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PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY IN INFLUENCER MARKETING

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Abstract <p>The purpose of this master's thesis is to enrich the knowledge regarding the perceived authenticity of a social media influencer. Perceived authenticity has been acknowledged as an attribute that impacts the successfulness of influencer marketing. Thus, the topic of perceived authenticity is examined within the context of influencer marketing and the objective is to discover elements that may foster or diminish the perceived authenticity of an influencer from their followers' perspective. To achieve this objective, the study will answer the research question of "how do followers experience the perceived authenticity of a social media influencer?"</p> <p>The study's findings are valuable for both influencers and brands. The concept of perceived authenticity has been studied extensively with other contexts, such as brand authenticity and within the context of personal and self-branding. In-depth knowledge regarding perceived authenticity within influencer marketing remains scant. Previous research related to influencer marketing has emphasized quantitative methods as the effectiveness of influencer marketing has received enormous interest. This study was conducted as qualitative research, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary data and content analysis as the secondary data. The chosen methods allow in-depth examinations regarding the research topic that is subjective and complex in nature.</p> <p>A total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2023. The participants were chosen based on certain criteria: they must be active followers of influencers on social media. In addition, the participants were selected from different generations to achieve knowledge that can be applied to wider target groups. Research participants familiarized themselves with the subject before the interviews as they were asked to write journal entries regarding their thoughts and feelings related to influencers' content. The journal entries were discussed in the semi-structured interviews and utilized as the secondary data of the study.</p> <p>The research's key findings supported previous theories related to perceived authenticity, and novel contributions were discovered. The findings indicate that influencers' perceived authenticity is related to elements of openness, vulnerability, personality, and similarity. Influencers' content is perceived as authentic when it appears as spontaneous, interactive, and not-heavily edited. The findings highlighted the significance of brand-influencer fit as the parties' values and brand must be aligned. In addition, the importance of influencers' personal approach, extent of collaborations and transparency regarding brand endorsed publications were stressed.</p>			
Keywords Influencer marketing, perceived authenticity, social media influencers, social media			
Additional information -			

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1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is to gain in-depth knowledge on the topic of authenticity within the context of influencer marketing. This chapter comprises the background, the justification, and of the aim of the study, following by the research questions. Subsequently, the key concepts of the study and the chosen methodology are introduced. And lastly, the structure of the study is explained.

1.1 Background and justification of the study

The field of marketing has faced prominent developments during the past decade due to the exponential growth of digital media (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). The current media landscape that consists of both online and offline channels has embarked novel challenges for marketing experts as the consumers encounter advertising stimuli more frequently than before (Chopra et al., 2021). Digital sources allow new forms of engagement with consumers, such as consumer-to-consumer recommendations via social media which is defined as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Tan, 2021). As eWom has become increasingly significant in consumers' purchase intention process, brands have started to utilize new tools such as influencer marketing to accomplish interactive communication with the consumers (Dhun & Dangi, 2022).

Influencer marketing has become an integral global phenomenon during the recent years, and the growth has been explained by the enormous number of active social media users (Karagür et al., 2022; Mallipeddi et al., 2021). In 2020, 75 % of advertisers declared that they utilize influencers in their marketing activities and 45 % of them estimated that they will increase their budget allocated for influencer marketing during the next year (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Influencer marketing has achieved more than eleven times return on investment compared to other forms of digital media marketing (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth of influencer marketing towards a new peak as consumers spent even more time online due to restrictions (Taylor & Carlson, 2021).

Influencer marketing provides an opportunity for brands to target consumers with advertising messages on social media platforms by utilizing celebrity endorsers (Feng

et al., 2020). Furthermore, effective influencer marketing can enhance brand attitude, brand perception, consumers' purchase intentions and brand's results on search engines (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Effectiveness of influencer marketing can be measured by various indicators. The indicators differ depending on the objectives that companies set for their marketing initiatives. For instance, a company can thrive to achieve a higher level of engagement or a larger audience for their influencer marketing efforts (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). Feng et al. (2020) conclude that the effectiveness of influencer marketing can be explained by consumers' perception of influencers' content. Personal story-telling increases interest and trust, and thus, influencers are perceived to obtain a higher level of credibility compared to traditional celebrities.

Due to the nature of an emerging industry, interest in research concerning influencer marketing has expanded extensively during the past five years. Previous research regarding influencer marketing has primarily focused on examining its effectiveness. Furthermore, research emphasis has been on the interrelation between certain factors that impact the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Influencer credibility is perceived as one of the key factors that obtains an effect on influencer marketing's successfulness (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). Other significant factors or attributes presented are trustworthiness and similarity towards an influencer, influencer's level of expertise, entertainment value, and attractiveness (Lee & Kim, 2020; Saima & Khan, 2020a; Xiao et al., 2018).

Cohesive research has been conducted on factors such as influencer credibility, yet an important factor impacting successfulness of influencer marketing has not been explored with the similar scope: perceived authenticity of an influencer (Lee & Eastin, 2021). In the current digital landscape, perceived authenticity is considered as a key determinant in consumers' purchasing decisions (Balaban et al., 2022). Lee and Eastin (2021) argue that perceived authenticity can be established as a prerequisite for the other factors that strengthen the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Due to its complex nature and subjectivity, the factor is challenging to measure. Nevertheless, research has determined that perceived authenticity has a strong, positive correlation with consumers' buying intentions.

Notwithstanding the mediating role of authenticity on the consumer's buying intention, research on authenticity (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021; Steils et al., 2022b) has emphasized the topic of brand authenticity, and the emphasis has then shifted to personal brands (Audrezet et al., 2020). Brand authenticity is a widely researched area, and the conducted studies have indicated that generations differ greatly in their views and opinions regarding authenticity (Kirnosova, 2021). Millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z) are described as groups that value and demand authenticity from brands in their consumption decisions (Carroll et al., 2022a). The different outlooks on authenticity are formed by the generations' values, priorities and their views on life that emphasize the significance of matters such as responsibility (Kirnosova, 2021). Particular interest has peaked in research towards the Gen Z, based on the generation's unique characteristics that have developed due to the fact that they have lived their whole life in a digital world (Carroll et al., 2022).

1.2 The aim of the study and research questions

Previous research has stressed the significance of authenticity in branding, however research on the authenticity of influencer marketing has remained scant. Particularly, in-depth knowledge regarding authenticity within influencer marketing from the consumers perspective needs to be further explored to comprehend the consumers' emotions and experiences. This knowledge can provide greater understanding of how consumers' buying intentions can be developed. Furthermore, the differences between generations and their experiences on perceived authenticity in influencer marketing are not yet examined comprehensively. **To address this research gap, this study will propose the following research question: How do followers experience the perceived authenticity of a social media influencer?** To answer this main research question, a sub-question is presented as follows: which elements do the followers use to form their perception of the authenticity of influencer marketing?

The objective of the study is to provide in-depth knowledge on the topic of authenticity that is described as multidimensional, complex, and subjective (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Due to the nature of the topic explored within this study, the chosen method is qualitative research. The aim of qualitative research is to comprehend phenomena on a deeper level and enrich the knowledge regarding a certain phenomenon extensively

(Baxter & Jack, 2008). In addition, the field of research on influencer marketing has emphasized quantitative methods as various studies have examined the correlations of certain factors and their impact on the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Thus, the chosen method is justified as it provides novel insight for this emerging field of research.

1.3 Key concepts of the study

Influencer marketing. Influencers create branded user-generated content on social media platforms (Jin & Ryu, 2020) by sharing personal information to their community of followers concerning for example their day-to-day life or their topic of interest, and simultaneously they present recommendations to their peers about products or services (AlRabiah et al., 2022a). The marketing aspect occurs when the influencer obtains an ability to impact follower's buying intent or consumption habits by leveraging certain attributes, such as their sense of authority or the relationship between the influencer and their followers (Spálova et al., 2021). The brands who choose to collaborate with influencers attempt to leverage these attributes and achieve increased level of brand awareness, a shift in brand image, or an increase in sales (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Perceived authenticity. Perceived authenticity of an influencer has been established as a driver for effective influencer marketing due to its ability to strengthen the relationship between the influencer and their followers (Park et al., 2021). The concept of perceived authenticity is interpreted by the followers who sense whether the influencer is genuine and sincere as they openly share self-disclosure on social media (S. S. Lee & Johnson, 2022). When the influencer is perceived as authentic, the bond of the parasocial relationship becomes stronger and simultaneously branded endorsements are perceived as more authentic compared to firm-based advertisements (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021; S. Lee & Kim, 2020).

Parasocial relationship. A parasocial relationship is established when a person develops form of intimacy and closeness with a media persona, resulting in a long-term relationship that obtains similar attributes as a real social relationship (Leite & Baptista, 2022). The current digital era enables more interactive relationships between

the audience and the media persona (Wang et al., 2021). In social media, a person can send messages and replies to an influencer, and the influencer may reciprocate, but nonetheless, the follower typically comprehends that the influencer receives a large number of messages, and the reply is not guaranteed which differs from a traditional, two-sided social relationship (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

1.4 Research methodology

To accomplish the research objective, this study conducts semi-structured interviews. Interviews are considered to be the most prevalent method in qualitative research (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). Semi-structured interviews allow reciprocity during the interview; the interviewer can address questions inspired by the participant's answers, and the participant is able to share their individual interpretations (Kallio et al., 2016). Hence, the method is appropriate to address this research question as the participants must be able to express their individual opinions on the subjective matter.

The criterion for participants entails certain prerequisites; all participants must follow an influencer actively on social media and they need to be part of a certain target group determined by their generation (gen Z, millennial, or generation X). In addition, as a complementary method for the semi-structured interviews, the study incorporates content analysis. Content analysis will be conducted utilizing a journal method; the participants shall follow an influencer for a certain period of time, and they will write down what kind of emotions and feelings they experience towards the influencer's content that they publish during the chosen period. Influencer's content can encompass both organic publications and paid collaborations, hence, the feelings and emotions can be compared between different forms of content. This particular knowledge is valuable as the master's thesis is commissioned by an influencer marketing agency.

1.5 Structure of the study

This thesis comprises seven chapters. The chapters can be divided into theoretical and empirical sections. The first four chapters form the theoretical part. Introduction explains and justifies the chosen topic. The theory background of the study is explored in chapters two, three and four. First, influencer marketing is further explained, and

the characteristics related to it are presented, including the perceived authenticity of an influencer. Next, the perceived authenticity is explored within the context of brand authenticity and personal and self-branding. The fourth chapter concludes the theory background as it presents the current theoretical knowledge regarding perceived authenticity within the context of influencer marketing.

The empirical part of the study begins with the fifth chapter which focuses on the research methodology. The chosen methodology of semi-structured interviews and content analysis is further explained and justified following by detailed information regarding the research process. The sixth chapter concentrates on the research findings. Lastly, the seventh chapter concludes the thesis by presenting the key results of the study with managerial implications. In addition, the chapter includes assessment of the research's validity and limitations, and subsequently future research directions are proposed.

