such as labels, age, ingredients or performance to form their authenticity evaluations (Morhart et al.,

2015). Moreover, verification is possible through a given trustworthy context that provides the consumer with confidence to judge whether something is authentic, for example by having additional information about the cues (e.g. historic information) (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Iconic authenticity reflects the constructivist perspective, assuming that reality results from different interpretations of what "the real world" looks like (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authenticity is seen a projection of one's beliefs, expectations and perspectives, which is driven by consumers' senses rather than by facts (Wang, 1999; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In an authenticity judgment, consumers make an assessment based on their own expectations and beliefs about how something "ought to be" (Beverland, 2009). In a branding context, iconic authenticity refers to a brand's ability to create a schematic fit with consumers' expectations of an authentic brand (Morhart et al., 2015). Consumers' iconic BA perceptions arise from their subjective construction of the brand's essence as communicated through the its marketing efforts. As such, iconic authenticity is affected by a consumer's level of scepticism towards advertising (Morhart et al., 2015). Grayson and Martinec (2004) highlight that indexical and iconic authenticity are not mutually exclusive but that every cue has indexical and iconic properties.

Morhart et al. (2015) add a third perspective to consumer perceived BA judgements: the existentialist perspective *(see Appendix 1)*. Rooted in philosophical existentialism, it regards authenticity as relating to one's identity and advances the notion of being true to one's self. Authenticity is attributed to an object if it supports consumers' quest for self-identity construction and for uncovering their true self through consumption (Arnould & Price, 2000). Thus, authenticity drivers are also represented by existential cues that reflect values or relationships deemed important for identity construction (Morhart et al., 2015). The authors explain that a few verifiable indexical cues suffice when making quick situational-based authenticity evaluations (e.g. a glass of beer). However, in their quest for long-term identity goals, consumers draw on a broader range of cues to negotiate a strong sense of authenticity that reinforces the desired self. Morhart et al. (2015) conclude that "perceived BA arises from the interplay of objective facts (indexical authenticity), subjective mental associations (iconic authenticity), and existential motives (existential authenticity)" (p. 202).

The notion that BA judgments are underpinned by consumers' personal identity goals is also addressed by Beverland and Farrelly (2010), who reveal that authenticity is not only context- but also goal-dependent. They explain that "different interpretations of authenticity are often a by-product of the personal goals that influence which properties are uniquely identified as significant and relevant" (p. 839). As a result, consumers focus on those particular authenticity cues that convey the benefits needed for their goals. Thus, BA judgments of different consumption experiences are rather active and systematic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

Extending the findings by Grayson and Martinec (2004) and Beverland and Farrelly (2010), Napoli et al. (2016) find support for the existence of a perceived BA continuum. Building on the idea that consumers rely on different drivers to assess the authenticity of an object and enjoy different benefits of authenticity, the authors find evidence that consumers do not separate brands into being authentic or inauthentic, but instead, their evaluations vary along a continuum between these two extremes. Consequently, they argue that brands perceived as highly authentic are better able to satisfy higher-order needs related to the "self" and thus are influenced by a combination of authenticity cues. In contrast, low-authenticity brands are more adept to satisfying basic functional needs, requiring the consideration of less or other types of cues.

Rose and Wood (2005) take on a more critical perspective on consumer perceived BA judgments. In their research on consumer authenticity in the context of reality TV consumption, the authors reveal a postmodern paradox. They argue that the consumption of reality TV represents a quest for authenticity within a fiction-oriented entertainment paradigm. Considering the simulated nature of this type of entertainment, however, it contradicts the widespread idea of authenticity judgments involving examinations of genuineness, credibility and trustworthiness. To resolve this contradiction, the authors introduce the term "hyper-authenticity", which is grounded in the idea of consumers being active co-creators of meaning. They explain, "hyper-authenticity denotes viewers' reflexive consumption of an individualized blend of fantasy with the real. […] This process is not a compromise but rather an active negotiation of real and fantastic elements that leads to a constructed, authentic experience" (pp. 294f.). Thus, consumers are able to find resources for

their self-authentication even in the obviously fake. Consumers' goal-driven behaviour is used to explain this seemingly contradictory phenomenon. Beverland and Farrelly (2010) argue that consumers who use reality TV as a source of self-authentication do so with a certain motivation in mind, such as escaping the phoniness associated with modern life.

The summary of previous research highlights that consumers have the power to create their own BA judgments based on a set of objective as well as subjective cues. These BA judgments seem to be influenced by the given context as well as underlying motivations or goals that the consumer maintains. Thus, by using the term BA we will hereafter refer to the notion of consumer perceived BA.

2.3.2 Outcomes of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity

Grayson and Martinec (2004) call for a better understanding of the benefits associated with the consumption of authentic offerings. In order to address this need, various scholars have examined the outcomes of BA. The following section synthesizes their findings and turns first to the impact on consumers before looking at the positive outcomes of BA for brands.

Napoli et al. (2016) mention four sources of consumer-derived benefits. First, authentic brands have the potential to deliver utilitarian benefits to consumers, such as exerting control over their environment or life (e.g. maintaining a healthy lifestyle), mastering certain skills (e.g. surfing) or making informed purchase decisions (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Thereby, consumers rely on factual, or indexical, cues to make authenticity judgments (Napoli et al., 2016; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Second, authentic brands have the value to satisfy consumers' hedonic desires, which focuses on acquiring pleasure and fun out of a consumption experience. Third, authenticity attribution to a brand reflects a consumer's quest for self-authentication. Choosing or rejecting brands forms part of an authenticating act (Arnould & Price, 2000). For example, consumers strive for authentic brands with a clarity of purpose that is sincerely executed whereas they want to be disassociated with inauthentic brands that are seen as lacking in morals or breaching ethical norms (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Morhart et al., 2015). Moreover, authentic brands are used to publicly display membership of a group or community, or to express social affiliations (Arnould & Price, 2000). Fourth, brand love is another valuable outcome of an authentic brand positioning for consumers and refers

to the emotional connection between a brand and its consumers. In fact, Morhart et al. (2015) find that consumers form stronger emotional attachments to brands if they perceive them as authentic. In general, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) highlight that the benefits derived by consumers are contingent on their personal goals for forming their authenticity perceptions *(see 2.3.1 Formation of Consumer Perceived BA)*.

A growing body of literature points to positive impacts of BA on brand management and overall business success. Napoli et al. (2016) present brand-derived benefits of BA and note that they are reflective of the benefits attributed to an authentic brand by consumers. Similarly, Fritz et al. (2017) associate the consequences of BA for businesses with positive brand-related psychological and behavioural *consumer* outcomes. Starting with the psychological consumer outcomes, BA has been repeatedly found to positively correlate with brand credibility and trust (Napoli et al., 2016; Eggers et al., 2013; Schallehn et al., 2014). These attributes are regarded as especially relevant for companies operating in today's postmodern economy, which increasingly demands trustworthy relationships and companies to act according to their promises (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Holt, 2002). Furthermore, trust can be classified under "brand relationship quality", which represents a major goal of contemporary marketing (Smit, Bronner & Tolboom, 2007). In addition, a brand's authenticity has been found to signal quality to consumers. Moulard et al. (2016) find evidence that consumers, when faced with an unfamiliar brand, are likely to rely on perceptions of BA in assessing the expected quality. Following these findings, Napoli et al. (2016) outline that BA positively influences brand reputation, as it is defined by value judgments made about a brand's trustworthiness, reliability and quality (Balmer, 1998). The authors add brand equity as another brand-derived benefit. It refers to consumers' differential responses to branding and is strengthened when consumers hold favourable, strong, and unique brand associations compared to other brands (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). The positive relationship between BA and brand equity mirrors the loss of BA and consumers' perceived brand parity as observed by Burmann and Arnould (2008). Hence, BA allows brands to differentiate themselves from competition.

Turning to the behavioural consumer outcomes, Morhart et al. (2015) note that the higher consumers perceive a brand's level of credibility, integrity and trustworthiness, the more they assume the company to be dedicated towards its stakeholders. This dedication is likely to be reciprocated with positive behavioural responses, such as brand loyalty, purchase likelihood and intention to recommend the brand (Lu, Gursoy & Lu, 2015; Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). Furthermore, in the context of corporations, Eggers et al. (2013) verified a positive relationship between BA and growth. These findings show that high perceptions of BA can lead to repeated purchases and a higher willingness to pay, ultimately bearing a positive impact on the triple bottom line (Fritz et al., 2017; Eggers et al., 2013).

Taking the psychological and behavioural outcomes together, it becomes evident how BA positively affects some of the key factors to a company's competitive advantage. In fact, it seems to address the contemporary challenges of consumer scepticism and increasing brand parity perception within brand management *(see 1.3 Contemporary Challenges in Branding)*.

2.4 Brand Authenticity in the Context of Human Brands

According to Beverland and Farrelly (2010), an underlying commonality in the authenticity assessment of a *person* is the behaviour according to one's true self. Similarly, self-determination theory describes intrinsically motivated behaviour (i.e. behaviour that is self-determined and inherently enjoyable or satisfying) as "authentic in the fullest sense of those terms" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74). In contrast, externally motivated behaviour is related to peer pressure, rewards or punishment, and seen as inherently inauthentic. In fact, these two notions are widely found in the intersection of authenticity and human brands. For example, Moulard et al. (2015) define celebrity authenticity as "the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self" (p. 175). Furthermore, Moulard, Rice, Garrity and Mangus (2014) define artist authenticity (seen as a type of human brand) as "the extent to which consumers perceive the artist as intrinsically motivated in that the artist is passionate and committed to producing her/his artwork" (p. 579). These authors note that also human brands must engage in the careful management of their identities, as it affects important psychological and behavioural consumer outcomes (Moulard et al., 2015; Moulard et al.,

2014). Therefore, researchers are increasingly interested in the authenticity perceptions of human brands; their formation as well as their impact (Moulard et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2014; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2018). The following sections synthesizes the drivers and outcomes of human BA found in the existing literature.

2.4.1 Drivers and Outcomes of Celebrity Brand Authenticity

Moulard et al. (2015) examine the antecedents that influence consumers' celebrity BA perceptions *(see Appendix 2)*. Since one's true self and intrinsic motivations are unobservable, the authors rely on attribution theory to explain consumers' authenticity judgments. Attribution theory considers whether a person's observable *behaviour* can be attributed to intrinsic motivations or extrinsic pressures (Kelley, 1973). They reveal that consumers' perceptions of celebrity BA (i.e. its associated behaviour) are driven by two higher order factors that underlie six theoretical dimensions. The first factor is rarity, which the authors define as "the degree to which the celebrity is seen as uncommon" (p. 177). It implies that the celebrity holds unique and differentiating characteristics that are not easily copied. The idea that rarity leads to authenticity perceptions rests on the logic that celebrities that do not conform to the norm are less likely to receive social approval and are perceived as being intrinsically motivated (Moulard et al., 2015). Rarity is further divided in three sub-dimensions. First, consumers consider a celebrity as authentic when s/he possesses a special, rare talent that enabled her/him the fame. Second, celebrities' discretion about their personal lives is seen as a driver for their authenticity. Third, the idea that a celebrity that thinks or acts in an independent, creative or individual manner (i.e. originality) is presented as another driver. The second factor is stability, defined as "the degree to which the celebrity is perceived as unwavering" (p. 178). Moulard et al. (2015) find support for this factor within psychological research and the folk theory of "essences", which suggest that each individual has unalterable characteristics and therefore, the true self must be static (Gergen, 1991; Schlegel, Vess & Arndt, 2012). Within stability, the authors propose three sub-dimensions. First, consistency, or the perception that a celebrity's personality has not changed over time is found. Second, authenticity is attributed to a celebrity when s/he is perceived as candid. Candidness implies that statements of celebrities reflect their true inner-self instead of being a means to craft a

desired public image. In a similar vein, Gilmore and Pine (2007) find that ubiquity and over-commercialisation decreases a brand's perceived authenticity. Third, the authors find a connection to morality. Following arguments in sociology, authenticity incorporates a society's ethical ideas, arguing that one cannot be authentically immoral or antisocial (Taylor, 1991).

Considering the powerful benefits of BA that have been repeatedly emphasized in the literature, Moulard et al. (2014) examine the outcomes of perceived BA of artists in a human brand context. They find evidence that an artist's authenticity positively influences behavioural intentions of consumers via the attitude towards the artist and the artwork. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) provide further insights into the impacts of celebrity BA *(see Appendix 3)*. They find that celebrity authenticity fosters an emotional bond or relationship between the consumer and the celebrity. Further, they prove that celebrity authenticity and emotional attachment both have a direct positive impact on WOM and purchase likelihood.

2.4.2 Drivers and Outcomes of Social Media Influencer Brand Authenticity

Besides celebrities, also SMIs have been found to actively manage their brand identities in order to be perceived as authentic. In fact, SMIs' messages are perceived as "one of the few forms of real, authentic communication" (Scott, 2015, p. 295) and their followers are particularly drawn to their content, as it is perceived as rather trustworthy and non-commercial (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). At the same time, SMIs BA makes them especially attractive collaboration partners for influencer marketing (*see 3. Influencer Marketing*). In this regard, Erz and Christensen (2018) explain that a potential identity conflict may arise as the identity work by bloggers is not only done for their own personal brand, but increasingly for third-parties. Similarly, Audrezet et al. (2018) note that commercially-driven brand collaborations represent an authenticity dilemma for SMIs. Thus, the authors explore the signs and strategies applied by SMIs to resolve this tension and maintain their personal authenticity in their sponsored posts:

Audrezet et al. (2018) find several *on-stage* authenticity signs applied by SMIs. First, SMI content is characterised by an originality of text, photos and videos, taking on the form of a mini-story that links the SMI's life with the promoted product. These involve the use of

factual information combined with emotional influences. Second, they find expressions of intrinsic motivation, manifested in the satisfaction and excitement that SMIs seem to derive from posting content. In fact, Lawrence, Fournier and Brunel (2013) find the perceived motivations of a blogger to be critical in establishing authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness with consumers. These expressions of intrinsic motivation are reflected in the use of stylistic punctuation, such as exclamation marks, capital words, and emoticons as well as in the use of certain verbs and nouns that express positive emotions, appreciation and enthusiasm for the endorsed brand. Moreover, SMIs express the good fit between themselves and the endorsement, thereby highlighting their sincere interest in the brand. In fact, consumers' perceived affiliation between the SMI and the advertised product has been found to increase the credibility of the SMI (Lim, Cheah & Wong, 2017).

Third, Audrezet et al. (2018) observe expressions of integrity, which are manifested in the sharing of objective, fact-based opinions about the endorsed brand as well as a clear disclosure of the contractual terms. In fact, scholars have found that the informativeness of a post, the provision of detailed recommendations and a professional appearance leads to favourable reactions and a more trustworthy relationship between the SMI and consumers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2018; Van Esch, Arli, Castner, Talukdar & Northey, 2018; Konstantopoulou, Rizomyliotis, Konstantoulaki & Badahdah, 2018). Audrezet et al. (2018) explain how these authenticity signs are applied by SMIs depending on which *behind-the-scenes* authenticity strategy they a follow as a guideline for collaborations. While using a *passionate authenticity* strategy aims to express intrinsic motivations and creative freedom, a *transparent authenticity* strategy emphasizes the idea of integrity and honesty. Overall, the authors identify four paths that SMIs adopt to authentically manage their brand collaborations. These range from absolute authenticity (passionate and transparent) to disembodied authenticity (only transparent) and fairytale authenticity (only passionate) and finally to fake authenticity (neither passionate nor transparent).

Turning to the outcomes of SMI BA, Audrezet et al. (2018) find that following an absolute authenticity strategy creates greater self-esteem and life satisfaction for the SMI as well as a stronger connection to followers. In contrast, SMIs who follow no authenticity strategy may

fail in the long run because their overly commercial orientation may lack resonance with followers. Erz and Christensen (2018) emphasize that bloggers who offer authentic contextualization of their collaborations find positive, personal vibrancy among their audience. Although research specifically addressing the outcomes of SMI BA is quite scarce, some scholars have investigated the outcomes of some of its sub-dimensions. These studies have been primarily carried out in an influencer marketing context. For example, Lou and Yuan (2018) find that trustworthiness and similarity (i.e. sharing common interest) of the SMI have a positive impact on the credibility of a branded post. However, they note that if consumers do not clearly see the SMI's intrinsic motives behind a brand collaboration, their trust decreases, which negatively affects purchase decisions. Also van Esch et al. (2018) argue that consumers' perceived similarity positively impacts attitudes and engagement with the blogger. Further, it makes them more likely to recognize sponsored posts as authentic, affective, credible and trustworthy. Lastly, the authors find entertaining and pleasurable content to be a key factor in affecting consumers' purchase decisions.

2.5 Leveraging Brand Authenticity

Different scholars within the BA literature have repeatedly highlighted the importance of authenticity for brand management. In the light of a new branding logic, in which brand value is constantly co-created in a dynamic, reciprocal and social ecosystem by multiple stakeholders, it seems that the authenticity of a brand positively impacts all its co-creators. In fact, there exists significant evidence that BA carries important benefits for conventional brands, consumers as well as human brands. In the case of conventional brands, such as product or service brands, achieving BA is desirable as it positively impacts brand reputation, brand trust, brand equity, growth, and ultimately can serve as a source of competitive advantage. Essentially, BA has been recognized as crucial for rebuilding strong consumer relationships and brand differentiation in a postmodern world characterised by corporate distrust and brand parity. For consumers, brands perceived as authentic play a central role in their lives, as their consumption helps them to express themselves, create a sense of belonging, and most importantly, to create, define and enhance their identities. SMIs, who

have been recently acknowledged as a new type of human brand also draw benefits from being perceived as authentic. These benefits include the fulfilment of their intrinsic desires as well as maintaining integrity for themselves and in the face of others. While BA has individual benefits for each of the three market actors, their quest for authenticity all comes together in the notion of influencer marketing.

3. Influencer Marketing

The following part will give a better understanding of the practice of influencer marketing. First, it presents how the introduction of UGC platforms gave rise to a modern type of key opinion leaders whose main characteristic is their high perceived authenticity. Second, it describes how influencer marketing emerged as a response to the new consumer realities and challenges in branding. Finally, it outlines the opportunities of influencer marketing before turning to its current challenges.

3.1 From Traditional Key Opinion Leaders to Social Media Influencers

The two-step flow communication theory developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) significantly impacted the domain of marketing and communications. It claims that messages disseminated by mass media are filtered by opinion leaders, who act as intermediaries that transmit the message within their personal network. According to the authors, these opinion leaders are "individuals who [are] likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment" (p. 3). Katz (1957) identifies these highly influential individuals based on three common characteristics: "personification of certain values (who one is); competence (what one knows) and strategic social location (whom one knows)" (p. 73). In this regard, conventional celebrities from mainstream media have been regarded as key opinion leaders, since they maintain a high level of expertise and a broad network that values their competences and opinions (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

While early studies within this research stream considered physical proximity a necessity for opinion leadership, current technological developments no longer make it a requirement (Backaler, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). In fact, with the introduction of UGC

platforms, a new type of opinion leaders emerged: digital opinion leaders, digital influencers or more recently, SMIs (De Veirman et al., 2017). Unlike traditional celebrity opinion leaders, even ordinary consumers are able to turn into digital influencers (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). They are able to influence the attitudes, decisions and behaviours of their audience by sharing experiences, passions and expertise in form of texts, photos and videos on their social media profiles (Backaler, 2018; Abidin, 2016). Today, the group of SMIs ranges from celebrities, over macro-influencers, to more micro-targeted professionals or non-professional 'peers' (Gottbrecht, 2016). Macro-influencers have reached a certain celebrity status, either only through social media or in the traditional sense, emanating from mainstream media. Micro-influencers, however, represent regular consumers with a certain influential status in their social network, gained through the professionalization of their social media work (Erz & Christensen, 2018). Senft (2008) calls them "micro-celebrities" and notes that they are able to sustain relationships with their followers that seem more "real" than the conventional one between mainstream celebrities and fans. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) find that SMIs are perceived as more credible than celebrities as people can relate to them more easily. Similarly, Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) present SMIs as online micro-celebrities, whose most important trait is a promise of authenticity and realness achieved through their relatability. By providing insights into their private lives, they give followers the impression of an exclusive, intimate exchange, which appears to be genuine and raw (Abidin, 2015). In fact, due to their high authenticity perception and their ability to effectively transmit brand messages to consumers, SMIs have been recognized as key collaboration partners for promoting brands online (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Abidin, 2015).

3.2 From Celebrity Endorsement to Influencer Marketing

For decades, celebrities have been chosen as brand ambassadors, as traditional media prevented ordinary individuals from gaining influence (Backaler, 2018). Within celebrity endorsements, celebrities have been found to be able to turn an unknown product into a well-known one, create positive associations, build brand equity, and contribute to a brand's

competitive advantage (Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011; Elberse & Verleun, 2012; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Moreover, it has been found that the celebrity brand influences perceptions of the sponsoring brand and vice versa, both positively and negatively (Bartz, Molchanov & Stork, 2013). Central to this practice is the idea that brands can leverage on the "halo" (e.g. reputation) of the endorser in order to transfer positive associations to their brand (Smith, Read & López-Rodríguez, 2010; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). While celebrities used to endorse brands on traditional communication channels (e.g. TV spots), with the rise of the internet, they also started using their own media channels to spread brand-related content (Khamis et al., 2017; Backaler, 2018).

In fact, the process of digitization has required marketers to engage in more innovative marketing strategies, as traditional advertising methods no longer met the demands of the market (Brown & Hayes, 2008). In response to the increasing pressure, the practice of influencer marketing emerged and quickly gained popularity among marketers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Already in the early 2000s, scholars recognized the positive effect of WOM on consumers' attitudes and noted that this influence could be leveraged by companies (Brown & Hayes, 2008). In the digital era, influencer marketing brings together the notion of digital opinion leaders and eWOM. It represents a new type of third-party endorsement in which SMIs act as mediators who spread eWOM about a company or brand among their wide and committed network (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). According to the Word of Mouth Association (2016), influencer marketing is defined as "identifying key communities and opinion leaders who are likely to talk about a product and have the ability to influence others' opinions". Over the past years, the term *communities* and *opinion leaders* have been replaced by *followers* and *influencers*. In an influencer marketing campaign, companies provide free products or services to chosen SMIs whereupon they produce and share brand-related content on their digital platforms (Tapinfluence, 2017). Depending on the terms of the collaboration, companies also offer monetary rewards (Backaler, 2018). Currently, Instagram and Facebook are found to be the most popular social media platforms for influencer marketing (Augure, 2017). Childers et al. (2018) note that brands pursue influencer marketing for two main reasons: First, SMIs create authentic and relevant UGC for the brand, which is more relatable and generates positive consumer responses (Solis, 2017). Second, brands leverage on SMIs'

wide reach and strong follower engagement (Backaler, 2018; Childers et al., 2018). Thus, influencer marketing combines two contemporary demands of the market: The desire of consumers for trustworthy and authentic advertising, and the goal of companies to commercialize their products in a consumer-focused and effective way (e.g. Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Schallehn et al., 2014; Eggers et al., 2013).

Today, the popularity of influencer marketing can be explained by its effectiveness. A survey done by Solis in 2017 found that influencer marketing is able to achieve an eleven times higher return on investment than usual digital marketing activities. Another study by Linqia (2017) shows that 88% of marketers used influencer marketing in 2017, from which 92% highlighted its effectiveness and strategic importance. Due to these developments, Solis (2017) anticipates a new generation of influencer marketing: Influencer Marketing 2.0. In this new era, not only the marketing function, but several business departments are responsible for pursuing Influencer Relationship Management in order to foster strong relationships with SMIs and increase influencer marketing effectiveness.

3.3 Emergence of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has emerged as a promising approach to branding due to three main developments: First, the arrival of Web 2.0 gave rise to UGC platforms, thereby breaking down traditional barriers of communication and supporting pro-active consumer behaviour (Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). On these platforms, brands can connect with consumers more directly and organically (Backaler, 2018). Consumers not only receive information from brands in a one-directional way anymore but are able to engage in conversations with the brand and with each other (Childers et al., 2018; Glucksman, 2017). Each individual can share her or his opinion, recommendation or critique within an expansive network, whereby consumers' opinions are shaped at any point of time (Backaler, 2018; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). In fact, several scholars find that not only peers, but especially SMIs have the power to affect behaviours and attitudes of their audience. Recognizing the opportunities, marketers started to leverage on the commercial value of SMIs and their large online networks (Watts & Dodds, 2007; Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Booth & Matic, 2011).

Second, consumers have become increasingly sceptical, turning away from traditional brand-driven advertising and mass media (Childers et al., 2018). Research within consumer behavior has found that distrust for brands evolved as consumers began to behave less loyal, change brands more frequently, and strive for more individualism (Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). This development has made (e)WOM one of the most trusted and relevant sources for consumers' decision making (Glucksman, 2017). Especially on social media, the reach of eWOM is accelerated, as consumers are better connected to like-minded peers than ever before (Backaler, 2018). In fact, De Veirman et al. (2017) argue that due to the rising importance of eWOM, influencer marketing has reached global popularity. Since consumers are more receptive to SMIs and even pro-actively seek their recommendations, brands started to maximize the advantages of eWOM by letting SMIs talk about their products (Childers et al., 2018; Lee & Youn, 2009).

Third, being increasingly overwhelmed by product choices and advertisements, consumers started to perceive brands as largely homogenous and advertising as strongly intrusive and disruptive (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Backaler, 2018). In response, they have become unable to differentiate between brands and started applying new ad blocking technologies to bypass so-called "interruption marketing" (Backaler, 2018). However, ad blockers cannot bypass SMI content, as SMIs "advertise" on their own social media platforms (Dahan, 2016). Moreover, companies realized that by partnering up with niche SMIs (e.g. fashion, beauty, technology, etc.) they can target specific audiences and thus not only ensure relevance of the advertisement but also create unique associations that lead to brand differentiation (Backaler, 2018; Childers et al., 2018). Taken together, the emergence of influencer marketing can be seen as a response to the new consumer realities that have formed the contemporary challenges in branding *(see 1.3 Contemporary Challenges in Branding)*.

3.4 Opportunities and Challenges in Influencer Marketing

3.4.1 Opportunities in Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is labelled as one of the most promising marketing activities in today's marketing mix (Linqia, 2017). Specifically, engaging in influencer marketing practices holds

certain strategic benefits, not only for branding but also for overall business success. While these benefits were touched upon in the previous paragraphs, this section aims to synthesize them, thereby highlighting the central role of BA. First, by collaborating with SMIs, who have a strong, engaging consumer network and maintain a certain degree of persuasive power, brands can spread brand-related content more widely and effectively (Abidin, 2015; Konstantopulos et al., 2018). This is built on the idea that information obtained through interpersonal sources is more credible and has stronger effects on consumer decision-making than traditional advertising (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008; Konstantopulos et al., 2018). By letting SMIs present and recommend products on their social media, brands can leverage on the power of eWOM, engage in consumer conversations, and market products indirectly (Childers et al., 2018). Moreover, in contrast to regular online advertisement, consumers actively visit social media platforms to find inspiration for their next purchase (Van Esch et al., 2018).

Second, by utilizing SMIs as intermediaries, companies can establish strong relationships with consumers based on trust and credibility. In fact, brands can make use of the "halo effect", thus transferring consumer associations with the SMI brand to the sponsoring brand (Smith et al., 2010). With their highly personal content, SMIs are regarded as authentic and credible endorsers, as they convey a sense of similarity and relatability to consumers (De Veirman et al., 2017). In fact, sponsored content by SMIs can achieve higher product engagement than celebrities, leading to increased sales and brand loyalty (Tapinfluence, 2017; Childers et al., 2018). As such, it addresses one of the key demands of today's consumers, namely the call for more honest, credible and authentic advertising. Besides the fact that SMIs' perceived BA leads to lower resistance towards brand-related messages, Woods (2016) find that SMIs are able to maintain authenticity even though followers know that they might get paid for some online activities.

Third, influencer marketing has been found to facilitate the reach to new, highly targeted audiences (Childers et al., 2018). By collaborating with niche SMIs, brands can reach out and connect with a specific target group in an easy, exclusive and more discerning way (Solis, 2017). Khamis et al. (2017) explain that this is enabled through the authentic and intimate connection SMIs maintain with their audience, which brands seem to be able to take over (Gromley, 2016; Abidin, 2015).

Lastly, collaborating with certain SMI personalities can serve as a source of differentiation. As outlined before, BA is seen as a credible way to differentiate from competitors (e.g. Burmann & Arnhold, 2008; Eggers et al., 2013). Although no research so far has explicitly investigated on SMIs as sources of differentiation, the combinatorial effects of perceived BA and the halo effect can lead to positive and unique associations that serve as important points of differentiation.

3.4.2 Challenges in Influencer Marketing

Marketers today have embraced the benefits of influencer marketing by integrating its practice into their company strategy. Yet, many companies are still experimenting and facing various challenges (Childers et al., 2018). For example, marketers struggle with measuring the effectiveness (e.g. ROI) of their campaigns, due to difficulties in quantifying and interpreting engagement, clicks and conversions. Moreover, stricter regulations have been put into practice, e.g. by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which protects consumers from unfair and misleading business activities (FTC, 2017). With the aim to provide more transparency, the FTC requires that SMIs clearly mark content as sponsored if they have received monetary or other compensations. Marketers have to ensure that their collaboration partners comply accordingly, as such disclosure not only prevents lawsuits, but also helps to maintain credibility and authenticity for both parties.

However, the greatest challenge remains the identification of the right SMI - one that is influential, authentic and at the same time fits with the company (Li, Lai & Chen, 2011; Backaler, 2018). According to De Veirman et al. (2017) companies need to look for a likeable and authentic SMI, who maintains a high value as opinion leader. Similarly, Booth and Matic (2011) argue that brands have the challenge to choose a collaboration partner that fits with their communication strategy. Further, Backaler (2018) points out the challenge of finding SMIs that hold authentic and trusted relationships with their community. They advise companies to focus on SMIs who maintain an engaged and growing audience, as relevance and engagement are crucial KPIs for SMI collaborations.

Not only sponsoring companies, but also SMIs face challenges in the pursuit of influencer marketing, as they find themselves in a conflict of authenticity versus

commercialisation (Audrezet et al., 2018). In general, many SMIs seek to maintain a high level of authenticity in order to resonate and create trustworthy relationships with their followers (Grafström, Jakobsson & Wiede, 2018). However, SMIs authenticity perceptions might get compromised in the light of commercial opportunities (Grafström et al., 2018). In fact, followers form a negative attitude towards the SMI if s/he is found to be merely motivated by monetary interests (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson & Mäg, 2016; Tripp, Jensen & Carlson, 1994).

Finally, spurred by the recent influx of SMI campaigns as well as the increasing commercialisation of SMIs, consumer scepticism is slowly expanding towards SMIs. This makes it even more important for companies to identify authentic SMIs and more difficult for SMIs to build and maintain their own BA perceptions. According to a study by Medium, 52% of millennials said they trust SMIs less than they used to (Quoc, 2017). Since this observation is a rather new issue, academic research is still limited. However, it is widely known that people are generally suspicious about advertisements and business-provided information (Rotfeld, 2008; Koslow, 2000). Moreover, Korotina and Jargalsaikhan (2016) find that consumers perceive product placements in a negative way, especially if the ad appears to be too obvious and commercial. Since advertisements by SMIs are not always labelled as such, Ewers (2017) argues that consumers might become sceptical towards all recommendations due to their inability to differentiate those from unbiased opinions. In addition, Konstantopoulos et al. (2018) observe that consumers are likely to doubt the authenticity of beauty SMIs. They are rather sceptical when receiving reviews or recommendations from them and tend to conduct their own research.

Summing up, although influencer marketing emerged to take advantage of consumers' high BA perceptions of SMIs, its rapid expansion and over-utilisation has created challenges for SMIs to manage their perceived BA as well as for companies to identify suitable SMIs. Thus, further research within the perceived BA of SMIs is required in order to maintain a win-win situation for all parties.

III. Research Gap and Research Question

The synthesis of literature shows an important interconnectedness between the three research streams on the *Evolution of Branding, Brand Authenticity* and *Influencer Marketing.* Therein, the researchers identify a relevant gap in the intersection of SMIs as human brands and BA *(see Figure 1).* Driven by the rise of internet technologies and the paradigm shift in branding, three temporary challenges have been emphasized by scholars, including the rise of consumer power (e.g. Rezabakhsh et al., 2006), increasing scepticism towards traditional marketing practices as well as a high brand parity perception (e.g. Burmann & Arnhold, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2011). This gave rise to a growing literature stream, which highlights BA as a key opportunity in dealing with these new consumer realities. Although research on BA is still quite scarce and fragmented, evidence suggests BA as an effective way to establish trust, loyalty and differentiation in today's postmodern economy (e.g. Napoli et al., 2016; Arnould & Price, 2000; Morhart et al., 2015). Having recognized the importance of authentic brands, various scholars examined BA from different perspectives (e.g. corporate, consumer) and for different brand types (e.g. product, service brands). More recently, scholars started to explore BA also in the context of human brands, such as celebrities or SMIs (e.g. Moulard et al., 2015; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2018). This research domain has been strongly driven by the rising popularity of influencer marketing, since its practitioners seek to leverage on consumers' authenticity perceptions of SMIs in order to reach marketing goals, such as brand awareness, positive WOM, increased purchase intention, and loyalty (e.g. van Esch et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2018; Li et al., 2011). However, the most important challenge in influencer marketing remains identifying SMIs that are authentic, influential, and match with the sponsoring brand (Li, et al., 2011; Backaler, 2018).

Despite an increase in scholars' interest on how consumers attribute authenticity to human brands and its impacts (e.g. Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2015), no research so far has empirically investigated consumers' BA perceptions of SMIs: First, there is a lack of understanding on *how* consumers form their BA judgments of SMIs and what *drivers* they take into consideration. The BA signs outlined by Audrezet et al. (2018) are derived from content-analysis and interviews with SMIs, considering solely brand-sponsored blog posts and excluding consumer perspectives. With this limited focus, the authors disregard two key

assumptions within the new branding logic: Firstly, brand identity associations are socially constructed by multiple stakeholders and cannot result only from efforts by the SMI. Secondly, BA attribution is a highly subjective, context- as well as goal-dependent process and thus should integrate consumers' perspectives (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Hence, different BA drivers are likely to exist depending on the UGC platform, the type of SMI content, and consumers' usage motivations. Moreover, while Moulard et al. (2015) identified rarity and stability as antecedents of celebrity BA, it remains unclear whether these also lead to BA perceptions for SMI brands. A clear identification of the drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs would extend the current body of BA literature to a new type of human brand. In addition, it would shed light on how companies can use this knowledge to craft effective influencer marketing campaigns. Similarly, it could prove useful for SMIs that aim to refine their authenticity strategies, especially in the light of rising consumer scepticism towards digital influencers.

Second, existing research has not yet specifically addressed the psychological and behavioural *outcomes* of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. Work by Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) focuses on the outcomes of celebrity BA and found positive effects on consumer emotional attachment, WOM, and purchase likelihood. The question remains whether this also holds for SMIs. Furthermore, other research does not focus on the BA outcomes per se, but only makes references to its subdimensions. For example, consumer perceived trustworthiness, credibility, similarity, and intrinsic motivation of the SMI have been mentioned as key factors for building a favourable attitude towards the SMI and the sponsored ad. With their narrow focus on BA, these studies do not provide a holistic view on the outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. However, clarity about these outcomes is essential for marketers, as it helps them choose an appropriate SMI according to their influencer marketing objectives. Moreover, it could justify the need for SMIs to apply their perceived BA more strategically in order to maintain trust, build loyal relationships, differentiate from the large mass of SMIs, and ensure brand strength in the long run. Hence, in reaction to these observations, this study poses the following research question:

> What are the Drivers and Outcomes of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity of Social Media Influencers?
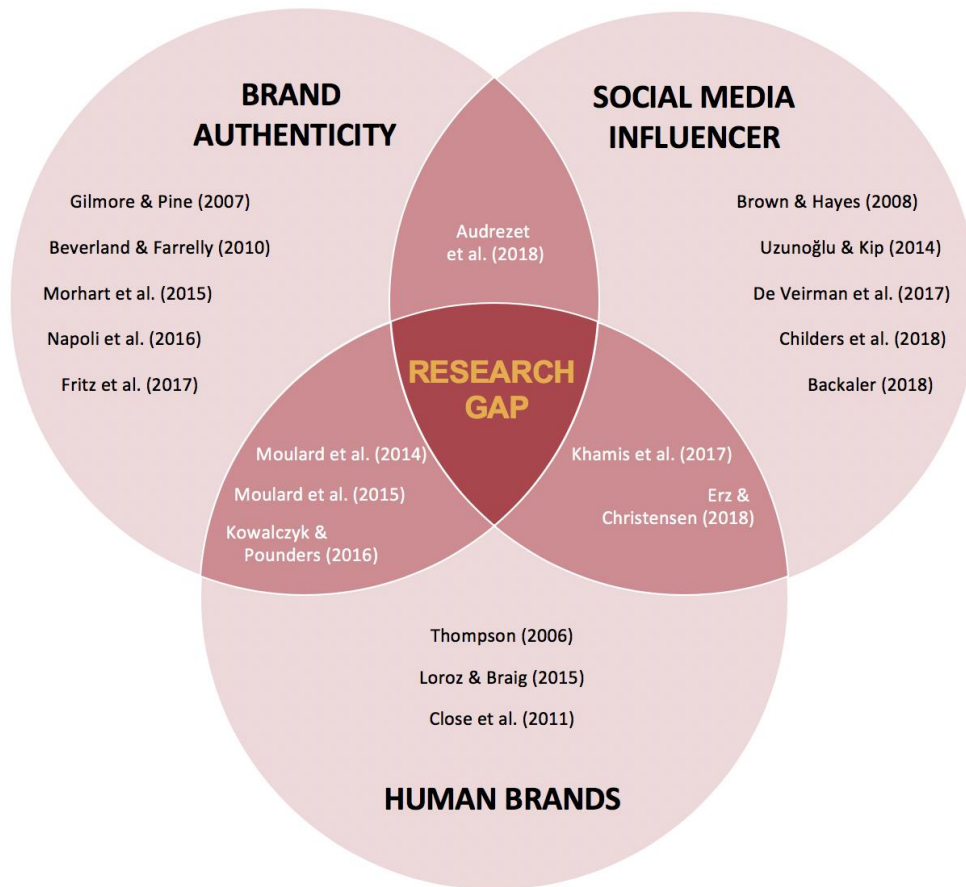
Figure 1: Illustration of Research Gap

IV. Methodology

In this chapter, the underlying research strategy applied to most appropriately address the research question is described and evaluated in a traceable way. Moreover, it presents the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the authors' stance within the philosophy of social science, thereby justifying the choice of data collection methods, the sample and the analytical approach.

1. Qualitative Research Approach

There is widespread agreement that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation by the observer rather than a property inherent to an object *(see 2.3.1 Formation of Consumer Perceived BA)*. In fact, many scholars highlight authenticity attribution as a perceptual process

that is inherently subjective, context- as well as goal-dependent (e.g. Beverland, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Rose & Wood, 2005). Different interpretations of authenticity depend on the types of cues (e.g. indexical, iconic or existential) that are uniquely identified as relevant to the individual (e.g. Morhart et al., 2015). As we are interested in identifying the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs, a qualitative research strategy is deemed most appropriate to address the purpose of this study, for the following reasons: First, qualitative research studies the meanings of people's lives under real-world conditions (Robert, 2015). Undoubtedly, social media and SMIs have become part of the lives of many people, who form their own BA interpretations of SMIs independent of any research inquiry. Since these interpretations are likely to reflect a wide diversity of meanings, it is necessary to take on an open and flexible approach, which is granted by the unstructured nature of qualitative research methods (Bryman, 2012). Second, qualitative research covers contextual as well as personalistic conditions that strongly influence all human events (Robert, 2015). Instead of providing cause-and-effect explanations, it assumes that interpretations of people are situational, emphasizing the uniqueness of time and place. Moreover, it seeks to understand individual perceptions and people's points of views in rich detail (Stake, 2010). Taking into consideration the contextual and personalistic factors is crucial when studying the perceived BA of SMIs, since the unique circumstances and goals of individuals have been found to significantly influence BA perceptions. Third, with a view on social life in terms of processes, qualitative research is occupied with how events and patterns unfold over time (Bryman, 2012). Since authenticity attribution represents a perceptual process that is subject to constant negotiation and change, it is important to apply a strategy that does not convey a sense of stability.

Despite the benefits of qualitative research, we also recognize its weaknesses. Scholars often criticise qualitative research as being too subjective and over-reliant on the views of the researcher that are influenced by personal relationships and limited by intellectual shortcomings (Bryman, 2012; Stake, 2010). Moreover, a lack of transparency of how the researcher arrived at the study's conclusions is often pointed out. These issues often lead to respectable concerns for the validity of observations. However, we aim to overcome these weaknesses by following certain guidelines: Evidence and interpretations are well

triangulated, as we are using multiple primary and secondary data sources instead of relying on a single source alone (Robert, 2015). Furthermore, we conducted a thorough literature review to be well informed about the main theories relevant to our study. In addition, by providing information rich in detail we allow readers to form their own interpretations without imposing our own ones.

1.1 Research Philosophy

The decision to apply a qualitative research practice comes with underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions about how research should be conducted. Epistemology deals with the question of what should be regarded as acceptable knowledge. While a positivist position assumes that humans are measurable and should be studied according to the laws of natural sciences, interpretivism argues that studying the social world requires a logic that reflects the distinctiveness of humans against objects (Bryman, 2012). Interpretivism seeks to understand rather than explain human behaviour in an empathetic way, whereby knowledge is seen as being subjectively constituted through an individual's lived experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Weber, 2004). Since this study aims to understand the drivers and outcomes of consumers' BA perceptions of SMIs, it is important to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity and context-dependency of the subject matter. Thus, this research takes on an interpretivist stance, thereby recognizing that there may be a wide array of dynamic interpretations of consumer perceived drivers and outcomes of SMI BA (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Moreover, understanding the context in which consumers form their BA perceptions requires immersion and learning from each step of the process in order to adapt the research design accordingly (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

Ontological considerations address whether social entities are objective or socially constructed. While advocates of the objectivistic stance assume that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence independent of social actors, a constructivist position argues for their socially constructed nature (Bryman, 2012). This study adopts a constructivist view, assuming that social reality is an ongoing accomplishment of social actors rather than something external to it. This notion is in line with the new branding logic adopted in this

research, which regards SMI human brand identities as social phenomena that emerged through the co-creation among multiple stakeholders. Moreover, there is widespread agreement within multiple research disciplines that BA is not a given objective attribute but underlies a highly subjective perceptual process that involves a variety of cues. Thus, we acknowledge not only the importance of social interaction in the creation of BA perceptions, but also the idea that it is a process subject to constant revision. This is reflected in the Grounded Theory approach taken in this study *(see 3. Data Analysis)*.

1.2 Double Hermeneutics

The interpretivist stance in qualitative research seeks to gain an empathetic *understanding* of a social phenomenon, which represents an inherently subjective process. The theory of the understanding and the interpretation of human action is a key concern in hermeneutics (Bryman, 2012). Nørreklit (2006) distinguishes between reflexive hermeneutics and constructive double hermeneutics. According to the traditional approach of reflexive hermeneutics, "understanding is to achieve insight in the pre-understanding of the other" (p. 6). Thereby, a human's pre-understanding, the mental framework that allows her/him to make sense of reality, information, and stimuli, is said to be behind the actor. A common understanding is reached when both actors use their *outer* hermeneutic circle, whereby they lay out their pre-understanding in an open dialogue so that both reach a common pre-understanding (Nørreklit, 2006). In a constructive double hermeneutics approach, the idea of understanding addresses also *why* the other actor has and displays a specific pre-understanding. This requires engaging not only in the outer hermeneutic circle, but also in the inner hermeneutic circle of the other, which controls the relation between actor and her/his pre-understanding (Nørreklit, 2006). As such, it represents another space of interpretation (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). Giddens (1984) notes that within double hermeneutics, the mental framework is regarded as standing in front of a person's consciousness, instead of behind. Operating as a mediator, it supports the actor in constantly interpreting the situation and in deciding which pre-understanding skills to apply (Nørreklit, 2006). Understanding "is not a passive reception of information about the world but an active understanding"

(Nørreklit, 2006, p. 4). Thus, it occurs when two actors make sense of each other's' premises and perspectives, thereby producing reactions and meanings accordingly.

Within the research of social sciences, the double hermeneutics effect can be found and calls attention to the complexities of meaning-making within an interpretivist stance (Mills et al., 2010). Researchers apply this approach when making sense of reality and of other individuals' inner hermeneutics, such as subjective responses, judgments or understandings of reality (Nørreklit, 2006). Double hermeneutics remind researchers "to examine the discursive effects of a given research context, within which discourse and meaning-making are produced by both the context and by the researcher's interactions and interpretations of and with said context" (Mills et al., 2010, p. 324). Also in this research, which studies consumers' BA perceptions of SMIs, it is important to maintain the flexibility to make meanings of a specific context and to tailor responses of individuals to various circumstances. However, the related subjectivism strongly relies on the researchers' sense making, purpose and perspective, which could cause limitations (Mills et al., 2010).

1.3 Exploratory Research Design

Academic literature integrating the concepts of BA and SMIs as human brands is scarce *(see Research Gap and Question)*. In fact, no research so far has investigated the drivers and outcomes of SMI BA from a consumer's perspective. Due to the limited available insights and newness of the BA context, this study has opted for an exploratory research design. The exploratory nature is reflected in the chosen data collection methods and in the data analysis *(see 2. Data Sources; 3. Data Analysis)*. This design grants the needed degree of flexibility and versatility to generate new, relevant descriptions and situational interpretations of consumers' attitudes, motivations and behaviours in the drivers and outcomes of BA (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Stake, 2010). Moreover, it resonates with the chosen research strategy and philosophical considerations outlined above.

Legitimacy of this exploratory approach is established through an abductive mode of reasoning, which contains elements of both, induction and deduction (Danermark, 2002). While induction aims to produce universally valid laws and generalisations through

observation of individuals in specific contexts, deduction seeks to reach conclusions based upon agreed and measurable premises (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). According to Collins (1985), abduction is neither a purely empirical generalisation like induction, nor is it logically rigorous like deduction. More specifically, it is different from induction, since it already starts with a certain theoretical frame and different from deduction as the conclusion is not necessarily logically given but rather one of the many possible conclusions that allows new theoretical ideas to emerge (Danermark, 2002; Denzin, 1989). In other words, abduction can be seen as a way "to recontextualize, i.e. to observe, describe, interpret and explain something within the frame of a new context" (Danermark, 2002, p. 91).

In line with an inductive approach, the underlying study seeks to first, generate new insights and contribute to a better understanding of consumer perceived BA of SMIs and second, generalise these findings to provide empirically justified suggestions for marketers and SMIs on how to effectively manage BA. Therefore, primary data is observed and collected, patterns are identified, and a theoretical model is developed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Essential to an inductive approach is avoiding the use of a restrictive theoretical framework and instead focusing on issues that are observed or elicited by the in-depth questioning of respondents (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Nonetheless, in this study, theoretical direction for the data collection and analysis is given by employing broad themes and frameworks from available literature. The perceived BA framework by Morhart et al. (2015) serves as a point of reference. The four dimensions of the perceived BA construct (continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism) and the cues of BA (indexical, iconic, and existential) are used to aid respondents explain the drivers of their BA perceptions. For the outcomes, the categorisation of psychological and behavioural consumer outcomes of BA by Fritz et al. (2017) provides the necessary structure in this research process. This reflects an abductive approach to theory, since new information is organized according to existing structures and theories are developed in different contexts (Danermark, 2002).

1.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

1.4.1 Research Context: Instagram

Instagram is a social media platform that provides users with the possibility to share photos and videos as well as engage with each other through comments, likes and direct messaging (Miles, 2014). We decided to focus on Instagram as the main platform for our investigations on SMIs due to several reasons: First, both brands and SMIs rank Instagram among the most important social media platforms (Solis, 2016). Forecasts by Mediakix Team (2018) estimate global influencer marketing spend on Instagram to increase up to 5-10 billion USD by 2020, making it a platform with a very high marketing value. The popularity of Instagram is also reflected in the growth of its user base. In June 2018, monthly active users hit 1 billion, thereby it more than doubled within two years (Statista, 2019). Second, through the visually engaging content and the possibility to provide product- and brand-related information, Instagram lends itself well for the purpose of influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). Furthermore, different content formats (e.g. feed, InstaStories, IGTV) imply a variety of sources for potential drivers for the BA of SMIs *(see Appendix 4)*. Thus, Instagram represents a rich source of information for our exploratory study. Third, a study by Pew Research Center (2018) shows that more than 60 percent of Instagram's users are between the ages of 18 and 29. This group represents the target sample of our study, namely millennials.

1.4.2 Purposive Sampling Strategy

The use of non-probability sampling methods is mostly prevalent within qualitative research. Among those, purposive sampling has been selected for this study. Due to the depth and specificity of insights needed, the sample is not chosen randomly, but according to the researchers' personal knowledge and judgments (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016; Questionpro, 2018). This is essential since this study requires high quality access to a wide range of individuals, who are willing to open up and share their different perspectives relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, widely known as a cost- and time-efficient alternative, purposive sampling lends itself well considering the limited scope of this study. In order to form a homogenous sample that allows for an in-depth study of a sub-group

(e.g. millennials), individuals were strategically identified according to set criteria, which hold for *both* of our primary data collection methods (Bryman, 2012):

First, participants should be millennials, thus born between 1982 and 2000 (Howe and Strauss, 2000). This generation is known for their daily use of technologies and digital platforms as well as their social-media savvy behaviour (Raines, 2002). In fact, millennials form the biggest user group on Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2018). Thus, they represent a relevant target group when investigating on SMIs on Instagram from a consumer perspective. Second, candidates need to have access to the Internet and be users of Instagram. More particularly, they should follow and be interested in SMIs, since SMIs represent the subject of our study and participants should be able to form well-grounded opinions about them. However, the activity of the participants in terms of posting own content is not considered a criterion, because we are interested in perspectives of all kinds of followers. Third, the sample of participants should reflect a good balance in terms of gender and country of origin in order to reveal a wide range of interpretations that might derive from demographic factors.

1.4.3 Sample Size and Description

As a consequence of applying a purposive sampling strategy in qualitative research, the sample size is often smaller than in quantitative studies. This is justified by the focus on gaining in-depth, high quality knowledge about a narrow set of themes (Saunders et al., 2016; Malhotra & Birks, 2007). However, defining the appropriate sample size at the outset of investigations proves to be very difficult (Bryman, 2012). Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) argue that "a sample size in qualitative research should not be so small as to makes it difficult to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy. At the same time, the sample should not be so large that it is difficult to undertake a deep [...] analysis" (p. 289). According to Grounded Theory, theoretical saturation is reached if emerging concepts have been fully explored and no new theoretical insights are generated when adding people to the sample (Bryman, 2012). However, there are no established criteria for recognizing when theoretical saturation is reached (Guest, Bruce & Johnson, 2006). Being constrained by time and location, we sensed that after ten interviews, not much more valuable insights were generated. Thus, we rather continued with focus groups as an additional primary data

collection method that might yield different kinds of insights.

In total, our sample contains 20 participants from which 75% are female and 25% male. The age range is from 20 to 29 years. Five nationalities are represented in the sample, including three Danes, one Azeri, one Brazilian, one Portuguese and 15 Germans. With the exception of interviewee 1, who works as a social media manager, each interviewee was enrolled as a student, either undergraduate or graduate level. The bias towards female participants can be justified by the fact that more women than men use Instagram and actively follow SMIs (Pew Research Center, 2018). More Germans were represented due to the personal network of the researchers, which has been leveraged in the sampling process. Furthermore, it is important to note that interviewee 4 also runs a professional Instagram account with 50.000 followers besides his private one. Thus, his perspective not solely mirrors the view of a follower, but also of a SMI *(see Table 1)*.

Interviews						
Interviewee	**Age**	**Gender**	**Profession**	**Country of Origin**	**Location**	**Date**
1	26	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	28.02.19
2	23	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	28.02.19
3	26	male	Student	Brazil	Copenhagen	28.02.19
4	22	male	Student	Germany	Düsseldorf	04.03.19
5	27	female	Student	Germany	Düsseldorf	06.03.19
6	24	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	10.03.19
7	25	male	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	10.03.19
8	20	female	Student	Germany	On Skype	12.03.19
9	29	female	Social Media Manager	Denmark	Copenhagen	14.03.19
10	24	female	Student	Azerbaijan	Copenhagen	14.03.19

Fokus Group 1						
Participant	**Age**	**Gender**	**Profession**	**Country of Origin**	**Location**	**Date**
1	24	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	18.03.19
2	24	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	18.03.19
3	25	male	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	18.03.19
4	23	female	Student	Portugal	Copenhagen	18.03.19
5	24	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	18.03.19

Fokus Group 2						
Participant	**Age**	**Gender**	**Profession**	**Country of Origin**	**Location**	**Date**
1	26	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	19.03.19
2	27	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	19.03.19
3	24	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	19.03.19
4	23	male	Student	Denmark	Copenhagen	19.03.19
5	26	female	Student	Germany	Copenhagen	19.03.19

Table 1: Final Sample

2. Data Sources

In line with the adopted exploratory research design, this study investigates on the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs through the primary data collection methods of in-depth interviews and focus groups as well as through secondary data.

2.1 In-depth Interviews

The first phase of primary data collection comprised ten semi-structured in-depth interviews. According to Malhotra and Birks (2007), an in-depth interview is "an unstructured, direct, personal, interview in which a single respondent is probed by an experienced interviewer to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings on a topic" (p. 179). There are two major types within qualitative research, unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). While an unstructured interview is similar to a normal conversation, in a semi-structured interview, the researcher creates an interview guide with a list of questions or topics to be covered (Bryman, 2012). This ensures that issues the researcher considers important are addressed in each interview in a similar manner. At the same time, semi-structured interviews maintain a certain degree of flexibility, which gives respondents the opportunity to depart significantly from the guide, to let new issues emerge, and to steer the course of the interview in a different direction (Bryman, 2012). We have chosen to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with followers of SMIs, as it holds several advantages particularly important for the purpose of our research: First, it puts emphasis on the interviewees' point of view, giving them the freedom to express which drivers of perceived BA of SMIs they regard as personally relevant in their authenticity attribution (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The focus on subjective, independent follower interpretations is important due to the high subjectivity underlying the BA construct. Second, the semi-structured nature ensures spontaneity on the side of the interviewer as well as room for creativity on part of the interviewees. This can help uncover new insights on the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs that have not been previously considered by the researchers. Third, a rather passive role of the interviewer during in-depth interviews allows the participant to provide information rich in detail and complexity (Bryman, 2012). Since the

drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs might not always follow an easy logic, it is important that interviewees elaborate as much as possible on their personal interpretations, feelings, and behaviours. The intimate setting and personal interaction style of in-depth interviews further ensures that respondents feel comfortable enough to talk about sensitive aspects, such as the relationships and feelings they might have with the SMI.

Despite the advantages of using semi-structured interviews, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations: First, the quality of results heavily depends on the interviewer's ability to remain nondirective and flexible. To uncover relevant or even hidden issues, the interviewer needs to carefully listen and follow the topics the respondent wants to talk about (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Second, the messages and interpretations of respondents might be difficult to analyse and interpret, as their answers might be incomplete, misleading or include hidden information. To overcome this, the interviewer needs to ensure a strong theoretical awareness and the use of different data sources to add richness to the data analysis (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Nonetheless, in-depth interviews suit the objectives of our exploratory study, which is to understand the view and interpretations from a participant's perspective.

2.1.1 Interview Design

The ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with candidates that matched with the a priori set criteria. These interviews were organized within an overall time frame of two and a half weeks (28.02.2019 - 14.03.2019) and mainly took place in Copenhagen, Denmark, and in Düsseldorf, Germany. All of them were conducted face-to-face with the exception of one, which was managed through Skype Video Call with a participant living in Milan. This more intimate approach enabled us to read the participant's facial expression and body language and to adjust the course of the interview accordingly (Bryman, 2012). Each interview lasted 35-40 min, which resulted in 361 min of recordings, leading to 118 pages of transcribed text *(see Appendix 12)*. Overall, the interviews helped us gain relevant insights into followers' perspectives and make first generalisations to be refined and enriched in the second phase of primary data collection with focus groups.

The organization of the in-depth interviews took place as follows:

- First, we defined the sample criteria according to the requirements defined above.

- Second, within approximately one week, we prepared an interview guide that helped introduce a certain degree of structure into the interviews. However, this guide was further modified on an ongoing basis with new insights gained after each interview.

- Third, we reached out to the potential participants, either in person or through WhatsApp, in order to schedule an appointment.

- Fourth, together with each participant, we selected a comfortable, quiet and easily accessible location to conduct the interview. In most cases it was decided on public libraries or at private homes.

- Fifth, the interviews were digitally audio recorded with mobile phones. Furthermore, a transcription tool called Otter was used to assist in the transcribing process. The transcriptions can be found in.

2.1.2 Interview Guide

In line with a semi-structured interview design, an interview guide has been created *(see Appendix 5)*. Made up of a few topics that cover a broad range of issues, it served as a foundation to derive questions and probes believed useful for eliciting respondents' drivers and outcomes of SMI BA. However, the researchers remained flexible throughout the data collection process, making modifications to existing questions or adding new ones whenever aspects deemed more or less relevant than previously theorized. This approach reflects a key idea of Grounded Theory, which emphasizes not to start out with too many preconceptions, but rather let new ideas gradually emerge throughout the process (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The following paragraphs present the overall structure of the guide, including the types of questions used and the motivations behind our choices:

The first section aims to establish initial rapport and comfort with the respondents. The researchers introduce themselves, the overarching topic and the purpose of the study. Moreover, the interviewees are presented with the confidentiality terms and are asked whether they would like to stay anonymous. This is followed by general demographic questions about name, age, level of education, nationality and gender.

The second section consists of warm-up questions about the respondents' general involvement with Instagram and SMIs. With questions like *"How often you use Instagram?"* or *"Do you follow SMIs?"*, we ensure that the interviewee is an active user of Instagram and has an affinity towards SMIs. A key question in this section is *"Why do you follow SMIs?"*, as the given answer remains a fundamental consideration in all following insights and interpretations provided by the respondent. This assumption builds on the notion of goal-driven behavior presented by Beverland and Farrelly (2010) *(see 2.3.1 Formation of Consumer Perceived BA)*. Thus, it is important to first establish the motivations of the respondent before turning to her/his considered BA drivers. Going further, with the open-ended question *"What is important for you when you decide to follow a SMI?"*, we want to find out whether the authenticity of a SMI, or related aspects to it, are a top of mind consideration of the respondent.

The third section introduces the main topic of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. Without providing a clarification of the term, the respondents are asked whether authenticity of the SMI matters to them. Under the consideration that BA is a multidimensional construct, the aim is to elicit a wide variety of interpretations that may or may not fall within the given dimensions found in the BA construct by Morhart et al. (2015). Again, we actively refrain from posing probing questions as we are interested in the most conscious interpretations of the respondent and want to remain open to new insights.

In the next two sections the concept of SMI BA is more extensively explored and probed by first concentrating on the *drivers* and then turning to the *outcomes*. The respondent is asked to show us a SMI that s/he regards as authentic and to explain which drivers are considered in this evaluation *(see Appendix 6)*. The idea behind this game is two-fold: First, the chosen SMI profile assists respondents in elaborating on the drivers included in their BA judgments. Moreover, as they are given a few minutes to familiarize themselves again with the profile, new ideas could arise in the same moment. This is deemed important, since we believe that respondents normally not look out for authenticity drivers nor think about their outcomes. Second, a visual foundation for the discussion supports the researchers in better understanding the interpretations and to reduce the risk of potential misunderstandings.

The fourth part particularly focuses on the *drivers* of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. The dimensions of the BA framework by Morhart et al. (2015) serves as an underlying structure for the researchers to first, formulate probing questions related to these dimensions and second, infer the drivers accordingly. For example, we ask, *"How important is continuity in your SMI BA evaluation?"* and then follow-up with *"Where and how do you see that this SMI maintains aspects of continuity?"*. Despite the use of a framework, flexibility is granted as one dimension naturally leads to discussions on another and questions are adapted accordingly.

In the fifth section, the respondents are asked to think again about their authentic SMIs and elaborate on the *outcomes* of their perceptions. We divided this part in two sections, psychological outcomes and behavioural outcomes, thereby following an approach to summarize brand-derived benefits of BA as done by Fritz et al. (2017). The interview ends by asking the respondents whether they would like to add or emphasize anything related to the research topic.

