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The Negotiation and Governance of (In)Authenticity on Social Media

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Abstract

The growing prevalence of manipulated images and fictitious narratives on social media is blurring the lines between fact and fiction, as well as reality and fantasy, raising questions about individuals' perceptions of authenticity in digital spaces. This research explores what authenticity means in contemporary society by examining its multifaceted nature within the context of social media. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality, as well as institutional theory's notion of legitimacy, the study aims to understand the complex dynamics of authenticity, how it is perceived and enacted among social actors, and the wider implications for society. Using a netnographic approach, the study analyses nine exemplars of (in)authenticity through media coverage, revealing the diverse ways in which authenticity is expressed and negotiated within the social media landscape. Focusing on the components of accuracy, consistency, and legitimacy, the research refines these into empirical dimensions, identifying veracity and content staging as facets of accuracy, and scrutiny as the mechanism of consistency, to investigate how social actors govern perceptions of authenticity. Crucially, the research reveals that transparency and proximity to reality often serve as mitigating factors that allow relational honesty to outweigh objective veracity, thereby securing legitimacy and transforming perceived inauthenticity into a form of conditional authenticity. Furthermore, the findings uncover a system of three overarching governance strategies – reward, punishment, and resistance – employed by social actors to enforce or contest institutional legitimacy. As they navigate the governance of authenticity, these actors use such strategies to maintain, reinforce, and challenge perceptions in accordance with established social norms and dominant discourses. This research offers valuable insights into how authenticity is constructed, negotiated, and contested in the digital age, providing a theoretical foundation for understanding its governance within the social media landscape.

Declaration

The thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

The word count for the thesis is 67,967 and does not exceed the permitted maximum word limit.

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Personal Reflections

As I started to reflect on my PhD journey when writing this introduction chapter, I recalled a number of moments that sparked my interest and fascination, and later on, distrust and scepticism of social media, or rather experiences mediated by social media. Social media has been an important part of many people's lives, playing a vital role in their daily socialisation, communications, and connectedness. Despite my conflicting feelings about social media, I still use a number of social media platforms in order to communicate and stay connected with friends, family and social networks all over the world.

During my adolescent and late adolescent years, in the late noughties and early 2010s, Facebook was very popular amongst my friends and classmates. One specific incident or anecdote comes to mind that began my curiosity about the genuineness of social media mediated experiences and communications. As part of the platform's many features to connect users with their social networks, Facebook would remind users of their 'friends'' birthdays on the day of. This would usually prompt users to post birthday messages on their friends' walls. This prompted me to think about how sincere and genuine those birthday messages are, not just for me but for a considerable number of social media users on the platform. To me, many of those birthday messages are empty and disingenuous gestures that people felt obligated to complete, to fulfil a social obligation. In retrospect, this incident was the start of my complicated relationship with social media.

Fast forward nearly a decade later, my cautious fascination with social media remains where it is a central theme to my PhD proposal. During the first year when I was exploring the context surrounding the research and the specific areas I would like to delve deeper into; my interest surrounding truth and genuineness that encompasses the social media endured. In particular, I came across an interview between Fearne Cotton, a British media presenter, and Jane Garvey on BBC's Radio 4's Women's Hour back in 2017. It was their discussion on social media that stuck with me. Both Cotton and Garvey discussed the 'filtered' and 'fantasy' lives portrayed on social media, particularly on Instagram. In particular, Cotton remarked on the 'danger' associated with social media where people can pit themselves against others over this 'fantasy'. She further shared that whilst she aimed to show a 'fair reflection of her day', she would not want to show episodes of depression on her social media, believing that Instagram is not the right platform for it. To which Garvey agreed and pointed to Instagram as a place for 'happy people' to broadcast their 'happy lie'.

This specific interview prompt me to think about what may be behind the beautiful and idealistic posts shared on Instagram. Did it truly represent the lived experience of the people who shared them? Are their lives as happy and perfect as their photos seemed to be or is there something realer, darker, and maybe uglier lurking beneath the filtered fantasy lives shared? These questions were the beginning of the culmination of my investigation into authenticity and inauthenticity within the social media space in this thesis. More specifically, I am curious about people's perception of the real and fake, authentic, and inauthentic on social media, particularly on Instagram. That is, the way in which people perceive and react to realistic but perhaps uglier shared lived experiences versus the idealistic but more enhanced, exaggerated and possibly fake and vacuous ones shared on Instagram. These are some of the questions I began to ask myself: *what do people considered to be real and fake on social media? Who decides what is real and what is fake? How do people react to real vs fake content? Does it matter if the content shared is real or fake? Why does it matter? Who does it affect? What is the impact of real and/or fake content?* In this thesis, I aim to explore and shed light on these questions that addresses the circumstances/processes/happenings around the sharing of both the ugly but realistic lived experiences as well as the idealistic but enhanced and manipulated lives on social media.

List of Tables

List of Figures

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Society and academia's enduring interest in authenticity is well-documented (Collins, 2023; Lehman et al., 2019). Scholars and social critics have posited that authenticity and society's preoccupation with the topic is integral to a modern culture where the demand for authenticity has been identified as one of "a pivotal attribute of contemporary life" (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p.296). Authenticity has been the subject of several seminal work. In the past two decades, authenticity has been the focus of a continuous stream of research across a wide range of disciplines, arts, aesthetics, anthropology, archaeology, literary criticism, management, organisational studies, marketing, media and cultural studies, organisational studies, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and tourism (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). Many of which extended beyond academia, including Anderson's (1990) *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, Baudrillard's (1983) *Simulations,* Benjamin's (1969) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Boorstin's (1987) *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America*, Goodman's (1976) *III: Art and Authenticity*, MacCannell's (1999) *The Tourist*, and Trilling (1972) *Sincerity and Authenticity*, to name a few.

The marketing field often faces criticism for its perceived inauthenticity, rooted in its reliance on strategies that create and manipulate perceptions rather than genuine realities. For example, the advertisement of products and services often relies on persuasive messages and idealised representations to appeal to target audiences. This reliance on curated imagery and messaging raises questions about its compatibility with authenticity, which is fundamentally about truthfulness, genuineness, and integrity. Scholars have highlighted this paradox, where marketing simultaneously seeks to project authenticity while relying on mechanisms that can distort or embellish reality (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003; Deibert, 2017). Indeed, the quest for authenticity is considered to be "one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003, p.21; Deibert, 2017). And as Merriam-Webster (2023) named 'authentic' as the 2023 Word of the Year, authenticity is cementing its significance on society's collective consciousness and contemporary life (Collins, 2023).

