Chapter 16

The Authenticity Gap: How Influencers Commodify Authenticity on Instagram

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Abstract

The authors examine the tensions between the public and commercial functions of social media platforms with a particular focus on how Instagram influencers look to demonstrate their "authenticity" whilst also pursuing commercial objectives. Drawing on a large-scale quantitative content analysis of the accounts of prominent Dutch fashion and lifestyle influencers, the authors demonstrate an "authenticity gap" between the way these influencers claim to be authentic in the way they talk about influencer culture, and the extent to which they actually implement "authenticity marker's" in their Instagram posts.

Keywords: Influencer; Instagram; fashion; lifestyle; authenticity gap; authenticity marker

Social media platforms like Instagram are nowadays central in shaping social interaction, self-expression, and identity (boyd, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010). People are increasingly conscious of the (online) identities they construct and use platforms such as Instagram to simultaneously explore, document, and share a sense of self. In the age of social media, this requires a constant awareness and an ongoing and ever more flexible negotiation of who we are and how we orient ourselves in the world (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

As a picture-based social media platform, Instagram is relatively unique for enabling "social interaction and aesthetical presentation, which allow users to build personal narratives and showcase identities that attract audiences" (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019, pp. 567–568). Although it is not its only feature, the visual esthetics of the platform are central to Instagram's identity and appeal

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(Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020; Manovich, 2016). The specific visual nature of the platform affords users to share intimate stories about themselves and their experiences via pictures, images and videos, based on the idea of a "perceived interconnectedness" between users and followers (Abidin, 2015, p. 1).

This public orientation is paired with a strict commercial nature. Platforms focus on profit-making and the commercial opportunities they afford (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013). Within this context, influencers have emerged as a specific type of social media users. They can be defined as "microcelebrities" who, through their strategic self-presentation, have gained a large number of followers and take on the role of opinion leaders (Gräve, 2017; Senft, 2008). Brands recognize the strong appeal platforms and influencers have on large numbers of social media users and use it to their commercial advantage. They partner with influencers to exploit their capacity to positively influence their followers' attitude toward specific brands and products, ultimately persuading them to buy these products (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Duffy, 2013; Gräve, 2017).

Authenticity is considered to be a vital ingredient in trust and identification processes between influencers and their followers (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Colucci & Pedroni, 2021; Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen, & Laaksonen, 2019). Yet, the commercial context in which influencers operate by monetizing their popularity puts their claims to authenticity at risk (Abidin, 2017; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Pooley, 2010). As Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch (2021, p. 2) argue: "overt monetization of content leaves audiences feeling that everything is simply staged for commercial motives." The social norm of being authentic compels influencers to engage in authenticity labor. They need to negotiate their authenticity and popular appeal by reconciling personal motives, social norms and expectations of their followers with commercial incentives and demands (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

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In this chapter, we explore the junction of the public and commercial functions of social media platforms by studying how influencers on Instagram commodify their popularity while maintaining their authenticity. We analyze how influencers claim and negotiate their authenticity in the way they talk about Instagram and influencer culture, and to what extent they actually implement authenticity markers in their Instagram posts. Based on this analysis we argue that there is an "authenticity gap" – a gap between what influencers in public discourse on influencer culture consider important and necessary authenticity markers, and the extent to which they actually implement such markers in their everyday social media practice.

Existing scholarship on social media and influencer culture has pointed to the centrality of authenticity. Mostly through interviews, case studies, and small-scale qualitative textual analyses, research has explored how authenticity manifests itself in influencer content on social media (cf. Abidin, 2017; boyd, 2008; Colucci & Pedroni, 2021; Duffy, 2013; Khamis et al., 2017; Maares et al., 2021; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). We argue that the focus on interview data and the limited scope of research into Instagram content have obscured insight into the frequency and scale on which influencers mark their authenticity in their posts. In this chapter, we therefore apply a mixed-method analysis, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach to not only understand how influencers

mark and negotiate their authenticity, but also gauge the scope and extent to which they do so.