2.2 Focus Group

In the second phase of primary data collection, two focus groups with each five participants have been carried out in order to gain deeper insights and new perspectives on the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. A focus group is a discussion conducted by a moderator in a non-structured way with a small group of respondents (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). It has been chosen as an additional data collection method for several reasons:

First, since a focus group is based on group discussions and interactions, it offers insights into how a certain issue is discussed as members of a group, rather than as individuals in one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1996; Bryman, 2012). These naturally occurring group dynamics often stimulate the creativity of participants, revealing new ideas not previously thought of by the researcher (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Moreover, individuals often make sense of a phenomenon collectively (Bryman, 2012). This idea is not only in line with the constructivist stance of this study, but it also reflects the new branding logic, which posits that brand value and identity results from the interactions of multiple stakeholders. Thus, a collective approach to study BA is especially important in this exploratory study.

Second, the focus group method allows researchers to get a deeper understanding of what is *behind* each participant's opinion (Bryman, 2012). By sharing opinions and experiences among each other, researchers are able to discover how participants form their arguments and how they respond to contradicting views (Kitzinger, 1994; Bryman, 2012). As opposed to interviews, participants are challenged to defend, revise or qualify their arguments as candidates probe each other. This leads to a more realistic account of what people think (Bryman, 2012). This level of detail is relevant for this study, since we are interested to uncover *why* participants consider SMIs as authentic.

Third, focus groups have the potential to reveal a wide variety of different views in relation to a particular issue (Bryman, 2012). Considering the multidimensional construct of BA, the inherent subjectivity of BA perceptions as well as the various types of SMIs, the existence of many interpretations of perceived BA of SMIs is likely. Thus, in order to identify patterns and draw generalisations, it is necessary to access these various interpretations.

Despite the advantages, focus groups also entail disadvantages: First, during the discussions, two or more participants may speak at the same time, thereby complicating the transcription process (Bryman, 2012). To minimize this risk, we asked the participants to talk one at a time and to use the recording app Otter when speaking. Second, a group effect problem might occur (Bryman, 2012). Some participants might be stronger in discussions while others feel intimidated and too shy to reveal their own opinions, which might create a leading opinion for the entire group (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Thus, this research followed Krueger's (1998) suggestion to ask reticent participants in a direct way (e.g. "what do *you* think about that?"). Third, when dealing with sensitive topics or when people are brought together in a hierarchical relationship, participants might not feel comfortable to share their experiences in front of others (Madriz, 2000). However, the investigated topic of SMI BA is not considered sensitive and our focus group design does not allow for hierarchical structures. Last, due to its unstructured nature, various focus groups may be difficult to compare with each other, as the topics discussed might differ in each group. By providing a certain level of structure through a focus group guide, we aim to overcome this challenge.

2.2.1 Focus Group Design

The success of a focus group depends on its design as well as the skills of the moderator (Yin, 2010). With regard to focus group size, a focus group should be small enough that participants feel comfortable and share opinions, however, big enough to provide diverse viewpoints that lead to revealing discussions (Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Therefore, they should vary between four and eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Considering the participants' familiarity with the topic of SMIs, we decided that involving five people in each focus group is sufficient to stimulate creative discussions. In addition, the relationships and characteristics of participants were considered in their allocation to the focus groups. According to Malhotra and Birks (2007), a commonality between group members should be ensured to avoid potential conflicts. In fact, by selecting millennials with similar educational level and a common interest in SMIs, we formed focus groups that are fairly homogeneous in terms of demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Some group members even knew each other from their private lives. Bryman (2012) argues that for some research objectives, natural grouping (i.e. people that know each other "naturally") may provide greater insights, since people who are familiar with each other are more likely to share thoughts and opinions without feeling embarrassed. Furthermore, the private home of one of the researchers served as the physical setting to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere in which participants forget that they are being observed (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Finally, the moderation of the focus groups was kept to a minimum, thereby allowing natural and dynamic discussions to emerge while making sure the relevant topics are sufficiently covered through the probing of respondents (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Each focus group lasted 80-90 min, which resulted in 170 min of recordings, leading to 44 pages of transcribed text *(see Appendix 13)*.

The organization of the focus group took place as follows:

- First, we prepared a focus group guide that helps us maintain a certain degree of structure throughout the discussion.
- Second, we reached out to 24 potential participants with a group message on Facebook. To make the selection process as efficient as possible, we shared a Doodle link with optional dates in which each individual could indicate their available times.

- Third, the participants were matched according to their availabilities and two focus groups were scheduled on two days (18.03/19.03.2019). These took place at one of the researcher's private homes.

- Fourth, we prepared the equipment and set-up for the two sessions, such as tables, chairs, post-its, pencils, microphones (i.e. phones), snacks and drinks. Moreover, we set up a circle seating to encourage discussions.

- Fifth, one day prior to the focus group discussion, a message was sent to the participants on Facebook in which they were asked to already reflect about a SMI that they consider authentic and familiarize themselves with her/him profile on Instagram. The aim was to stimulate some first thoughts around the topic of SMI BA and create a frame of reference for later discussions.

- Finally, just like the interviews, also the focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the mobile application Otter.

2.2.2 Focus Group Guide

Building on the insights of our first manual data analysis, guidelines for the focus groups were formulated *(see 3.2.1 Manual Preparation; Appendix 7)*. The aim of the guide is to provide a structure which ensures consistency across sessions and to gain confirming, contradicting as well as new in-depth insights about the group's views and thoughts on the SMI BA (Berkowitz, 2019). The preparation of the guide took three days and was not revised after the first focus group, since the chosen questions successfully led to discussions and relevant insights around the research issue. The following paragraph illustrates the overall structure, including the types of questions used and the motivations behind our choices:

The first part of the guide serves as an introduction, in which the researchers present themselves, the structure of the focus group, the conventions, and the research goals. Furthermore, participants are introduced into the recording technique with Otter. One person at a time is asked to speak into the microphone and say their first name, age and nationality. This procedure serves beneficial for transcribing purposes but also as a way for the candidates to get to know each other.

The second part initiates with an icebreaker game in order to establish a fun, relaxed,

and comfortable atmosphere as well as to gain first insights into the participants' activity on Instagram and its significance in their daily lives. The participants are asked to go to *Instagram activity* and read out loud how much time they spend on average on Instagram. Then, they should elaborate on what they spend time on, which SMIs they follow, and why. With these questions the authors aim to understand to which extent the participants' BA perceptions are goal- and context dependent.

In the third part, the guide seeks to gain insights into the various interpretations of SMI BA and the related perceived drivers. To avoid a leading opinion from emerging too quickly, we decided to hand out post-its and to give participants the following task: *"Please write down at least five aspects that make an influencer authentic for you. Thereby, think about the authentic influencer you reflected on after we've sent you the Facebook message yesterday"*. After the respondents have written down their thoughts, the researchers pinned the BA construct by Morhart et al. (2015) onto a whiteboard. This has been deliberately done *after* they finished the task and without any further elaboration on the dimensions in order to avoid any bias. Apart from the dimensions of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism, an additional category called *other* is added to allow room for new interpretations. The participants are then invited to assign their post-its to a category *(see Appendix 8)*. Afterwards, the researchers go through each category, read out loud the respective post-its and systematically ask *"Who wrote that down and why did you put this in that category? Who agrees or disagrees?"* followed by *"What are the signs of this aspect? What shows you that?"*. With this procedure, we aim to encourage a discussion around each dimension and thereby elicit the specific drivers that shape participants' perceived BA of SMIs. In addition, contradicting and controversial statements from the in-depth interviews are presented to stimulate discussions on different viewpoints and to gain deeper insights into the reasoning of these. For example: *"Some interviewees mentioned that insights into the personal life of the SMI makes them more authentic, others said, they're not interested in their Mom's birthday or dating life. What do you think? How much of personal insights are needed to be perceived as authentic? Also what kind of insights?"*. This section finishes with a lively discussion around the authenticity dilemma described by Audrezet et al. (2018).

The fourth part of the guide investigates on the outcomes of consumer perceived BA

of SMIs. Therefore, several open-ended sentences are presented to the participants. For example, the researcher starts by saying *"I would value an SMI's recommendation as trustworthy when..."* and then a respondent finishes it and elaborates *why* s/he would end a sentence like this. Main topics researched in this section refer to psychological and behavioural consumer outcomes and include brand loyalty, purchase decision, WOM, and general feelings and attitudes towards SMIs perceived as authentic.

Finally, the focus group finishes with the question *"What can an influencer do to be perceived as more authentic?"* in order to give participants a last chance to share remaining thoughts and opinions that did not fit into previous discussions and provide us with first ideas for managerial implications.

2.3 Secondary Data

In addition to the primary data collection methods, the researchers engaged in the collection of secondary data *(see Appendix 9)*, for two purposes: First, it acted as a starting point in the problem definition process as well as input for the interview guides. Specifically, insights from secondary data contributed to a better theoretical understanding of the current state of research and prompted initial ideas for the questioning and probing of participants during primary data collection (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Moreover, it helped to form the focus of this study by uncovering limitations in existing literature. Second, secondary data has been gathered with the aim to support the evaluation and discussion of this study's findings. With new insights gained throughout the primary data collection process, also related secondary data has been researched and added to the data pool in order to enlarge the range of perspectives on the research topic. The type of secondary data collected includes reports, articles, blog posts and studies from industry experts on consumer attitudes and their BA perceptions of SMIs. Moreover, we looked into forecasts and trends related to the future of influencer marketing. These were all found online, since we were interested in the most recent state of affairs.

2.4 Triangulation of Data Sources

A key consideration in doing research is the validity of a study and its findings. According to Maxwell (1996), validity of a qualitative study implies "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 87). As opposed to quantitative research, in which validity refers to measurement issues, in qualitative studies, the idea of *credibility* is often used as an alternative evaluation criterion (Bryman, 2012). Since an interpretivist stance acknowledges the existence of multiple interpretations of a social phenomenon, credibility of a study confirms that the social world has been correctly understood by the researcher (Bryman, 2012). One way to strengthen the validity of a qualitative study is through the practice of triangulation, which seeks to corroborate a reported event, description, or fact through at least three ways (Yin, 2010). In this study, we implemented three types of data collection methods, each drawing on a different data source. This approach enabled us to cross-check our findings and gain considerable confidence in reporting these. Moreover, since the in-depth interviews and focus groups are carried out with different participants and secondary data has been collected from various internet sources, the independency of data sources is ensured (Yin, 2010). Besides addressing the issue of validity, a triangulation of data sources allowed us to access a large variation of possible interpretations essential to the purpose of this study. Insights from the in-depth interviews have been compared to those from the focus groups, which helpd us appreciate the possible similarities and emerging differences resulting from the various participants as well as the underlying dynamics of the chosen methods. Secondary data from experts of the research domain added an additional, professional perspective to our research, thus helping us in obtaining a profound and holistic view on the investigated issue.

3. Data Analysis

This section illustrates how data from our semi-structured interviews, focus groups and secondary data sources has been analysed. Since we follow a Grounded Theory approach, the three steps of open, axial, and selective coding are presented after a short introduction into this prominent methodological approach to qualitative research.

3.1 Grounded Theory

In 1967, Grounded Theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss with the aim to legitimize qualitative research as a credible methodological approach in its own right instead of only being a precursor for quantitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By providing an integrated set of concepts and procedures to systematically study social phenomena, Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged the dominant belief that qualitative analysis is not rigorous and thorough enough to generate theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As such, Grounded Theory can be described as "a systematic, yet flexible methodology for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories that are grounded in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Some of its key defining components include the following:

Firstly, data collection and analysis represent iterative processes. As the researcher collects the first insights from interviews and observations, relevant issues must be analysed and incorporated in the following research endeavours (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This has the advantage that all potentially relevant aspects of the researched topics are captured, and that theory is advanced during each step of the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, focusing on concepts that are repeatedly mentioned and discarding those that are absent in the data, reduces risks of bias by the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Secondly, sampling is aimed towards theory construction not population representativeness (Charmaz, 2006). This means that the researcher chooses the individuals, organization or community according to his own judgment of whether they can provide relevant insights on the studied social phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thereby, the researcher collects rich data, which allows to enter the participant's world and "reveal what lies beneath the surface" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 19) *(see 1.5.2 Purposive Sampling Strategy)*.

Thirdly, Grounded Theory involves the construction of analytic codes and categories from data (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers work with conceptualizations of data that represent potential indicators of the social phenomena instead of raw data per se. Throughout the coding process, these conceptualizations become more abstract and several concepts are grouped into categories. This is done by following a comparative logic, which involves the continuous analysis of similarities and differences between the concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such comparisons have the advantage of increased precision (i.e. sub-division of an original concept) and consistency (i.e. grouping alike concepts) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Fourthly, another key concept in Grounded Theory is theoretical saturation, which applies to both, the collection as well as the coding of data. Within the former, theoretical saturation is reached when continued data collection no longer provides new insights into the researched social phenomenon. Within the latter, theoretical saturation implies no further need to review and code data into concepts and categories (Bryman, 2012).

Overall, the procedures of Grounded Theory allow for a systematic approach to data analysis, which is beneficial in judging, generalising, and comparing the results of the research. Moreover, they provide researchers with enough evidence to support their claims and thus, ensures rigor and trustworthiness in the emerging theory (Myers, 2009; Hussein, Hirst, Salyers & Ouji, 2014). Following a Grounded Theory approach to qualitative data analysis is deemed appropriate for the purpose of this study, as it assists in the development of explanatory models grounded in relevant empirical data where a lack of theory exists (Hutchison, Johnston & Breckon, 2011). To facilitate the iterative process associated with this approach, this study utilized a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software called NVivo (Bringer, Johnston & Brackenridge, 2006). With NVivo, the researchers were able to take on an organized and structured approach to coding, which is necessary to reach the goal of theory construction in Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3.2 Coding Process and Scheme

The fundamental analytical process underlying Grounded Theory is coding. Coding includes "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and

accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). It represents an iterative process of moving from concrete statements, identified during data collection, to making analytical interpretations and developing an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006). Codes are not formed according to *known* categories based on existing literature, but are created *in vivo* by looking into words, sentences or concepts mentioned by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The relevance of each code must be proven through continued scrutiny in order to gain relevance for theory construction, for example, by its repeated presence (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, codes are in a constant state of revision and fluidity (Bryman, 2012). Grounded Theory distinguishes between three steps of coding: open, axial and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These three stages are further elaborated in the next sections.

3.2.1 Manual Preparation

Before engaging in the coding process with NVivo, the researchers manually looked out for emerging as well as repeatedly occurring themes elicited in the course of the first round of primary data collection. These insights were deemed relevant for further research and thus, served to refine the interview guide and to create the focus group guide for the second round of primary data collection. Contrasting viewpoints among interviewees were utilized to formulate open questions for the focus groups in order to stimulate vivid discussions. Rarely mentioned themes were discarded from the guides. In addition, insights from secondary data sources have been continuously added during data collection and analysis. The aim was to collect further support from journalists and experts to strengthen the relevance of recurring concepts mentioned in the interviews and focus groups.

3.2.2 First stage: Open Coding

Open coding is "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). In this first stage of coding, concepts are formed based on the comparison of events, actions and interactions found during the data collection process. These concepts are later grouped together into categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In NVivo, concepts are gathered in so-called *nodes*,

which represent "a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or area of interest" (Bryman, 2012, p. 596). In order to answer the research question pertaining to the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs, open codes were formed based on concepts that have been repeatedly mentioned (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thereby, we reduced the risk of potential bias towards existing concepts in the literature and remained open and flexible to all phenomena reflected in the data. In fact, next to the drivers and outcomes, other phenomena that raised important considerations for our research topic have been coded. Prefixes were used in NVivo in order to distinguish whether concepts relate to drivers or to outcomes (e.g. DR_ for drivers and OC_ for outcomes). Two examples for open codes with their related quotes are shown in Table 2.

Open Code	Quote
DR_Admitting imperfections	"*I would say, [authenticity is] if not everything is perfect. When you know influencers are okay with showing themselves, being a little stupid sometimes, things not going well or are like a bit of a mess or sometimes. Like that really adds to authenticity.*" (Interviewee 8) "*I think you can relate much more to them and you can trust them more [...] when they stop being this perfect human. Then you definitely the gain some kind of credibility because they are also trying to be on your level.*" (Interviewee 10)
DR_Showing a variety of emotions	"*I put emotions because I think it makes the person very relatable, if there is like a variety of emotions. So it's not only about high life, but it's about having good and bad days, and having like successes but also things you need to improv*e." (Focus Group 2) "*If he's showing what is going on in his life with all his ups and downs and not [only showing] this fake social media life. Then I think it's related to authenticity.*" (Interviewee 4)

Table 2: Example of Open Coding

3.2.3 Second stage: Axial Coding

Axial coding represents "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). More precisely, codes from the first stage are brought into relation and linked to specific

contexts, consequences, patterns of interactions, or causes in order to form categories and sub-categories (Bryman, 2012). Each hypothesized relationship is formed deductively and considered provisional until repeatedly verified with data. Thus, while some categories are further enriched with data and broken down into subcategories, others do not achieve adequate saturation and need to be revised or discarded. For example, with increasing indications found in the data, the initial axial code *Transparency* was merged with the axial code *Commercialisation* due to overlapping concepts. Also, the open code *Feeling Motivated* gained increasing relevance so that it got separated from the axial code *Feelings* to form its own category, namely *Motivation.* Furthermore, this stage allowed us to categorize the open codes that not strictly indicate the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs but still are deemed relevant in this research. For instance, these open codes could successfully be grouped into *General Scepticism* or *Consumer Goals*. Again, to ensure clarity in the coding process, prefixes were used to indicate whether the code relates to a driver or an outcome. Table 3 continues the example of Table 2 by integrating the second axial stage.

Axial Code	Open Code	Quote
DR_True to Self	DR_Admitting imperfections	*"I would say, [authenticity is] if not everything is perfect. When you know influencers are okay with showing themselves, being a little stupid sometimes, things not going well or are like a bit of a mess or sometimes. Like that really adds to authenticity."* (Interviewee 8)
	DR_Showing a variety of emotions	*"I think it makes a person very relatable, if there is like a variety of emotions. So it's not only about high life, but it's about having good and bad days, and having like successes but also things you need to improve."*(Focus Group 2)
	DR_Portraying reality	*"[Being] the same person online as you are offline"* (Secondary Data 1)

Table 3: Example of Axial Coding

3.2.4 Third stage: Selective Coding and Synthesis with Theory

Selective coding is "the procedure of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). According to Bryman, a core category is formed around the central issue of the research, thereby integrating all other categories. A core category should have two important characteristics: First, it must maintain conceptual density in order to have explanatory power for theory construction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Second, it should be abstract enough to ensure that the theory is generalisable and can be applied to a broad range of situations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Following the complete coding process of Grounded Theory, a total of seven selective codes have been formed, whereby three pertain to the drivers and two to the outcomes of SMI BA *(see Appendix 10)*. Moreover, two selective codes called *Moderators* and *Sources* were created, which represent important considerations in the development of our theoretical model *(see 1. Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs Model)*. In line with the abductive approach taken on in this study, the final step included a synthesis with the theory from existing literature. More specifically, the selective codes for the drivers were compared to the types of cues identified in the conceptual framework of perceived BA by Morhart et al. (2015). *Verification*, *Expectation* and *Identification* were assigned to indexical drivers, iconic drivers, and existential drivers, respectively. Similarly, the outcomes were merged with the categorization of *Psychological* and *Behavioural Outcomes*, as applied by Fritz et al. (2017). The following Table 4 presents a complete example of the coding process together with the theoretical synthesis.

Theoretical Synthesis	Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote
Existential Driver	DR_Identi fication	DR_True to Self	DR_Admitting imperfections	*"I would say, [authenticity is] if not everything is perfect."* (Interviewee 8)
			DR_Showing a variety of emotions	*"I put emotions because I think it makes the person very relatable."* (Focus Group 2)
			DR_Portraying reality	*"[Being] the same person online as you are offline"* (Secondary Data 1)
		DR_Aspiration	DR_Skills & expertise	*"I look at the stuff that they create and then I try to redraw it"* (interviewee 10)
			DR_Integrity	*"Once she spoke at the European Parliament and made a story about it. I was quite impressed, and I think this really makes her authentic, 'cause it's something so big and political. This is integrity to me."* (Interviewee 5)
			DR_Personal development	*"I would like to see the process on how you achieve a certain success."* (Focus Group 2)
		DR_Relatedness	DR_Providing insights into private life	*"I want the person to be authentic & post stuff not only for advertising, but private stuff."* (Interviewee 4)
			DR_Commonalities with followers	*"Her name is Pernille Theisbeck, she lives in Copenhagen. She tags that she lives in Frederiksberg where I live, so I feel we live very close."* (Interviewee 2)
			DR_Engaging with followers	*"Social media offers many opportunities to connect and build relationships. Authentic engagement on social media is about listening to your audience."* (Secondary Data 29)

Table 4: Example of Selective Coding and Theory Synthesis

V. Findings

The following sections present the findings from the conducted in-depth interviews and the focus groups along with the secondary data that have been collected in order to answer the research question at hand, namely *"What are the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs?".* First, our conceptual model is presented, serving as a guide through the remainder of the findings. Then, each dimension of the model is explained in detail and supported by consumer comments and quotes from secondary sources.

1. The Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity of SMIs Model

Figure 2 depicts our conceptual model on consumer perceived BA of SMIs and summarizes the findings from our research. It illustrates the drivers, which are categorized as *Indexical*, *Iconic* and *Existential* drivers as well as the outcomes, which have been grouped by *Psychological* and *Behavioural* consumer outcomes. Furthermore, it portrays the moderators of *General Scepticism* and *Consumer Goals* that indirectly affect consumers' authenticity attribution to SMIs. In the following sections, the drivers, moderators, and outcomes are explained in detail.
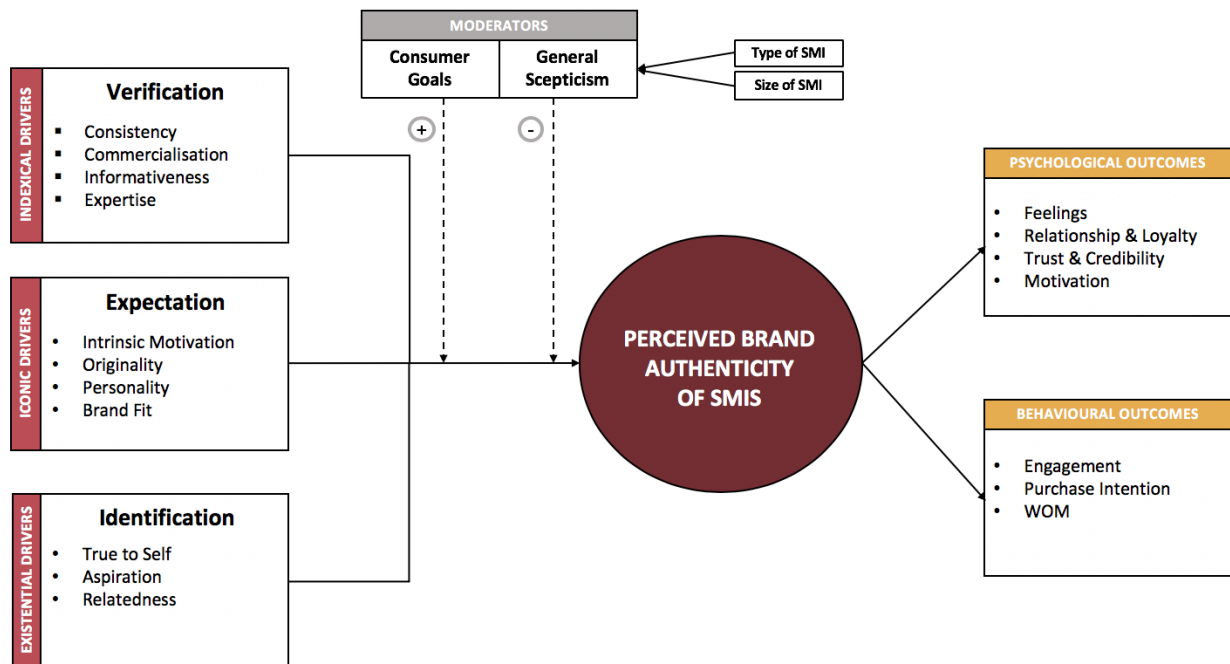

Figure 2: Conceptual Model: Drivers and Outcomes of Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs

2. Drivers of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity of SMIs

Three categories of drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs emerged during our analysis, which revolve around the notions of 1) *Verification*, 2) *Expectation* and 3) *Identification*. These are representative of the three classifications of BA cues outlined by Morhart et al. (2015), namely 1) *Indexical drivers,* 2) *Iconic drivers* and 3) *Existential drivers*, respectively. These drivers are divided into sub-drivers, which are visible or inferable from various sources mostly inside but also outside of the SMI's Instagram profile *(see 2.4 Sources of Drivers of Perceived BA)*. It is important to note two things when interpreting these drivers: First, the categorisation of drivers should be regarded as tendencies rather that strict allocations. As outlined by Grayson and Martinec (2004), iconic and indexical authenticity are not mutually exclusive, as each driver can have iconic and indexical properties. We posit that the lines are also blurry with regards to existential drivers. Second, since authenticity attribution is an inherently subjective process, not all drivers in our model are equally considered and weighted by each individual in their judgments of SMIs' BA. In fact, these drivers are moderated by consumers' general scepticism towards SMIs as well as personal goals. The next sections first present the categories of drivers in more depth, then turn to the sources of these drivers, and finally elaborate on the moderators.

2.1 Indexical Drivers: Verification

The first set of drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs are indexical drivers (*see Figure 3*). These relate to the idea that authenticity is an objective fact that is verifiable through evidence found on the SMI's Instagram profile. Verification of a SMI's authenticity can also result from respondents' experience with the SMI and from an established trustworthy context. From our data analysis, we identified that indexical drivers converge on four dimensions, namely *Consistency*, *Commercialisation, Informativeness*, and *Expertise*.
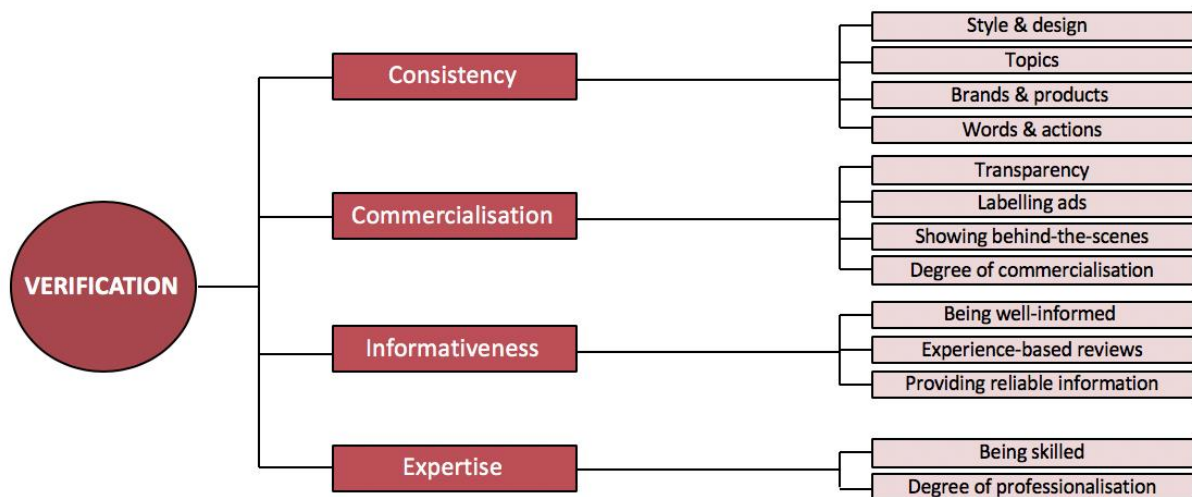
Figure 3: Indexical Drivers/Verification: Drivers and Sub-drivers of Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs

2.1.1 Consistency

Consumers repeatedly expressed that a certain degree of *Consistency* makes a SMI appear more authentic. Thereby, consistency has been mentioned in relation to a variety of aspects. Firstly, consumers largely agree that a consistent style of the SMI, in terms of the overall structure, look, and feel of the feed, leads to a higher BA perception. Specifically, the consistent use of colours, the editing of photos (e.g. filters), and the design of the feed (e.g. minimalism) are considered to be the artistic signature of a SMI, which helps consumers identify who and what the SMI represents.

> Interviewee 1: *The first thing that comes to mind is probably colours. [...] I think that everyone has their own colour scheme. [...] I like darker scandi style looks.*

> Interviewee 6: *I think when you're on the Instagram feed you want to have some kind of structure. That helps the authenticity because then it's easier to remember them [...]. That makes it authentic when you know the person has a signature on the photo.*

Secondly, another mentioned aspect of consistency relates to the addressed topics as well as promoted brands and products, in both, a commercial and a non-commercial context. Our respondents think that SMIs appear more credible if they set a strategic focus in terms of the themes they talk about accordingly, stick to a certain category of brands and products (e.g.

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only food-related) as well as price range (e.g. only high-end bands). Our respondents explain that they have certain expectations towards the content they want to see when following a SMI. Thus, when SMIs jump back and forth between topics and brands, they would lose sight of what the SMI stands for.

> Focus Group 2: *That they have like 1, 2, 3 topics they focused on that they deem important. It's more important that they're consistent, not that they have a variety.*

> Interviewee 6: *If a food influencer who's normally providing recipes for food would now collaborate with a car manufacturer or with like a vacuum cleaner company [...] - to me that's not credible anymore and also then not authentic.*

> Focus Group 2: *[Consistency] also in terms of brands they advertise for. So that it's not some random cheap fast fashion brand and then the other day, it's the most high-class beauty product.*

On the commercial side, industry experts also highlight the importance of long-term collaborations between SMIs and brands as a sign of authenticity, as it induces a perception of consistency that seems credible to followers:

> Secondary Data 17: *Create longer term partnerships with influencers: The most successful influencer relationships extend beyond a single post, and often involve a long-term ambassadorship where the influencer will continue to mention a brand over an extended period of time. Establishing these longer-term relationships is an effective way to maximize trust and authenticity when working with influencers.*

Thirdly, consistency with regard to the personality and the values the SMI stands for was also a key consideration for our respondents. An authentic SMI sticks to the values s/he represents and also shows congruency between her/his words and actions. For example, if a SMI promotes a sustainable lifestyle, then s/he should live accordingly in order to be more credible and taken more seriously as a role model.

> Focus Group 2: *I think it can be very important if you perceive the person as authentic or not, if they would just change the values and the symbols that they're standing for.*

Focus Group 1: *I think consistency is not only in terms of the content they post [...] but also about their attitude and their general behaviour - that shouldn't be contradicting to over time.*

Our participants largely align on the idea that various aspects of consistency drive the authenticity of SMIs, however, some respondents believe that showing versatility and a variety of styles and topics in the profile is more authentic than always sticking to the same. Thereby, the key to authenticity would be to *"vary the content and still manage to be her/himself"* (Focus Group 2). One respondent strongly opposes the idea of consistency as a driver of SMI BA. Interviewee 8 mentions the SMI Cara Delevigne and argues that:

She's a lot more authentic because her feed doesn't have the same colours or same collaborations with the same kind of people; or her feed is not always so manufactured to always be perfect and always look the same. [...] I think it makes it more authentic if they speak about things that are outside of their specialization. [For example] you know that they are fashion bloggers and then suddenly they speak about restaurants… it usually comes across relatively authentic to me.

2.1.2 Commercialisation

Another category of drivers within indexical cues is *Commercialisation*. It represents the idea of being transparent about the commercial part of their work as a SMI as well as the degree to which a SMI's profile consists of advertisements. All participants in our research are aware about the fact that SMIs engage in brand sponsorships, in which they advertise products on their social media channels in return for monetary rewards. Interestingly, all of them do not significantly mind that SMIs follow commercial interests when sharing content with their audience. Some even show comprehension, as Interviewee 1 explains: *"it's understandable that people need to live from what they're doing on Instagram"*. However, all participants agree that an authentic SMI is transparent about her/his sponsored posts. In fact, we find that for SMIs, *"transparency is essential for building trust" (*Secondary Data 29)*. Many respondents express difficulties in identifying whether a post is sponsored or not. This conflicts with their authenticity perception of the SMI, since they are unable to uncover the true intentions

behind the post. Through the labelling of ads, SMIs can show transparency and thus, appear more authentic. The labelling of ads is not only required by the FTC, but also a highly controversial topic among industry experts, who all strongly advise SMIs to be transparent about their sponsorships.

> Secondary Data 22: To establish trust, transparency is key. [...] Young people are well enough informed to know that influencer marketing exists. Adding a simple #ad or #sponsored to a sponsored post will prevent the audience from feeling deceived.

> Focus Group 2: This rule that you have to say that it's an ad or that it's sponsored - I think that's kind of honest [...] I think it's very important so that people don't get completely blinded.

In addition, SMIs can show transparency by revealing the *behind-the-scenes* of their commercial work and guide followers through the process of a brand collaboration. Respondents often expressed that they are curious to find out more about the hidden processes taking place between brands and SMIs. A SMI appears more authentic when s/he provides insights into the commercial side of Instagram and explains how it is possible to pursue it professionally and earn money. Additionally, considering the many collaboration requests from brands, followers consider it authentic when SMIs mention collaborations that did not work out as expected or explain why they did not engage in certain partnerships. This would reflect positively on the credibility of the sponsorships that the SMI finally engages in.

> Interviewee 7: He's super honest about what he is doing and how he is earning money. He is even showing how it's working with affiliate links or recommendations. He makes videos about how to make money out of that, because he's so transparent.

> Interviewee 1: It's hard to understand the underlying relationships between a brand and an SMI, what they talk about beforehand, and how the outcome comes to life. It would be nice to be guided through that process and understand it. [...] If you don't pursue a [commercial] opportunity that arose because you don't feel comfortable with it [...] that would give them more authenticity in what they end up promoting.

Although transparency about sponsored posts drives consumers' authenticity perceptions of SMIs, it only holds up to a certain number of ads. In fact, when the SMI reaches a point of perceived over-commercialisation at which consumers think that there are "too many ads" on the profile, then the SMI loses her/his credibility and appears rather inauthentic.

> Focus Group 2: *I put down "no-ad-overload". If an influencer only posts ads all the time - I know, it's a big part of it - but if it's like every single or every second post, I would not take that person seriously anymore or find him credible.*

2.1.3 Informativeness

Informativeness is another indexical driver of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. Participants repeatedly discussed that SMIs should be knowledgeable about the topics, brands and products they present on Instagram in order to provide reliable information to their followers. Especially in terms of product reviews, our respondents emphasize that SMIs can establish credibility and trustworthiness when they have rigorously tested the products over time and can form reasonable arguments for or against it. In fact, according to the State of Creator Economy report (2017), 32% of consumers can tell if the SMI has actually tried or used the product based on the content posted (Secondary Data, 13).

> Interviewee 6: *I want them to present, show or inform me about something that they perceive as really good. I don't want them to sell me something they get a lot of money for and then I buy the product and I'm disappointed. So, I really want them to be authentic in the sense that they provide me the right information.*

> Focus Group 1: *When they give reliable reasons why this product did [or did not] live up to the expectations. I think this is really giving credibility to them.*

> Interviewee 7: *It seems that he is really into that stuff and testing it right; and takes some time before he wants to make a review [video] about it.*

Besides that, respondents point out that the perceived reliability of the given information can be strengthened if the SMI links to objective external sources that confirm the SMI's claims or provide supportive information (e.g. statistics, articles or videos). Industry experts also

strongly recommend SMIs to inform themselves about the brands that reach out to them before accepting a collaboration request. Thereby, they can ensure that they share correct and reliable information with their followers.

> *Secondary Data 25: When you receive a collaboration request, it is important that you inform yourself well about the company and its products before accepting it. Are you enthusiastic about the product and can you recommend it to your followers with a good conscience?*

2.1.4 Expertise

The final indexical driver is *Expertise*, which encompasses the notion of being an expert or skilled within a certain field as well as the degree to which the SMI pursues Instagram professionally. Several respondents agree that if a SMI is skilled in the topics s/he talks about, it would make her/him more credible and authentic. This was especially prominent among respondents that follow SMIs that focus on a niche topic, such as photography, illustrations or fashion. For example, when Interviewee 2 showed us her authentic SMI she claimed, *"I rather prefer to follow the experts".* Also Interviewee 3 said he looks a lot into the skill and the talent of a SMI when forming his authenticity perception, claiming *"He's actually really, really good at it or he knows best".* Respondents mention that the SMI's job outside of Instagram is often an indicator for expertise, i.e. if the work specialisation is related to the topics s/he talks about. For example, when thinking about authentic SMIs, participants in Focus Group 1 notice:

> *It was mostly influencers who were not only pretending to be that kind of person on Instagram, but who actually worked within that field. For example, if it was a fitness person, it's mostly people who are also personal trainers. So, if it's what they do for a living, then for me it represents their credibility even more.*

Although some respondents consider the professional synthesis between Instagram and the job as authentic, others believe that if a SMI runs Instagram *too* professionally or as her/his main profession, it reduces the authenticity perception. It would create the impression that the SMI uses Instagram only for career and financial purposes, thereby regarding followers only as a means to an end. Therefore, several participants claim that *"influencers are more*

authentic, if they actually do something besides Instagram" (Interviewee 2)*.* Thus, SMIs should have a rather unrelated job outside of Instagram. This would imply that they are not financially dependent on it, which allows them to be more natural and sincere in their posts. Moreover, it shows that the SMI's life does not only consist of Instagram but that s/he has various facets, which is perceived as more interesting by our respondents.

> <u>Interviewee 7</u>: *It's part of their routine and [...] they think about it with purpose. Based on the professionalism of their pictures and Instagram stories, it seems always that they are doing it every day and then they lose the authenticity.*

> <u>Interviewee 10</u>: *First of all, they're not making money primarily on Instagram. They have other businesses. This is not like their career. They're influencers, but they're influencers because they want to carry a message and share it with people.*

2.2 Iconic Drivers: Expectation

The second set of drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs are iconic drivers, which are characterised by their predominantly subjective nature (*see Figure 4*). In line with a constructivist perspective to reality, this category encompasses the *expectations* of respondents in terms of what *they* think constitutes an authentic SMI. Therefore, it depends on what an individual personally associates with authenticity and the degree to which the SMI is perceived to fit into that scheme. It relates to an individual's senses, or as Interviewee 1 points out *"[Authenticity] is a matter of gut feeling"*. Nonetheless, while a variety of iconic drivers have been identified in the interviews and focus groups, they strongly revolve around the four dimensions of *Intrinsic Motivation, Originality, Personality,* and *Brand Fit.*

Figure 4: Iconic Drivers/Expectation: Drivers and Sub-drivers of Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs

2.2.1 Intrinsic Motivation

Consumers' authenticity perceptions of SMIs are strongly driven by the extent to which they believe that the SMI is *intrinsically motivated* in her/his work as a content creator. Authentic SMIs post content not only because of monetary rewards, but because they are driven by a passion for the topics and brands they share with their followers. In fact, all participants agree that SMIs come across more credible when they *"don't just do it for the money"*. Although it is difficult to discern the true motivations of a person, our respondents make references to two key indicators of an intrinsically motivated SMI: Firstly, some respondents claim that they can sense and see if a SMI puts effort into her/his posts. Showing effort has been mentioned in terms of posting self-produced content and having a well thought-through posting strategy, in which each post carries value for the followers. Especially with respect to the integration of ads, respondents appreciate it if the SMI has carefully reflected about it and does not simply post a meaningless product placement. Interviewee 9 mentions that her authentic SMI *"does sponsored content but it's very well thought of"* as well as one participant of Focus Group 2, who claims that *"if they have a well thought-through strategy where they can integrate advertisements, I think no follower would mind"*. In addition, posting good content, in terms of high quality and creativity, is recognized by our respondents as a way to show great effort. For Interviewee 7, good content is when SMIs go the extra mile to produce extraordinary and

personal content. He notes that his authentic SMI *"is doing that in his own personal way and [...] he's even cutting some of his InstaStories. So, he puts a lot of effort in there"*.

> Interviewee 1: *The way she talks about the brand, and she's writing her own captions, you can tell that it's not just an agency sending her a pre written text, but she's actually coming up with it herself. And that [...] makes it more authentic to the consumer to see, okay, she actually has thought about this brand before posting.*

> Interviewee 6: *Sometimes you feel that content is produced in a bad way, because it's just posted to be in the feed. But some are really creating content themselves and it's good content. To me that's authentic as they really consider that as primary their job*

> Secondary Data 12: *Posting for the sake of posting is often done unconsciously and with little intention or plan. Offering your community, a handful of authentic, thoughtful posts throughout the week will be far more effective than posting meaningless content three times a day.*

Respondents further mention that the perception of effort and good content is amplified when the SMI posts on several online platforms, such as YouTube, Podcasts, or on an own blog. This would show that the SMI is truly committed to her/his job as a content creator. Interviewee 6 and 7 recognize the following about their authentic SMI:

> Interviewee 6: *She's still using her blog, and not only Instagram. She really wants to be honest and really puts lots of efforts in it. You really can see that it's her main job*.

> Interviewee 7: *If they have different kinds of platforms, usually they are really into it and put a lot of work into it.*

Secondly, SMIs are said to be intrinsically motivated when they truly believe and are committed to the brands or products they present on their profiles. According to our respondents, this implies that they are not primarily driven by monetary rewards but mainly because they are convinced and motivated in recommending good brands or products to their followers. Secondary Data 28 suggests that an authentic SMI *"speaks about the product or service because they truly like it. And they speak about the topic because they have a genuine*

passion for it." In the interviews and focus groups, it became evident that our respondents observe the SMI's usage behaviour in order to identify whether or not s/he believes in a posted brand or product. More specifically, consumers look out whether the SMI actually uses or wears the brands and products in her/his everyday life by continuously showing them on their profile but without actively advertising for them. As such, the iconic driver of intrinsic motivation is in itself driven by a cue that is to some extent verifiable or indexical through signs of consistency.

> <u>Interviewee 10</u>: *Before she became a brand ambassador for Audible, she was always talking about them. [...] And then afterwards, the brand noticed her. [...] So, she's not promoting it, because they paid her, but because she really loves the app.*

> <u>Focus Group 2</u>: *When I see somebody, who has sponsored posts, and then they subsequently in the different posts use the same product without that one being the sponsored post, it shows me, they weren't just doing it for the #ad. They were also actually really fond of the product and they want to use it.*

> <u>Secondary Data 28:</u> *Authentic influencers don't just talk about products or services because they have been paid to do so. In fact, they might have spoken about it even before the brand approached them for a partnership. And they might continue to talk about it even after the campaign is over and they are no longer being paid.*

2.2.2 Originality

Our respondents associate *Originality* of the SMI with being authentic. In other words, an authentic SMI sets her/himself apart from the crowd and is different as s/he does not follow the mainstream but instead maintains an own style and personality that is reflected in her/his content. One participant of Focus Group 1 defines "*Unique is that someone that doesn't just follow up trends".* In a similar vein, Interviewee 3 explains "*Authenticity of an influencer would be that you try to choose to express yourself in a different way".* The importance of originality is also reflected in the quote by Interviewee 9, who claims "*An authentic SMI] generates*

content and has original ideas. [...] It matters that you can actually stand out and not be a type of person who is doing what everyone else is doing."

Investigations into the potential sources of originality and differentiation reveal that the clothing style of the SMI, the photo locations, and especially her/his personality *(see 2.2.3 Personality)* are key considerations of our respondents. Moreover, they embrace it when the content of a SMI tells a personal story that makes it unique and credible. An interesting insight is that respondents also acknowledge the difficulty for SMIs to differentiate themselves and be unique among the many similar SMIs on Instagram today.

<u>Interviewee 9</u>: *A lot of fashion bloggers are doing the exact same thing and they're all using the same flowers, they're all using the same clothes, taking pictures at the same places around town and it gets really boring.*

<u>Interviewee 1</u>: *The thing about influencers is that they are people and not just a brand, so you need to show emotions in order to differentiate yourself.*

<u>Interviewee 6</u>: *I think it gets really difficult for influencers to build authenticity, because there's an overflow of influencers, and then everyone is doing the same. So it's really difficult to step out of the entire range of influencers and build your own character, or communicate your own personality.*

Another mentioned source of originality relates to the editing style of the photos. In fact, respondents highly appreciate the artistic thought behind a SMI's photo editing instead of being irritated by it or perceiving it as inauthentic. Interviewee 6 explains that "*Editing photos is the art of the content creation. That makes it authentic. I wouldn't say an influencer is less authentic because s/he's editing photos."* Consumers perceive it as authentic when SMIs not just copy each other's' editing style but create their own one that reflects their artistic vision. Nonetheless, a "too strong" editing that distorts reality and the true visual appearance of the SMI is perceived as strongly inauthentic. In fact, according to our respondents, posting an unretouched photo every now and then would drive authenticity. On the one hand, it reveals the artistic effort put into the photo, and on the other hand, it re-establishes a connection to reality. To not break the artistic feed, SMIs could for instance integrate the unretouched version of a post by using the gallery post function in Instagram.

Interviewee 3: *A lot of people are using this new "pre-set thing" – and he is really against it. [...] It's not like talent, if it's just about putting pre-sets. The fact that he doesn't have those things does give him a bit more street credibility.*

Interviewee 9: *She does edit some pictures but also puts out a lot of un-edited pictures to actually show, what it takes to get to the edited point and show all the things behind it; and it also breaks down the picture-perfect feed.*

Focus Group 2: *Sometimes I've seen the actual post, then you can swipe on the post to see more photos that might not fit into the feed. It's the same post but on a rawer level. So that's a great way of circumventing the problem.*

Interviewee 10: *Endless edited pictures don't show real life. What's the point of this? It's unrealistic. This is not what their life looks like, it's just what they want to portray.*

2.2.3 Personality

Our investigations reveal that our respondents perceive SMIs that exhibit certain *Personality* traits as more authentic than others. These drivers represent consumers' expectations on how an authentic SMI is ought to be like and can be summarized with four key personality traits: Firstly, most respondents believe that an authentic SMI is humorous. For some, humour makes them feel related to the SMI, for others, it adds value to the content of the SMI. The notion of humour has also been brought in connection with showing self-irony.

Interviewee 2: *I like them, if they are humorous, if their Instagram shows that they can make fun of themselves or fun of their friends. [...] I relate to that because I am very jokey with my friends, too.*

Focus Group 1: *They have to be really funny for me to appreciate, whatever they're saying or whatever they post.*

Secondly, many respondents believe that the authenticity of a SMI is driven by a personality that is down-to-earth or as Interviewee 6 puts it: "*They kind of have a down to earth personality or a personality that is reachable*". This can be traced back to the fact that

respondents regard SMIs as more reachable and maintain a different kind of relationship with them compared to mainstream celebrities *(see 3.1.2 Relationship & Loyalty).*

> <u>Interviewee 8</u>: *I don't like when they portray themselves like that or they want other people to perceive them like they are kind of a celebrity like this God who's unreachable and untouchable. I think that really takes away from the authenticity.*

Thirdly, participants in our study also deem it authentic when SMIs are spontaneous and able to surprise their followers by what they say or do. For them, a spontaneous SMI not only posts content that was planned ahead in time, but also pictures or videos that reflect a situation in which s/he currently finds her/himself in or wants to talk about. Authentic SMIs also manage to surprise their followers, for instance by going *against* all expectations.

> <u>Focus Group 2</u>: *It seems to be something that they experienced in the normal course of their life and it's just happening. [...] so I think it's more authentic. [...] They didn't sit down and brainstorm and thought "oh my god what can I post today".*

> <u>Interviewee 8</u>: *It doesn't seem manufactured to have the perfect feed. It just seems like whatever she wants to say in that moment and whatever she wants to post.*

> <u>Interviewee 7</u>: *So maybe instead of saying, "I had breakfast, I went to gym, I had lunch, and then whatever". Just maybe say "today I overslept totally and now I'm just hanging in my bed, I didn't even put make-up on".*

Fourthly, another key personality trait in our respondents' BA perceptions of SMIs is honesty. Honesty should be reflected in everything SMIs talks about, whether it is related to stories from their personal life or to product recommendations. Followers expect that authentic SMIs are honest in what they say and stand behind their claims, even though they have a large audience and collaboration partners that might disagree or raise objections. With regard to the personal life, our respondents perceive it as honest if SMIs admit that they are not in a good mood or if they are struggling with something in their lives. Concerning product recommendations, they want to hear their honest opinion about a product's performance. Most participants agree that SMIs should not be afraid to share their real opinion with their audience, since this is essentially what makes them trustworthy.

Focus Group 1: *It could be encouraging to tell followers that you don't always have to follow with what you are praising in the feed. Like if it's about nutrition or about the fitness stuff - that it's okay to also have cheat days. Just giving personal examples that it happened for them as well, and just being honest about it.*

Secondary Data 12: *Your community will value your honesty and also feel that they can trust that your recommendations do come from a genuine place and are not just lining your piggy bank.*

2.2.4 Brand Fit

Another important dimension within the category of iconic drivers is *Brand Fit*. This driver represents consumers' interpretations of whether the brands that the SMI promotes fit with the SMI's personal brand or not. In fact, our respondents repeatedly expressed that a strong brand fit between the SMI brand and the promoted brand must exist in order to maintain authenticity in the light of commercial interests. They require authentic SMIs to carefully select their brand collaborations and not engage in every offer they receive. A good brand fit ensures that authenticity and brand collaborations *"go hand in hand"* (Interviewee 3) and has been mentioned in terms of clothing style, lifestyle and personal values.

Interviewee 2: *I trust someone if [..] they advertise brands I think fit to that person. Then I think it's super authentic and then I also don't mind if they advertise because obviously they also have to earn money.*

Interviewee 9: *[Her brand collaborations are] linked to her personal profile. She reflects a lot when doing a sponsored partnership, because it needs to be authentic in terms of what she is communicating instead of promoting all sorts of things.*

Interviewee 3: *It really depends on how they integrate that partnership. Right? Yeah, I think if it's authentic in the sense that if it's something that they believe in and use or that's included in their daily life.*

In a similar vein, respondents also mention the reputation of the sponsoring brand. They claim that authentic SMIs generally abstain from cooperating with brands that are marked by scandals in order to preserve their own credibility and values in front of their audience. Moreover, in our interviews and focus groups, several brands have been mentioned that are perceived to flood Instagram with their sponsored SMI posts, such as the social-media born brand Daniel Wellington or Seidenfelt. As much as followers require authentic SMIs to carefully select their collaboration partners, they also think that collaborating partners should be very selective in choice of SMIs. Otherwise, it sheds a negative light on the authenticity of the SMI who engage with them.

> <u>Focus Group 2:</u> *A German brand, Seidenfelt, sends out lots of cheap bags to influencers. And they all promote it and be like, "Oh, it's such nice bag" and I'm like, "Well you only wearing Chanel every day, as if you wear this 50 Euro bag now". I think it's ridiculous and there are so many that are doing it.*

> <u>Interviewee 1:</u> *Definitely the brands that they portray [...]. It's a cliché, but for example Nestlé - someone who would promote their water, I cannot trust.*

> <u>Interviewee 6</u>*: I actually think that with sponsored post, credibility is super important when it comes to authenticity because I think it's good to provide the message that they don't engage with everything.*

2.3 Existential Drivers: Identification

The third set of drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs are existential drivers, which are underpinned by the idea that authenticity relates to one's true identity (*see Figure 5*). Consumers perceive these drivers in their authenticity judgments of a SMI insofar as they represent resources for uncovering and constructing their own identities. Symbolizing values and relationships, existential drivers are actively sought by consumers to assist them in finding out who they really are. Similar to the iconic drivers, existential drivers are highly subjective, however, they differ in terms of the self-references that consumers make to their own identities during their BA judgments. Our investigations uncover a variety of identity-related

cues, which are divided along three key existential drivers that support consumers in finding out who they are (i.e. *True Self*), who they want to become (i.e. *Aspiration*) as well as who they are in relation to the SMI (i.e. *Relatedness*).
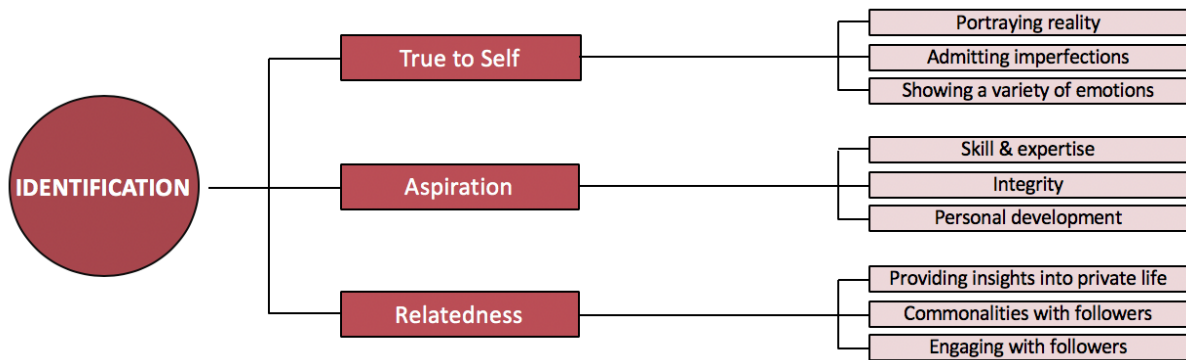
Figure 5: Existential Drivers/Identification: Drivers and Sub-drivers of Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs

2.3.1 True to Self

Participants in our interviews and focus groups largely agree that it makes a SMI authentic if s/he shows her/his true self on Instagram. Strong support for this insight is found in several articles, which suggest that being true to self is the solution to maintaining authenticity as a SMI in today's increasingly deceptive world of social media. Our analysis reveals that the notion of being true to self in the context of SMIs is associated with *"not trying too hard to fit into some kind of form"* (Interviewee 2), *"not being someone else or fake"* (Focus Group 1) or *"[being] the same person online as you are offline"* (Secondary Data 1). Even though it is difficult for followers to judge whether or not a SMI is showing her/his true self on Instagram, our respondents believe that certain behaviours are indicative of their true self. Firstly, a SMI's true self is reflected when s/he shows realness. An authentic SMI is candid and portrays her/his life on Instagram in a way that resonates with the actual reality and not only with what s/he thinks the audience wants to see or to drive follower engagement.

> Interviewee 8: *I can notice people really trying to fit a certain role as this influencer; just to sell a product or be that person because they think it makes them popular.*

> Interviewee 3: *[One aspect of authenticity is that] you're showing exactly how life is - because normally on Instagram you see everybody traveling all the time and doing their best life, which is not authentic [...] because it's not how they live it.*

> Focus Group 2: *I read this interview with some influencers and they all say they'd rather post a picture of a burger than with a salad because their engagement rates always go up with this.*

Secondly, by admitting imperfections and not only showing the highlights of their lives, SMIs can also reveal their true selves to their audience. Our respondents understand that a real person's life is not perfect and that everybody faces difficulties at some point. By talking about personal challenges and also sharing the non-perfect moments in life, consumers can better relate to that SMI and thus, perceive her/him as more authentic.

> Interviewee 8: *If you don't just see the perfect person who's being dressed up and sent to certain places, but when you understand who they really are and what they are really like, that makes them a lot more authentic.*

> Focus Group 1: *I cannot relate to people that only show their perfect and ideal life - they need to show also weaknesses.*

> Interviewee 10: *If you follow more of these perfect influencers, you feel like their life is perfect, they never have a bad day. Everything is great always in their life - which is not true. It's kind of a lie. They're lying to themselves and they're lying to you.*

Thirdly, SMIs that exhibit a variety of emotions on their Instagram profile are perceived as presenting their true selves and thus, as more authentic. Similar to the idea of admitting imperfections, showing a variety of emotions also contributes to conveying a complete picture of who the SMI really is, instead of only one part of it.

> Interviewee 10: *I think you can kind of relate much more to them and you can trust them more when they are showing their emotions.*

> Focus Group 2: *I think it makes the person very relatable, if there is a variety of emotions. So, it's not only about high life, but it's about having good and bad days.*

Secondary Data 12: *Life in its very essence presents us with challenges and plays havoc with our emotions. [...] Whether you're sleep deprived, jet-lagged, overworked, heart-broken - these are emotional states we can all relate to!*

2.3.2 Aspiration

Participants of our interviews and focus groups acknowledge that they do not only consume authentic SMIs brands to uncover who they are, but also to actively construct their identities towards becoming who they want to be. Therefore, the second driver within existential drivers reflects a sense of aspiration or becoming a better version of yourself. The majority of our respondents indicate that they follow SMIs mainly for inspiration within a certain field of interest (e.g. as fashion style, travel destinations, food recipes, interior design or fitness). No respondent explicitly stated that s/he has the intention to copy the SMI that s/he finds authentic. However, they all revealed that they like to get inspired by what they do and then try to implement it in their own lives. We identified three key values of an authentic SMI that respondents find aspirational and relevant for their identity construction:

The first aspirational value relates to the SMI's skill and expertise. For example, Interviewee 10 follows a SMI illustrator and *"[looks] at the stuff that [the SMI] creates and [tries] to redraw it"*. Similarly, one participant of Focus Group 1 follows fitness SMIs *"who are posting workouts because [she] uses it as an inspiration for exercises when [she] goes to the gym"*. Interviewee 3 shows his photography SMI and claims *"I would like to be able to have his life, to take pictures and travel, and also be good at it"*.

The second aspirational value of an authentic SMI refers to her/his perceived integrity. According to our respondents, behaving ethically and adhering to good values and morals is not a primary consideration when reflecting on the drivers of a SMI's BA, but rather a strict expectation of a public figure. However, what drives the authenticity of SMIs and makes them aspirational, is when they actively stand up for their own believes, promote a good cause or engage politically. Most respondents regard SMIs as very powerful communication channels, who are able to reach a large audience with their messages through their Instagram profile.

Authentic SMIs use their influence for a good cause and try to mobilise their followers to reflect about certain issues or even change their behaviour to the better.

> Interviewee 9: O*ne time she spoke in front of the European Parliament and she made a story about it. I was quite impressed, and I think this makes her really authentic, because it's something so big and political. This is integrity to me.*

> Interviewee 1: *I think at a certain stage of being an influencer and having above 30,000 followers, I think you should realize that you're speaking to a town right now when you speak on Instagram and you can use that to promote good causes.*

The third aspirational value that drives the authenticity perception of a SMI is personal progress. Most of our respondents have been following their authentic SMI for a while and are highly interested in observing their developments in life, whether it relates to their personality or to their career. It carries an aspirational value for consumers, since it allows them to draw parallels to their own life goals. Therefore, followers appreciate it when SMIs realistically explain the process behind what they have accomplished or how they want to achieve certain goals in the future. In addition, SMIs, who share how they are trying to improve themselves or how they overcome difficult challenges, are also perceived as authentic, whether or not the consumers can actually relate to these problems.

> Interviewee 4: *Maybe because I pursued the same dream as him. Maybe I can relate to him or maybe because he's pretty much the same age as me.*

> Focus Group 2: *I would like to see the process on how you achieve a certain success [...] For example, Devin Brugman built a swimwear brand with her friend. And they keep inspiring other people to build their own business. But they also keep telling, it's not easy and you have to work for it, that there are going to be ups and downs.*

> Interviewee 9*: She's been single for a long time - so she's challenging herself to go out on a blind date. [...] And she wants to go out and be active and meet people and try to get away from the point she is at right now. So, I think it brings a lot of authenticity, that she is actually doing these things to change the situation.*

2.3.3 Relatedness

The last existential drivers that consumers use as a resource for their identity projects are found within the relationships between them and SMIs. During the interviews and focus groups, almost all participants expressed that they feel related to their authentic SMI and that they believe to have some sort of relationship with them *(see 3.1.2 Relationship & Loyalty)*. The more intimate the relationship and the stronger the feelings of relatedness, the more does the SMI serve as a resource for identity construction and accordingly, the more authenticity is attributed to her/him. Relatedness to SMIs emerges from three key aspects:

Firstly, our respondents largely agree that when SMIs open up and provide insights into their private lives, then they appear more authentic. Most participants highlight that personal insights are free of any advertisements and reflect intimate situations that would usually only be shared with people felt close to. For instance, such a situation could be when SMIs show themselves with their friends and families at home or on vacation. By receiving insights into the life and relationships of the SMI outside of Instagram, consumers can see that there is an actual human being behind that public character, whose life might not be too different from their own ones. This in turn, creates strong feelings of relatedness. However, these feelings can only be established when private insights are perceived as meaningful.