2 INFLUENCER MARKETING

This chapter focuses on the concept of influencer marketing. First, the concept is examined through interrelated phenomena, eWom and user-generated content. Furthermore, the concept of parasocial relationship is presented, following by a detailed definition of an influencer. The subsequent section focuses on influencer characteristics from both the influencer-follower relationship and the brand-influencer perspective. Lastly, the interrelations of these characteristics are further examined.

2.1 Influencer marketing

The current dominant digital landscape has shifted the focus of marketing (Rindfleisch & Malter, 2019). Consumers utilize media in a novel way due to multiple outlets risen by advancing technologies (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). In 2019, the number of active social media users reached 2.95 billion, and by the year 2023 the number is expected to grow to 3.43 billion (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Consequently, marketing has emerged into to a new digital era (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). This development has enabled the inception of novel forms of marketing, such as, digital ads and banners and search engine optimization (Berman & Katona, 2013; Goor et al., 2022). Furthermore, communication between brands and consumers has changed due to emerging communication channels, such as e-mail/newsletters, websites, and companies' own social media channels (Taylor & Carlson, 2021).

As a consequence of this drastic shift in the media landscape, phenomena related to marketing has adapted into the digital age, for instance, word-of-mouth (WOM) has transferred into the online world as electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Todri et al., 2022). WOM refers to consumer-to-consumer communication as people share their experiences about products and services with each other, and within the context of eWOM, this takes place in digital platforms such as social media channels (Dwivedi et al., 2021). According to studies conducted regarding its effectiveness, 93 % of consumers stated that eWOM has a remarkable impact on their purchasing behavior (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Nevertheless, further research emphasizes the significance of eWOM's credibility as the number of messages has become enormous and

consequently consumers' assessments of trustworthy sources is more complex (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

In eWOM, consumers share experiences on digital platforms, such as, a review on TripAdvisor or a post on Instagram, and this phenomenon is referred as user-generated content (UGC) (Ye et al., 2021). Research indicates that people share their experiences to enhance their level of individualism and altruism (Donthu et al., 2021) This provides a novel opportunity for brand communication as companies can share and response to UGC on digital platforms (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Studies have depicted that evaluations drafted by peers obtain a stronger impact than evaluations conducted by experts, and thus, consumers acting as co-creators has become vital for companies in today's world (Al-Abdallah & Jumaa, 2022).

A novel form of marketing has emerged in the digital era that encompasses both previously presented phenomena: influencer marketing (AlRabiah et al., 2022b; M. Kim & Baek, 2022). Influencers create branded user-generated content on social media platforms (Jin & Ryu, 2020) by sharing personal information to their community of followers concerning for example their day-to-day life or their topic of interest, and simultaneously they present recommendations to their peers about products or services (AlRabiah et al., 2022a). The marketing aspect occurs when the influencer obtains an ability to impact follower's buying intent or consumption habits by leveraging certain attributes, such as their sense of authority or the relationship between the influencer and their followers (Spálova et al., 2021). The brands who choose to collaborate with influencers attempt to leverage these attributes and achieve increased level of brand awareness, a shift in brand image, or an increase in sales (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Recent studies state that more than 75 % of marketers have decided to allocate budget towards influencer marketing and the field is expected to reach a worth of 16,4 billion dollars in 2022 (Leung et al., 2022). In Finland, influencer marketing's worth as a field surpassed 39 € millions in 2021 as the industry grew approximately 41 % compared to the latter year 2020 (IAB Finland, 2022). The steady growth of the field peaked due to the COVID-19 pandemic as people spent more time online than ever before and forms out-of-home marketing were extinct due to quarantines and governmental restrictions (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). As a consequence of the extensive growth, brands have

embarked to utilize influencer marketing in a more strategic manner and the implemented strategies have developed drastically in the past years (Haenlein et al., 2020).

The rapid growth of the field can be explained by the effectiveness of influencer marketing: marketers rely on its cost-efficiency and studies have depicted that successful influencer marketing can enhance brand awareness, strengthen, or even modify the brand image, increase the level of consumer-brand engagement, and ultimately, it can impact consumers' buying intentions (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Taylor & Carlson, 2021; Ye et al., 2021). As consumers face more marketing stimuli than ever, they become skeptical and hesitant to focus on advertisements (Breves et al., 2019). Influencer marketing enables marketing messages in a more natural environment as followers choose willingly to consume the influencer's content that comprises both organic content and brand endorsed messages (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

Notwithstanding its novelty in the field of marketing, the roots of influencer marketing are embedded in past decades. Brands have attempted to benefit from celebrities' public recognition as they have endorsed products or services in traditional media, and this has phenomenon been referred as celebrity endorsements (Bennett et al., 2022). In the digital landscape, fame and popularity provided by the traditional media do not determine whether an individual can act as an influencer (Hess et al., 2022). Due to the nature of social media, everyone is allowed an opportunity to become influential by consistently creating content on social media and simultaneously building their community of followers (Steils et al., 2022a).

Nonetheless that influencers have been referred as "insta-famous" or "Youtube celebrities", the concepts of influencer marketing and celebrity endorsements vary with each other (Breves et al., 2019). To specify, influencer marketing offers a novel approach for building relationships between consumers and brands via interactive digital engagement (Farrell et al., 2022), versus in celebrity endorsements the messages are commonly shared by the brand itself as the celebrity performs as an advocate for the product or service in brand-generated advertisements (Bennett et al., 2022). In addition, within the context of celebrity endorsements, the key driver for value-transfer is determined as celebrity-worship which can ultimately affect the

purchase intent, and in the context of influencer marketing, a parasocial relationship that appears between the influencer and their follower is established as the key element that influences buying behavior (Bennett et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

2.2 Parasocial relationship

A parasocial relationship is established when a person develops form of intimacy and closeness with a media persona, resulting in a long-term relationship that obtains similar attributes as a real social relationship (Leite & Baptista, 2022). The current digital era enables more interactive relationships between the audience and the media persona (Wang et al., 2021). In social media, a person can send messages and replies to an influencer, and the influencer may reciprocate, but nonetheless, the follower typically comprehends that the influencer receives a large number of messages, and the reply is not guaranteed which differs from a traditional, two-sided social relationship (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

In an article by Naderer et al. (2021) parasocial relationships are defined as the fundamental aspect of influencer marketing due to the nature of the relationship between the message receiver and the influencer. The message can obtain a higher effect if the source is likeable and perceived as relatable. Furthermore, para-social interaction is an element that can foster the bond in a parasocial relationship. Parasocial interaction is distinguished as a spontaneous response toward the media character, in this context, the influencer. Parasocial interaction changes the more traditional way of viewing parasocial relationships as one-sided due to the novel form of interaction facilitated by social media (Kim, 2022).

2.3 The definition of an influencer

The scientific definition of an influencer has evolved during the past decade. Recently published academic articles describe influencers as individuals who obtain a position where they can inspire, encourage, and direct actions of others, and thus, act as an influential opinion leader (Spálova et al., 2021; Steils et al., 2022b). The key determinant is their community of followers who possess the role of audience for the influencers' content (Leung et al., 2022; Steils et al., 2022b). An influencer utilizes

their position for commercial purposes and consequently, monetary benefits, by attempting to arouse interest towards a certain product or service among the community of followers (Spálova et al., 2021).

Influencers are typically divided into categories based on their number of followers (Isyanto et al., 2020a). The “mega” influencers have over 1 million followers, macro-influencers have total of 100 000 to 1 million followers, micro-influencers have 1000 to 100 000 followers, and lastly nano-influencers have less than 1000 followers (Isyanto et al., 2020b). These categorizations vary between countries due to the different levels of population. In Finland, nano-influencers have less than 1000 followers, micro-influencers between 1000-10 000, macro-influencers have 10 000-100 000 followers, and “star” influencers more than 100 000. Previous studies have focused on the larger number of followers as a key factor determining success, yet recent studies have established that the level of followers is not considered as an indicator for effective influencer marketing (Park et al., 2021).

2.4 Social media channels

Social media is evolving continuously, and consequently novel channels appear regularly (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The most relevant platform within the context of influencer marketing is the photo and video sharing application Instagram (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Instagram has become one of the fastest growing social media platforms in the past decade: in 2018 it reached 1,074 billion monthly active users, and the majority of users are under 34 years old (Haenlein et al., 2020; Santora, 2022). The social media platform has developed multiple features that strengthen the utilization of paid collaborations, such as, the ability to add direct links to Instagram Stories and the ability to advertise influencers’ content as a sponsored posts to other consumers in addition for the influencers’ own followers (Haenlein et al., 2020).

A social media platform that has been able to challenge the popularity of Instagram is Tiktok, which was launched in 2016 and has recently reached over 1 billion monthly users (J. Santora, 2022). Tiktok has been especially popular among younger users: in the United States nearly 40 % of the users were teenagers aged from 10 to 19 years old (Haenlein et al., 2020). The platform that focuses on short-form videos has attracted

more older users in recent years, in 2022 nearly 30 % of the platform's users belonged to the age group of 20 to 29 years old (Doyle, 2022). Tiktok has developed supportive initiatives for its influencers, for instance, the platform launched "Creator Fund" in 2020 through which Tiktok will share monetary support to the content creators for more than 230 million worth (Molenaar, 2022). Other social media channels that have been utilized actively by influencers include platforms such as Youtube, Snapchat, Twitch, and Twitter (Haenlein et al., 2020).

2.5 Influencer characteristics

As the influencer marketing industry has grown rapidly, interest within research has followed and the number of studies has peaked from 2016 to the current year (Hudders et al., 2020). The extant research has focused on determining what generates effective influencer marketing, and the studies indicate that certain attributes and factors obtain an impact on the success of influencer marketing activities (Xiao et al., 2018). The attributes related to follower's perceptions of influencers include influencer credibility, trustworthiness, level of expertise, similarity, entertainment value, attractiveness, and perceived authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2022; Shamim & Islam, 2022; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020; Xiao et al., 2018). From the brand's viewpoint, brand control, and brand fit are perceived as key determinants impacting the effectiveness of influencer marketing efforts (Breves et al., 2019; Martínez-López, 2020).

2.5.1 Characteristics related to the influencer

One of the critical key determinants impacting the effectiveness of influencer marketing is found the credibility of an influencer. When regarding to information or message credibility, the influence of the characteristics of a message are perceived to affect how believable the receiver evaluates the message (Xiao et al., 2018). Studies indicate that the informational value of influencers' content plays a role in consumers' buying behavior (Shamim & Islam, 2022). Nonetheless, as influencer marketing has grown rapidly, and brands utilize influencers more than ever before, the level of skepticism and doubt has increased in consumers' perceptions regarding recommendations and endorsements (Tan, 2021).