We show how authenticity is discussed and conceived within public discourse on influencer culture, how the discourse on authenticity is translated into markers of authenticity, and, finally, to what extent these authenticity markers are actually employed in everyday practice and content. Therefore, we first explore which elements of influencer content on Instagram are considered authentic within public discourse, to then analyze to what extent these markers of authenticity are part of influencer content across the board. After a theoretical discussion of (mediated) authenticity and commodification in relation to identity formation and self-expression, we first present a taxonomy of textual "markers of authenticity" based on a discourse analysis of the way authenticity is conceived and discussed in influencer culture (Carvalho, 2008). We compiled and analyzed a sample of 50 articles. The sample was collected through a Google search for terms "influencer," "authenticity," "inauthenticity" and "real" and "fake," as well as combinations of these terms. The articles in the sample originate from a wide variety of sources, including (online) magazines and newspapers, marketing websites and blogs and include content both in Dutch and English. As discourse on this topic is highly context specific, the sample only included articles published between 2017 and 2020.

Subsequently, we discuss the results of a large-scale quantitative content analysis of the accounts of nine prominent female Dutch fashion and lifestyle influencers. For this, we analyzed the presence and frequency of markers of authenticity in 450 posts, consisting of 1,170 visuals with tags and captions.[1] We focused on female influencers because the fashion influencer sphere on Instagram is dominated by women. Their content that shows markers of (in)authenticity is then explored in further detail through a qualitative textual analysis in which we took a closer look at the ways in which certain influencers make authenticity the unique selling point of their Instagram posts.

Self-Expression and the Commodification of Mediated Authenticity in the Digital Age

Van Zoonen (2012, p. 62) argues that self-identity and authenticity have become pivotal in the way we gather information and knowledge, and determine what and

[1]As authenticity is highly context specific, the influencers in the sample have each been selected for their focus on fashion and lifestyle. They are all female and from Dutch origin. The sample used for the quantitative analysis consists of 9 influencers, 3 from each following range: micro (approx. 10.000–100.000 followers; Elise Bak (70K); Michelle Fleur (38K); Fia Hamelijnck (45K)), macro (approx. 100.000-1.000.000 followers; Benthe Liem (214K); Bruna Rizk (194K); Isaya Elais (326K)) and mega (approx. >1.000.000 followers; Rianne Meijer (1,5mln); Stephanie Abu-Sbeih (1mln); Juultje Tieleman (968K). They were selected using Instagram's recommendation system for finding similar influencers. Then, the 50 most recent posts of these influencers were selected for analysis.

who we trust. This is evident in popular culture which has become much more geared toward the "disclosure of the self and its most intimate thoughts and experiences." The popularity of reality TV, first-person narratives, and autobiographical modes of expression on social media are exemplary for this development.

Rather than putting their trust in traditional authority figures such as parents, teachers, journalists, politicians, scientists or literary writers, younger generations turn to social media personalities and influencers to learn how to behave, what to wear, and, ultimately, how to make sense of the world and themselves (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Papacharissi, 2010). If knowledge, trust and power become so closely linked to identity and self-expression, it is easy to understand why authenticity has become such a desirable attribute. Whether we need to decide which party to vote for or how to dress, if we determine the truthfulness of the knowledge and information that people offer us by assessing who they are, our perception of the authenticity of the sender becomes crucial.

Thinking about identity, self-expression and authenticity has a long history. The idea of being true to who one really is, to one's "intrinsic" self (Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017, p. 552), and expressing oneself in an authentic way is deeply rooted in Western culture since Romanticism (Doorman, 2004). Seminal thinkers such as Goffman (1955) and Giddens (1991) have shown how self-identity is socially constructed as well as reflexive and therefore dynamic. In how people express and behave themselves, they constantly perform their self-identity, which is situationally shaped and constrained (Goffman, 1955). Moreover, people are unremittingly involved in reflecting on, negotiating and "updating" who they are, which becomes very manifest in the way social media allows people to express themselves.