Nevertheless, this preoccupation with authenticity is not a new phenomenon. Over half a century ago, Trilling (1972, p.125-126) foresees society's anxiety and moral panic and

concern with authenticity due to the antithetical prevalence of inauthenticity in an increasingly technological society. In the post-truth media landscape and marketplace where misinformation, fraud, lack of transparency, digital manipulations and concerns surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly pervasive (Collins, 2023; Italie, 2023; Merriam-Webster, 2023; PwC, 2023; The Economist, 2016).In fact, scholars have suggested that the growing demand for authenticity is a reaction to its scarcity as well as a sign of contempt and resistance to the intimating dominance of inauthenticity in contemporary life (Collins, 2023; Lehman et al., 2019; Potter, 2010, p.9). As such, brands, social media influencers and celebrities are striving to be authentic to facilitate their success and survival as consumer trust and loyalty continue to decline in the midst of the cost-of-living crisis and unforgiving marketplace (Ernst and Young, 2023; Merriam Webster, 2023; PwC, 2023).

Trilling's (1972) prediction is actualised as society's anxiety and interest in authenticity intensify (Italie, 2023; Potter, 2011, p.9-10). The in the erosion of consumer trust necessitates discriminating consumers who frequently question the authenticity of any text, images, videos, experiences as well as products, and services encountered (Collins, 2023; Faust and Householder, 2009; Italie, 2023; Lehman et al., 2019; PwC, 2023). As such, product and service offerings that could be described as 'authentic', such as *authentic* self, *authentic* voice, *authentic* dish and cuisine, and *authentic* experiences, are not only valued but actively sought and encouraged (Collins, 2023; Italie, 2023; Merriam Webster, 2023; PwC, 2023).

Technological advancements in the field of communication have enabled social networking sites (SNSs) - such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter - to be woven into the very fabric of our everyday lives, social interactions, and practices (Adami and Jewitt, 2016; Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzsky, 2010; Cirucci, 2015; Rambe, 2013). Since their emergence, SNSs have allowed individuals to access information, connect to their networks and seek support with ease, reducing isolation and loneliness (Hancock, 2019; Papamichail and Sharma, 2019). SNSs have also presented new opportunities for self-representation and self-promotion, opportunities that may be otherwise limited in face-to-face communication (Hjorth and Hendry, 2015; Hogan, 2010; Liu and Baumeister, 2016). Notably, the majority of SNSs have claimed that they are platforms for authenticity where terms like 'real life' and 'genuine' were widely used in their promotional material (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017).

An important yet precarious aspect of the social media experience is the pressure on individuals to portray a curated and idealised version of themselves (Abidin, 2016; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Ong et al., 2010; Seidman, 2012; Sheldon and Bryant, 2015). That is, SNSs such as Instagram and Snapchat feature inbuilt image editing tools that allow users to conveniently manipulate and enhance images in-app prior to posting them (Tiggemann, 2022). This results in a culture of digital manipulation and inauthenticity in social media postings where manipulated and staged images and fictitious narratives are increasingly common (Abidin, 2016; Brown and Tiggeman, 2016; Liu and Baumeister, 2016; Lobinger and Brantner, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015; Soleas and McConnel, 2019).

The rise of inauthenticity is partially attributed to the human's inherent need to compare themselves with others, a trend that is increasingly observed with the rise of influencer culture (Bearne, 2019; Brown and Tiggeman, 2016; Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis and Giulietti, 2017; Liu and Baumeister, 2016; Tiggeman, 2022) where individuals with modest followings can earn substantial amounts through endorsement of products and other activities, often on social media (Bearne, 2019). However, there is a stark discrepancy between many micro-influencers from their seemingly perfect, glamourous, luxurious, and often contrived lives on Instagram and the realities that can involve poor mental health and wellbeing, FOMO (fear of missing out), intense criticisms and threats, conspicuous consumption and isolation (Bearne, 2019; Hern, 2018). Fashion bloggers like Scarlett Dixon, whose contrived and staged posts on Instagram drew intense criticisms, clearly stated that her "[Instagram] feed isn't a place of reality…it's staged…" (Hern, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that a UK snapshot survey has found that Instagram is the social media platform that has the worst impact on young people's mental health.

This tension between the curated and the real highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of self-presentation on social media. The manipulated, curated, and commodified aspects of SNSs, coupled with the blurred boundaries between the contrived and the genuine, actively negate the societal quest for authenticity. These tensions raise critical questions about the motivations behind curated online personas, the impact of social comparison, and the broader societal implications of a culture dominated by performativity and the pursuit of online validation.

While the complexities of self-presentation and inauthenticity on social media are recognised, a comprehensive understanding of how this contested notion of authenticity is policed, negotiated, and ultimately *governed* by social actors remains significantly

underexplored. These profound dynamics underscore the intricate interplay between individual agency and structural forces in shaping identity and social norms, providing the core justification for this study.

The growing significance of authenticity in contemporary culture and its intersection with digital technologies provides the compelling context for this study. The need to address the complexities of inauthenticity is the crucial catalyst that drives this research to explore what authenticity means in this digital age, how it is perceived and enacted by social actors, and what implications these practices hold for individuals and society at large. Therefore, drawing upon robust theoretical frameworks is essential to illuminate the power dynamics and social processes underpinning authenticity in the digital realm, providing the fundamental rationale for the approach detailed in the next section.

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This section outlines the theoretical perspectives guiding the research, drawing upon Foucauldian concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality are the primary theoretical perspectives utilised to understand the power dynamics in the social media context and the construction of authenticity discourses (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1990). Focusing on the techniques of power that serve to discipline, control, and regulate individuals' conduct, behaviour, and attitudes in disciplinary institutions through a system of surveillance (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000; Oksala, 2013; Skålén et al., 2006). These concepts offer a foundation for analysing how social actors participate in the construction and governance of authenticity discourses, acting as both the *governors* and as the *governed*.

Foucault's (1979) notion of power as dispersed and ubiquitous, operating through discourse and knowledge, is central to this research. Social media is conceptualised as a disciplinary institution where pervasive power operates through practices of surveillance and self-regulation to shape perceptions of (in)authenticity. This aligns with the concept of governmentality, which encompasses the techniques of power used to control and regulate attitudes, and behaviours.

This positioning is enriched by institutional theory's concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy, defined as a social evaluation of desirability and appropriateness (Suchman, 1995), acts as the social metric through the rules and norms around authenticity are constantly negotiated. Through the lens of governmentality, social actors employ techniques of power

to control and regulate perceptions of authenticity within the social media institution, acting simultaneously as *governors* and as the *governed*. Crucially, legitimacy provides the mechanism that demonstrates the way in which power is enforced by social actors through social evaluation to construct maintain, reinforce and challenge existing norms and legitimate practice within the social media and digital landscape.

