Article

A Proposed Model of Self-Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

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Abstract
It is rather contradictory that there is a high demand for authenticity in today's virtual space, where some platforms encourage the proliferation of idealized images, the products of digital alteration. Previous studies have examined how social media users perceive the authenticity and credibility of new digital celebrities—influencers—and the impacts on advertising outcomes. Authenticity in media communication has been defined in many ways, but most definitions include factors such as sincerity, trustworthiness, accuracy, originality, and spontaneity. Prior research on authenticity in computer-mediated communication emphasized the importance of three levels of authenticity, that of the source, of the message, and of the interaction. How social media influencers (SMIs) perceive their own authenticity is an understudied topic. SMIs are simultaneously perceived by their audiences as celebrities, experts, and consumers. Expanding their audiences is one of their goals. Being authentic at the beginning of one's SMI career as a content creator might be simple, but it becomes much more challenging after one's audience has grown significantly. Sponsorship can pose a challenge to an SMI's authenticity. The present study aims to explore the role that authenticity plays for SMIs and develop a theoretical framework for understanding the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with SMIs that have both national and international audiences (*N* = 20). Sincerity, expertise, uniqueness, commitment to values, mediated realness, visibility, communication style, spontaneity, transparent and creative brand endorsement, commitment to followers, and frequency of interaction are the components of the proposed model.

Keywords
authenticity; Instagram; interaction; social media; social media influencers; TikTok; YouTube

1. Introduction

In today's society dominated by digital communication, there is an ongoing discussion about the relevance of authenticity not only for brands and professional communicators but also for social media users. What does it mean to be authentic? Being true to oneself—that is the simple definition (Wood et al., 2008). The essence of authenticity is realness, which Hopwood et al. (2021) define as the tendency for one to act in keeping with the way one feels on the inside. Authenticity is highly discussed when it comes to social media. When we think of things that are authentic, our thoughts would likely not turn to the digitally altered idealized images that flood today's social media landscape (Naderer, Matthes, et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study of authenticity in this context involves looking at related elements: trustworthiness, accuracy, originality, and spontaneity (Enli, 2015).

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of social media influencers (SMIs). Their popularity has grown

astronomically among social media users and marketers (Hudders et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). SMIs are people with large communities of followers who post on social media in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019) and perform purposeful strategic communication to achieve organizational goals (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They wear many hats; they are content creators, advertising developers, opinion leaders, and entrepreneurs (Childers et al., 2019). For SMIs to be seen as effective opinion leaders, in particular, it is essential that they be perceived as authentic (Casaló et al., 2020). SMIs are also considered by their audiences to be celebrities, experts, and consumers. Expanding their audience is one of their main goals and being perceived as authentic by their community of followers can contribute to meeting this objective (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Like traditional celebrities, perceived authenticity is critical for fostering SMIs' relationships with their followers (Pöyry et al., 2019).

Some scholars argue that authenticity is positively associated with SMIs' advertising activities, with their genuine intention to recommend products or services for external compensation (Evans et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021). Sponsorship transparency has been found to improve relationships between SMIs and followers and even to make SMIs' persuasive messages more effective (Campbell & Evans, 2018; Evans et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2019). In contrast, Audrezet et al. (2020) have stressed that SMIs who frequently post sponsored content are perceived as less authentic. Influencer marketing can be viewed as a multi-layered relationship, as SMIs are connected not only to their followers but also to the brands they endorse (Kim & Kim, 2021). Authenticity is a relevant asset when it comes to the communication outcomes of SMIs, but it is perceived differently by different actors involved in the communication process (Pöyry et al., 2019). Therefore, the perspectives of SMIs, their followers, and the brands they represent need to be taken into consideration when elaborating on SMIs and authenticity.