Particularly, Goffman's (1955) theater metaphor of everyday social interaction has been foundational for much of the research on mediated authenticity in the last decades. He distinguishes between a frontstage, where we perform a role, and a backstage, where we can be our true selves. This implies that being authentic is not the same as being perceived as authentic, which makes authenticity something that is very much in the eye of the beholder. In most research authenticity is therefore not approached as an essential quality of a person, but as an interactive and ongoing negotiation. This shapes how social media users such as influencers, present themselves on social media (Vannini & Franzese, 2008).

In anticipation of how they might be perceived, social media users carefully plan and curate what they post to construct and maintain their public image. Khamis et al. (2017) argue that they increasingly engage in self-branding and use online content creation to develop "a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital" (p. 191). As such, the online identities of (social) media users become a commodity which they carefully cultivate and protect. Authenticity plays a crucial role in this process, as Maares et al. (2021) argue, because "it contributes to sociocultural capital in the form of audiences" trust and engagement which can later be transformed into economic capital" (p. 3).

A recent book-length non-fiction story on Dutch influencers by journalist Doortje Smithuijsen (2020) shows how influencers are the perfect example of this dynamic. She vividly portrays how influencers carefully consider, prepare

and select the content they present online. It generally involves multiple "takes" before they are satisfied with a picture of video. Daily activities are cautiously orchestrated for the purpose of Instagram. With the ultimate goal of attracting commercial partnerships, influencers attempt to convey an image of their genuine selves, while frantically trying to increase their number of followers and the extent to which their public engages with their posts.

This kind of "impression management" or "authenticity labour" (McRae, 2017, p. 14) is aimed at successfully creating "a front that is both believable and elicits the approval of others" (Vannini & Franzese, 2008, p. 1623). Yet, influencers need to tread carefully, because deliberately managing one's impression to be perceived as authentic is commonly presented as the direct antithesis of being truly authentic. When followers do not accept posts as authentic self-expression that reflects who influencers genuinely are, they are unmasked as professional advertisers rather than authentic individuals who share their lives and passions as is demanded in influencer culture (Khamis et al., 2017; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). This tension is pivotal in the interdependencies between influencers, their followers, and commercial brands, which results in a complex negotiation of influencers' authenticity (Vannini & Franzese, 2008, p. 1623).

Influencers thus need to carefully maintain their image and avoid the impression that they are strategically managing their account for commercial reasons. This does not mean that they cannot engage in partnerships and make a living out of Instagram, but these partnerships need to align with their "real" personality, preferences and behavior (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Tolson, 2001). In other words, to reconcile the tension between the demand for genuine self-expression and their commercial goals, influencers need to carefully manage what they share while maintaining the illusion that they are not doing so. This "calculated authenticity" asks for continuous "authenticity labor" in which influencers employ careful strategies to mark their authenticity (Pooley, 2010; Maares et al., 2021).

Yet, research by Maares et al. (2021, p. 7) into the way influencers and their followers view and perceive authenticity on Instagram points to the complexity of this negotiation. Influencers indeed stress the importance of authenticity, and followers echo this to a certain extent. Yet, they also point out that "there is not one audience perspective; what appears to be inauthentic to some might be genuine to others." Followers are very much aware of the performative nature of the authenticity of influencers, and they question to what extent authenticity is really possible on social media. Moreover, Maares et al. (2021) question whether the judgment of certain elements of influencer content as inauthentic, such as retouched pictures, affects the actual consumption of such content. This raises questions about the nature of markers of authenticity and their actual centrality in influencer content.

Markers of Authenticity on Social Media

In an ongoing negotiation, users, followers, brands and media critics define what are considered socially acceptable norms, practices and forms of expression on Instagram, what role authenticity plays in this, and how influencer content reflects

such debates. To complicate things further, influencers also need to – and do – take into account Instagram's affordances and the demands of "instagramism" (Cotter, 2019; Manovich, 2016). Grounded in a culture of esthetically pleasing content and polishing of posts through filters and editing features, influencers are expected to meet esthetic standards, although these are often at odds with the markers of authenticity we discuss below. To reconcile these competing demands, influencers are expected to strike a balance between esthetically pleasing posts and "less flattering" or "more real" imagery of themselves. In our discourse analysis we discerned six main strategies influencers apply to mark their authenticity: ordinariness, human imperfection, intimacy, consistency, transparency, and interaction.