> Interviewee 1: *One thing that is always difficult as a consumer is understanding how their everyday life works. [...] I think sometimes it would be nice to be guided through that process and [...] feel more part of their everyday life.*

> Interviewee 4: *I want the person to be authentic and post stuff not only for advertising, but maybe private stuff, just photos without advertising and I want them to post photos from at home maybe or vacation.*

> Interviewee 6: *I don't think that she has to share super much of her personal life. So, for example I don't necessarily need to know from the virtual person that I'm following if it's her mother's birthday, for example.*

Secondly, feelings of relatedness can emerge from factual or perceived commonalities. Interestingly, when asking our respondents to show us one authentic SMI, the majority of

respondents presented SMIs that live in the same city or come from the same country of origin as them. Thus, authenticity is attributed when consumers and SMIs share the same cultural background, as it forms part of their identity. In addition, commonalities can also relate to topics of interest, hobbies and political attitudes.

> Interviewee 2: *Her name is Pernille Theisbeck and she also lives in Copenhagen. She always tags that she lives in Frederiksberg where I live, so I feel like we live very close.*

> Interviewee 10: *I follow a few micro influencers from Azerbaijan, just to keep up with what's going on in our community. [...] They sort of went through a lot of stuff, like I went through [...] So, definitely their background plays a role why I'm following them.*

> Interviewee 6: *Being authentic in terms of being close to my own personality. So sometimes you also feel like, "oh they have the same hobbies, they have the same interests" - so to me that's also authentic.*

Thirdly, SMIs who actively engage with their followers by replying to messages and comments are perceived as more authentic. While the previous two aspects support the formation of one-sided relationships in consumers' minds, this authenticity driver fosters a dyadic relationship through the interactions between both. SMIs who take part in follower conversations are believed to sincerely care about the relationship with their audience. Moreover, authentic SMIs contribute to the maintenance of their relationships by actively seeking feedback and being responsive to the wishes of their followers, for instance the kind of content they would like to see. The positive effects of relationships on SMI BA are amplified when these are acknowledged even outside of Instagram, hence when SMIs meet their followers in real life during meet-ups.

> Secondary Data 29: *Social media offers many opportunities to connect and build relationships. Authentic engagement on social media is about listening to your audience. [...] Become a part of the community and find out what motivates [them] and what they want.*

Interviewee 5: *She answers to everybody. She has some questionnaire where she asked about something, like you do you like this better or that, and you can click on it. So, I think she's quite responsive to everything.*

Interviewee 10: *I know she does these meet-ups with her fans. It's usually very informal like in some coffee store. People just come and hang out with her, which supporting her credibility because she's just there to connect with people who are following her and find out why are they there.*

2.4 Sources of Drivers of Perceived Brand Authenticity of SMIs

Instagram offers SMIs a variety of content formats to express themselves and communicate with their audience. Content can take on the form of photos in the feed, captions, hashtags, the profile bio, and more recently also videos on InstaStories and IGTV *(see Appendix 4)*. These various content types can be seen as *sources* of consumer perceived BA, as they portray *where* followers search for authenticity drivers. Our data analysis reveals that due to the unique characteristics of each content format, some sources are better able to convey a sense of authenticity than others. In fact, all respondents agree that especially the 24-hour video format of InstaStories allows them to look behind the *"wall of filtered images"* and find out that there is a real person behind it (Focus Group 1). In fact, various articles highlight InstaStories as a key opportunity for showing authenticity on Instagram, without breaking the consistency of the artistic feed. Specifically, InstaStories offers the possibilities of ephemeral storytelling, taking followers behind-the-scenes, showing less perfect moments of life as well as creating original and raw content. Moreover, it allows for interaction between SMIs and their followers, since it offers direct replies, polls and sticker questions. Therefore, InstaStories represents the most important source of drivers for consumers' BA judgments of SMIs.

Secondary Data 12: *If you do love keeping a clean and stylized feed, use stories to offer more authentic glimpses into your day to day life. Stories only last for 24 hours, so you have the freedom to share images and videos that are not necessarily perfect. Offer your followers a look into what lights you up throughout the day, who you are spending*

time with, what you are working on right now, where you are in the world. Stories are fun and catchy, they are unedited and raw.

Interviewee 6: *InstaStories has a more personal touch. When you think about the feed that is edited and there are perfect pictures, then it's really not relatable. But if you see them at home or when they're not perfectly dressed, then it's down to earth and then you can easily relate to them - that makes them authentic.*

While hashtags, the profile bio or IGTV are barely mentioned by our respondents, the caption below the photos in the feed is also an important source for the drivers of SMI BA. Authentic SMIs make use of the caption to show their originality, tell a personal story or show humour.

Interviewee 2: *I think the more quirky or smart or interesting the caption, the more I think it's authentic because it captures what the person is actually thinking instead of just throwing in a quote that everyone says.*

Sources of SMI BA drivers are not limited to the content formats within Instagram. In fact, consumers also draw on external sources when forming their authenticity perceptions. In this regard, especially YouTube and Podcasts have been mentioned as sources where they look out for drivers of SMI BA. In addition, several respondents say that the people the SMIs hang out with and their appearance on other SMI's profiles flow into their BA judgments.

Interviewee 2: I *also get to know influencers, or I built my perception about them by what they do and with which influencers they hang out.*

Interviewee 8: *I guess like it's nice to see that people have friends and the only thing they're doing is not just showing themselves.*

Interviewee 7: *[Podcasts and YouTube] give them a bigger chance to tell their story [...]. So, I use them sometimes if I'm interested - it just gives me a more well-rounded perspective, if they can talk about something, in a podcast for an hour.*

2.5 Moderators of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity of SMIs

2.5.1 General Scepticism

While investigating on the drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs, we noticed a *General Scepticism* prevailing among our respondents. This general scepticism emerges from four key factors: the awareness of SMIs' commercial interests, the difficulties in identifying sponsored advertisements, the increasing exposure to influencer marketing campaigns, as well as the increasing number and similarity of SMIs. Respondents with a high general scepticism towards SMIs are highly critical of their claims and rely less on the identified BA drivers of SMIs. Thus, the strength of the drivers is moderated by a consumer's tendency to believe or disbelieve in the true motives of the SMI. In other words, the more accentuated a consumer's general scepticism, the lower the strength of the drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs, implying a negative relationship. Although *"authenticity is why brands and marketers work with influencers in the first place"* (Secondary Data 11), we found evidence that consumers' BA perceptions and trust towards SMIs is slowly crumbling down. In fact, *"criticism [towards influencer marketing] is becoming unmistakably loud"* (Secondary Data 26) and *"ad-exhausted audiences are increasingly looking for authenticity [on Instagram]."* (Secondary Data 5). Also, all our respondents agree that authenticity will be crucial for the future of SMIs and influencer marketing:

> Interviewee 8: *[SMIs can be authentic] to the extent that it's possible, I guess. I mean, if you're in that role as an influencer, you're always a bit like…you're promoting certain products that people pay you for, so obviously you're not 100% fully yourself.*

> Interviewee 6: *I think you're always more critical if you know that people get money for what they tell you. So, I mean, they also become advertising channels.*

> Interviewee 10: *It is becoming more important: authenticity wasn't that important before. People were just following everyone. [..] And then suddenly everyone started talking about mental health and how you shouldn't strive for perfection.*

Interviewee 7: *I have a feeling it's changing now. Because now we have so many good, perfect influencers in Instagram, they all look kind of similar, because they all have the same kind of level and now there has something to change.*

Our interviews and focus groups revealed that general scepticism is affected by the type as well as the audience size of the SMI. We find that scepticism towards SMIs increases the more followers and reach the SMI has on Instagram, since it usually parallels with the amount sponsored posts. In addition, SMIs that specialize within some topics are generally perceived as less authentic than others. Especially fashion SMIs are regarded as less authentic, since they are perceived as being the most commercialized group of SMIs. In contrast, general scepticism towards food or sustainability influencers is smaller, because they are believed to engage in fewer commercial collaborations and hence, to be less biased.

Interviewee 8: *If people become famous, I don't consider them authentic anymore. And I don't consider them standing for who they are, what they believe in, the products they believe in. They're not actually showing their lives, they're showing the life people are putting them into.*

Secondary Data 17: *As influencers continue to rise in popularity, many are beginning to feel more like traditional celebrities or brands, and some of that authentic connection with their audiences will naturally erode as a result.*

Interviewee 5: *I follow some ethical, sustainable influencers and they seem to be a bit more authentic, than like influences that just post fashion or beauty.*

Interviewee 10: *I feel like fashion influencers are not so necessarily authentic most of the time, because they're getting sponsored by most of the brands or they're getting all this fittings and different things.*

2.5.2 Consumer Goals

During our interviews and focus groups, it became increasingly evident that authenticity attribution is influenced by *Consumer Goals*. Most respondents note that the SMIs they follow

serve for a range of different purposes, from pure entertainment to more inspirational or aspirational ones. Accordingly, consumers' authenticity expectations towards SMIs vary significantly. When the SMI should only entertain them, the perceived BA of the SMI does not matter a lot. However, when the SMI serves as a resource of identity construction, the perceived BA is highly crucial. In fact, consumer goals and the level of required perceived BA can both be depicted as a continuum *(see Figure 6)*.

> Focus Group 2: *But in general, for me, you want to be entertained, you want to look at something nice. [...]. And I think then it doesn't matter if it's authentic or not. [..] It depends on what kind of purpose you have when you go on Instagram.*

> Focus Group 2: *Some [SMIs] are purely for entertainment value and don't have to be authentic. Like if you see a comedy movie, it's not authentic, you know, it's just a bad comedy movie but you still want to see it. [...] You all know that but it has a different place and a different purpose. Same goes for Instagram, I think.*

Considerations of the various goals of followers is important, since they strongly affect the quantity as well as the type of BA drivers that flow into their judgments. On the one hand, when the SMI serves as a source of identity construction, consumers rely on a broader range of drivers and take iconic and existential drivers more strongly into consideration. More specifically, consumers look more into the type of personality of the SMI, want to receive more personal insights, and require a stronger and more intimate relationship with the SMI. Also, when the goal is to receive trustworthy product recommendations, consumers more closely examine various SMI authenticity drivers. On the other hand, when the goal of following the SMI is only entertainment, then a few verifiable indexical drivers might suffice. Thus, consumer goals moderate the effect of drivers on consumer perceived BA of SMIs, insofar that the more the consumer uses the SMI as a source of identity construction, the stronger will the drivers affect their BA perception, implying a positive relationship.

> Interviewee 6: Y*ou want to have them as authentic as possible when it covers something that really interests you. If I follow someone who is super sporty, then it's a source of motivation for me. This person does not have to be super authentic. [...] An*

influencer has to be authentic when you really want to have a long-term bond with them, because if you feel they are authentic, you trust them in buying products.

<u>Focus Group 2</u>: *You follow everyone for a certain reason, and you attach some kind of meaning to it. I think it can vary a lot. If you follow someone, because you think that person has an interesting personality or is discussing a very interesting topic, then it's really nice if they share personal things. But if you follow a fashion blogger, just because you like the style, then it might not be too interesting to get these insights.*
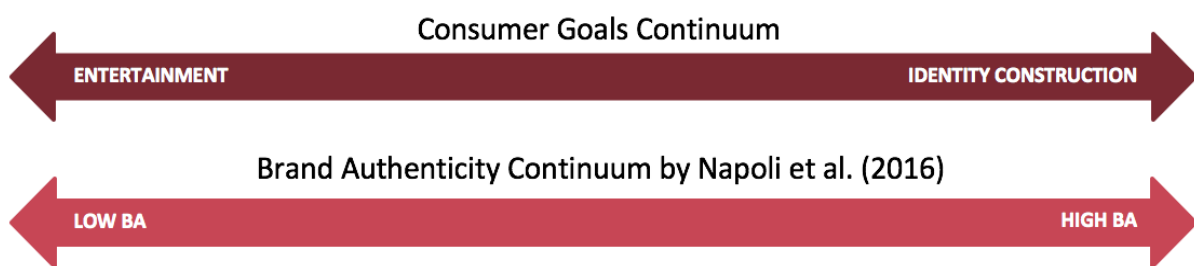
Figure 6: Consumer Goals Continuum

3. Outcomes of Consumer Perceived Brand Authenticity of SMIs

The analysis of our data collection revealed a variety of outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs. These have been grouped into two categories: *Psychological* and *Behavioural Outcomes*. The following paragraphs elaborate on each category and its sub-dimensions.

3.1 Psychological Outcomes

The first identified set of outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs refers to the *psychological* effects. These reflect various mental phenomena that are triggered when consumers perceive a SMI as authentic. We defined four key dimensions of psychological outcomes: *Feelings, Relationship and Loyalty, Trust and Credibility*, and *Motivation*. These are further broken down into more concrete outcomes as depicted in Figure 7.
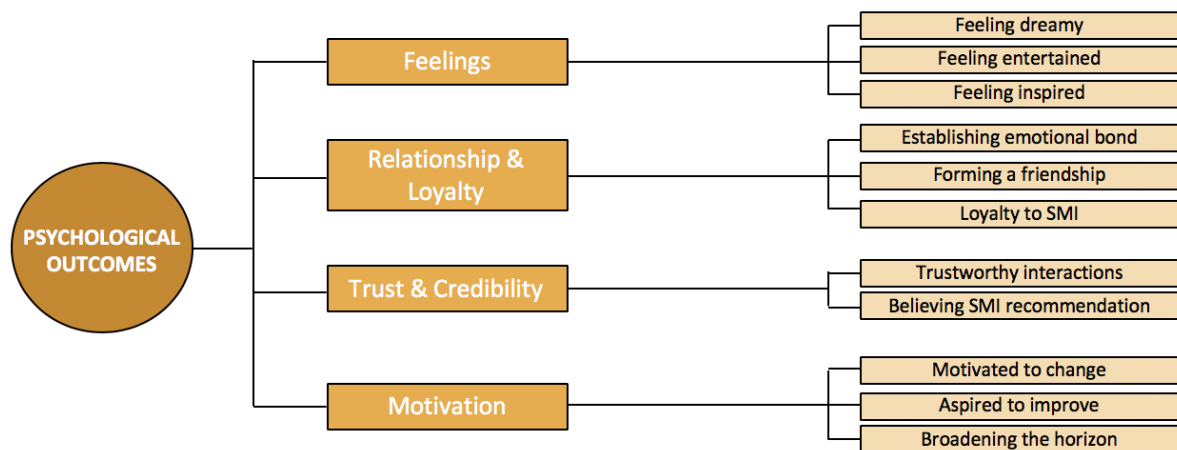
Figure 7: Psychological Outcomes of Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs

3.1.1 Feelings

According to our data analysis, our respondents experience a variety of feelings after getting in touch with a SMI that they consider authentic. These feelings are rather positive in nature: Firstly, some respondents mention the authentic SMI allows them to escape into a "dream world", where they can disconnect and take a break from their stressful everyday lives. Secondly, other respondents feel entertained by a SMI's authentic content, since this is among the primary reasons why they go on Instagram. Nonetheless, due to the endless amounts of content on social media, the pleasure of entertainment does not last long. As such, it does not serve a deeper purpose but allows only for instant gratification. Thirdly, feelings of inspiration after looking at an authentic SMI's profile are also very evident among our respondents. They feel inspired as the authentic SMI is able to spark new ideas and open up different perspectives on various topics related to consumers' own personal lives.

> Focus Group 1: *In the end of the day, it takes your mind off something for like five minutes [...]. You like to have dreamy kind of post sometimes because in order to just have a normal life presented, you also don't have to pick up your phone.*

> Interviewee 6: *I feel entertained. But I'm not thinking about it the whole day. Because Instagram is so fast. You get so much exposure. So, you tend to forget things quickly.*

> Focus Group 2: *I feel inspired. Because I can just think about what I'm doing next, get inspired for style, workouts or whatever I want to see. [...] So if I see something that I might not have thought of myself, it can spark an idea.*

Moreover, our focus groups and interviews reveal that most SMIs create rather negative feelings of jealousy and resentment, because they portray perfect and unachievable lives on Instagram. In contrast, authentic SMIs are able to make their followers feel good about their own lives, because they show a more realistic picture of how life really is.

> Interviewee 8: *[I don't feel] great to be honest. Usually when I look at influencers' profiles, it's addictive, you can't stop, you want to see more, you want to understand their life more, but it doesn't make me feel so great about my own life.* [...] But *if you can see that this person isn't perfect in the sense that they're real people and they have real problems - that would make me feel better when I look at their accounts.*

3.1.2 Relationship & Loyalty

We recognize that authentic SMIs are able to establish a strong emotional bond with their followers. Especially over time, consumers believe that they truly know the SMI as a person and not only as a public figure. This is because they receive daily insights into what they are doing, how they are feeling, and what they are planning for the future. These insights bring followers not only closer to the SMI, but also make them feel personally involved in their lives. Moreover, consumers are better able to relate to them and feel understood by the SMI. Therefore, they engage with them by asking personal questions and by sharing their wishes or concerns. By reaching out to create a dialogue, they try to extend the relationship beyond being a one-sided one. In fact, the majority of our respondents confirm that they regard their authentic SMI as a virtual friend with whom they could imagine being friends, even outside of Instagram.

> Focus Group 2: *After looking at the profile of my authentic influencer, I feel understood, because I can relate to what they're posting what they're doing what they're feeling. So, I see myself in some kind of content that was posted or published.*

Interviewee 3: *I feel like yes [friends with SMI]. And that's what gets me freaked out. Sometimes, you know so much that you feel like you know the person. And then probably if you see them on the street, you will talk to them like they're your friends*.

Secondary Data 26: *A stronger emotional bond is created because they have accumulated so much experience with them. In that way, Influencers are even often regarded as friends or even family members. [translated]*

A SMI-follower friendship is built and can last over a long time. Thus, it can be interpreted as loyalty, since it requires consumers to keep following that SMI. Their commitment to this friendship makes it difficult for them to "unfollow" a SMI again, or as interviewee 1 confirms: "*The ones that I consider my friends, I wouldn't like to cut them out of my life that quickly.*" This shows that emotionally attached followers have a higher barrier of "unfollowing" someone, as they draw value out of this relationship and would not want to lose an important friend in their life.

Focus Group 1: *It's way easier to follow than to unfollow because as soon as you follow you usually get personally involved - at least someone like me who is also interested in their personal story, in their background, what moves them.*

3.1.3 Trust & Credibility

Another psychological outcome of consumer perceived BA of SMIs is trust. Trust between the follower and the authentic SMI evolves over time. It mainly results from the emotional bond that emerges through feelings of relatedness and personal involvement, but also through positive experiences with a SMI's brand and product recommendations. Moreover, an authentic SMI creates trust, as s/he engages in a dialogue with followers and accepts feedback and implements suggestions.

Interviewee 6: *If you follow their advice over a long time, and you think "It's a really good advice that helped me", then you get a bond. This makes you consider them authentic as you know they only recommend something they really think it's good.*

Secondary Data 26: *Through an ongoing dialogue over a longer time period, Influencers build up a certain relationship with their followers, which is characterised by strong trust that is quite hard-wearing up to a certain degree. [translated]*

Although all our respondents strongly agree that they trust an authentic SMI more than an inauthentic one, most would not blindly trust their claims. In fact, establishing a higher degree of trust is inhibited as long as SMIs follow commercial interests that give rise to consumer scepticism. In addition, when SMIs address more serious topics (e.g. politics), our respondents would always conduct their own research in addition to the information provided by the SMI.

Interviewee 5: *I would trust her recommendations but I'm also aware of the fact that what that, what you have said earlier, that it's a job and she gets some money for.*

Focus Group 1: *I don't take them as credible [...]. Let's say with political opinions, I think it's an inspiration to think about the topic, but I would make further research or google it and read myself into different sources to build myself an opinion.*

3.1.4 Motivation

After getting in touch with an authentic SMI on Instagram, our respondents are motivated to take action, to improve themselves, and to achieve their personal goals. They admire the authentic SMI for her/his personality, consider certain skills as desirable, and would like to live a similar lifestyle. Some even aspire to be like them, as they are their role models or idols. Examples of aspirations relate to the SMI's skills in sports, cooking and arts (e.g. drawing, photography), or concern a certain a lifestyle (e.g. vegan, more sustainable). Motivations and aspirations are psychological outcomes but can turn into concrete actions by the followers.

Focus Group 2: *I feel motivated. Either if it's about food or fitness it's just that you have this topic on top of your mind and you might be more prone to take action.*

Focus Group 1: *Their lifestyle, in a sense, is desirable. Tn a way that like, for example, in fitness. It's nudging me in a way. It keeps reminding me that I should get my ass off.*

Interviewee 3: *I definitely would like to be able to have his life for sure to be able to like, take pictures and travel, and also be good at it*

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Even though some respondents do not directly express a motivation to change their habits or lives, they at least admit that authentic SMIs are able to broaden their horizon and help them discover new things and perspectives to reflect about. New discoveries can be insights into certain topics, "*[my authentic SMI] always has new information and stuff that I'm interested in*" or new brands and products "*I discover brands through influencers which I didn't know before*" (Interviewee 5). Being confronted with new perspectives also causes respondents to reconsider their own values, which might turn into new motivations to change their mindsets.

> <u>Interviewee 7</u>: *I rethink what I thought about some certain topics of certain stuff [...]. For example, throwing stuff away or just really thinking about ideas he had about what you really need, what do you really have to consume. So he's actually like influencing me and my actions kind of and it is not just passive consuming.*

3.2 Behavioural Outcomes

The second identified set of outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs are represented by various *behavioural* outcomes. Taking actions and changing certain behaviours often presume a change in the consumer's mindset. Thus, the psychological outcomes described above can be seen as influencing the decision-making processes of consumers and thus, take place before behavioural outcomes become visible. Insights from our data analysis converged on the behavioural outcomes of *Engagement, Purchase Intention,* and *WOM*. These are depicted and divided into more concrete outcomes in Figure 8.
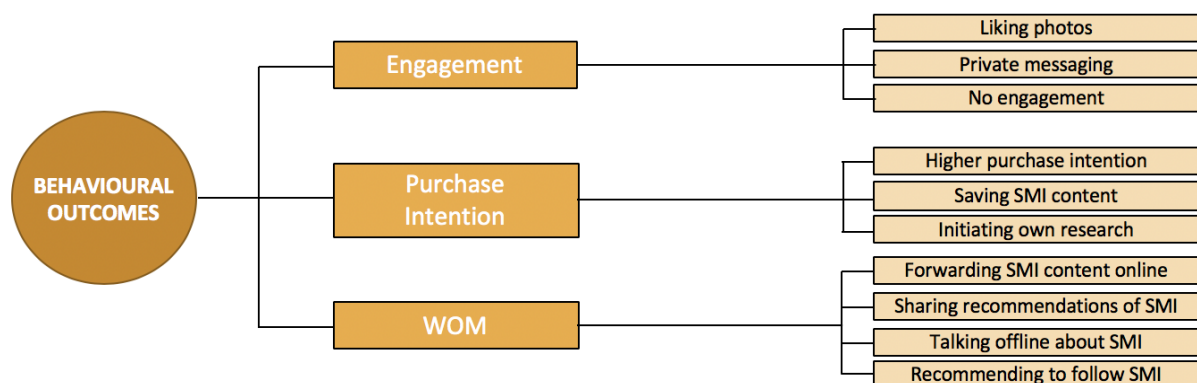

Figure 8: Behavioural Outcomes of Consumer Perceived BA of SMIs

3.2.1 Engagement

We found that the more authentic a respondent perceives a SMI and the more emotionally involved s/he is, the more likely s/he is to interact with the SMI. However, we reveal that overall engagement is quite low even though respondents often consider authentic SMIs as their friends. We discussed three different ways of engagement, which can be ranked according to their level of effort and intimacy, starting from liking a picture, over commenting below a post, up to writing a direct message to the SMI. At the lowest level of engagement, almost all respondents show their support by liking the content of the authentic SMI. Interviewee 10 mentioned: *"I definitely like photos on their profile"*. However, for most participants, this is the only type of engagement they pursue. For example, interviewee 5 states that *"the biggest thing I do is liking"* and another one notes *"to be honest, I never really comment or write".* In fact, almost no participants say they would comment on a SMI's post, no matter if s/he is perceived as authentic or not. The lack of engagement can be traced back to our respondents' believe that the SMI would not take notice of their comment, let alone reply to that comment. Thus, for the sake of maintaining a good SMI-follower relationship and not be ignored, they decide not to comment.

> Interviewee 1: *I do like pictures but I never comment, just because I feel like "What does make common change right now?". My comment on something will not make them coming back to me.*

Interestingly, respondents' opinions diverged with regard to the highest level of follower engagement, namely writing direct messages. On the one hand, some respondents did not feel the need or are too shy to share thoughts via direct messages, as they assume that the SMI receives many messages and will not have the time and nerve to answer all of them. Moreover, they do not consider their opinion important enough to share it with the SMI or simply never have any urgent questions to ask them. On the other hand, when our respondents feel very related to their authentic SMI, they would message them privately, ask questions, give feedback or share their personal opinion on a topic the SMI talked about.

> Interviewee 8: *I feel you're one of million people, and that there's not really a point as you just repeat what thousands of other people have said. And I never really had a burning question that I needed to ask this person [via direct message].*

> Interviewee 1: *If I had something very important to say to them, then [I would text them], or if I feel that they influenced my life in one way and I wanted to tell them how they can do that for other people, too. Or maybe how they've disappointed me.*

> Interviewee 10: *if I feel strongly about something, I can message them. [...] I feel like when you send a message, maybe they will see it. And often they do see it actually, I mean, you can see that it was seen or and they reply.*

This strongly divergent behaviour shows that maintaining a good relationship with an authentic SMI does not necessarily require interactions to take place. Not all respondents feel the need to engage with their authentic SMIs. For them, a purely one-sided relationship suffices. However, some respondents feel personally affected by what the SMI says or does and actively reach out to them because they care to hear their opinion on certain personal matters. We believe that this outcome is likely to be influenced by the goals consumers have when following SMIs *(see 2.5.2 Consumer Goals)*. For instance, following authentic SMIs for identity-related reasons might induce the follower to reach out to them privately.

> Interviewee 1: *I don't know why, even though I told you earlier that I sometimes feel like they're my friend, it's a one-way street and I know that very well.*

3.2.2 Purchase Intention

We found several studies that prove the effectivity of influencer marketing in influencing consumers' consumption behaviour by using SMIs as brand ambassadors. For example, according to Secondary Data 31:

> *Influencer marketing and user generated content shape consumer buying behaviour and influence their purchases. [...] "49% of people say they rely on recommendations from influencers when making purchase decisions.*

Our findings show that SMIs perceived as authentic have a stronger impact on consumers' purchase intentions than less authentic ones. Our respondents elicit a few reasons why they get influenced more easily by an authentic SMI in their consumption behaviour. These reasons can be traced back to the psychological outcomes described above. For example, since many respondents feel motivated to initiate change and aspire to be more like the SMI, they are more prone to use the same products and brands, hoping that it would enable them a similar lifestyle. In addition, as a consequence of the established trust between the follower and the authentic SMI, consumers are more likely to follow a SMI's recommendation. This is because they believe that the SMI has given her/his honest opinion, which will not mislead or disappoint them. However, many respondents find themselves buying products and only afterwards realizing that they have seen it promoted by their favourite SMI. Thus, decisions to buy brands and products may occur unconsciously.

Focus Group 1: *I think people tend to rely on recommendations and - we talked about role models, aspirations, or desirable lifestyles before - if there is someone that I desire actually likes the product, then I am more prone to buy that product.*

Interviewee 1: *I'm definitely influenced by it. I was watching Kenza's story the other day, and she promoted a brand called NAKD and I mean, I'm studying marketing, but nonetheless, I really fell into the trap and I bought her stuff.*

Focus Group 1: *Sometimes I find myself buying stuff just due to nice packaging or something else and then a day later I see that one of my influencers actually talked about it. Then I think, okay maybe that's also another ad why I bought it. Just because I saw, maybe not even consciously.*

After being exposed to an authentic SMI's recommendation, some respondents engage in various actions that indicate an increase in their purchase intentions. For example, they screenshot or save SMI content on their phones. This gives them the opportunity to have another look at it at a later point of time, increasing the chance of a deferred purchase. Interviewee 1 explains: *"I would screenshot [the product] if I really like it and save it for myself"*. Moreover, respondents note that when an authentic SMI recommends a product or brand they find interesting, they start doing their own research to collect more information.

While this might increase the likelihood of a purchase, it also uncovers that followers not always trust the authentic SMI enough to buy a product without further information. While this is less the case for fashion-related items, it is deemed necessary for beauty or technical products. In those cases, consumers search for more neutral information and peer-to-peer reviews on Amazon or Google in order to form a more grounded opinion. Interviewee 3 explains: *"I obviously would take in consideration what he says and look into it myself. I wouldn't blindly trust because he posted it"*. A participant of Focus Group 1 mentions that *"[he] would try to build [his] own opinion about this or Google or see some reviews"*. Similarly, interviewee 5 says that *"[she] would not buy them just because she's posting them, but always do some research [her]self"*. Such behaviour can be explained by general scepticism among followers *(see 2.5.1 General Scepticism)*. Due to the commercial motives of a SMI, no matter if perceived as authentic or not, consumers seldomly trust them blindly and thus, would not buy something without further research.

During our data collection, one respondent mentioned the existence of voucher codes that are often shared by SMIs when promoting brands. This triggered interesting discussions about the relevance of SMI authenticity when an opportunity to save money through discount codes exists. In fact, we find that for some respondents the perceived authenticity of SMIs becomes irrelevant to purchase intention when s/he already is familiar with the advertised product. However, other respondents would still not follow the recommendation of a SMI perceived as inauthentic, because they do not want to support the commercial motives of such SMIs.

> Focus Group 1: *If I know it's a good product, and I get a discount, I would sure I would buy it or more keen on doing so. Regardless if the influencers actually authentic or not because I have already built my opinion about this.*

> Interviewee 6: *If the influencer is not authentic, but still offers vouchers, I would still not do it. Because also I would feel like I'm supporting that inauthentic influencer by clicking on it and then she gets the revenue on that so I would not do that.*

3.2.3 Word-of-Mouth

SMIs perceived as authentic have been found to drive online as well as offline WOM. Instagram's sharing button allows consumers to easily share videos and photos with other consumers and engage in ongoing conversations about the SMI. Even outside of Instagram, followers tend to talk about their authentic SMIs. We identified four main reasons why consumers think that content by an authentic SMI is especially worth sharing with their friends: Firstly, when followers feel related to the SMI and see their personality traits or behaviours reflected in certain photos or videos, then they like to share it with their friends to tell them "this is so me". That way, consumers seek confirmation from friends for their feelings of relatedness with the SMI, which forms part of their identity construction. Similarly, they share SMI content when it reminds them of a friend's personality or behaviour, telling them "this is so you". Secondly, authentic SMIs are more likely to talk about and post content that their followers find particularly funny, interesting or unique. Therefore, they feel the urge to share it with their friends, as they want to spread positive vibes or helpful information. Thirdly, if the authentic SMI recommends a product or brand that consumers intend to buy or want to suggest to their friends, then they engage in WOM. This is more likely to happen with a recommendation of an authentic SMI, because followers have enough trust to stand behind it and forward it to their own close friends. Or as Interviewee 6 explains: *"I have so much trust in her that I would even recommend it to my friends".* Fourthly, followers often share the whole profile of the authentic SMI with their friends to tell them to follow the SMI as well. This implies that the person knows the SMI almost as much as their own friend to be sure they would make a good fit. Advice to follow a SMI can also occur when a consumer believes that the SMI offers good inspiration for the friend's next travel destination or clothing purchase. Thus, authentic SMIs can grow organically through the high likelihood to prompt WOM among followers.

> Interviewee 10: *She was just running and filming herself and saying, "I'm the kind of person who is always late", and I was like "this is so relatable". So I even sent it to my boyfriend, because I was like " See, just like me".*

> Interviewee 1: *Lena, who I think is really funny; I comment back and forth between my best friend and we always talk about her stories [offline] and that we liked it.*

> Interviewee 6: *Sometimes when there's a something super interesting or like a product that I like or my friend was looking for, then I will share with them.*

> Interviewee 3: *I shared with my brother because he is going to Rio now. He went for the carnival. And he was like going to different Carnival parties. And I was like, "Look, this is where you go" and send it to him. And, he started following him and said "Oh, yeah, he's so nice. So cool."*

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter provides a discussion on how the findings of this thesis contribute to theory. Moreover, the authors present the managerial implications, limitations of this research as well as suggestions for future research.

1. Theoretical Contribution

Scholars widely acknowledge authenticity as a core component of successful brands, since consumers are increasingly seeking authentic brands for their offline and online consumption acts. However, empirical research on BA is quite recent and research especially lags behind in understanding BA in the context of SMIs as human brands. The underlying study fills this gap by illuminating on the drivers and outcomes of BA of SMIs from a consumer's perspective. We find that consumer perceived BA of SMIs is formed through a combination of indexical, iconic and existential drivers, which are moderated by a consumer's general scepticism as well as her/his personal goals. In addition, we reveal that SMIs perceived as authentic are able to trigger a variety of psychological and behavioural outcomes among their followers, which positively reflect back on the SMI brand. Overall, our proposed theoretical model responds to calls for a better understanding of consumers' BA perceptions in a human brand context (e.g. Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2015) *(see Figure 2).* Specifically, it contributes to theory by providing the following empirical propositions:

First, this study confirms the highly subjective, goal-dependent, and dynamic formation of BA perceptions, as proposed by several scholars (e.g. Fritz et al., 2017; Napoli et al., 2016; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). In line with Napoli et al. (2016), followers do not differentiate between authentic and inauthentic SMIs, but rather judge along a continuum between these two extremes. The extent to which a SMI is perceived as authentic is highly subjective, as it is determined by an individual's choice and assigned relevance to certain BA drivers: Firstly, it depends on an individual's personal interpretation of BA. Followers' interpretations may vary slightly from each other but largely stay within the realm of the multidimensional construct of perceived BA by Morhart et al. (2015), consisting of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. Secondly, followers' BA judgments are strongly influenced by their personal goals for following a SMI. These range along a continuum from pure entertainment to more high-order identity-construction goals *(see Figure 6).* Hence, this finding provides new evidence for Beverland and Farrelly's (2010) proposition that BA attribution is a goal-driven process. For entertainment purposes, followers' BA judgements include only a few indexical and iconic drivers. For their identity projects, followers have higher BA expectations towards SMIs, as they draw on a variety of drivers and assign a higher importance to iconic and existential BA drivers. Hence, our results show that SMIs do not necessarily have to be perceived as very authentic to provide value to their followers. Thirdly, consumers' general scepticism towards SMIs and influencer marketing is another source of subjectivity in their BA judgments. While Morhart et al. (2015) identified the moderating effect of consumer scepticism in the context of product and service brands, this study provides evidence for its existence in relation to SMI brands. When general scepticism is high, consumers rely less on the BA drivers, as they believe that the SMI is driven by monetary interests rather than by intrinsic motivation. Interestingly, it is influenced by the follower size as well as the specialisation of the SMI. Followers are more sceptical towards bigger SMI accounts and towards certain types of SMIs (e.g. fashion SMIs) than others (e.g. food SMIs). Moreover, we prove that with changing follower goals and scepticism, also BA perceptions of SMIs can evolve and adjust over time. For example, certain drivers can gain or lose in relevance for an individual, which affects her/his SMI BA perception accordingly.

Second, our research contributes to theory by uncovering a variety of concrete drivers that flow into consumers' BA perceptions of SMIs. Audrezet et al. (2018) identify authenticity strategies deliberately used by SMIs in sponsored blog posts but do not explore consumer perceptions nor consider non-sponsored content. Our research argues for the importance of investigating BA from a consumer's point of view and provides a new perspective on BA of SMIs by focusing on perceived drivers. Due to its growing popularity, we shift the focus to Instagram and remain open to *all* types of content on the SMI profile. In fact, among Instagram's large variety of content formats *(see Appendix 4)*, InstaStories represents the most important source of BA drivers, due to its possibilities of ephemeral storytelling and of providing raw insights into the SMI's private life. Moreover, we find that BA perceptions do not only arise from efforts taken by the SMI but are also influenced by external sources. This implies the existence of co-creational dynamics. For example, followers pay close attention to the reputation of sponsoring brands as well as their fit with the SMI brand. Also, they form attitudes towards friends, family members and other SMIs visible on the SMI's profile, which affect their BA perception. These findings represent first insights into the brand identity co-creation of other human brand types than celebrities, as called for by Centeno & Wang (2017). In addition, we find that the identified BA drivers fall within the categorisation of indexical, iconic and existential BA cues as illustrated in the perceived BA framework by Morhart et al. (2015). In fact, our results show that consumers rely on signs of verification (indexical), compare impressions with expectations (iconic), and look for sources of identification (existential) when forming their BA perception of SMIs. However, as opposed to Morhart et al. (2015), our sets of drivers are more exhaustive and concrete. As such, our model provides a more holistic and in-depth understanding of perceived BA drivers.

Comparing the identified drivers to the antecedents of celebrity BA outlined by Moulard et al. (2015), we find similarities but also important differences that highlight the context-dependency of the BA construct. The dimensions of talent, originality, consistency, candidness and morality by Moulard et al. (2015) largely mirror our drivers of verification and expectation. However, we note one key discrepancy between the authors' dimension of discretion and our driver of identification. According to Moulard et al. (2015), fans of celebrities find it more authentic when celebrities limit exposure into their personal life. In

contrast, we found that followers actively look for insights into SMIs' private lives in order to find resources for constructing their own identities. We believe that followers draw more strongly on existential drivers for their BA perceptions of SMIs, since they pursue more high-order consumption goals with SMI than with celebrity brands. This is because they feel more related to them than to celebrities, who are regarded as less approachable.

Third, this research expands the knowledge base of perceived BA of SMIs by providing extensive insights into its consumer outcomes. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) explore the BA outcomes of celebrity brands and find positive effects of BA on WOM, purchase likelihood and emotional attachment. Audrezet et al. (2018) outline only the psychological outcomes of BA for the SMI her/himself. The scrutiny of the study at hand yields a variety of behavioural *and* psychological consumer outcomes that go beyond common key metrics in brand management, making our model more complete. In terms of behavioural outcomes, our findings confirm that also in the context of SMIs, perceived BA leads to positive effects of WOM and a higher purchase likelihood. Further, WOM on SMIs not only leads to positive conversations but also to the organic growth of the SMI's follower count. Moreover, we add engagement as a third behavioural outcome. In fact, follower engagement is considered one of the most important metrics for SMI and influencer marketing success.

Turning to psychological outcomes, we discover that our findings show significant parallels to the consumer-derived benefits outlined by Napoli et al. (2016). Although the authors mention these benefits in relation to conventional brands, we find evidence that they are also applicable to SMI human brands. For example, the notions of "hedonic benefits" and "brand love" by Napoli et al. (2016) largely align with our dimensions of "feelings" and "relationship & loyalty", respectively. Further in line with Napoli et al. (2016), we argue that our consumer outcomes are reflective of brand-derived benefits. For instance, we identified "trust & credibility" as a key outcome of SMI BA, which represents one of most important challenges for brands today. However, we reveal that although a higher BA perception leads to more consumer trust, followers still maintain a certain level of doubt towards SMIs. In addition, we argue that the positive nature of our consumer outcomes allows followers to develop more favourable and stronger associations with the authentic SMI, which positively

reflects back on the SMI's brand equity. Thus, as emphasized by Burmann and Arnhold (2008), we confirm that BA allows SMI brands to differentiate themselves from competition.

In addition, we find proof for the existence of "hyper-authenticity" in the consumption of SMI brands on Instagram. We thereby extend the findings by Rose and Wood (2005) on reality TV shows to another type of entertainment media. Followers of SMIs are aware of the commercialisation and the editing of SMI content and even believe it can contribute to BA instead of harming it. Similar to the explanation provided by Beverland and Farrelly (2010), finding authenticity in the obviously fake on Instagram can be traced back to consumers' wishes to escape into a dreamy world of aspiration, away from their stressful everyday lives.

Fourth and finally, our investigations into consumers' BA perceptions of SMIs provide initial evidence for the increasing loss of authenticity among SMI brands. This conclusion can be drawn from three key developments within the last years: The over-utilisation of influencer marketing practices, the increasing commercialisation of SMIs as well as the rising number of similar SMIs. Thus, SMI brands that used to have the presumed key advantage of perceived authenticity are slowly facing similar challenges like traditional brands, posing a threat to their existence.

2. Managerial Implications

In the light of growing consumer scepticism towards SMIs and influencer marketing, it has become increasingly important for SMIs to actively manage their authenticity perceptions as well as for companies to carefully choose the SMIs to collaborate with. The findings of this research provide practical implications aimed at overcoming these unique challenges. With the help of the identified drivers, moderators, and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs, we developed specific guidelines that help SMIs and companies to continue to reap the rewards of BA and at the same time resonate with the demands of today's consumers.

For companies, the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs serve as a guide to craft successful influencer marketing campaigns. Specifically, it assists in identifying authentic SMIs that fit with their brand and communication strategy, which currently

represents the key challenge of this practice. This is crucial if the brand wishes to take advantage of the benefits of collaborating with an authentic SMI, such as boosting brand awareness, establishing trustworthy relationships, initiating positive WOM, increasing purchase intention, and differentiating from competitors. Based on our findings, we propose the following directions:

First, before reaching out to SMIs for a collaboration, sponsoring brands should align their SMI selection criteria with consumers' BA expectations towards SMIs. Depending on the goals of the followers, a SMI does not necessarily have to be perceived as very authentic. For companies this means that for some influencer marketing campaigns, marketers can draw on a *larger* pool of suitable SMIs. More precisely, the degree of perceived SMI BA depends on the type of products or brands to be promoted as well as the specific marketing goals to be reached. For example, if a brand wants to increase brand awareness by targeting the mass-market with a generic product (e.g. a T-shirt), a very authentic SMI might not be required. In contrast, a company that aims to gain the trust of new customers for a niche product (e.g. a fair-trade T-Shirt) might need to set higher requirements in terms of SMI BA. In fact, for well-known brands that focus on driving sales, companies might compromise on the perceived BA of SMIs and leverage on their reach by spreading promotion codes. As a general rule of thumb, the level of perceived BA of a SMI decreases with the number of followers. Therefore, micro SMIs are regarded as more authentic. Due to their higher relatability that encourages follower engagement and loyalty, micro SMIs are a good fit for promoting niche products.

Second, when deciding on the SMIs to collaborate with, marketers should ensure a good brand fit in terms of the overall theme, personality, (life-)style, and personal values. Marketers should acknowledge that SMIs are brands themselves and as such, carry certain meanings for their followers. A perceived misalignment between the SMI brand and the sponsoring brand might come at the expense of the credibility of both parties. Marketers should be aware that finding a SMI with a good brand fit requires time and effort. Before reaching out to SMIs, marketers should immerse themselves into the position of a follower and observe the SMI for a longer period of time. Looking out for the drivers of perceived BA will help to reveal who the SMI really is and what s/he stands for. Thereby, especially InstaStories and the photo captions represent valuable sources. Once identified, a good brand

fit will create synergetic and unique content that will serve as a source of differentiation among the plenty of influencer marketing campaigns found on Instagram.

Third, when reaching out to SMIs, companies should lay out the conditions of the collaboration. On the one hand, companies should provide SMIs with a high degree of creative freedom in the production of the branded content. By allowing SMIs to express their own identity and to tell a personal story around the sponsored products or brands, consumers will not only perceive it more credible, but also gain realistic insights on how they could use them in their own lives. That way, the perceived BA of the SMI can thrive and reflect back positively on the sponsoring brand. On the other hand, marketers should set certain requirements towards the SMI, which will ensure the visibility of objective drivers of SMI BA. Since expertise and informativeness are drivers of consumer perceived BA of SMIs, companies should provide SMIs with sufficient information about their products, so that they are able to form and share fact-based opinions with their followers. Moreover, marketers can ensure transparency by obliging SMIs to label the sponsored content as advertisement. Additionally, companies can ask SMIs to do InstaStories, in which they show the behind-the-scenes of the collaboration, such as a "product unboxing" or a "try-on haul".

Fourth, companies should aim at building long-term relationships with SMIs and make the first steps towards Influencer Marketing 2.0 (Solis, 2017) *(see 3.2 From Celebrity Endorsement to Influencer Marketing)*. In this new generation, winning SMIs as continuous collaboration partners sends positive signs of credibility and consistency to the outside world. If followers see that the SMI repeatedly shows and uses the sponsored product in her/his everyday life, it shows that the SMI truly believes in it and has gathered enough experience to honestly recommend it to her/his community. A successful influencer relationship management could even entail the co-creation of limited editions, thereby actively engaging SMIs in the value chain. Such strong commitment on both sides will increase consumers' BA perceptions, especially in terms of originality and favourable WOM.

For SMIs, the drivers and outcomes of perceived BA represent valuable input for refining their authenticity strategies. In fact, SMIs find themselves in a dilemma of maintaining their authenticity in the light of commercial collaboration opportunities. With rising consumer scepticism, crafting and refining an authenticity strategy has become more crucial than ever.

Nonetheless, before engaging in certain BA strategies, SMIs should figure out the authenticity expectations of their followers, since these might vary significantly. In any case, to continue to grow followers, to initiate positive WOM, and to foster loyal relationships, we have the following practical suggestions:

First, SMIs should be very selective in the choice of commercial collaboration partners. Engaging in all sorts of different collaborations leaves the impression that the SMI only cares about the monetary rewards, which negatively impacts her/his perceived BA. Thus, it is highly recommended that SMIs only engage with companies that have a good reputation and that show a high brand fit in order to maintain trust and credibility in their community. In fact, building up trust and a loyal followership is a long-term process. However, a breach of trust and a loss of followers due to a doubtful collaboration is a risk at any time. Followers expect SMIs to be intrinsically motivated when posting content and truly believing in the brands they promote. Therefore, SMIs should strategically integrate sponsored posts into their feed and avoid obvious product placements. Moreover, they should openly share their reasons and motives behind each partnership and mention *why* they have turned down other collaboration inquiries. SMIs who over-commercialise will lose resonance with their followers, harm their SMI brand, and ultimately make themselves less attractive for cooperation partners.

Second, SMIs should leverage on the various content formats that Instagram offers in order to enhance their authenticity perceptions. Especially InstaStories serves as a great opportunity to engage with the community, involve followers in the everyday life, and provide additional behind-the-scenes content as well as information not visible in the feed. Moreover, putting effort into the formulation of the captions is highly appreciated by the followers, as it adds a personal touch to the post. SMIs should link to external sources (e.g. newspaper articles, official statistics) when making claims about sensitive topics, as this will make their posts more credible and reliable. Moreover, Instagram's gallery function allows to upload several photos within one post and as such, offers a great possibility to show the edited photo as well as more raw, unedited versions. Finally, SMIs on Instagram should consider expanding to other media platforms, such as YouTube or Podcasts. Getting in touch with followers through various channels not only shows that the SMI is truly passionate about high quality

content creation, but also allows followers to get insights into the many facets and skills of the SMI, that make her/him truly aspirational.

Third, SMIs should always be true to themselves and make clear what they stand for. Followers are very critical and will note when the SMI is "fake" or playing a certain role just to portray a certain image that seems desirable or popular. SMIs that are candid and show who they really are will find more resonance and positive responses, especially when they serve as an important input in followers' identity projects. By showing a variety of real emotions, being spontaneous, showing humour, and behaving down-to-earth, followers can better relate to the SMI and are more likely to see her/him as a friend. Moreover, it is essential that SMIs allow their audience to get to know the person behind the seemingly perfect Instagram profile. A loyal audience does not judge but instead highly values when SMIs stand behind their "flaws" and show the less perfect moments, too. Finally, SMIs should involve friends and family members on their InstaStories. Seeing how the SMIs interacts with their closest people helps followers establish an emotional bond. After all, SMIs should keep in mind that showing the true self does not only resonate with their audience but also ensures inner satisfaction from being a SMI.

Fourth and finally, SMIs should engage with their community. By involving follwers in a dialogue, accepting their feedback, and responding to their ideas and concerns, SMIs foster a strong relationship and encourage trust and credibility. For instance, this could be done with a poll or sticker questions on InstaStories. In addition, SMIs should keep in mind that followers who have personal questions and highly value the SMI's opinion, do not comment on photos but rather seek private contact through direct messaging. Therefore, SMIs should make sure to always reply to these messages in a timely and careful manner. Overall, SMIs should keep in mind that their followers are their most important asset and that with rising fame on Instagram also their responsibility towards their community increases.

3. Limitations and Future Research

Our qualitative research into the drivers and outcomes of consumer perceived BA of SMIs has notable limitations but also provides ample opportunities for future research. First, it faces some methodological limitations due to a shortage of time and resources. The interview and focus group sample is biased due to the purposive sampling technique applied. Moreover, it is constrained by gender, age, occupation, nationality, and location. The homogeneity of the sample may limit the generalisability of the findings. Including a more diverse group of people would strengthen the contribution to BA research. Moreover, although we sensed considerable confidence after conducting ten interviews and two focus groups, theoretical saturation has probably not been sufficiently reached. This might be due to the various types of SMIs and consumers goals, which led to a broad variety of interpretations. To reach a higher validity and generalisability of results, future studies should consider increasing the number of interviews and focus groups or add an additional data collection method, such as a netnography. Including SMIs in the sample of respondents could also be interesting, as it may reveal potential discrepancies between consumer and SMI perspectives on BA.

Second, our investigations were not built around a specific SMI as respondents self-selected their authentic SMI. While this highlighted the subjectivity of the BA construct and yielded a variety of valuable interpretations, it also complicated the comparison and consolidation process of our theory. In fact, we discovered different patterns in the BA perceptions of different types and sizes of SMIs. Future research should therefore examine a variety of SMI types (e.g. food, fashion, photography) and SMI sizes (e.g. micro, macro). This could be done by applying a multiple case study design, which would allow the identification of common and differentiating drivers of follower's BA perceptions. These insights could be especially interesting considering the new trend in influencer marketing of collaborating with micro SMIs. Moreover, this approach would yield a strong theoretical basis for a quantitative study for measuring the strength of the drivers and outcomes.

Third, while this research focused on the generation of millennials, future research should test our theoretical model with other generations, for example generation Z. In the framework of celebrity BA, Moulard et al. (2015) investigate on the moderating effect of age

on the relative importance of the identified antecedents and find significant differences. In a similar vein, we believe that the interpretations of BA, the importance of certain BA drivers, the consumer goals as well as the general scepticism towards SMIs might be different in other generations. These insights could be particularly interesting for brands that want to reach a certain age group through SMIs.

Fourth, although the co-creation of SMI BA was not explicitly explored in this research, we find evidence that consumers form their SMI BA perceptions not only based on actions taken by the SMI but also based on external sources. Therefore, the co-creation of a SMI brand identity could be an interesting area for future research. In fact, it would respond to the calls by various scholars to advance the understanding of human brand identity co-creation, by including SMIs next to celebrities (Centeno & Wang, 2017) and fashion bloggers (Erz & Christensen, 2018).

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Appendices

Appendix 1
Framework Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, B. (2015)
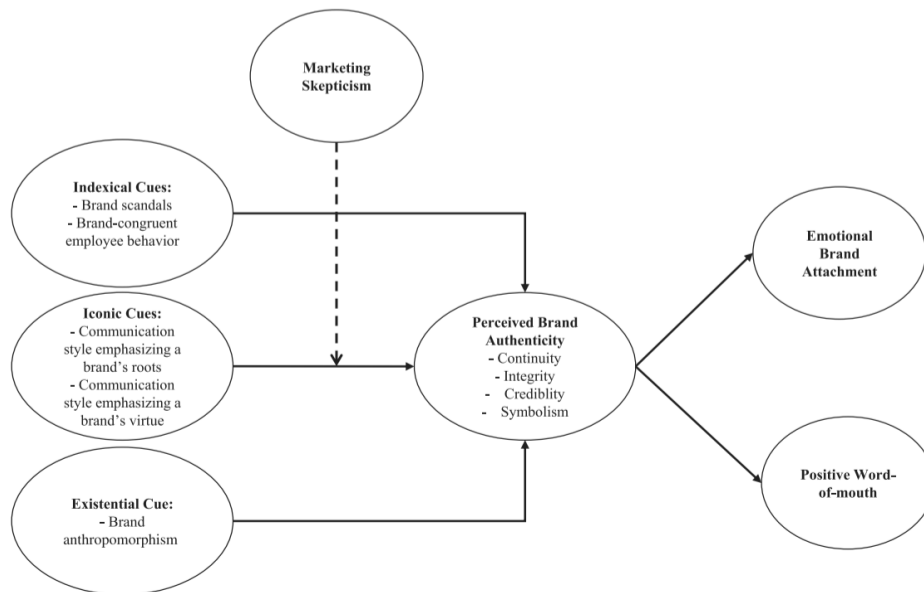
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of perceived brand authenticity (study 5).

Appendix 2:
Framework Moulard, Garrity, & Rice (2015)
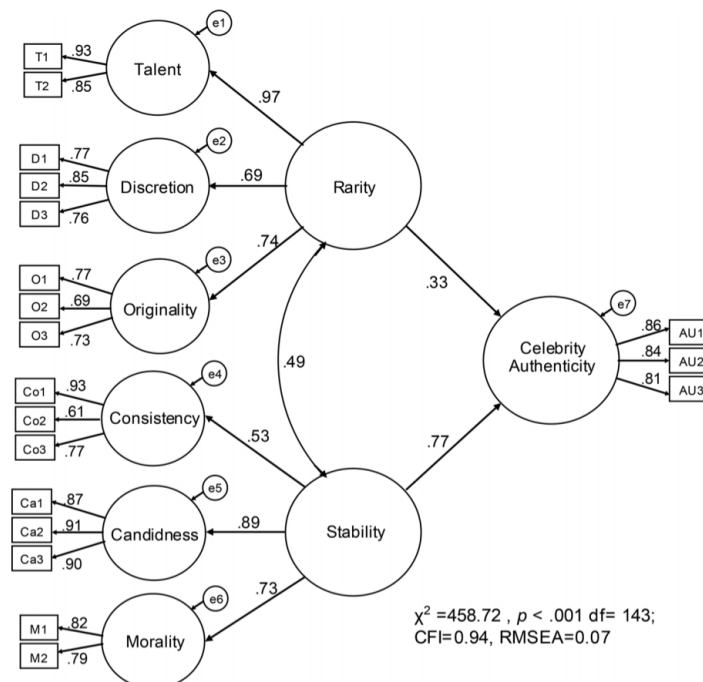
Appendix 3:
Framework Kowalczyk & Pounders (2016)
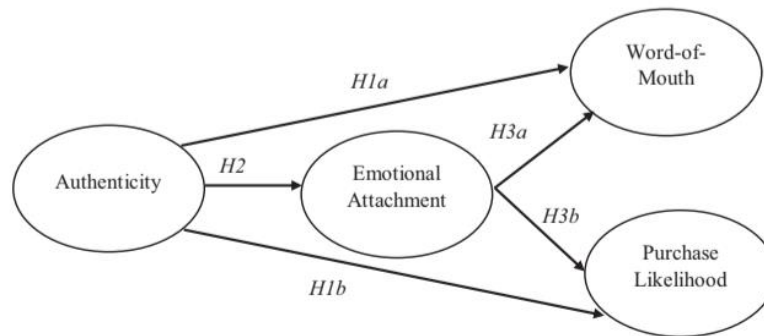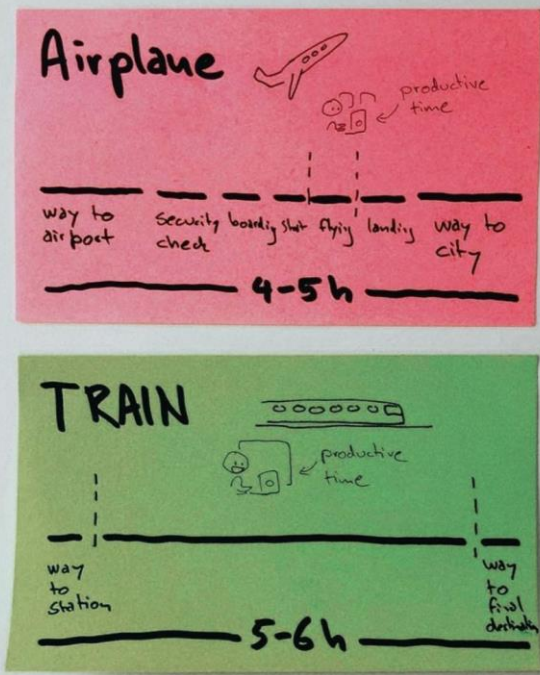
Appendix 4:
Sources of Drivers of Consumers Perceived Brand Authenticity of SMIs
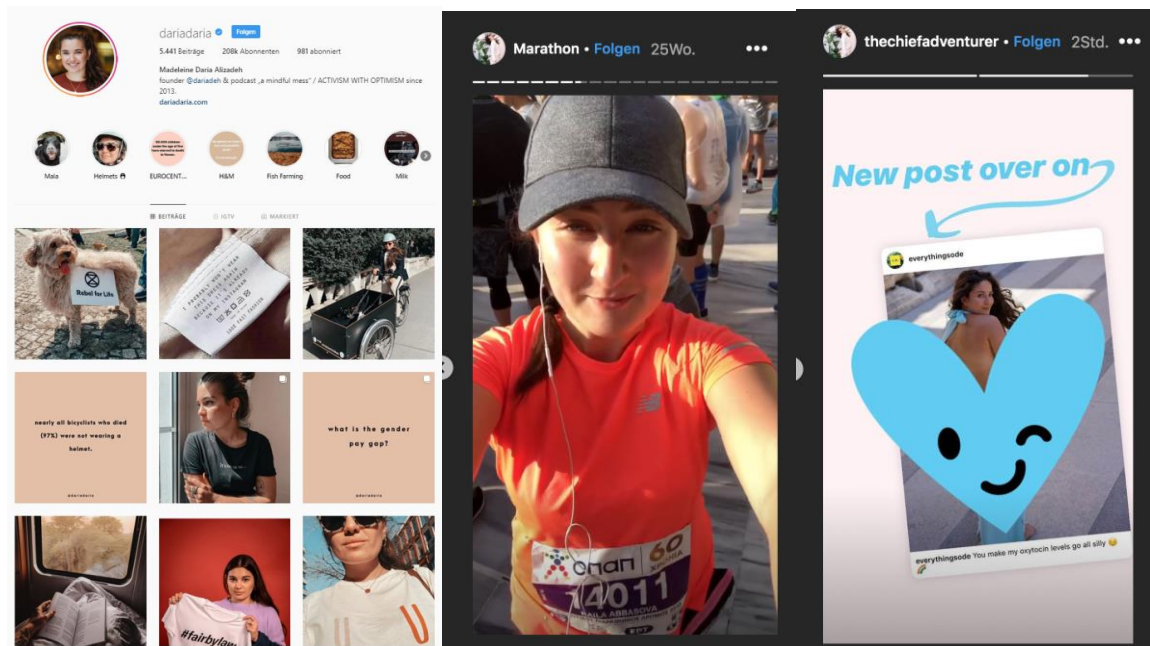
Instagram Profile with Bio, Feed & InstaStories

IGTV

Caption below the feed photo
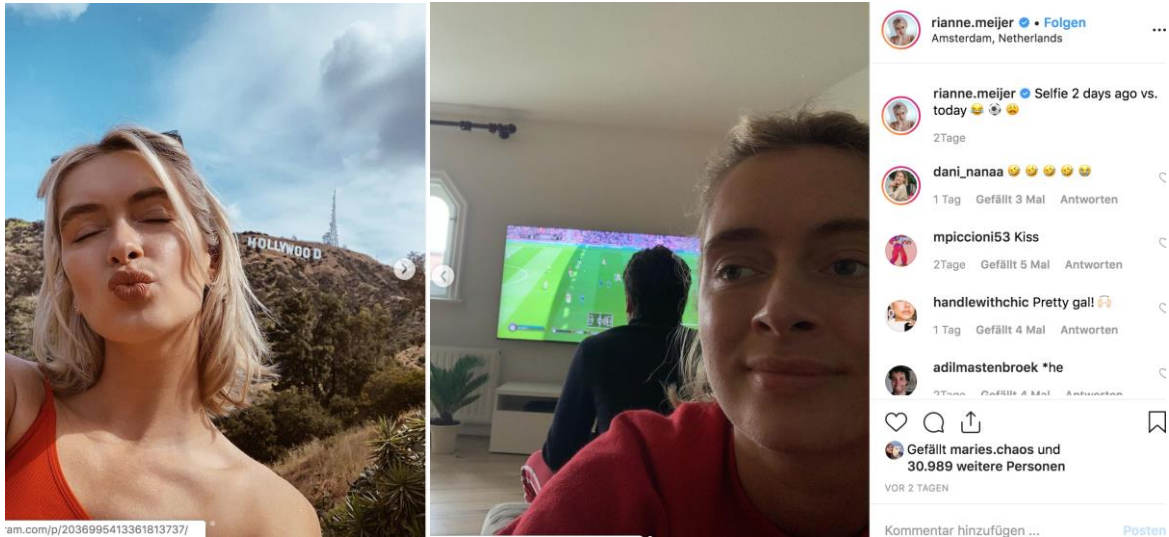
Gallery Swipe function

Appendix 5:
Interview Guide

Presentation and Information

- Presentation of the researcher, study and topic.
- Indication of the approximate time frame for the interview.
- Indication that the respondent if desired can be anonymous.
- Permission to audiotape the interview

Demographic Questions

1. What's your name?
2. What's your nationality?
3. What's your gender?
4. How old are you?
5. What is your highest level of education/ current occupation?