When an influencer posts content that obtains informational value, a follower can develop sense of trust towards the influencer (Shamim & Islam, 2022). In the field of marketing, trust is described as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (Lou & Yuan, 2019a). Trust and trustworthiness are considered as crucial elements in the context of influencer marketing and its effectiveness: trust is highly related to the transparency of the marketing activities as lack of disclosure can strongly affect the trust between the influencer and their audience due to consumers’ perception of a possible exploitation (Balaban et al., 2021).

In addition to trust, a primary component in developing credibility is distinguished as expertise which relates to the level of knowledge of a certain source (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Studies indicate that when a person is perceived as knowledgeable regarding certain area, obtaining a title that entails expertise or they possess a higher level of experience, the audience of the source are more likely to agree with them (M. Xiao et al., 2018). The influencers’ level of expertise has been found to increase brand satisfaction and enhance brand attitude compared to non-expert influencers (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

The third requirement for the Credibility Model is attractiveness (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). In the context of influencer marketing, attractiveness regards to both the physical attractiveness of an individual (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020) and non-physical attractiveness such as level of wisdom, wholesomeness, psychographic features, and sportsmanship (Koay et al., 2022). Various studies conclude that attractiveness can shape the consumers’ perception of the influencer towards more positive and a higher level of perceived attractiveness can strengthen the effects on behavioral intentions of the consumer (E. Kim & Kim, 2022).

Extant research stress the significance of perceived similarity in influencer marketing: when a person views similarities with themselves in influencers, they are more likely to build a parasocial relationship and consequently shape their buying intentions based on the influencer’s endorsements (Naderer et al., 2021). Similarity or similar characteristics are the basis of the homophily principle which states that people require similarity from others to develop relationships (Tan, 2021). Sense of similarity can be

based on beliefs, norms or interests shared with the influencer, or on desired attributes that the followers wish to obtain (L. Xiao et al., 2021).

Within the context of advertising, brands have attempted to entertain their customers for decades which has strengthened the concept of entertainment value (Lou & Yuan, 2019b). The concept is a salient element in digital media because people typically use social media to seek entertainment (Saima & Khan, 2020b). Thus, entertainment value is present in influencer marketing as well: influencers can create entertaining experiences for their followers which can subsequently accumulate the persuasiveness of a message and ultimately shape the consumers' buying intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019b).

Lastly, the perceived authenticity of an influencer has been established as a driver for effective influencer marketing due to its ability to strengthen the relationship between the influencer and their followers (Park et al., 2021). The concept of perceived authenticity is interpreted by the followers who sense whether the influencer is genuine and sincere as they openly share self-disclosure on social media (S. S. Lee & Johnson, 2022). When the influencer is perceived as authentic, the bond of the parasocial relationship becomes stronger and simultaneously branded endorsements are perceived as more authentic compared to firm-based advertisements (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021; S. Lee & Kim, 2020).

2.5.2 Characteristics related to the brand's point of view

In addition to the previously presented attributes related to the influencer or the relationship between the influencer and their followers, studies have been conducted on certain elements related brands' perspective: in an article by Martínez-López et al. (2020) the nature of brand control is presented to be shifting due to the novel and interactive digital landscape. Consumers have gained unseen power due to their ability to co-create content regarding recommendations or reviews on social media channels, and thus, brands are forced to cede some of its control. Regarding influencer marketing, consumers can detect bias if the content entails high level of brand control, and the consequences can be negative.

In addition to brand control, previous studies argue that effective influencer marketing requires an assessment of the potential brand fit: robust scope of research depicts that when a consumer perceives the endorser and the endorsed brand as fitting with each other's, the message is evaluated as more credible (Breves et al., 2019). The brand fit can be assessed based on the how the brands and influencers' image, personality, physical attributes, or expertise are matching (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021).

Furthermore, brands can benefit from evaluating the follower-brand fit which indicates how the interests of the consumers are applicable to the brand's focus, for example, a cosmetics brand's target group should be consumers who are interested in beauty (Leung et al., 2022). When regarding the brand's perspective, poorly handled influencer marketing cases can obtain negative impacts, for instance, when a supplier of meat-based goods collaborated with an influencer who had identified themselves as vegan, the feedback from the consumers was highly critical and both the brand and the influencer were forced to apologize to their audience for their misjudgment (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021).

2.5.3 Interrelations of characteristics

Extensive amount of research emphasizes that these previously presented factors are highly interrelated: for example, studies have shown that similarity supports trust because you are more likely trust someone you perceive as similar to yourself (Tan, 2021). Furthermore, the credibility of an influencer is depicted to obtain a mediating role in creating entertainment value and affecting the information quality (Saima & Khan, 2020b). In addition, the different attributes and their significance differs between channels and influencer categories, for example, in the context of influencers who are focused on educational content, a higher level of expertise is required compared to "life-style" influencers who share content about their daily-life (Xiao et al., 2018).

3 PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY

This chapter comprises different perspectives related to authenticity within the context of marketing. First, the concept of brand authenticity is explored, followed by a further investigation of authenticity within personal and self-branding. In the latter section, different generations and their characteristics are explained, and how their views on authenticity vary.

3.1 Brand authenticity

Longingness towards authenticity has been present in people's lives for centuries and its relevance has steadily grown and peaked quite recently (Carroll et al., 2022b). The increased significance of authenticity can originate from the shift in consumers' role as they demand more from brands (Shoenberger et al., 2021). The novel role of consumers has been enabled by the digital era as it has provided new forms of interaction, for example, people are able to question corporate practices that raise suspiciousness in social media, and this development has reached a prevalent state due to the Covid-19 pandemic which moved people into a virtual world without the ability to connect in traditional ways (Caven, 2022).

The phenomenon of authenticity is complex and subjective by nature, and thus, it should be examined relying on the context (Shoenberger et al., 2021). In the context of brands, authenticity is achieved when brands are perceived as honest, real, and genuine by the consumers (Carroll et al., 2022b). Brand authenticity comprises certain integral elements such as "genuineness", "reality", "sincerity", and "truth" (Shoenberger et al., 2021). Furthermore, brand authenticity has been distinguished as "the perceived genuineness of a brand that is manifested in terms of stability, uniqueness, ability to keep its promises and unaffectedness (i.e. naturalness) (Carroll et al., 2022b).

In the article by Carroll et al. (2022) an additional definition for perceived brand authenticity is stated as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful towards itself (continuity), true to its customers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity) and able to support consumers in being true to themselves

(symbolism)". Subsequently, the brand's purpose, values and culture must be in parallel with the external perception of the brand, and if conflicts occur between brand's promises and practice, they are exposed to severe criticism (Caven, 2022).

Brand authenticity has been examined by various studies and its relevance is depicted to reach additional sub-categories of marketing. For instance, an article by Vredenburg et al. (2020) elaborated that authenticity is prevalent in brand activism, and if its relevance is ignored, the outcome can be negative and entail the "woke-washing" effect. If the brand purpose, values, and corporate practice are not aligned with the communicated brand activism efforts, trust toward the brand can decrease exponentially and as a result, consumers and other stakeholders can be alienated.

A similar viewpoint was distinguished within the context of brand extensions: when the extension fails to align itself with the core brand's values, practices, and heritage, the extension is perceived to be inauthentic and it can obtain a negative effect on the core brand as they are (Loebnitz & Grunert, 2022) et al., 2012). A study by (Loebnitz & Grunert, 2022) indicated that images leveraged in advertisements can extract authentic or inauthentic perceptions on the brand in question. Visualisations of ideal images were depicted as inauthentic and images that appeared as real were perceived as authentic.

In addition to trust towards a brand, perceived authenticity can strengthen the consumers' preference and it can create a higher level of attachment toward the brand which ultimately can manifest as brand loyalty (Caven, 2022). Studies have argued that perceived authenticity has a positive impact on brand attitudes and purchase intentions and consequently on the effectiveness of marketing (Shoenberger et al., 2021). On a deeper level, consumers may build their own identity based on the sense of meaning provided by brands (Carroll et al., 2022b). The longingness for meaning and purpose is highlighted in today's world of myriad brands (Caven, 2022).

The consumers' identity and how its formulation is interrelated with brands is further explained in the article by (Carroll et al., 2022b). The concept of self-authenticity is presented to be built on consumption choices, that can obtain expressions of certain values for example. Nonetheless, the article stresses that consumers who possess a

lower level of meaning for self-authenticity obtain only a minor significance towards the authenticity of the brands that they consume. When a consumer obtains a higher level of self-authenticity, brand authenticity is a substantive tool to express self-congruence. By utilizing authenticity in the essence of the brand, brands can form a group or a community of these sort of consumers, and subsequently achieve high loyalty as a result.

Studies have stressed that the level of perceived authenticity is higher when the information is consumer-based rather than information shared by the company itself (Zhang & Patrick, 2021). Nonetheless, brands are required to share consistent information about their values and practices for their stakeholders in both of their own and shared channels to accumulate transparency and honesty (Caven, 2022). The emphasis is on the core of the brand, and how successfully the core is translated into messages for consumers who value their self-authenticity at a higher level (Carroll et al., 2022b).

3.2 Authenticity in personal and self-branding

Personal branding has become crucial in today's world where competition has grown exponentially within the context of groups such as influencers, celebrities, and politicians (Tang et al., 2022). People's brands are considered as the key to success as a consequence of the prominent focus on individualism (Rampersad, 2008a). The relevance of such concept has emerged as communication has develop into "mass self-communication" which implies that the rise of global system of networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn enable individuals to communicate to masses (Potgieter et al., 2017).

Furthermore, in certain fields of business, personal brands have established a significant role with "normal people" due to personal branding's ability to differentiate individuals based on their uniqueness, relevance and how interesting they are perceived by others (Manurung et al., 2017). Personal brand is an integration of expectations, images, and perceptions associated with the individual (Rampersad, 2008a). The key is that the perception is established by someone else than the individual and the individual is exposing a reflection of who they would want to be

(Potgieter et al., 2017). The effectiveness of personal branding is determined based on how the individual is able to control and manage the perceptions of others related to them (Rampersad, 2008a).

The concept of authentic personal branding has been distinguished as an organic and authentic model and framework which leads how to build, implement, and maintain personal brands that are parallel with one's dreams, life goals, values, and other aspects that are related to a desirable life (Manurung et al., 2017). An authentic personal brand comprises elements that foster the effectiveness of a personal brand, such as consistency, relevance, visibility, authority, specialisation, integrity, goodwill, persistence, and personality (Potgieter et al., 2017). To achieve authenticity, the personal brand should exhibit the true character of the person and allow their fears and weaknesses to be visible, and as a result, the personal brand will strengthen and become clear, complete, and valuable to others (Rampersad, 2008a; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018).