First, influencers can emphasize their *ordinariness* to prove they are not deliberately staged personae. The discourse highlights the importance of being perceived as "real people: believable, credible, relatable and genuine" (Prodigi.Influencers, 2020). This implies that they are "driven by authentic, creative self-expression" and "success 'found' them" (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4460). To achieve this, influencers portray themselves as being just like everyone else, a strategy also often used by politicians, for instance (Enli, 2015). They do not actually need to be ordinary, but rather construct a form of "mediated (extra)ordinariness" (Tolson, 2001, p. 450). By regularly sharing less glamorous images of everyday life, such as what they look like after waking up with no make-up on, getting soaked in the rain during a bike-ride, relaxing on the couch in pajamas, or simply eating, they can downplay the professional nature of their posts and the unattainable experiences they share. This "calibrated amateurism" thus acts as an antidote against the distance that comes with their growing popularity, celebrity status and commercial success, which could alienate them from their followers (Abidin, 2017, p. 1).

Second, influencers embrace *human imperfection* by avoiding the impression of sharing carefully curated content. Our analysis indicates that within the discourse on influencer culture the estheticized self-portrayal is considered to be in decline:

> "Instagram vs reality" photos have grown in popularity as influencers attempt to make themselves seem more accessible. (…) Instagram stars spoke about moving away from ring lights and toward showing off their faces in sunlight. (Lorenz, 2019)

By displaying their bodily imperfections, influencers convey that they offer an unedited version of themselves, painting the full picture rather than merely sharing the favorable parts of the self (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4659).

Third, discourse emphasizes the need for influencers to evoke a feeling of *intimacy* by providing seemingly spontaneous and unstaged snapshots of their "real" selves, showing both the "highs" and the "lows." This suggests that

> followers get to know influencers when they share the quirks of their personalities and stories of their vulnerable moments on social media. It creates a sense of connection which is how genuine feelings of affection can grow. (Chan, 2019)

By sharing insecurities or their emotions in vulnerable moments, influencers involve their followers in their lives. Through this seemingly unscripted footage, followers get the impression of a raw and uncut image of an unguarded celebrity in his or her private setting (Meyers, 2009; Reade, 2020).

Fourth, *consistency* involves portraying their online persona as a coherent and consistent extension of their offline selves. It is considered a prerequisite for influencers to convey an authentic image of themselves. As several voices in the discourse point out: "For content to feel genuine, it must 'fit the feed', and complement the influencer's content and personality in a way that makes sense" (Tabor, 2020). Doing so, influencers indicate that they are not commercial sell-outs, but only showcase products, venues or brands that align with who they are and what they genuinely like, or in other words: "Liking and using the products they endorse further authenticates paid partnerships" (Rice, 2020).

Fifth, *transparency* about sponsored products and commercial partnerships is considered to be beneficial for an influencer's perceived authenticity, and is closely associated with trust (Whitaker, 2019). Although in the Netherlands influencers are not (yet) obliged by law to indicate whether or not a post is part of a paid collaboration with a brand, honesty about partnerships and sponsored products is believed to lead to a stronger sense of trust among followers (High, 2020). AQ3

These five strategies are aimed to ensure that the carefully and consciously constructed online personas influencers create are not perceived as contrived, artificial or forced. Posts should show spontaneously captured moments of authentic expression. Influencers and their followers believe that the latter must feel as if they know, like and trust the influencer (Chan, 2019). They can bond over mutual interests like taste in fashion, food, or television series (De Boer, 2020). A sixth AQ4 strategy that follows from the discourse is when influencers strengthen this initial feeling of acquaintance by actively nourishing follower-relationships through different forms of *interaction*. What is recommended to increase authenticity is to "respond to questions and queries, engage in debates and become part of your niche community's conversation" (Edgy Universe, 2021). These forms of interac- AQ5 tion are seen as reflecting a genuine, authentic mutual interest. Whatever message influencers convey through that communication becomes less important than the fact *that* they communicate with their followers.