The integrated theoretical approach, combining Foucault's concepts with institutional theory's legitimacy provides the essential framework for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of authenticity. However, prior research often presents a fragmented and ambiguous conceptualisation and focuses on the identification and examination of specific subtypes of authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani, 2021). This study addresses this limitation by offering an integrated conceptual framework based on three core components derived from existing literature: *accuracy, consistency*, and *legitimacy* (Table 3). These components serve as the core definitions of authenticity through which this research investigates how social actors perceive and govern authenticity on social media.

This research addresses this limitation by positing that to understand the governance of (in)authenticity, it is crucial to articulate its key components and dimensions by which social actors perceived and understand authenticity. The contribution of this study is, therefore, to offer an integrated framework for the concept of authenticity, building on the three core components: *accuracy, consistency,* and *legitimacy*. These three components were most prominent and emphasised aspects found in the exemplars investigated in the research.

By applying this framework this research extends the combined use of Foucauldian concept of power, discipline, and governmentality and institutional theory's legitimacy as empirical tools to analyse the governance of (in)authenticity in the social media landscape. The theoretical lens elucidates the mechanisms through which social actors navigate, shape, and negotiate social rules and norms. Ultimately, this research extends the understanding of the complex interplay between individual agency and social norms in shaping perceptions of authenticity online, highlighting the pivotal role of power dynamics and the ongoing negotiation of the legitimacy of (in)authenticity on social media. This framework is the essential foundation for addressing the research questions on the manifestation and governance of (in)authenticity that follow.

1.3 Research Questions and Aims

The concept of authenticity has been a subject of fascination and debate for centuries, spanning various disciplines and philosophical traditions. From ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary social theory, authenticity has been explored as a fundamental aspect of human existence, encompassing notions of truthfulness (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Beverland and Farrelly, 2009, 2010; Dutton, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; MacCannell, 1973; Morhart et al., 2015; Theodossopoulos, 2013; Wang, 1999) and genuine self-expression (Cable et al., 2013; Carroll and Wheaton, 2009; Dutton, 1994, 2003; Kernis and Goldman, 2006; Moulard et al., 2014; Newman, 2019; Sheldon et al., 1997; Södergren, 2021; Trilling, 1972)

In the modern era, the rise of mass media and consumer culture has complicated this notion, creating an "image-saturated" society dominated by "pseudo-events" manufactured realities and narratives that often blur the lines between reality and representation (Boorstin, 1971; Rose and Wood, 2005). The ambiguous boundaries between the real and fantasy has intensified with the advent of social media with their affordances for image manipulation, selective self-disclosure, and the creation of curated online personas. This leads to a space where the performance of authenticity often takes precedence over genuine self-expression.

The quest for authenticity in the digital age has become increasingly complex and challenging. Social actors must constantly negotiate and contest the boundaries of authenticity, seeking to construct and present their identities that aligns both with their values and the expectations of their online audiences. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, serve as a prominent stage for this performance and negotiation, emphasised by its visual content, curated aesthetics, and the pursuit of social validation.

This tension between authenticity and inauthenticity is highlighted by the affordances of social media platforms, such as filters, editing tools, and algorithmic curation of content that facilitate the construction of unrealistic representations of self. As Abidin (2016) notes, social media encourages a "calculated sincerity," where users strategically present themselves to achieve specific goals.

To address these tensions and fill the critical gap in authenticity studies, this research adopts the combined theoretical position of Foucault's governmentality and institutional legitimacy. This unique positioning allows the study to investigate the social mechanisms

by which actors actively police the boundaries of authenticity in the digital and social media landscape, thus defining this study's core intellectual contribution.

To achieve these aims, this research is guided by two core research questions:

1. How does (in)authenticity manifest on social media? (RQ1)

The first research question explores the various ways in which authenticity and inauthenticity are expressed and perceived on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. This research question focuses on the *accuracy* and *consistency* components of authenticity. It seeks to uncover the different dimensions of authenticity, a dynamic and subjective concept encompassing truthfulness and genuine self-expression, from a visual, textual, and performative perspective.

2. How do social actors govern the perceptions of (in)authenticity on social media? (RQ2)

This question investigates the role of social actors, including social media users, media authors, and content creators, in shaping and regulating perceptions of authenticity, examining how they act as both the *governors* and the *governed*. The investigation then delves into the specific strategies and techniques of power employed by social actors to maintain, reinforce or challenge dominant authenticity discourses and shape the boundaries of acceptable online presentation. This research question focuses on the *legitimacy* component of authenticity and draws upon Foucault's (1979, 1980, 1990) core concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality, and institutional legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), in line with literature on the power dynamics and social processes in which actors negotiate and contest authenticity norms (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Androutsopoulos, 2015; Salisbury and Pooley, 2017).

By addressing these research questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of authenticity in the digital age, shedding light on the ways in which social actors navigate, shape, and contest the boundaries of authenticity within the social media landscape.

1.4 Research Design and Methodology

The data collection took place between September 2019 and December 2020, adopting a 'pure' netnographic approach to further understand governance and legitimation of (in)authenticity on SNSs. The choice of a pure netnographic approach is particularly salient for this research. Conceptualising social media as a disciplinary institution, the method enables *hierarchical observation* of social actors navigating an environment of permanent visibility, akin to Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault, 1979). This allows the study to empirically access the effects of the disciplinary gaze and self-regulation as demonstrated through observed language, conformity, and attempts to police the boundaries of authenticity in a natural, unobtrusive setting (Foucault, 1979; Skålen et al., 2006).

Netnography is a method that combines ethnography and technology; it is a method that is able to holistically capture the human experience by analysing an individual's online experiences and engagement (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018). Netnography belongs to the interpretive epistemology and the social constructivist ontology, which seeks to understand the world by studying participants in a natural setting where their interactions construct the meaning of their social world (Bowler, 2010; Costello et al., 2017; Creswell, 2003; Kozinets, 2006; Paccagnella, 1997; Toledano, 2017). Due to the ubiquity of SNSs in individuals' daily lives as well as social interactions and practices, it is undeniable that social media has become a new form of social reality and lived experience (Belk, 2013). In fact, Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018) has described social media as "the garbage of everyday lived experience in an excremental culture, filled with information, misinformation, debate, deliberate deception, socio-ethnic-political-economic chest-thumping, desperation, anger, hope and fear." This inherent chaos is precisely for the use of the netnographic approach as it allows the researcher to capture and make sense of this contested social reality at a specific moment in time, providing a valuable insight and a rich context for understanding the negotiation of truth and genuineness (Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018).