Authentic personal brand reinforces the sense of trust towards the individual (Rampersad, 2008a), and the perception of warmth which increases the person's likability (Tang et al., 2022). The competitive advantage provided by successful personal branding is presented as increased attractiveness in the eyes of a potential contact, customer, or employers (Potgieter et al., 2017). The authentic personal brand that comprises both the individual's strengths and weaknesses can enrich the consensus between the individual and their customers as co-creation can occur with the customer when the individual exposes their weaker traits (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018).

In an article by Pruchniewska (2018) self-branding is depicted as a concept that is closely interrelated with personal branding. Self-branding imbues the concept of personal branding by encompassing another aspect to it: monetary advancement. In self-branding, an individual embraces the idea that their self is a commodity that can be sold for potential employer, clients, and various audiences. Hence, this concept can be applied within the context of influencers, particularly because self-branding prominently occurs in social media through engagement which cultivates social interaction into capital.

Authenticity is embedded in a successful self-brand as it requires to be simultaneously genuine and carefully constructed (Pruchniewska, 2018). Social media platforms enable the individual's inner self to be visible for their audience in a transparent manner without artificiality (Faleatua, 2018). Skilfully built self-brand can be utilized in various platforms to accumulate millions of followers (Psarras, 2022).

A study conducted by Faleatua (2018) stresses that social media involves aspects that can diminish the level of authenticity: high expectations from followers or social media platform's regulations may obtain negative effects. In addition, heavily edited images can diminish the perceived authenticity of the individual's self-brand. Nonetheless, in social media images that appear as natural remain edited to a certain extent which indicates that accepted level of inauthenticity is present in today's social media environment.

3.3 Generations and their differences related to perceived authenticity

A person's generation obtains an integral impact on their beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and views (Çankaya et al., 2020). The definition of a generation is distinguished as a "group of individuals who were born within a defined period of time and, importantly have experienced consequential social and historical events at key developmental stages of their life histories"(Gray et al., 2019). There is a robust scope of studies conducted regarding generational differences in various contexts such as leadership, parental and educational styles, sustainability concerns, and political views (Breau et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2019; Mora et al., 2022; Myears, 1988; Pinelli et al., 2018).

The division of generations fails to be distinctly based on age due to the role of shared experiences that define on which generation the person is attached to, such as historical events both negative and positive, innovations, and cultural icons (Goldring & Azab, 2021). The emphasis on shared experiences that build a generation gap in a critical age are distinguished as generational cohorts (Goldring & Azab, 2021; Jiang et al., 2022). The defined generational cohorts in today's research are the following: Boomers born between 1946 and 1964, the Generation X (Gen X) born between 1965 and 1980, the Millennials born between 1981 and 1996, and the Generation Z (Gen Z) born since

1997 (Goldring & Azab, 2021). The newest generation is born since 2010 to this day, and they are described as the Generation Alpha (Gen A) (Drugaş, 2022).

Generations differ in various ways, for instance, in their style of communicating, and in their characteristics, principles, strengths, and weaknesses (Çankaya et al., 2020). Another prominent factor affecting the generations is their relationship with technologies: Gen Z is described as the “generation of digital natives”, and the newest Gen A is distinguished as “screenagers” since they have experienced the world only with the current technology (Drugaş, 2022). Thus, generations differ on their media consumption ways which is one of the key reasons why generations are important to the field of marketing (Dou et al., 2006). Furthermore, generations differ on how they perceive things, which is relevant within the context of perceived authenticity (Çankaya et al., 2020).

The Gen X has come of age at a time when the traditional media was the prominent outlet (Paul & Claire, 2020). The distinctive characteristics linked to Gen X entail “independent” and “nonconformist” which originates from their experiences with their parents who typically were committed to full-time jobs and chose to show less affection (Goldring & Azab, 2021). The generation has been described as “digital immigrants” because their way of communicating and receiving information in their everyday lives due to the lack of involvement with technologies and the internet to the same extent as the newer generations (Jiang et al., 2022). Today, Gen X is described as eager adopters of technology and they are willing to search for information and obtain a sceptic attitude towards brands which results in lower degrees of brand loyalty (Goldring & Azab, 2021).

An article by (Dalessandro, 2018) depicts how the shared experiences that have shaped the generation of Millennials are prevalently related to rapid leaps in technologies and innovation, which have fundamentally impacted the generation as they were growing up during the revolution of the digital era. Due to the emergent digital era, the number of choices and alternatives concerning products, and even relationships have grown drastically, and subsequently, millennials are characterized as stressed about decision-making and whether their choices are “true” to themselves. Thus, the craving for

authenticity is declared as critical for the Millennials and the other newer generations that followed (Carroll et al., 2022b).

The Gen Z is considered as a group that is setting trends and increasing their purchasing power, and thus, its relevance is emphasized in the current marketing field (Zatwarnicka-Madura et al., 2022). Gen Z is characterized as a group of individuals who are independent-minded, yet simultaneously influenced by other's opinions, highly educated, technologically savvy, innovative, and creative individuals who obtain a strong desire for uniqueness and information, and hence, often perceive things from a sceptical perspective (Carroll et al., 2022b; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Priporas et al., 2017). The generation's life begun in the digital era, and thus, they behave in a very different manner than the older generations (Priporas et al., 2017). Due to these previously stated reasons, the Gen Z is depicted to emphasize the meaning of authenticity within marketing more than any other generation (Carroll et al., 2022b).

4 PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY WITHIN INFLUENCER MARKETING

This chapter focuses on presenting a cohesive overview of the current research regarding influencer marketing and the concept of perceived authenticity. The viewpoints on authenticity and influencer marketing are examined as follows: authentic relationship between influencer and the follower, the relationship between authenticity and commerciality, and lastly, authenticity in the context of brand endorsement's disclosure.

4.1 Authentic relationship between influencer and follower

As influencer marketing has grown its role to the current state, consumers have adopted a more sceptical view on the authenticity of an influencer and how independently the influencer chooses their brand endorsements (Steils et al., 2022b). This development has strengthened the importance of perceived authenticity due to the audience's desire for experiences that are more similar to their own daily life (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021). Authenticity is described as a performative act where the influencer attempts to appear as "real" through their content while simultaneously controlling their own brand in a consistent manner (Wellman et al., 2020). The nature of authenticity is continuously evolving as the act is performed and negotiated by the audience (Wellman et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the relationship between the influencer and their followers is depicted to remain stronger when it appears authentic and similar to a normal relationship between people built on shared memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations (Wellman et al., 2020). In addition, a journal article by Steils et al. (2022b) argues that the scope of the audience can impact the perceived authenticity of an influencer. Micro influencers with a smaller following are perceived as more authentic and engaging compared to macro influencers whose audience size can ultimately create a perception of a celebrity persona. Hence, the basis of a relationship is constructed by the follower's perception of the influencer's true identity (Wellman et al., 2020). In the context of brand endorsements, authenticity can be achieved when the influencer's values and interests are aligned with the brand (de Cicco et al., 2021).

4.2 The relationship of authenticity and commerciality

Authenticity has been established as the key driver of influence, and it can be leveraged to differentiate from the ocean of sponsored content that followers come across in social media (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021; S. S. Lee & Johnson, 2022). Authenticity is interdependent with influencer's self-disclosure as it formulates more followers, higher recognition, appreciation, and stronger parasocial interaction (S. S. Lee & Johnson, 2022). Consequently, authenticity can enrich influencer's social capital and consequently attract monetary benefits through commercial advantages with collaborative brands that aim to utilize the authentic relationship between the influencer and their followers (Wellman et al., 2020). Perceived authenticity can impact follower's attitudes and behaviour towards the influencer, and ultimately reshape the reputation of an influencer (Steils et al., 2022b). On the contrary, influencers who appear as inauthentic are perceived as less trustworthy and fraudulent (Duffy et al., 2022).

The significance of perceived authenticity is emphasized within the context of brand endorsements (Steils et al., 2022b). Commerciality and the perceived authenticity obtain discrepancy to a certain extent and influencers are required to find balance between their followers' and the collaborative brand's expectations (Wellman et al., 2020). In creative fields, artists who are perceived authentic typically become the most successful, yet the level of success can negatively impact their perceived authenticity (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021).

The role of balancing is exemplified when an influencer determines to only work with brands that they use in their daily lives before the collaboration or when the influencer consciously manages their style of communication, images, and content consistently (Wellman et al., 2020). Furthermore, perceived authenticity may diminish if the followers' sense that the influencer is endorsing brands overly extensively in their content (Borchers et al., 2022). This may occur if the influencer publishes enormous amount of endorsed content with various brands or if the influencer is accused of over exaggerating their emotions towards a brand in their endorsed content (Audrezet et al., 2020; Borchers et al., 2022). In addition, the level of perceived authenticity may

decrease if the influencer gathers a larger group of followers, and thus, they become more closer to celebrities in the eyes of the follower (Park et al., 2021).

Within brand endorsed content, influencers typically share stories where they create a bond between their personal life and the brand by messaging both factual and emotional information to their followers (Audrezet et al., 2020). Research on two-sided messages and their influence on authenticity was examined in an article by Lee & Johnson (2022). The results indicate that when an influencer provides both positive and negative disclosure on the endorsement (two-sided messages), the message receiver perceives it as more authentic compared to one-sided messages that only focus on the positive elements. In addition, two-sided messages were more likely shared among consumers through eWOM.

A study conducted by (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021) emphasizes the role of authenticity within the visuals of influencers' content. Heavy manipulation of photos can affect the perceived authenticity negatively, yet, today's technological advancements has increased the difficultness to detect photo manipulation. Furthermore, environment and background of visuals that appears as less familiar from advertisements are perceived as more authentic. For instance, urban city view can obtain a higher level of perceived authenticity compared to a blank background. Lastly, consumers perceived people who were presented on sponsored content related to fashion as more authentic when they appeared as more similar to the consumers rather than the high-end fashion models.

4.3 The disclosure of endorsements and transparency

Various studies have presented incongruent views on how the disclosure of an endorsement affects the perceived authenticity of an influencer (Steils et al., 2022b). From the influencer's viewpoint, clear disclosure of endorsements strengthens their sense of true self, and thus, increases their own perceived level of authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Regarding the followers' opinions, extant studies support both arguments: higher level of transparency can diminish the trust and create negative attitudes, and on the contrary, clear disclosure can be perceived as ethical and positive (Steils et al., 2022b).

A concept of transparent authenticity proposes that endorsed content must present clear information that is based on facts about the product or service and simultaneously the influencer must disclose the commercial nature of the collaboration to its full extent (Audrezet et al., 2020; Steils et al., 2022b). A recently published study stresses that clear disclosure of endorsements increases the level of perceived authenticity and facilitates the formation of trust both in the context of micro and macro influencers (Steils et al., 2022b).