Presence on Instagram

In our quantitative content analysis, we have translated these markers of authenticity into clearly defined content characteristics. We analyzed the focus of the post, the theme, its setting, the type of product, service or venue that is displayed, the degree of transparency about branding and/or paid partnerships, the type of caption, and type of engagement. Inevitably, the quantitative nature of such content characteristics means reducing the complexity of the authenticity markers, which are perfect examples of "latent content" categories that are hard to code for in an objective fashion (Neuendorf, 2016, p. 31). The quantitative content char- AQ6 acteristics we coded are, however, important "manifest content" features which provide an important indication of the presence or absence of the authenticity

markers in the influencer content (Neuendorf, 2016, p. 31). Because we employed a mixed-method approach, we could further explore these authenticity markers qualitatively through an in-depth textual analysis that complements the quantitative results. Overall, our results suggest that, despite consensus about their importance in discourse about influencer culture, the six markers of authenticity defined above are only scarcely present in Instagram posts. Within our sample, some of the prominent Dutch influencers carefully apply such authenticity strategies, but these are the exception to the rule.

We have distinguished between self-presentation that occurred through portrayal of relationships with others, places, or things; and self-presentation focused specifically on the influencers themselves. Although the other relations do play a role, the majority (61%) of posts mainly showcased the influencer herself. The prevalence of this kind of self-presentation aligns with Instagram's focus on the individual profile.

Next, we explored whether the content shows the six markers of authenticity. Influencers are considered more authentic when they disclose a backstage view of their lives, and let their followers peak into their private settings (Enli, 2015; Meyers, 2009; Reade, 2020). We thus expect influencers to take photos in domestic settings, such as in their homes. However, as Fig. 16.1 shows, the majority of visuals in the sample is set before a plain or undefined background (43.5%) or in an urban setting (23.8%), which hints at a more public appearance of the influencers' identity, rather than a private one. More private spaces such as living areas and bedrooms, only appeared in respectively 5.6% and 1.2% of the posts explored. Interestingly, the influencers in the sample do not seem to take the opportunity to provide an authentic backstage view of their lives by using typical private spots and settings from their everyday lives in their visuals.

If we consider only the posts revolving around the person of the influencer this is still the case. With 44% of the visuals portraying a "plain" or undefined

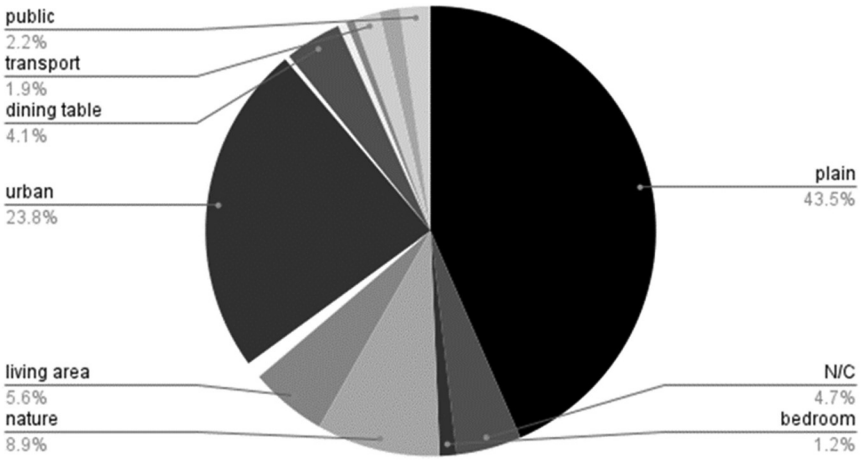

Fig. 16.1. Setting of Instagram Posts.

background, and 33% an urban background, non-domestic spaces also dominate these posts. Only 2.2% of them display domestic spaces, such as bathrooms (1.6%) or bedrooms (0.6%).