The data is framed by a set of predetermined exemplars of social media (in)authenticity, focusing on a specific example that exposes and relays (in)authenticity on SNSs. I focused on microcelebrities and Instagram accounts whose (in)authentic contents are widely reported and highly debated in the media (e.g., Amelia Liana, Chrissy Teigen, Johanna Olsson). This approach will allow the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the power relations in the social and mass media institutions as well as a rich description of the

studied social actors, society and culture involved (De Valck et al, 2009; Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018). Data collection and analysis included the examination of all relevant English language media stories gathered through search engines, taking the form of textual and document files, screenshots, and associated field notes (Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explores the multifaceted nature of authenticity and its significance in contemporary society, particularly within the context of social media. It examines the historical development and theoretical underpinnings of authenticity research, drawing upon various disciplines, including art, aesthetics, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and consumer research (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). The review highlights the enduring interest in authenticity and its significance in contemporary life, as evidenced by Merriam-Webster's (2023) recognition of 'authentic' as the Word of the Year.

The review also examines the role of social media platforms in shaping perceptions of authenticity. Social media, while offering opportunities for connection and self-expression, also creates a breeding ground for inauthenticity. This aligns with the observations of Abidin (2016), Brown and Tiggemann (2016), Ong et al. (2010), Seidman (2012), Sheldon and Bryant (2015), who have highlighted the pressure on individuals to portray a curated and idealised version of themselves to conform to the perceived social norms and expectations of authentic expressions on social media.

The review further discusses the challenges posed by the increasing prevalence of inauthenticity in the digital landscape with diminished consumer trust and a demand for greater authenticity (Faust and Householder, 2009; Sachs, 2012; Zhang and Patrick, 2021). This highlights the importance of understanding how authenticity is perceived, negotiated, and contested in the digital age.

Additionally, the review explores the theoretical frameworks that inform this research, particularly Foucault's (1979, 1980, 1990) concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality, and institutional theory's concept of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). These frameworks provide a lens for understanding the power dynamics and social processes that shape the construction and negotiation of authenticity within the social media landscape.

Overall, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the concept of authenticity, its significance in contemporary society, and the theoretical frameworks that inform this research. It sets the stage for an in-depth investigation into the dynamics of authenticity on social media, exploring how social actors navigate, shape, and contest the boundaries of authenticity in the digital age.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter justifies the use of qualitative methodology in this research. Netnography and textual analysis are utilised to explore visual authenticity on social media. Through an examination of microcelebrities' media stories, the research examines how authenticity is constructed, negotiated, and contested, particularly amidst the tension between curated personas and genuine self-expression. Combining theoretical insights with empirical data through abductive reasoning, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals and communities navigate and shape the complexities of authenticity in digital spaces. Ethical considerations are integral to the study, ensuring responsible data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion to RQ1: Manifestations of (In)authenticity

This chapter addresses the first research question by detailing how (in)authenticity is expressed through the components of accuracy and consistency. Moving beyond theoretical abstractions, the findings uncover specific empirical dimensions: veracity and content staging (as facets of accuracy) and scrutiny (as the mechanism of consistency). Through the analysis of nine high-profile exemplars, the chapter demonstrates that accuracy is a negotiated construct rather than a static measure of fact, and it culminates in an empirical refinement of the *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity* (Table 6).

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion to RQ2: Governance of (In)authenticity

This chapter addresses the second research question by investigating the governance of authenticity through the component of legitimacy. Drawing upon Foucault's concept of governmentality and institutional legitimacy, social media is conceptualised as a disciplinary institution where social actors, including users, media authors, and content creators, function in a dual role as both the governors and the governed. The analysis uncovers a system of three overarching strategies and techniques of power – reward, punishment, and resistance – used to shape, reinforce, and challenge the social rules and norms of authenticity.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter synthesises the research findings and presents the overall conclusions of the thesis. It outlines the theoretical contributions, most notably in the refined *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media* (Table 7), the *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity* (Table 8) and the application of Foucauldian power to the social media landscape. It further provides practical contributions for social media users, content creators, and policymakers, offering tools for critical consumption and ethical digital engagement. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the study's limitations and proposing directions for future research to expand the framework to other dimensions of authenticity.

1.6 Conclusion

In an era dominated by social media, where curated online personas and meticulously crafted digital narratives reign supreme, the concept of authenticity has become increasingly elusive and contested. As social media platforms have become integral to our daily lives, shaping our interactions, self-perceptions, and understandings of the world around us, the question of what constitutes 'authenticity' within the digital landscape has moved to the centre of academic and social discourse.

This research delves into the intricate dynamics of authenticity within the social media landscape, particularly on Instagram, a platform renowned for its visually driven culture and the prevalence of curated self-presentation. Driven by a fascination with the blurring lines

between reality and curated online personas, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which authenticity is manifested, perceived, negotiated, and contested in this digital realm.

By moving beyond fragmented definitions, this study contributes a refined *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media* (Table 7), categorising its manifestations through the dimensions of veracity, content staging, and scrutiny. Furthermore, by conceptualising social media as a disciplinary institution, the research uncovers how authenticity is governed through a system of reward, punishment, and resistance strategies.

Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that authenticity is not a static concept but a dynamic, negotiated state where relational honesty and transparency serve as primary mechanisms for securing legitimacy. The following chapter establishes the theoretical and historical foundation for this investigation by critically reviewing the evolution of authenticity across various disciplines.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the literature review is to establish the research context and position the study within the current body of knowledge. This chapter provides the foundation for the theoretical lens adopted, which is essential for understanding the power dynamics and social processes underpinning authenticity in the social media landscape. The literature review proceeds by critically examining the complex and multifaceted nature of authenticity. It highlights the research progression and key debates across a range of disciplines, including arts, aesthetics, anthropology, philosophy, and consumer research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the foundational concepts relevant to this study. Subsequently, the chapter formally introduces the core enabling theories which includes Foucault's concept of governmentality and the institutional theory concept of legitimacy, both of which are instrumental in analysing how authenticity is perceived and negotiated within the social media context

This chapter identifies the research gaps and provides the initial groundwork for the theoretical contributions that justify the research.

2.2 Authenticity

Authenticity has long been a topic of fascination in academia, and this is reflected in the continuous stream of literature produced on the topic over the past two decades across a wide range of disciplines including marketing, particularly within the field of branding and consumer research (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). At a time where consumer trust is dwindling due to misinformation, manipulation and lack of transparency in the current digital landscape and marketplace, scholars have suggested that the growing demand for authenticity is a reaction to its scarcity, as well as a sign of contempt and resistance to the intimating dominance of inauthenticity in contemporary life (Faust and Householder, 2009; PwC, 2023; Sachs, 2012; The Economist, 2016; Zhang and Patrick, 2021).