Warm-up questions: General involvement with Instagram / SMIs

6. Do you use Instagram? How often?
7. Do you follow influencers? Why? What value does it give to you?
8. What factors are important for you when you decide to follow an influencer?

Consumer Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

DRIVERS

INPUT INTERVIEWER: You mentioned (aspect related to authenticity) is an important characteristic of an influencer that you would follow.

9. Does authenticity also matter to you? If yes/no why?

INPUT INTERVIEWER: *Show us one authentic and one inauthentic Influencer. Feel free to take some time and go through his/her profile again a bit.*

10. Why do you follow this influencer?
11. Why is this influencer authentic to you? Please describe and show us some drivers you consider in your evaluation.
    a. What sources do you use? (e.g. feed, InstaStories, external)
12. Do you differentiate between different types of influencers in the drivers for authenticity?
13. Do you think that influencers are more authentic than models or brands on Instagram? If yes, why?

INPUT INTERVIEWEE: *Imagine this influencer would post a sponsored post promoting a certain product.*
14. How would this impact your perceived authenticity of the influencer?

OUTCOMES

INPUT INTERVIEWEE: *We have talked about your authenticity perception of influencers, now let's turn to how you engage with him/her.*

Psychological Outcomes
15. How does this SMI make you feel?
16. Can you imagine being friends with that influencer? Why?

Behavioural Outcomes
17. Please describe how you engage with the influencer. And why?
- *Would you write him/her a message? Comment content? About what?*
18. Would you buy a product that s/he recommends, and why?
19. Would you share his/her content or profile? Why? How?

Appendix 6:
Screenshots of Instagram Profiles of chosen authentic SMIs by participants
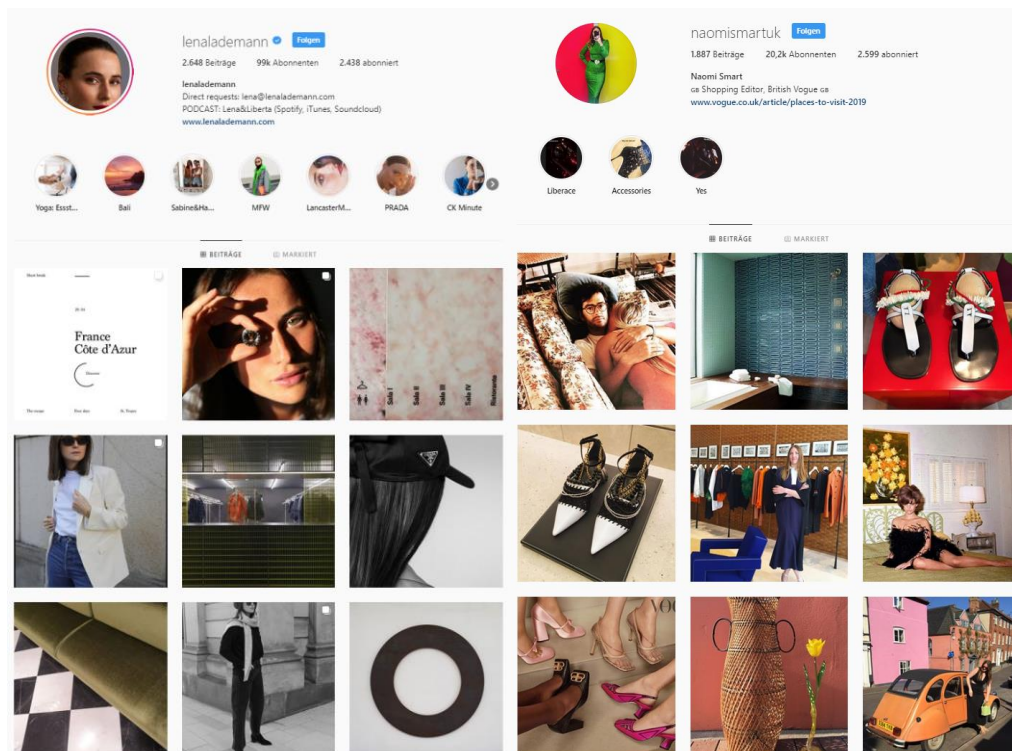
Lenalademann & Naomismartuk (Interviewee 1)
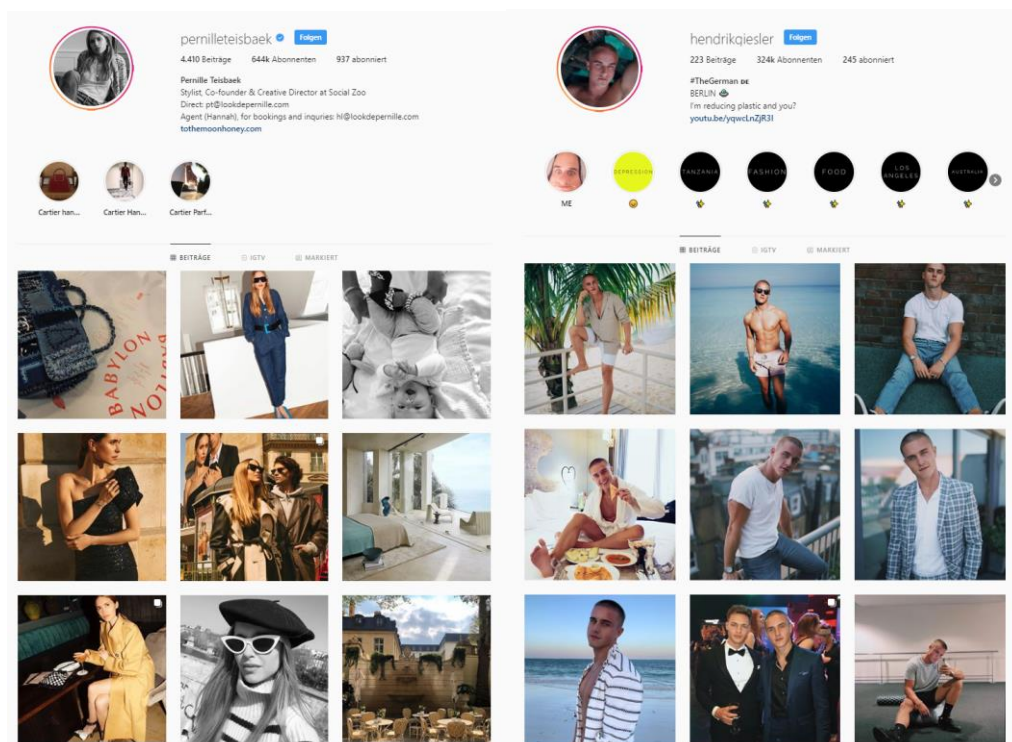
Pernilleeisbaek & Henrik Giesler (Interviewee 2/4)
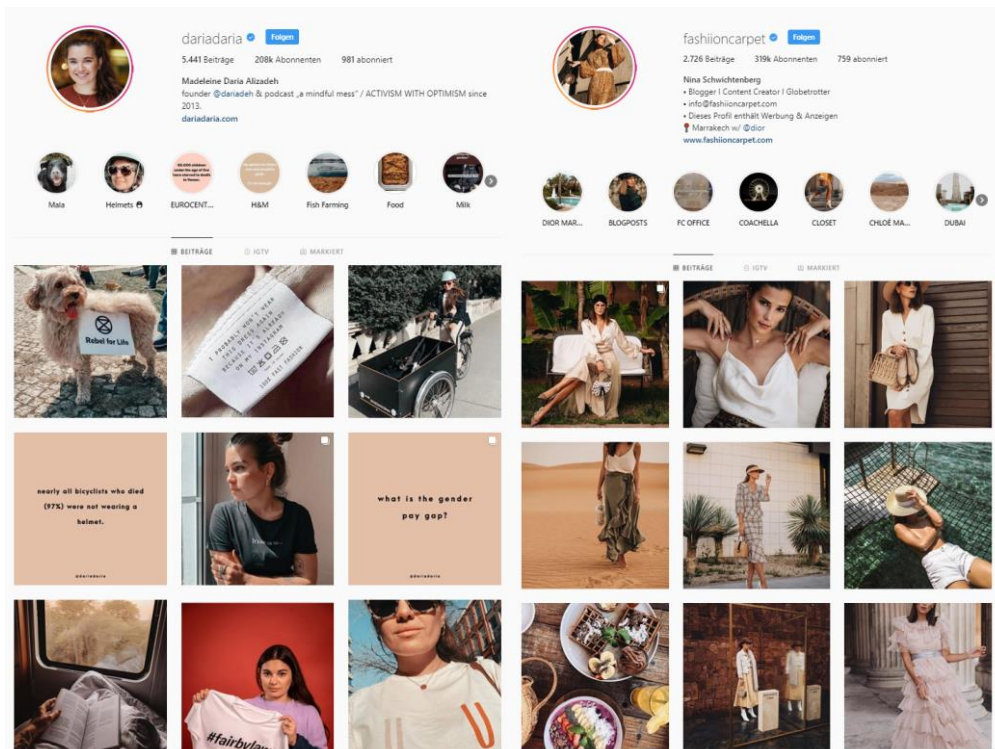
DariaDaira & Fashiioncarpet (Interviewee 5/6)
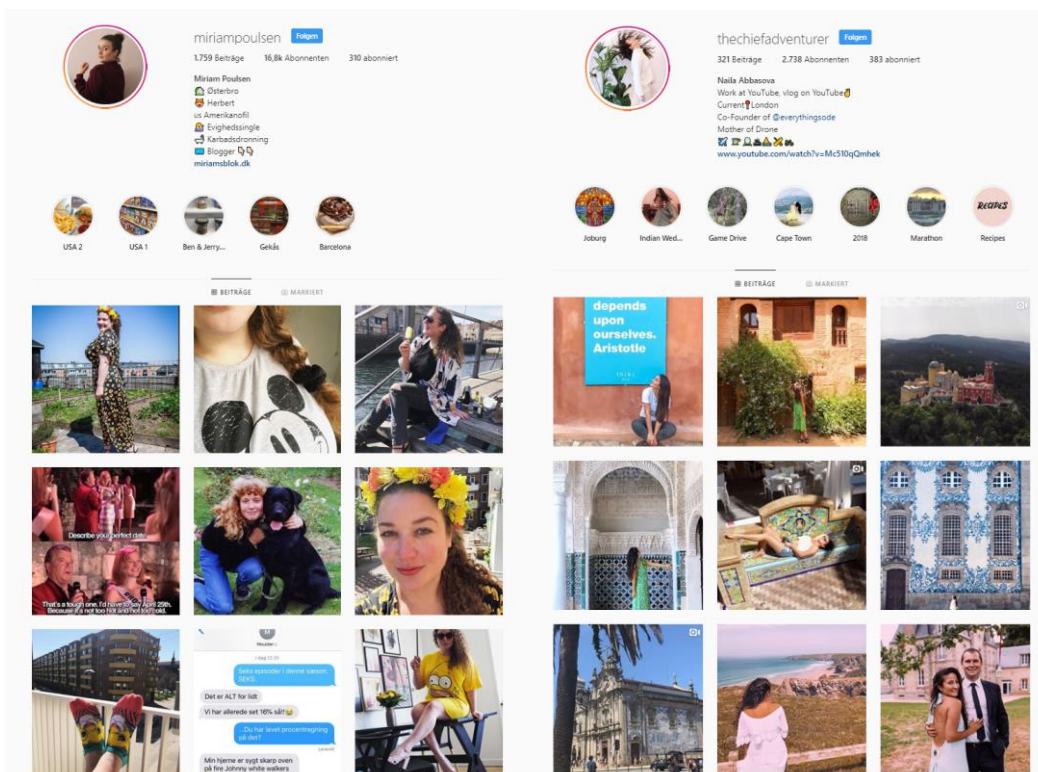
Miriampoulsen & Thechiefadventure (Interviewee 9/10)

Appendix 7:
Focus Group Guide

Overall Objectives: *picking up new thoughts mentioned in the interviews + elaborating on topics not sufficiently covered in the interviews*

Priming Participants before Focus Group

Message sent one day earlier in Facebook Group:
In preparation for the focus group tomorrow, we would like to ask you to think of an influencer that you consider authentic and familiarize yourself with their profile. Especially think about why you perceive this SMI as authentic and what kind of aspects you look at.

Presentation and Information

- *Presentation of the researcher, study and topic.*
- *Indication of the approximate time frame for the focus group.*
- *Indication of the guidelines during the focus group e.e. respect each other's opinions.*
- *Permission to audiotape the focus group*

Introduction of the Participants

1. What's your name?
2. What's your nationality?
3. What's your age?

Ice-breaker Game: General involvement with instagram/Influencers
Icebreaker: *Let everyone look into their IG activity*
1. How much time do you spend on Instagram?
2. Do you follow influencers? Why? What value does it give to you?

Whiteboard Discussion: Clarifying the term Authenticity of SMIs and Investigation of drivers

MODERATOR: *Write down at least 5 aspects that make an influencer authentic for you (5min). Thereby please think about the authentic influencer you reflected on after we sent you the message. Please pinn your ideas on the construct on the whiteboard and then we will discuss your ideas.*

3. Who wrote this down? Why?
4. Who else wrote that down and why? Who disagrees?

DRIVERS
5. What are the signs of this aspect? What shows you that?
6. How do you see that they show this driver?

Statements form the interviews to stimulate discussions (per dimensions):

Continuity

7. Some said that a certain sense of consistency in the Instagram profile makes influencers more authentic. Other's said if a profile is too homogenous it could not really represent who they really are. What position do you take and why?

Credibility

8. Picking up on the term credibility again, some interviewees mentioned that insights into the personal life of the SMI makes them more authentic, others said, they re not interested into their Mom's birthday or dating life. What do you think? How much of personal insights are needed to be perceived as authentic? Also what kind of insights?

Integrity

9. Some of you said, you a monetary motivation / lot of sponsored posts as not authentic, how could SMIs show that they are intrinsically motivated in what they are doing?

Others

10. One interviewee said that within an Instagram profile, you can see two kinds of authenticity: One related to the artistic aspect, one one related to being an own personality/opinion leader with an own life. How do you feel about this idea?
11. Is an SMI's authenticity in conflict with pursuing instagram as a profession? Do you see a positive relationship?

General skepticism

12. I normally don't take influencers as a credibility stamp - Interviewee 3
13. People always trust people over companies - Interviewee 9

Relation reality & authenticity

14. I know if she posts a beautiful picture that is maybe not reality but she's authentic - Interviewee 4

Open-ended Sentences & Interview Statements: Investigation of outcomes

DRIVERS.
MODERATOR: Think about the engagement with your authentic SMI

Psychological Impact

15. After looking at the profile of my authentic SMI, I feel ...

Promotion Codes

16. If he has a good voucher or code, and I know it's a good product, then I would buy it even if I don't trust the influencer - How do you feel about this relationship between promotion codes and SMI authenticity?

Purchase Decision

    17. I would value your SMI's recommendation as trustworthy when…

Brand loyalty

    18. Several interviewees saw a trend that people started to unfollow "perfect profiles" as they see them as not authentic. However, still a lot of people are aware and continue to follow inauthentic influencers. Do you also see such trend and what do you think, why do people follow inauthentic influencers?

Closing Question

    19. What can an influencer do to be perceived as more authentic?

Appendix 8:
Photos of Focus Group Activity

Appendix 9:
List of Secondary Data Sources

Secondary Data	
Article	Title
1	How Authenticity Drives Influencer Engagement: An Interview with Brian Fanzo
2	The Importance of Authenticity in Influencer Marketing
3	Credibility, Trust and Authenticity in Influencer Marketing
4	Millennials' preference for authentic and transparent content
5	Survey Reveals How Consumers Really Judge Brand Authenticity (and Influencers)
6	4 Ways Brands Can Be More Authentic On Social Media
7	Authenticity is crucial for your brand on Social Media (and here's how to improve It)
8	Real vs. Fake Followers: FREE Tool to Detect Fake Followers and Fake Likes on Instagram
9	Are Your Influencers Buying Their Followers?
10	The Anxiety Of Authenticity
11	How authenticity is an ever-changing factor on Instagram
12	What it Really Means to be Authentic on Instagram
13	Consumers: Credibility Is King When It Comes to Influencer Marketing
14	Want to Be an Instagram Influencer? Here's What You Need to Know
15	5 Ways to Be More Authentic on Social Media
16	Fit, Power, Authenticity and Credibility. Influencers, and how to find them.
17	Millennials Are Losing Trust in Online Influencers. Here's What Marketers Can Do.
18	Without These 3 Things Brands and Influencers Have Declining Trust
19	Instagram Stories: How Brands are Authentically Flexing for the Gram
20	The Complete Guide: The Role of Instagram Stories in Social Influencer Marketing
21	Wie werden Instagram Stories bzw. der Instagram-Feed wahrgenommen und genutzt?
22	Under the Influence: The Power of Social Media Influencers
23	Pursuing authenticity: Why podcasts are the next big influencer platform
24	Sei Dir selbst treu – Wie bleibe ich als Influencer authentisch?
25	Authentische Influencer
26	Die Krise des Influencer-Marketings: Das Vertrauensproblem
27	Psychologie der Follower
28	The Secret to Gaining Consumer Trust through Authentic Influencer Relationships
29	Authenticity is the Number One Key to Your Brand's Success
30	Survey Finds Consumers Crave Authenticity - and User-Generated Content Delivers
31	How Influencer Marketing Affects Consumer Buying Behaviour

Appendix 10:
Codebook – Drivers

		Axial Code	Open Code	Quote Example
Theoretical Synthesis: Indexical Drivers	**Selective Code: DR_Verification**	DR_Consistency	DR_Style & design	"*The first thing that comes to mind is probably colours. [...] I think that everyone has their own colour scheme.[...] I like the more dark scandi style looks.*" (Interviewee 1)
			DR_Topics	"*That they have like 1, 2, 3 topics they focused on that they deem important. It's more important that they're consistent, not that they have a variety.*" (Focus Group 2)
			DR_Brands & products	"*[Consistency] in terms of brands they advertise for. So that it's not some random cheap fast fashion brand and then the other day, it's the most high class beauty product.*" (Focus Group 2)
			DR_Words & actions	"*I think it can be very important if you perceive the SMI as authentic or not, if they would just change the values and the symbols that they're standing for.*" (Focus Group 2)
		DR_Commercialisation	DR_Transparency	"*Transparency is essential for building trust*" (Secondary Data 29)
			DR_Labelling ads	"*This rule that you have to say that it's ad or sponsored - I think that's kind of honest. I think it's very important so that people don't get completely blinded.*" (Focus Group 2)
			DR_Showing behind-the-scenes	"*He is super honest about what he is doing and about how he is earning money. He is even showing how it's working with his affiliate links or his recommendations. Also he makes videos about how you make money out of that, because he's so transparent.*" (Interviewee 7)
			DR_Degree of commercialisation	"*I put down "no-ad-overload", if an SMI only posts ads all the time - I know, it's a big part of it - but if it's like every single or every second post, I would not take that person seriously anymore or find him credible.*" (Focus Group 2)
		DR_Informativeness	DR_Being well-informed	"*When you receive a collaboration request, it is important that you inform yourself well about the company and its products before accepting i.t*" (Secondary Data 25)
			DR_Experience-based reviews	"*It seems that he is really into that stuff and testing it right; and takes some time before he wants to make a review [video] about it.*" (Interviewee 7)

			DR_Providing reliable information	*"When they give reliable reasons why this product did [or did not] live up to the expectations. I think this is really giving credibility to them."* (Focus Group 1)
		DR_Expertise	DR_Being skilled	*"He's actually really, really good at it or he knows best"* (Interviewee 3)
			DR_Degree of professionalisation	*"Influencers are more authentic, if they actually do something besides Instagram"* (Interviewee 2)

		Axial Code	Open Code	Quote Example
Theoretical Synthesis: Iconic Drivers	**Selective Code:** DR_Expectation	DR_Intrinsic Motivation	DR_Driven by passion	*"They speak about the product or service because they truly like it. And they speak about the topic because they have a genuine passion for it."* (Secondary Data 28)
			DR_Striving for high quality content	*"he does sponsored content but it's very well thought of."* (Interviewee 9)
			DR_Believing in brands & products	*"So, she's not promoting it, because they paid her, but because she really loves the app."* (Interviewee 10)
		DR_Originality	DR_Original style & photos	*"Authenticity of an SMI would be that you try to choose to express yourself in a different way."* (Interviewee 3)
			DR_Credible storytelling	*"The thing about SMIs is that they are people and not just a brand, so you need to show emotions in order to differentiate yourself."* (Interviewee 10)
			DR_Unique editing style	*"Editing photos is kind of the art of the content creation*." (Interviewee 6)
		DR_Personality	DR_Being humorous	*"I like them, if they are humorous, if their Instagram shows that they can make fun of themselves or fun of their friends.*" (Interviewee 2)
			DR_Being down-to-earth	*"if they kind of have a down to earth personality or like a personality that is reachable."* (Interviewee 6*)*
			DR_Being spontaneous	*"[Videos] seems to be something that they experienced in the normal course of their life and it's just happening.*" (Focus Group 2)

			DR_Being honest	*"You community will value your honesty & also feel that they can trust that your recommendations do come from a genuine place."* (Secondary Data 12)
		DR_Brand Fit	DR_Matching with lifestyle & values	*"I trust someone if [..] they advertise brands I think fits to that person."* (Interviewee 2)
			DR_Reputation of sponsoring brands	*"And then definitely the brands that they portray [...]. I mean, it's a cliché, but for example Nestle - someone who would promote the water or whatever they have, I cannot trust"* (Interviewee 1)

Theoretical Synthesis: Existential Drivers	Selective Code: DR_Identification	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote Example
		DR_True to Self	DR_Portraying reality	*"[Being] the same person online as you are offline"* (Secondary Data 1)
			DR_Admitting imperfections	*"I would say, [authenticity is] if not everything is perfect. [...]".* (Interviewee 8)
			DR_Showing a variety of emotions	*"I think you can kind of relate much more to them and you can trust them more when they are showing their emotions."* (Interviewee 10)
		DR_Aspiration	DR_Skills & expertise	*"I look at the stuff that they create and then I try to redraw it" (interviewee 10)*
			DR_Integrity	*"Once she spoke at the European Parliament and made a story about it. I was quite impressed and I think this really makes her authentic, 'cause it's something so big and political. This is integrity to me."* (Interviewee 5)
			DR_Personal development	*"I would like to see the process on how you achieve a certain success."* (Focus Group 2)
		DR_Relatedness	DR_Providing insights into private life	*"I want the person to be authentic & post stuff not only for advertising, but private stuff."* (Interviewee 4)
			DR_Commonalities with followers	*"Her name is Pernille Theisbeck, she lives in Copenhagen. She tags that she lives in Frederiksberg where I live, so I feel we live very close."* (Interviewee 2)
			DR_Engaging with followers	*"Social media offers many opportunities to connect and build relationships. Authentic engagement on social*

			media is about listening to your audience." (Secondary Data 29)
■■			

Appendix 10:
Codebook – Outcomes

	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote
Selective Code : OC_Psychological Outcomes	OC_Feelings	OC_Feeling dreamy	*"In the end of the day, it takes your mind off something for like five minutes [...]. You like to have dreamy kind of post sometimes because to just have a normal life presented, you also don't have to pick up your phone. "* (Focus Group 1)
		OC_Feeling entertained	*"[After looking at the profile of my authentic influencer] I feel entertained."* (Interviewee 6)
		OC_Feeling inspired	*"I feel inspired. Because I can just think about what I'm doing next, get inspired for style, workouts or whatever I just want to see."* (Focus Group 2)
	OC_Realtion-ship & Loyalty	OC_Establishing emotional bond	*"A stronger emotional bond is created because they have accumulated so much experience with them. In that way, Influencers are even often regarded as friends or even family members."* (Secondary Data 26)
		OC_Forming a friendship	*"I feel like yes [friends with SMI]. That's what gets me freaked out. Sometimes, you know so much that you feel like you know the person. And then probably if you see them on the street, you will talk to them like they're your friends."* (Interviewee 3)
		OC_Loyalty to SMI	*"The ones that I consider my friends, I wouldn't like to cut them out of my life that quickly."* (Interviewee 1)
	OC_Trust & Credibility	OC_Trustworthy interaction	*"Through an ongoing dialogue over a longer time period, Influencers build up a certain relationship with their followers, which is characterised by strong trust that is quite hard-wearing up to a certain degree.* [translated]" (Secondary Data 26)
		OC_Believing SMI recommendation	*"If you follow their advice over a long time, you think "It's a really good advice that helped me", then you get a bond. This makes you consider them authentic as you know they only recommend something they really think it's good."* (Interviewee 6)

	OC_Motivation	OC_Motivation to change	*"I feel motivated. If it's like about food or fitness it's just that you have this topic on top of your mind and you might be more prone to take action with regard to that.*" (Focus Group 2)
		OC_Broadening the horizon	*""I discover brands through influencers which I didn't know before*" (Interviewee 5)

	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote
Selective Code: OC_Behavioural Outcomes	OC_Engagement	OC_Liking photos	*""I definitely like stuff on their profiles.*" (Interviewee 10)
		OC_Private messaging	*"If I feel strongly about something, I can message them."* (Interviewee 10*)*
		OC_No engagement	*"I don't know why, even though I told you earlier that I sometimes feel like they're my friend, it's a one-way street and I know that very well."* (Interviewee 1)
	OC_Purchase Intention	OC_Higher purchase intention	*"49% of people say they rely on recommendations from SMIs when making purchase decisions."* (Secondary Data 31)
		OC_Saving SMI content	*"I would screenshot it if I really like [the product], and then save it for myself."* (Interviewee 1)
		OC_Initiating own research	*"I would try to build my own opinion or Google or see some reviews."* (Focus Group 1)
	OC_WOM	OC_Forwarding SMI content online	*"I comment back and forth between my best friend and we always talk about her stories and that we liked it."* (Interviewee 1)
		OC_Sharing recommendation of SMI	*"Sometimes when there's a something super interesting or like a product that I like or my friend was looking for, then I will share with them."* (Interviewee 6)
		OC_Talking offline about SMI	*"I talk about it offline. I would say I talk about it more."* (Interviewee 4)
		OC_Recommen-ding to follow SMI	*""I have so much trust in her that I would even recommend it to my friends."* (Interviewee 6)

Transcripts Interviews

<u>**Interview 1**</u>
Ranim
Hey Interviewee 1 very nice that you took the time to be here and do this interview with us. So I am
 Ranim, this is Pascale and today we want to research about your perception of the authenticity of social media influencers. This interview will take around let's say 45 minutes to one hour. We don't know yet. Do we have the permission to audiotape you?

Interviewee 1
Yes, you do.

Ranim
Do you want to remain anonymous in our results or is it fine if we publish your name?

Interviewee 1
Yes, that's fine.

Ranim
Um, yeah, perfect. Then let's start off with some easy demographic questions. So how old are you?

Interviewee 1
I'm 25

Ranim
What's your highest level of education?

Interviewee 1
I have a bachelor's degree.

Ranim
Okay. All right. Good. I think the other questions are pretty obvious… gender…
Okay, then let's go into the warm up questions. We want to find out about your general involvement with Instagram and influencers. So, do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 1
Yes, I do use it on a daily basis.

Ranim
Okay. And do you follow influencers?

Interviewee 1

Yes, and I do I follow more micro influencers than very big ones I would say, but I do follow them. Yeah.

Ranim
Okay. So why do you follow them? What value does it give to you?

Interviewee 1
So I think most influencers I follow are fashion related and I think it's a source of inspiration. Yeah, I think that's the main reason that you get inspired by what they wear, maybe also the places they visit. Maybe it's even restaurants and cafes that they go to, so I think it's mostly inspiration.

Ranim
Yeah, okay. And do you consider any like personal aspects as well?

Interviewee 1
Yes, definitely. So most influencers I follow, I have to agree with their personality to some extent. For example, there are two also more micro influencers from Hamburg that I really, really love. And they're super funny. That's not necessarily portrayed in their feed, but in their stories, and I think that's one of the main reasons they now have a podcast as well, which I really appreciate. And it's definitely about how they write their captions and those things that I can relate to. I think just merely having nice content without having personality does not interest me.

Ranim
Yeah, all right. All right. Good. What is important for you when you decide to follow an influencer?

Interviewee 1
I think one thing is definitely the feed and how their Instagram page looks like. So it needs to be a little bit yeah, consistent, and there needs to be like an overall look and feel. And then definitely the captions and what they write. I wouldn't be interested in someone who's just like, "Hi, it's me", and then nothing else. I need some more depth on maybe they have interesting topics. Maybe they are vegan and they talk a lot about plant based lifestyles or maybe they're just super funny. Or maybe they have some other type of edge. I think that's one thing and then of course I need to like their style. I wouldn't like someone who only wears brands that I cannot relate to. So it needs to be a little bit of what I'm interested to know.

Pascale
Okay. So you would identify yourself with the style or why would you…?

Interviewee 1
Yea, I think so. So for example, I'm personally - I don't know if you can tell - but I like a mix of street and a little bit of like rocker surfer style, I think that's what I like; I'm not very chic. Of course I can appreciate a chic picture and if it's someone that I like then would also like those styles but I think like this scandi style and street style that are areas in which I'm into.

Ranim

Okay so you need to somehow relate yourself style and what he expresses?

Interviewee 1

Yea, so I can also take some of their way, for I don't know, combining an outfit and maybe applying it to my own life or yeah, just get inspiration of what I should buy in the future.

Ranim

Now you mentioned some important aspects to you. What do you think about authenticity? Does authenticity also matter to you?

Interviewee 1

Yes, for sure. Um, so there was one example, it is not a blogger per se. It is more someone who has a podcast and is also a radio host. She's gained a lot of attention in Germany because of her podcast. And of course, she does Instagram stories now. She's not portraying her outfits all the time, but she is talking about some, like beauty related stuff as well. And she did a partnership with Luna, which is a lemonade brand. And at first I was like, "Oh, that's, that's a little bit unrelated. That's weird." But then the way she talks about the brand, and she's writing her own captions, you can tell that it's not just an agency sending her a pre written text, but she's actually coming up with it herself. And that makes it more relatable and that makes it more authentic to the consumer to see, okay, she actually has thought about this brand. And she actually likes the brand and it's not just to make money.

Ranim

Yeah. Okay. So you somehow realized that this sponsoring brand and her might not even be in a conflict; so she can still be authentic even though you first thought it's not.

Interviewee 1

Yeah, exactly yeah. So there's for example an English blogger I follow, Naomi Smart, I don't know if you know her, she was a YouTuber now she is more into blogging and she has for example a plant based lifestyle and I would not consider her authentic if she was ever wearing or advertising beauty brands that do animal testing for example. I think it needs to be consistent in what she does and then the lifestyle, okay yeah

Pascale

So the brand should fit to her expressions, values and …

Interviewee 1

Yea, yea.

Ranim

Okay okay yeah nice. We will look more deeper into the idea of how you attribute authenticity to an influencer in a little bit, but now we want you to show us an influencer that you consider authentic

Interviewee 1
Yeah. Okay. Um. I think I will go with Lena Lademann. She is from Hamburg and I think one really interest fact about her is that her feed is usually very clean, very graphic. And she also I think, has an education in graphic design. So that's what she stands for, like she is very like clean cuts and not a lot of personal stuff. It's not necessarily that I like the style, but I think it's very consistent and very cool. And she's the one that's really funny. So her stories are super funny. And she portrays her personality in her stories and then the blog or her feed is more like the art of fashion. I think it's kind of cool that she has these two things and she's very consistent with herself as a brand that she keeps these two separated.

Let's see if I can find something where she talks. Maybe here. So this is one of her best friends that she went to Bali with. They're just talking shit and I think it's really funny because if you see her pictures you wouldn't think of her as a funny person and I like that kind of contrast with her. And then let me think, I had one example earlier that I wanted to think about so there is for example Masha, you know her, and I really like her feed for example, I think she does a lot of nice and creative stuff. And I also really like her style. It's a little bit dark I would say the style and I really I'm really into that.

Ranim
Why do you like the darkness?

Interviewee 1
Because it is a little bit edgier than the pink beauty-guru lifestyle that is more special, more like different from the rest. I think. So wears some things - not like I would personally wear them - but the style of it, I appreciate. And then it's a little bit I just like darker stuff. So I think it's again the personality and relating to it. But for example with her, I even though I really, really like her feed, I have unfollowed her because I'm so annoyed by her Instastories, because I don't like her in the way she talks. I think she's very stiff. And it's I don't know, like she has a very weird voice when she talks. It doesn't feel like she's authentically just talking to a friend. And that's I think one thing I like about Instagram and then I actually came from YouTube first. I was really into YouTube when I was like 16 and I think. One thing I like about YouTube and it's also on Instagram that you can really relate to someone and you feel like they're your friend, which is really weird, probably.

But with Marsha for example. I didn't feel like she was my friend. So she was a little bit like, I cannot relate to this person. So I didn't. Whereas with the Lena, even though her photos are not something I would create myself, I really want to be friends with her. Yeah, yeah.

Ranim
Nice consideration. And so you, you talked a lot about continuity. Can you elaborate more on this idea of consistency? Like what do you look into; what tells you that this is consistent? So what take do take into consideration to say "okay, this is consistent".

Interviewee 1
I think one thing that is like the first thing that comes to mind is probably colors. If you look at the feed, you cannot even tell what type of jewelry or what type of shirt they're wearing. But

it's the colors that pop up to you. And I think that's one thing and everyone has their own color scheme. And that's something that you relate to. So like I said earlier, mine was more dark. So I like the more dark scandi style looks, maybe also like Scandinavian rainbow colors. So that is one thing. And then also, I think the opinion that they display, maybe sometimes not all bloggers do, but when they advertise for a certain type of brand. I think it needs to be consistent, that they don't go from a super high scale brand to Bershka or whatever it is. So I think again, coming back to the Lena example, she only does relations or collaborations with very upscale brands. And I think it would kind of destroy her image if you would now go to low brands or more mainstream brands. And the partnerships as well that's one thing that needs to be consistent.

What else can I think of … also, maybe even the people that they hang out with. I think that's something maybe a little bit more insight into. But I think it would be weird if, if a blogger was friends with everyone, and would always be like, just displaying pictures of themselves with someone that you as a consumer think, - Well, can they be friends like, Is that even a thing - or if they have, like, consistent people throughout their feed, I think that's also one thing. It's, again, a personality thing, because in a friend, I actually appreciate it if they have friends from a long time ago. And I think that's one thing that keeps you grounded and it keeps you maybe centered. And if I don't see that in a blogger, and they are hanging out with different people every day, then I'm thinking what type of personality do they actually have?

Ranim
Nice, thank you. Thank you very much. Maybe let's go on with another concept you already hinted at it a little bit, we were thinking of credibility. How much is credibility important for you in determining the authenticity of an influencer? And what does it tell you like how do you get this idea of this person is credible or not from that influencer?

Interviewee 1
That's a difficult question. Of course, it's a it's a matter of trust. And it's a matter of your gut feeling. For example, this one girl I talked about, the English blogger who has a vegan lifestyle, she also released a beauty brand and then people were commenting like on her that was YouTube, but she also has Instagram. "like, oh, but your products are using so much packaging and you don't talk about the fact what ingredients you use blah, blah, blah". And I was also when I watched her video of the release. And I was a little bit like "that's weird" and then in a follow-up video she actually explained "Of course all of these products are vegan - What do you guys think? Why would I do anything differently?". So I think also the way she has talked about it before, the way that she has actually considered it without even mentioning it because it was so clear to her that her products would be vegan. I think that is one thing that she is consistent in what she produces and that it's always like this sustainability thought is always in the back of her mind.

Pascale
So people wanted to have a bit more information to really believe?

Ranim

Exactly. In that case I think she unconsciously withholding information because for self It was very clear but as a consumer you don't know what's going on in their mind. So you need a little bit more you know.

Ranim
So, it was important for you that she actually respond actively?

Interviewee 1
Yes, that is also I think, a very important thing. Of course, I assume that as a blogger, if you get the same questions all over again then you can get annoyed. But I think the communication part of actually giving information and clarifying things if there are rumors going on or whatever, I think that is also one thing to address your audience. It gives you credibility.

Ranim
Going back to the content of the photos. Do you feel like if the editing of a photo; does it somehow impact your perceived authenticity?

Interviewee 1
Yes, I think so. So for example, I don't know maybe they're doing a good job, but I would assume that the bloggers I'm following, they do their editing in a very subtle style, so you cannot really tell if….I don't know the English word… Nevermind, but it doesn't look too fake. So it's still like for most of the ones that I follow, it still looks like it's a snap from their everyday life. Of course, they do stuff about it, but that is again going into the credibility thing, I wouldn't want to follow someone where I can immediately tell you edited everything on your photos - Like that's not your real life! – And I need a little bit of authenticity and a little bit of real life in their pictures. So yeah.

Pascale
So do you think there's a conflict between the term reality and authenticity? Like how do you see the relation between these two terms? Because you said of course there's a bit of let's say fake in every picture because it's in a way edited. But it depend if it's like an extreme case and depends….

Interviewee 1
Yeah, I do think there's a relationship I haven't thought about it yet, but now that you mentioned it, it's actually very true. For example, the Swedish blogger Kenzas she's now pregnant; it's all over the blogger world; but she did a post recently on stretch marks and then she just mentioned like in a half sentence; she was like "I have stretch marks on my butt" or something like that. And that way she also gave away some of her maybe insecurities or her imperfections, which made the post more credible and more authentic because it was real to her as a problem as well. So definitely, I think there is a relationship - actually showing your flaws makes her more perfect. Maybe because you're more relatable.

Ranim
Interesting. Yeah. And how important is it for you that the influencer maintains some sort of integrity?

Interviewee 1

Yeah, I think that goes into the same direction. I mean, naturally, you change your opinion over time, and then you develop, you get new influences, you travel to countries of course. Maybe someone who has flown a lot in the past and now is becoming aware of climate change. Maybe they changed some of their behavior but yeah, you need to be integer to what you believe. Even for example, like I said, a vegan. Yeah, that is using animal tested good products is not, it does not have a lot of integrity for me. So you need to stand to what you believe in and promote it also. I don't know if you want to go into politics, or like, if that is the thing, but I also think that if you are speaking to a lot of people, you have maybe half a million people following you, then I think you should also use your voice and raise it for the causes that you're interested in. Whether it may be promoting, I don't know, gay rights or whatever it may be. And I think that is also one part of being that if you hang out with gay people all the time in your job, because maybe they're doing their makeup or they're your stylist or whatever, then you should also promote them and show some integrity for what you believe in no matter if you lose followers or not.

Yeah, I think one big example is the Taylor Swift one. She's not a blogger per se but she's a very public person and has millions of followers and she actually made a statement on Instagram saying that she's going to vote for the Democratic Party in Tennessee her home state. And she had elaborated upon why she does that and that was the first time that she actually publicly said that she's a democrat and of course a lot of people in the south where she comes from are republicans so I think that this post she actually withheld that for a long time and that was actually one criticism I had about her because I was like, "you're so big, you need to use your voice". And then she finally did and a lot of people appreciated that and she got a lot of people to vote. So I think she showed integrity and that actually made her very, very authentic and nice.

Ranim

Also in terms of integrity and In connection to collaborations with brands. Is it for you important that this it's visible that this blogger or influencer has a passionate about what he's doing or she's doing or even if he or she follows like some commercial interests as well?

Interviewee 1

I think it's a balance. Of course it's understandable that people need to live from what they're doing on Instagram. And I mean, there are lots of jokes going on. "Look, blogging is not a real lifestyle." And so a lot of people are saying, well, we do a lot, we're doing this and this and this to kind of defend themselves. And I think that's fair. Of course, you want to be credited for what you do, and it is a lot of work that goes into it. But at the same time, I'm thinking well, but you work eight or 10 hours on something that you really, really love. So maybe that makes it less hard than having I don't know an everyday job where you lift heavy things or were you just sit and edit an Excel spreadsheet or whatever it is.

So I think even though you display that it's your job and that it takes a lot of time and you need to get up early or whatever at the same time. I think for me it is nice to know that they also mention from time to time, "well I'm happy I have this job it's so easy or not everyone can do

what I can do I'm very grateful for what you guys as fan base give me" or whatever. So I think it is important to also mention that from time to time that you're really enjoying what you're doing and that it's not hard wor only.

Ranim
Yeah. And in this context, is it important for you that this influence of shows emotions like it not only in this context, but generally emotions and like their true self?

Interviewee 1
Yeah, definitely. So of course, I think some things are just reserved for private life. And I really understand that not everyone wants to show everything and that's fair. And that's I mean, I think that's getting bigger and bigger that some people for example they don't show their kids on Instagram which I think is a good thing.

But at the same time if you're feeling down or if there's something going on in your life I think it's very very fair to say "well guys right now it's not a good time for me I'm not going to post a lot or I'm really sad I just need to spend time with my family" or the other way around if you just want to say how happy you are and scream it to the world because your in love or whatever I think that's really fair and if it's just like a stable thing all the time then it is more like an actual advertisement whereas I think what is like the thing about influencers and bloggers is that they are people and not just the brand so you need to show emotions in order to differentiate yourself from just a model or just being a model for a brand.

Ranim
Okay, nice, nice, very nice. Apart from the ideas we just had about your perception of authenticity, can you still think of something else? Or should we move on to the next part where we talk about the impacts are the outcomes?

Interviewee 1
I think, well, this is a personal thing. Maybe I just really like when when they use their voice to promote something big if they tell people to go vote, or, for example, Kenza who talked about her difficulties with becoming a mother and that it's something that doctors for example, didn't take seriously.

Or like, there's a lot of causes that you can support. And I think at a certain stage of being a blogger and having I don't know, above 30,000 followers or whatever it may be, I think you should also realize that you're actually speaking to a town right now when you speak on Instagram and that you can use that to promote good causes. That is a personal thing that I think should everyone should do but of course, not everyone's doing it.

Ranim
All right. All right. Nice. Cool. Thank you so much for this first part. Now that we have talked about your authenticity perception of influencers, we want to turn to more the impact or the outcomes of it.

So can you describe how you engage with, for example, that influence so you just showed us?

Interviewee 1

I think I'm called a lurker - so I watch a lot of Instagram stories and I'm on Instagram every day like I told you. Also in study breaks whenever it may happen. I do like pictures but I never comment on pictures, just because I feel like "What does make common change right now?" I don't know why, even though I told you earlier that I sometimes feel like they're my friend, it's a one-way street and I know that very well. My comment on something will not make them coming back.

I don't have criticism or anything that I would phrase online just because I feel like that's maybe a waste of negative energy. And there's so much hate going on that I don't want to engage in that at all. So that's why I'm watching and liking but not commenting. Yeah.

Pascale

How is it with your friends?

Interviewee 1

Oh yeah, that's different. I definitely comment my friends' pictures, or if they have a super nice picture, I'm going to compliment them on that. Or if they post something funny in their story, I'm going to react to that and write something funny back or whatever it may be. So that is different.

Ranim

Yeah. Okay. But would you write them a direct personal, private message, the influencers?

Interviewee 1

If I had something very important to say to them, then yes, or if I was really feeling that they influenced my life in one way or the other and maybe I wanted to tell them how they can do that for other people as well. Or maybe how they have disappointed me, maybe. I could imagine that some people do that as well. And I think that's fair. I haven't done it yet. But I'm like, never say never. It might happen in the future. Yeah.

Pascale

And let's, let's say you were talking about your influencers and you really like a product or the lemonade you were talking about. Would you recommend to a friend then? Or how would this engagement, like not between you and the blogger, but between you and other followers may be?

Interviewee 1

So one thing I was definitely hooked by because bloggers use it is the pop socket. And I get a lot of comments on it from friends and people around me. I have given it to my sister, to my best friend as a present. So I'm definitely influenced by it. I was watching Kenzas story the other day, and she promoted a brand called NAKD and I was I mean, I'm studying marketing, but nonetheless, I really fell into the trap and I bought her stuff and I have a friend who bought a necklace because of Instagram. She told me, now I bought it. So yeah, that's definitely happening.

Ranim
Why? Why do you decide to buy the Kenza promotes something? Why would you buy it?

Interviewee 1
Okay. Um, I think it's like I said earlier, it's a matter of inspiration. And I like their style, that's why I followed her in the beginning or like initially and then yeah, I just I think one thing is also that it makes it easier to know exactly where something is from. If you see someone on the street and they're wearing something nice you wouldn't go up to them and say, "Oh, nice shoes that you're wearing, Where are they from?" And but on Instagram, it makes it really easy for you to actually buy the products that you like and see. And of course I think one thing is that you relate to them and you want to be like them, maybe to some extent. So yeah, that's why you copy them to a certain extent and I think that's exactly why influencers are that successful as they are.

Pascale
So if you relate to them you would also trust their recommendation in that sense?

Interviewee 1
Yeah yeah, you can definitely say that. Again it's maybe also because they sometimes wear things that not everyone has and not everyone sees on the street or in the shops but maybe sometimes they also have niche products that you as a normal consumer don't have access to and they make it public for everyone. So I think that's also one thing why I like their content or their products that they promote. And then again if you go into like, not fashion related, but more beauty lifestyle whatever - then again it's for me personally, it's a lot more about okay "I can trust their opinion that this is an actual good product because they've tested it themselves, they tell me all their ingredients". I think it's for me personally it's more in the beauty and food context than in the fashion context.

Ranim
Okay, interesting. Yeah, yeah.
Do you also sometimes talk with your friends about this influencer and tell them "hey you know I really like this person you should check them out" or something like that?

Interviewee 1
Yeah that definitely happens for example I was really touched by Kenzas story on that she wants to be pregnant. And I wasn't really into her account, I mean she has nice pictures, I follow her, she's a fun interesting person. But it's not like I was personally involved a lot, but after that story I'm like "oh my god it's so nice" and I told so many people because I watch all of her YouTube search stories where first she explains that. And then the Lena girl that I think is really funny I comment back and forth between my best friend and we always talk about her stories and like that we liked it. And then maybe I would share pictures if I see something interesting …

Pascale
In the application?

Interviewee 1

Yeah, either that I would comment and then someone else sees the picture. Or I would screenshot it. If Yeah, if I really like it, and then save it for myself.

Ranim

Would you say when Kenza talks about her personal life, do you get like more emotionally involved with her?

Interviewee 1

Yeah, definitely. I think that's a very, very big factor. I think it's good that they keep some stuff to themselves but of course explaining your personal difficulties and the hurdles you've had in your life really makes you more relatable than if you're just like a plain face and you just were nice stuff and post somewhere but without having something that you can really grasp as a personal trait of you. Then yeah, I think you're like I said earlier you're just a model and being an influencer is having a personality and sharing personal experiences to me.

Ranim

One thing actually going back to the drivers - what are the sources you take into consideration when trying to make your perception about the authenticity of this influencer? You mentioned some things like the feed and Insta stories, but do you also take into consideration other factors?

Interviewee 1

Yeah, I think the captions but they write. If it's a German person, I would also look at the spelling and grammar. Maybe that's a personal thing. And then definitely the brands that they portay because I wouldn't trust someone who advertises for a lot of products that I cannot relate to. Like, I mean, it's a cliché, but for example Nestle - someone who would promote the water or whatever they have, I cannot trust. Whereas if they promote brands that I like or personally use, or maybe would use in the future, then that gives them a lot more credibility in my opinion. And then again, like who they hang out with, if they hang out with people I find personally not so nice, then. Yeah, that reflects on them.

Ranim

All right. So I think so far, we went quite nicely through the drivers and the outcomes. Do you have anything else related to the things we just discussed about your perceived authenticity of influencers that you still want to tell us?

Interviewee 1

I think one thing that is always difficult as a consumer is understanding how their everyday life works. And you only get the nice images and you sometimes see them I don't know in first class and you're thinking "how does this person and I end up at first class" and sometimes it's hard I think as a consumer to understand the underlying relationships that go on between a brand and the Instagrammer or and what they talk about beforehand, and how the actual outcome comes to life. I think sometimes it would be nice to be guided through that process and actually understand how someone's selects and what they select and not just get the final

product but also feel more part of of their everyday life than the consumer nowadays usually is.

Ranim
So you wish to see even more transparency to make them more credible and authentic in what they're doing?

Interviewee 1
Yes. For example, it was a someone who does a podcast he's not an influencer but he's a comedian and he said that he actually wanted to collaborate with a brand called Hype in the UK and he has a like comedy program that's called hype and so he thought, well, that's a great relationship between me and that brand. They do cool products.

In the end, the brand didn't do things that the way he was expecting them to do it or they were too expensive, or they had too many rules that he had to follow. So he ended the relationship between the company and himself and I think that was really interesting of him to share that and to actually understand that at some point you also cut it off as an influencer. And you don't pursue an opportunity that maybe arose because you don't feel comfortable with it or whatever. So I thought that was a really interesting insight. And I was thinking well, bloggers you would actually give them more authenticity afterwards with what they then end up promoting. I mean, it's maybe it's a conflict as well because you cannot say, well, this bread was shitty, so I'm not going to promote them and then ruin them in a way. Maybe that's the underlying reason for not doing it. Or maybe you think, well, I can do it in the future or whatever, so I'm not sure if that's even feasible. But I think as a consumer would be nice to see more transparency.

Pascale
Okay, now that you mentioned that awesome authenticity actually matters to you, is it a criteria to actually follow an influencer? Or could you imagine following influences that you don't perceive as much authenti?

Interviewee 1
I think in general that is probably for a lot of them it is the main criteria but then there are some people I follow where I just enjoy the feet and I just enjoy the picture is the way they they create their pictures and it's not so much about the personality but it's more a look and feel and maybe it's just a picture of a nice person or that that you feel like oh I would like to look like that but it's not so much about what the person stands for and it's more like yes next level content that you you just consumed without thinking about it like like a TV show?

Pascale
Yeah. And would you engage differently with that kind of influencer?

Interviewee 1
for some influencers that I really like it would be hard to unfollow them maybe. And for those influencers if they did something that maybe they changed the look or maybe they said something in a description where I'm like, oh, wow, I cannot relate to that at all, then it would

be really easy for me to unfollow them whereas with the other ones that I consider my friends wouldn't like to cut them out of my life that quickly Okay, nice. Great.

Interview 2
Pascale
Very good. So just quickly, what's your name?

Interviewee 2
My name is Interviewee 2

Pascale
How old are you?

Interviewee 2
I'm 24 years old.

Pascale
Okay. And what is your highest level of education?

Interviewee 2
Completed education? bachelor.

Pascale
Okay. And thank you. Okay, then some general, warm-up questions. Do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 2
Yes.

Pascale
And how often would you say you use this application?

Interviewee 2
It depends a bit on the period of life. So if it's like a stressful period, of course, I use it less. But if I have more time, I spent a lot of time on it Scrolling. So this could be in the morning, or just in between when I walk somewhere just to checking it out.

Pascale
And why do you use Instagram? For a specific reason?

Interviewee 2
I think for two things. So first of all, since all of our friends have Instagram, especially with the Instastories I lIke to see what they're doing. But I think the majority of who I follow is actually bloggers, instagrammer or how you want to call them, and brands themselves.
For the brands maybe to see what's going on what's like new and for the influencers more to see what they are up to.

Ranim

Okay. Now can you elaborate a little bit more on why you follow influencers? What kind of value do you derived from following them?

Interviewee 2

So I think one of the main reasons is to get inspiration for fashion clothing. So, for example, I follow a lot of Scandinavian influencers or bloggers, because I'm into a Scandinavian fashion. So I look up their new looks, like what are they wearing to fashion week. But there are also some influencers I'm interested in what they are actually doing in their personal life.

So I have this influence on here. I can tell you what…

Pascale

Yes, you can go ahead and show us the influencer

Interviewee 2

Her name is Pernille Theisbeck and she also lives in Copenhagen and she always tags that she lives in Frederiksberg where I live, so I feel like we live very close.

Pascale

Okay. And you feel like related to her?

Interviewee 2

I kind of do… because, okay, so she often posts stories in her Instagram Stories of her personal life when she walks somewhere, or when she's doing business stuff. So if she's in meetings, or she's going to a fashion thing. But to answer your question, I think, I don't know why I follow her. I think her and her husband are really cool together. He is the founder of Rains - Yeah, the jacket brand. And she actually is not only an influencer but also has this agency where she has several influencers under her umbrella, for whom she kind of negotiates with some brands or whatever. So anyway, I think she's a businesswoman. And I'm also interested in her personal life and she also has two kids which I think are adorable,

Ranim

So you kind of identify with her and she inspires you also not in terms of only fashion but also more for your personal life?

Interviewee 2

Yes for her lifestyle in general. She also show really nice interior for example. She films that a lot in their house or shows us the bathroom because it's so beautiful.

Ranim

And generally what is important for you when following an influencer? Like when you decide to follow someone; what factors do you look at? What do you consider?

Interviewee 2

So of course the general style, clothing wise, I think it's important. If it's something I like or not. Then I think I look a lot at the feed itself - I prefer more minimalistic photographs or content in general, more like clean, also with the stories I don't like lots of gifs and texts everywhere I think. I like the more simple, okay nice editing but more toned down

Ranim
Why do like that?

Interviewee 2
I think it has to do with I don't like glitter and I don't like too much floral. It's just I think the style in general, it's like if I look at art, I like them more minimalistic or simple, clear lines. I like architecture which is not maybe found in Rome but more modern in like Helsinki.

So I think maybe that's why I just I just prefer influencers who keep it simple and also to say something content wise… so that is like maybe the second thing besides the what it looks like but also what they talk about and what the content is about. If it's like a job everyday life I think it's a bit interesting than if it's only about I don't know, makeup, it's not my interest so I don't follow them.

Pascale
So let's say makeup would be a big passion of the influencer and at the same time this influencer is very personal. Would you then follow the influencer?

Interviewee 2
No no. If she does it very good and if I she maybe is the founder of some kind of really cool brand or if she it's like an expert in really cool makeup then of course. But if it's just like a side thing that always pops up then I think it's a bit distracting. And I rather prefer to follow the experts.

Ranim
Okay. And in terms of factors why you follow someone is authenticity important for you? You said you like it simplistic, not exaggerated. Is that something you can relate to this term authenticity or what is authentic to you?

Interviewee 2
Yes, it matters to me. Probably mostly not because of the simple and not the simple thing but because of the brand collaborations. Because you always see these ads and blah blah and if I see the influencer just got this sent and they're not into it at all or it's not their style but they still talk about it and represent it and it doesn't fit to what they would normally buy then I think it's less authentic and then obviously I don't really trust their advice too much. Because I don't think they really like it either.

But on the other hand, if I trust someone or if I think someone has really good taste normally and then they advertise some other brands I think fits to that person than I think it's super authentic and then I also don't mind if they advertise because obviously they also have to earn money.

Pascale

So the perception of the influencer would then positively affect the brand perception of the brand?

Interviewee 2

Yeah I discover brands through influencers which I didn't know before

Pascale

Could you now maybe show us an authentic influencer we can still talk about the same one if you want

Interviewee 2

May be more authentic… I didn't follow her for a very long time, I just discovered her recently. Her name is …… And maybe why I think she's authentic - doesn't have to do much with Instagram so far but I listened to a podcast, which I also got through Instagram because she does it together with her best friend who also an influencer and who is also authentic. But in the podcast they will just be super straightforward, super funny, super themselves like made fun of themselves, talked about being an influencer. I think she's authentic and doesn't really try too hard to fit to some kind of form. Also she does different things that I think are in her mind.

Pascale

Okay. And would you say you see a difference between the authenticity of the story and the feed?

Interviewee 2

I think it's always a bit different between the story and the feed, also with the people I follow because the feed more … Well I know that the feed has been put more thought into. So I think when influencers creates a story, then it's more spontaneous, and it's right now, and it's just talking into the camera, what you're seeing right now. But I think the feed is less authentic in a way that, maybe it's also more to do with brands often and less with their personal life, but also it's more planned. Like even here, you see, like, she values - it looks beautiful I think - but she values keeping her feed in order, which maybe doesn't mean that she's not authentic, but it means that she has a certain aim in mind and maybe does not create content just as she wants, but with a purpose.

Pascale

Would this represent continuity?

Interviewee 2

What is continuity?

Ranim

Continuity, in terms of consistency. Sticking to the same style…

Pascale

… and would this be a sign of authenticity for you?

Interviewee 2

I think it depends. Okay, so it on the one side,I think, yes, she's continuing with this style of taking photos of talking that way, which means that is probably her because she does it a lot. On the other hand, I think sometimes people also have to go the extra mile in order to make everything fit so perfectly. Okay. Which then could mean maybe it's not… maybe it's a bit too "tried". Its a little bit difficult, but I think it could be both.

But I don't know, concerning authenticity, personally, I have a more distant, I don't feel like I am an influencer or feel like I am super connected with influencers and I follow the most authentic ones that I think authentic, but I still think that as an influencer, per se, its a bit difficult to be authentic. Okay, like with the job you have to do what brands tell you or you have to present yourself in a certain way. Doesn't matter what you are like, as a person.

Pascale

Could this maybe be affected by transparency, if they would be more transparent about all the processes and how they work with brands? And why they post this and all this information, let's say about the collaboration. Would this affect the authenticity in a way?

Interviewee 2

Yeah, it will probably increase it … but it's a I think it's a bit difficult to say that.

Ranim

So you said that you generally think that being an influencer and authenticity kind of like contradict each other, or that the concept of influencers is not authentic in itself?

Interviewee 2

Yeah, that's my feeling. Yeah. And even though I follow them, and I get inspired by what they do, I think it's still it's a profession.

Ranim

So what do you think this, that this could inhibit your potential, like to develop a relationship but trustworthy relationship with them, or trust them in what they tell you in terms of like, product recommendations? or?

Interviewee 2

Yeah, I think, as I said, if they advertise something that I don't think fits to them, then I doubt it and I wouldn't probably go for the product. But if it's in line with the general style, and I know I think I'm no in the topic enough to understand everything. Okay, they work with those brands, because, yes, they get paid by them. But also because they generally really like it and it's generally a good thing. For example, my best friend bought this jacket that I shared with her because we saw it on her.

Pascale

Okay, so you buy it because of her recommendation or because…

Interviewee 2
because I like her style. She didn't advertise it in her story. But I saw it, I thought it was super cool.

Pascale
How did you know where the jacket brand is from?

Interviewee 2
The brand, where it comes from was tagged on the photo. And I didn't know the brand before and obviously thought like "I've never seen or touched this jacket before, but now …???…

Ranim
Do you think that the if that jacket would have been worn by some other influencer, would that have differently affected your purchase decision?

Interviewee 2
Probably. Yeah, yeah, I think so. Because, yeah, I think she's really like a cool person. And probably also think, yes, I also want this and I also want to be, I don't know, stylish or cool.

Ranim
So again, when you think of making a perception of the authenticity of this influencer. What kind of things or contents do you look at when making up your mind about it? So you already mentioned in the stories and the feed. Can you first elaborate more on how you use them for your establishing your perception, and if you also take into consideration other things, like let's say your best friend follows that person? Or does it give you some sort of a more positive feeling towards that? How does it affect your perception?

Interviewee 2
Yeah, so how get to the influencer - often my best friend sends me some, influencers as "hey, follow that person. I think she's really interesting or funny or cool". And then I'll look and I immediately follow normally. So I get to know the person sort of thing. And if I don't like that person, after a while or I don't remember who it is then I unfollow again.

But also I also get to know influencers, or I built my perception about them by what they do with which influencers they hang out. So if they in their story tag someone, or if they tag someone on the photos and then the person looks nice or whatever, I'll just check them out as well. And then I see "Oh, yeah, it's just nice to follow them as well". So that's how I get to know them. And I also unfollow if I don't like someone or don't like watching the story.

Pascale:
 What would be a reason for unfollowing?

Interviewee 2:
Just not being interested; their content, their daily life something that appeals to me.