The majority (79.8%) of captions in the sample is used to highlight or describe what the image captures. Here, we refer not to personal expression, but rather to elements of the image that remain on the surface, such as where the photo was taken, what the influencer is doing or what she is wearing. This may occur both through text and/or emoticons.

7.7% of captions in the sample can be categorized as *banter* in which the influencer makes jokes or tells funny anecdotes. While these captions might be simple puns and remain on a surface level, we might also read them as markers of *ordinariness,* particularly when banter occurs in the form of self-mockery; or *intimacy* portraying their sense of humor and therefore showcasing the personality behind the online persona.

Finally, 7.4% of the captions concerned a personal issue such as homesickness or a broader (social) issue such as climate change. This is particularly interesting as we again see that influencers do not frequently use these captions for authenticity labor. While we might expect them to engage in "real talk" and disclose insecurities and/or emotions, thereby creating illusions of intimacy, highlighting imperfections or their ordinariness, the captions are primarily used as a brief summary of the key elements in the picture, but not to justify or deepen the personal meaning of the visual, remaining very much at the surface.

In the captions, interaction and engagement is also considered an important element of authenticity labor. Influencers can actively get in touch with their followers, thus authenticating their online identities. They, for example, ask them to engage with the content through directly addressing their public or providing a discount code or giveaway. Influencers indeed make a modest effort to elicit engagement from their audience in 16.3% of captions, for example through asking them a direct question or motivating them to take a certain action. Efforts to elicit engagement can be considered as "shorthand" for actual engagement and interaction. Influencers might assume to be perceived as authentic simply *because* they elicit engagement from their audience even when they do not feel the need to actively respond to followers.

The markers of authenticity related to partnerships and transparency about these commercial affiliations are best understood in conjunction with one another. While endorsement of products, services and places is not uncommon within the sample, it often remains vague whether or not such content is sponsored (see Fig. 16.2). Influencers only rarely explicitly indicate content is sponsored through hashtags such as #ad only (7%), although such transparency could prevent followers from feeling as if they are being deceived and help to authenticate the influencer (High, 2020).

Moreover, influencers only provide specific explanations or justifications for working with brands in 3.9% of the coded sample. These findings are interesting because theory and findings from the discourse analysis show that influencers are perceived as more authentic when they engage in partnerships that match their overall identity and/or justify why they work with a particular brand or endorse a certain product (Rice, 2020).

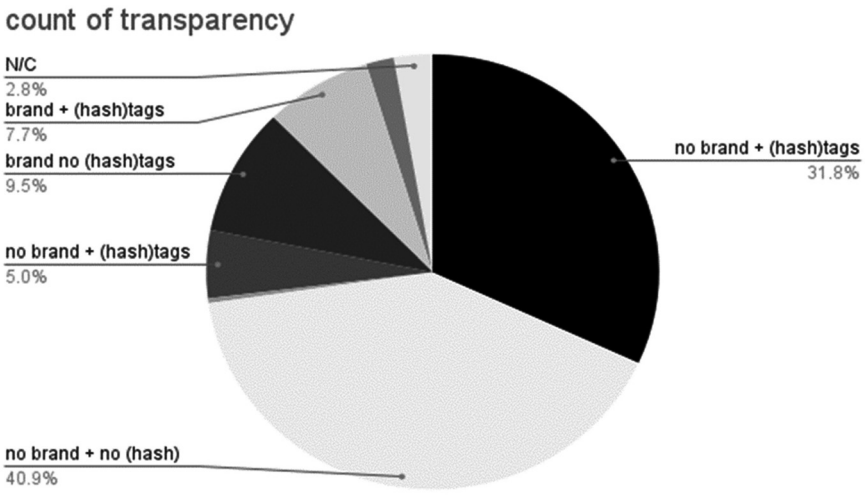

Fig. 16.2. Use of Transparency Marker of Authenticity.