Modern society is living in a culture of authenticity where consumers are becoming savvier and discriminating, relentlessly scrutinising products, services, and brands to determine their authenticity (Laermans, 2018; Lehman et al., 2019). Renewed interest in the topic not

only reflects consumers and academia's continued fixation but also demonstrates its significance on contemporary life where the former yearn for it, and the latter seeks to understand it.

The significance of authenticity, however, is matched by its conceptual fragmentation. While most scholars agree that authenticity embodies what is 'real', 'genuine', and 'true' (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), inconsistent application and interpretation have resulted in a fragmented and ambiguous understanding of the concept (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). Therefore, examining the diverse perspectives of authenticity is critical to establishing a clear theoretical basis for this research.

The following sections provide an overview of the research and definitions of authenticity generated from extant literature, beginning with the fields of arts and aesthetics before proceeding to marketing and consumer research. The review of this progression is necessary to demonstrate the various conceptualisations that contribute to the ambiguous and fragmented understanding of authenticity in contemporary society, ranging from objective historical verifiability to subjective expressive truth. The chapter highlights the need to establish the diverse dimensions to build a clear conceptual foundation for analysing the ongoing contestations of authenticity within the social media landscape.

2.2.1 Authenticity in the Art and Aesthetics

The value assigned and the pleasure derived from viewing an authentic and original work of art, and 'a perceptually indistinguishable forgery' will change dramatically once it is known whether the work of art is an original or a forgery (Newman, 2019, p. 8). Walter Benjamin (1986) used the term aura to describe the feeling of awe, reverence and wonderment, a symbolic halo one experiences when one is in the presence of an authentic and original work of art (Peim, 2007). For Benjamin, modern mechanical and technological productions such as photography, film and sound recordings lead to the demise of the aura, destroying the traditions and rituals through the politics that revolutionise aesthetic and artistic production (County, 2013; Gilloch, 2002). In his view, technological reproductions, particularly photography, actively diminished and dismantled the aura of the work of art where the reproduced work is no longer unique, authentic or sacred because the work of art has become democratised and accessible to the masses (Dant and Gilloch, 2002; Duttlinger, 2008). The aura of an "authentic" work of art indicates that they are timeless and temporally untouchable (Costa and Bamossy, 2001). Benjamin further condemned the

commercialisation of artistic reproduction for its role in the destruction of aura, where its presence and value are forever lost to produce the 'soulless' mechanical copy (Dant and Gilloch, 2002; Duttlinger, 2008; Gilloch, 2002). To Benjamin, mechanical and technological reproduction is responsible for the decay and ultimately eradication of the aura where the auratic experience from witnessing an original and authentic work of art or witnessing a live storytelling, theatre and musical performance cannot be recreated or experienced again (Benjamin; 2002, 2006; Conty, 2013; Gilloch, 2002). This demonstrates the monetary and experiential value associated with the perception of authenticity (Benjamin; 2002, 2006; Moulard et al., 2014; Newman, 2019). The following sections highlight the main subtypes of authenticity in the arts and aesthetics fields.

2.2.1.1 Nominal, Indexical, Pure and Objective Authenticity in the Arts

One such subtype of authenticity is *nominal authenticity,* which denotes "the correct identification of the origin, authorship or provenance of an object" (Dutton, 2003, p.259). That is, once it has been confirmed that the painting was painted by and can be traced back to one of the old masters, for example, the painting can be said to possess *nominal authenticity*. There are several subtypes of authenticity that are closely linked to *nominal authenticity* through the objective evaluation of the object and entity's history and origin, including *indexical authenticity* (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), *pure authenticity* (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008) and *objective authenticity* (Wang, 1999). Indexical authenticity refers to the factual and spatio-temporal link that the object to a specific space and time (Grayson, and Martinec, 2004). Whilst pure authenticity refers to objects that commit to tradition and place of origin, and objective authenticity refers to objects that possess a verifiable history and, as such, have “an absolute and objective” criterion to measure authenticity (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008; Wang, 1999, p.351). *Nominal, indexical, pure* and *objective* authenticity of artwork, historical memorabilia and artefacts can be evaluated and verified through notes of provenance, carbon dating and expert evaluation (Newman, 2019).

2.2.1.2 Expressive and Moral Authenticity in the Arts

The object's origin, authorship and provenance are not the only criteria by which one can evaluate its authenticity. The author's intention and expression are also an important and

relevant characteristic to consider (Moulard et al., 2014; Newman, 2019). Objects are considered to possess expressive authenticity and moral authenticity when the artists who produce them are intrinsically motivated as opposed to extrinsically motivated (Moulard et al., 2014; Södergren, 2021). That is, the work is produced for themselves because they are passionate and genuinely committed to the work of art rather than being commercially driven, rejecting conformity and resistance to extrinsic motivations (Moulard et al., 2014; Newman, 2019; Södergren, 2021). Using the same example, if a painting by one of the old masters was found to be influenced by fashionable trends of its time or if the artist themselves were motivated by monetary gains, the work of art will be considered lacking in expressive (Dutton, 2003) and moral authenticity (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). More specifically, Dutton (2003) defined expressive authenticity as "true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs" (p. 259).

Whereas Carroll and Wheaton (2009) defined moral authenticity as objects that reflect sincere choices made rather than ones that pander to social acceptability. The evaluation of an object's expressive and moral authenticity may be more challenging to define as it is more subjective to judge the sincerity, intentions and motivation of the artists when producing the work of art. Dutton (1994) utilised ‘deep authenticity’ to describe instances where an object's status reflects a true expression of individual or social values and beliefs. Numerous authenticity scholars, particularly in psychology and organisational study, have explored the concept of authenticity that relates to the notion that one’s external expression is congruent with one's internal values, beliefs, and experiences " (Cable et al., 2013, p.6; Kernis and Goldman, 2006, p.293; Sheldon et al., 1997). However, past consumption and sociological research have linked authenticity and morality, often through the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad', where authenticity is not merely a quality that describes an entity but also an indication of its social worth and prestige (Plüg and Collins, 2022; Grauel, 2016). This especially resonates when authenticity is equated to sincerity and being true to oneself (Trilling, 1972). On the other hand, inauthenticity is associated with negative and 'bad' characteristics. For example, an inauthentic person can be described as a fake or a fraud where they are assumed to be dishonest, unethical and immoral (Gino, Norton and Ariely, 2010; Gruel, 2016).