Ranim
When would you say you like an influence? Because you said you would follow depending on whether you like them or not.

Interviewee 2
So okay, feed-wise, I told you already what I like graphically. But also from how much I can maybe see their personality or what they actually like. I like them, if they are humorous, if their Instagram stories shows that they can make fun of themselves or fun of their friends. Also when it's funny because I also I relate to that because I am very jokey with my friends. So I like that.

Ranim
And maybe in terms of like, ethical attitudes and morals. Would that be an aspect to like them more or less?

Interviewee 2
Yeah, definitely. I think of course I would unfollow someone if they would say something unethically or which I think is completely against the morals.
And I follow people especially also because they do something good like, I don't know Michelle Obama or something which I think is a really cool strong woman but I don't think she's an influencer so I'll leave that out.

Pascale
Yeah, it's a celebrity

Interviewee 2
Yea, former First Lady. No, I think Pernille Theisbeck she also promotes like sustainable brands a lot and also for me to learn something new that's a really good source for me so I like that.

Pascale
Then you could also adopt a more moral lifestyle or…

Interviewee 2
Yeah then I get to know brands which are equally attractive to me but still do something good.

Ranim
You said you said Michelle Obama is a completely different category. Do you also differentiate between within certain types of influencers - like sizes of influences when you make up your mind about how authentic you feel they are?

Interviewee 2

Yeah, and I think it has to do with what they do because as I mentioned this Pernille for example, she has also an agency and Michelle Obama obviously she has a cool to have as well.

So I think people are more authentic or influencers are more authentic, if they actually do something besides Instagram or their blog. Okay, if they have like a job, which is super interesting, and they talk about it on social media. I think it's more interesting then if someone just does, or only does fashion, or only does Instagram and only create content just for that. So I like if some of their real job gets into the Instagram.

Pascale
And do you think there's also a difference between the categories, let's say food or fashion. Do you think some categories are more authentic than others? Or is this the same?

Interviewee 2
Of course, like in my mind, I feel like fashion and influencer go hand in hand these days, so that maybe it's less authentic?

Ranim
Why is it less authentic?

Interviewee 2
I don't know. Because I feel like I could develop as an influencer on Instagram just by addressing cool and buying some expensive brands and then develop from that by being seen by other brands and then establishing it from that. Whereas if I am I don't know Deliciously Ella who has cookbooks and is really good chef and very innovative and then from that it follows that people follow her because of her recipes on Instagram but also for her lifestyle; she's pregnant and everything; so I think she developed into an influencer but she has some kind of other things she brings with.

Ranim
Let's say hypothetically, that fashion influencer what would he or she needs to do in order for you to receive him as more authentic or is there no possibility? Do you just generally think that's according to the category?

Interviewee 2
It's also again with the content. So talk about relevant themes in terms of fashion or I don't maybe start their own business in this area of any other area or interview other interesting people in the industry. Yeah, some kind of differentiating factor

Pascale
Okay, thank you for your first impressions. Now, we would like to focus more on the impact which the influencer has on you. How do you engage with the influencer?

Ranim

Like thinking in terms of Pernille who you actually regard as authentic. Like, how do you engage with her?

Interviewee 2.
I saw her once live!. I don't really comment. I don't comment on stories or posts or anything I like in terms of social media engagement. I like pictures. Engagement in terms of I follow her recommendations, not only in terms of fashion, but also if she's at a cool cafe in Copenhagen with her family then I have it on my list. Its not like I go there the next day. But I have it on my mind them would go there as well.

Maybe doesn't activity recommend it, but just because I've seen it that she's there. I know, I should go that as well.

Ranim
And you go there as well, because you kind of feel this identification with her, which you said in the beginning?

Interviewee 2
Yeah, yeah, no, no, I think that's really the reason. Also of course because the cafe itself looks good. I think she has a cool lifestyle per se.

Pascale
Let's say you went to one of these cafes – Would you maybe like recommend it to your friends, and say I have it from this and this blogger? You should also follow him or her?

Interviewee 2
I probably wouldn't. No, I'd rather would take it on my own cell and say, "Hey, I found this really cool café". Okay, so I don't think I would take the cafe recognition and then say back to the blogger, I think it would stop there. And I will just be like, I found this cafe. But maybe if the friend of mine already follows her as well. "Yeah, you know, Pernille went there". And then that would maybe increase the other person's willingness to go the whole thing but normally not.

Pascale
And in general, would you talk about the influencer?

Interviewee 2
Yeah. It depends on what for example, about style topics with my friends, but for example, my boyfriend and I talk about Pernille and her husband and that they got a new baby and everything. So it's something I talk about.

Ranim
So would you say you're kind of emotionally involved with her some way?

Interviewee 2

Yeah, but no, yeah, I mean, it's like a person I relate to, I would say. And I like her. I think that if we would meet in real life and I would also maybe be her age or in that generation I would like to hang out with her like a friend or something. But like not that emotionally that if says something that I think is bad or stupid I'm not upset or anything. Its more like positive I could also go three days without looking at her. I don't seek out every day.

Ranim

But you could imagine being friends with her

Interviewee 2

Definitely. Yeah.

Ranim

And after looking at her feed or like having engaged with her just by watching her stories. How does it make you feel, what kind of feelings do you get afterwards?

Interviewee 2

I feel happy. I feel inspired.I feel surprised because I maybe that is not how it is in real life but I feel that she's quite successful in what she does but still I see her chilling on a Sunday with their baby and then taking the baby to, I don't know Paris Fashion Week. It's a positive way and that she's such a good looking interesting and cool woman who has like a family of four next to it. So I think that's like a nice feeling like "everything can go so you can do what you want and still like everything's gonna be fine". I don't want to work with fashion but it's just a general concept that I think it's quite nice, and yeah so it's mostly positive feelings

As I said if I if I have negative feelings are normally unfollow people. So if I feel like annoyed with someone who I'm like, come on. I can't deal with that anymore. It's so boring that I'll just unfollow. But I know that some of my friends who talked about it and they say I don't really like but still follow her because I want to see what's up.

So no, I cannot follow her. And I am not like that.

Pascale

Okay. Okay. So you really stick to your let's say authentic influencer…

Interviewee 2

Authentic Yeah. And also how I like them.

Ranim

All right.

Interviewee 2

Maybe one more thing I could share with authenticity. There's this person called Rachel's Zediac, or whatever. And I think she's into business, but also fashion. She did this thing called hashtag Delphie. I don't know, whether she invented it, I don't think so. But it is a desk selfie, which means that people take selfies of them when they are actually at work, which shows that their life is actually also kind of boring. And that they also sit at a desk, which I think is super authentic, not only showing yourself on the beach all the time taking photos, photos, photos taken by others in super amazing environments that you actually sit there. Yes, I'm here with my computer, it's a Delphie

Pascale
So the relation between reality and authenticity in this case is different than as the other examples.

Ranim
Again, going back to what you consider authentic, you have mentioned that you think its authentic when they show different parts of their life like if they have a job next to it. But in the case of influences, who do let's say Instagram professionally as a full time job, does this directly mean to you it's less authentic than someone who has a job outside of social media?

Interviewee 2
Difficult to say, because obviously I know that having an Instagram account is nowadays also a job. It's just I don't know, it's probably something different for me - a different kind of authenticity because then it needs to be within that bubble authentic; within that "I create content for Instagram I actively blahbla do that and that. That is different I think from when you do many things or have so much work experience or have friends which are super diverse. I think that's two different kinds. I don't know whether that helps

Ranim
Yeah, I understand. So you generally feel that because they do Instagram which in itself is a form of like self representation; they do it for someone. So maybe it's not real or not that true.

Interviewee 2
Yea, and I also think within that people who only do Instagram I think there also can be differences. People would just do any brand corporation or any job and they get lots of parcels every day and they show everything from like sweets to microwaves.

No authentic, yeah no consistency nothing what I think their personalities is reflected in there. They just do it because it's for free or they get paid for it. It's two different things from people are more selective and I think that the only two things even if its for Instagram or for themselves and that I really want to keep and send back stuff they don't like

Ranim
So you feel like this commercial aspect is in conflict with….

Interviewee 2

Yea, sometimes yea

Pascale
… because it's not fitting as you said to the personality

Interviewee 2
Yea, maybe it's also because I know I studied marketing and maybe that's why I say that.

Pascale
Do you also care about the information an influencer shares with his audience? Like what the influencers rights in the caption for example, or if the influencer responds to comments?

Do you see any authentic value in in these aspects?

Interviewee 2
I think captions Yes. Shows lots of authenticity or not. Someone who just posts 100 hashtags underneath just to be seen everywhere. I think it's less authentic, then people with a caption and maybe one hashtag or whatever. And I think also the more quirky or smart or interesting the caption, the more I think it's authentic because it captures, what the person is pretty thinking instead of just throwing in like a quote that everyone says. But I actually never read comments. I see the ones that have shown but I would never go in and see if they engage with someone, but that's also because I don't comment myself I think.

Ranim
From my side I'm fine.
Thank you very much.

Interview 3
Ranim
Hey Interviewee 3 thanks for taking the time to be here with us today. So our researchers on the perceived authenticity of social media influencers and the interview will take around let's say 35 minutes. First of all, we want to ask you if we can audio tape you.

Interviewee 3
Yeah sure, no problem.

Ranim
And do you desire to stay anonymous or is it fine to mention your name?

Interviewee 3
Yea, that's fine.

Ranim

Good, then let's start first with some like general warm up questions about your involvement with Instagram and with influencers. So do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 3
 Yes I do.

Ranim
And how often do you use it?

Interviewee 3
On a daily basis.

Ranim
Do you follow influencers? And if you do, why do you follow influencers? What kind of value does it give to you?

Interviewee 3
I follow mostly like photographer influencers. I like they're how their envision and also they give good some good tips and advice on how to edit pictures, also which camera they use and stuff like that. So I think that's really valuable to improve.

Ranim
Okay and what is important for you when you decide to follow an influencer? What kind of things do you look at?

Interviewee 3
I normally follow very specific like niche people. I don't like when they do a lot of things. But it's not much lifestyle it's more like a skill right?! So then it would be then again that I look at their profile and then their content is very homogeneous in a sense. I don't like when people just post random things. I like to get a constant kind of information flow.

Ranim
So you're looking a lot into the skill and like the talent?

Interviewee 3
Yeah.

Ranim
And do you also look into the personality of the person as a factor of following him?

Interviewee 3
Sometimes I think sometimes. They the way they come across in the way they are able to kind of express their skill. I think that plays a huge role. Yeah.

Ranim

Okay. And since you know our topic is about authenticity of influencers. Does authenticity matter to you? The authenticity of an influencer?

Interviewee 3
Do you mean by like, how they're represent themselves or like how that is not a copy or different from the usual thing you see?

Ranim
This is your interpretation. So yeah, let me maybe start off with what is authentic for you in terms of humans? In terms of the influencer?

Interviewee 3
I think for me, like authenticity of an influencer would be that you try to choose to express yourself in a different way, right? I think through Instagram, we see a lot of, especially with Instagram models, things that everybody kind of post almost the same thing and kind of wear almost the same thing. So I think the authenticity is when you try to express yourself in a different way, I think I see. That's why for me, when I follow photographers, I see that they are able to be different from one another. So some people like landscapes, and then they see it through a different, their own way. And I think that's what makes me follow them because they could, you could easily take the same picture but in different ways and convey different things. So I think it's very important that the person that I follow has showed us different views, not like very normal or very common, you know, you see with a different influences.

Ranim
Nice, nice. So, keep your own definition of authenticity in mind, because we're running a bit deeper into this aspect now, and we will also look into what drives this perception of authenticity. So, to make it more like tangible…Can you maybe show us one influencer that you consider as authentic?

Interviewee 3
Yes, [Shows profile of Influencer]. It's a Brazilian influencer

Ranim
So why do you follow this influencer?

Interviewee 3
Because he travels a lot and I like the way he captures most of his pictures. So it has do a lot with within Brazil where I'm from. So I think I like to explore Brazil through his eyes.

Ranim
And do you also somehow identify with this person?

Interviewee 3
I definitely would like to be able to have his life for sure to be able to like, take pictures and travel, and also be good at it. So yeah, for sure. I think I would like to be closer to how he is.

Ranim

So as like source of inspiration, or even aspiration?

Interviewee 3

Yes. Yes.

Ranim

Okay, nice. And can you tell me now more specifically, why do you think this influencer specifically is authentic? You already said differentiation and originality are some important aspects for you. What do you think about continuity?

Interviewee 3

I think he's very good at, even though he goes to different places, he's always good to capture the atmosphere the place. And also when he does his stories, he's very personal and shows a lot about the places. So I think that's that is actually it, but I can't remember for sure the question… so I need you to repeat it.

Ranim

Of course, yea. We were thinking about aspects of continuity because you said he goes to different places and he always manages to confer the atmosphere. So there is some sort of like consistency.

Interviewee 3

Yes. And even though, if he has like let's say some ads and stuff it's still kind of very close to what he is – or seems like what he is like. So he doesn't branch out to different products or it's mostly to do with traveling or cameras or things that I would still find interesting even though it could be an ad. So I think in that sense he's still very continuous within his content I feel

Ranim

Okay so you would say despite the advertisement - Is it in conflict with his authenticity?

Interviewee 3

No no, it goes really like hand in hand. And it is something that I don't see much with influencers. I think that's why I'm really drawn to his content

Ranim

Nice and now turning to another aspect which might have been implicitly been said by you - credibility - him as a person. Is his credibility important to you? Does it make him more authentic to you?

Interviewee 3

I normally don't take influencers as a credibility stamp. I feel like, it's very, very hard just because a person has so many followers and has so much reach. It's more about that he's actually really, really good at it or he knows best. So I don't actually see that correlation. I obviously would take in consideration what he says and look into it myself. But I wouldn't do it like a blindly trust because he posted it, assuming that it's actually the best camera. Yeah,

that's the best way to do it. I'll definitely take it in consideration but not just blindly trust him just because he's an influencer.

Ranim

Okay. So So basically, you are not sure if he's honest about his opinions when he says them.

Interviewee 3

Yeah.

Ranim

But do you still see him as authentic?

Interviewee 3

Yeah, I think because there's two there's two different ways. There is the artistic part of his Instagram, which is the content of pictures and capturing the moment - and that's him – that's what he can sell. That's him as a photographer as an artist. But when it comes to products or some kind of opinion, I don't know him to be able to judge if he has the best opinion or the best view on it. Or if he's honest. Yeah. So in that sense I don't trust him blindly.

Ranim

Yeah. Nice. That's interesting. And in that sense, do you also differentiate between what you see in his feed and maybe what you're seeing in his InstaStories?

Interviewee 3

Yes. Sometimes I feel like Instastories in his case, has more ads than actually in his feed. So then I do kind of see it a bit more. His feed is more like his craft, while the story is a bit more where he kind of promotes himself and partners with different brand.

Ranim

Okay, okay. So does it seem to you as if it's like two different sources of authenticity?

Interviewee 3

Yeah, I do think so. Because I think he also plays that strategy in a way to not to be so "sell-out" in a sense – I mean to not have too much ad in his in your feed, because that also doesn't bring that much credibility.

Ranim

Okay. Nice. And since you talked about how important the artistic aspects are for you, in terms of authenticity, how do you feel about the editing of the photos in terms of again, Authenticity?

Interviewee 3

I think he's, he's very good, especially, I think within photography. A lot of people are using this new "pre-set thing" – and he is really against it. He like okay, there's so many of these presets, but it doesn't really give quality to the picture. It's not like talent, if it's just about

putting pre-sets. The fact that he doesn't have those things does give him a bit more of, not street cred, but a bit more reliability.

Ranim

Yeah, so that's interesting. So you would basically say that the editing of a photo doesn't mean that something is fake or unreal? And it's not in contrast with authenticity?

Interviewee 3

I mean it really depends on how much editing you do. If you're altering a picture, maybe change aspects of it then yes, that's something different than just making sure the lighting and the color is optimal. Yeah, so I see those two things as different things

Ranim

Okay. Nice. I know that you said it's more about like an artistic stuff behind it and that you don't really know him. But still, aspects of his personality, like his ethicality or morals or other personality traits, do you consider them in your evaluation of authenticity?

Interviewee 3

I do, I do. I think he's a person who also has some values that I also share. Like with when he posts about a bit of politics or a bit of his attitude towards LGBT and stuff like that. So that also makes me feel like I want to support this person because he's also spreading a good message. But I don't know if he actually means it when he says it. But if he does mean it then definitely that makes me follow him even more or wants to know a bit more about it

Ranim

And what are the sources from which you derive your perception about his authenticity, within his Instagram, but maybe also other sources from which you make up your mind about him?

Interviewee 3

No, it's basically just Instagram. I don't know him outside of it. I just know that he sometimes appears in celebrities' Instagram, or in other influencers' Instagram. But I just know him for his Instagram. So I don't really know anything from anywhere else.

Rnaim

And the fact that he appears on other Instagrams with other celebrities, does that somehow impact your perception on him?

Interviewee 3

Not really. I mean, I think it was the way through which I managed to find him but then I unfollowed the person that I followed him through.

Ranim

Okay. And within Instagram, of course, in terms of sources of perceived authenticity, you mentioned the feed, you mentioned InstaStories. Can you maybe elaborate on any other

sources? Do you look at the caption for example; is that important for you to say "okay, this person is really real and authentic to me"?

Interviewee 3
Yeah the way I consume Instagram – For me it's really more the content. I see it as a form of entertainment because it's always been like "I don't have anything to do and I go and check Instagram". So I for me it's more just the visuals and for me the differentiator would be like the feed and the stories. I don't really look at the description, the bio, the descriptions or the hashtags.

Ranim
All right interesting. Thinking again about him as a person - isn't Is it important for you that he maybe talks about his personal life, about his emotions, his career, any like personality related stuff?

Interviewee 3
i think for me is important when he talks about his career, on how he started and how he explains how he became a photographer and all those things that interests me. But I don't really care who he's dating. I just maybe care what's his next travel. But more of a personal life that – I don't really care. Maybe I care more about what what his upcoming projects would be but not really much about anything else.

Ranim
Okay. So him as a personality doesn't really flow into your authenticity perception that much?

Wiliam
I mean I think he's authentic due to his position I would say. Like the way he doesn't really care about what people are going to think about him or anything. I think that is something authentic to him, but for me it doesn't really play a big role

Ranim
You said that you follow most likely photography influencers. And do you also follow any other influencers actively?

Interviewee 3
You know, I'm trying to think… I mean, I don't follow this girl from my high school, but she became a really big influence and sometimes I do check her out but that's just to see what's up with her.

Ranim
Okay, but then let's think again, in terms of photography influencers. Do somehow make differences in your authenticity perception when they are small photographers, in terms of followers, versus when they are a really big?

Interviewee 3

I do, I mean, then it goes like – "Okay, this person established himself this one didn't". Not that look down on the person has less followers because they could still have a great skill, right? But I do feel like, "Okay, this person has more experience for him to have gotten to this level of let's say, 100,000 followers or something". So I see the different level of recognition, for sure.

Ranim
Yeah, but do you also feel like bigger ones are more authentic or less than small ones? Or is it really not a matter of size?

Interviewee 3
 I don't think it's a matter of size I think, it's a matter of your vision.

Ranim
And what if the one with the more followers has also more collaboration partners? How would that impact your authenticity perception? Would there be a difference or not?

Interviewee 3
It really depends on how they integrate that partnership. Right? Yeah, I think if it's authentic in the sense that if it's something that they also believe in and use or that's included in their daily life - then, yes, it's more authentic than if somebody just goes like, "buy this because I got paid to."

Ranim
Yeah, nice. Nice. Okay. Um, now a more like, philosophical question: How do you see the relationship between authenticity and reality, considering Instagram, which is like a virtual medium? So maybe, in other words, how do you see the relationship between authenticity and reality? Can you even find authenticity in something that is maybe edited or something that is not 100% real?

Interviewee 3
I think when it comes to photography, I think you can see authenticity in certain things that are edited or may look better. But I do agree that you do get a bit more authenticity by being real. So I think there's two aspects of authenticity: The fact that you're true to what you're showing, and then you're showing exactly how life is - because normally on Instagram you see everybody traveling all the time and doing their best life, which is not authentic to that person's life because it's not how they live it. But then I think that within the photography influencers, if they take a picture - part of photography is editing - it is kind of making it a better version. So that's still authentic for their vision as an artist. So I think that's still kind of authentic. But I would argue that sometimes I think -I don't know if it makes sense to say it here - but the whole thing with fyre festival, that really showed me how you could create a whole world or a whole kind of brand based on people that are just important, influencers. I think that the strategy that they had was just "let's get the people with the most amount of followers and if you think about it, I mean, they were successful in that part of creating something that's not real – that is so big, they be made it authentic – they made that dream authentic.

Ranim

Yeah, they may they took something which is fake and made seem authentic with the help of authentic influencers.

Interviewee 3

Yeah, exactly. Yeah,

Ranim

Really interesting example. So now that we've discussed your perception of the authenticity of influencers, we want to find out more of how it actually impacts you. So first of all, maybe describe how do you engage with this authentic influencer that you just showed us.

Interviewee 3

Sometimes like his pictures but I don't even like his pictures all the time. Okay.

Ranim

And why?

Interviewee 3

I don't know sometimes I'm just not into liking screen I just don't like things; I only like my close friends and then support them. Because I feel like my like is not going to make a difference in his hundred thousand likes, so I might as well not like it.

Ranim

And so you also don't messaged him or comment?

Interviewee 3

No I don't, mostly because I just feel shy about it.

Ranim

But would that make a difference in, maybe your emotional involvement with this person?

Interviewee 3

Yeah, because I but feel like that with everybody that I don't know. I would never also just come up to a celebrity and talk to them in real life if I don't know them. And I also just think it's strange like to write this person which I have no connection, no relation to.

Ranim

So you would say that you don't really have a relationship with this person? But in the beginning you said you can somehow relate to him in terms of like, what he's doing in an inspiring sense.

Interviewee 3

Yeah.

Pascale
If you would consider a smaller influencer? Or maybe is there any other influence of where you would see yourself more related to?

Interviewee 3
With smaller Influencers I feel like then it's a different thing because I know that I'm not fighting for his attention, then it's like "Okay, there's chance that the person has time to reply or that I can actually engage in a conversation and kind of get something out of this". But if I'm just commenting among so many, like, I don't see the point if I try to dm a person that's so big, like what's the chance that they're going to reply?

Ranim
Yeah, yeah,

Interviewee 3
Even though there's one influencers, not influencer by one this the CEO of remote, I started following him when he was, really low key. And now obviously, he's really big because his Dad is the CEO of LVMH. I was like "we should have become friends before he blew up". But just because I like the brand. And I like what he's doing with the brand.

Ranim
Yeah, yeah. But yeah, I was just thinking of going back to, again, imagine if this authentic influencer that you perceive as authentic would advertise product. I wanted to pick up on the idea of trust again. Would you rather listen to him for like a product recommendation or would you not?

Interviewee 3
I mean, I understand where it comes from like, if it would make me more inclined if it comes from him, then he comes from like somebody else? I think I probably would, but like I would take more in consideration what he says. So if he says, "Okay, camera A is much better than camera B, I think that would influence me a bit when I'm actually checking both out and say, "Okay, he said, this part oh yea that's true", you know what I mean? So I would definitely take in consideration what his opinion is about, but I feel like it has to be something that I relate to him. So in this case, I relate to him in a photographer sense. So I'll maybe be influenced in that realm of products or ads, but if he comes with like, a tooth whitening, or like a shake, then I'm like, No, I don't care. Because then this is something that I believe it's nothing that you know; you know about photography. He would not "authentify", is that a word?
He wouldn't give me that stamp in a different kind of product range. Yeah. But maybe if he's doing something within what I trust him that he's good, then I think I'll be a bit more inclined.

Ranim
Okay. Yeah. Interesting. And do you sometimes talk about this influencer with your friends? Have you ever like shared him?

Interviewee 3

I shared with my brother because he is going to Rio now. He went for the carnival. And he was like going to different Carnival parties. And I was like, "Look, this is where you go" and send it to him. And, he started following him and said "Oh, yeah, he's so nice. So cool."

Ranim
Okay. So you share him as a source of inspiration for other people to like show they also should go to this place because he has been there?

Interviewee 3
Yeah.

Ranim
One thing again. Do you think you have like enough information or enough to say, if you could imagine being friends with that person?

Interviewee 3
I feel like yes. And that's also what gets me freaked out. Sometimes, you know so much that you feel like you know the person. And then probably if you see them on the street, you will talk to them like your friends. Yeah, I think that part of the whole Instagram freaks me out a bit. But I do think I know enough about him to kind of have a conversation that it feels like we're friends.

Ranim
And why exactly, what would be the basis of the friendship?

Interviewee 3
Basically I know wherever he was, and I have questions on how nice it was. And I think, that's how you start a conversation with your friends. Like, I know that he was also in Mexico. So I would be like, "Okay, this is great, right?". Like, how do you do this, and this and that?. So I think and also by knowing that we kind of share the same, or at least it appears that we share the same values, we also have a base to also discuss different things

Ranim
And values in what terms?

Interviewee 3
Just like in like political stance, or just what it appears to be the way to live life in a sense.

Ranim
Okay. So apart from the photography and as you mentioned, also like other things outside of his profession?

Interviewee 3
Yeah, yeah, it's a bit more about his personality. Let's say that I think our personalities would get along.

Ranim

Okay, nice. And then do you have generally any other thing you want to say about authenticity within social media influencers or Instagram?

Interviewee 3

I think for me, what has been on my mind lately is the Fyre Festival thing because I really discussed it with a few friends how crazy is. You see us a lot of brands coming up only from like partnering up, there's also the example Fashionova I read about it that they were like, also nothing but then they started getting Kylie Jenner and like big, big big names and people are like, "Okay then I could trust this because this is big" and I think a lot of brands use that strategy. But it Fyre Festival, what was so fascinating for me is that they used it so well but they fail to deliver and that just showed the scale that you're able to do it right? And then there was also the discussion, I mean I have no information on it because I don't know, but about who is responsible for it. In a sense I don't blame the influencers because that's a deal that they just post this picture, yes this is their job basically. But it is crazy that they were able to create something so big and hype something so much with only peoples' inputs.

Ranim

Now that you said that you don't blame the influencer… So like next time this influencer advertises something, do you have less trust or less credibility in that influencer?

Interviewee 3

I mean I'm already sceptical person per se. I do believe that there's people that blindly trust the influencer if they post a jacket they're going to buy the same jacket because they like it and they use the promo code and all those things. But yes, I definitely would say bit more like "okay but then if they were part of this huge thing they didn't look into it or even though it's a business transaction they do post it without much knowing. Yeah I would definitely say it would affect them in their credibility.

Ranim

Yea, all right.

Interviewee 3

And I also watched a lot of YouTube, which is a different social media, but there was one guy that made a video, I think was Shane Dawson or somebody like that, made a video and placed somebody's book in the description and the next day that book was like number one on Amazon. So the influencers do have a lot of power over what they put out.

Ranim

Yeah, that's true. Yeah, I think we were good. Thanks.

Interview 4

Pascale
Hi **Interviewee 4**

Interviewee 4

Hi

Pascale

Thanks for joining our interview and it's **Ranim** and **Pascale** and we're focusing on our thesis topic brand authenticity on social media and I would like to ask you some questions. First Is it OK for you if we audiotape this interview?

Interviewee 4

Yes, it is.

Pascale

And would you like to be anonymous or can we mentioned your name?

Interviewee 4

You can mention my name.

Pascale

Okay then just let's start with some warm up questions.
Do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 4

Yes, I do we use Instagram, daily I think. Yep.

Pascale

Ok, so on a daily basis. Okay, do you also follow influencers?

Interviewee 4

I do follow a few influences, but not too many.

Pascale

Okay, why would you follow these influencers? Can you tell me some reasons and what value it gives to you?

Interviewee 4

Mainly I think I follow influences because of the, I think, I have a interest in fashion, so I follow a few guys who post like fashion stuff so I get a little bit of inspiration from these guys. So, I can have a look at what they were and where they buy this stuff.

Pascale

Okay and when you follow these influencers what is important for you apart from the aspect that they inspire you? It's there's something else?

Interviewee 4

Yeah, for me is important that they seem authentic, so I don't want them to be like…I don't want them to just provide content just to make money, so I want them to provide some good content with stuff they really like and not content they just post just to make money.

Pascale
So, you mean that they for example passionate about their expertise?

Interviewee 4
Yeah so if I don't want a guy who post stuff about things he's not interested about just to make money. And then his photo and I see this stuff and I think well he's just doing this for his living, but still he's just doing it for the money, so.

Pascale
Yeah, okay. So, you right away mentioned the aspect of authenticity. So, do you want the influencer to be authentic? So, I would assume that this is important characteristic an influencer has to have that you follow him?

Interviewee 4
Yes.

Pascale
Okay. Would this authenticity matter to you, and why? Can you maybe explain a bit more about this fact?

Interviewee 4
I think it matters or at least it matters to me, because I feel a bit closer to the person. Because if you just post ads and advertisements about something I don't care about or he doesn't care about, I don't feel like close to the person. And if I follow a person, to stay relevant for me, if the person wants to stay relevant in my feed, I want the person to be authentic to post stuff, not only for advertising, but maybe private stuff, just photos without advertising and I want them to post photos from at home maybe or vacation whatever.

Pascale
Okay, talking about these authentic influencers. Can you show me an authentic influencer, so like an influencer you would perceive as authentic? Maybe on Instagram.

Interviewee 4
Yes. I think this guy's pretty authentic.Okay, he's German Henrik Gisela.

Pascale
 Why do you follow the guy? Can just go through his feed. And show me.

Interviewee 4
I think I started following him, I think a year ago or so. And he creates some cool content. Like he's not posting only collaborations with some brands. He's also posting some photos of himself without some advertising and he's traveling a lot and his content is pretty not that

unique, but it's like, it's not the same every time so he posts different styles, different perspectives and like it's an interesting feed. He's pretty authentic is doing some interesting stories as well. So, he talks in his stories you kind of get an idea of how he is as a person and how he acts as a person, so you feel closer and you can, yeah, like I said, you get an idea on how he is.

Pascale
What he's talking about in his stories?

Interviewee 4
He's talking about his plans or where he's traveling. So, different stuff as well. Sometimes he's doing ads in his non-paid ads, I think that's a pretty cool thing as well because he's like, talking about a product he really enjoys using, so and if it's not paid, it feels like it's really authentic because it's not paid and he says it a really good product, I will make some advertising for it, but I won't get paid for it. So, it's authentic.

Pascale
So this recommendation in that case would be more credible for you then?

Interviewee 4
kind of Yeah, I think 'cause I remember he was showing a backpack the other day and he was showing some features of the backpack and why he's enjoying this product. And then I was like, Yeah, I guess that's right what he's saying because he explained why he likes it and how he uses it. And then he said, it's a non-paid ad so I was like yeah, that's a good product I mean if I need a backpack why not.

Pascale
So, in terms of the quality of its recommendations and about the information he uses to tell you what is good about the backpack. These could be all things why believe in his recommendation?

Interviewee 4
I feel like in the recommendation he talked a lot about how he's using it. And this backpack is good because of this. And it has a small zipper here, you can put in your password here and whatever. And I thought, Yeah, that makes sense. That's a good product. And then the factor that it was non-paid ad, I was like, Damn, that's a good backpack.

Pascale
Let's all let's stick to this term credibility. So you mentioned that he's labelling the post so also non paid and paid posed that he's really honest and his opinions when he's talking about several products. what would you say about the editing of his photos in terms of authenticity and the credibility?

Interviewee 4
I think, I mean, he edits his photos pretty hard, if you can say that like this, I mean, he uses a camera he uses his phone as well but he's doing like good quality photos with his camera as

well. So he's editing as photos a lot but I think his credibility is not going down because he is editing his photos. He's still providing some nice shots from like this, for example, he's in Africa with some kids and you see the photo is edited but still I don't care you know what I mean it just makes the colors brighter or whatever the contrast better. I wanne see his content, I don't care if I mean if it's too crazy the editing maybe it can have an effect on credibility, I guess, because I see some other influences who have like crazy editing and I don't really enjoy watching this type of content because it's like too much. I think the credibility is better. for me it feels better when he's not editing too much.

Pascale

You also mentioned that this guy is posting several things, so he's posting travel pictures he's posting lifestyle pictures. If we would talk about continuity. Can you say something about that? Do you know what I mean by that? it's like let's say a food influencer would post everything about food and it would sponsor food chains and so there's I can kind of continuity to be in his feed which some people perceive as more authentic. In your case the guy is like doing several things but still, do you think see like a continuity, for example in his passion.

Interviewee 4

So, if he has a kind of a pattern in his profile? Yeah it is.

Pascale

Is it important to you for perceived someone as authentic?

Interviewee 4

It is. I think it is because I don't if he would start posting some stuff about cosmetics or makeup I would say this is not authentic anymore he's just doing it for the money. he is, I don't know but if he keeps going with this travel and lifestyle stuff he is I think that's the way to go if he wants to be authentic.

Pascale

Do you think that brands he posts are in a flow with his posting and brand's he's promoting? Or would you see the relationship between them.

Interviewee 4

I think he's three presenting a brand pretty well because he's only doing collaborations or I think I feel like he's only doing collaborations with brands he likes to wear, for example, some fashion brands, so it kind of fits into his into his flow and he's authentic if he's if he's posting pictures of these brands. So, you as a follower kind of believe he's really liking this stuff and not only doing it for the money.

Pascale

But still would you say that there could be a conflict with sponsored ads? if there's no brand fit for example?

Interviewee 4

I think yes, because like I said, if he's starting to promote some cosmetics and he has nothing to do with cosmetics before that first picture you feel like this is not authentic anymore and it's a bad I don't know it kind of puts a bad light on his profile because you know where he's just doing it for the company.

Pascale
Is this guy doing the Instagram professionally?

Interviewee 4
I think he is yeah at least he's traveling a lot and he's doing a few collaborations with hotels I think as well so he's kind of doing it I think full time and that's what he does for a living.

Pascale
If we will talk about integrity…you mentioned the picture where he is with the African kids then I can see some pictures with other people. Integrity includes, for example, some moral aspects. Do you see some values or ethical behaviour you can relate to or is he for example hanging out with other celebrities or Instagram? who kind of the express the same values as him? Or is there anything you can think about?

Interviewee 4
I think, he's not really or least what I see is not really hanging out with some other influencers is more like doing his own stuff I think he's sometimes traveling with his sister as well.

Pascale
is this authentic to you when he would travel with his sister?

Interviewee 4
Yes, it is because it's not like another influencer and they are just go on vacation together to push each other's accounts into the sky. So it's for me it's more way more authentic when he goes on vacation with his sister because she does not really do Instagram professionally and for me it is really nice that he post picture, I think we mentioned it before as well ,he posted a picture with an African kid and for me this is like, from the ethical point of view, it's really nice to see this. Because I think like as I see now it is an advertisement but it's something really good and he's with his sister as well I don't really know what it is exactly what it says advertisement for love. So, I don't know maybe participating in a project in Africa phone to help some kids but yeah, he's doing a good job and this makes him more authentic.

Pascale
you also said in the beginning that you can kind of relate to the influencer. Why do you relate to this influencer?

Interviewee 4
Maybe because I do a little bit of Instagram myself. And I think he was in the modeling industry before so I don't know if he's still or if he was doing it full time or whatever, but I was or I am in the modeling industry as well. And I think maybe 'cause I pursued the same dream as him. Maybe I can relate to him or maybe because he's pretty much the same age as me, maybe a

little bit older, older, but I think that's why he's the same age. He has the same interests and that's why I think I can relate to him pretty good.

Pascale
And you mentioned in the beginning that he's kind of special because of his feed.
So, you do you think he has like a special talent which makes him authentic?

Interviewee 4
I mean, a lot of nice profiles on Instagram, millions of profiles. So, I wouldn't say like he has the best looking profile or the most authentic but for me, this is a pretty authentic guy because he shares whatever like I said, he's doing stories where he's talking about his daily life and he's providing content from the places he travels to.

Pascale
OK, so we've talked about the drivers of authenticity. Could you maybe mention which one was the most important for you?

Interviewee 4
I think for me, if this counts as a driver of authenticity, the one with the non-paid for me was the most important one because I feel like he's not advertising products just for money. He's doing it because he likes the products and I feel like this is the way to go. If you want to be authentic,

Pascale
Do you think authenticity kind of varies between different types of influences? If we would talk about your macro and micro influencers?

Interviewee 4
Yeah, I think if you have a really big account, so if you have more than a million followers, I think it's like, if you show your personal life, it has not really something to do with authenticity in my opinion, because I don't know they just live the lifestyle for Instagram, and they do whatever they do. And if you if you have a smaller account, I think it's way more authentic, because you show what you do. But your life is not Instagram, you know what I want to say?

Pascale
So let's say they show their daily work, they go to work, they walk their dogs, they meet their friends, and Instagram is just kind of a hobby or like a parallel thing. This would be more authentic for you?

Interviewee 4
Yeah, I think because the other ones, they just live the life I mean, Instagram is their life. So it's kind of authentic as well. But you know what I'm trying to say?

Pascale
The guy you showed me you perceive as authentic, right? But you think he is doing it professionally?

Interviewee 4

He's doing Instagram for a living but still his account has not like and he's not crazy big. He's just I mean, he has 300 k, I think it's big. But it's not like he's a superstar. So it still feels like it's pretty close to he's pretty close to his followers.

Pascale

Okay. And so now I would like to talk about the engagement you have with the influencer? Can you say anything about that?

Interviewee 4

to be honest, I don't really engage with influencers. I don't really engage with people on Instagram in general. I don't know why. But I don't really like pictures. I don't comment pictures. I mean, other people like pictures. They have to because the influence I would not be there where he is now if there are no people commenting or liking these pictures, but personally, for me, I don't really like pictures or common on pictures. I just look at these pictures or look at his stories, but I'm not really interact with the guy.

Pascale

But is there for example, a purchase you've done? Or would you recommend a product to a friend? Would you share posts of him with others?

Interviewee 4

I would. Because if he's, for example, let's say he's wearing a sweatshirt and I would say I would send it to my friend and say, I look at this, that's a cool thing. Maybe I would if he's if he's talking about a product he likes. And then let's say let's go back to the backpack he advertised then, if I needed a backpack, I would go back to his opinion and think, Oh, yeah, he recommended that backpack so the chance of me buying the back biggest higher.

Pascale

Why?

Interviewee 4

Because he said it's a nice backpack. And the reasons he brought up for "Why it is a good backpack" were or at least I thought they were there were some good reasons. So, he made me believe it is a good backpack.

Pascale

And have you ever bought them something promoted on Instagram or violence? Or at least had a look on it on the web?

Interviewee 4

Yeah, for sure. I think I've not I don't think I have bought something because I saw something on an influencers account. But surely, I looked on things or at least they made a swipe up link in their story and I had to look at the products they were making advertisement for. So, I have

not really bought something but for sure, I had a look on products they showed on their website or showed their account.

Pascale
Would you talk about the influencer with others?

Interviewee 4
Yeah, for sure. Why not? Yeah, let's take this guy as an example. And like I said, if he's wearing some cool stuff, I would talk about it with my friends about, "Oh, have you seen his or his whatever"

Pascale
Would you forward post? Or would you rather communicate offline about the influencer?

Interviewee 4
I think both, I mean, I talk about it offline. I would say I talk about it more. But still, I would I sometimes forward pictures,

Pascale
Would you if you recommend this influencer to a friend? That's a Do you think this guy would also follow him then?

Interviewee 4
I mean, if my friend has the same interest then I have been I think the challenge of him following this guy's higher.
For example, I recommend this influencer to let's say a person has nothing to do with new has nothing to do is not the same interests as me. I don't think they would follow him.

Pascale
Could you imagine being friends with this guy?

Interviewee 4
Yeah, why not? Because at least I feel like he has the same interests than I have. I mean, that's the reason why I'm following him. So, I think he didn't, he seems like a nice guy. So yeah.

Pascale
Okay. Is there anything else you would like to add about authenticity in general of this influencer, of Instagram, or…?

Interviewee 4
I mean, to summarize what I said in this whole interview. I think for me, like I said, the most important things are that you do not post too many advertisements. And you don't do too many collaborations with some brands for money, because I think it decreases your grade of authenticity. It is like, oh, he's just doing another ad, and another add another ad. And I'm annoyed because I just see ads and the money he is earning. So, for me, it is very important that he's doing nonpaid ads. Of course, he does not have to do nonpaid ads but he has to post

some pictures without ads. I want him to post some pictures from his personal life or from his life without any collaborations or any brands mentioned.

Pascale
And as a last question, how would you think or how would you see the relationship between authenticity and reality?

Interviewee 4
I think if they show the reality, it is more authentic. If he's showing what is going on in his life with his ups and downs and not like this fake social media life. Then I think it's relating with authenticity.

Pascale
Okay, are both terms rather the same kind of thing or it can also be complementary? So let's say that because is professionalised. Which is not kind of always real….

Interviewee 4
I mean, that is that is kind of you can relate to it in a way. But authenticity is not equal reality. So, if he's authentic, it does not mean he shows the reality because if he's really authentic, he shows up for me, if he's authentic, he shows his ups and it's downs and he shows a lot but still in some people think he's authentic, he can still just pretend something's to be the reality and he just takes a picture in the moment and then people think, oh, that's reality. And that's, that's what the guy is about. it's not the same but like I said, has a relation.

Pascale
Okay, good. Very good. Thank you very much. Have a great day.

Interviewee 4
Bye.

Interview 5
Pascale
Hello.

Interviewee 5
Hello.

Pascale
Thanks for joining the interview today. And just quickly some questions. What is your highest level of education so far?

Interviewee 5
I'm in my master's program and I have a bachelor's degree.

Pascale

You are German?

Interviewee 5
Yes.

Pascale
I would like to begin with some warm up questions. Are you using Instagram?

Interviewee 5
Yes, I am.

Pascale
And how often do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 5
I use a daily I have an app on my phone and I use it daily. Yeah, every time I'm bored I turn it on and look around. Okay, just for fun.

Pascale
And do you also follow influencers?

Interviewee 5
Yeah, some I do. So, I follow some

Pascale
Yeah. Why would you follow them?

Interviewee 5
I think because they post a lot and they have some contrast content that I'm interested in so for example I follow some sustainability influencers, some fashion influencers, beauty, but also some political influencers. So, I'm just interested in the content.

Pascale
So, you get inspired by the content and it kind of fits with your areas of interest.

Interviewee 5
Yeah, with my areas of interest, but also just to look at beautiful pictures. Okay, just for fun.

Pascale
Like entertainment. The visuals give you a good feeling.

Interviewee 5
Yeah, exactly.

Pascale

What is important for you when you follow an influencer? Are there some characteristics you look at?

Interviewee 5
It's important for me that they are real, you know, that I believe what they are sharing. So, I'm not that much interested in influencers that just post products and that just, you know, have some promotion codes for you to buy stuff and show you products and the bio is full of companies. I'm not that much interested in that because I'm just on Instagram for fun and also bit for information and not because I want to buy stuff.

Pascale
Okay. You right away mentioned some characteristics of authenticity and this is actually the topic we are digging into now. So, does authenticity matter to you? And if yes, why?

Interviewee 5
Of course, because, you know, Instagram I think in general is quite superficial app and I know that and it's okay. Because I also like to look at beautiful pictures and I also post beautiful pictures myself but I also want to believe what is posted so I want to have some kind of value. Yeah, I want to have some kind of value or some information that I can you know process afterwards so, yeah, so it matters to me.

Pascale
And could you maybe show me an authentic influencer in your feed?

Interviewee 5
Yes, that's just think about that. I have some, but there's one girl I really like. Her name is DariaDaria, she's from Austria. This is her profile. She has 200,000 influencers followers. Kind of her theme is sustainability and fashion but also in food and traveling. She also posts products, she has her own fashion brand and she has some cooperation with sustainable brands. She also posts information, for example, about plastic use, some political stuff like women's day. So, topics that are kind of related to sustainability.

Pascale
And there are other reasons why you follow her apart from the ones you've just mentioned? Why do you follow her? Why have you decided to follow her?

Interviewee 5
She posts regularly like she has some consistency and she always has new information and stuff that I'm interested in. I think besides of the things that I've mentioned not so much but she's also connected to other influencers. She said, she shares some spots where you can travel to that are sustainable. So, I think that are the main reasons. She also has some recipes in her feed, I've never actually cooked some of them, but I, you know, like to think of them or look at the pictures.

Pascale

Okay, and talking a bit more about the fact continuity. So, you've already mentioned her feed is kind of consistent. Would you see this as a feature which makes this profile authentic?

Interviewee 5
Yes, yes, I would.

Pascale
So, let's say she posts always everything around the topic of sustainability. Could you think of something which could kind of destroy this continuity.

Interviewee 5
Something that actually happened?

Pascale
Or maybe something happened, which make you feel like, Hey, this is not what is her style normally.

Interviewee 5
I didn't mention that so far. Maybe I would unfollow her then, if, for example, if she posted some cooperation with a company or products that I don't really support. And I feel like okay, this is not right. Or it's too much commercial, you know, because she also posts some private stuff.

I didn't mention that. Like, also when she's, for example, feeling down or, or said, and that's something for me, that's also very authentic. Because I think in general, like Instagram with you always look to have beautiful pictures. But when you also sometimes post a picture where you were no makeup or write something like Okay, today, I'm not in a good mood. I think that's really authentic.

Pascale
Like the honesty.

Interviewee 5
Yeah, her profile is quite honest.

Pascale
With this honesty, and with all her theme, can you do you personally relate to this person?

Interviewee 5
Yes, I do. I think it's also because she's kind of the same age that I am and interested in the same topics. And I think actually, that she's a really cool person.

Pascale
So, you could imagine being friends with her.

Interviewee 5

Yes.

Pascale

Why? Can you think of some other aspects?

Interviewee 5

So, I think she's a nice person. And that's important to me, because I also follow some influencers that don't seem to be like nice people, but they show beautiful pictures, but I don't like to look at them so much. So yeah, I could imagine being friends with her.

Pascale

And so, you mentioned that entertainment is important for you, that she's funny, that you can really see that she's kind of passionate about the topic she's posting on. So, in this case, it was about sustainability. If we would talk about integrity…integrity, in this case, that for example, the collaboration partner she's using, they kind of fit to her sustainability topic. Is there anything you can think of?

Interviewee 5

Yeah, actually something quite impressing. I think, because one time she spoke in front of the European Parliament and she's, I mean, she's actually an influencer that posts a lot of fashion, you know, a lot of lifestyle stuff not so much political content she has some information but not so much. But one time she spoke in front of the European Parliament she made a story about it and I was quite impressed and I think this really makes her really authentic, because it's something so big and political that this integrity point that you asked about, yeah, it's really believable.

Pascale

In terms of this like collaboration with the European Parliament you can see her ethical behaviour and her moral values

Interviewee 5

I think they wouldn't invite her if she was not like really doing what she what she posts so yeah I think she spoke about like plastic use and food waste and stuff.

Pascale

And she's also sharing all of this with her followers. She has so you can be kind of be real life.

Interviewee 5

If you want you can do that. But she also I think she still has that story in her in her feed. Because I think it was probably the biggest thing that she has ever done, so yeah.

Pascale

Okay. And so, let's talk a bit more about her collaboration partners. We've talked about the European Parliament is the other brands she's collaborating with, or other partners? And what do you think about it? Does this kind of pushes her authenticity? Or is this rather harming?

Interviewee 5

She is, but I can't name you some. I know that she has her own brand that is called "ethical" and she does some t shirts, but I don't know what the collaboration company is. But she also posts clothing like sustainable clothes and she I think she always post the origin (i.e. label) like where the claws come from.

Pascale

And so, would you say she's really transparent when it comes to the collaboration partner.

Interviewee 5

Think so. Yes. Yeah.

Pascale

And this is also one important thing which would have for you regarding authenticity?

Interviewee 5

Yes, yes.

Pascale

How would you describe her engagement with the followers?
So, is she is she really trying to respond to every comment? Or how would you see the relation between her and the followers?

Interviewee 5

Yes, she is. She does a lot of stories like I told you and when we spoke about the honesty and she also in her stories, she also posts that comments that people make and she answers like for everybody. So, she writes down the question or she has some questionnaire like where you can say, where she asked about something like you do you like this better or that and you can click on it. So, I think she's quite responsive to everything. But I actually I mean my myself I don't really post, I don't ask questions so I don't know if she would answer but probably Yes. I think so.

Pascale

Even though she's so big already?

Interviewee 5

Yeah.

Pascale

Just one last question about the credibility of her feed. So, you you've mentioned that she's giving a lot of descriptions and gives a lot of information and I also see that she posts pictures just with statements. So, is this something which is important for you to perceive her as authentic? That she's giving so much information about everything?

Interviewee 5

Yes, I think that makes her authentic, but I wouldn't support the fact that just because of the posts a lot that the person is authentic.

Pascale
I meant like in regards of the information like of the quality of the content.

Interviewee 5
Yeah

Pascale
You know that in Instagram or like using Instagram professionally is let's say a new job, and maybe also she's a professional in influencer. How do you see reality and authenticity related? How would you describe the relation between these two terms?

Interviewee 5
I don't think that it's always related to each other on Instagram and I think with that specific influencer it's also not always the case, so I know if she posts a beautiful picture that is maybe not reality but she's authentic, because she sticks to her values and she is like the same in every post, so I can relate to that and I see some consistency and continuity, but I don't feel like it's okay this is her real life because you know she posts a lot of products she style and I mean it's not something that you are focused on like the whole day. But because she also posts like stuff when she said or depressed or not in a good mood, she also post that so I think that's quite realistic.

So, both of it but yeah

Pascale
So, you see both them you see both kind of terms in her feed

Interviewee 5
yeah that they are not always related but with this specific influencer like they are more related and with others I think

Pascale
Would you also say this is different and for different types of influencers?

Interviewee 5
Yeah, I think I think so I follow some ethical, you know, sustainable influences and they seem to be a bit more authentic, than like influences that just post fashion or beauty.

Pascale
Why do you think is that?

Interviewee 5
Because I think it's a bit deeper topic you know, it's something that you really have to in also in in your real life think about before you post it and I think when you I mean it's maybe not

the case with all the influences when you, but when you just post like pictures that like beautiful pictures it's nothing it's nothing deep or where you can think so about so much it maybe it doesn't come by heart so much and I think with this ethical topics or political topics it's something that's it's really important to you as a person.

Maybe it's also a trend you have that, too, but I don't feel like it's the case with that influencer because she is doing this for a long time.

Pascale
You basically kind of distinguish between different types, so like sustainable fashion and for some traveling and what about an influence like let's and sustainable influencer with 2 million followers? Is that also different to her maybe from the authenticity wise, or would you say if it's coming from kind of bottom of their heart, and it's still more authentic than others?

Interviewee 5
I don't know. I don't know that big influences that are sustainable, I think because it's a topic that's not I mean, it's a quite popular topic at the moment, but it's not that mainstream or big as other like fitness. So maybe it's something that comes by heart, but something that is also quite commercial. So, I don't think that all the influences that do sustainable stuff are, you know, really political or stick to their values. So, I know in general that it's a superficial app and that you can't really believe everything that is told you on Instagram, but that's fine for me. I know that I'm just doing it for fun and that's why you also kind of follow certain influencer? and everyone?

Pascale
We all the time talked about characteristics or drivers which let your influence appear authentic. If we will talk about your engagement with this influencer and how would you describe maybe in general or maybe with this certain influencer your engagement?

Interviewee 5
There's no big engagement. I sometimes like pictures, but I never comment on them. I don't feel the necessity, it's maybe it's not that important to me that I or I don't relate that much to that person that I have the feeling to tell them, you know, so if you look at the comments, you see a lot of people that write something like oh, you look beautiful or that food looks delicious and I think of that, but I would never write it. So, I think you have a lot of people like followers that are really supportive and I like, yeah, I like what you're doing and I think that's super cool and nice and I supported like 100%, but I don't engage with them. I just I don't know. I just look at the pictures at but the biggest thing I do is liking one. So yeah, not that deep.

Pascale
But is there for example, something that you've ever considered to buy or that you kind of like checked on something again online?

Interviewee 5
Yeah, I've never bought something but I look at the products or at the brands that are posted. So, for with this specific influencer, she has her own fashion brand. And I checked on that I

went to the online shop. I was looking how much is the T shirt, but I didn't think it was super beautiful. So, I didn't buy it, but maybe I would have bought it.

Pascale
Okay. So, you got kind of inspired?

Interviewee 5
Yeah. I got kind of inspired. And I look at the products.

Pascale
And would you for example, recommend products from that influencer or the influencer itself? Did this ever happen?

Interviewee 5
Yeah. Like the influence or the brands that she's posting?

Pascale
Like both?

Interviewee 5
Yes. I told some friends about her when we were talking about like influencers and I showed her to them.

Pascale
Why did you do that?

Interviewee 5
Because I like the content and I think that my friend was like, too. But I'm I was never like pushy like please follow that influencer I really like her she's super cool but I would say something like, yeah she's nice and she posts some different stuff, maybe you'd like her, too.

But nothing bigger than. So I never like showed people products that the influence was posting. I've never done that. But maybe I would, why not? I mean yeah if I talk with my friends about fashion then why not when it's related to an influencer. I don't see a difference to an online shop maybe.

Pascale
Okay so you would see it like buying inspiration, just another way let's say, you google something.

Interviewee 5
Yeah, I think it's the same.

Pascale
Okay. So, you said you share content with your friends, for example, you shared this influencer or you told them that you think your friends would like this influencer as well? Because the

influences kind of valuable for friend as well. Also in terms of uniqueness? Do you think that is because the influencer is more unique than others? Important enough to mention him or her for your friends? Do you think anything about this influencer is unique?

Interviewee 5
I think if you really like dig into the topic and really look for other influencers, you've would find hundreds of them. So, I don't think she's like super, super special unique but I think maybe…she posts everything in English.

So, she's quite International, but she's like, from Austria. So, there's some German stuff too. And I think for like a German speaking influencer, she's quite unique. But you also have some others. You also have some others sustainable. But I don't think that the content is extremely unique.

Pascale
But this doesn't it does need to be that unique to consider and you still consider her as authentic?

Interviewee 5
Yeah, right.

Pascale
You just mentioned her home country, Austria. Is it maybe you also characteristic, the heritage or the origin where she's from, which could be also in characteristics of authenticity?

Interviewee 5
Yeah, I think so. I mean, I'll also follow people from Australia or like New York but or Paris but I think yeah, it makes her authentic, too. Sometimes she's doing stories in English, sometimes in German. I think that's, that's nice. And maybe because it's like my, my birth language. I can relate to that. Yeah.

And by the way, she has also travelled to, like, places that I've travelled to. So, for example, Bali and yeah, so maybe that's something that makes her relatable, authentic to, you know, if she does the same things that I did, yeah.

Pascale
If we just quickly talk about, let's say, the engagement with you in the influence that again, do you think the product he's recommending of the recipes she's suggesting? Do you think it is more is credible for you, and you would kind of trust her recommendations? Because of her authenticity?

Interviewee 5
I would trust her recommendations but I'm also aware of the fact that what that, what you have said earlier, that it's a job and she gets some money for it. So, I know that she's probably posting stuff not be just because she believes in them. I think she would never like post something that is not sustainable, because it's it would make her like the contrast of credible.

Pascale

So, do you think it is very important for authenticity to have a fit between the brand and the influencer?

Interviewee 5

Yeah, I would trust her with the products, but I would not buy them just because she's posting them you know I would always take some research myself.

Pascale

Alright, one last question would be, what do you think about edited photos in terms of authenticity?

Interviewee 5

Yes, I'm aware of the fact that like on Instagram most of the photos are edited and I always see that and but I think it's all right, you know. I do that myself so I think it's nothing that is like with this specific influencer it's not something that makes her fake or not authentic and that's maybe also because of the fact that I told you that she sometimes post pictures that I where she wears no makeup and she says something like yeah I'm not in a good mood today. The pictures all have kind of the same look at like the same filters and also sometimes you just post text you always have the same colours, but that's something that makes it may be consistent and just beautiful to look at and I mean in general that's why we use Instagram we want to like see beautiful people beautiful pictures and that's fine for me, but I know that pictures are edited.

Pascale

Okay, and that doesn't kind of bother you?

Interviewee 5

Not that much. I don't think that she's like a person that uses too much filter or you know like uses really complicated product programs like photoshop to shape her body or something man she just has specific colors that she sticks to but not like faking the whole picture

Pascale

The last question. You talked about her stories where she's sharing a lot of her personal life as well. Does this matter to you in terms of authenticity?

Interviewee 5

On personal life that just the things that I told you that she's maybe when she's not in good mood sometimes and but not like her relationship? I think so. I I've never seen that she has posted her mother maybe, but I am not sure about that, so it's still a professional profile it's not too personal.

Pascale

And do you think do you rather like this? Or would you prefer that she posts, oh I'm eating this and I go on this street or do you think it's also kind of professional that she kind of hides

something or do you don't mind? And still think she has a nice profile. What are your thoughts on that?

Interviewee 5
Yeah I'm more interested in the things that she's posting professionally, so like the product she uses and I can relate her to her. But I'm not that much interested in her as a person, you know. You asked me about if I could imagine being friends with her and yes I could but I'm not that much interested in, you know, her family and stuff like really personal stuff. So maybe her flat. That's something I like to look at that's fine. But yeah, the more personal the more authenticity, of course. That's always the case I think.

Pascale
Maybe it depends. What you think?

Interviewee 5
I think yeah, I mean if you think that something is really personal, but with personal I mean honest. I think for example like you also have a lot of couple influencers and they post personal stuff, too. Sometimes post pictures in the bed where they are almost naked, but I don't think that makes them authentic. But yeah, if you if you share a lot of your personal life…it depends. It really depends. But with that influence, I think she's really authentic also with a personal stuff, but it's not too much and I prefer the professional stuff.

Pascale
Okay, thank you very much. Thank you.

Interviewee 5
Good luck. Good.

Interview 6
Ranim
Hey, Interviewee 6. Thanks for taking the time to be here for this interview. It will be a research about the perceived authenticity of influencers. Just starting up with just some warm up questions about your general involvement with Instagram and influencers. So, do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 6
Yes, daily.

Ranim
Okay. Do you follow influencers and if yes, why do you follow them?

Interviewee 6

I follow influencers mainly because of inspiration and also after time you get to know them so you're kind of interested in what they do and they show you the newest trends. So it's kind of primarily for inspiration, I would say.

Ranim
What is important for you when you decide to follow an influencer? In like what are the important factors?

Interviewee 6
I think it's important that they give me daily updates; like that they produce good content, authentic content that they stay natural, that I know that they don't want to make only business out of it, so that they're also interested in their followers. So, and actually also like that they produce good content in terms of they have a nice feed. Cuz I'm looking for inspiration and then I want to have a good feed and want to get inspired by the pictures, the outfits, the products.

Ranim
Okay, so you look on the one side into the personality of the person but also into the content that he or she produces'?

Interviewee 6
Yeah.

Ranim
Okay, nice so you actually mentioned that being natural and being authentic is important aspect to you. Like, you said authenticity matters to you. Why does authenticity matter to you?

Interviewee 6
To me, I like looking at them for inspiration, but also for example for recommendations. I really want them to present something or show me or inform me about something that they perceive as really like good. So that I don't want them to sell me something that they get a lot of money for and then I buy the product and I'm disappointed. So I really want them to be authentic in the sense that they provide me the right information. And also being authentic in terms of being close to my own personality, probably, so sometimes you also feel like, oh they have the same hobbies, they have the same interests - so to me that's also authentic. That they kind of have a Down to Earth personality or like a personality that is reachable.

Ranim
Okay, so something that you can relate or identify with?

Interviewee 6
Oh, yeah, definitely.

Ranim

Okay, nice we will dig deeper into these drivers of authenticity for you, and a little bit, but maybe just to make it more tangible.. Can you show me an influencer that you consider authentic?

Interviewee 6
Yeah. So, I'm following this one, it's called fashioncarpet. Yes, and I'm actually following her since I think four or five years now.

And I think she's super authentic because she always has super good content the always sticks with. She never like goes with trends, but she always sticks with aspects of her life that she's identifying with, which I really like. And I also feel like she's still using her blog, and not only Instagram. She really wants to be honest and really puts lots of efforts in it. So you really can see that it's her main job and really works for her followers.