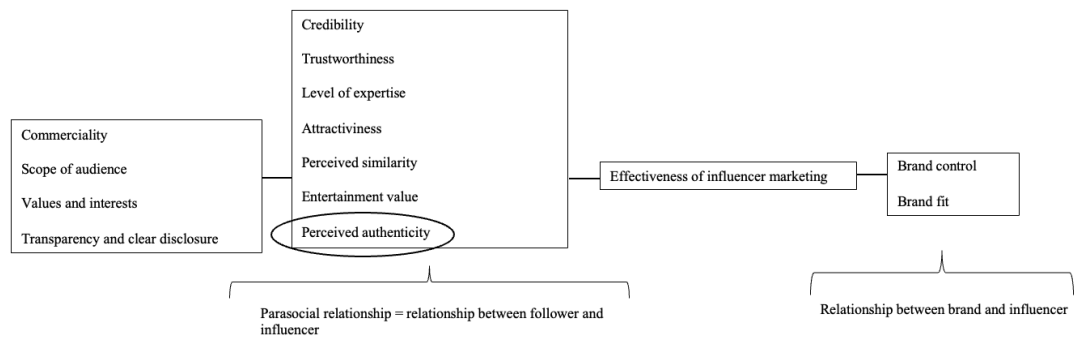


Figure 1 Concepts related to perceived authenticity.

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on describing the research methodology of this study starting with the introduction of the thesis commissioner. Next, the chosen research methodologies of semi-structured interviews and content analysis are explained. Following the methodologies, the data collection process is further elaborated. The data collection section includes a table that comprises a detailed list of research participants. Subsequently, the chosen method of data analysis is distinguished and justified.

5.1 Introduction of the thesis commissioner

Indieplace Oy is a Finnish PR and influencer marketing agency located in Helsinki. The company was one of the first influencer marketing agencies in Finland as they initiated business in 2009 with a blog portal referred as Indiedays (Indieplace, 2023). In 2021, Indieplace Oy's revenue was 3,06 million, making it the second largest influencer marketing agency in Finland based on revenue (Kauppalehti, 2023). Indieplace focuses on data-driven influencer marketing utilizing multiple channels. Campaign channels comprise Instagram, Tiktok, blogs, Youtube, and podcasts. In addition, the company offers versatile PR services for its clients (Indieplace, 2023).

5.2 Primary research method: semi-structured interviews

Due to the abstract and subjective nature of the research topic, the chosen method for the study was qualitative research. Qualitative research is described as an umbrella concept that comprises various methods that aspire to provide meaning and larger contributions to issues that are deeply contextual (Tracy, 2020). The concept of meaning is highly relevant in this study, as the perceived authenticity is a subjective matter that carries various meanings in peoples' minds.

In addition to the abstract and subjective nature, the research on this particular topic has been found to lack of deeper understanding. The previous research regarding influencers and influencer marketing has mainly focused on quantitative methods and the qualitative, in-depth knowledge regarding the topic remains scant. In-depth knowledge is typically achieved through interviews where participants are allowed to

share their personal opinions and the justifications behind them on deeper level (Galletta, 2013). Thus, the precise research method within the qualitative research concept's umbrella was semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews utilize interview structure that offers the researcher possibilities to rephrase or change questions during the interview. The method allows the researcher to observe the participant's trail of thought as open-ended questions are presented. The researcher can modify the structure spontaneously if needed to achieve deeper understanding of the participant's views. (Galletta, 2013). The research was conducted based on the logic of semi-structured interviews. The participants were asked to present examples or clarify their ideas in a spontaneous manner if the researcher observed it necessary.

5.3 Supportive research method: journal entries

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a supportive method was conducted to enrich the empirical findings. The research participants were guided to write journal entries for a week (7 days) regarding their feelings and experiences towards influencers' content on social media. The method involved multimedia content analysis as the participants were asked to analyze their perceptions on images, videos and text represented on various digital media channels (Li, 2017). The journal entries assisted the participants to familiarize themselves with the complex research topic in a natural setting as they were encouraged to observe influencers' content as they normally do. The method supported the discussion conducted in the semi-structured interviews as the participants had the chance to provoke ideas regarding the topic through actual examples.

5.4 Data collection

A total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. The research participants were chosen by the researcher's consideration to reach the applicable target group. The key criteria for participation were the participants generation, active following of influencers, and their location of residency. Thus, the target group included people from different age groups or generations and the participants were selected from

various locations in Finland to ensure more versatile views and opinions, detailed information is presented in the Table 2. Before the semi-structured interview, the participants wrote journal entries for one week regarding their thoughts and feelings towards social media influencers' content. The entries were thoroughly reviewed and further discussed in the conducted interview where the participant was able to openly express their feelings and the researcher was able to present follow-up questions as custom in a semi-structured interview.

The interview structure was constructed by three themes: first the participant's journal entries were examined and discussed thoroughly. This enabled the participant to familiarize themselves with the research topic and provoked ideas for the further discussion as well. Second, the perceived authenticity of an influencer was explored in a more general manner. The participants were encouraged to disclose their opinions and views regarding influencer's authenticity from various perspectives. The last theme involved perceived authenticity within the context of commerciality, in other words, influencer marketing. The participants explained their views and opinions related to the perceived authenticity in influencers' brand endorsed publications. The participants were encouraged to present examples to assess various perspectives from both positive and negative examples of perceived authenticity.

The interviews were conducted during March 2023. Interviews were held both in person and via Teams or other digitalized platform to enable the participation of people living in various locations in Finland. All participants received a privacy notice before the interview and the researcher ensured that the participants understood the issues presented in the privacy notice at the beginning of the interview. The interviews' duration was approximately one hour or less depending on the participant's answers. The number of interviews was determined as the gathered data reached certain level of saturation: when the participants elaborated similar answers to the interview questions, the data was considered as sufficient for analysis.

Table 1 Detailed information of participants

Name (fabricated by the researcher)	Generation, age group	Location of residency	Influencer's profile type or interest	Influencer's channel(s)
Jessica	Millennial, born between 1981-1996	Oulu, Finland	Make-up & lifestyle	Instagram
Mary	Millennial, born between 1981-1996	Kajaani, Finland	Renovating, handicraft & lifestyle	Instagram
Susanne	Boomers, born between 1946-1964	Mikkeli, Finland	Celebrities, & lifestyle	Instagram, Tiktok, Youtube
Erica	Gen Z, born between 1997-2010	Mikkeli, Finland	Make-up & lifestyle	Tiktok, Youtube
Elisabeth	Millennial, born between 1981-1996	Helsinki, Finland	Lifestyle, food	Tiktok, Instagram
Nadja	Millennial, born between 1981-1996	Helsinki, Finland	Lifestyle, fashion	Instagram
Rose	Gen Z, born between 1997-2010	Ivalo, Finland	Fitness, lifestyle	Instagram, Youtube
Irene	Millennial, born between 1981-1996	Helsinki, Finland	Fitness, lifestyle	Instagram

5.5 Data analysis

The research data was first categorized and coded according to three themes: perceived authenticity of an influencer, significance of authenticity and perceived authenticity within the context of influencer marketing. The categorization was conducted to

facilitate the analysis process and ensure various perspectives for the analysis of the findings. The chosen analysis method for the research data was abductive analysis. Abductive analysis offers the ability to compare the research findings with existing theoretical knowledge. The objective is to detect similarities and possible differences to achieve novel contributions for existing theories (Earl Rinehart, 2021). The chosen method of analysis is well-suited for the topic as it has been studied in other contexts extensively. Hence, previous theories related to, for example, brand authenticity and perceived authenticity within personal-branding can be explored within the context of influencer marketing.

The semi-structured interviews conducted in this study were recorded and later transcribed into text. The transcription was conducted in a precise manner to accomplish deeper understanding of participants thoughts and feelings, yet pauses and filler words were not transcribed due to their lack of ability to provide value for the analysis. Total of 62 pages of transcribed text was analyzed. In addition to the analysis of the primary interview data, secondary data was explored to support the findings. In this study, the secondary data included journal entries conducted by the research participants before the semi-structured interviews. Examples of the journal entries can be found in the Appendix section of this thesis.

6 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter includes the examination of the empirical findings gathered from the semi-structured interviews as presented in the methodology section. The findings are presented utilizing previously defined categories to achieve a cohesive overview of the research topic. First category is “perceived authenticity of an influencer” which focuses on determining the attributes and elements related to the research participants’ perception of authenticity in the context of influencers. The second category “significance of authenticity” establishes the meaning and relevance of authenticity for the research participants. And lastly, the third category “perceived authenticity within the context of influencer marketing” examines the elements and attributes related to authentic paid collaborations.

6.1 Perceived authenticity of an influencer

The research participants emphasized the meaning of influencer’s ability to share personal and negative issues in their content. Openness fosters the level of perceived authenticity of an influencer, and they appear as more human in the eyes of their followers.

“Showing all the emotions and talking about challenging topics makes influencers look more authentic. That is, life does not seem so perfect or just smoothed out... (Influencers) talk about something like mental health or their relationship with their body image or challenges like that, which, despite peoples’ backgrounds, touch so many.” (Mary, Millennial)

“...That there are also downsides to life, or to the fact that since they are human beings just like the rest of us, the fact that you shouldn't be too “shiny” persona or that... that I understand that you make your personality a brand, but it shouldn't be too kind of like a robot, you're a human anyway.” (Erica, Gen Z)

"An influencer was away from social media for a while and then when he came back, he said that there had been some bad times, and of course I can't know for sure if that's true either. There were such human aspects to it compared to something like, maybe a different kind of a shiny life, or something like that, that if you just want to show the best things of life." (Susanne, Boomers)

In addition, openness and sense of vulnerability was found to strengthen the parasocial relationship between the influencer and their follower. The participants elaborated that the openness and vulnerability can be related to various topics, such as more personal issues or the influencer's own opinions regarding societal themes.

“Such vulnerability and openness of influencers brings them closer to the follower, talking a little like a friend, although the audience can be quite large. And maybe it occurred to me that quite a few people put themselves at risk. It's quite a lot of criticism if you talk about the most difficult topics on social media in public.” (Mary, Millennial)

The participants elaborated that the openness and vulnerability regarding more negative aspects of life can be strongly disclosed on specific outlets or platforms.

Journal entry by research participant (Mary, Millennial): “Day 6: One influencer is filming her home, and it appears to be messy. It's good to see more than just styled interior photos on social media. It is noteworthy, that many people describe real everyday life with a much lower threshold on Instagram stories compared to feed publications (Appendix).”

In addition, the social media channel and the content type or format can alter the sense of perceived authenticity.