Despite the ongoing academic interest in analyzing authenticity on social media, prior studies have mostly examined followers' perceived authenticity of SMIs and their effect on advertising outcomes (Hudders et al., 2020). Existing scholarship on authenticity and SMIs focuses mainly on the persuasive communication's impact on affective and behavioral outcomes. Furthermore, authenticity is relevant for brand communication because brand authenticity has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on brand attitude (Schallehn et al., 2014) and purchase intention (Fritz et al., 2017). Authenticity is one of the elements contributing to the source credibility of SMIs (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Authenticity, together with expertise, has an impact on developing trust in SMIs among their followers (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Prior research differentiates between social media users' perceptions of the authenticity of influencers (Pöyry et al., 2019; Shoenberger et al., 2020) and SMIs' self-perception of authenticity, both of which contribute to advertising message effectiveness (Lee & Eastin, 2021a). The concept of "self" is a multifaceted and malleable notion (Chen, 2019), and, therefore, when elaborating on self-perceived authenticity, the context of the communication needs to be examined as well.

Empirical evidence proves that authenticity plays an essential role in effective traditional and native advertising (Becker et al., 2019). Furthermore, in the case of influencer advertising, the perceived authenticity of an SMI has a positive impact not only on advertising outcome but also on behavioral intention toward the SMI (Lee & Eastin, 2021a). Empirical data indicate that from the user perspective SMI authenticity consists of five components: sincerity, sponsorship transparency, utility, expertise, and uniqueness (Lee & Eastin, 2021b). Being authentic at the beginning of one's SMI career as a content creator might be simple, but it becomes much more challenging after one's audience has grown significantly. In addition, too much advertising content and a lack of sponsorship transparency can negatively affect users' perceptions of digital influencer authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). There is a robust body of literature dealing with the impact of advertising disclosures made by SMIs (Naderer, Peter, et al., 2021). However, within the context of sponsorship transparency, the role of authenticity has not yet been systematically explored.

Despite the interest in analyzing the authenticity of SMIs, prior studies have mostly approached authenticity from the perspective of SMI followers and how their perceptions affect advertising outcomes. How SMIs view authenticity and its role in content development and interacting with followers, however, is underrepresented in the literature (Audrezet et al., 2020). The present study addresses this gap, focusing on how SMIs define authenticity and understand the role of authenticity in their profession. Taking into account specific aspects of SMIs' professional activities, which include content creation and strategic social media management (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), we have developed a conceptual framework for explaining the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs based on Lee's (2020) authenticity model of (mass-oriented) computer-mediated communication. We aim to explore the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs by looking at more than just source characteristics and their impacts on consumer outcomes, which have been addressed in prior research (Breves et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Xiao et al., 2018). We intend to build upon existing scholarship by developing a nuanced model of the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs that differentiates between awareness and expression elements and explains the complex mechanism of how SMIs interact with their followers and elaborate on the endorser–brand relationship.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Defining Authenticity

In recent years, authenticity has become a key focus in a wide array of fields (e.g., sociology, marketing, etc.). The concept of authenticity, although important and frequently invoked by scholars, has proven rather elusive to define (Pöyry et al., 2019). As a result, this notion has been conceptualized in diverse ways (Lehman et al., 2019). Many factors determine authenticity, such as ethical behavior, consciousness, subjectivity, self-processes, and social or relational contexts, and make it hard to define. Nonetheless, authenticity has been defined in contrast to "whatever is fake, unreal, or false" (Lindholm, 2008, p. 2) and in contrast to inauthenticity, that is, false behavior or self-deception (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

According to the constructivist approach, authenticity is linked to one's beliefs, perspectives, and expectations (Wang, 1999). Furthermore, authenticity cannot be defined objectively (Ebster & Guist, 2005); instead, it is a context-related and ideology-driven concept (Leigh et al., 2006). In marketing, authenticity is defined as a brand's ability to match consumers' expectations (Beverland et al., 2008).