Ranim
Okay, nice so you mentioned that putting a lot of effort into it kind of makes her more authentic. So, is it for you important that this person is really passionate, passionate about what he or she is doing?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, definitely. I think authenticity on Instagram is also, when they consider themselves as influencers. It's really important that they have the skills of like providing the right content. So sometimes for example content is, you feel that content is produced like in a shitty way, because it's just posted to be in the feed. But someone that's like really creating content themselves and it's good content, then, to me that's authentic because they really consider that as primary their job. I mean they also produce the content for their followers. I'm following her for example because she always asks what do you want to hear, what are the topics that interest you, what should I talk about and the next phase. So, she always really like requests from her followers what we want, and then she provides the content.

Ranim
So the fact that she actually speaks directly with her followers makes her more authentic?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, and also sometimes when you message her she replies back, which is also like a metric for me of authenticity. So that she's really engaging and not only pretending to engage but she really also replies and interacts.

Ranim
Okay. Nice. And also you said that personality is important for you and your perception of authenticity. So is it important for you as well, that this person talks about like, emotions and more about her personal life? Does it affect the authenticity? Or how do you feel about this relationship?

Interviewee 6

I don't think that she has to like share super much of her personal life. So for example I don't necessarily need to know from the virtual person that I'm following if it's her mother's birthday, for example. So I'm actually not super obsessed or interested in really personal stuff, because I still I really consider it as like a channel of information. So I'm not super interested in that. But of course there's some influencers, that are also super authentic because they talk about lots of different emotions, but most of the time to meet these other influencers who really have a topical story they want to tell, and they engage over that with their with their followers, but normally I don't, I don't.

Ranim
So do you think it differs also between the type of influencers, if focuses on lifestyle, fashion, food …?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, exactly, yeah.

Ranim
Okay, and now turning to the aspect of credibility. Is credibility in general like a factor for you when it comes to how authentic this influencer seems to you? [**Interviewee 6** looks confused] In general about their posts, maybe thinking about also sponsored posts, saying their opinions…?

Interviewee 6
I actually think that even with sponsored post, credibility is super important when it comes to authenticity because it's I think it's good to provide the message that they don't engage with everything. So, some influencers, for example, they really have like one area – "I only buy these kind of products for example, or only buy I don't know let's call it fair trade products; so I only work together with these brands" and then that's for me that's credible and that makes them authentic..

But I mean, I think the fact that on Instagram, you don't always know… I mean they of course they receive the money and I think credibility also has to rise because they have to mark for example that it's sponsored, so you can build your own opinion towards okay is it not credible, or not. But in general, I think if you have a bond to the influencer credibility is really important for authenticity.

Ranim
Yeah, so it's important that they partner up with brands that you feel fit with influencer?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, yeah. So if, for example, if a food influence or like food blogger, who's normally providing recipes for food would now collaborate with I don't know, a car manufacturer or something or with like a vacuum cleaner company or something or all of a sudden would provide hair products. To me that's not credible anymore and also then not authentic. Yeah.

Ranimm

Okay, so you don't think that like let's say a fashion blogger could all of a sudden promote maybe some food brand. Is that less authentic, or do you think that there could be ways to make it authentic?

Interviewee 6
So in the beginning it's to me a bit inauthentic. But if the person would share her passion for food, or for special food, and you know about it - but that's again the thing was personal life, you know that this person loves eating pasta and all of a sudden she's like, collaborating Barilla pasta or something, then I think there are like small nodes that have to become like connected to make it authentic.

Ranim
Yeah. Nice. Also in terms of credibility, how do you feel about the editing of photos for example, sr like using colors and just really changing aspects of the photography… does this somehow influence your perception of authenticity?

Interviewee 6
No, no, I would say, editing pictures to me. It's kind of the art or the content creation again. And that makes it authentic so I would not say that an influencer is less authentic because she's editing more pictures or edit more pictures than others… That's for me that's not a topic for authenticity.

Ranim
And also, again, talking about consistency. You said okay consistency off collaborations, but maybe also, let's say consistency of style is that something that you consider as a factor? Like in having a consistent feed for example.

Interviewee 6
Yeah, I think, in general, yes. So switching around, I think that's the perception when you're on the Instagram feed that you want to have like to structure. And also that helps actually the authenticity because then it's easier to remember them to like make a mark on them. Okay this is this person, that's like their unique selling point kind of your signature something. And I think that It makes it authentic when you know that the person not only has like one topic but also like her, her signature on the picture.

But I also don't mind if this consistency changes and then stays new within a new range of consistency. So if there is a major switch or something that does makes it authentic. Yeah, because the person also changes and I think that even adds on to that - that they also sometimes need to change.

Ranim
Okay. Nice. And you said that It's also like a signature thing when they have a certain style. So how important is it that for you for authenticity that it's something original. that this influencer is different from the rest?

Interviewee 6

I mean being super different is also difficult today since are abroad, but I just think in the long term it just makes followers more loyal, if they are consistent.

Ranim

Would that be with their with their feed or maybe also thinking in terms of instance stories?

Interviewee 6

Yeah, I think when you're talking about stories, yeah of course because some people might always talk on a Sunday and talk about a topic.

But that's to me more content creation again and doesn't have to do some lot with authenticity.

Ranim

Okay, and nice and then maybe in this regard, also that we talked about instastories. Do you make any differences in your perceptions when you look into the instastory or the feed, or is it like the same for you?

Interviewee 6

I enjoy looking more into the feed, because there you can like pick the things you like and you really want to see, or like that interests you and if you're then good and providing good pictures you can sometimes easily see or you can always refer back. For example, if their recommendations or inspirations you can pin them you can refer back and see was that or is that a restaurant recommendation I have to go there. And with stories, I mean they're gone after some time, and to me I don't enjoy watching, like, if it's an interesting topic or if it's a topic, or if I know that this influencer is like posting this on that time that I always go there and watch it, probably, but I would not necessarily like always watch their stories, because it's too much of not super relevant content to me.

Ranim

Okay, okay. And does the story then. So you don't really consider it as a source of authenticity?

Interviewee 6

It's still a source of authenticity. Like if I would choose between the two I will choose the feed more as the source of authenticity. Because you see the person kind of talking immediately to you. And, it is authentic definitely. And I also feel like, after a time it was necessary that you can see them talking to you.

Ranim

Why?

Interviewee 6

Because it is a more personal touch. When you think about the feeds that are like edited and they're like perfect pictures, then it's really not relatable. But if you see them when they're at home or when they're not perfectly dressed or like in a perfect setting, then it's a down to

earth like kind of puts it down to earth again and then you can easily relate to them and then and that makes them authentic.

Ranim
Yeah. Okay. So, in general, the fact that the feed is edited and it's kind of arranged and posed doesn't really contradict the idea of authenticity for you?

Interviewee 6
No. No.

Ranim
Why?

Interviewee 6
Because it's still the same person. And that makes the influencer, like that would be different with the brand for example, because the brand itself cannot talk to you kinda and authenticity I mean it's also built up from this personal interaction.

And you have the option to like write something about a post is also again interaction. So for me, these are two same streams.

Ranim
Okay so you, you also look into the captions?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, yeah, yeah so I also read the captions and sometimes they say something about it, or what that was, or they talk about topics, and that's like the personal touch. I think if they would just post something without writing something, then it's inspiration, but not like a super authentic bond with your followers.

Ranim
All right. Do you make differences in your authenticity perception, when it comes to different types of influencers? Yeah, so we're thinking about lifestyle or food or photography. And do you expect like different levels of authenticity or rate them differently?

Interviewee 6
I think authenticity of influencers, like how you perceive them as authentic, really depends on your own interest and your own your own lifestyle, kind of. Because you want to have them as authentic as possible when it covers something that really interests you. And if for example, if I follow someone who was like super sporty, then it's more a source of motivation for me. This person does not have to be super authentic. Yeah, cuz the reason for me to follow us only my motivation. Yeah, so I just want to look at it but it's not that I think that it's super authentic.

And I feel like an influencer has to be authentic when you really want to have like a long term kind of bond with them, because if you feel they are authentic, you trust them in buying products for example or beauty products, creams. I don't know, different stuff that you really

enjoy because you think that they are authentic in recommending it. But in areas where I don't need something to be recommended like environmental factor I don't need them to recommend me a car, then they don't have to be authentic.

Ranim
OK, so the importance of authenticity kind of depends on the goal you want to get out of that influencer?

Interviewee 6
Yeah.

Ranim
Nice and interesting. And also you talked about brands on Instagram. Do you think that influencers are more or less authentic than let's say brands or models for example?

Interviewee 6
I think influencers, for example, are more authentic than brands. Brand can be authentic but sometimes you miss the face behind. Models can be authentic. Models can be super authentic and showing their life and showing that it's not only the pictures that they have and that will also be to me authentic. Okay, so I don't differ that but I think it's difficult to... I mean brands can also be super authentic but it's more difficult I would say, because you always know that they want to sell you something, in particular.

Ranim
So, good point. Would you actually rate, now that we talked about the perceived authenticity of influencers, would you rate it differently than if you would rate a normal person or a friend in terms of authenticity? Do you look at other factors?

Interviewee 6
I think you're always more critical if you know that people get money for what they tell you. So, I mean, they also become advertising channels.

So of course you always rate them differently and you also kind of try to be very critical. But if over a long time you for example, follow their advice, and you think that "oh it's a really good advice that helped me", then you get the bond, then you consider them as authentic because you know they really only recommend you something when they really think it's good. And then, in the long term, I would say, I would always follow them. I am more keen on buying stuff that they buy if I have a good connection with them.

Ranim
Yeah, so there is exists a general scepticism about the authenticity of influencers, but once you've established trust with them, then you may be see them more as a friend also?

Interviewee 6

I would never see them as friends. To me that's too distant, because I never interacted with them and even if I would talk to them, they're still not friends.I wouldn't say that.

Ranim
Okay. Nice. And, again, flowing into your perception of authenticity. How do you feel about integrity? Like, for example, that this influencer stands up to the, it's like political stance or morals, or it's just act ethical in general?

Interviewee 6
I think it's always good, but being authentic…showing integrity to me as always like, they really have to be convinced and then they really have to be consistent in doing it, because I think lots of people, lots of influencers as just are doing it for the sake of saying that they do it. So if they're consistent in doing this and you see that through their entire life they're doing it, then that's to me authentic but like, integrity, in general, like, I don't feel like they have to show lots of integrity..

Ranim
All right, and what are the cues that you take into consideration when making up your mind about the authenticity of the influencer? So we talked about the feed, Instastory and the caption… do maybe consider also other factors? Inside Instagram maybe also outside of Instagram?

Interviewee 6
I think I would also like consider locality, for example. Can I for example, can I buy the things in my own country. I follow most of the things… like most of the influences I follow are from Germany for example, because then I can really relate. And to, I can barely relate to someone who lives in a completely different country, with completely different lifestyle. So I can actually pretty relate to them. Or you see the cities, you know, or you get recommendations of stores. So locality is one aspect.

And then of course also their reach. Because if others follow them. Then you also want to follow them because there must be something interesting about the person that everyone is following them.

Ranim
Okay, nice. Interesting. And what do you feel about when this influencer like hangs out with other influencers, or with other people or if they show their family or their friends? Does this somehow affect your perception of their authenticity or it doesn't really matter to you?

Interviewee 6
I would say it does not really matter. Like it would be strange if they would never show their friends. But they don't have to hang out with special people can come authentic to me. Yeah.

Ranim
And you talked about fashioncarpet who has a blog and other platforms as well. Is this also playing into the perceived authenticity or is just like adding more information that you need?

Interviewee 6

I think it does not add to authenticity. Because she can also just use Instagram and still be authentic. Yeah.

Ranim

All right. And we already talked a little bit about the fact that they have a commercial interest in what they're doing. But do you think that this is in conflict with their authenticity?

Interviewee 6

No, I wouldn't say so, because I think it just became an industry, like TV advertisement and became a new channel of advertisement and I think if you engage in these things you have to be aware that it exists. Yeah, but it doesn't harm authenticity.

Ranim

Okay. Nice, nice. Alright cool then, now that we have talked about your perception of in the authenticity of influencers and what kind of things you look at, let's see how this impacts you. Like, for example, talking again about fashioncarpet, do you engage with her? Like do you comment, like a post…

Interviewee 6

Sometimes I messaged her the past, when I liked something that she wore and I didn't know where to find that I messaged her. Then she super quickly messaged me back you can buy it here. Or once I went to a flea market of her and bought something from her. I saw her in person and in that sense I interact, but I'm not like super crazy about it.

Ranim

But do you feel like you are more willing to interact with her because she's authentic then maybe another another influencer?

Interviewee 6

Yeah definitely. And if the influencer is not authentic. I also don't need to connect with a person at all. I don't have intentions.

Ranim

So you feel like you have some sort of like emotional bond or relationship with her somehow?

Interviewee 6

Yeah, I would say over time, because I mean you know a lot about the person by now and you even get to know a bit about how she lives where she moved, how her apartment looks like, I don't know these things and then you kind of build a bond I would said

Ranim

So her talking about her life, and like showing insights into her life, kind of, lets you emotionally connect to her?

Interviewee 6

Emotionally would be a bit too far.

Ranim
… but you develop more trust?

Interviewee 6
 Yeah, more trust. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ranim
Okay. And do you also sometimes talk about this influencer with your friend, or with someone?

Interviewee 6
No, I would say I just keep that for myself. Also because it's not that much part of my life.

Ranim
But maybe thinking online, do you sometimes maybe share a photo that she posted with a friend and say "Hey, look at this" or tell people, "hey, go follow her"

Interviewee 6
Yea true sometimes when there's like something super interesting or like a product that I like or like my friend was looking for, then I will share with my friends and say look at this, for example, that I would do.

Ranim
Okay, so you kind of trust, or you know trust your friends with know that if they said… ehh I don't know how to phrase that

Interviewee 6
Yeah, I have so much trust in her that I would even recommend it to my friends

Ranim
Yeah exactly, that's what I was going for.
And, and, after like having looked at her profile or a story or anything. How do you feel?

Interviewee 6
Neutral, neutral.

Ranim
You don't feel inspired or maybe…

Interviewee 6
Sometimes I feel entertained, but it's not, I'm not thinking about it the whole day. Because Instagram is so fast. You get so many exposure to it. So, you tend to forget things super quick. If there's something that you really were looking for that really interests you, then I would probably think about it or Google it, or click on it and then I get referred to the website and

then I probably might be more engaged with her in that sense but I normally I would forget about it soon.

Ranim
Okay, so, yeah, and thinking in terms of purchase intention… so if she recommends a product, would you would you believe her and then make you more likely to actually buy this product?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, for example once she had like a hair product, and she had the same problem with dry hair like I had, and then she recommended it and I actually bought it.

Ranim
Okay so you would follow her recommendations more than compared to other influencers?

Interviewee 6
Yea I follow her purchase recommendations and my intentions are high. But I also feel like there's always a barrier of price for example. So, when she would recommend something for like 1000 euros of course the barrier to purchase is higher than for products that are not like super risky or something. Yeah.

Ranim
Yeah. And also one thing that was mentioned. When talking about like vouchers, like in many collaborations they even offer like some discount vouchers. Does that somehow compensate for less authenticity - let's say you have an influencer that you don't really find that authentic, but this one offers you a discount code would that make you more likely to purchase it or does it still need to be from an from influencer that you've actually find authentic?

Interviewee 6
If the influencer is not authentic, but still offers vouchers, I would still not do it.
Because also I would feel like I'm supporting that inauthentic influencer by clicking on it and then she gets the revenue on that so I would not do that.

Ranim
Okay, so you can. So you're talking about support, so you feel like you want to support for example fashioncarpet?

Interviewee 6
Yeah. For example, because I mean they really influence in the sense of they put effort in it and then they really want to provide good good information content and if there would be someone who just earns the money for like distributing vouchers for me that super inauthentic and I also would not support that.

Ranim
Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So you're quite loyal to fashioncarpet?

Interviewee 6

Yea.

Ranim
All right. And I think we are quite good. And maybe in general, do you have any like final remarks about authenticity in terms of influencers or something that comes to your mind?

Interviewee 6
I think it gets really difficult for influencers to build, or to provide authenticity, because there's just like such an overflow of influencers, and then everyone is basically most of the time doing the same. Yeah, so it's really difficult to step out of the entire range of influencers and build your own character, or like communicate your own personality or for what you stand. So I think it's really difficult nowadays.

And if you manage to be authentic, it's easier, or like you bond, you engage your followers, even more. If you built that up once.

Ranmim
Yeah. But, in that sense, what do you think what could influencer do to be perceived more as authentic?

Interviewee 6
I think it's really necessary to listen more to the followers, because, I mean, if they want to be influencers they also kind of, they see it nowadays as business, and then you have to reply to your like you have to answer your customers, kind of, because we are kind of the customer. You have to follow the demands kind of.

Ranim
And would you also maybe say that if they would be more transparent about the process of their sponsorships, would that help with the authenticity as well? Like say maybe how the process works like "okay they approached me and I got to choose some products"; like just provide more details of the behind the scenes of their work as a blogger?

Interviewee 6
Yeah, probably. I mean, I think it would actually not help if they for example, talk about how much they get, because I think that's always like a weak point. Because lots of people don't even know how much they get, and it's still such a bubble so that's their assets so people might think they're more authentic, if people would more know how much they probably might get. It is huge business for them to sell you the product that's something else. But in general, like yeah transparency, always makes authentic.

Ranim
Alrighty then. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you, this was it.

Interview 7
Ranim

Hey Interviewee 7, thanks for taking the time to be here for this interview. So, as I already told you, our research is about the authenticity of influencers. So, let's just jump right in. So, the first questions are just some warm up questions about your general involvement with Instagram and influencers. So, do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 7
Yes, I do. Many times, per day. Probably like 3-5 times at least.

Ranim
Okay nice and do you follow influences and if yes, why?

Interviewee 7
Yes I do follow influencers because of different reasons. Some of them I'm interested in what they're doing and some of them because maybe what they're doing. Also, because they sometimes even like presenting products but more like tech influencers but not more like less like styling and stuff like that.

Ranim
Okay. So why should get like information out of them? Like technology?

Interviewee 7
Yeah, for certain topics like cooking, for example.

Ranim
Cooking as well. Nice and what is important for you, when you decide to follow an influencer? What kind of things do you look at?

Interviewee 7
I think at the beginning, it was just like, who is speaking who's popular, but now it's get kind of boring because everybody looks the same and nice. So there has to be something different. But it's hard to find. So usually, I'm just browsing through Instagram. Sometimes I like somebody and I'm looking for it. And I was like okay, he has something different, then it will follow him. And sometimes because I knew that he makes good reviews, or he's like, for example, is an interesting cooker. I watched a documentary about him or something that I'm interested in.

Ranim
Okay. And when you say different, different in what terms?

Interviewee 7
Like it's hard to describe it, but it's just that he has his own style. And what he's doing is styling if it's how he is doing his photo, posting stories, like maybe putting much more effort into that. So I think that's about different because there's so many out there will have like, nice pictures but they're all look the same. Because always kind of maybe a guy in a leather jacket and a chino, you know, and then it's a story about how he's going to the gym and how is eating clean. There has also to be something personal. So, it's hard to describe it.

Ranim

No, I understand. Definitely. So, you mentioned this idea of originality maybe as one aspect that matters to you and does authenticity also matter to you?

Interviewee 7

Yeah, I think so. Because I also unfollwoed a lot of influencer because they got annoying and they just posted products and their stories which are totally shit but a knew they just did it because they have to do it. And so when it gets too annoying and I feel like that just try to sell out their follower I will probably unfollow them and also did it in the past

Ranim

What is the authentic to you in terms of influencers?

Interviewee 7

I think as long as like the products they presenting kind of fit into their personality and also what they're doing Instagram it's fine. I think it's hard to say but with clothes because you just can give an objective review by just looking at them and say yeah they fit, but every other product if it's I don't know if fitness tea or some supplements they just get them and they just put them out of their followers, without even reviewing them it's just about hey, I got it, I have to show you that, I have no idea if it's really good but look at it, it looks nice probably, it's good yeah, that's for me no authenticity.

So that's what I'm more looking for. If people want to present me something it should at least think about it and maybe tested it. If they don't do it it's just about getting the money so.

Ranim

So, do you think that the product that they're promoting should fit with the influencer?

Interviewee 7

Yeah, definitely as well and also they review it properly not only showing it immediately when they get it.

Ranim

And in this, you're talking about already sponsorships. Do you think though that let's say a photography influencer can also authentically promote something out of his reach, like let's say some fashion related product? Or do you think they should stay within the expertise to remain the authenticity?

Interviewee 7

I think it always depends on the product but they of course they have to try it out like if they really into that and they say yeah, I'm you know, more for my photos. But actually now I am also more into fashion and trying stuff out just totally acceptable because how should they change if they're not allowed to do it but if it's just like yesterday I got clothes yesterday I got

I don't know, tea and now I get a hairdryer or something. It's just about products. Not about any kind of niche you want to go in there. It's just so.

Ranim
Yeah. So, do you think it needs to be credible that it fits with him definitely?

Interviewee 7
Yeah.

Ranim
Okay and can you maybe show me one authentic influencer. You can take your time think about it. Do you have someone who you think he's very authentic?

Interviewee 7
Yeah like it depends for example. I don't know his name right now he's like he's for doing tech in Germany. I think it's called Felix bar.

Ranim
Can you show me?

Interviewee 7
He's not doing that much on Instagram but Youtube, but I also follow somebody on Instagram who is called Frank Adams. He's not even that big but he is making films. I am not even interested in doing that but it's just doing it in his own personal style that I really into that and he's really testing stuff for laugh like roughly and like I believe in what he's saying. And that's the thing and who else? Let me check.

Ranim
Let's maybe stick with this guy. Just to have like a base or you can also think in terms of another authentic influencer but maybe let's stick for this one. So why is this influencer authentic to you? You have already said like he's a bit different.

But yeah, like when he's sometimes previewed difference stuff than film tech, and when he is doing that he does it in his own personal way and he puts a lot of effort into his videos and into his stories.

Interviewee 7
That you believe him that he's really into that stuff. And he's just honest about his opinion, he is just saying, I got something it looks nice. But he's like, no, that's shit or no, that's really good, but it has this and advantage or disadvantage. So I just believe him because he's just, he has a balanced opinion, probably. And it seems that he is really into that stuff and testing it right, not right away, but takes some time before he wants to make a video about it. Yeah. And he's also kind of honest, in this process, how is maybe now reviewing something totally different. But he is usually not in this kind of scope.

Ranim

Nice. So, credibility is a really big aspect for you in terms of authenticity. And you mentioned now his videos and Instastories. So, do you differentiate between, like, your perception of the authenticity between the Instastories and the feed, for example?

Interviewee 7
Yeah, I think it changed a lot last year's like, in the beginning there was no Instastories. So it was as about the pictures. And for me, for example, I never really read the description in the pictures, but with the stories it changed, because now he presents it more into his stories, into the picture anymore. And now there, you can easily see if somebody is putting effort in there. Because usually, if in a story, they just say, Hi, I got this here and it's fine. But he's like, he's even cutting some of his Instastories. So he puts a lot of effort in there. So it's much more enjoyable to watch them.

Ranim
Yeah. And you mentioned a lot that he's putting a lot of effort into it. So, is it for you important that this person has like a passionate about it that he's intrinsically motivated?

Interviewee 7
Yeah.

Ranim
Does it make it more authentic?

Interviewee 7
That's why because you can be into anything and can change it as long as you have to believe he is really into it.

Ranim
Would you say that you could, like, identify with this person? Or that you can somehow relate to him?

Interviewee 7
In some way, yeah, but not all of them. But in some ways, definitely yes.

Ranim
And how do you make up your mind about it? Like, what does it tell you? Like, how do you identify with this person? What do you look at?

Interviewee 7
I think something which is really important for me on Instagram is somebody takes himself not too serious and also everything is doing because then it's most of the time much more honest and that's what he's doing. So that's a big point. And that makes maybe also a big point regarding sympathy. What else? He's a little bit edgy, probably, I would say, that also makes it more like trustworthy, kind of like, he wouldn't act like that, if he doesn't really feel like it, so he is sometimes not perfect. And that's maybe also a good point.

Ranim

So he's going against the mainstream a little bit.

Interviewee 7

Definitely.

Ranim

And you said that he's sometimes doing something out of his normal thingy. So I don't remember exactly what you said. But it made me think of his private life. Is it important for you that he somehow involves like his private life or talks about his feelings and most of his life in his stories? Does it make it more authentic to you?

Interviewee 7

Yeah, I think so. Because he has an interesting story, because, you know, I think he's just traveling, so he doesn't even have a real home anymore. But that's interesting, then, but it always depends how his personal life is. Right now he has like an interesting progess in his life I maybe want to follow and it makes total sense. But I don't know how much I want to know about his daily business. If it's just yes, no, but it always depends. Because if you can relate to it, and it can always be interesting to have is like daily life and listening to that and watching that. So it's always like, I cannot say if I like more this way or this way. But it is a little bit of both, probably.

Ranim

So for you can still see him as an authentic personal influencer, even if you wouldn't, like talk about his feelings or emotions or like the behind the scenes.

Interviewee 7

It depends a little bit of what he's doing. But the thing is, I maybe got connected, because he talked about that stuff. So, I probably would say, Yeah, I do. Because know I trust him. Because I saw it before. Maybe now, I would say you don't need it anymore. I think it's a good connector, a starting point that you have somebody like that talked about emotions, because it shows that he's kind of honest on the camera.

Ranim

And maybe talking about continuity, again, just like continuity and important aspect for you, when you consider the authenticity of that person?

Interviewee 7

Not at all, because it depends, like, it could be good or bad, because if he shows me every day a new product, I wouldn't believe him anymore. So, I would say it actually has a negative relationship if it's too much.

Ranim

If it's too much of the same?

Interviewee 7

If he's showing me every day, new test, for example, or new clothes, I wouldn't believe him anymore. Because that's not how somebody would test or like, try something out an, every day, so.

I would say that. It's nothing I would really look for. Because I will just browse my Instagram and if I see something new, I'm looking at that but it's not like I'm waiting for something new. So, it's not that important for me.

Ranim
Okay. And what about the type of collaboration partners and him actually labelling that this is a sponsored partnership set important for you?

Interviewee 7
Yeah, most of the times that is.

Ranim
Yeah, so it's it makes them more like authentic as a person if he labels like, this I was paid for?

Interviewee 7
Yeah, makes it more credible because I think sometimes he or for example that reviews he got not paid for. And sometimes he is doing something he got paid for. And just to know, the difference makes it even more credible because I can see there's no difference actually, he's always kind of honest. Okay. It's also important that you know, what is paid and what is not because then you can actually compare

Ranim
Yeah, that's true. So, as it for you also important that he has unpaid the posts as well?

Interviewee 7
Yeah, yeah.

Ranim
Okay. And also, maybe thinking in terms of credibility. What do you think about the editing of photos? Is that something that contradicts may authenticity?

Interviewee 7
Not really because I know it that they edit. I'm over the age where I think however, I have to aim for something. So, for example, for styling clothing. It's not like the editing process could change my opinion about what he's wearing and stuff like yeah, it just makes it more like attractive for model and it looks better, but it's nothing I would say, it makes it more fake.

Ranim
Ok, ok. Nice. And do you perceive an influencer as more authentic if he engages with his community or doesn't that really play a role?

Interviewee 7

I think that's really important. Because it's like, then I can see if it's like, just part of a community where he wants to tell and share a story, or somebody who sees its followers and as his clients or his ways of earning money. So yeah, I think that's really important, because that's how we can see probably the best.

Ranim
And what would you say? How, how should you engage with the community?

Interviewee 7
Probably by answering comments, and also kind of referring to questions in his videos. On his Instagram story and his pots just kind of, yeah, he thinks about what is communities is saying or asking or worried about?

Ranim
Yeah. Now, going on to another big topic: integrity. So how important is that for you. Also, in terms of, okay, the person provides actual information, tells the sources and it's like, maintains a sort of integrity when he posts a photo?

Interviewee 7
That's really important, I guess, and I think it goes in the same line as before because if he's honest, and he's doing something wrong, or if that doing something bad, and he's saying that. That is for me a good point, because then I'm like, No, okay, he's, he's just transparent with his sharing his product or whatever. So it doesn't really change my kind of consumption of Instagram. But if I'm really into this stuff he's presenting then it's really important. Probably, yeah. For so if I want to buy stuff he's kind of recommending, it's really important. It makes them more trustworthy, and then you can make sure that it's actually a good product.

Ranim
And you already talked about that you follow someone if he's a bit more different, more original. Can you maybe, does that make this person also more authentic?

Interviewee 7
Not really. Like it's just for the first click probably, I would say I would follow him. Because

I am not an Instagrammer and I am not really thinking about who I am following. But at some point, I was like, I just see some influencers on my stories and on my feed is boring, like, I don't even see my friends anymore. So, I deleted a lot of them and I deleted them based on that kind of stuff. So it takes some time to say, yeah he is maybe different or he brings something different on the table every day I am most of the time interested in, so it's just usually random clicks. And then over time, you have get a feeling it's still interesting for you or not. So it's hard to describe more concrete.

Ranim
Yeah. All right. And are there other things you would look up when you make up your mind about this person? Is it for you, for example, important that with what kind of persons he like,

hangs out with in his private life, or what kind of persons he shows in this story, or in his feed does this have some effect on the perceived authenticity?

Interviewee 7
I guess I wouldn't say in a good way, I couldn't recall anything like that. But probably in the other way, if there's something really if it's kind of persons with believes I wouldn't somebody our new he's kind of the wrong way or is kind of corrupt or an asshole, those kind of things, I would probably stop and say, Okay, this doesn't look good for him. Maybe change my opinion, but in a good way. I didn't. I couldn't recall any. Maybe I would say it was like, there was a Yeah, okay, you hang out with this guy and now I like you even more.

I'm not sure.

Ranim
Yeah. So it's more like one way into the negative way? Yeah, cool. Interesting.

Okay. So some of our respondents, they said that the concept of influencers is generally in conflict with authenticity, because they have like this, they follow this commercial interest as well. How do you feel about the statement? Do you agree, disagree?

Interviewee 7
And I think it's kind of true, because I was starting using the internet, there are blogs where people will were reviewing products and stuff for free. So they just did it because they were into it. But now you don't have this kind of clear distinction between what is reviewed because he believes in that or he wants to share something, what is reviewed because it gets money from that. And based on that, it's kind of too many misleading information, because there are too many influencers doing it just for the money. So of course, there's this kind of group where it's true that you can say that being if you're like, driven by money, that you can give, like objective reviews, or can talk about objectively, but the other hand for some people who did it before, for example, they use the money to just and do what they always wanted to do, and do it just better. So it can go both ways. But yeah, I think it doesn't really help that much to make it more authentic, because of the money they get. But there are also good example who are doing it good. Like where it can work.

Ranim
Okay, so where they can sponsor or promotes the stuff, commercially, but they do it in authentic way?

Interviewee 7
Because based on this they can get the money, they can get more options, they can do more stuff, like would maybe even control it anymore. So it's just one way I can like, which can support them to do their stuff and achieve even more, so I'm fine with that because it gives them more opportunities.

Ranim

Okay, that's interesting. So basically, the fact that they getting sponsored helps them to follow their passion and get better at it and more authentic with it?

Interviewee 7
Yes, like for example, now he can go for traveling to Japan, maybe based on the money he got for some review, I'm not interested in but anything do that I'm fine with that, because now he can do nice videos of Japan, for example.

Ranim
Okay, nice. Cool. And in that sense, also, do you differentiate between like smaller influencers and bigger influencers? Do you see a strict relationship between the authenticity and size of the following?

Interviewee 7
It depends, because usually, if the smaller ones are still unprofessional, it seems more raw and more honest, but even some smaller influencers already so professional that you don't see any difference. So it always depends on the case. But you can see based on their experience and how they handle the pictures and the videos that they are more trustworthy, and more honest because they seem more unprofessional not because they are more honest, I don't know.

Ranim
Okay. Okay. Interesting. And so, in that sense you would not say that like following this as a profession means it's not authentic?

Interviewee 7
There are both ways. Where I would say yeah, you know, one level where you do it just so rapidly that I wouldn't believe you anymore because it's just part of your routine kind of and I want to select millions of followers and we still every time you think they do it, like with purpose and really think about it, I don't wanna give like a general conclusion on that but I think based on the professionalism of their pictures and also have to Instagram stories and seems always kind of as if they have a routine and doing it every day, and then lose kind of the authenticity because it seems like they do it every day

Ranim
And these kind of influencers, what do you think, what could they do to show, Hey, this is still authentic, this is me, this is how I work. So how could they do something about it? And you should share my information.

Interviewee 7
Yeah, I think maybe just break out of this kind of routine where they really kind of expect the kind of content that they deliver every day. So maybe instead of saying, Yeah, I did, I had breakfast, I went to gym, I had lunch, and then whatever. Just maybe today I overslept totally and now I'm just hanging in my bed, didn't even put makeup that would just be honest. Or just don't post anything for like two days because there was nothing interesting would be kind of honest. And with products it is the same, if they get so many clothes every day and say the

second hundred time, that's the perfect leather jacket. It's kind of non-authentic. So when they would say, I don't like the stuff, I don't know why they send it to me?

Ranim

Okay. So kind of involving more like the everyday struggles every person goes through. Like today, I woke up overslept, so more…

Interviewee 7

The good and the bad things because they show both, not just, trying to pretend it's kind of perfect life, the perfect product, so everything is good.

Ranim

Yeah, kind of maybe also making fun of themselves? Not taking it too seriously? And maybe also in that sense, is it for you also important that this person also has like, maybe another job in like, the real life next to it?

Interviewee 7

it can like, it makes him maybe, maybe. Because sometimes I cannot relate to the people who are annoyed of staying at the airport and having to wait for the airplane 200 times. I am also annoyed about that. I'm like, Yeah, sorry for that. But it's, it's just annoying. So maybe would unfollow them. But I wouldn't maybe it wouldn't change anything about their authenticity. But yes. Just gets annoying sometimes because they just talk about their maybe if it could…I'm pretty sure it's a kind of hard profession if you do that. But I cannot relate to that.

Ranim

To both problems. Yeah. Nice. And do you think influencers are more or less authentic than brands or models, let's say on Instagram?

Interviewee 7

I think this is all on the same level because all of them are profit oriented. So they have to show the best possible outcome. So they all have to the same motives most of times, but unless, with the like, the influencers there is a certain part who are doing this because its their hobby.

…But the other two are just professions. And like a company and a woman's job to be a or whatever. Yeah, I would say influencers they started with maybe a genuine, honest, honest motives, and they got they got money out of it. I believe they may be more than the companies or some for example, models.

Ranim

Okay. Nice. I think we talked quite well about the drivers of authenticity. So now that we have like, a clear idea of what is authentic for you. Of what kind of, oh, I actually just remembered one question, which is so important. And so we mentioned the feed and the story as like sources of where you look at authenticity, do you also consider other aspects inside the profile? Or outside of it?

Interviewee 7

Do you mean, our networks, social media?

Ranim

Yeah, maybe like that. Because some people mentioned like hashtags, captions or a podcast that they do outside of Instagram.

Interviewee 7

Yeah, like one of podcasts as well. And also they connect their YouTube videos to their stories and I watch them for example or they have kind of websites they use, we can also link to. So, I use them sometimes if I'm interested in, so it just gives them more like a well rounded perspective. If they can talk about something, for example, a podcast for an hour, it's like much more information. And just six second is a story or a picture.

Ranim

Okay. So this providing information on different platforms makes them more authentic?

Interviewee 7

yeah, because it gives them like a bigger chance to tell their story, whatever they want to show you. Yeah, but it also dependent on the content they show on the different platforms as well. It's the same kind of negative content and like profit driven content, I wouldn't say it's imported, but usually it doesn't. I don't have really bad experiences. Because if they have different kinds of sources, usually they are really into it and put a lot of work into it.

Ranim

Okay, nice. Perfect. Now we can really turn to the impact of it. So you've talked about the authenticity perception of influencers. And now let's see how you engage with them. So maybe thinking back to this authentic influencer? Do you somehow engage with them? Like, do you like, comment?

Interviewee 7

No, I'm mot, I'm like a really solid, mature and listen to everything, to be honest. Okay. I don't really engage with any.

Ranim

And you don't even like write a private message to say you have a question about the technology he was presenting?

Interviewee 7

No, actually no, because I'm just using his information to purchase stuff, for example, but it did never went that deeper. I had a feeling after or something additionally.

Ranim

Okay. Yeah. And maybe in terms of like, psychological engagement. So, you said you trust this person is recommendations?

Interviewee 7

Yeah, definitely. Because he's just super honest about most of this is doing and also how is earning money he is even showing how it's working, with his affiliate links or if his recommendation stuff, He even makes videos about how you make money out of that and that, because it's so transparent and honest, I'm just trusting him with that.

Ranim

Oh, nice. Nice. And maybe you said that the personality of this person is also important for you. And could you let's say, imagine, even be friends with that person?

Interviewee 7

Maybe. Yeah, I think because, like the stuff he is sharing with his values about many things. I think I shared the same. I don't know if you could be friends. But I could we could have an interesting talk. Probably. Yeah.

Ranim

Because you share the same interests and values.

Interviewee 7

Yeah.

Ranim

And do you also sometimes talk with your friends about your favorite influences?

Interviewee 7

Yeah, sometimes you like, for example, recommendation when somebody is asking about Yeah, I want to get this or I need that, definitely. Yeah, maybe I say, watch this, or look at this that and something about it. So I would say yes, yeah.

Ranim

And do you tell them that in real life? Or do you maybe sometimes send like links? Or how does it work?

Interviewee 7

Sometimes I'm sharing stories of Instagram. And sometimes I'm just referring when I'm seeing them.

Ranim

Okay. And do you sometimes I will so maybe tell your friends Hey, follow that person you would like him?

Interviewee 7

I would say I would never said kind of directly. I would rather say, if you're interested this could be interesting. Sometimes yes.

Ranim

Do you sometimes save some of his recommendations for later to look at it later or to you take screenshots or something like that?

Interviewee 7
Yeah, sometimes I'm doing that because if there are any kind of codes or vouchers or information which is just in the story it gets lost pretty easily, so I do that.

Ranim
So, you do to keep the information for a later point?

How does this influencer like makes you feel after like having looked at his feet or at his stories?

Interviewee 7
Because he's a lot about minimalism and clean stuff, it kind calm, which makes him really interesting and it's somebody for example, after I've watched some stuff I'm interested in like doing something he told us for example, like throwing stuff away or just really thinking about values he had about what you need, what do you have to should consume? So he's actually like influencing me and my actions kind of. Not just passive consuming because I am just watching some kind of style, influencers sometimes it's about passive consuming. So, it's just nice to look, but nothing really changes. But usually, if I bought something from him or his pictures or his videos, there's something happens afterwards. I'm kind of influenced by it. Yeah.

Ranim
So like a change of my mind?

Interviewee 7
I rethink what I thought about some certain topics of certain stuff.

Ranim
Oh, nice. Nice. Would you share these thoughts and also with friends?

Interviewee 7
Sometimes Yes, yeah.

Ranim
Okay. Maybe, let's say another influencer? Not this one. But someone who you actually think is less authentic, would you and he makes a product recommendation, would you also be inclined to buy it to buy that what he is saying? Or would you be more sceptical than if it would come from this and other influencer we just talked about?

Interviewee 7
It always depends on the product because if he has a good voucher or code and if it's a good price, it can still could be a good product, but I still don't trust this person. Maybe I will do it. But usually I wouldn't do and just ignored it because I don't get any information out of that.

Because most people I wouldn't trust regarding that also don't give me any kind of interesting information which would help me in my decision to purchase something. So it's just usually like, look at this, this is nice, here you have a code, so okay, I don't get any kind of value out of this information. So I wouldn't buy it probably not because it's not trustworthy, but also it doesn't give me any information which helps me to convince me why I should buy this product.

Ranim

Okay. Yeah, so information is really important to you. And also I found it quite interesting this aspect about the voucher code and so with this somehow let's say make you more likely to buy the product?

Interviewee 7

Sometimes for example, one concrete example, my protein vouchers. Every fitness influencer has them and I don't believe in them if they say this is not the best protein shake and the other three before that were not as good. I don't care because the products are all pretty similar but he has like the best voucher so you just use this one because it makes it even cheaper for example so some products I know already so it's just about what he gives me extra. But I don't really believe in what he's saying.

Ranim

Oh, I can't so it's not really about this influencer that is trusted recommendations but…

Interviewee 7

It's just a certain product that I already know and I already kind of had my own opinion about, but also this new product that would you will probably wouldn't do it and I would rely on our information.

Ranim

Okay. So this is more for products you know about already. I think we kind of went through everything that is important. Maybe also, do you have anything in mind that you want to still tell me about authenticity in terms of social media influencers that you still want to say?

Interviewee 7

I don't, I have a feeling it's changing now. Because now we have so many good, perfect influencers in Instagram, they all look kind of similar, because they all have the same kind of level and now there has something to change, probably because you have to diversify you from the rest. So I'm really eager what will happen with Instagram and all the rest in the future.

Ranim

So would you say that everyone has become more or less the same? And this also does impact negatively the authenticity like the general authenticity of this whole social media influencer?

Interviewee 7

Yeah, because everything looks perfect. And you see pictures of stuff you would never imagine you could kind of, I don't know, over satisfied with that. So it's not like it touches you anymore and you start like, what he's saying is so interesting to think he is the one I would believe in.

So there has something to change in from my perspective, a changed from being just follow the one who is the best and perfect life to somebody who's showing also his not as perfect life because that's more interesting for me. Maybe it goes more this way.

Ranim
More interesting or small related as I said before, okay, so you wish that everything becomes more…?

Interviewee 7
More balanced, more honest, because it's if everything is always good, and you always show just the best products and you lie on the beach, on the best location is kind of yeah...

Ranim
So you really see that it's not the reality.

Interviewee 7
Not everything can be good. So why should I trust you with that? Because I know it from my perspective, it's not like that. I'm pretty sure it's also not in your life like that, so.

Ranim
One last question, talking about reality, do you think that people can actually find something authentic and something that is not so real that is, like, more like made up or fake or, so what I'm thinking is people often like watch reality TV shows, for example, and they know a lot of things are played and they're not real, but they still see it as a source of self authenticification. Do you think Instagram being also that people know that it's not 100% real could this also be like a source of authenticification?

Interviewee 7
Think it's just more about entertainment. I would definitely say that but for my case, I wouldn't say it makes more authentic or would be enough for me to buy something or trust him. If they maybe break the rules then they promoting this stuff, then maybe, but if they stay in the role, and I don't even know what to think about.

Ranim
Alright, cool. Then I think we are good.

Interviewee 7
I think so.

Interview 8
Ranim

Hey Interviewee 8 thanks a lot for taking the time for this interview today. This interview will be about the perceived brand authenticity of influencers just to give you a little hint.

Interviewee 8
Perfect. Thank you.

Ranim
Alright so let's start with some warm up questions about your general involvement with Instagram and with influencers. So do you use Instagram and if yes how often?

Interviewee 8
I do use Instagram several times a day. At least ten times a day I open it.

Ranim
Okay, all right, all right. And do you follow influencers and if yes why do you do that?

Interviewee 8
Okay, um, I do follow some influencers. However, I noticed that during the recent months I guess I kind of started unfollowing some. Why I do that though.. is just because I think it's kind of interesting to see what they do, where they go what they wear. And usually, they kind of give you inspiration for certain things. Yeah, that's usually

Ranim
Okay inspiration. And what is important for you when you decide to follow an influencer?

Interviewee 8
For me, usually, before I decide to follow an influencer and kind of look through their account. And if I feel like the pictures of them are very varied and it's not always the same thing, and it's something where I'm like okay this is, this seems like new or different. And then, usually I start following them. Or also other reason would be if I see that a lot of my friends follow them, and usually that's kind of that person must be kind of interesting. All my friends seem to be following the person.

Ranim
Okay, that's interesting. And do you also look at the personality of this influencer or first just look at the content as such?

Interviewee 8
I think that's not the main deciding factors for me - the personality - but it definitely makes it a lot easier for me to follow them. If I feel like the person is really funny or really cool, or something like that. However, only up to certain limit. If I feel like the person is like too like too specific of the personality sometimes that actually deters me from following them.

Ranim
Okay. What do you mean with too specific?

Interviewee 8

Yeah, I'm sorry, maybe I didn't describe that very well. I can just remember certain situations where I would see some influencers, and they tried to be extremely cool, in a way, that just makes me not be able to relate to them anymore if they're trying to be too cool too….

Ranim

Yeah. Yeah. No, I understand what you mean. So in that sense, when they're trying to be something that is not really credible to you, which is I think basically what you just said. Does authenticity also matter to you?

Interviewee 8

And, yes, it does actually in the sense that when I can notice that people are really trying to fit a certain role as this influencer; just to like sell a product or to kind of like, be that person because they think that makes them popular… I dont really like that. Like that makes that puts me off a bit because I would say authenticity is important to me. To kind of see that person. "Oh, that, looks like a funny person and then actually they're not, they're only trying to be that person".

Ranim

Okay. All right. So, authenticity for you in that sense would be someone showing how they really are and not just pretending?

Interviewee 8

To the extent that it's possible I guess. I mean I think like if you're in that role as an influencer, you're always kind of a bit like… I mean you're promoting certain products that people pay you for so obviously you're not 100% fully yourself because you're kind of like a model who is wearing clothes from certain brands and in some way you're kind of "made". Also, or like influenced by the things you're meant to influence or promote.

But I think like, for example, situations when you know people are lying. As we saw with certain influencers in the past, or where people are over the extreme – like having one personality trait too extreme. That doesn't come across as it's actually them.

Ranim

So you said that somehow the, the idea of being an influence and authenticity not really contradicts, but do, you would, would you say that you would describe an authentic person or a friend different than an authentic influencer? So, do you understand what I mean like, do you make differences in the authenticity of a friend versus of an influencer?

Interviewee 8

And, yes, I guess so a little bit, because with the… Well let me think about it. When I think an influencer is authentic its when the things they are saying, they say them because they actually believe them. Or often when they speak about a product, it seems to me that they're, like, speaking their true opinion about it, and not just what they're being told to say. So that's the moments when I would perceive them as as authentic if I feel like they're saying or they're behaving how they would actually behave.

Whereas for friend, I think, I mean I guess it's a similar thing actually to me because it's something about being yourself.

Ranim
Okay. Okay, nice. So, now I actually want you to show me an influencer that you consider authentic.

Interviewee 8
Okay, so I actually had a situation this morning where the influencer Caro Daur - I actually never followed and I still don't follow her - because my perception of her was that she's just constantly advertising products, constantly like just showing products. Like in my opinion when influencers become too famous that actually takes away from the authenticity to some extent because they, don't they don't have the ability to show who they are anymore because they're just constantly have to promote some kind of product. And to me she was the same kind of person where I just felt like "okay, there's no point in following her because all I'm going to see on her account is literally some kind of fashion items that people pay her to wear and take pictures of".
However this morning, actually I looked through her account and she gave me a feeling of authenticity, the way she kind of created some of her stories or some of the things she said that made me like giggle a bit and where I felt like, "okay, maybe you're really good at like putting yourself in the same in the right light, or you're actually showing you're a part of your real self, you know.

And that made me feel like she was kind of authentic. Like she was, she was like a funny person and I felt like even though she's kind of in a way just a model who is just showing all these items, there was a part behind her that was actually herself.

Ranim
Okay, super nice. So maybe keep that in mind Caro Daur in mind and the way she, she manages to be perceived as authentic, because now I want to dig deeper into this idea of authenticity.

So, what kind of aspects, inside the Instagram account of Caro Daur, would you to take into consideration making up your authenticity perception? Like for example, how important is continuity for you? So the idea of something being consistent

Interviewee 8
Consistent in what sense?

Ranim
Like for example, that the influencer sticks to a certain style and has a consistent feed, that she collaborates consistently with the same kind of partners…

Interviewee 8
To be honest, for me, that works against authenticity kind of, when they collaborate always with the same brands and you always see the same kind of feed. People who are really

themselves... Hmm, somebody else who I just had to think of actually in that moment is Cara Delevingne. Like when you look at her account, it doesn't seem like manufactured to like have the perfect feed at all. It just kind of seems like whatever she wants to say in that moment and whatever she wants to post she will post. So I think actually like authenticity, like if I'm speaking about Caro Daur she gives me a certain feeling about simplicity, to the extent, a fashion influencer can give it to me. But she still not the kind of person where I would say "Well, she saw authentic". Like that's more someone like Cara for example, where I would say, she's a lot more authentic because her feed for example isn't… she doesn't have the same colors, or same collaborations with the same kind of people or her feed is not always so manufactured to always be perfect and always look the same.

Yeah, but in terms of the question of what do I look… The first thing that came to my mind is I think a lot of authenticity I consider when I look at the stories like when you see how people speak and how they behave. I think that's where you can always kind of get an opinion as to how authentic they are

Ranim
Okay nice and inside of the inside story… can you maybe elaborate a little bit more, what will make you think that this person is authentic?

Interviewee 8
Um, I would say, if not everything is perfect. You know influencers or people are okay with showing themselves being a little stupid sometimes, things not going well or are like a bit of a mess or sometimes. Like that really adds to authenticity, because I think really in their fields, it's all about like everything matching together perfectly. And if there's stories they can kind of show that are a human being behind all of this by like being a bit like clumsy here and there. Just being a bit more real.

Ranim
Okay, nice so something like spontaneity is something that you will consider authentic.

Interviewee 8
Yeah.

Ranim
And you just compared also the story and the feed. So do you think that these two are actually two distinct things in terms of authenticity perception?
So, you said the feed often very much perfectly arranged, whereas the stories they can actually show their real selves and be authentic.

And so, and my question is, do you considered it as something negative in terms of authenticity when they have like perfectly arranged feed or can they make up for it through the stories for example?

Interviewee 8

I think it's not something negative that the feed is perfectly arranged, its pleasant for the eye to look at something nice. And I agree the story does make up for it to some extent, but it's also not just the fact that the feed is perfectly arranged, it's kind of if you look at the individual pictures and everything is the same. Every facial expression is the same and you see that all of this, like every photo is just a paid advertisement. That really takes away from it. Like, it can still be a perfectly arranged feed and everything just fits well together but you can see that it's not all just advertising in there, you know.

Ranim
Okay, so maybe again thinking in terms of the feed and authenticity. How do you feel about the editing of photos? Does this somehow negatively impact your perceived authenticity?

Interviewee 8
No, actually the editing usually. I mean if you can clearly see that they were edited in terms of not like a filter or something but the legs made longer body made skinny and stuff like that that really bothers me and I think that takes away from authenticity because it just creates a wrong image of people. But generally like the way it's edited and stuff I think it doesn't really influence my perception of authenticity, neither a negative or positive word.

Ranim
Okay. All right. And maybe another thing, how do you feel about an influencer actually responding to the followers if they have questions or commenting back or the general engagement of the influencer? Does this affect your authenticity perception?

Interviewee 8
Yeah, I think that's actually really, really important. I've never personally had a situation where I tried to reach out to influencers, they got back to me or didn't get back to me. I didn't have a situation like that but just the thought of it really impacts my perception of authenticity because I don't like when they kind of, I don't know they perceive themselves like that or they want other people to perceive them like they are kind of a celebrity like this God who's like unreachable and untouchable. I think that really takes away from the authenticity. I mean they can be authentic about it but like it deters me from liking them, if they are so like in another world, they're not relatable anymore. So whereas if they engage and interact with people. I think that'd be … well I don't know how much that affects… Yea well I guess it affects authenticity because it just shows that it's not just all like a facade, it's kind of like a real person behind that engages with it.

Ranim
Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Nice, um, you also mentioned quite a lot that these influencers follow a commercial interests and have a lot of sponsored posts. Do you think that the labeling of sponsored posts will have an effect on the authenticity?

Interviewee 8
Yeah. Actually, yes, unfortunately because i mean it's correct I think, it's good that they should be writing whenever they're advertising for things, but if I think about it like the fact when influencers start advertising too much for products that really takes away from their

authenticity for me because then like I said I just feel like they're being paid to promote certain things rather than promoting them because they actually like them. And usually like when they label things, you can see the commercial interests behind it. And that's why I think it actually impacts authenticity. I mean it's still good I think that they have to label, whenever they're advertising them or whenever there's a commercial interests behind it, because otherwise it would just be lying to people. But, like I said, unfortunately that's also kind of the moments when you see that everything is just kind of a paid post.

That's usually like the point where people get too famous and are just constantly advertising for products which is when I start unfollowing them because to me they're not relatable anymore.

Ranim
Okay, yeah, yeah nice so you rather want like a balanced feed?

Interviewee 8
Yeah. Okay.

Ranim
And also, in that sense, how important is it for you that the influencer kind of shows that being an influencer is his passion that he or she shows emotions about it and really likes what he or she is doing?

Interviewee 8
How would an influencer show, that like just by saying, "I love my job" or?

Ranim
And so for example…. wait let me think. Yeah, just by basically talking about his job and talking positively about it. Also being reflected in the content itself that a lot of effort is put into it and not only representing a product because it's paid but actually making like good content out of it.

Interviewee 8
I don't know how it influences authenticity, but to me it doesn't give me the greatest feelings when somebody's like "oh my god I worked so hard". Because even though I'm aware that this is a tough job, I think for the average person – someone who is going to work and, and I don't know staying in one country and having an office job or going to university or whatsoever – seeing a person who is just traveling around constantly in the most beautiful clothes and hearing them say "this is so hard". even though it is hard, makes me think of it like, "yeah, like top life" you know.

So like hearing them saying like, "I work so hard for this, or this is so difficult" or like "I love my job". It makes me feel a bit like "of course you do", or like "really is it that hard though?". Which is a interesting because I mean, I'm aware actually how tough it must be. It's just a fact when they actually say it, it doesn't make me feel good about it.

Ranim

So in that sense, if the influencer would maybe talk a little bit more about their life out of Instagram - would that make them again more authentic?

Interviewee 8
Yeah, I think that would make them a lot more authentic actually. Like if you kind of don't just see the perfect person who's being dressed up and being sent to certain places but where you kind of understand who they really are and what they really like, that makes them a lot more authentic.

Although I understand that they're kind of like, I don't know if that's always so easy for influencers because that means you're just completely giving up your privacy.

Ranim
Yeah, okay. And do you even differentiate between, like in terms of authenticity, do you differentiate between different types of influencers? Let's say when looking at a fashion influencer or beauty influencer or food, all these categories – Do you make any differences?

Interviewee 8
Well I guess so yeah I do. I mean what I was kind of referring mostly to was fashion influencers or lifestyle, like kind of like travel and like that kind of stuff. Yeah, I think if you're like a food blogger, it's a different story…. I think my perception of the whole that authenticity thing is a bit different and I generally have a lot more trust in them.

Also because I think like this whole food thing for example, people tend to be a little bit more honest and actually say like, hey, this wasn't so great or this is so great. Like I've barely seen a food page that was actually just speaking perfectly about every place. And I think that's why, like if you can see that they say they are capable of saying negative things, it's comes across a lot more authentic and a lot more real.

So, what else was there, travel answers. Yeah, I mean travel influencers. Yeah, you get put into a beautiful hotel, of course you like it like..

Ranim
So generally you would say that, depending on the category itself we have authenticity differences, without even looking at other factors?

Interviewee 8
Yeah, yeah.

Ranim
Okay, and maybe thinking again, in terms of collaboration partners of influencers. We kind of talked about it a little bit. So, do you think that an influencer, let's say fashion influencer, can promote a product outside of a sphere of specialization in an authentic way?

Interviewee 8
What do you mean in terms of specific specialization?

Ranim

So for example if the fashion influencer would promote a restaurant or something out of the area of fashion.

Interviewee 8

I think that actually comes across more authentic, usually because you know that they are fashion bloggers and then suddenly they speak about restaurants…I think it makes it more authentic if they speak about things that are outside of their specialization, usually comes across to me relatively authentic, even though, being aware that sometimes, it's also to promote a product, but just because it is not the thing that they're usually known for. I think you believe them a little bit more.

Ranim

Okay, that's interesting.

Let me just see if I covered most of the stuff in this chapter.

Yes. So besides Insta stories, and the feed. Do you also take into consideration, other aspects within Instagram, or maybe even outside of Instagram when making up your mind about the authenticity of an influencer?

Interviewee 8

So could you repeat the question?

Ranim

So, when you make up your mind about the authenticity of an influencer. You said you're looking at the feed, you're looking at the insta story you do you take into consideration also other drivers?

Interviewee 8

Yeah yes, depends on how engaged I am with that person. I have those moments where I'm like, "Who is this person?" and I want to find out more about them and to be honest then I start googling them. And I want to look at who are they like how did they get started with all of this. And, for example, I remember I did this with Chiara Ferragni or with Xenia, or I don't know who else with. So I would start by googling the story to kind of understand who they were before. That's usually what I actually take into consideration to get a picture of how authentic they are. By kind of comparing like - Who were they, and who are they now that there's so famous - you know like is it a similar person or is it just manufactured based on their success.

Ranim

Yeah, super interesting. Nice and, and anything else maybe do you look at what kind of other people they show in their profile, or do you look at hashtags, captions,..?

Interviewee 8

Hashtags not at all captions; captions yes, like, usually if people have like some witty or funny captions, that's like a plus.

I also find it kind of interesting to see like the kinds of people they are with and kind of see the connections of the who knows who, but that usually that doesn't….

To be honest, if I see too many people they put onto their their stories or feed or whatever. I kind of start being like a bit "Are you the kind of person who just super friends everyone and a little bit fake?" So, yeah, I guess like it's nice to see that people are friends and the only thing they're doing is not just showing themselves, but it has to come across like real not if it's too many people, it just it's just seems like very like fake actually.

Ranim
All right. Nice, um, then, since we have covered your authenticity perception, we want to turn now to how you actually engage with that influencer now again thinking of Caro Daur or any other authentic influencer that you follow. So do you actually engage in a way with that authentic influencer, do you comment, do you like, write direct messages?

Interviewee 8
To be honest I just don't really ever comment or write.

Ranim
And why do you not want to get into a conversation?

Interviewee 8
I mean, I just feel like you're one of the million people or like one of thousands of people, and that there's not really a point, and you just kind of repeat what thousands of other people have said. And never really have I had such a burning question that I needed to ask this person. More usually more like me wondering like, how do they know each other or like, like I'm not going to text the person directly about that.

So generally like other things. I don't see a need, because I feel like you're just one of 1000s.

Ranim
Okay, so you don't really engage with the influencer but do you may be somehow share content of this influencer with other people you know?

Interviewee 8
That for sure. I tend to do that quite a bit that I forward, certain pictures or whatever of a person, either, if I want to show like hey look how cool this is or if I want to if I speak negatively about it.

Ranim
Can you elaborate a little bit more on why you share it with friends?

Interviewee 8

Okay. Usually it's either because the person does something or says something or wears something that I think is great that I want to share with another person so I could forward it because I could say §hey look at how cool this looks or I want to go to this place" or something that this person has shown me that I approve of that I want to share with other people, or if I disagree with what the person is doing. And, and I, I want to share that with another person so it's if it's extremely to one direction, I'll usually share it with other people, if it's just a general post that I don't find particularly special then I would not share it.

Ranim
And are you more likely to share something of an influencer you perceive as authentic with your friends or tell them to follow that influencer?

Interviewee 8
I think, sharing yes, because probably I guess the people who are more authentic will have content that I find more interesting. Or they maybe say something that really stands out, and then that I would share with people.

Ranim
But, but when it's more negative things then could be from anyone?

Interviewee 8
Yeah, I think it's like if it's on the negative side then I'd probably rather share it from people that are not authentic because then it's somebody who I say, hey, this person's kina fake like look what they're saying and then I shared that.

Ranim
Ok. Ok. Nice. And now, again, maybe thinking of Caro Daur, one that you perceive as authentic. Could you actually ´imagine being friends with that influencer?

Interviewee 8
Yeah. Yeah. So I mean, I think maybe a part of the reason why I perceive Caro as authentic is because I know one of the girls briefly from when I was younger that she's very close with. That, I think, gives you like a certain level of relatableness, you, like I could see myself getting along with her so they like that.

But I think it's not just limited to the fact that I know the person.. I think generally like if you proceed a person as authentic you kind of perceive them as more relatable or to some extent that there's a character behind it, and then usually makes it a lot easier to imagine to be in contact with a person or to be friends with them. Okay, nice.

Ranim
And in that sense, would you say that you would trust her? For example, in terms of product recommendations or in general trust her and her opinions and her values?

Interviewee 8

Yeah, I guess I guess more than a person who I believe is completely manufacturer will consider completely manufacturer to completely product of their, their role as an influencer and as the advertising person kind of I mean I guess the person will I consider more authentic, that person I trust more with their judgment on things. Yeah.

Ranim
Okay. And another question. So when you look at this influencer's profile like Caro Daur, how does it make you feel afterwards?