“The Tiktok was well-fitted because I love food and thai food. I love restaurants and it was really authentic because it was filmed like a unedited or un-cut video. The un-cut video appears like it was just so the phone was picked up and filmed without so much planning.” (Elisabeth)

Journal entry by research participant (Elisabeth, Millennial): “Day 2: ...Maybe pictures don't work as well as videos? There should be more visuals of the room and menu etc. Now there's only overly posed pictures.” “Day 3: ...But the video was edited so why not just talk to the camera without cutting bits of video together. (Appendix)”

Interaction between an influencer and their followers was determined as an attribute that fosters the authenticity of an influencer. Interaction can occur as an influencer discusses their personal issues in their content and simultaneously, they may provide peer support for their followers who might face similar issues and approach the influencer via messaging. Furthermore, interaction was depicted in a less-emotional

manner as the participants had presented questions regarding for example certain product information to influencers.

“For example, childlessness is a topic that is such a pretty personal and difficult for sure for many people to talk about, but then when influencers with a really large audience will tell you about it, then you kind of feel like it's someone who is close to you, who talks about these topics, even though the audience can really be pretty big. So it becomes an image, in a way, that there is such genuine interaction.” (Mary, Millennial)

“And then also the kind of communication with the audience as I talked about earlier, that in a way (an influencer) takes into account the followers and is able to fulfill their wishes so it's with one of the things that definitely makes that authenticity... It makes them easily approachable, I like if they have direct messages open, for example. You can also be more quiet if you want, but still you should have a path through which you can communicate with your followers.” (Erica, Gen Z)

“I also think that kind of conversational content is nice... to be involved. For example, I like influencers' question boxes and read those answers very often.” (Nadja, Millennial)

Few research participants emphasized the meaning of perceived similarity with the influencer as an attribute that strengthens the level of perceived authenticity. When the participant can relate to the influencer, they appear as more authentic. A noteworthy finding was that the participants described how they can feel sense of similarity with influencers who obtain a very different lifestyle compared to themselves.

“Of course, I live a different life than they do (influencers). So, it's also interesting to see that someone wants to, for example, live somewhere in the city center in a studio apartment. And you go on many trips abroad a lot, but then there has to be some sense relatability, some kind of contact with yourself, that makes you feel like you could be a friend with this type of person in real life.” (Mary, Millennial)

“Content which is easily approachable and so close to your own life on some level, that even if it is just some kind factor related to your interest in make-up for example, there's something that the follower can relate to. The idea that hey my life could be like that also.” (Erica, Gen Z)

Simultaneously, few participants had mixed opinions regarding perceived similarity and its role with the emerging of perceived authenticity. Perceived authenticity is highly related to the influencers' personas rather than their level of similarity.

“Maybe I don't even have to have just necessarily that relatable way in that content or the content doesn't have to apply to me. But maybe it's just that that persona somehow shows through. I'm not that polished person, so somehow if you see that kind of traits shining through from time to time, I think it develops such a genuine feeling.” (Nadja, Millennial)

”It's not like there's anything connected with my life, or there's nothing necessarily about that person that I follow that I identified with, but I just follow them out of the curiosity and interest.” (Susanne, Boomers)

The influencers' ability to portray their personas in their content was established as highly relevant in the context of perceived authenticity. Few participants described how they have developed an image of the influencer's persona through their content on social media.

“Personality is perhaps the most important attribute if you dare to bring out your own personality. People with no personality is such a red flag for me that I immediately lose interest. It's really important to bring your own personality to the table.” (Erica, Gen Z)

In addition, one participant had developed the image through traditional media. They appreciated how the influencers were able to create content on their social media channels which is aligned with the personality depicted through TV shows.

”...After seeing a lot of his hosting, in TV shows and other, he has a similar style on Instagram, this kind of bubbling persona.” (Susanne, Boomers)

The findings comprised attributes related to the influencer and more precisely on their content. Next, the attributes related to the authenticity of content are more thoroughly explored. The research participants established how sense of spontaneous content increases the level of perceived authenticity. Influencers who share spontaneous updates from their daily lives are perceived as authentic and content that is described as scripted or planned is determined to be inauthentic.

“Well maybe relaxed is the right word that would describe the content, because it seems real if the content is spontaneous, not scripted in advance.” (Rose, Gen Z)

"Maybe content that... it's not too scripted or planned. But the fact that if everything is such that "I've scripted supposedly life and all the content" - it looks a certain way, then maybe the feeling comes that it doesn't seem real. That is, maybe spontaneous. Maybe it could be the word to describe it. And maybe not all the content has to be spontaneous, but if there is something spontaneous, the impression comes that this is genuine." (Mary, Millennial)

In addition to spontaneous content, the participants described consistency in influencers' content as an attribute that creates a sense of authenticity. Participants appreciated influencers who share similar content every day, for example related to their daily routines.

“The content typically starts with some sort of morning thing. They're pretty much the same every day but it doesn't matter. There's that kind of everyday stuff and more light content as well. So basic things about everyday life, for instance about grocery shopping and their outfits.” (Irene, Millennial)

“I like her style, she has the same thing every day, it also creates that feeling of authenticity, when she has a similar structure in those videos. In the morning she sits in the car and tells you what she's been up to or what she's going to do that day. Then she goes to the gym and then some work stuff. I can imagine that it's the actual way that she spends her day because it repeats itself. She does this consistently.” (Susanne, Boomers)

Lastly, the participants described certain visual attributes that are relevant regarding perceived authenticity. Images that are edited by filters that alter the individual's appearance are distinguished as inauthentic. Influencers who share content where they haven't altered their appearance with filters or make up are considered as authentic.

“For example, even such a simple thing that if you dare to present yourself as you are, even sometimes without makeup and without filters.” (Jessica, Millennial)

“So even though the filters are beautiful, if it's so terribly edited then it might be that it feels like fake.” (Rose, Gen Z)

”The influencers who I follow have shared so called unrepresentative images of themselves without filters or such. These pictures or videos create a more authentic feeling than appearance-altering filters or thoroughly planned poses.”
(Mary, Millennial)

Table 2 Summary of the key findings

Context	Finding	Observations
Influencer’s attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness, vulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative aspects are shared, the downsides of life • The content type and channel can impact
Influencer’s attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influencer interacts with their followers, creating stronger parasocial relationship
Influencer’s attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similarity, relatability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influencers’ personality is considered as similar
Influencer’s attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influencer appears as they would behave in their everyday life
Attributes related to content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spontaneous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencers’ content is perceived as spontaneous, not thoroughly planned, or scripted
Attributes related to content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavily edited images, filters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Altered appearance is perceived to create feelings of inauthenticity

6.2 Significance of authenticity

The significance of authenticity was discussed with the research participants. All participants determined that authenticity of an influencer is significant as they choose whether to consume influencer’s content or not. Nonetheless, the level of significance varied between the different generations. Younger participants emphasized authenticity as a profound factor that determines whether they choose to follow certain influencers.

”Definitely authenticity really matters a lot that... I think it's a bit naïve to think that it doesn't matter, because authenticity is such a massive concept. It's in a lot of things, comes up everywhere. In a way I think it's just because social media influencing or social media influencers are becoming more and more visible all the time, so I think it's extremely important that the content is authentic and perceived as genuine.” (Erica, Gen Z)

Participants who represent the older generations elaborated that they can follow influencers who don't necessarily portray as authentic. Nevertheless, they also stop following influencers as they continue to appear as inauthentic in their content.

“Well, if I'm going to follow an influencer, I don't necessarily think about their authenticity. But as I consider who I'm following, it's quite clear that if I think that somebody is not authentic, I just stop following them. The ones that I perceive as authentic are the ones that stay.” (Susanne, Boomers)

As participants examined the reasoning behind the significance of authenticity, certain aspects embarked. Altered appearance of influencers and the lack of perception of real life raise concerns. Participants established how peoples' self-image can damage due to pressure caused by social media's standards for appearance. The concerns apply heavier the younger population as they develop their self-image in the digital era. In addition, concerns regarding lack of diversity were stressed.

“When we always talk about this social media-created image of what normal life is like... no matter what kind of background a person comes from. At this age, you may not take it so seriously, but for young people in particular I think that authenticity is so important. So that young people's mental health is somehow better and that they understand the realities of life, that there is room for everyone and different people. Life just can't be what social media makes it look like, and it's not worth even wanting such life as social media portrays.” (Jessica, Millennial)

"If the content you follow on social media makes you feel less beautiful or negatively affects your self-esteem, then stop following, edit the content you follow. I have tried to do quite a lot to make my own social media bubble so that there is nothing there that makes you feel bad. There should be more people to follow who look like you. And also, not only look like themselves, but there should also be many different looking bodies and people, to portray the wide spectrum of people.” (Mary, Millennial)

In addition, the participants stressed the possible negative effects of inauthentic influencer content within the context spreading diss-information.

“People absorb a lot of information from social media and influencers unknowingly and if everything is just inauthentic and unrealistic and not a fact, the worst-case scenario is that you can influence really big groups of people in the wrong way. You can abuse those who are affected for bad purposes.” (Erica)

6.3 Perceived authenticity within the context of influencer marketing

Lastly, the theme of perceived authenticity is explored within the context of influencer marketing. Factors and attributes that may diminish the level of perceived authenticity within influencer marketing were distinguished.

The research participants stressed that one of the key elements related to authentic influencer marketing was the alignment between influencer’s brand and values to the collaborative brand. Conflicts with influencer’s and brand’s values obtain a negative impact. In addition, the participants emphasized the significance of influencer’s relationship and history with the collaborative brand.

“I like when influencers talk a lot about what they really want to do and what they don't want to, how they are not going with everything that is suggested to them. For example, if you're an athlete, you won't do collaborations with something that hasn't anything to do with sports.” (Irene, Millennial)

“In my opinion, what actually makes you suspicious is that if you're talking about being sustainable or something like that, but then you do a post in your feed with some questionable brand then in a way it creates the feeling that are not trustworthy or authentic, because you have such conflicts. In my opinion, it makes everything related to the influencer really negative.” (Nadja, Millennial)

“If it doesn't fit just with the influencer's brand, the collaboration is inauthentic. Because everyone has some kind of a personal brand. Of course, people use a lot of different products, but if you start advertising something, then it has to be somehow related your everyday life, not like a random product that you don't use often.” (Erica, Gen Z)

The participants emphasized the negative impact of excessive endorsements in perceived authenticity of an influencer. The number of collaborations in influencer’s content was found to obtain negative effects as well as too similar brands in shorter time periods.

"If you advertise a lot of the same type of products from different brands in a short period of time, it makes you feel like, well, you can't use them all when you're always advertising something new. It's a bit annoying at times." (Elisabeth, Millennial)

"I had taken a note that there had just been commercial collaborations in consecutive days so then it becomes a bit like... well if you have two commercial collaborations at the same day or two days it's a bit too much." (Nadja, Millennial)

Nonetheless, few participants elaborated that the extent of collaborations can vary between the influencers and product categories. If an influencer focuses on a particular interest in their content, for example, renovating, their content can obtain excessive number of collaborations as they are related to the topic that interests the niche audience. In addition, participants argued that certain product categories are more accessible for cross-promoting between various brands, such as food-related products that people use without strong brand loyalty.