Previous literature focusing on authenticity (Knoll et al., 2015) in professional environments distinguished between self-directed and expression-oriented authenticity, which according to empirical evidence coexist. Moreover, at work, authentic self-awareness and authentic self-expression contribute to health and well-being (Knoll et al., 2015). Considering the distinct nature of SMIs as communicators concerned about their image, brand endorsers, and people who express themselves with the means of digital content development (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), authentic self-awareness and self-expression are important factors that need to be addressed in the context of the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. For professional communicators like SMIs, self-awareness can contribute to their efforts to build a personal brand (Vasconcelos & Rua, 2021). Self-expression, in turn, is reflected in content creation. Self-awareness and self-expression can be connected to the three components (source, message, and interaction) of the authenticity model developed by Lee (2020), which will be presented in the following section.

2.2. Authenticity and Social Media Influencers

On social media, where we encounter what Marwick (2013) calls *edited personas*, authenticity is subjective, personally defined, and socially constructed. Research on authenticity and social media has underlined the role of authenticity in self-disclosure (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014) and authenticity's usual association with well-being (Wood et al., 2008). Furthermore, for social media users, projecting authenticity is also a reflection of personally held standards. Hence, to stay authentic both

offline and online, people must sometimes stand for the values in which they believe, even if that translates into negative experiences (Smallenbroek et al., 2017). Even platform affordance plays an important role in the authentic self-presentation of all social media users. Ephemeral tools such as Instagram stories have a positive impact on perceived authenticity for common users (Kreling et al., 2021).

Recent studies have underlined the importance of authenticity for the advertising activities of SMIs (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021a, 2021b). Prior research mostly approached authenticity from the perspective of followers, examining the impact that authenticity has on persuasive messages. Followers prefer SMIs that are perceived to be authentic, and this preference is reflected in the affective and behavioral outcomes of SMI communication (Jin, 2018). Pöyry et al. (2019) have highlighted the importance of the "aura of authenticity" possessed or performed by digital celebrities. They also found that posting sponsored content that aligns with SMIs' ideals and values has a positive impact on advertising behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intention. Based on empirical evidence, Duffy (2017) determined that realness, visibility, and uniqueness contribute to SMIs being viewed as authentic.

The success of an SMI relies on balancing an authentic voice with brand advertising strategies (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). Exploring SMIs as brand endorsers, Audrezet et al. (2020) have introduced a four-path framework that provides a conceptualization of how influencers can manage authenticity. They found that SMIs deliberately use two strategies to manage the tensions they face when dealing with commercial opportunities: the passionate authenticity strategy and the transparent authenticity strategy. SMIs use the passionate authenticity strategy when creating digital content that is enjoyable and intrinsically gratifying. In contrast, they employ the transparent authenticity strategy when providing fact-based information about a product or service (Audrezet et al., 2020). Furthermore, posting unedited content or disclosing information about a partnership between the SMI and a brand are forms of transparent authenticity. Abidin (2018) coined the term *porous authenticity* to describe the results of making unedited posts. To project *porous authenticity*, SMIs strategically create self-presentation practices in digital spaces that allow followers to evaluate and validate how genuine their personas are. SMIs use this approach to emphasize two distinct spheres, their digital personas, and their offline selves. They intentionally show "behind-the-scenes" details from their daily lives to disclose more of their "authentic" selves (Abidin, 2018).

Exploring how SMIs perceive their role models, Kühn and Riesmeyer (2021) highlighted the fact that SMIs are aware of the importance of authenticity. Thus, for SMIs being a role model means being close to their followers, maintaining a balanced media persona, and staying committed to their own values. Lee and Eastin (2021b)

consider the user perception of SMI authenticity to be a multi-dimensional construct based on five elements: sincerity, transparent endorsement, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. The dominant factor is sincerity. SMIs with *sincerity* are perceived as being warm. Social media users tend to have more favorable attitudes toward SMIs displaying high sincerity compared to SMIs with low sincerity. The *transparent endorsement* dimension is exposed in SMIs' brand-endorsement practices and can be identified in their engagement in authentic behavior when endorsing brands. This factor has an impact on purchase intention. The third dimension, *visibility*, refers to when SMIs expose intimate aspects of their lives or are open. *Expertise*, the fourth factor, increases the influencer's credibility as an opinion leader. Lastly, *uniqueness* concerns audience perceptions of influencers being original or distinct from others.