Previous types of authenticity are linked to verisimilitude to the production of the object, including the author and their intentions, origin and provenance. However, there are other types of authenticity that are used to evaluate the authenticity of reproductions and recreations, which are iconic authenticity and constructive authenticity (Grayson and

Martinec, 2004; Newman, 2019; Wang, 1999). The 'constructive' in constructive authenticity refers to the social constructivist aspect of the concept where its evaluation is subjective (Wang, 1999). The object and/or experience itself is not inherently authentic, but this type of authenticity can be projected onto the object and/or experience, which can be perceived as such due to the point of view, beliefs and perspectives (Wang, 1999). Similarly, iconic authenticity refers to an object and/or experience that resembles and mimics the authentic object and/or experience to the extent that it is perceived as being similar to the authentic object and/or experience (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Iconic authenticity requires some pre-existing knowledge or expectation to judge and acknowledge that the object and/or experience resemble the 'real thing' (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Södergren, 2021).

Despite the subjectivity of the concept of authenticity, the field of photography seemed to have a clear grasp and understanding of the concept. Scholars have often praised photographs due to their "apparent truthfulness" (Rose, 2007, p.15), where they are often preferable to the “deceptive world of words” (Collier, 2001, p.59). This is because photographs carry an aura of authenticity as the camera captures what is in front of it indiscriminately (Lobinger and Brantner, 2015; Rose, 2007; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). Authentic photographs should be effortless, carefree, real, genuine, spontaneous, indifferent to consumers' reception and true to the speaker and to the experience they are reporting, whilst the supposedly ‘inauthenticity’ refers to a performance that is strategically planned, staged with a kind of 'calculated sincerity' (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Dutton, 2003; Montgomery, 2001; Salisbury and Pooley, 2017). Images that appear casual, relatively unposed, organic, “rushed, carelessly composed, take almost by chance,” even with staged spontaneity are natural and authentic (Abidin, 2009; Gannon and Prothero, 2016; Iqani and Schroeder, 2016). Authenticity in the field of photography embodies iconic and constructive authenticity where the focus is on the subjective interpretation of the subjects in the photographs rather than the verisimilitude characteristics associated with nominal, pure and objective authenticity nor the true expression of the photographers associated with expressive and moral authenticity. (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Wang, 1999). The differing perceptions and views regarding the authenticity and inauthenticity of an individual and their social media content will be present in the data in the research, reflecting the polemical, diverse and subjective nature of the concept of authenticity.

2.2.2 Authenticity in Marketing and Consumer Research

The concept of authenticity is gaining more traction in the field of marketing (Becker, Wiegand and Reinartz, 2019; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). In fact, Laermans (2018) proposed that we are said to be living in a culture of authenticity where consumers are increasingly fixated on whether something is authentic, real and genuine. This is because consumers are increasingly confronted with misinformation, fraudulent reviews and website as well as commercial and media messages are often contrived and over-produced, which enable consumers to become savvier and discriminating in their consumption (Faust and Householder, 2009; Sachs, 2012; Zhang and Patrick, 2021). Consumers have had to use their judgement to filter the 'fake' information from the 'real' one, especially in today's digital landscape (Zhang and Patrick, 2021). Research around authenticity tended to focus on the consumption of authenticity and authentic experiences from consumer and commercial perspectives like brand identity, transparency and the consumption of authentic goods (Alexander, 2009; Becker, Wiegand and Reinartz, 2019; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). However, research on consumer motivations around the consumption of different types of authenticity remains under-researched (Newman, 2019).

Authenticity is a concept that is vital to both consumers and marketers alike (Thompson and Kumar, 2022). For consumers, authenticity is central to their consumption experience (Newman, 2019; Cohen, 1988), where they continue their quest for truth and thirst for authenticity as part of their attempt to construct their identities and find meaning in their lives (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009; Kreuzbauer and Keller, 2017; Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani, 2021; Thompson Rindfleish and Arsel, 2006) so much so that their quest for authenticity is considered to be “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003, p. 21). Authenticity is particularly important in branding where genuineness and originality are considered to be an essential and coveted brand asset (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019; Södergren, 2021). This is because brand authenticity is not only linked to a higher likelihood of purchase but is also one of the criteria that consumers seek and evaluate when purchasing goods and services (Newman, 2019; Södergren, 2019). Attributes associated with brand authenticity include heritage, pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality to commitment, clear stance on brand identity and what it stood for whilst embracing their customers without resorting to conforming to the latest trend or commercial motives (Beverland, 2006; Faust and Householder, 2009; Sachs, 2012).

The literature has also found that authenticity is integral in enhancing brand equity and effective marketing communications, determining the success of advertisements themselves as well as the sales that follow (Becker, Wiegand and Reinartz, 2019; Thompson and Kumar, 2022). Advertisements can be considered effective when they can capture the brand's essence and stories, are located in a specific space and time, and can create an aura of brand authenticity (Becker, Wiegand and Reinartz, 2019; Beverland, 2006). In fact, loyalty and consumption are tied to the perception of the authenticity of a brand or business due to the stronger emotional ties formed (Casteran and Roederer, 2012; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015; Thompson and Kumar, 2022). However, this is argued to be challenging due to the inherently inauthentic nature of marketing, where sceptical consumers may construe attempts to convey honesty and genuineness as a ploy to enhance commercial gains (Morton, 2017; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021; Thompson and Kumar, 2022). As such, Beverland (2006) has concluded that brand authenticity consists of attributes of both real and stylised elements and values, possibly because fabrication can be a justifiable means to an end (Arendt, 1967, pp.215-6). Furthermore, the concept of authenticity is not only subjective but context-dependent and unstable; as such, they may differ depending on the brand and markets and are subject to negotiation and contestation (Morton, 2017; Södergren, 2019; Thompson and Kumar, 2022).

Beverland and Farrelly (2009) proposed that consumers may actively construct authenticity as a form of escapism, for security and nostalgia, where they continue their quest for authenticity by seeking "elements of what is genuine, real, or true in consumption experiences or objects that others may deem to be altogether unreal or false" (p.839-40). Rose and Wood (2005) have proposed the concept of hyperauthenticity or contrived authenticity, which denotes consumers' active construction of authenticity. Here, consumers are actively negotiating the individualised and personal blend of the real and indexical elements with the fantasy that connects to their lived experience and imagination (Rose and Wood, 2005). Belk and Costa (1998) also proposed fabricated authenticity, another quest for authenticity through the consumption of fantasy through community as well as shared meaning and passion that are accepted as real (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Further, Beverland and Farrelly (2009) have acknowledged consumers as "an adept, creative and capable producer of authenticity against a background of seemingly competing societal norms" (p.853).