"For example, food brands, people use all sorts of different products from different brands no matter what. So maybe it can be advertised... Maybe yes, I think it depends on the product or the service you advertise." (Elisabeth, Millennial)

"Some (influencers) clearly know how to choose their collaborations and carry out their cooperation in a relaxed manner, so that it didn't feel like fake compared to the influencer's other content. I follow an influencer who does a lot of renovation content, because she does it for a living, so if the collaborations suit the content, I don't mind the amount because it doesn't feel fake." (Mary, Millennial)

Participants emphasized that over-exaggeration creates sense of inauthenticity, and it impacts the collaboration negatively.

"Influencer's advertisement is inauthentic when it's frosted with too many superlatives. I prefer more of a... a pretty simple advertisement." (Erica, Gen Z)

"If it's a bit over-the-top. It's kind of like, well, somehow it doesn't sound terribly genuine. When it's an overkill it feels a bit caricatured." (Rose, Gen Z)

"Such over-hype is fake, because really the fact is that if you do a lot of commercial collaborations, every single thing you advertise can't be like the best in the world." (Elisabeth, Millennial)

The research participants would prefer enhanced level of two-sided messages within endorsed content: both positive, neutral or even negative feedback on the collaborative brand.

“It would be wonderful if someone would sometimes say that in fact this is just not for me. Well, sometimes like that I can't believe that all the products are somehow really good and world changing. Somehow if someone could say like, hey, this is pretty nice, but maybe not quite fits my skin that would be amazing.” (Elisabeth, Millennial)

“A genuine and an outspoken influencer who isn't afraid to say her opinion that, for example, if you make a review video, even if you have a gift from a brand and you get some products, you can still honestly say this wasn't my style or my favorite.” (Erica, Gen Z)

The research participants highly appreciate clear disclosure of commerciality. Transparency was established as a fundamental aspect in brand endorsed publications.

“Well, let's say that there was a little bit of a negative feelings when I couldn't be sure whether the influencer was endorsing the service without a collaboration. It made me think that maybe I can't trust the other recommendations either. I guess that kind of transparency is important in those.” (Susanne, Boomers)

“In a way what I'm asking of influencers is that they would really really openly mention about which products they have gotten from brands and what's not, because it also gives you the feeling that you know that you can analyze how they talk about the products, that if it's gifted or not.” (Erica, Gen Z)

“I think it's weird that an influencer didn't mention about the collaboration in the video verbally, only in text in the caption. It somehow does shape the setting of how you watch that video. I do think that it should definitely be said in the same way as it should be said in the text. I think they should say it at the beginning of the video.” (Elisabeth, Millennial)

Journal entry by participant (Elisabeth, Millennial): “Day 6: ...Weird that it wasn't mentioned in the beginning of the video that it was a collaboration. (Appendix)”

In addition to the clear disclosure of commerciality, the participants declared the importance of transparency in the context of altering one's appearance.

“If this a commercial collaboration, it should be mentioned. And then similar example: use of filters. If you use them, then you should tell that there is a filter here because if you do something that changes the way you look, then you should be transparent and tell it directly and honestly.” (Mary, Millennial)

The research participants identified that influencers' personal approach is key in commercial publications. The endorsements that include personal views, opinions, or stories related to the collaborative brand are perceived as authentic. On the contrary, endorsements that are perceived as scripted by the brand or extensively information-oriented are perceived as inauthentic as they appear as less suitable for the influencer's organic content.

“Well, I think it should include something that is your own. That is not directly scripted by some brand. And then if you see that someone has really put their creativity and their own time into it, then I appreciate it a lot more. For example, if you're reading directly from the manuscript when you're talking about vitamins or something like that, then it's easy to just read the list of ingredients. But if you're like, hey, I haven't actually measured my vitamin levels in a long time. So, I bought this vitamin-D because I should increase the level and so on... It makes it instantly better because you add something of your own to it. Otherwise, it could just read in the brand's own advertisement.” (Elisabeth, Millennial)

Nonetheless, certain aspects may facilitate the acceptance of an “advertisement-like” publication. The research participants established how the history of an influencer related to the collaborative brand may affect the acceptance of endorsements as well as the follower's perception of the influencer.

“Maybe the fact that you advertise products that you have used even before the collaboration, for example an influencer that I follow is very excited and keen on one particular's brands exercise wear and she has been talking about the clothes for years. When she got a collaboration with the brand, it was quite ad-type but it doesn't matter because I know the history.” (Elisabeth, Millennial)

“But in a way, when you know about the past, you know that they are actually using the product. But then again, if you're talking about a single publication like this, that I'm seeing this for the first time, you don't get that impression. I think and know that this would be in her everyday use. It's important that you know the influencer.” (Rose, Gen Z)

“It really catches the eye, when you're able to portray that "hey you're a human being like the rest of us". So, when you recommend a product then it may actually be good, because you are like yourself in a way. In a way it's not just that ad. It's also the brand. So, if you built yourself some more meaning and then if you have some really like commercial-style posts, it doesn't bother me

because you are so authentic as a person. When your personal brand is genuine, then it's kind of forgiven.“ (Nadja, Millennial)

The research participants elaborated that endorsements must appear as they were conducted with high effort to appear as authentic. Endorsements that appear as low-quality or not done properly diminish the level of perceived authenticity.

“Yes maybe, first of all, a post that seems that it was done in a hurry. That is, that the influencer may not have had the interest to dive into it, to make thoughtful content. You get the feeling that something is just quickly done, the inspirational juices haven't been flowing.” (Jessica, Millennial)

“An inauthentic collaboration is somehow poorly produced. You somehow aren't able to do it in good quality, or you haven't put in the effort or spend enough time to do a good thing.” (Irene, Millennial)

Table 3 Summary of the key findings

Context	Finding	Observations
Attributes related to brand-influencer-fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value and brand - conflicts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influencer's brand and values must be aligned with the brand and if not, conflicts shall occur.
Attributes related to influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive number of endorsements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If an influencer endorsed brands extensively, they appear as inauthentic. Yet, certain influencers with a particular interest and niche audience can appear as authentic even with extensive endorsements.
Attributes related to the endorsed content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over-exaggeration the brand Two-sided messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If an influencer over-exaggerates the brand, the endorsement is perceived as inauthentic. If an influencer provided two-sided messages, both positive, neutral, or even negative, the endorsement is perceived as authentic.
Attributes related to the endorsed content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear disclosure of commerciality in its full extent is profound for the perceived authenticity of influencer's endorsements.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency is demanded in the context of filters as well: influencers must articulate if they are altering their appearance.
Attributes related to the endorsed content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencers must obtain a personal approach in their endorsements to appear as authentic.
Attributes related to the influencer and the follower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parasocial relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong parasocial relationship allows more advertisement-like publications because the follower knows the influencer's past history with the brand, or they feel as they know the influencer's true character.
Attributes related to the endorsed content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance between staged and low effort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influencer must create endorsements that remain as not staged or overly designed, yet, the endorsements must appear as high-quality and with the sense of effort.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter concludes the thesis as it presents the key results of the research accompanied by the theoretical implications. Later, the study's managerial implications are elaborated followed by the assessment of the limitations and validity of the research. Lastly, future research directions are explored in the subsequent chapter.

7.1 Key results of the research and theoretical implications

The primary objective of this study was to provide in-depth knowledge on the topic of perceived authenticity within the context of influencers. The research question of “how do followers experience the perceived authenticity of a social media influencer?” is answered within this chapter. The conducted study established various attributes and elements related to the perceived authenticity of an influencer both in the context of the parasocial relationship between the influencer and their follower and in the context of influencer marketing. Several findings were aligned with previous theoretical contributions, yet also novel elements and attributes were detected.

This study supports previous research that emphasized the significance of perceived authenticity as a profound factor that fosters the effectiveness of influencer marketing and strengthens the parasocial relationship between the influencer and their followers (Dávila-Ruiz & Vazquez, 2021; S. Lee & Kim, 2020; Park et al., 2021). The findings indicate that the perceived authenticity of an influencer obtains a strong meaning for the followers. The level of significance was high in different generations, yet the younger generations emphasized the aspect as a prerequisite for following an influencer. The older generations implied that the authenticity of an influencer is viewed after they have followed a certain individual on social media as they choose to un-follow influencers who appear as inauthentic. Thus, perceived authenticity can be determined as a profound factor within the emergence of a parasocial relationship.

As aligned with previous research of Lee and Johnson (2022), the influencer's ability to share open self-disclosure was found to foster the perceived authenticity. The study depicted how openness and vulnerability were highly appreciated elements that both

strengthen the perceived authenticity of an influencer and the parasocial relationship. In addition, the significance of openness and vulnerability are aligned with theories related to personal branding, where authenticity was established to occur as an individual depicts their true character and allow their weaknesses and fears to be visible (Rampersad, 2008b; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). Furthermore, the perception of an influencer's true character was highlighted in the study findings in relation to the followers' perception of how the influencer would behave in their own life. In addition, true character was related to the significance of influencers' personality: influencers who are able to strongly portray their personality are viewed as authentic.

Research conducted by Faleatua (2018) regarding the role of edited images in self-branding argued that perceived authenticity may diminish due to heavy alternation of one's appearance. The study findings support this argument within the context of influencers: altered appearance of influencers, both done by photo-editing and with the utilization of "beauty" filters reinforce senses of inauthenticity. Influencers are demanded to openly disclose if they are altering their appearance in their content. The demand for transparency was highlighted due to the participants concerns raised by the possible negative outcomes as people may develop their self-image through social media. Particularly the well-being of younger generations who formulate their self-image in the digital era was stressed.

In addition, the concept of transparency was highlighted in the context of disclosure of brand endorsements. Previous research has presented differing views on whether the clear disclosure of brand endorsed publications has a negative or positive impact on the level of perceived authenticity (Steils et al., 2022b). This study supports the positive effects of clear disclosure of brand endorsements to the full extent. If an influencer fails to transparently disclose the endorsement, or the follower must ponder whether certain recommendation was done based on monetary benefits, the perceived authenticity of the influencer is at risk. Hence, influencers must first notify their followers directly about the possible commercial aspects in their content. The influencer must consider the format of the content, if the collaboration is a video, the commercial aspect should be disclosed verbally as well.

A novel research finding was related to the interaction between a follower and an influencer: engagement was emphasized as an attribute that strengthens the level of perceived authenticity. Followers tend to perceive influencers who engage with their audience as authentic, particularly the followers who receive personal contact with the influencer which excludes them from the mass of other followers. The parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer gains further dimensions as the relationship becomes two-sided when interaction is shared between the two parties. The interaction can occur both organically and in relation to endorsed content. The positive impact of audience interaction in endorsements was emphasized as it increased the feelings of usefulness towards the commercial content.