2.3. The Authenticity Model of (Mass-Oriented) Computer-Mediated Communication and Its Relevance for Social Media Influencers

Lee (2020) has proposed an integrative conceptual framework for studying computer-mediated communication, focusing on authenticity as a core unifying construct. The original model does not deal in particular with SMIs. It aims to bring together several approaches that have been used separately to examine authenticity and conceptualize notions such as message credibility, perceived realism, parasocial interaction, and credibility. Lee identified three subcomponents: authenticity of the source, authenticity of the message, and authenticity of interaction. Authenticity of source concerns whether a communicator is really who he or she claims to be. In this framework, authenticity of source represents the authenticity of the person who (supposedly) produced a message. In interpersonal relationships, people tend to assume honesty and truthfulness, but in the case of internet-enabled many-to-many communication and rapid developments in artificial intelligence technologies, it is challenging or even futile to talk about those two values (Lee, 2020). According to Lee, when a communication source is unknown, stereotypes about social categories will frame the observer's expectancy. Moreover, the authenticity of the source is associated with source credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise. Hence, this subcomponent of authenticity is related to the source credibility of SMIs.

The perceived credibility of SMIs has a decisive effect on the outcome of their advertising campaigns (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Empirical evidence highlights the role of SMI source credibility in the affective and behavioral outcomes for both the SMIs themselves and the brands they endorse (De Veirman et al., 2017; Munnukka et al., 2016). Pöyry et al. (2019) highlighted that, alongside expertise, authenticity is often mentioned as a source characteristic that contributes to message effectiveness, attractiveness, trustworthiness, uniqueness, and similarity. Several studies have identified authenticity as an element contributing to the source credibility of SMIs (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019) and hence to the success of influencer marketing campaigns (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). Source credibility has a strong direct impact on both brand attitude and behavioral intentions. The credibility of an SMI can be determined not only by the product- or brand-endorser fit (Schouten et al., 2020) but also by familiarity (Breves et al., 2019).

The second subcomponent of Lee's (2020) model is authenticity of message, which refers to whether a message truthfully represents its object. This object can be a person (even the source), an event, or an issue. Perceived message authenticity is linked to the degree to which a message conforms to the receiver's expectancy (people do not doubt the authenticity of a message unless it violates their expectancy in some way), as well as to the degree to which a message is congruent with the receiver's prior knowledge, beliefs, values, or opinions, and even whether the chosen medium for the given communication task is perceived as appropriate (Lee, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that messages from SMIs perceived to be authentic have an impact on followers' purchase intentions of the promoted products (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019).

The third subcomponent of authenticity in Lee's (2020) model, authenticity of interaction, centers around the idea of whether an interaction is real or not. It also concerns how closely people feel that they are a part of an actual interaction. Reciprocity and spontaneity can increase the perceived authenticity of interaction. In computer-mediated communication, reciprocity can be achieved through message contingency, which distinguishes conversations from broadcasting. Spontaneity may differentiate between fake and authentic interactions (Lee, 2020). For SMIs interacting with their followers is particularly important. Focusing on growing their follower base has economic relevance because large follower communities bring in advertising revenue (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). SMIs tend to cultivate a strong bond with their followers, creating a sense of community and "stoking perceptions of authenticity" (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 7). Followers seek and enjoy authenticity in social media content from celebrities because it fosters a feeling of engagement or emotional attachment between them and the celebrity (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). The strength of an SMI relies on the emotional bond they build with their followers and being a source of inspiration, enjoyability, and competence (Ki et al., 2020).