2.2.3 Conceptualising Authenticity in Social Media

This section demonstrates the research's positioning against the broader academic context. The research aims to elucidate the mechanism of power in the perception of authenticity. This section also illustrates the application of the concept of governmentality and legitimacy-enabling theories to the social media context. Since the advent of Web 2.0, many social networking sites (SNSs) have claimed that they are platforms for authenticity where terms like "real life" and "genuine" are often in promotional materials (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017). One of the functions of social media is to provide a space for individuals to express, negotiate and authenticate their identity through digitally mediated interactions and self-expression (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Salisbury and Pooley, 2017).

Social media provides a public stage for self-branding, where users manage and market their image to communicate perceived value and character (Peters, 1997; Whitmer, 2019). The rise of influencer culture has further amplified his focus, positioning content creators as highly visible exemplars of desirable lifestyles (Marwick, 2015). In practice, individuals will often present an idealised or exaggerated version of themselves “through the mediated aesthetics of Instagram” (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Iqani and Schroeder, 2016, p.410). The curated and commercialised nature of influencer content raises questions about the genuineness of self-presentation (Brown and Tiggeman, 2016; Liu and Baumeister, 2016).

This tension is best framed by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical concept. While individuals perform and present themselves on the front stage to convey a specific impression, social media audiences seemingly gain access to the intimate backstage, where true attitudes and beliefs lie. Yet, this access is often deceptive, revealing a pseudo backstage intentionally misrepresented as authentic (Cohen, 1988; Daugstad and Kirchengast, 2013; MacCannell, 1973). This perpetual misalignment between the presented and the true self highlights that authenticity in the digital age involves a constant and careful negotiation between external and internal self-expression (Lehman et al., 2019). The following sections present the subtypes of authenticity in social media based on the conceptualisation in the arts and aesthetics.

In this research, the concept of authenticity in the context of social media borrows from the art and aesthetics discipline due to the focus on visual content on Instagram**.** The different types of authenticity that are related to verisimilitude that can be objectively interpreted such as nominal authenticity (Dutton, 2003), indexical authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), pure authenticity (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008) and objective authenticity

(Wang, 1999) are relevant, yet subjective evaluations are equally critical. or instance, judging content on expressive authenticity and moral authenticity contributes to the perception of genuineness; posts must retain a sense of spontaneity and effortlessness (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017), aligning one's true and sincere intentions with their external expression. The following sections present the subtypes of authenticity in social media based on the conceptualisation in the arts and aesthetics.

Influencers, as individuals who have amassed a significant following and influence within their respective niches (Marwick, 2015), are often seen as exemplars of authenticity, embodying certain values or lifestyles that resonate with their audiences. However, the curated and often commercialised nature of influencer content raises questions about the genuineness of their self-presentation and the authenticity of their experiences.

2.2.3.1 Nominal, Indexical, Pure and Objective Authenticity in Social Media

Social media users share multitudes of content on various social media and through their content, several indicators of authenticity and inauthenticity can be observed. In text-based content on social media, determining nominal authenticity (Dutton, 2003), indexical authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), pure authenticity (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008) and objective authenticity (Wang, 1999) – all rooted in verifiable facts – may be simpler to ghostwrite by brands or publicists. However, applying these objective criteria proves more challenging in visual content. (Marwick, 2015, p.146) as expressive (Dutton, 2003) and moral authenticity (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009) contribute to the complexity of authenticity in the social media context.

This preoccupation with objective truth is increasingly scrutinised due to the growing success of influencer marketing (Marwick, 2015; Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024). High-profile incidents like the Fyre Festival in 2017 demonstrate the need for transparency, accountability, and regulatory compliance into the public discourse, highlighting the significant risks when objective claims fail (Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024). This push for accountability underscores the pressure on digital content to adhere to traditional standards of objective truth and verifiable facts (Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024).

2.2.3.2 Expressive and Moral Authenticity in Social Media

Despite these pressures, consumers also value aspects of content that transcend strict objectivity, such as in photography. Scholars examine authenticity in photography, including selfies that stayed true to the nature of what individuals in the images are expressing, would, therefore, have achieved expressive authenticity (Dutton, 2003; Gannon and Prothero, 2016) as well as moral legitimacy (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). In some instances, the authentic nature of the content is clearly indicated, with #nofilter pointing to the lack of editing and manipulation in the photographs shared (Abidin, 2016). Additionally, visual content can be perceived and judged as being authentic when it is revealing and candid (Gannon and Prothero, 2016; Marwick, 2015). For example, product fails, make-up free and self-deprecating selfies indicate a level of sincerity and intimacy as well as possessing expressive (Dutton, 2003) and moral authenticity (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009) by sharing aspects of their personality using humour, resulting in increased likability (Abidin, 2016; Dutton, 2003; Gannon and Prothero, 2016: Sandlin and Peña, 2014). Such expressions of genuine self-representation illustrate how the evaluation authenticity move beyond verifying objective truth toward deeper subjective criteria.

The evaluation of authenticity in the social media content is heavily influenced expressive (Dutton, 2003) and moral authenticity (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). This shifts the focus from objective to subjective judgements and within the social media context, expressive and moral authenticity manifest in the form of self-disclosure and sponsorship disclosure.

Expressive authenticity is demonstrated when microcelebrities who convey and disclose their emotions, opinions, thoughts, and personal life are able to foster a relationship with their audience and improved their perceived authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness (Sardar and Vijay, 2025). This self-disclosure fosters trust and an emotional relationship with the audience, leading to positive behavioural outcomes, including higher perceived authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness and purchase intention (Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024; Sardar and Vijay, 2025). For example, sharing product reviews alongside personal self-disclosure has been found to enhance authenticity and credibility on platforms like Instagram (Sardar and Vijay, 2025) as this is construed as a reflection of their sincerity and pure intentions rather than being commercially driven or following trends (Moulard et al. 2014; Newman, 2019; Södergren, 2021). However, this is not always the case as research has shown that the display of ideal physical attributes, such as male influencers disclosing

muscular bodies, can reduce perceived trustworthiness among female followers, thus lowering purchase intention (Sardar and Vijay, 2025)

On the other hand, moral authenticity is challenged by the need to transparently disclose commercial ties and monetary gains. While prior work often argued that commercial ties diminish authenticity, more recent research presents mixed implications of sponsorship transparency, where the effects are highly nuanced (Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024; Sardar and Vijay, 2025; Whitmer, 2019). Surreptitious advertising and sponsorship by microcelebrities are frowned upon by consumers (Marwick, 2015). While transparent disclosure is increasingly seen as a form of moral legitimacy (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009), as it enhances their authenticity, genuineness and trustworthiness to consumer (Alexander, 2009; Marwick, 2015; Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024). Conversely, overt disclosure can negatively affect microcelebrities' perceived trustworthiness and influence (Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024). This paradox highlights that while authenticity is generally favoured by consumers, disclosure and transparency must be managed carefully to maintain the influencer's authenticity and influence (Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024).