Interviewee 8
Not great To be honest, but I generally have that with most influencers because you see a very perfect life or like on the outside perfect life, cause they show a lot of beautiful places and a lot of beautiful clothes and a lot of smiles and people… And to be honest, usually when I look at influencers' profiles, It's addictive like you can't stop looking, you want to see more, you want to understand their life more, but when I stop it doesn't make me feel so great about my own life.

Ranim
Okay, okay. And would that change if this influencer would include like you said, maybe more spontaneous things more funny things more non-perfect, things outside of Instagram?

Interviewee 8
Yeah I think like if you can see that this life is not perfect, though.
And it's weird because you asked me for like if the person spoke about that they love their job or whatever. The for that question I was kind of thinking – no. But I think if you can see that the perfect person's life isn't perfect and that doesn't necessarily have to do their job, you know that doesn't have to be like, "Oh my God, my life is so difficult because my last flight to Australia and then to LA and then to whatever, it was so exhausting" doesn't make it any better. it's more if you can see that this person isn't perfect in the sense that they're real people and they have real problems and that would make me feel better when I look at their accounts.

Ranim
Okay. Cool. Thanks a lot, I think, I think we got it. Maybe one final thing. Do you want to share anything else with me in terms of authenticity of influencers? Some thoughts you want to get rid of?

Interviewee 8
Yeah, I mean i think i had my little rant about them not doing too much advertising because it takes away from their authenticity. Right now I cant really think of anything else.

Ranim
Okay, nice yeah becasue you said in the beginning already you had like a wave of unfollowings that you did….maybe…

Interviewee 8

Yeah, I mean I think that was based on the fact that you know if people become famous, I just don't consider them authentic anymore. And I don't consider them like standing for who they are, what they believe in, the products they believe in. And I just feel like somehow they become too mainstream media. Then brands have understood, how important they are to people, and just invite them everywhere and that just takes away… actually, I mean they don't promote anything anymore, they don't share about their life anymore, all they do is showing the clothes they are wearing at events they were invited to. That doesn't really give me a good reason to follow them because, I mean, they're not actually showing their life they're showing the life people are putting them into.

Ranim
That's the nice last statement. Thank you very much **Interviewee 8**, And, yeah, thank you very much.

Interview 9
Pascale
Hello, and thanks for joining the interview today. Before we start, I would just ask some demographic questions and some warm up questions. And then we will dig deeper into the topic. So what is your highest level of education at the moment?

Interviewee 9
That's a professional bachelor's degree, which is a free three and a half years degree you do in Denmark. So it's the highest.

Pascale
And what is your current position?

Interviewee 9
I work full time as a global social media marketing specialist at a software company.

Pascale
Okay. And you're Danish. And okay, so do you use Instagram? and how often? Do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 9
Yes I do. Daily? I think just to check in and see what's going on.

Pascale
So is there any reason why you use it?

Interviewee 9

Just to get inspired or see what my friends and family are putting up. It's not really that I go in and look for recipes or whatever. It's just like time. spend your time on something like another social media platform.

Pascale
Okay. And do you also follow some influencers?

Interviewee 9
I do yes, a couple?

Pascale
And why do you do this?

Interviewee 9
That's a good question. I think because they're delivering something that's either the same interests as I have or they are providing some new insights and something I don't know anything about and to get a bit of product perspective on things they might have a different point of view than I have and then get a bit of contribution to whatever I'm thinking or get a broader horizon and different topics I think that's like the main drivers of why I do it.

Pascale
nice and what is important to you when you decide to follow an influencer?

Interviewee 9
It is a type of content deliver if they're too much ad focused. And you can see that they are just trying to generate money and generate new followers for themselves to get more money. and more sponsored deals, then I don't do it. I think that's fake, rather when they come up with some original idea and content instead of focusing on or just want to make money because they might get annoyed and yeah I do it because they're fun to follow a typical original, whatever you call them.

Pascale
All right, you already mentioned this problem of being fake. So it kind of fits to the topic we're talking about today. And it's about authenticity of an influencer matter to you and why?

Interviewee 9
I think it matters more and more in general, because it has been a long time where people just have been trying to generate revenue and make a name for themselves within the area so it matters to me that you can actually stand out and not be a type of person who is doing what everyone else is doing
So i think it's it's that perspective that they focus on, okay so how is it that I can actually stand out in the field, that makes it interesting to me.

Pascale
Okay and if we stick to an authentic influencer or could you maybe show me one yeah influencer?

Interviewee 9

So I have a lady called Miriam. Yeah, and she is a Danish influencer. She's not that big, she has like 16 point 4000 followers. So it's not like she has 100,000 K but see generate some content I like it has some original ideas as well. And she does do sponsored content but it's very well thought of and it fits into her profile and what she would like to communicate. Yeah, and of course, she has a cat and stuff like that. So so it is like the animal perspective as well. But she's very real in the things she does. And the way she communicate is really great. And she's funny and she's not scared of showing that is vulnerable.

Pascale

so she shows also some negative sides or aspects?

Interviewee 9

Yes, she has a lot of psychological problems as well that she openly communicate about it's not like she puts up the front, she actually talked about what's going on in her life and why she's having bad days and whatever and I really like that as well. So is that the typical Instagram that everything is great and everything is awesome and my life is perfect, but she actually lives people into what's going on in the world. I think that's really nice.

Pascale

Interesting. And so you already mentioned some aspects for example, the personal aspect. So would you say that the one people show their own personality and their negative sides that this would make an influence and more credible?

Interviewee 9

Yeah, I think it does, you're actually trusting what it is as she saying, because she's not communicating this perfect picture but she actually communicates much real if you can say like that. So I think that's kind of nice. And it makes her credible as a communicator, instead of only showing everything that's good in her life and it makes it more relatable to yourself.

Pascale

Good point. So you would say you could relate to this influencer? and this relation makes it also more authentic for you?

Interviewee 9

Yeah, I think so. Even though she is the only one I check up on the posts she is doing and kind of the stories that she's doing because it's authentic and I know it's great content that comes out of it. I don't check out the stuff because I find it boring most of the times and it's mainly just like check out to the product I have decided to become a sponsor of and I get annoyed by that and I don't want to look at it but hers actually I want to read, what's she saying, because it's authentic and it's credible.

Pascale

So you you think this is really valuable for you?

Interviewee 9

Yeah, because all about on social media is that it has to add value in some way and you need to figure out how it is you're adding value to what you want to communicate you, it ends up being she's really great at that.

Pascale

Could you imagine being friends with her?

Interviewee 9

I'm not sure really. I think seems really cool stuff but I'm not sure we will get along that way, but it's just like to one of the things you get inspired some in some ways.

Pascale

So we talked about her credibility she's not fake, she's very honest. She's sharing her deepest thoughts with the community and what is about the editing of her photos, is there is she editing a lot, does this kind of harm authenticity or do you don't mind?

Interviewee 9

She does edit some pictures but you also puts out a lot of un-edited pictures to actually show, what it takes to get to the edited point to show all the things that's behind it and also it breaks down the picture-perfect image that it actually takes a lot of time a lot of effort to make this perfect Instagram feed. So yeah he doesn't mean anything but when you see the back stuff behind it as well let anything it brings some authenticity to it in that relation.

Pascale

So she's very transparent and telling this is edited and this is not added?

Interviewee 9

Of course there is edited photos and everything but she also puts other stuff. Like all the things where it goes wrong, so that's really funny. She did one with her legs once and then she showed a picture how she looked like on the floor laying down, how she looked ridiculous to get the perfect picture of legs and stuff like that.

Pascale

So making fun of the typical Instagram shot, nice. Sticking to credibility, is she engaging with with some other influences or showing her friends?

Interviewee 9

She's engaging with a lot of others instagram influencers as well in the Danish blogger field. And they have like a "gang" where they meet up and do all sorts of fun stuff and they tag each other in the different videos and stuff, but I haven't really been enticed to go to the others, because they are not really my thing, it's a bit too much fashion and sponsorships and so it gets a bit too fake for me.

Pascale

So, it seems like she's hanging out with kind of fake influencers?

Interviewee 9
In my perspective yes.

Pascale
Does this support or harm her authenticity?

Interviewee 9
I think does because she actually brings the authenticity to the group, you can say. So she brings the realness to it and I think they're all friends or whatever, so the real by each other and like to interact with each other, so it's not like she is the odd one out that's just hanging along but they're actually making a nice group out of it. I think that brings a nice view or impression to the blogger and Instagram field that they can actually communicate and be very great friends and not just competitors because all battling for the same thing, right?

Pascale
Okay and if we would talk in terms of authenticity about continuity, so is this a characteristic for you of authenticity, for example, she has like a certain continued topic or she's talking about or she shows other forms of continuity in her feed? Is there anything you can think of?

Interviewee 9
Yes she does she actually does a lot of user generated content so she involves her followers a lot. She has like, the weirdest secret you can send her and then - she can not see who it is because she does it for Google - and there's all these kinds of weird secrets that people are telling each week that he's putting up. And then the "wtf" topics she also does every week and its really great that she kinda like get the followers involved as well. And they're really interested in in telling their quote an embarrassing stories and you cannot see who it is. And this is kind of the gateway to get to know weird secret about others, but you don't know who it is. Anyway, I kind of like that idea. And so she has that as continuance in a profile. And then of course, there's some other stuff as well as she's continuing with and but those, having like, two main things were she involves her followers. That's actually really cool. It's kind of fun to follow. And that's also reason why to follow because she does these things where you get an insight into other people's lives.

Pascale
So you already talked about that she's integrating followers? Is she also integrating brands which kind of support or harm her authenticity?

Interviewee 9
She works with brands that support her, i think, right now she's doing something with Rungebü which is a juice lemonade brand in the denmark, and you have to challenge yourself within something. And then she's been single, and she's been single for a long time. So she's challenging herself to go out on a blind date. And they're (the brand) making a video about that, and how it is actually a challenge. Because she has these psychological problems. And she wants to go out and be active and meet people and try to get away from this point, she is

at right now. And so I think it brings a lot of authenticity, that she is actually doing these things to change the situation

Pascale
Supported by the brand?

Interviewee 9
Yes, it's collaboration between R and her.

Pascale
Ah, ok. And how is she was showing the drink,

Interviewee 9
drink is not really being shown. It's just the concept behind it the brand has developed.
And then it's like, challenge yourself and go out and try something new. They are trying that, it is not to drink itself that she brings and put it up. And that's also why brings authenticity because she's not promoting the product line going on a picnic put into the product and say, hey, look at this, go and try it out. It is linked to the personal profile of who she is. So I think she considers a lot when she's doing a collab or a sponsored partnership, because it needs to be authentic in terms of what it is that a she is doing and communicating instead of just promoting all sorts of things.

Pascale
So it really fits to her own brand.

Interviewee 9
Yes, to her personal brand. So I think that's the type of collab that she goes for. I don't think there's anything else we can just find. No, no, I don't think so.

Pascale
So it's really a secondary thing she's doing. Do you think she's using her Instagram professionally? Or is she having a normal job?

Interviewee 9
it's a professional, she is a full time blogger.

Pascale
in general, do you think, because a lot of other people mentioned that they think Instagram in general is not authentic. You do you think it depends on the size or on the category, do you have any thoughts about that?

Interviewee 9
I think there is a lot of people who have seen that Instagram is a place where you can easily generate money and attention. And that's another thing that's wrong with it. So that it because you get attention than you worth something. And then I think that a lot of people try to boost themself with fake followers and stuff like that. But if you actually want you to

generate something valuable and that is more difficult to do, and thinking in terms of what it is and how it is that you're doing it, then you can be authentic, but you need to look out for what it is that you interact with. And and what type of person is behind it.

Pascale
So the personality really matter. And how they present the personality.

Interviewee 9
Yeah.

Pascale
Do you think the authenticity could also been driven by a passion? A certain passion, a certain expertise?

Interviewee 9
Yeah, definitely. There's a lot of photographers to use Instagram, for example, I think that's a passion that they use. food people, as well as chefs, whatever they also using it, even though you might not even be professional, you just do something as a hobby project. I think that's really also a passion, that drives that and there's also another lady called the siimoon, she just started by drawings.

Pascale
And so very original, unique?

Interviewee 9
she just started with drawings. And then she is devoted to like a whole business for herself. And she has a lot of small businesses she's driving as well. But he just started out with making drawings on Instagram and people wanted to buy them and then it just grew from there. And that's a passion as well and you get to do what it is that they actually really want to do instead of working full time and somewhere and then you go in and have this on the side right? so things like passion can drive a lot of stuff you just need to find a right angle to it and get the interest.

Pascale
...and do you also think that entertainment and humor drives authenticity of an influencer?

Interviewee 9
Yeah, it does. It definitely does, like it is always needs to have that funny angle to it. Otherwise, it gets really generic a lot of the times if it's not has some personal, humorous touch to it. And that's also why I stopped following some influencers because I like that kind of authenticity to it as well, in terms of personal voice to it. Let's see if we can find her. And she's called XX. it's very polished, I think. And it lacks the sort of humor to it. And it gets a bit too promotional as well. And yes, she's just, I just lost interest after a while, it got too mom blogger like, I have so much troubles with my kids and everything like that. And I'm not in that state of life as well. So if you're in that state of life, then it's probably fine for you. But for me, it's more like a humor to it. I think that's what drives me to follow someone.

Pascale

So you said that you really would like to see that they're kind of intrinsically motivated that they're not doing it just because money?

Interviewee 9

at least to resonate to who it is they are.

Pascale

Nice. Do you see any difference between the story and the feed in terms of authenticity?

Interviewee 9

yeah, the story is way more authentic than the feed is. And we also talked about it in here that you feed it something where it needs to be really special to be put up to story is like the day to day stuff that you're doing and like all the cut outs and the takeaways that you don't want to include and be permanently on your feed. But it's more real than the story. You can see it and it's often also more fun to check stories than it is to check the feed, I think and yeah, so I think there is a big difference in authenticity in terms of feed and Instagram stories, I think okay.

Pascale

Do you think in general that influencers are more authentic than brands or big celebrities on Instagram?

Interviewee 9

yeah, people always trust people over companies and that's my influences has become such a big deal. Because brands know that, brands know that they are not trusted because they only communicate their point of view. And that's also a big deal to a lot of influences that they need to be able to communicate, what did they actually think if they want to be considered authentic? So yeah, and that's why it's just such a growing business and why something you as a brand should look into if you can, because otherwise, you lose out in terms of what everyone else is doing. And, but it's just finding that unique way to do it. I think that's difficult. And not that it ends up being too promotional, and you need to communicate that sort of value that differentiates you from what everyone else is doing. Because a lot of people can fashion brands can send out a ton for try out, put it on your profile says who has bought it, they'll give it to you.

And that's not really the way to do it because a lot of the new influences, the ones who are just starting up, say, Oh, great, free clothes, let's do it.
But need to find an ankle to actually attract the ones you want to attract through the influencers.

Pascale

And Okay. That was really interesting. And so far, we've kind of talked about the drivers of authenticity. Now, if you would look at the impact.
Do you engage with influencers?

Interviewee 9

Nope. Okay. I'm a silent follower. I don't like things. I don't comment on things. I just follow for the sake of following

Pascale

would you maybe take some time screenshots from things you like, or?

Interviewee 9

Yeah, that's mainly of animal videos

Pascale

so for entertainment?

Interviewee 9

Yeah, no, I don't interact with them to be honest, because the thing is just drowning out and I don't have something to contribute with that adds value to them. And I think that you go both ways. Of course, I think that some of them are doing a great job and I think they are generating content but is that something of unnecessary to communicate, honestly.
I don't want to be that type of fan girl who goes back in and starts to comment and liking and sharing your stuff. No.

Pascale

would you recommend some some influence at all, some products to friends or not?

Interviewee 9

not until I tried it myself, okay.

Pascale

offline? maybe talking about something

Interviewee 9

Yeah, if I heard about an influencer of saying something, okay, I tried this and then if I hear someone talking about that product without the context of the influencer and I might mention something okay. And but it's not something that I'm going in without having tried it myself say, Oh, I try this is really great and awesome and I want to try it out myself first.

Pascale

Okay. So you would trust an influencer's recommendation maybe but then as one step before you own test?

Interviewee 9

Yeah,I could be enticed to buy the product if they have talked about it a couple of times and they keep saying is really good. And you can see that actually happy forward if I can sense that is real, what they're saying, then I might go and buy it and try it out. But then I can also

recommended to someone else, but I won't recommend it just, because they have said something without trying in myself.

Pascale
Okay. Would you the recommendation from the influence that would you trust it even more if they would give you more information and more use cases? and then you would be like, Oh yeah, this is kind of credible what they what they're presenting. Is there anything which would make you believe the more?

Interviewee 9
I think it needs to be a couple of posts a couple of videos, it doesn't just take one post for me to buy something for me. For instance, she has a blush, a makeup thing that she's talked about for eight months now or something so we talked about for a long long time and now I'm considering to buy it and it's really cheap. So it's not because it's like really expensive and I think it's a bit of a waste to buy it and stuff like that. But eight months it takes for me to buy.

Pascale
So kind of continuity to you as well, like to see still working, you see her using it for quite a long time?

Interviewee 9
Yeah, and she keeps on recommending it and and she doesn't get paid for it. It's not some it's not a sponsorship or anything. But it just keeps on talking about this. This one is really great. But it takes time for me to be persuaded to go down and buy it, I don't want to be too easily talk into it because I want to make up my own mind to see if it's worth enough.

Pascale
Okay. Um, I think I'm more or less asked everything. Is there anything you would in general one to add about authenticity on social media? And I don't know trends you've seen about just things you...

Interviewee 9
The best thing to be authentic, you need to be real, and you need to find your niches and your ankle that you actually can stand behind instead of just communicating when everyone else is doing. I think that's really important for one to drive somewhere now because a lot of fashion bloggers and whatever are doing the exact same thing and they're all using the same flowers now, they're all using the same clothes, taking pictures at the same places around town and it gets really boring. And so thing you need to find a niche kind of, yeah,
the thing that relates to communicate to you, I think that's most important thing.

Pascale
Thank you very much.

Interviewee 9
You're welcome.

Interview 10

Pascale
Hello, we got to quickly start with some demographic questions and then some warm up questions because before we got to dig deeper into the topic of brand authenticity of social media influencers. So, is it okay if we record the interview

Interviewee 10
Yes, it is ok.

Pascale
Do you want us to name you anonymously or can we mention your name?

Interviewee 10
You mentioned my name. I have nothing to hide.

Pascale
Okay just and the last demographic question. What is your highest level of education at the moment?

Interviewee 10
Well, I guess master's degree or well I'm about to get my master's degree, hopefully.

Pascale
Okay great so then directly let's jump in. Do you use Instagram and if yes, how often?

Interviewee 10
Yes I use it unfortunately every day, but probably more than 25 minutes per day because I actually have like a limit that I put and I always override it so it's definitely more than 25 minutes.

Pascale
Okay, do you also follow influencers?

Interviewee 10
Yeah I do. Actually have like two profiles on Instagram and one is just for my friends and I don't follow any like people that I don't know from that profile and then I have like an open one where there, like, I it is not a restricted like not a private profile but there aren't that many pictures of myself there it's more like about traveling and about different things and then I follow like people that I think like, are influencers or my favorite brands and different things like that.

Pascale
Okay, what and why would you follow an influencer?

Interviewee 10

I think for me it's mainly for inspiration because I also like, I follow a lot of influencers who are like illustrators for example, and I like illustration a lot so I look at the stuff that they create and then I like try to redraw it may be or this kind of like I really like following illustrators. And that's one (reason). And then yeah some, I guess, people who are in fashion but not really that many it's like more for example, Leandra Medine she's an owner of Man Repeller, she's very true to herself. And she also doesn't really care the way she looks like she has the most random like outfits and things that like all the influencers, who are trendy, they would never wear because they would feel embarrassed and not sexy, but she doesn't care. And like, I would follow rather this kind of people and like, I love fashion and I love style, but I don't like when it becomes something that like, staple, everyone is just wearing the same thing, everyone promoting the same thing. So I try to follow people who are different than then like, try to get inspiration from what they're wearing. Maybe. And yeah, and I guess I follow a few like, the kind of influencers, micro influencers from Azerbaijan, just to keep up with like, what's going on in our community just to see like, what people are up, so yeah, that's so the main reasons.

Pascale

You have already mentioned a lot of things you mentioned that the influence of you follow need to be trustworthy, that they are rather smaller, that you look at their heritage in some cases, that you think they're kind of unique and original compared to other mainstream ones. Really interesting. and this is a perfect transition to our topic of authenticity. So would you generally say, authenticity matters to you when you're following an influencer?

Interviewee 10

Yeah, definitely. For me, it's very important because I mean, I unfortunately I spent a lot of time on Instagram, I should reduce it because it just takes too much of my time sometimes, and I procrastinate on it but authenticity I think matters a lot because you just, you want to see people's real emotions and like day to day activities and not like not a perfect world.

And I think, yeah, I think for me it matters a lot, because I don't want to see like, just endless edited perfect pictures because it just not like it doesn't show real life. What's the point of this? Because it's like unrealistic. This is not what their life looks like either it's just what they want to portray. And it's always perfection that is an achievable, and if you're like, constantly looking at it you start feeling bad about yourself, or you start trying to think like, Oh, I never looked this perfect all the time. Or I never get to travel so much. But actually, this people sometimes like they have a feed planned one year in advance, and they're not traveling, they're just at home and they just posting like, every day, something that they've done months ago. So I don't like I think whatever I follow, I want to see the reality like what's going on right now. But not just like the projection of some perfection. So for me, it matters a lot. Like I don't just want to see perfect pictures. I want to more like see the emotions that like things that people experience and this kind of stuff because it's it just also brings you back and makes you think that everyone is just a person, everyone struggles with something. But when you follow more like this perfect influencers, you feel like their life is perfect, they never have a bad day. Everything is great always in their life. Which is not true. It's kind of a lie. Like you're just lying to yourself, and they're lying to you. And it's like, endless vicious circle. I really don't like it.

Pascale
Yeah, interesting. And then and could you show me one authentic influencer, who would be authentic for you?

Interviewee 10
I can show you actually, maybe let me just see, there are two that I really liked. But I think one of them is a bit maybe more perfection rather than authenticity. Yeah, then it wouldn't be this one. She's not. I think she's not that big on Instagram. But she is a pretty like, she has a lot of subscribers on her YouTube. And she's from Azerbaijan originally. She's called the chief adventure. And she travels a lot. And she actually on her YouTube, she talks a lot, she has a lot of this blogs where she just talks about her daily life. And she actually calls out this whole authenticity and how a lot of people are portraying, like a perfect life and that she doesn't want to do that. She doesn't want to make people feel that her life is perfect. Because she always is kind of, she's just, I like her. I mean, maybe her profile is not really that special. But I like her more for the personality rather than the pictures that she puts, also because of the videos. And she always like, first of all, she's very, she puts a lot of stories up and the stories are always like, she's just herself there. And she's very goofy. And she's like,
I think she's 30 something maybe, or she's just turned 30. But she's like, always acting like a teenager, kind of. And she's always fun. And she's always like making jokes. And she's just like, she doesn't care if she's ridiculous. Like, she can be ridiculous. And that's what she does. Like, that's why I like her. Because she's not trying to be someone else who's always and she talks about it a lot as well that you have to like, when you are part of the social media community, you need to really think twice before you post something. Or like what kind of image are you're portraying. So that's why I like her. She's I mean, I, of course, follow a lot of other people. And maybe her profile is not the top one. But I like her personality, like, probably the most.

Pascale
So you can relate to her?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, I can. Yeah, I can definitely relate to her. And I mean, she's very, like, you can messaged her and stuff. And I think I was once watching some blog about, she was talking about where, like, what is the importance of vlogging and like, why you should film and she was talking about that when we were children our parents were always filming us. And that's like, that's a memory. But now back like in the 90s, it was a big thing and like, our parents could only film for like 20 minutes. And that was it. But now we're like constantly on the phone filming everything. So it loses it's important somehow. But still, you have to do it like if you want to keep the memories because you're always reliving it when you look at the pictures are at the videos. And I messaged her saying because she put a lot of like, videos from her childhood in that video. And I was thinking like, my childhood videos look very similar. Because it's like, it has this big stamp of the time when it was recorded and stuff like that and like the quality, it's all the same. Because my parents like lived in the same, of kind of, she's a bit older than me. But she likes she replies. And she always tries to reach out to people and kind of, I like that about her. She's super busy. But still engages. I mean there is one more actually who is, she's also azeri. But she is much much bigger.

Her name is Mimi icon. She has like 1.3 million subscribers. She has like a very big businesses that she already sold, and she like is a co founder of this love here and dreamers and creators.

Pascale
Where would you see authenticity on the profile? Like more feed on the story, because of the pictures…?

Interviewee 10
Yes. I think like, that's the difference between those two. I think like Mimi's pictures always look perfect. And she always edit it and she doesn't hide it. But she always talks like her stories are I think the authenticity more in the stories. I guess her stories are always more real than the pictures than she posts, are always like over edited. Always looking perfect. Everyone smiling.

Pascale
Does this bother you, would it harm her authenticity?

Interviewee 10
I think yes, I think a little it would definitely like you're just it's not the picture. It's not how the picture looks when you're edited. It's not real anymore. Like there is something you took a picture of a reality. But then you change that by some reason. But why like when you saw whatever view you were seeing, like it was beautiful already. Why did you have to ended it kind of? Like I mean, I also edit my pictures. But I try actually to use as less as possible of like here, for example, it's not really edited. And I try not to use filters that much and just maybe like change the brightness or something the most. But yeah, I think when you edit too much, it just doesn't look realistic anymore. And sometimes. What's the point of doing that? Like, the view was already amazing. Why did you have to change it? So I think it's more in stories you can see like how authentic people are. But also, sometimes in the stories for example, both Me Me and the this chief adventure they always talk about things like their feelings and emotions. And that's a bit more like I think real kind of, they're just trying to interact with you.

Pascale
Do you think because they talk a lot about their emotions their personal experiences? Do you think this makes the influencer of more credible?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, I think so I think you can kind of relate much more to them and they will you can trust them more, when they are like showing their emotions, when they're stopped being this perfect human than you, definitely the gain some kind of credibility because they are also trying to be on your level even if like some of the influencers, for example, like the second one Mimi she's very like she's an owner of a huge businesses, she already like sold and she has multiple oh one. So she actually has a lot of money. She's pretty rich. But she never presents herself this way. She's always down to earth and tries to be down to her. It's so it's kind of you don't feel like oh my God, this person is so far away. And so great. And so rich. Like some people, I think, try to really paint this picture that they're rich, and they have everything and

257

others really just are humans, just humble and being themselves. So that's that's kind of gives you credibility.

Pascale
And another characteristic was mentioned by others that, for example, continuity. Yeah, like, let's say, continuity to you in the feed or in the, in the expertise or passion they have support the authenticity. Do you agree?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, I don't know. Actually, funnily enough, I was yesterday listening to the podcast of Mimi, me because she just started this doing this podcast, and I never listened to it before. But she was talking about that she tries to be very, like, you know, post daily and always follow kind of this theme of now she has a child. So she's always like, posting about her child, and about being a mother and kind of supporting children, supporting each other, all this kind of stuff. So she has, like, sort of a theme of family and traveling, but I don't, I don't know if that gives more credibility to her. I mean, if tomorrow she decides to post about or whatever I think it would be fine for me like, I don't, I don't think she has to that actually makes maybe boring at some point. If you're just like pulling one topic all the time, and you never switch it, then it's at some point, you're just like, Okay, well, I don't even want to follow this any more. Like for her it was a bit different. Because first she was a bit more focused on traveling, then she had a baby. So she was talking about the baby. There was a transition. But like, for example, when she started having a child in the early days, like in the first year, I wasn't so interested in her anymore, because I was just like, I can't relate to this. And I'm like, I wasn't even like, looking at her posts anymore, or reading them. Because before I was actually reading whatever the captions were, and then I stopped because I was just like, okay, I don't have a child. It's like, at this point for me, not relevant. So I would start like looking at someone else more.

Pascale
Do you think that a certain like, the first influence you showed me was really into traveling, right? So is this expertise or this passion? Does this influence the authenticity? Also in terms of collaboration brands. Is there anything is she using collaboration?

Interviewee 10
Again, for like most of them, they actually don't really do it, do it that much. And that's I like it because their profiles are here. First of all, they're not making the money primarily on Instagram. They have other businesses. This is not like their career. They're influencers, but they're influencers because they want to carry a message and share with people something.

Pascale
There's a deeper thought?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, exactly. And they are not just here to promote and Mimi, like until the last again, because I just listened basically, to her podcast, I found out that she never really promoted anything. Until recently, she became like promoting audible. It's like this app where you can

listen to audiobooks because she actually listens a lot before, like, she became kind of advertising for them.

Pascale
So would you like, do you think this advertising is credible than because it fits?

Interviewee 10
I think this one actually is like I I kind of, because before she became a brand ambassador for them, she was always talking about Audible, like her and her husband always listen to audiobooks. And before it was like some other app overcast or whatever, then they switch to this one. And I think then the brand notice them and was like, oh, they're actually pretty big influencers. And they're talking about us for free already. So why don't we collaborate with them? Because that was actually she actually does that she actually listens to this book. She's not promoting it, because they paid her she's promoting it, because she really loves the app.

Pascale
So acting with the intrinsic motivation?

Interviewee 10
Exactly, so and this is the only thing with like, she has 1.3 million followers. She never promoted anything ever before. Because she just she said, she gets contacted by like, hundreds of different companies daily, but she rejected because if she doesn't stand for the products, she doesn't want to promote it, especially because she has such a huge following. She doesn't want to just like whatever, do it for the money.

Pascale
So yeah, that's really kind of supports her authenticity, right?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, definitely. That gives her credibility that she's not, you know, here for the money and just pushing whatever product, people I mean, there's, of course, Instagram at the end of the day is kind of now becoming more of an advertising platform but then you don't want to follow this people who are constantly advertising something because you're just like, I mean, if I want to buy something I can always I can find it online, I don't need an influencer like I feel like it's sort of losing its sense now, when influencers are like constantly contacted by different companies to advertise something, because it's not like they using this product or they don't necessarily stand for this product. They're just they're getting paid for it. And they're showing it but then there's no connection between like, Yes, I think the brands they think okay, well, this influencers seems to be into sport, and we are this like, I don't know, startup or whatever, Nike, whoever, we're going to contact them. But it doesn't mean that that person actually likes Nike, or that startup, they're just doing it for the money like if if there was some way to ensure that this person actually loves the brand like and they actually use it all the time, sure. And if they were promoting it, yeah, I could totally, that would be credible for me. And I mean, even for me, sometimes on my Instagram, I post something that I really love or I use all the time for example, Airbnb, I just noticed, like a few days ago, because now you can see, like, archives of the stuff that you are tagging in and like, I often tagg Airbnb when I'm staying in

Airbnb or when I'm a host, and like, people are leaving review or some note for me, and I'm like, I'm sort of promoting them. But because I really love the service and they like, I don't, it's kind of true. And I'm promoting them because I love it. And because I think other people should use it, not because there is something else behind it. So if it is actually something that you use and you love, then that would be credible. But I think most of the things are not credible, because they are just there.

Pascale
we have talked about a lot about continuity, credibility. And you also mentioned some facts of integrity because you mentioned that one of your influences really, yeah, engaging with the community and other also hanging out with other bloggers, which would support your authenticity or are they actually like me, like the collaborations partner? We talked about it, they're kind of supporting?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, like Mimi she does. I know she does this meetups with her fans, but it's usually like very informal things like having kind of a meet up in some coffee store. And then people just come and hang out with her, which is kind of, again, supporting her credibility because she's just there to, you know, connect with people who are following her and find out why are they there? Like, why are they spending their time looking at what she's up to? And she, I mean, she actually doesn't...

Yeah, I saw her a few times because she lives in London, there is a few she speaks Russian, basically. And there are a few like big influencers who speak Russian and they live in London. So I saw like, she's kind of friends with these people and they hang out together. But actually, I don't like that in some way. Because I feel like some of them they want to hang out with her because she's so big and not because of her. And there is one that too often, like, post pictures with and they hang out because they both have small children. But that one I really don't like that influencer. I think she's not authentic at all. And she's constantly like, just the way she behaves as well. It's just weird to me. And when they kind of clash because they have such different perspectives on everything, it is just weird when you see them together, like and there's another one like this one. She's also I think she's pretty big. I also don't really like her because she's just constantly portraying something else and having I don't know, just being weird and they are again, they were like collaborating and having a podcast together but it's always I feel like it's a bit fake. Because when this influencers hang out together, they're constantly like, posting pictures of themselves. And even in the stories when, like, their kids are hanging out, you can see like, both of them are constantly like, from all the angles are taking pictures of the kids. So it feels like their kids are hanging out, so they can take pictures of them, which is like, super weird. So, I mean, I don't think Mimi does it for the sake of that, but feels like the other one does it. So I think that's why she's trying to avoid this kind of too many of this sort of interactions.

Pascale
Yeah, and do you see, so we talked about that you can relate to the influence or do you see any in terms of integrity, which might push the authenticity Do you see some ethical values or

moral behavior which you support? And that's the reason why you really perceived this one as authentic?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, I think with both. First of all, I can, like I can relate to them because they're both from Azerbaijan, like, but they were, they were born in Azerbaijan, but then they both like immigrated to Canada, they actually know each other, they're two friends as well. But they're more like you never see them hanging out together. Because when they hang out, it's not ever on social media. Like they just because they're such close friends. They don't need to advertise that they're like, hanging out. But yeah, first of all, because they are coming from where I'm coming from. And they sort of like they went through a lot of stuff, kind of that I went through, they are older, but in terms of like immigrating at a young age, and they, I think they both like immigrated to Canada when they were like teenagers. So they like, they often talk about it and more, the other one talks about it more than Mimi, who doesn't talk as much about it, because she doesn't like she doesn't connect that much to the culture like to Azerbaijan. She she doesn't talk about it that much. Actually, she's more like, I'm Canadian, or now I live in London. But definitely their background plays a role of why, like I'm following them, but also their value, for sure. Like they're, they don't, they're not afraid to be emotional. They're always like talking about your feelings. And they're always talking about this fact that you don't have to be perfect. Like, it's not all about chasing perfection. And it's kind of you should be able to show your emotion and you should be able to really connect with people and have some friendships, for example, that are meaningful not it's not about like, the quantity of friends or quantity of people who surround you. So I think like, yeah, they're, they're kind of ethical stance, or I don't know what you call it and their values, I feel that connection. I don't think we have like, hundred percent matching values, but there is some kind of connection for sure

Pascale
Could you imagine being friends with one of them?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, definitely. Like, I don't, I think with the chief adventure.I could totally like see myself being friends with her. Mimi maybe not so much. First of all, because she's I guess, because she's a mother already. I feel like she's so much more adult. But also she's I think she's a bit tough, like as a friend because she always says she doesn't have a lot of friends because she spends more time with her husband and her child. But also she's not like she's extrovert. She can become friends with anyone. But I feel like maybe we wouldn't really hit it off as much as with with the other one. I could definitely see it with Mimi bot so much. I think.d

Pascale
Nice. Yeah. Okay. And as last question about drivers of authenticity. So you talked about the lot about visible emotions and that you really like when they show their passion and their true self? And do you also think humor plays an important part of authenticity?

Interviewee 10
Yeah,I think so. I think it's more obvious. Again, like it talking about this to influencers that I mentioned. The chief adventure, she's really funny, like, and she, I again, I can relate to her

because she's, like, always late for everything. And it is kind of because of our culture, I think partially, but she's like, last time I saw she was going to the airport to meet her niece who came from Canada, and she was super late. And she was just running and filming herself and saying, like, I'm the kind of person who was, like, always late, and I was like, This is so relatable, you know, really good. I even sent it to my boyfriend. Because I was like, Yeah, see, so, just me. Like, everyone from our culture is like that. And I think like, she's super funny most of the time, and the way she laughs is so also like, it's not fake. Like, when she's laughing. She's actually laughing from the heart. I feel like so. Yeah, I think it definitely like also for her to, she often makes fun of herself, like, you know, so she's, she's not taking herself too seriously. She's not trying to be like, oh, like, you can not make fun of me. She, she encourages people to make fun of her, which like some people would be offended about, and they wouldn't want other people to laugh at them. It really depends how, like, you feel about kind of your importance. She doesn't feel like she's that important. She's just like, everyone on we should be able to, like laugh at ourselves. We're being stupid and doing some stupid things. So yeah, I think Yeah, definitely. Does something.

Pascale
All right. Before we come to the impacts, would you say there's there are different types of influencer, let's say a micro macro influence or different categories, which are more authentic than others e.g. food or fashion?

Interviewee 10
So you want like, is it in terms of size? Or in terms of like, what they do?

Pascale
Depends? You can say both?

Interviewee 10
Well, I think of course, it's kind of Yeah, in my mind, the bigger the influence or the less authentic they become, but like Mimi, I think it doesn't always apply it it it is most of the time true. But there are some exceptions for sure. About like really big influencer, being really authentic and being trying to, you know, stay true to themselves and just portrayed the real picture and not the perfect picture. But yeah, I think there is definitely a correlation the bigger you are, the less time you have to be yourself or you don't want to be maybe yourself because so many people are following you. But in terms of like, the categories of like, what type of influencers.

I feel like fashion influencers are not so necessarily authentic most of the time, because they're just, I don't know, they're getting sponsored by most of the brands or they're getting all this fittings and different things. And they're like, sometimes they don't even have any style, like, for example, the Danish influencers that I I was following until some point until I got sick of it, they all wear the same thing. Like it's the same designer, and they all want to look the same. They don't try to be different. And it's not how they dress, this is just like, okay, I don't know, Stine Goya or some big designer sponsoring them, and they all just wearing this stuff that looks ridiculous. And you're just like, so there's

Pascale

So there is no originality or uniqueness?

Interviewee 10

Yeah,exactly.There is they're just all the same. And I mean, it's also not just Danish influencers, I think a lot of influencers. I like that in fashion. But I think fashion is such a, like, becoming a dangerous topic. Because fashion industry is like, known for doing a lot of harm. And people are kind of promoting this past fashion. And I mean, of course, we're all part of this fast fashion trend. And everyone is like, we're always but they're like, pushing it even more, because they are constantly like, they're never having the same outfit. They're always wearing something else. And you always feel like, I need to buy this stuff. So you're always like, pushing this thing that is kind of like snowballing. And it's not a good thing like I mean, I think with food influencers, they can push some product, but it's not like they're not going to ruin any like the environment as much like and it's not like you will see some kind of tea or oil or whatever they're promoting and be like, Oh my god, I really need this. Yeah, you might think like, oh, maybe I'll try this tea that this influencer talked about, but I feel like their impact, negative impact is so much smaller venue, or like in food, or in illustration, or this kind of stuff, like people who are, for example, influencers and drawing and illustrations that I follow. First of all, most of the time, they don't really promote anything, like sometimes they might promote some brand that is like making markers or paint or something very rarely, because they are they are usually using a specific, you know, specific paint brush or specific thing. So they don't like they wouldn't just switch to something else. Because that's like, how they draw. I mean, the,they can, again, promote some kind type of paint, but you wouldn't have the strong feeling of like, I really need this paint, you will just be like, Okay, if you are an artist, you will think, Okay, looks good. Looks like it has good properties. Maybe I'll try next time. But you still have your own tools. And you won't be as like, there is no urgency. Like in the fashion there's like an urgency and needs to be in the trend. But in a lot of other categories there is no urgency like you don't need to be part of this trend, like in fashion

Pascale

So you can be authentic and stick to your style and your passion?

Interviewee 10

Yeah, but there it's more like you don't really stick to that when you're in fashion and your big it's more like, Okay, what Chanel is doing, you're gonna wear those new bags or whatever. So it's, I think, definitely, like in fashion. I would say it's less or least authentic ones or Yeah, modeling whatever. Again, it's fashion and okay.

Pascale

Yeah, interesting. Let's quickly switch to the impacts. So you've talked a lot about characteristics which drive authenticity do you engage with influencers? Do you comment? Do you send the messages do you do you I don't know for what posts to friends so you already mentioned that you send the message to one of the influencer because of the video. Is there anything else you have engaged with?

Interviewee 10

yeah, I definitely like stuff on their profiles. And yeah, sometimes I would message them if it's something like, I don't think I comment much, to be honest, because they often post something like, you know, when they're where they're trying to get the engagement, they post something where it's like, oh, tag your friend, or let me know how you feel about this. But I don't like I'm just like, okay, I don't have time for this. And what's the point? Because there will be like, 2 million comments there anyway. But I feel like when you send a message, maybe they will see it. And often they do see it actually, I mean, you can see that it was seen or and they reply, but it's not that often that I would send a message.

Pascale
Why do you send the message then?

Interviewee 10
I think it's like, one was where I felt really strongly emotionally about this video. And I sent it to her. And she actually replied to me, and I was like, speaking of being friends, it was this chief adventure. And I was telling her like, I don't know, because she's traveling always. I was telling her like, you're always welcome in Copenhagen, just let me know, next time you're here. And she was like, Sure, I would love to, like, I would love to visit Copenhagen. And she was actually like, meaning it and I think like, or sometimes I would message to ask something. But it's very rare. Usually, they know that people are going to ask them something. So they only say like, Oh, this is from here. Or this is where I got this. So yeah, I think it's if I feel strongly about something, I can message them. But and also that, yeah, I probably forward some stuff to my friends.

Pascale
Why? Because you think it fits to their personalities. Well, or into the intimate,

Interviewee 10
Maybe, like, there is something that they posted. And I think, wow, that's interesting. Or I want my friend to see something like I might forwarded just because it was interesting, or it was funny, or there was something that they might find useful. I don't, I don't think there is one reason like, I wouldn't just forward and be like, Okay, see this, check this out.

Pascale
It's more just like with an intention behind that?

Interviewee 10
Yeah, I don't know, for example, reason. I know they're on on this beach or something. And I would follow it to my friend and say, Hey, do you remember we're talking about it? I don't know, some kind of food. And then I can send it to my friend and say, should we cook it or something nice feeling. Or if it's an interior, like, I can send it to my boyfriend and say, yeah, we should get this thing or it looks nice. Maybe we should when we're changing the apartment should do that.

Pascale
So the relation to the content is really important?

Interviewee 10

Yeah, you can relate somehow in there is some kind of maybe conversation that you had about it with your friend or your mom. Like, I send a lot of stuff to my mom, she's on Instagram, all the time as well. So I think it's, yeah, if they can relate to it, or they can make use of this content, I would forward it.

Pascale

Have you ever purchased something on it from like, because of a recommendation? Or did you maybe check it again, online? How is it about the products? Do you get inspired to buy something?

Interviewee 10

I think not really. Actually, I don't, again, because of this whole authenticity thing. I don't really like I know that it is kind of just an end and I don't feel like oh, I need this thing. Most of the time when I see some sort of ad or something. I don't really feel like oh, I need to get this. So I don't think i really purchase anything. Sometimes I save for example, like I see a person and it may it might not be an ad someone was wearing nice trousers or something. And I can save the post and be like, Okay, I won't look for executives like this brand and stuff. I will just look okay. Like, I really liked the shape or color. I will look for something like that. So way like, I probably would save it just for an inspiration. And then look at something after, but not like I would want specifically this thing that they're wearing.

Pascale

If you think about a recommendation of any influencer. Is there anything on your mind? Which like, maybe you didn't purchase it? But like you said, Oh, this mug brand look nice. And then you checked it online and scrolled through. Or are you rather on Instagram look for the content?

Interviewee 10

Yeah, I think the only thing I can like, remember is the food recommendations. Like if they posted some recipe or something. I actually could have done this thing. Or like I actually cooked it. But that's like the only thing getting that comes into my mind. Like I okay, one. Maybe there is this, but I never bought it because it's just way too expensive. But there is this like influencer. I randomly somehow stumbled on this Georgian girl who is nothing special. Really her profile. She has a lot of followers. Her name is salka06. But she has a brand of shoes. And I started following this brand because I really liked the shoes. But they are quite expensive. Because I know that they're coming from Georgia and everything is cheap there. So I like they are designer and everything. But I like it's way too much for the standard of the pricing. But I like when I just saw it and I love the profile. Like I just I usually don't follow any brands actually. Because it, I'm like, well, what's the point? But this one I like somehow because it's not just the shoes that they're promoting. There is like arts and girls and different things. And I would probably at some point, I really consider buying them. And I just figured out yesterday that the Georgian website is cheaper than the international one. So maybe when I'm back home, I will actually get a pair delivered there or something. But like I started following it, because I saw her and she doesn't actually share that much about her brand. To

be honest, it's just there in her bio. And I started following it. I didn't purchase it. Maybe I will eventually purchase a pair of shoes when I have a job and money or when I'm back home, actually. They have a really nice profile. I think it's really well done. Like the way they have it. And it's not even that big to be honest. But they were were in like Vogue us and stuff. I don't even like I don't really understand how they got there. But I think that's like what comes into my mind. I mean, it's probably been a year or two that I've been following this page. But I didn't buy anything yet. Okay. The only thing I can remember.

Pascale
Nice. Okay. Any last thoughts on authenticity of social media influencers before we stop?

Interviewee 10
I feel like it's going, like it is becoming more important topic like the authenticity wasn't that important before I think it was more like people were just like following everyone and looking at this and then people started getting mental breakdowns on that. And then suddenly everyone started talking about mental health and how you shouldn't strive for perfection and all this stuff. So I think it's becoming like a bigger and bigger conversation than you should be mindful that you shouldn't just be scrolling and mindfully like thinking that everyone likes everyone has perfect life and it's like a big topic in general I think not just on Instagram but any like on social media that like perfect life image that people are trying our influencers are portraying is actually crushing others. So, I think it's going to go down and more people are trying to be authentic some people just can't because they created a brand that is just like they don't know how to go to being authentic and some people are just not authentic in general like not everyone excellent shows their emotions that you can know a person but they might still you know, always carry something and never tell you how they feel. So of course this kind of influencer will also never tell the like 10 million followers how they feel, they will just be like, yeah, everything is great. So it's I think it will be more and more important and probably like this whole, it will there will be and maybe there is already a trend in decline in the following of this like perfect profiles. So yeah, I think that's most about it.

Pascale
Thank you very much.

Appendix 13:
Transcripts Focus Group

<u>Focus Group 1</u>

Ranim
Hi everyone, thanks for taking the time to be here today. Our topic is going to be about the authenticity in the context of influencers and the results from today will be used for our master thesis. And you were the lucky ones to be chosen because we believe that you are quite active on Instagram and that you follow influencers. All right. Now we just have like some short guidelines for the focus group, so you should know that are no right or wrong answers

so don't hesitate to talk about your experiences about your opinions and thoughts. And also, we are tape recording with Otter. So please talk into the phone when, when it's your turn, and also talk, one, one person at a time. And we are the moderators, we will guide the discussion, and please feel free to talk to each other so it's not to us they relate to each other with us with everyone and respect each other's views.

Okay, now we want actually a first round. Each one of you should introduce themselves with name, age, and origin as well, just like to identify you later when we listen to the audio note.

Participant 2
My name is Kathleen, I'm 25, and I'm from Germany.

Participant 5
My name is Elizabeth, I'm 25 as well and me too from Germany.

Participant 4
I'm Maria I'm 23 from Portugal.

Participant 1
Nora 24 from Germany and

Participant 3
Dustin 25 from Germany.

Pascale
All right, we want to start with a little icebreaker game. So please get your phone and open your Instagram account.

Participant 3
What if I don't have Instagram.

Pascale
And then we really want to find out how addicted, you are now so if you would go to your own profile and check your activity, so you go on to the three lines on the right side, and then you, we just wanted to like, see how active you are and what is what's surprising results you get.

Ranim
How much time you spend?

Participant 2
I have also 40, but I also worked today. So, it might be biased. Usually its higher.

Participant 5
Well, I was lying in bed yesterday, so I spend a lot of time on Instagram. One hour 18 minutes.

Pascale

Maria, what do you have?

Participant 4
I have 40, but one hour sixteen on friday.

Participant 3
My peak is 18 minutes, but average 12 minutes.

All
crazy, crazy.

Pascale
That's ok, only Elisabeth is above an hour.

Ranim
I actually I used to have around 50 but it was, it was very bored. My average went up to one hour and 15 minutes. I never had before. To be honest.

Participant 5
I have never checked this before.

Pascale
Me neither.

Participant 5
I'm very surprised.

Pascale
So, as we seen you're quite active or some are more active than others, but we saw that you're using Instagram and we want to ask you if you also follow influencers and if yes, and why?

Ranim
And also tell us what kind of influencers.

Pascale
Anyone wants to start? Yep.

Participant 4
Maria here. I usually follow influencers, either. Regarding food, especially like vegetarian or vegan food. Because I like all the colorful Instagram's they have. And they have to be really funny for me to appreciate, whatever they're saying or whatever they post, because it's kind of like the energetic field that vegetarian, vegan means. So that's mostly the kind of Instagram was that I follow.

Participant 5

Well, in addition to food Instagram influencers I would say that I'm following a lot of Fitness like fitness influencers who are like posting workouts because I use it as an inspiration to whenever I go to the gym to have like inspiration on what kind of exercises I can do and yeah, that is like mainly food and fitness influencers. Yeah.

Participant 2
I also put a lot of food Instagram is, I guess like influences, but also some. Yeah, I would call it maybe lifestyle influencers, but recently I started to actually like unfollow a lot of them because it just, yeah, not as interesting anymore. And I tend to follow only people that I'm really interested in what they do, so I kind of discovered that over the past weeks.

Participant 3
For me, I don't, I don't really follow food Instagrammers but travel and like celebrities, I saw on on movies and TV and stuff.

Ranim
Why?

Participant 3
Why those? For travel is inspirational also that I see where I want to go or, yeah. Mostly it's the same places they all go to and make beautiful pictures but still. And there are some more authentic, and some less authentic but some just have nice pictures and some have a story behind this or, like a whole theme and celebrities I don't really know why I follow them. Probably because I'm interested what other people like celebrities do. And if I become a celebrity myself someday then I know how to behave.

Participant 1
And, yeah, I also follow influencers or bloggers, but mainly for fashion, and also travel, but not for food, or fitness. I don't know why, but fashion like mainly to get inspiration. I think that's my main purpose of like following influencers and also maybe to kind of see get attached to their personal life kind of see they way of living, what they do for career, kind of their perspective on life, I guess, and then travel also for inspiration and blogs sometimes.

Pascale
Okay, cool. So you all follow some influences and as we told you in advance, we wanted you to think about an influencer that you perceive as authentic and come up with some thoughts about this person.
And, yeah, and this is where we want to make a little game with you. So we prepared some post its. And we would like you to write down five characteristics of social media influencers which make you perceive them as authentic, so you can keep this certain person in mind or you can also, if you have several authentic influencers or persons you follow, just keep them in mind when you write down five characteristics. Is this clear or should explain more?

Participant 5
Character like adjectives that describe them?

Ranim

Well yeah, for example, so like any aspects that make that person or that influencer authentic to you. And it could be adjectives. Okay, stuff they do, or any content.

Participant 5

Content as well?

Ranim

Exactly. Anything that kind of makes you found that perception.

Pascale

Could also be something on the profile you see it's a big variety. There's no right or wrong so just. We respect your feelings.

Participant 4

Just a word?

Ranim

Yeah, you can also you can also write sentences. Everything. You can also look at the influencer's profile if this inspires you?

Participant 3

So not why we follow them, but why we find them authentic?

Ranim

Right, it would be nice if you would have this idea of authenticity in mind during the whole focus group discussion. Right now, in the first step we will kind of clarify what I means for you. Well done, then. Authenticity is like defined by different subcategories. And I am hanging on the wall now. And then I want you guys to actually come with your aspects and see if they fit into these categories. And there's also another category which is called other. Maybe it doesn't fit into any of those.

Participant 5

Could you explain what integrity in that context.

Ranim

Yeah so integrity would be things related to ethics tomorrow, too. Yeah, pursuing things morally justified manner.

Participant 2

Yeah, doesn't have to be the one to one particular can also open up and it can also overlap?

Ranim

It's fine if you just put it under one category for now.

Pascale

And then you can say, you also think it's related to the other when we talk about it. Yeah, exactly.

Ranim

Okay. Yeah, you can just hang it up and then we will discuss it all together. Okay, so let's start like I mentioned by dimension. So, you guys have said consistency and be coherent, especially in terms of sponsorships and then consistent attitude opinion towards certain topics e.g. sustainability and body shaming. Maybe the ones of you put it up there and maybe elaborate a little bit further on this.

Participant 4

So as I talked about being coherent, especially sponsorships. Also because just in the authenticity. What perspective, especially with sponsorships that's what kind of takes it a bit away of them as a person and more like a job. So when I say coherent, I mean more like your don't show like you're doing it just for the money. Your stay coherent with your content, and you don't choose just anything that can sponsor you or pay for your activity, whatever.

Ramim
Yeah, nice.

Participant 5

I wrote the one with the consistent attitude and opinion with regard to certain topics, and because I think a big part of why I perceive that particular influencer as authentic.
Yeah, authentic, is that she is like a lot of her content is with regard to sustainable, like or to make your life a bit more sustainable and how you can do like make easy like switches in your daily routines. And, yeah, it would be… I think it would be weird if she would then advert are not advertised but they promote content that would say the direct opposite of that. So, I think that's why I personally perceive her as authentic because she's like, not posting the same content every day but it's like all going into the same direction. And, yeah, yeah,

Pascale

Yeah. Exactly, exactly. So you say it can be overall topic with sub-content.

Participant 5

Exactly, a overall topic and her content be related to that topic, but there's no contradiction in what she's actually posting. Yeah.

Ranim

Yeah. Maybe the ones who didn't put up. Also feel free to contribute something comes up to your mind, regarding that topic. So I'll tell you talked about consistency as, you talked about consistency, as a sign of authenticity. Also in our interviews we had a few people who said that as a certain sense of consistency make inferencers more authentic. But there are also people who said that if a profile is to homogeneous, then it actually takes away again from the authenticity of that influencer, because one person cannot be just one thing, so it doesn't really show who they really are.

So these were these two opposing views. What do you guys think of these opinions?

Participant 1
I think consistency in something maybe you stand behind, kind of like a style or something like a lifestyle you live is good, but I think a variety in the sense of opening up maybe about personal stuff, or something that actually really matters, and that is always, I mean something that's usually defined by variety. That is something I perceive as authentic. So in that sense, I think it's nice if there's a certain variety and what the person has to say or just share because that's I guess normal that you don't think about the same thing every day.

Participant 4
I think that it's okay I understand the view that you should have, because life is not about one team. But when you're following these people, you want to get inspiration and it's usually a certain person that brings inspiration in one theme. It's, I understand if you're following your friends, maybe you want to see whatever it is that they're doing in their lives and there's no such consistency in that matter. But when you follow an influencer your aim is to get inspiration in one matter, it's not the person itself it's what it stands for. So, in that sense I would not say that continuity or consistency is that you have to stand for so many different content. So…

Participant 1
To that, like I think for me, I have a different view on it because to me often influences are about that one person and that share a lot of different stuff so I think I have a different view on it because I don't follow often influencers for only one reason, but for that I find them. An interesting persona themselves

Participant 2
I think you can think of consistency as a general theme throughout the whole profile so if it's like a sustainability blogger or influencer doesn't really make sense if they then like advertise stuff as you previously said about like no like a company that's super unsustainable sustainable, or if they fly twice day, or, like, that doesn't make sense I think consistency is not only in terms of the content that they post of course it needs to be some Rarity but also whether about their attitude on about their, their general behavior, that doesn't that shouldn't be contradicting to overtime.

Ranim
Nice. Yeah. OK, Cool. So, move on to the next dimension. Okay, next one is credibility.
 And here we have: content on weak spots, sharing videos that look more like real life, then filtered one, independent style and creativity, not just ads, not afraid of speaking out their opinions, they actually do what they are promoting for a living, daily life, not just special occasions, dinner, events, engaging, answering to comments with followers and not 100% retouched and edit. Okay so, who have you wrote stuff and maybe elaborate further on it?

Participant 5
And I wrote the one with content on weak spot because for me, it's quite important that the influencers don't only emphasize how great they are but I've actually usually follow people

who I can relate to somehow, so it has to be like a real person. And every real person also has some flaws, I think, and that that's what they like that's what makes them authentic if they also can say that they do some mistakes or they are not perfect, in some ways, and the other one was about, that they actually do what they're promoting for a living, because I always think yeah, whenever those people who really know when I thought about those people who are really like who I have the feeling that they're super authentic. It was mostly influencers who were not only like pretending to be that kind of person on Instagram, but also like actually worked within that field, like if it was like a, I don't know, fitness person, it's mostly like people who are also personal trainers or something like that so if it's like, what they do for a living, then it for me represents their credibility even more.

Ranim
Can we go back to you for a second. So, what do you look at when you kind of see... so what's kind of aspect to them the profile itself will tell you that this person shows that you're weak spots or shows that their expertise, like, how did you infer that? You said you look at her profile, and that is what you were saying about her, but how did you find that out.

Participant 5
Yeah, probably. By looking at different posts like clicking on to the pictures and actually reading the captions like what it says underneath. And, yeah, then it's like an assessment process that I do myself like if I read what it says and I find it appealing and I find, like I think that it sounds real, then that's probably how I assess it, I don't know.

Ranim
Yeah. So you kind of look at the caption? And it's something over time which comes to you?

Participant 5
Yeah, exactly. Like, probably, it could. It could also happen that I would follow the influencer like after looking at their profile once and then over time I might realize okay, this is not really what I was looking for and then just unfollow them, because I can see on their stories that they're like, like that it's not really interesting stuff that they're providing me with So, you know,

Ranim
Yeah, in that sense we kind of forgot to say that when you talk about it maybe also say how you infer that idea from the profile for me from other aspects like how you came to this idea.

Participant 3
I wrote...the one, not 100% retention edited, some pictures or some photos I see, they have like crazy pictures and a really really good, but you kind of get the feeling that they're retouched and, yeah, for some places that I have been for example, Bali is like, amazing photo spot, but actually being there is something totally different, and the waters are blue stuff like that. So, for example I have the feeling and that they, they retouch a lot of pictures, and I don't really believe in that content and then it's not very authentic anymore. Still good content but not really authentic. Oh yeah and engaging with the follower base. In terms of credibility, if

you post something or say something, and then don't pull, you're not following up and it's kind of hit on the credibility.

Pascale
Where have you seen engagement, for example, what kind of engagement?

Participant 3
For example, or political engagement, for example, and take for example, gun laws, someone says something about gun laws and then there's some shit storm and those people like engaging with their follower base and saying yeah but it's really standing for their views and stuff like that.

Ranim
Okay, and how do they engage with that file based, in a caption, in story or how would they do that?

Participant 3
Um, yeah. Some story features are there where you can answer stuff and where you can rate stuff, you know, and also the captions. Yeah, and also just interacting, make a video with someone, some people say something and then take it up again in another video or stuff like that.

Ranim
Yeah.

Participant 4
Okay, I talked about sharing videos that looked unfiltered. Because, especially with the Instagram you can have those stories. And I think that kind of makes people more real, in that sense, so you have all these filters also because you want to keep it in this also what we talked about consistency. You want to keep it very consistent. So some things you have to change with filters so that the page looks kind of consistent. But then when I talked about sharing videos (i.e. story) is something that looks a bit more you're a human being, and you're filming yourself, or you're talking about any anything even if it's politics anything, but that shows that you're a real person, you're not just having this wall of filtered images. And then I talked about not being afraid of speaking your opinions. And that means any type of content, where you don't, also you don't keep yourself too serious.

Because I feel like, you're a bit more credible when you're not afraid to laugh about certain things, or when you're not afraid to express certain opinions that might be a bit controversy, or that shows that you're also a bit of more credible person just because you keep loyal to yourself even though you have this Instagram page that has a lot of people following. So yeah, that's it.

Participant 1
I wrote the one was a independent style and creativity, and I think maybe firstly, it is important to say that I want different stuff from different influencers, so for like this is really only for

fashion, but like, from other influences, or maybe I'm more interested in the lifestyle or travels, that wouldn't apply. But for fashion I, for example, don't need so much personal like input but I really like if they have their own style. And, that like is completely creative and maybe I feel it is so typical them. And that I get inspired by and that is also something that I actually like and become like a consistency. So, yeah, kind of like a unique style that I think is typical that person and that you may be get inspired by.

Ranim
And what is unique for you?

Participant 1
Unique is, for example, something that someone that doesn't just follow up trends, but like I know for example one influencer that I have in mind, she always worse like really neon colors but in a really nice way and that's from me like unique her, even though she does that since years. And, but like in a good way.

Ranim
Yeah. Okay.