Negotiating Authenticity and Commerce

Although most influencers in our sample employ markers of authenticity only sparsely, for some of them these take center stage. It could be seen as one of their unique selling points. In the sample we have explored for this research, this was particularly the case for mega influencer Rianne Meijer.[2] Zooming in further on authenticity labor via a qualitative textual analysis, we see throughout the sample how the felt opposition between the stylized versions of reality Instagram affords, and the gritty reality of everyday life is thematized.

An important strategy is adhering to the theme of body positivity. Influencers, with Rianne Meijer as the clearest example, juxtapose polished versions of pictures of themselves with the "real," i.e., unfiltered and unretouched versions of the same, or a similar, shot. In certain instances, influencers make a point out of deliberately emphasizing particular angles of the self that might generally be considered less flattering. Meijer shows herself, for example, while making a face that results in a double-chin or while squeezing the bum to clearly show their cellulite in that area. It emphasizes her honesty and sincere attempt to share all aspects of herself, while showing that she is still ordinary like her followers and deals with the same imperfections.

In other cases, Isaya Elais,[3] Benthe Liem,[4] and Juultje Tieleman[5] use a less explicit version of this strategy by using carousel posts – consisting of several

[2]https://www.instagram.com/rianne.meijer/
[3]https://www.instagram.com/elaisaya/
[4]https://www.instagram.com/bentheliem/
[5]https://www.instagram.com/juultjetieleman/

pictures – that pair a more polished first photo, with unpolished equivalents for which the user needs to swipe right. Carousels generally enable influencers to share aspects of their life that would otherwise remain hidden, as they do not match with the overall feed or the polished look that Instagram prescribes. While the first photo, that is permanently visible on their profile, aligns with the more polished standard of instagramism, the other pictures in the carousel still allow influencers to emphasize the authenticity of the image they share of themselves without breaking the "rules of instagramism" (Manovich, 2016).

Similar tactics are employed with regard to sponsored content. Although we did not encounter it often in our sample, when influencers are explicit about sponsorship behind a post, they tend to "justify" their partnership with that particular brand. They do this in several ways, for instance through appealing to a personal connection with the brand or a consistent use of its products before a commercial partnership was formalized. This may also occur through an appeal to a broader social cause that the influencer claims to advocate for, for instance when promoting a sustainable brand. This broader social cause frames the paid partnership as an extension of the influencer's persona because it expresses what they stand for. A direct example of this is Benthe Liem promoting clothing in a paid partnership with the brand Filippa K. She captions the carrousel:

> we are all looking for a more sustainable way of living…wearing the @filippa_k core collection. #filippak #wegoslow #ad

We see here how Benthe, who has a clothing brand that emphasizes sustainable production, makes an appeal to the broader social issue of overconsumption. She begins by essentially telling her followers that they too are looking for a more sustainable way of living, to then provide the answer by leaning on the brand mission of Filippa K. This brand does, for instance, not take part in Black Friday sales and instead creates core collections that do not go on sale. This matches with Benthe's general image of being someone who supports sustainability.

Other strategies include appealing to bodily imperfections, which the endorsed product needs to remedy. Interestingly, this functions to authenticate the influencer as being imperfect, while at the same time endorsing a product that provides the solution. This suggests that imperfections ought to be fixed or perfected. For instance, when Bruna Rizk[6] promotes beauty supplements in paid partnership with cosmetics store Douglas, she captions the visual:

> used to have regular periods of break-outs/pimples etc. (which is normal but annoying) but since i've been taking the #innerbeauty supplement (available at @douglasnederland) it has definitely cleared up my skin and made it look more glowing from the inside out! #mydouglas #partner

[6]https://www.instagram.com/brunabear/

Appeals to personal connections or good deeds for others also function to authenticate sponsored content and partnerships. For instance, when influencers offer a discount code to share with friends or frame a product as something they would give to their friend(s), this emphasizes and strengthens the personal connection with followers. It shows how they "share the wealth" as their followers also benefit from their partnerships, which downplays influencers' personal commercial gain. Less explicitly, influencers also simply make sure that in general their partnership and posts fit the overall online persona they have created for themselves. Through these tactics, they frame their partnerships as natural extensions of their online persona, and therefore an authentic expression of their offline identities.