Daily interactions between SMIs and their followers nourish a parasocial or even a trans-parasocial connection. Understanding the nature of the interactions between SMIs and their followers is essential when discussing the (self-)perceived authenticity of influencers. Parasocial interactions are similar to social interactions. The psychological processes in this context are parallel

to those in face-to-face social activities and relationship building (Giles, 2002). Lou (2021) has updated the concept of parasocial relations, introducing the notion of trans-parasocial relations that take into account the type of interactivity and the frequency with which SMIs produce content. These types of relationships are collectively reciprocal, (a)synchronously interactive, and regulated by a co-created relation between SMIs and followers. Platform features provide the opportunity for mutual communication through direct messaging or query functions that can enhance interaction (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2021). Social media facilitates user engagement in interacting with media personalities via liking, commenting on, and sharing their posts. In this co-created relationship, SMIs can express their authenticity by sharing stories from their lives or replying to comments from their followers. Furthermore, in some cases, SMIs create content in response to audience requests (Abidin, 2015). Lou's (2021) findings show that followers trust their favorite SMIs and consider their shared posts (whether organic or sponsored) to be largely genuine. SMIs seek to appear authentic to create closeness to their followers (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2021). Close relationships with followers can contribute to increasing positive attitudes and purchase intention. Such closeness plays a moderating role in the relationship between SMIs and their followers. Moreover, closeness can act as a buffer in the sense that SMIs that lack attractiveness can compensate by being closer to their followers (Taillon et al., 2020).

The three subcomponents of authenticity described above are intertwined and related, and they can enhance the level of perceived authenticity. According to Lee's (2020) model, perceived authenticity can have three possible types of outcomes: cognitive (such as uncertainty reduction, reality perception, and knowledge acquisition), affective (it can intensify dominant reactions, both positive or negative), and behavioral (it can facilitate or inhibit a particular behavior). Lee's (2020) three subcomponents of authenticity should thus be considered when analyzing the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. Aiming to contribute to a more detailed understanding of how SMIs perceive authenticity, we formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: How do SMIs define authenticity?

RQ2: What role does authenticity play for SMIs?

RQ3: What are the constituent elements of a model of the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs?

3. Methods

The purpose of our exploratory study was to gain insights into SMIs' perspective on the role of authenticity and develop a theoretical model of how SMIs perceive their own authenticity. We chose a qualitative approach that can help us gain in-depth knowledge (Tuchman, 2002), and explain the meaning of authenticity for SMIs and the role of authenticity for their profession. Conducting detailed interviews allowed us to explore how research participants construct meaning related to the concept of authenticity based on their daily online activity. Non-probability sampling, an adequate approach for qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015), was used. This methodological approach has been used in previous qualitative studies that contribute to theory building in the field of SMI credibility and relationships between SMIs and their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2021).

We aimed to have a broad sample of SMIs in terms of number of followers, subject area, age, and gender, which reflected the worldwide population of SMIs. Potential participants had to have publicly accessible accounts on Instagram or TikTok or a public YouTube channel and post advertising content. We direct messaged 35 SMIs and received a positive response from 20 (*N* = 20). We conducted semi-structured guideline-based interviews with them from September 2020 to June 2021. Our sample consists of 15 females and 5 males, ages 21 to 40, from a European country. They all participated voluntarily. The majority of the SMIs we interviewed were women, which is consistent with the fact that in 2019 women represented 84% of the influencers on Instagram (Statista, 2021b).

Similar to other researchers, we included in our sample SMIs that have at least 5,000 followers (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2021). The highest number of followers was 1,100,000. However, most interviewees had between 5,000 and 100,000 followers, and, therefore, the sample reflects the structure of the worldwide SMI population in 2020 (Statista, 2021a). They are active in the main subject areas of influencer marketing: lifestyle, fashion, beauty and make-up, photography, music, hairstyling, entertainment, food, and fitness. Some of the SMIs included in our sample address international audiences and produce content not only in their native language but also in English. The interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted mostly online, using Zoom or Facebook video calls. In some cases, subjects chose to participate via email. Detailed information is provided in Table 1.

Data analysis was performed based on categories related to the themes (Creswell, 2009; Tuchman, 2002). The interview guidelines were theory-driven. First, the SMIs were asked to define authenticity and to elaborate on the role of authenticity for them as SMIs. The following themes related to authenticity were also addressed: the history of their activity as an SMI, increasing visibility, differentiation strategies, the principles and values that guide SMIs' activities, relationships with brands, sponsorship transparency, and interaction with followers. We linked these aspects to Lee's (2020) model and to Lee and Eastin's (2021a) approach to studying the perceived authenticity of SMIs.