Participant 2
I wrote the one talking about the daily life. I think we kind of touched upon that so that they basically, you know, they don't only talk about super special occasions and they only post and use like stories when actually something is going on, but also show their daily life. And that's mainly for kind of lifestyle influencers, and then I also wrote the one with, yeah saying that a profile should not only consists of ads, what I hate about some influencers is when they kind of talk about something that they don't advertise and then they say, like particularly say, this is not an corporation and it's like that I'm like okay well like, can be true if your if your content only consists of ads and promotions and whatever.
So, yeah, for me it's also kind of important to not only have stuff that is actually being advertised but what they also actually like.
Yeah. And of course they should like the stuff that they promote.

Ranim
So basically you want to see some intrinsic motivation in that posts?

Participant 1
Yeah.

Ranim
And what do you think, how could you see that it is not only a collaboration or some monetary monetary ideas behind, but they're actually, that's passion or that they're intrinsically motivated.

Participant 2
So for many from an emphasis you always see, like, I think there's this new law, like that's really new, but like couple of months ago, years ago, but they actually have to like why if it's

an advertisement or not. And then of course, that's how you see it. But, yeah, in general, like also talk like having them talk about why they find something particularly interesting in that day. Yeah.

Pascale
Anyone else has an idea of how to show intrinsic motivation?

Participant 5
It's basically, it's the same as reviewing on the internet I would say, it's just giving your personal opinion, like when you've used a product or like, if it's clothes or food or whatever and you really liked it for a particular reasons and you can indicate that other products without naming them, but why other products, didn't live up to your expectations, and they can release, like, give reliable reasons why this product did live up to the expectations I think this is really like giving credibility to them. And also showing me that I'm like, I might get interested in that product as well if I have experienced like similar discomfort or with other products. Yeah.

Ranim
Nice. And also, some of you touched upon the idea that they show insights into their personal life, and which makes them more credible and authentic. And also this has been like picked up in our interview some said okay they really need this, these insights into their personal life to see if they're authentic or not, but others said that they're not really interested in stuff like their mother's birthday or about their dating life to make them more authentic so, how much insights into that personal life is actually needed to say okay this person is authentic or not. And also what kind of insights?

Participant 3
I think I don't need too much information surrounding them but it's more about what kind of information, so I would somewhere say, the good the bad and the ugly so that you have it all that. It's not just the the beautiful stuff but maybe also the not so cool stuff or what's bothering them or something like that, so not the amount of information but more like all parts. That you have the feeling of a holistic image.

Participant 1
Yeah, I agree I also like if the information is kind of honest about everything, and I also generally, I would say, I like personal touch. To some, I think two lifestyle inferencers more than two for example, people that you just follow for fashion or for travel, but when you really follow them for the lifestyle, then definitely. And I also like, if it goes beyond like the obvious but maybe it goes into, I don't know, political opinions or something they've experienced that they think is like important to share.

Participant 4
No truth is can be transcribed but there's this one event, like on Facebook, which is called like fuck up nights. And it's people like cheering like about stuff that you fuck up in life. And for example, I think that would, that is something really cool if you're sharing something that you did wrong, I fucked up in this, I did this or that, and that gives you a certain, like you said, I

don't know it differentiates you it's, it's something, okay, this person has this flaw and that's actually funny and it's more engaging, I would say, yeah.

Ranim
Nobody wants to add anything?

Pascale
Yeah, okay, we have as next category integrity, and we have things like, don't show like it's a job for them, oo many caps with advertising words. We have opinions on criticism but reaches them from followers. So I think that's kind of in involving the followers. Honesty and reflections, a personal touch to open up and spread the word about interesting experiences. Yeah, these ones. Nice ideas. So, yeah, again, what kind of showed you, these aspects. And where did you put it? I don't know who wrote that I wrote.

Participant 4
What was the first?

Pascale
Only show like it's a job for them.

Participant 4
And what is next?

Pascale
Too many caption was advertising words.

Participant 4
Yeah, I'm not, I wasn't sure if I should put this in credibility or integrity. In this case I put integrity just because, okay, you talked about a bit about okay morals and ethics and everything. But for me, integrity, it's also about staying true to yourself. So, your own values. And that also goes in the case of influencers, to not showing too much like it's a job, and be a bit more true to yourself and for example, this when I say about the captions, is that sometimes you have those captions that you can clearly see that is, oh I use this shampoo what amazing shampoo, go and buy it. No, it's like we talked before, it's more like I really liked it and give some reasons and yeah actually I had problems with, I don't know, had problems with my hair before when I was a kid I suffered from this and that or something that is more true to yourself than just those captions..are boring.

Ranim
And how else can they show that they're true to themselves? Apart from the captions.

Participant 4
Apart from the captions that they're true to themselves? I guess it's all in the same line of thought. Also, when I talked about sharing videos about their normal lives and be to be true to yourself is also, because when you follow Instagrammers. And imagine you follow them for your some, some of these Instagram has become too mainstream because also because of

money, and then you kind of lose interest in them, and staying true to yourself, it's not letting that kind of theme, go into the mainstream market like now I'm doing fashion all of a sudden, or I'm doing traveling, all of a sudden when what I did the most was talking about dogs, I don't know, just because it makes more money so that kind of loses your integrity and your, yeah.

Participant 5
Yeah, just in line with what Maria just said, I wrote the one with opinion, like, interacting with what followers, like, yeah… And, yeah, I think it's mostly about that whenever, a lot of influencers are being criticized from some of the people that like, I don't know, interact with their content so I think staying true to themselves also in a way that they actually like answer to those criticisms and don't change their opinions. If, for example, the majority of the comments is like criticizing them for something, but they will like stand up for their own opinions and just, like, yeah, somehow try to explain why. Why this criticism, like that they can understand the criticism but on the other end how their own opinion and their values is actually right to them. And, yeah, in that way. Make those criticisms, like, yet, try to diminish them a bit.

Ranim
Yeah.

Participant 1
Yeah, I wrote the ones. The one with personal touch, I think that we touched upon before and that also with honesty and reflections. And I had like, like one story in mind there, that was about like an influencer that I followed since a while and she talked about her struggles, getting pregnant. And for me that was for example something really interesting because it's maybe nothing that we're too much in touch with right now, because we're a little bit younger, but I thought in general like that's nothing I ever thought about but like after she opened up on that. I thought that is like something really interesting that actually, I don't know, I kind of took throughout the week with me and they thought about that like some woman actually have so hard times getting pregnant and yeah that is actually like a struggle that many people have. Yeah, so stories like that I kind of get inspired by, in order to think like about a little bit different stuff maybe and, Yeah, I don't know, give me new thoughts kind of.

Ranim
Where she talking about in the news stories?

Participant 1
Yeah, she was talking about it on a post, and then she also linked a YouTube video.

Ranim
Oh, yeah. All right,
Okay, so next point is symbolism, and here we have no shame, mainly in stories, opinions, and political personal views on current matters, stories texts besides, images. No..videos and texts besides images and including their surroundings.

Participant 2

Am I would the one saying no shame, because I cannot identify that also cannot relate to, like, perfect people that only show they're very perfect and, yeah, ideal life, but also have weakness. Yeah points of weakness, as we talked about before, so I think...

Ranim
Yeah, so you see this in their stories

Participant 2
I mean they don't have to post like super ugly pictures of themselves about lifestyle products in their feed.
But again, I think in stories that's something that they could do.

Ranim
Why do differentiate between the feed and the story, do you see it as two different things?

Participant 2
I think, particularly again for lifestyle bloggers it is the feed also talking about consistency it needs to be like for them I guess it's a goal to be at look nice and to and to of course, kind of reflect the real life but not it. doesn't have to be the daily, daily life, but an Instagram stories I guess that's rather about your personal life and that's stuff like, yeah, unperfect moments could also go.

Ranim
Do you guys agree with the fact that maybe the feed is more like an artistic kind of representation and the story more insights into their lives?

All
Yeah.

Pascale
The next point is very interesting, including their surroundings.

Participant 3
Mm hmm. That's mine. We talked about this before that. It's not just what they really want to show but also how they kind of show and what else what other information they want to give away. Yeah, it's not really about how they live or showing every detail like, I don't know but just a bit more. Yeah, the holistic image that is that you really can identify with that person, I guess.

Pascale
Do you would you guys say that you can identify with your authentic influencer?
And if yes why would you identify.

Participant 4
I don't know if it's so much about identifying myself with. Maybe it's more of. Maybe I wish I was a bit more like that. So I do identify what I wish to be. So for example, I talked about being

like super energetic and funny and having all this, like super busy life and healthy and everything. That's what I would like to have. So I kind of identify just my wishes, with the person, not so much myself, I would say,

Ranim
So more some aspiration?

Participant 5
Yeah, I agree with her like it's more in terms of that their lifestyle, in a sense, is desirable, in a way, like for example for the whole fitness, I will just keep going with that example, that It's just not nudging me in a way where like keeps reminding me that I should get my ass off. And, like, go to the, to the gym more often. So I'd like to be not like a similar person but it's just like that. I think it's desirable and it's important to work out and, yeah, so that kind of represents that thought, I think.

Ranim
Great. I think for. Now, let's talk about another one.

Pascale
There's a lot about the funny and humor, I can see and relevance and content such as indicating on whether post a sponsored or not the good and the bad, and the ugly, I think we talked a lot about this. And, oh, yeah, let's see who wrote this humor and funny things? Maybe we can get some information about that. And especially where do you see that they're funny?

Participant 1
Yeah, I think you is it, either as see that through the story or a caption, I guess, because I mean, alone a picture I usually don't find super funny, but like, yeah, I think it's nice if there's like some kind of entertainment I mean sometimes Instagram, maybe it's also not like a deeper, deeper thing, but just like a simple medium to entertainment. And just as TV or anything else. So in that sense, I think it's funny if someone posts a funny meme, or something like that, that I laugh about.

Participant 4
I think for me, this goes to anyone influencer not that when you say authentic. It usually has some funny trade, to me, so I perceive people that are more funny as more authentic to themselves. In general, I think humor it is part of its part of intelligence, it is part of emotional, everything in a person. So, in this case, if you're funny influencer or at least you have some funny parts of your captions or your videos or whatever. Then, for me, that's what's being authentic, yeah, that's why I put it.

Ranim
Okay, um, so now that we have like clarified a little bit but like authenticity ends up in terms of influencers means to you, we will have we have two statements that came up in our interviews: The one is one said, I normally don't take influencers as a credibility stamp. And on the other hand we have other person who said, people always trust people over organizations.

So, these are like two very opposing views. And what are your thoughts on on these views. Do you agree with one more, with the other more?

Participant 4
Can you repeated it.

Ranim
Yes. So one person said, I normally don't take influences as a credibility stamp. And then another person said, People always trust people over companies.

Participant 3
Regarding the first one that's credible, when I, when I think of that I think of like fake news and facts and politics and stuff. And if someone addresses their opinion and in the story or says this is how we live in this in this country. I don't think that's that's really credible or the whole picture I think it's their opinion so I would stand with that.

Ranim
Maybe credible in term of products?

Participant 3
Yeah right right yeah that's that's something that's something different. I wouldn't take it as a fact that it's good because I always have in mind that it could be advertised or I don't know their agenda, they might share it or my share might not share it. So, it's definitely more credible than, then when that company that produces, say shampoo says it's really good.

Ranim
And why?

Participant 3
I believe in the integrity, more or yeah I have my my own image about the kind of influencer I follow. So, when I purse purse perceive them as credible and they show or they advertise something, I think they have more on the line than a company that produces stuff. They could lose their follow up base or get a shit storm.
Yeah, they could get hurt, in a way, I don't know. So in the company's more like a. It's not a natural person right it's legal entity and they don't really care. They have a PR team.

Participant 1
Yeah, to me, I, I believe that influences for me I only like inspiration. But I don't take them as credible like and I don't think in any sense like if it's, let's start with like political opinions or anything then I think it's also again an inspiration to maybe think about the topic, then I would make further research or google it, because I think it's an interesting topic, then read myself into it from different sources and built myself an opinion, and maybe even think of maybe I don't agree. So, and the same actually goes was products like. I think for me it's again like oh yeah interesting there's products out there and then I would Google again and like, build myself my own opinion and actually go by quantity also, if, like if I think about a product I would go read reviews. The more the merrier kind of, and I think often even like if products

are hyped on Instagram I would perceive that as negatively and be like, okay, like, it's probably not that great of a product if it needs that much advertising.

Ranim
So when a lot of Instagrammers promote the same product the same time.

Participant 1
Yeah. In general, I think, like, it's for me rather negative like it doesn't work as advertisement for me.

Ranim
And how would you structure it what would it make it more credible, if an influencer wants to promote a product?

Participant 1
I think the only thing that sometimes I believe in credibility, if again if I look for a specific product and I see a lot of people have used it, like, for a longer time and didn't get like paid for it but in general, I think for me it doesn't work so well, that advertising...that part of Instagram, it's more of the creative inspirational thing.

Participant 2
Actually, I kind of disagree. Elisabeth talked about it before about reviews and in general, I think that we live in a world where there's so much information and information overload so it's difficult for consumers to make decisions. And I think that's especially two-fold, low involvement products rather, that sometimes it's also subconsciously. Sometimes I find myself buying stuff just due to nice packaging or something and then a day later I see that actually one of my influencers actually talked about it like a day before and then I'm, okay maybe that's also another, another ad, and why I bought it, just because I saw, maybe not even consciously saw but also.

So I think that's definitely, so I think people like tend to rely on recommendations one more and I think if that's like we talked about role models before and aspirations and desirable lifestyles and if there is someone that actually likes the product that I desire then I might be more prone to buy that product in the end.

Ranim
Yeah. Okay. All right. Nice, um, maybe one last question about your question before turning to the second shorter part, don't worry, about this discussion. So another quote that we would like to discuss with you is: I think the picture is beautiful and I know it's not real, but I think she is authentic.
So she kind of builds up on the idea that something that is not even real she knows it's fake, but she still perceives as authentic. How do you feel about this comment? Again, I know if she posts a beautiful picture that's maybe not reality, but she's still authentic.

Participant 4

Um, I think, okay, I'm again going to talk about for example, the fact that I like, there's a specific influencer who's vegan and he's crazy and he's super energetic and he is really really funny. And when it comes to the, for example, there, he's photos, sometimes you can clearly see that, okay this is really colorful. This is not real food.

But the thing is, when, and that's exactly what it is about authenticity. if you, if you already have a background where you trust this person, and where you already. Okay, in his videos you see that the real color of the food for example, but he in his page he tries to make it also like to full just like he is and I don't perceive that as being less authentic just because he has some filters that have more colorful food, for example. Because then he adds something more real to it, but it's also nice visually for me to go into his feed and see all those colors and yeah I also feel inspired by that so.

Ranim
Any other thoughts?

Pascale
And okay, um, we talked about, more or less about drivers which make you perceive your influence as authentic. And now you want you to think about a little bit about the engagement and how you engage with followers or with your authentic influencer.
We would start with a sentence and we want you to kind of finish the sentence, so that we can see how you feel in that sense. So, after looking at the profile of my authentic influencer I feel...

Ranim
For example, after watching his story.

Participant 3
Inspired.

Participant 2
Inspired. You find it interesting and then kind of, I mean it could be like a super tiny impact. But there is an impact.

Pascale
Yeah, like you said, with the purchase, maybe you got subconsciously impacted?

Participant 2
Yeah, you're not only, not only in terms of purchasing but also in terms of like topics that they talk about like Nora's are like the two would actually actually stuff up just because I talked about it that you would not have thought about.

Pascale
So, opinions and topics that they come up with.

Participant 4
I feel motivated.

Participant 5

Yeah I what I was just about to say the same. You're actually either if it's like about food or fitness it's just that you have this topic on top of your mind and you might be, like, more prone to take an action with regard to that, like, maybe I would go to the gym one more time, or maybe I would go to the supermarket and buy some stuff to, like, try to cook with similar recipe as the influencer posted. Yeah.

Ranim

And some people said that after looking at Instagram they sometimes feel negative afterwards because they feel like, oh my life is not as great. How do you, like in that sense when you look at your authentic influencers. Do you then also sometimes feel negative, or do you feel positively or neutral? Anything?

Participant 5

I mean, I can understand those feelings of like having the feeling that my life is not as like glamorous or not that interesting and kind of boring, but I would rather have, like, I wouldn't say that I would experience those feelings after looking at the next Instagram story or content of like an authentic influencer, but rather of a person that is more like a celebrity like of, like, I don't know, like, people who I cannot compare myself like, fully like compared to. So, if it's like, I don't know an actor or a model, I can, and I, I see their content and I think, Okay, looks cool but I wouldn't feel bad about it because I know okay they're in a completely different situation than I am, so, no I don't feel bad about it because yeah there's nothing to be jealous about, I mean, yeah.

Ranim

Building on this idea. So, you said, like we said okay people feel negative about like watching this perfect life influencers. And you said okay after looking at your authentic influencer you don't feel this negativity, but so we see that a lot of people still follow inauthentic influencers, or influencers that they perceive as inauthentic. Why do you think is that the case?

Participant 1

I've thought about this before in general was like Instagram as, I think it's often, that once you follow you, it's way easier to follow than to unfollow because as soon as you follow you usually get like personally involved, at least at least with like someone like me who's also interested in their personal story, often or, yeah, their background something that moves them, then you get like kind of person that personally involved, even though you maybe know that they're not hundred percent or something so I think. Yeah, maybe you kind of build up a relationship to that person and it's way harder to cut it down to open it.

Participant 4

I would say you some, at least most of the people like to see un-realistic things. It's the same way as you like to see a fiction movie or just to dream about it. So you like and realistic things I feel like, in terms of Instagram influencers, in terms of anything in life, sometimes you need to go into that Dream Land. That has nothing to do with you or your life.

Participant 5

I think similar to that it's also like, If we look at how marketing or advertisement nowadays is trying to lure us into purchases. Everything is advertised. Like every product you see in like magazines or on TV in the advertisement is kind of like, either in a perfect setting or in a perfect condition. So, we are kind of like, we are used to perfection, as consumers. So, we are used to seeing perfection so it's not that we are like. It's nothing new to us. So, yeah, maybe that's.

Ranim

Do you think, things are changing? I remember, can you said (Kathleen) in the beginning you started on following people, do you think maybe there's a direction that goes towards more un-perfect things? That people want? That people seek? Also terms of influencers?

Participant 5

Definitely I think there is like a movement towards that. But, I don't know, like, it's complicated to, to kind of explain what the drivers like what would drive me towards that imperfection. Because on the one hand, I'm used to the imperfection and I can like distinguish whether it's real or not, but I don't know it's a bit confusing. So, yeah, but I would actually, I would agree to the fact that there is a movement to like more towards more reality.

Pascale

But hard for you to distinguish?

Participant 5

Yes.

Participant 2

I think there's also a lot of influences that you just follow for entertainment, to be honest, like I was looking at my influencers and I couldn't find like lots of authentic ones, to be honest because there's also so many influencers that I just follow, who post super stupid things and random stuff. And it just yeah for amusement and for entertainment mostly so, I think, of course there's some, like there's a trend of following more relevant people and more like whoever, in terms of content but there's also still those entertaining people that you just followed for fun. and you just hang out or integrity, and sometimes it wants you to who don't feel like you missed out when you don't but sometimes it's just, yeah. Also something that you do know boring, our level.

Pascale

Yeah, sometimes you also don't want to have this deep thoughts behind it, you just want to kind of get you entertained and can find. Nice. Okay. And so, we want to talk about promotion codes because this should engage people to buy stuff right and we had one guy who said, if an influencer has a good voucher or a code, and I know it's a good product then I would buy it, even I don't trust the influencer, so even if it's taken un-authentic one. And, yeah, how do you see this relationship between promotion codes which in this case would be out of monetary incentives, versus the social media influence authenticity?

Participant 3

Well, if I know it's a good product, and I get a discount, I would sure I would buy it or more keen to to do so. Regardless if the influencers actually authentic or not because I have already built my opinion about this.

Ranim
So, let's say, new product so if you didn't know the product. That would make a difference?

Participant 3
Yeah, they wouldn't make a difference. I would then probably try to build my own opinion about this or Google or see some reviews, stuff like that.

Ranim
And if it wasn't authentic influence over the promotion code?

Participant 3
I might not rely on reviews so much, or let's say okay yeah it's bad but in my, in my situation it's good because said so or I don't know, so I would have a different take on this probably.

Participant 4
No, actually. When it comes to those codes. I doesn't make me want to buy at all. It makes me feel like it's more advertisement. So, in my opinion, it's like adding advertisement on advertisements so. So yeah, that's it.

Ranim
Final question, guys, some energy for the last question.

Pascale
What can influence that do to be be perceived as more authentic and be like as precise, like exactly actions that he/she can do?

Participant 5
What can they do?

Ranim
Yeah.

Participant 1
Transform personal stories into actions and political opinions. Yeah. So, in general, and I find, like, it's the first for me to be authentic, if your personal, and then it's even more authentic, if you actually derive an opinion from your personal history. So if, for example, something happened to you, then you reflect upon it, and then you may be spread the word about something. So first step I would say, open up about personal stuff and second step, actually promote what do you think is relevant for the outcome for change. Yeah, and how do they do that.

Ranim

Do you see it more in the Insta-stories?

Participant 1
I don't think it matters too much to me, I don't watch Insta-stories so much but more posts, or even you could fake also link, another source of something like that.

Ranim
So you take into external sources into consideration?

Participant 1
Yeah. I generally like that, if they are referring to an article or something.

Participant 4
My personal opinion is to not take everything so serious, because that's not what we want when on social media, don't. I mean, obviously if it's a political, even if it's a political matter. Sometimes we at least, I feel like as millennials, when we go on social media. We want to disconnect, a bit with the world that sometimes we're maybe not as happy about. And having this kind of, it's being authentic to, because in our own lives we also don't take everything so serious, or at least we shouldn't. So for me, it should be a bit more like not being extremely serious on social media. In certain aspects, obviously.

Participant 3
For me to be authentic, maybe share some behind the scenes content. So, even if I know this is highly polished this this picture or story or whatever, it's really interesting to see, this is how we did it and like be honest with that and say, yeah, here we have the crazy filters and we have a photo booth and stuff like that but if you're honest about this and say yeah but it's it's, this is the style we want to communicate, then this, it's totally fine, but behind the scenes. Transparency.

Participant 5
Yeah, I have, I'm sorry I have to go back like to the flaws and, like admitting that, like, for influencers to admit that they are not the perfect person that their feed is kind of picturing them. So, it could be like about encouraging or like telling their followers as well that you don't have to, like follow with what they are praising like on their feedback about if it's about nutrition or whatever, like about the fitness stuff and that it's okay to also like, I don't know cheat have cheat days or whatever like just giving personal examples that it's happened for them as well, and just being honest about it. And I think that also refers to the transparency that it's not only about trying to promote themselves as the perfect ideal, but also like human being.

Participant 2
I guess to be themselves like not to be someone else I'm not to be fake but just be honest be consistent in your behavior, attitude or whatever. Just be real kind of true to yourself.

Ranim & **Pascale**

Yeah. Okay. All right. Thank you guys so much for this focus group. It was an hour and 30 minutes. Perfect.

Focus Group 2

Ranim
Hey, everyone, thanks for taking the time to be here and help us with our master thesis. So as you already know, this focus group is about your perceived authenticity of social media influencers. And the results here will be used for our master thesis. And you were selected because we think that you might be active followers of influencers on Instagram. And yes know that during the discussion, there are no right or wrong answers. No, yeah, no right or wrong answers. We want to hear your experiences and your opinions and your different points of views. And you should know that we are taping all of this, and we're using this transcribing tool. So when you speak, please hold the phone and dont interrupt each other, like speak one at a time, otherwise, it will be difficult to transcribe. And and yes, **Pascale** and I will be moderators on this focus group. And also, yeah, talk to each other in the discussion and not like, we're not kind of teachers or something. All right. And then most importantly, respect each other's views and opinions, please.

Alright, so what we need to do now before we start, actually, we want to each and every one of you to say like, hold the phone, say the name their age and where they are from, for later for the transcription to to to identify your voices with your names.

Participant 3
Okay. Hi, I'm Charlotte 25, and I'm from Cologne, Germany.

Participant 2
Hi, I'm Sophie. I'm 27 from Hamburg, Germany.

Participant 1
I'm Charlotte as well, and I'm 26 and I'm from Hamburg, Germany.

Participant 4
I'm Sajaan 24. And I'm from Copenhagen, Denmark.

Participant 5
I'm Theresa. I'm 26. And I'm from Stuttgart Germany.

Ranim
Alright, so now we're going to do a little icebreaker game with you guys. So for that one, I want each one of you to take your phones and open up Instagram. And then, I don't know if you know how you find that out, but you can check how much time you spend on Instagram. And I want you to look how much time you spend and kind of tell us.

[Indistinct Chatter]

Ranim
Now, just tell us I throw it in.

Participant 4
1 hour and 8 minutes.

Participant 1
15 minutes.

Participant 5
26 minutes.

Participant 2
1 hour and seven minutes.

Ranim
So as we can see, you kind of split quite some time on Instagram. And now we want to know Do you follow influencers? And what kind of influencers do you follow and why?

Participant 5
Okay, some things that I look a lot into is some interior design, or some like furniture, or how to, like, put a furniture in the room very nicely. And I think that there is a person behind that. I think it's always the same person. And, and always her kitchen or where she travels and stuff and also like to go on these cooking or like food bloggers or Instagrammers...

Ranim
Yeah, why?

Participant 5
Because I like to have the inspiration from this. And I like to look at food.
And sometimes even though I don't pick the recipe to cook it in the end, but still, like makes you think about for example, today I saw something about Salomon. And I thought, okay, maybe we can, I can buy salmon and cook something similar to this. So it really inspires me to do different things. And also with the furniture as sometimes they tag it. And I picture myself having a house one day and then going back to my Instagram and picking among the collection of my selection. And then maybe one day I'll be able to get these kinds of furniture and put it in my own house.

Participant 4
And I follow same as you said, a different kinds of accounts that are not necessarily people but organizations or collections of different types of things. Some of them are architectures, some of them are food as well. But if I'm talking about specific people, then it's more music related: different DJ producers and all different kinds of people in the same industry. Just to mostly see what's happening, what's on the forefront of the industry, what's going to happen to kind

stay on the pulse of what's happening out there. But otherwise, it's all different kinds of accounts. I wouldn't say there's mostly one specific type of account that I'm following

Participant 1
I also follow influencers but rather specific persons, I would say. Mostly fashion, food and lifestyle related because I like to get some inspiration regarding fashion styles, or like, look at the current trends. And then I also like to get inspired for new recipes I could use for example, when I tried to eat more healthy I followed Deliciously Ella and try to like get her vegan recipes. So yeah, it's more like an inspiration.

Participant 2
I think I would also use it mostly for inspiration. I follow random accounts, fashion accounts, food accounts, and interior accounts. And I think whenever I look for something specific, for example, when my boyfriend moved into a new apartment, I was looking more into interior accounts.

Participant 3
yeah, I also follow many influences on Instagram, I would say mostly lifestyle related and maybe also fitness bloggers because I like to get some inspiration about for example, sports and also food as well. And then a big part is also traveling because I can relate to most of that. Like I create my list on where I want to go depending on what people show on Instagram. I would say are also follow some fashion bloggers, but not really because I want to resemble them but more because I'm interested in like, how they are living their life and what they do every day more than I would just go out and like buy the same bag as an influencer. Yeah, so I guess mostly probably because of inspiration.

Ranim
Cool. Nice. Thank you guys. All right.

Pascale
So we've talked about your influencers. And yesterday we told you that you should think about an authentic influencer like an influencer that you perceive as authentic. So maybe you have some thoughts about that. Now we would like you to write down five characteristics which show you that this influencer is authentic. It can be in a sentence, it can be one word, an adjective noun, whatever you think.

Ranim
Yeah. So what makes an influencer authentic to you? If you want, you can also look again into Instagram to see if it helps you to find some inspiration for that.

Pascale
Please it's just one word on each post-it. Because we want to hang them on the wall later.

Ranim
You're done? Okay, cool. Because now we're gonna hang up something on the wall. And it's actually a construct or the dimensions that we found that relate to authenticity and we want

you to come forward and see if your aspects fit into the these categories and just pin them below. But if they don't fit we still have another category, called "other".

[Participants pin their post-its to the wall]

Pascale
Now we would like to go through each of these categories with you and we would like you to explain why you have chosen this specific characteristic. And how did you see this on the profile or what shows you that this characteristic makes them authentic?

So in continuity we have different things. People put: humor, right content, if ads then serious ones, not many posts not daily, really out of out of inspiration. Okay, anyone would like to start ?

Participant 3
I put up humor because I think if an influencer has like a certain relatable humor and it's part of their personality and it's continuously on their profile, I'd like to follow because I can relate to that kind of humor. So that's what I think gives a lot of authenticity to the influencer to have that continuity with humor.

Pascale
And where do you see this humor?

Participant 3
I would say in the in the stories because you see like how they verbalize this. Like kind of jokes that they are making but also I think in captions, or even in the pictures themselves - as they also have a language kind of.

Pascale
An within a caption, for example?

Participant 3
Yeah, it could be just a word, like maybe also some kind of self irony. Like not taking oneself too serious, maybe some smileys, basically anything. But it has to be relatable between like, different posts to be a bit more continuous

Ranim
Anyone wants to add something to this idea of humor?

Participant 2
I put humor in the symbolism because you put identification and relatability behind it. And I think humor makes me identify more with the person. I was thinking about this one Instagrammer. She only posts like high end fashion but then on her Instagram stories, she is really funny. So I think that makes me identify more with her, because I'm not wearing Chanel bags every day. But because she is funny. I can identify with her.

Ranim

So do you see the feed and the story as two different things when it comes to authenticity?

Participant 2

Yeah, yeah. Maybe it's like complementary to each other. Because on the pictures, you don't see the character of a person, but in the stories you can see the character. I also put Instagram Stories under symbolism because I think this is a tool that makes you identify more with people because in pictures you can't really see how they are actually - I mean, probably also not in this stories, but you feel that at it's more.

Participant 4

I have the next one, which is varied content. I think in terms of continuity, it's good to see that the person is being themselves throughout their stories or their posts. But if they vary the content and still managed to stay himself, so if it's a sponsored post, or not sponsored posts, but the person behind the post is still the same, and presenting the information in the same way - that for me is continuity. Whereas if somebody is changing how they're speaking to their followers, based on if it's a sponsored post or not, that can seem a bit to me, okay, I know this is sponsored, I can just see it, you're not being authentic to me right now. So that's what I mean by varied content, but still being continuous.

Ranim

Other thoughts on this idea? You agree, disagree? Nobody? Okay don't worry.

So in our interviews, some said that a certain sense of consistency makes an influencer authentic, but other set of the profile is too homogeneous, then it couldn't really represent who they really are, because one person isn't just one thing. What position do you guys take to this?

Participant 1

Yeah, that's what I would say. I would attach importance to their consistency in terms of … like that why I also put if they do ads, that they should do serious ads, or credible ads or something, But if they do ads or present themselves on Instagram, then they do it like with some kind of consistency. And that they have like 1,2, 3 topics they focused on that they deem important. I don't know. But yeah, I think for me, it's more important that they're consistent, not that they have a variety of things. Because then I would say, "okay, you're just doing it for the money, because you're doing like this, this, this and this with these these these brands. And then yeah, it kind of loses its continuity for me,

Ranim

And how can they show this continuity? How's it reflected?

Participant 1

Good question. Of course, it's also the visibility on the profile. I would say that some kind some consistency… I think most influencers attach importance to a consistent look of their profile. But it's also in terms of brands they advertise for, so that it's not, some random cheap fashion

fast fashion brand, and then the other day, it's the most high class beauty product. That just that the whole thing is, like consistent.

Participant 4
Yeah, have something to add on that. I think it's really the continuity and the credibility of it, not to go into that one. When I see somebody who has sponsored posts, and then they subsequently in the different posts use the same product without that one being the sponsored post, it shows me Okay, they weren't just doing it for the #ad. They were also actually really fond of the product and they want to use it. So if you see somebody using that product, subsequently, maybe even a month after that post. The thing we usually see is there are three posts in a row where they say "this is my favorite watch brand" or something else and then you never see it again.

Participant 1
If we talk about fashion, then you also you attach a certain meaning or a certain symbol to an influencer that you follow. So you kind of expect that that person, has for example a certain routine in sports or has like a certain style and that's why you're following them. And if they suddenly they do things that differ from like, why you originally followed them for, then at least for me, personally, I get a lot less interested in the content that they post. So I think that would be continuity for me that you don't just change your style or like a fitness influencer that starts to advertise for food that isn't really healthy or something. I would kind stop believing that this is really continuously going to be the content that I would like to see.

Participant 5
I dont know if you know Celeste Barber - she's always making fun of the typical influencers on Instagram. And I think that she's really funny how she puts the way normal influencers are and just makes fun of it. But at the same time, I think she support that this is just how it is that people actually like to look at it. And I mean, yeah, she's just just making fun of them. And also, of course, it's some some certain advertisement for those influences. And for example I think I would stop following her if she would start doing some advertising for a fashion brand or if she would start working out like seriously or starting to lose weight or doing something that she used to make fun of before. I think that can be very important to if you going to follow someone or not, if you perceive the person as authentic or not, if they've just change the values and the symbols and the idea that they're standing for.

Pascale
Can you maybe elaborate a bit more on this idea, not daily posting?

Participant 5
Yeah so continuity for me was how often you post something and since I said I'm following a lot of like food and furniture and design stuff. I think they mostly post about things that they have in their own life like food that they think of or how they may be design some new corner in their house, so it's not necessarily a whole house or whole room but just like putting some flowers somewhere can already be something that freshens up the feed. And if this happens only once in a while then you think that it's more authentic because that's actually part of their life. I mean of course I know that they put a lot of effort into it and a lot of time but it

seems to be just something that they experienced in the normal course of their life and it's just happening on top of it and it's not the whole content of your life - so I think it's more authentic. That's what I meant by that. So really out of inspiration so they didn't sit down and brainstorm and thought "oh my god what can I post today". At least it gives me the impression out of inspiration you never know.

Ranim
So that it flows naturally and not forced?

Participant 5
Yea, yea.

Ranim
Cool then let's go on with the next aspect which is credibility. Bere we have: not on the highlights; realism; irony not taking yourself too seriously; no ad overload; not too superficial; season related and personal story.

Okay, so who wrote what and who can elaborate on it.

Participant 4
So I had the first one so I can start. What I mean by not only highlights is if someone is just showing me the highlight reel of everything going great. I don't know if it is a credible source or not. Because I don't know what was kept from me. And I don't know what was shown to me. Of course, it fits the feed better to have only the highlights, it looks better, it seems better. But by seeing what didn't make it, I can appreciate what did make it more.

For example, I saw this one Instagrammer who was working really hard and creating some merchandise for the followers. And it took like six months, revision after revision, after revision. It wasn't as good enough for her liking. And then finally, when she had something - even though I not that like interested in what she's doing, or anything else - I actually bought the merch, because I saw what went into it. And I was like supporting the idea of hard work and positive outcome rather than just saying, "Hey, I made something", then you don't know, if it is actually good, or if it's just a T shirt with a logo on it.

Ranim
And how can they show this hard work?

Participant 4
Drafts. This is just in the example of the merch, right? But if they have something they're working on, show us the "behind the scenes"; that they are working towards something. I have another one in the other category called "goals", the only one there - and what I meant by that is, if you know somebody aiming for something, then you can appreciate the process rather than just being shown the end product. That can seem very out of the blue, like where did that come from? But by being aware of the goal in advance, I can appreciate both the process and the outcome more.

Pascale

So also by showing some transparency?

Participant 4

Yea, transparency, for example, this didn't work out, so I'm going to do it again. That's nice to see that you're not just taking anything as in being like "yeah, my followers don't know anything, I can just sell this to them".

Participant 2

But don't you think it makes them more human, that it fits also to symbolism then? Because you can identify with them, because it's like your own kind of work process, you know, like how you work as well. And you want to see how this is in their life.

Participant 4

Yea, you could say it symbolizes credibility - so, I don't know where to put it.

Ranim

It's fine. It could fit in different categories. There's no real rough distinction.

Participant 5

I wrote a lot of stuff down there. So the last three are mine. And credibility to me, is something that like - as I said before... I think I'm always talking about the same thing somehow - But still, I can say that, if this really coming from the lives of the influencers and if you feel like they're also having a personal story within the posts and that they for example, one influencer I'm following about food she started to cook for her children, because they were intolerant to gluten. And then she just started off with this and then she continued and then she always puts a little story behind it, for example, how she was on the market and saw this league and then she thought, Okay, what can I do with league and and you know, the whole storytelling behind it. And to me, it seems to be very genuine and so I think it has a higher credibility if you do that.

Pascale

So it's also a bit like showing the process of how she's coming to the recipe?

Participant 5

Exactly,yeah, yeah. And that's also why I said "season related" because I mean food and furniture or design you can actually always relate it to the season you're actually in. And of course, for Christmas, for example, there is a big boom on Christmas recipes and candles and I don't know what

Ranim

So some sort of relevance?

Participant 5

Yes. And it's also I think as long as you can see that there's actually a person behind it, someone who thinks about what story to tell, and what products to put in, what idea to present, I think that makes it it credible at its best.

Participant 3
So I put down realism and irony. I think for an influencer to gain credibility. It's really nice that they are realistic in what they tell that's also a bit relatability. But I agree, it's about showing the process and not just some results. So my example would always be Devin Brokman. I don't know if you know her, she built a swimwear brand with her best friend. And they keep inspiring other people to build their own business. But they also keep telling you, it's not easy and you have to work for it, that there are going to be ups and downs. And I don't want to see on an Instagram story, just the highlights from like someone who just shows like working for this brand. I want to see what this person is doing. And I think therefore also taking yourself not too serious and not thinking you're like one person out of a million who has this kind of life. Yeah, makes it very authentic. And I think credibility is therefore like a big part of authenticity.

Participant 1
Should I continue? I think mine was like, hand in hand with yours. So I put down "no-ad-overload" because I feel like if an influencer only posts ads all the time -I know, it's a big part of it - but if it's like every single every second post is an ad, I would not take that person seriously anymore or find him credible. And also relating to it, is not being too superficial. Like some of you already said, just show some parts of your private life or something that is like, not just related to ads, or not just superficial things in life. For example, sustainability bloggers, for example, they address important topics. And that's what kind of appeals to me, or what gives them credibility.

Ranim
And where do you want to see all these things you just said about credibility? Do you want to see it in the InstaStory? Or do you also want to have it reflected in the feed?

Participant 1
Well, for me, the story is more like giving insights to some private aspects of life and I put that to symbolism, because I think it makes me relate to that person more. But I think it's also important to have it in the post actually, because, like I said, If every single post would be an advertisement, I would just not take that person for real.

Participant 4
I understand that a lot of influencers have a feed to keep intact, and a visual appearance of it, to not break the feed with something not related. So seeing it in stories makes a lot of sense. But sometimes I've also seen the actual post, then you can swipe on the post, and then they have more related to that which might not fit into the feed. But it's on the same thing on a more raw level. So that's a great way of circumventing the problem

Participant 3

I would also agree that it's kind of complimentary. So I think you cannot really separate stories and feed because it's the same person and the same thing that the person or brand stands for. So I would say it should be with some kind of consistency in both of those.

Ranim
Yeah, cool. Nice. Some of you picked up the idea that you want to have some insights into their personal life as well, which would make them more authentic. However, some other people in the interview said "Oh, yeah, I'm not really interested in their their mom's birthday, or in their dating life, or whatever". So according to you, what do you think how much personal insights is needed to see them as authentic? And also what kind of personal insights o you want to hear?

Participant 5
So for example, I'm following this account, and they went on a family holiday, and they showed pictures or stories every day. And then eventually they got home, and then she was saying "Oh, my God, 24 hours without Instagram stories, we now have to fill up the feed and story again", I was like, "No, you don't have to". I mean, if you're on vacation, just enjoy it. Even though they're just showing what they're doing. And I know they probably experienced much more things while they're traveling. But still, I felt like I don't want to see their children running around. They just sometimes take time off.

Participant 2
I following this Instagrammer from the US and she always shows her children and I really like to follow it. But then when I really realistically think about it, I think showing your children on Instagram is something that you shouldn't really do. Like, if you have an open profile, and everyone can see your pictures. Because you never know: First of all, if your kids actually want to be shown when they are crying, or when they are sick, or whatever. And also, you never know what kind of people are watching those stories, for example, and what they do with the content. I know there are some perverts out there that might use it. So I think this is something that makes them authentic on the one hand, but then on the other hand, like I would not like this person probably in real life, you know. Because I think it's not okay to use your children as a big part of your account to grow followings and to earn money. So I think, it makes them authentic on the one hand, but then on the other hand, it's not really something good to do.

Participant 4
I think for me, depends a lot on what kind of relationship you have with your followers. So if you're having a very personal one, talking about all your ups and downs, and your families, and what's happening and whatever you're going through, then kind of expecting to see a bit more than you would from somebody else. But it's a very professional account, where you know, it's Instagram for work. So somebody is using that to showcase their talent or their skill or whatever it is, then I don't expect to see anything private from them. That's beyond the scope of what this Instagram account is for. So I think it goes back to continuity - if you show then keep it that way. And as you be perfected throughout your brand, but if you don't, then the same should go through, if you're very professional, don't have a random post with your kid's birthday, that would break the continuity.

Ranim

So you think it depends on the type of influencer?

Participant 4

Yeah, I don't think there's one straight answer. And you have some accounts that I follow where I've no idea who they are personally, but it's still follow them. And then there are some where I feel like it's a distant family member. So it varies a lot.

Pascale

You guys agree with the different categories?

All

Yeah, yeah.

Participant 1

I kind of agree. And also, I think that I personally, personally follow Instagrammer who share a lot of their everyday life. And for me, on the one hand, it's important to make sure that that person is not just doing everything for sponsored stuff. But on the other hand, thinking about it, it's also quite creepy that we're all so so interested in their private lives, because we shouldn't care. And also, I think it's super authentic if instagrammers take a break from Instagram and say, "Okay, I'm not going to be online for at least a few days" or who just not share everything. I mean, I'm also not interested in the kids birthday or whatever. It's just I think it's a matter of balance.

Participant 3

Yeah, I would relate back to something I said earlier. But I think you follow everyone for a certain reason and you attach some kind of meaning to it. And I think it can vary a lot. So if you follow someone, because you think that person has an interesting personality or is discussing a very interesting topic, then I think it's really nice if they share very personal things. But for example, if you follow a fashion blogger, just because you like the style, then it might not be too interesting to get insights on what I think about whatever. So I think it also goes back to being continuous and what you share on your feed, and on your stories. Because you know what you're standing for, and why people follow you. And I think it should not vary too much within certain topics.

Ranim

Yeah, nice. Cool. Nice insights guys. Thanks.

Pascale

Let's go on with the next point, integrity. I mean, I think we mentioned some aspect already but: honest about ads, #not sponsored, honesty, not too many ads, seems to be real food, not too perfect, following your strategy (not promoting cheap watch when only wearing designer brands). Then, let's start maybe with the honest about ads.

Participant 1

It's just honesty for me, it's related to integrity, because I think that influencers should deal with it. Like with having sponsored posts and everything - I think they should be just very honest with it. And I hate those bloggers who are standing there like, I have this new Daniel Wellington watch, and I just love it so much. And also like you said, it's so good if you see that they're wearing it non sponsored posts. Recently one blogger who had like Stella McCartney bag, which was sponsored by a shop in Hamburg, and then I realized that she wears that bag, like all the time when she goes on travels and stuff like that. And then I thought, yeah, okay, that's fine. And so you kind of get the honesty from the sponsored posts and then you also kind of can relate to them because they actually wear the things

Ranim
How can influencers else show their honesty?

Participant 3
I think now this rule that you have to say that it's an ad or that it's sponsored. I think that's already kind of honest. I mean, they're forced to do it, but that's how it is. But I think it's very important so that people don't get like completely blinded by what they're doing. And yeah, like I said, not just pretend that you're like, such a big fan of one product when you're actually not.

Participant 2
I put down: following a strategy not promoting a cheap watch, when you're only wearing designer brands - and I think it goes very well with this. And I think some people that I follow on Instagram, they always wear, designer brands and then there's this new brand I think it's a German brand, Seidenfelder, and they send out lots of cheap bags, not real leather bags to influence us. And they all promote it and be like, "Oh, it's such nice bag" and I'm like, "Well you only wearing Chanel and whatever every day., as if you wear this 50 euro bag now". I think yeah, it's ridiculous and there are so many that are doing it. And then I can't really take any of those sponsored post really seriously.

Participant 5
I want to add something which we haven't spoken about yet - answering in the comments below. Because I think sometimes, of course, if you have like 500 comments per post, it's really hard to follow up. But normally, if you post something every day, there's not that many comments. So sometimes if people ask questions, or if it's actually about - no matter if it's a watch or other another fashion item, or food, or I don't know what - sometimes people ask questions like "Where can I buy it? or How can I use it? Or what can I change about it? How do you use it?" And I think if the people really start answering their followers and also interact, because there's always this sending and receiving kind of game going on. And normally, it's just like, from the influencer's point of view, just the sending. But sometimes they also receive something and and I think it's just honest, and it shows that they're actually themselves making these posts, thinking about the content of it, and also creating them. And then if they answer I think this gives the follower himself really a good feeling about the honesty of the person.

Ranim

Does it also help if you see if that influencer comments on other pages?

Participant 4
I'm going to come back to that one later. I wrote the first two ones or the one with the honesty about that's actually not sponsored. What I meant by that is I really like when some influencer or Instagrammer is talking about a product without it being sponsored. They just generally showing, "Hey, I just had this product, I use it a lot. It's great." And then subsequently, if they get sponsored, I'm actually happy for them, "Hey, it worked out for you".

And then if I'm seeing them doing the same thing on different companies' pages, they're going to post a great product or actually have it or whatever it is. Now, it's very product related, the examples I'm giving, but it could be anything. Then it's it's nice. It shows that they're also engaging without there being a direct gain for them. So that's interesting for me.

Ranim
Maybe one last question. Integrity is often also defined in terms of being ethical, showing moral values. How do you feel about that? Do you expect that from an influencer to show these traits actively, or? What do you think about that?

Participant 4
I think it depends very much on the brand.

Participant 3
I think it's again related to things or symbols that I expect from someone. And I think a good example is Faux Fur. And I think at least today, I would say no big influencers actually wearing real fur on jackets and stuff. And that's, I think, if we talk about fashion influencers, there's just some more guidelines. And I think if I would see someone now wearing a fur jacket, I would be really upset if they tried to set the symbol that they still like it, even though they know all the consequences about it. Especially in the fashion industry. And then if fashion bloggers, for example, engage in some kind of more political movements, or to engage in some kind of group like PETA and that they are standing for some values, I think that would just give them more credibility or more integrity in general. So I think it's also kind of the role of an influencer if they have so many followers and such a big reach that they kind of are a good example for their followers. And whatever the topic is, you can always be a good example, and not like push things further that have a bad influence on society. Like even for example, like when all the models were so thin, and then there was movement against it. So I think they should be conscious about the fact that they influence so many people by their reach.

Participant 2
Of course, it would be great if they would be a good example for others, but it would only show integrity if the person who's promoting this is actually believing in it. So only doing it because you think it makes me more "integer", it wouldn't really make sense. But then again, also, they're like, two influencers that I know that are really into this, and they talked about it every day. And because I, as a follower, am not that interested in it, although I know that I should be more conscious about it. I think it also annoys me a bit that they always talk about being vegan and about all the dead animals and that you should only buy from these and that

brands and that you should do this and that and you shouldn't wash your clothes that often and blah, blah. So I think it's also hard because, if your followers dont have this mindset, it won't help you as an influencer.

Participant 5
Directly relate to this - I think sometimes there's a huge reality gap between what is going on in the social media, and I'm not only talking about Instagram, but also about Facebook and the other kinds of social media channels, because I think everyone is trying to be very, like left wing oriented and very liberal and very anti racism or anti anti-semitism or whatever, but in the end, when you look at some political outcomes, like some election outcomes, there's always a lot of people being right wing oriented. There's still a few, like, only a certain share of the content is proof of representing this society. Whereas you can see in demographic investigations that there is actually a lot more opinions on ... I lost what I want to say....

Yeah, but I think the main point is that there might be a huge reality gap, I read, there's something which is called publication bias, which says that you normally only publish research to define that find out something but sometimes you just end up not finding out something and maybe also on Instagram and all the other channels you only put stuff that goes with the came to be a good point of view, which is liberal, anti anti for, I mean, I'm not taking to for example, but you know, that only one side of society's really reflected and sometimes it's maybe not that authentic, as you said, and also like some people claiming to be I'm vegan, I'm so much came for the environment. But in the end, they also take coke and do drugs and stuff. So it's not really authentic at all. And I think a good good an exact example is Leonardo DiCaprio actually, because he never posts things about himself. And I think like, all of us would like to see some things about him. But he always posted something about the environment and actually just uses his his popularity as, as a tool to make to create an awareness of some like political reasons or issues or environmental stuff. And I think that can also be very important.

Ranim
So would you say you would like to see an influencer holding a plastic bag and say, "I'm guilty, I just bought a plastic bag because I didn't take my recyclable bags with me" Like to kind of show, okay, "I'm kind of also falling for it. I'm trying. But it's not always working in that sense". Did I get it correctly for of what you want to say?

Participant 5
Probably not, because this would be just a social shaming,
Anyway, it's probably not within the scope of your research. You can put this into limitation.

Participant 3
But I just wanted to add on that maybe it's not an example of authenticity, even though if you don't believe in something to show it. So for example, I'm also kind of annoyed that everyone is vegan. But then on the other side, I mean, I think everyone like knows that there's a problem would like too high meat consumption. So on the other side, if you had, like, this blogger with this huge reach, and then they would advertise eating meat. Yeah, that would just be counterintuitive. So even though even the person might just say to be vegan, or like strictly

vegan, I think it's better to promote something like that. And then for the good of the community around it, rather than - even though it's might might not be authentic - but I think it would be so bad if you have such a big influence on others and promote things that we actually want to reduce.

I wouldn't follow someone who's like engaging in stuff that I find not ethically correct. And, I mean, we can obviously have a conflict about ethics, but I think in terms of like, using your reach for the good, I think it would be super bad if you promote something that is not good for our society, our environment, like in general.

Participant 2
Now I have to say something, because I read this interview with as some influencers and they all say they'd rather post a picture of a burger than with a salad because their engagement rates always go up with this. Like a pretty girl on a picture, biting into a big burger. And everyone is like engaging in this picture and liking it way more than if this girl is sitting there eating a salad. So I mean, eating a burger is kind of also not healthy. And I think they like to see sometimes that these people are normal, and they eat normal things. And that probably the super super skinny girls are not eating a burger every day, but they just buy it for the picture maybe as well. So I think they make themselves more relatable with these kind of things like normal behaviors, you know,

Participant 5
The problem with this is that like, if you see this super skinny girl biting into a burger, I cannot believe it. Because I know that like, you know, for example, from Germany's Next Top Model they sometimes bite into something like super unhealthy. And then after the shot was taken, they just spit it out, because they're not allowed to have it. And sometimes it's like, as if! They are creating this super unreal picture of I'm so skinny, I don't work out work out at all. I eat unhealthy old time. But then I fit into this. And maybe this also is a problem with not necessarily our generation but but the following generation, that they're a bit distracted by this kind of "fake authenticity". Because we still know a bit more about health in general, and working out and eating and maybe we have already gained some certain self consciousness about that, but you're younger and if you look into these accounts, probably you really believe that there are people eating burgers the whole day, not doing any sports, and then ending up being super skinny. And and maybe you ask yourself why am I not like this? And then I mean, it's also known that a lot of young people actually have problems with feeling bad about themselves because of these Instagram accounts.

Ranim
You said, "fake authenticity" - we actually have a had a nice quote in the interviews we want you to think about. So one said, "I know if she posts a beautiful picture, it might not be reality, but she is still authentic". So can you find something authentic, and something that you know, is not 100% real or fake even?

Participant 2
I think that would need to be something complimentary again to it. If this person would only post these kind of pretty pictures, then I might not think that but if this person is also like,

without makeup on in Instastories, or whatever, then I would maybe think. But with only like super makeup pictures and, like, from professional photographers, I would probably not think so. But then again, maybe this person can still be authentic, but you just don't relate to her. Because it's not how you are as a person. But I mean, this doesn't mean that she can't be authentic just because the picture is more pretty.

Participant 1
Yeah, I totally agree with you. I think it's about the whole picture you get from that influencer. So what does he or she personal stories, what are her posts? And of course, many of the pictures may be fake or not very realistic. But on the other hand, I think even us normal people who are not influencers we usually post pictures where we look pretty or where we look maybe a little skinnier than we are usually. So yeah, I guess that kind of also makes them relatable, maybe. But of course, I think it's important that the whole picture just authentic, I think.

Participant 4
I'm having trouble discerning between reality and authenticity. So what is reality and what is authenticity? It could very well be reality, in the moment, "momentary reality", then it will be authentic as well. But if it's trying to show that this is the overall reality, this is how it is 24 seven, then it doesn't become authentic to me. So it depends on what they are trying to portray, because anybody can have like a moment of reality, which looks perfect, which is what pictures are - they are moments. So in that term, it could be authentic, but depending on what it's trying to portray

Pascale
Yeah, let's say last category, because we already talked about the other, and symbolism. So I can see: routines, giving everyday life insights in their stories, humor, Instagram stories, personality and emotions. Maybe we picked already up on some topics, but I think emotions is very interesting, maybe we could elaborate more on that.

Participant 3
I put emotions because I think it makes the person very relatable, if there is like a variety of emotions. So it's not, as we mentioned before, not only about high life, but it's about having good and bad days, and having like successes, but also things you need to improve for your life, or you which you are not really satisfied with. And I think we mentioned a lot about this before, but I would like to see the process on how you achieve a certain success, for example, or if it's even smaller things, but just not putting like the end result. And then being happy about it. But being a person means there's not only good things in life, and it brings a lot more emotions with it. And I think that makes a person very authentic, if emotions are in any kind reviewed in the stories and the posts maybe also have day, for example, go offline for a certain time, because they don't feel good, or they are working on something or they on a vacation and just want to keep their mind off Instagram. And I think that's all kind of the emotions, I would want to see.

Ranim
And how can they show emotions, let's say in the text,

Participant 3

I think it's also a lot about, for example, if someone has quotes in it, or as a bit more critical about oneself, or as asking for feedback, or is saying, I think this was really well or just was a big success for me, or this didn't go well. I mean, there's also some things that just don't work out some contracts they don't get or collaborations or whatever that might be.

Ranim

Now that we've kind of clarify it, when you regard an influencer as authentic, we want to turn now to the second part. We want to look at the outcomes of your authenticity perception. So we actually prepared some sentences. We will start the sentences and we want you to finish it. So for example: After looking at the profile of my authentic influencer, I feel….

Participant 3

Understood, because I can relate to a certain extent to what they're posting what they're doing what they're feeling. So I see myself in some kind of content that was posted or published,

Participant 5

I feel entertained, because sometimes I go on Instagram, just to take my mind off the things that I'm doing for work, or like university.

Participant 4

I feel inspired. So if I see something that I might not have thought of myself, it can spark an idea.

Participant 1

Yeah, exactly the same. I feel inspired. Because, yeah, I can just think about what I'm doing next, get inspired for style, workouts or whatever I just want to see.

Participant 2

I have the same I wanted to say entertained, because I think that's what you mostly do when you go on Instagram. Of course, it's also for inspiration, but in the end of the day, it takes your mind off something for like five minutes, and then you go back to whatever you were doing.

Pascale

We also want to talk about the impact of a recommendation. So: I would value an influencer's recommendation as trustworthy when….

Participant 2

… if this person doesn't advertise too much. And if whatever he or she advertisers is consistent with everything else that he or she displays that Instagram account.

Participant 1

I would say the same and then also if she or he presents it in a credible way so that I believe it. And I think it goes hand in hand with the consistency aspect you just mentioned. Because

if its products or brands that relate to his or her your overall profile style, then I would believe it more. But if it's something, like this super random brand that doesn't fit at all, I wouldn't believe it. And then also what I said before, those inferences standing there like "I just love this new product" and I just totally don't buy it then, yeah.

Ranim
Is time also an aspect for you? Like how long you know the influencer for?

Participant 1
Yeah. Definitely. Because then I kind of know, which brand she represents or, what her style is, of course. If I follow an influencer for only a few days, and she presents a brand I would definitely think differently.

Participant 4
I think going back to the point of not having too many ads, I'm paraphrasing a quote I once was told or read somewhere was about: "The more words you say, the less each word means". The same goes for "the more ads you have, the less each ad is worth". So if somebody who's known for not advertising a lot when they do advertise something, I'm more intrigued like, "Okay, this might be something interesting". And if I've seen them use that product or whatever it is, before and after and how they use it that I'm more intrigued rather than just being another one.

Pascale
In our interview, several interviews saw the trend that people started to unfollow "perfect" profile. You also talked about this kind of fake profile and that people feel bad about it, because they don't see them as authentic. However, still a lot of people are aware and continue following inauthentic influencers. For example, you also said you follow lifestyle influencers people who eat burgers even though they're thin. Do you also see a trend of unfollowing, and start following more authentic people?

Participant 1
Yes, I feel like it because first of all, I did it myself at least I started to unfollow several influencers, because I realized they're not giving me any value. And then also I talked to a few people about it who just unfollow those influencers or people in general who just don't inspire them or don't bring them value. However, there are just some influencers I cannot unfollow.

Ranim
And why do you continue to follow these inauthentic influencers?

Participant 1
Maybe because I'm not sure if I find them authentic or inauthentic. It's like, I just feel the urge to follow them.

Ranim
Maybe you don't need them to be authentic to follow?

Participant 1
No, not necessarily.

Participant 5
I think you like to have some dreamy kind of post sometimes because just having a normal normal life presented in your phone, you also don't have to pick up your phone. Because sometimes you just look like to look at nice things, good looking people, skinny people, because this is perceived as good looking. And then also it helps to see they're also normal kind of people in real life or also on their Instagram account. But in general, for me, you want to be entertained, you want to look at something nice. And I think also Instagram started off as some place where you can put in nice pictures and nice captions. And I think yeah, it doesn't matter if it's if it's authentic or not.

Sometimes, I have to say sometimes. It also depends on what kind of purpose you have when you go on Instagram. Sometimes you have different purposes.

Participant 4
I think it's really interesting how in the previous question, all of us said, entertain and a lot of us said inspire - So I think the same goes back to what kind of accounts to follow. Some of them are purely for entertainment value and don't have to be authentic, like sometimes if you see a comedy movie you know, it's not authentic, you know, it's just a bad comedy movie which is still see it. Same goes for Rom Coms or whatever, it's not a documentary, you all know that but it's it has a different place and a different purpose. Same goes for Instagram, I think.

Pascale
Last question. Okay, so please think about it. What can an influencer do to be perceived as more authentic. And be as specific as you can be. And it's fine if you repeat some things we already said

Participant 5
Tell a credible story behind the post or around the post and the whole feed actually.

Participant 3
I would say a show more emotions on both story and on your feed.

Participant 4
I think the main reason behind influencer gaining such popularity and such everything is because we have become immune to traditional advertising. We have become immune to web pop ups and whatever banners we see. So influences our way to go behind that firewall we have in our personalities of not seen that ad and kind of relating to someone and then we're more likely to be influenced. So if they focus on that being relatable aspect of it then thinking keep being the influencer, but if they're just doing the influencing part without maintaining that relationship, then I think you're having a one sided conversation.

Participant 1

One thing that just came to my mind because we also talked about the sustainability aspect like that not all parts of life can be sustainable I think you talked about it. I think also kind of like what you say that they deliver the whole story. For example, a sustainability influencer, of course he will, she will take part in some activities that aren't sustainable. And I think in that respect, it's important that they're honest about it, not that they present themselves with a plastic bag and say I'm using a plastic bag, but that they communicate that it's kind of a journey that it takes time to be sustainable, stuff like that. Not that I follow that many sustainability influences but it's just something that came into my mind I think that would help influence and be authentic. To show the whole story and not just the superficial things.

Participant 2
I think in the end of the day and influencers are a brand nowadays, like human brand. And we expect something or followers expect something. And like this, these expectations have to be met somehow. And I think they can be met if they have a continuous feed, if they have a well thought through strategy where they can integrate advertisements which I think no like follower would mind, but those that could also give value to the followers. By integrating something into the account that actually be met by followers because they advertise something that they stand for as well. I think this would make them authentic.

Ranim
Okay, thank you guys. So you gave us some really good insights actually. Super happy. Thank you very much.