These strategies to justify partnerships are the most obvious examples of authenticity labor directed at maintaining their authority and credibility as influencers, while remaining attractive to advertisers. It makes it the most direct form of commodification of their authenticity. Yet, all strategies are geared toward countering any possible suspicion that influencers are only feigning their interests out of commercial considerations. Nevertheless, it is good to keep in mind that to what extent followers accept the authenticity of influencers is collectively negotiated, but ultimately a personal decision and can differ considerably between influencers and followers (Maares et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Nowadays, social platforms are increasingly central to the daily lives of people, with identity and taste formation moving beyond traditional institutions and authority figures. Influencers demonstrate how new norms and routines emerge with regard to how people make sense of who they are and what is going on in the world around them. An important part of this is negotiating who is accepted as trustworthy on Instagram and for which reasons. Analyzing how influencers navigate a digital world in which sharing who you are and what you like has gained commercial appeal, reveals an intricate process in which influencers, followers, commercial brands, and social media platforms negotiate what accepted practices are. Or, in other words, who and what content is considered appealing and reliable.

Authenticity has commercial value. Our research confirms that the public discourse about influencer culture highlights authenticity as a central and necessary trait of influencers and the content they share about themselves. This presumes an unscripted peek into who you really are, what you do, wear, like, and hate, including the less pretty sides of your life and personality. Yet, the commercial partnerships influencers engage in can cause them to be perceived as sell-outs, thus putting their authenticity at risk. Much research has focused on the strategies influencers employ to reconcile their commercial goals with their claim to authenticity. It argues that influencers perform "authenticity labor" to convince their followers that they remain authentic despite commercial incentives. In our discourse analysis, we discerned six main strategies through which influencers are expected to mark their authenticity.

Yet, our quantitative content analysis suggests that authenticity markers are not used very frequently. Based on our results, we suggest that influencers seem to take their authenticity mostly for granted. They engage less often in authenticity labor than we would expect from the emphasis on authenticity in their public discourse. Our results therefore point at, what we call, an "authenticity gap" within influencer culture on Instagram. This authenticity gap refers to the discrepancy between the emphasis in public discourse on the importance of the use of authenticity markers in influencer content and the scarcity of such markers in their posts. It suggests that the actual practice of influencers is only guided to a small extent by considerations about conveying authentic personal expression. Influencers mainly focus on esthetically pleasing content that gains likes, shares and engagement, and ultimately, content that can be commodified. Because their online behavior is guided by considerations about what attracts and what chases away followers, this might also indicate that followers consider infrequent and limited markers of authenticity enough to be convinced of the authenticity of influencers or to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Maares et al. (2021) have pointed out that followers are very much "aware that authenticity [is] a labour of creating the impression of authenticity" (p. 6). In our media saturated society, such media-savvy followers are increasingly aware of the fact that the people we see in professional media settings, such as magazines, websites and social media accounts, have been through an elaborate round of hair and make-up. They know that unflattering pictures are discarded and the best photos are retouched, before they are published. As such, they might actually expect similar practices in influencer content and be more accepting toward them. This reinforces the idea that even though followers sometimes deem certain content characteristics inauthentic – which is, thus, out of tune with the emphasis on the importance of authenticity within public discourse about influencer culture – it remains to be seen if that really affects their actual consumption of such content.

Although more research into our concept of an authenticity gap is necessary, it is important to acknowledge that the centrality of authenticity in discourse on influencer culture cannot be taken as proof that authenticity practices are ubiquitous within everyday practice of influencers, or that authenticity markers are common to influencer content. As Smithuijsen (2020) shows in her journalistic work on influencer culture, the idea of authenticity speaks very much to influencers, followers and brands. However, commercial pressures and platform affordances can easily disincentivize or prevent influencers to employ these markers of authenticity widely.

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AQ20

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