Table 1. Description of the sample.

	Gender	Number of followers on Instagram	Number of followers on TikTok	Number of subscribers on YouTube	Subject area
ID.1	f	5,8 K			Food
ID.2	f	8 K			Lifestyle
ID.3	f	5 K	13,1 K		Music
ID.4	m	16,2 K		55,5 K	Music
ID.5	f	35 K	6,6 K	4,93 K	Lifestyle/music
ID.6	f	10,4 K			Food/lifestyle
ID.7	f	76,4 K		3,05 K	Beauty/make-up
ID.8	f	45 K	18,7 K	3,65 K	Entertainment
ID.9	m	15,6 K			Photography
ID.10	f	10,5 K			Hairstyling
ID.11	f	12,6 K			Hairstyling
ID.12	m	100 K	66,5 K	128 K	Hairstyling
ID.13	m	106 K	41,2 K	1,42 K	Entertainment
ID.14	m	14,6 K	142,2 K		Fitness
ID.15	f	15,1 K	193,2 K	1,43 K	Hairstyling
ID.16	f	305 K	288,9 K	423 K	Lifestyle
ID.17	f	375 K	30,8 K	2,33 K	Music
ID.18	f	835 K	16,8 K		Fashion/lifestyle
ID.19	f	668 K	1,1 M	515 K	Music
ID.20	f	1 M		35,4 K	Lifestyle

4. Findings

4.1. Social Media Influencers' Understanding of Authenticity and Its Role in Their Professional Lives

Regardless of the size of their community of followers and their experience as SMIs, all respondents emphasized the importance of authenticity for their online activities. However, authenticity was defined in different ways. Most SMIs interviewed associated authenticity with sincerity, realness, transparency, and, above all, genuineness. The perspective of our respondents was that being an authentic SMI means "presenting yourself to the audience the way you are, not the way you think others would like you to be" (ID.20). Furthermore, authenticity is "in the first place, the sincerity you must have to yourself. Authenticity means to remain faithful to yourself in any situation" (ID.18).

For SMIs, being authentic means following their principles and values, even if that translates into avoiding collaborations with incompatible brands. It is important "to be yourself, not to go against your principles and values for recognition or money, to promote the products you believe in" and "to promote exactly those values and principles that guide both your professional and personal life, so that people can see the consistency between what you 'preach' and what you practice. This is where

authenticity comes from" (ID.1). Authenticity is associated with spontaneity, and being authentic gives SMIs freedom in their professional lives:

> Authenticity, for me, is the freedom to make the choices I want, to post what I want, to dress the way I want, the way I am and not to be somehow because that's what I'm told, because that's what the herd wants, to conform to what is cool or what is viral. (ID.16)

4.2. The Components of Social Media Influencers' Authenticity

4.2.1. The Authenticity of the Source

Authenticity is context-related, and SMIs' perceived authenticity is no exception. Some respondents underlined the fact that being an SMI and posting online is just a professional role, a layer of their identity: "Everyone starts from the bottom in social media, and if you become famous on a platform, you must not forget where you came from" (ID.2). SMIs must be constantly active on the digital platforms on which they have organically developed a community of followers. However, even though SMIs are constantly exposing themselves online, they can still afford to have a private

life. The interviewees highlighted that to feel authentic the values that guide both the personal and professional aspects of their lives must be consistent.

Even though the majority of SMIs involved in this research are young adults, some of them started working as digital content creators as teenagers. Thus, growing up as content creators overlapped with becoming an adult. The maturation process also meant making certain changes, ones that were often not easy, as one of our respondents underlined: "I had to compromise at one point and see what I liked, even at the risk of losing the audience. Had I continued to do what my followers asked for, I would have been unhappy" (ID.16).