One of the key concepts established in theory related to brand authenticity was that for a brand to appear as authentic, their purpose, values, and culture must be fundamentally aligned in their marketing activities. If any conflicts occur, the brand is at risk to be perceived as inauthentic (Carroll et al., 2022b; Caven, 2022). This study's findings stressed similar aspects in the context of influencers: one of the key elements related to authentic influencer marketing was the alignment between influencers' and brands' values. In addition to values, followers developed a certain perception of the influencer's brand that must be aligned with collaborative partners. Conflicts with influencer's and brand's values obtain a negative impact. Thus, the influencers must choose their collaborators with careful consideration and vice versa as the brand-fit is a vital factor.

Studies by Audrezet et al. (2020) and Borchers et al. (2022) investigated the impact of excessive endorsements to the perceived authenticity of influencer marketing. The study findings were aligned with the previously withdrawn argument that the number of endorsements may obtain a negative impact on authenticity. Nonetheless, few exceptions were found. Followers stated that the accepted number of endorsements vary between product categories and depending on the influencer's brand. Products that are commonly consumed with less brand-loyalty, such as groceries are accepted from various endorsements by different brands in a shorter period. In addition, if the influencer has a specific primary focus in their content, it can facilitate the acceptance of extensive endorsements. For instance, if an influencer produces content related to

renovating, the niche audience that shares the same interest is more accepting to consume endorsed content related to the topic.

In addition, over-exaggeration on endorsed brands has been established to negatively impact the level of authenticity (Borchers et al., 2022). This was highlighted in the study findings as the followers stressed that overly positive remarks appear as inauthentic. On the contrary to over-exaggerating the collaborative brand, the study indicates that followers would prefer enhanced level of two-sided messages. As determined in previous research, two-sided messages can foster the perceived authenticity as the influencer presents both positive and neutral or even negative opinions related to the collaborative brand (S. S. Lee & Johnson, 2022).

Furthermore, the findings established that in addition to two-sided messages, the endorsements should include a personal approach from the influencer to avoid excessive feelings of an advertisement composed by the brand itself. The study findings argue that followers are sensitive towards endorsements that appear as scripted by the brand. Thus, influencer's own approach and style should be visible in endorsements and brand-generated messages should be utilized with caution as they appear as not consistent with the influencer's content.

Nonetheless, a possible exception was found within the research findings: a strong parasocial relationship can facilitate the acceptance of endorsements that appear as more advertisement-like. People who were familiar with certain influencers and thus know their history and relationship with the collaborative brand, illustrated stronger perceived authenticity towards endorsements compared to the participants who had not familiarized themselves with the influencer in question. Furthermore, when a participant had developed a certain image for the influencer as they would know them personally, they were more willing to accept product-centered or "ad-like" publications.

According to the study, followers demand for spontaneous content that it is not portrayed as carefully thought-out. Ordinary and "everyday-like" content shared in a consistent manner was found to strengthen the level of perceived authenticity. Yet, it is noteworthy to mention that the followers may react negatively if the branded

endorsements appear as they had been done in a hurry, or with low quality and effort. Hence, influencers and brands must aspire to seek for the correct balance in their influencer marketing efforts. Endorsements must meet the expectations both of the brand, and the influencer's audience who ultimately determine the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

7.2 Managerial implications

Considering the managerial implications, this thesis provides beneficial knowledge for both the influencers and the brands who utilize influencer marketing in their strategies. Various elements and attributes were distinguished that strengthen the perceived authenticity of an influencer which can ultimately positively impact the parasocial relationship between the follower and the influencer. These findings can guide influencers to enhance their relationship with their audience. From the business perspective, the provided knowledge offers a deeper understanding of the complex topic, and it helps brands to conduct authentic influencer marketing which is fundamental for its effectiveness. From the commissioners' viewpoint, both the influencer's and the brand's perspectives are highly valuable as the company's core competence is interdependent of the two parties.

To provide authentic content for the followers, influencers should apply open self-disclosure of their true character, combining both their strengths and weaknesses. This can accumulate engagement as followers are able to relate to the influencer. Engagement should be encouraged as it provides positive impacts, hence, influencers should ensure that they dedicate enough time and resources to participate in interaction with their followers. In addition, the content provided by influencers should appear as spontaneous, consistent, and with minimum alternations. Thus, influencers shouldn't hesitate to share ordinary aspects from their life in a natural manner. Lastly, transparency should be recognized regarding the disclosure of commerciality and the possible alternations of one's appearance.

From the brand's perspective, influencer marketing activities should entail comprehensive assessment of the brand-fit. The brand's and influencer's values must

be aligned as possible conflicts can damage the perceived authenticity drastically. Brands should encourage influencers to apply their personal approach for the endorsed content and strongly consider the utilization of overly informative brand-generated messages as they may appear as scripted by the brand. In addition, brands should allow influencers to portray two-sided messages, to avoid the risk of over-exaggeration. Lastly, brand should also highlight the importance of transparency and offer possibilities for the influencers to engage with their audience.

7.3 Limitations and validity assessment

Due to the nature of qualitative research, the research findings lack the ability of generalization. Generalization provides wider interpretations, and it is typically accomplished by larger sampling in quantitative research which can aim to represent, for example, certain populations (Polit & Beck, 2010). Yet, the limited number of research participants was necessary to achieve in-depth knowledge with the sufficient resources on a subjective topic, and thus, generalization was not set as an objective for this study.

In addition, the nature of the topic can be considered as a limitation as the participants shared their subjective views and opinions on the complex matter. The research findings fail to prove that all participants comprehend perceived authenticity in a similar manner. This might impact the results, yet the nature of the topic does not entail a right or wrong way to understand the perceived authenticity as it is perceived by the individual itself. It can be determined that the study was able to provide deeper understanding of the perceived authenticity within the context of influencer marketing due to the findings that were aligned with previous research related to the perceived authenticity with other contexts. This validates the results as the participants were able share similar views that have been presented in previous research regarding the complex topic.

In addition, the research's validation can be considered through its ability to answer the established research question (Roberts & Priest, 2006). As depicted in the previous sections, the research question was answered, and managerial implications were achieved as a result. Furthermore, the research process was carefully documented and

described in this thesis. Hence, the research can be replicated to prove its reliability. Nonetheless, the reliability of the study could be improved by conducting larger number of interviews and gathering more journal entries from the participants. The level of reliability could also be enhanced by including more generations to the target group of the study.

7.4 Future research directions

Future research directions can be extracted from the research findings. An interesting point of view for future studies could involve more careful examination of the excessive brand endorsements. Research participants indicated that some factors or aspects facilitate the acceptance of numerous endorsements presented by an influencer. These factors and aspects could be further explored, and the results could provide valuable knowledge for both marketers and influencers.

In addition, an interesting viewpoint could be related to the differences between social media channels and their level of perceived authenticity. In this study, some participants elaborated that from their perspective, video format in influencers' content is perceived as more authentic. Thus, social media channels that strongly utilize videos, such as Tiktok and YouTube, could be compared with Instagram and other social media platforms that are built on the mix of video and still image formats in the context of perceived authenticity.

Lastly, the impact of the influencer's scope of audience could be further examined within the Finnish target group. Previous research has indicated that when the scope of audience increases drastically, the influencer becomes unrelatable and ultimately, they may appear as inauthentic. Yet, this research direction should be further studied within the Finnish target group as the field of influencers can be different compared to other countries where "star-influencers" can obtain a very different lifestyle compared to the Finnish "star-influencers". These research directions could offer valuable guidance for brands as they determine which influencer, and in which channels provides the best brand-fit for successful influencer marketing results.

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APPENDIX

Examples of research participant's journal entries.

Example 1: Mary (Millennial)

Day 1.

Today, in influencers' content, I have paid attention on how the influencers are showing emotions and talking about them. For example, sadness or tiredness is openly shown to followers > peer support?

Similarly, the influencers I follow are quite open about e.g. challenges in one's own food relationship and the role of motherhood in their own life. Equal parenting is a topic of discussion because of an article was published by Helsingin Sanomat. In the article, fathers open up about the reasons why they do not want to take parental leave.

Showing all your emotions and talking about challenging topics makes influencers look more authentic > life doesn't seem too perfect and polished.

Day 2.

Influencers share "unrepresentative" images of themselves without filters. Such pictures or videos create more authentic feelings than carefully considered poses with filters that modify one's appearance.

Day 3.

I find it genuine to talk about difficult or "taboo" topics, e.g. childlessness. In this case, the vulnerability and openness of influencers brings them closer to the follower, talking a bit like a friend although the audience can be quite large. In this way, one may expose themselves to criticism.

Day 4.

The influencer I follow has a commercial collaboration related to menstrual pads. A topic that I'm sure not everyone wants to openly tell a large audience about. This time it was about a certain product. I remember the same influencer collaborating with the same company regarding other menstrual products before. Since it is the same company and a similar product, the advertisement and the influencer's recommendation could still be considered genuine.

A commercial collaboration with a lingerie brand feels more authentic to me when it's done by an influencer who doesn't fit the slender "beauty ideal".

Day 5.

I've decided not to follow accounts whose content I don't feel is genuine or that otherwise cause me to feel bad.

One influencer is filming her home, and it appears to be messy. It's good to see more than just styled interior photos on social media. It is noteworthy, that many people describe real everyday life with a much lower threshold on Instagram stories compared to feed publications.

Example 2: Elisabeth (Millennial)

Day 1.

Influencer's paid collaboration looks like a "normal" Tiktok. Relaxed mood, relevant content for me (food), authentic, good instruction on how to eat... Filmed without any miraculous tools and edits. I'd know how to do it. Just relaxed.

Day 2.

An influencer's collaboration on Instagram has a nice casual text that talks about a staycation, but the pictures are a bit bleak and don't fit well with the text. But still I do desire a staycation. Maybe pictures don't work as well as videos? There should be more visuals of the room and menu etc. Now there's only overly posed pictures.

Day 3.

Nice that the influencer answered to their follower "you have asked how I make my skin glowing". Good spirits, kind of authentic. Yet she doesn't showcase the products that she uses in the videos. No special feelings because I had acne like the influencer. The "story" of her acne was personal. But the video was edited so why not just talk to the camera without cutting bits of video together.

Day 4.

An influencer on Tiktok applies some conditioner that should be used in the shower wearing a bathrobe and full-on make-up. Ramblings, annoying posing, not exciting voice and no music. The setting is quite fake but it looks like the product is working.

Day 5.

A relaxed and nice idea in a Tiktok collaboration. The influencer pulls a name of a restaurant from a hat that she and her friend will try. A new way to advertise. Interesting, new information, relevant as I work next store to the restaurant. The

video isn't more edited as I would have done it, food topic - I'm familiar to it, "storytelling" and not too long caption.

Day 6.

The influencer has done a "what I eat in a day" video. And they don't have the right kind of breakfast even though they are studying to become a doctor, just a bread with cucumber. Weird that it wasn't mentioned in the beginning of the video that it was a collaboration.