Besides sincerity, research participants also mentioned expertise as an important element of their activity as SMIs. The respondents claimed that being a professional content creator means offering followers quality and reliable content. Although some of the SMIs avoided calling themselves experts, all argued that the content they deliver is relevant to their online communities. One of the respondents had a fitting motto: "Post quality content and know what you are good at. For example, if you are good at cooking, post about cooking; if you are good at something else, post about it" (ID.2).

We also discovered that uniqueness is a relevant factor in SMIs' self-perceived authenticity. The respondents were aware of the highly competitive business in which they operate. Differentiation is the solution to standing out from the competition: "differentiation concerning followers and differentiation concerning collaborators, sponsors" (ID.3). In the fast-growing landscape of professional content creation, authenticity makes SMIs recognizable. In other words, "authenticity makes others talk about you without saying your name, but let the world know it's about you" (ID.1). In the context of maintaining authenticity, personal branding, as part of a differentiation strategy, was also mentioned: "I'm still working on developing my brand" (ID.3) or "I created a personal brand that developed into a brand with national awareness" (ID.4).

4.2.2. The Authenticity of the Message

Followers expect SMIs to post content with a certain frequency. This can contribute to organically growing followers, an important goal for SMIs. Visibility and differentiation were associated with authentic content creation. Editing pictures and using filters were not associated with inauthenticity, but with differentiation. As one participant noted, an SMI:

> Needs to have at least one element that differentiates [them] from the others, maybe a style of posts, maybe a style of pictures, maybe a style of props you use, maybe a certain style of editing, or a filter that you choose to put it in all your pictures. Something to make followers say "this is X's picture" before they see the name of the person who posted. But from

what I've noticed, "pure" authenticity is not necessarily attractive. It takes a balance between doing what you think represents you 100% and following some current trends. (ID.1)

Most of the SMIs interviewed are active on several platforms and practice a cross-platform approach; however, preferences for particular platforms were expressed. On the one hand, some of the SMIs we spoke to talked about their positive experiences with TikTok, which allowed them to spontaneously create content in contrast to Instagram, which due to its aesthetic nature requires more preparation. On the other hand, ephemeral instruments such as Instagram stories were mentioned by other SMIs as encouraging spontaneity and thus contributing to the self-perceived authenticity of the SMIs. Professional content creators often directly address followers via Instagram stories and emotional appeals. Displaying sincerity in such messages, going beyond social media's positivity bias, and talking about issues that are relevant for the audience contribute to high levels of self-perceived authenticity among the interviewees.

Sponsored messages can also be authentic, according to the SMIs interviewed. Consistency of communication style contributes to the self-perceived authenticity of the message: "There must be no style differences between sponsored and non-sponsored content. Everything you do needs to be personalized" (ID.4). Honesty is important, and advertising disclosure is an expression of it: "It shows your respect for your followers" (ID.10).

4.2.3. The Authenticity of the Interaction

SMIs are careful with their community of followers and cultivate constant interaction with them. Thus, responding to their questions and comments is an activity that SMIs perform daily. Followers react to a lack of authenticity. Authenticity must prevail in SMIs' interactions with followers, as well. Interacting with the community of followers contributes to SMIs' well-being, as one of the interviewees said: "I often feel more confident when I see that my followers appreciate me. I happened to have some bad day, but by trying to make them [my followers] feel better, they changed my state as well" (ID.3). Interacting with followers is critical to developing a strong parasocial relation. One of the interviewees expressed the following idea: "I liked to create for the public, from which I received positive feedback since I am a performer. That motivated me to develop my own content" (ID.18).

5. Discussion: A Model of the Self-Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

Drawing from our analysis of the interviews, we propose a model of the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs based

on persona-, content-, and interaction-driven attributes. Self-awareness is identified with the authenticity of the source, and self-expression with the authenticity of the message. As for the authenticity of the interaction, self-awareness and self-expression are combined. Our results support the idea that followers' perceptions of authenticity highlighted in previous literature (Lee & Eastin, 2021b) overlap with those of SMIs. Expertise and uniqueness, source characteristics that affect persuasive communication outcome (Pöyry et al., 2019), were identified by SMIs alongside sincerity as elements that define their self-perceived authenticity. SMIs are "human brands" that seek uniqueness or try to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market (Ki et al., 2020). That SMIs define authenticity in terms of uniqueness is a novel finding. Digital celebrities stage their authenticity (Hou, 2019), and thus, our respondents talked about mediated realness and about being able to separate between their online and their offline selves while still considering themselves to be authentic.

Authenticity is reflected in content creation, an important part of SMIs' activities. The authenticity of the message stems from visibility, a consistent communication style, transparent and creative brand endorsement, and spontaneity. To stay visible, SMIs must post frequently. Spontaneity is encouraged by platform affordance; ephemeral tools are preferred. Authenticity of interaction stems from commitment to followers expressed by closeness, constantly answering their questions, and frequently interacting with them. The model is depicted in Table 2.

6. Conclusions

The present research contributes to an in-depth understanding of the concept of self-perceived authenticity for SMIs and the role that authenticity plays in the professional lives of digital content creators. The proposed model adds to the existing literature and can be further developed into a scale measuring the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs that can be applied in future quantitative studies.

SMIs play multiple social roles that change in different contexts (Trepte & Reinecke, 2011), but they always seek to stay authentic in their interactions with followers and brands. Our research unveiled new aspects of the relationship between SMIs and authenticity. We found that, in the case of SMIs, professionalization does not rule out authenticity. On the contrary, the experience of interacting with followers helps SMIs emphasize their uniqueness and highlight their differentiating attributes (see also Hudders et al., 2020). According to the interviewed SMIs, authenticity is defined by differentiation, and thus personal branding strategies enhance SMIs' self-perceived authenticity. However, their advertising activities pose a challenge to their authenticity. When SMIs have the freedom to choose the brands that they endorse, when they endorse brands that are associated with the values they stand for, and when they are allowed to express their creativity in developing advertising messages, it contributes to the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. One of the principles SMIs adhere to is to recommend and promote only products that they have tested. Transparency of sponsorship as an expression of honesty to followers is positively associated with the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs. This finding is also in line with previous scholarship that empirically demonstrated transparent authenticity as a strategy that SMIs use for authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Platform affordances were also identified by SMIs as a relevant factor that can contribute to creating authentic messages. Ephemerality encourages spontaneity (Kreling et al., 2021). Spontaneity is an important element of authenticity for SMIs, and, in this regard, they are not different from any other social media user. To stay authentic, a consistent communication style is required. In line with previous literature (Taillon et al., 2020), we found that SMIs are aware that closeness to followers is a relevant professional asset.

This study is of an exploratory nature and, thus, has inherent limits. First, the results of our qualitative approach must be interpreted in the context studied and cannot be generalized (Bryman, 2015). Second, the sample itself presented a limitation. Interviewing SMIs from different countries or even different continents would have provided greater insight into how authenticity is seen by professional content creators. Third, when interviewing professional communicators, researchers generally receive socially desirable answers.

The present article contributes to the academic research on SMIs and furthers understanding of this phenomenon. The model we have presented here can

Table 2. The components of SMIs' self-perception of authenticity.

The authenticity of the source (Authentic self-awareness)	The authenticity of the message (Authentic self-expression)	The authenticity of the interaction (Authentic self-awareness and authentic self-expression)
Sincerity	Visibility	Commitment to the followers
Expertise	Communication style	Frequency
Uniqueness (differentiation)	Spontaneity	
Commitment to own values	Transparent and creative brand endorsement	
Mediated realness		

be operationalized by developing a scale that measures the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs and by testing it in future quantitative research. We could then compare how followers and SMIs perceive authenticity. This study also has practical implications: Marketers should consider analyzing previous content posted by particular SMIs to launch compatible collaborations between brands and SMIs, taking into consideration the importance of finding matches between the products being advertised and the profiles of SMIs in terms of authenticity. Our findings can also be relevant to influencers, who should be aware of the importance of the authenticity of the source and of the message in building long-lasting relationships with their followers.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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