Authenticity in photography further contributes to this complexity. Schroeder (2013) found that snapshot-like images convey a sense of authenticity that cannot be found in artificially constructed commercial corporate communications. This is due to the increasingly sceptical and disenfranchised consumers with a growing distrust of commercial and corporate-produced images (Holt, 2002; Morton, 2017). As such, consumers tend to prefer the more amateur and authentic snapshot-style images, which capture the spontaneity and embrace the imperfection, conveying a sense of honesty, sincerity and spontaneity whilst still applying technical production skills in comparison to the polished professional corporate images (Morton, 2017; Salisbury and Pooley, 2017; Schroeder, 2013). Similarly, posts that have gone viral organically can be perceived as more authentic than posts that are seemingly more orchestrated (Abidin, 2016). This

Amateurism is an indicator of authenticity where signs of the 'unrefined' signal a sense of realness (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017). This is also reflected in the marketing discipline, with Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) suggesting that imperfection, unpredictability and inconsistencies in brands are indicative of their humanity, honesty, intimacy and authenticity that speak to consumers, further signalling the brand's value and strength (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). This is because consumers value and support products and services that are authentic, genuine and sincere because this association reflect their own

moral values (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008). That is, if they are consuming and engaging with authentic content, the consumers themselves and their consumption are perceived as authentic as well (Plüg and Collins, 2022). Here, the aura of the authentic content and microcelebrities endures and clings to the consumers and their elevated social status (Benjamin, 1986; Duttlinger, 2008; Plüg and Collins, 2022). Thus, consumers can enhance their self-image by publicly enacting their moral and ethical values through authenticating acts and consumption, which further accentuates the symbolic value that consumers place on authenticity (Frakea, 2017). However, genuineness alone is no longer sufficient, social actors must have other qualities and characteristics to stand out in order to maintain and enhance their success (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008). As such, individuals will continue to search for ways to create the auratic experience for their audience to hold on to the illusion of authenticity (Holt, 2002).

On the other hand, inauthenticity can manifest in photographs when social media users and microcelebrities are wearing elaborate make-up, using image-editing software, excessive and/or deceptive use of plastic surgeries, angles and poses, or professional lighting (Abidin, 2016; Gram, 2013; Marwick, 2015). A less obvious form of inauthenticity is the snapshot aesthetic that has been associated with a kind of 'calculated sincerity' akin to the fabrication of authenticity where poses, context, subjects and style are intended to look as natural and unedited as possible (Gannon and Prothero, 2016; Peterson, 1997). This is one of the paradoxes surrounding the authenticity of mediated experiences and cultural productions that are a blend of reality and fantasy, and authentic and inauthentic where "the line between fact and fiction, reality and illusion has been erased" (Hede and Thyne, 2010; Rojek, 2001, p.18; Rose and Wood, 2005).

It may be that individuals sharing content on social media can be likened to a performance of sorts where they play themselves, further blurring the lines between the real and the fantasy (Boorstin, 1971; Rose and Wood, 2005). As such, it may be difficult to discern whether the content shared is a real and true reflection of the individual's life or a fictional entertainment (Rose and Wood, 2005). However, consumers can distinguish between the real and the fantasy, but they choose to suspend and reconcile their disbeliefs temporally and contextually to revel in their consumption (Costa and Bamossy, 2001; Rose and Wood, 2005). Consumers can pursue and search for authenticity in their consumption experiences as a form of fulfilment and an escape from the mundane of everyday life (MacCannell (1973). In these instances, consumers will concoct their own hyperauthenticity, a blend between the real and the fantasy that may not be objectively and entirely real (Arnould and

Price, 2000; Cohen, 1988; Rose and Wood, 2005). Here, they combine "indexical elements of programming that connect with their lived experiences and aspirations with fantastical or simulated elements that inspire their imagination" (Rose and Wood, 2005, p.295).

Despite consumers' preoccupation and thirst for authenticity, they continue to enjoy "the ironic mixture of factitious and the spontaneous" in their consumption experiences (Rose and Wood, 2005, p.286). Consumers may experience feelings of dissonance or, at times, suspend their disbelief when they are confronted with fabricated and contrived authenticity but the experience can still be perceived as authentic because authenticity is continually constructed and negotiated through context-specific consumption practices (Arnould and Price, 2000; Beverland and Farrelly, 2009, 2010; Costa and Bamossy, 2001; Hede and Thyne, 2010; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Rose and Wood, 2005; Södergren, 2019, 2021; Wang, 1999). At the same time, considering that social media may possess a pseudo backstage and that the platforms themselves, as well as their users and content, are commodified and commercialised, it may be that the social media landscape is largely inauthentic. That is, actions by the platforms are considered to be disingenuous and inauthentic because they have financial goals and material gains, whereas individuals and their content may be described as exhibiting a staged and contrived authenticity in order to be perceived as authentic on the platforms (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). Therefore, Brown and Patterson (2000) may be right in denying the existence of authenticity and claiming that there are degrees of inauthenticity instead.

2.2.3.3 Dynamism and Subjectivity of Authenticity

The cumulative review of authenticity research reveals that the concept of (in)authenticity is not a rigid dichotomy, rather, it is characterised by profound dynamism and subjectivity. This enduring instability demands that any comprehensive analytical framework must account for how authenticity is personally, individually, and collectively constructed, negotiated, and contested by social actors (Goulding and Dermaix, 2019; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Hede and Thyne, 2010). The concept of authenticity relies on some evaluation of truth (Newman, 2019). Thus, the meaning and understanding of authenticity depend on one’s perception and interpretation and said meaning could be projected onto the objects and experience (Alexander, 2009; Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006).

The subjectivity of authenticity is particularly evident in how consumers evaluate and perceived trust, or lack thereof. When content is perceived as inauthentic due to a lack of transparency, e.g. by failing to disclose sponsored content, the influencer is negatively affected rather than the endorsed brand (Marwick, 2015; Reinikainen et al., 2020). This suggests that perceived authenticity and trust in an influencer may transfer to the brands they endorse, but the perceived inauthenticity and distrust of the influencer may not necessarily have a similarly negative effect on the brand (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This complex transfer highlights how consumer interpretation is a key factor in negotiating (in)authenticity, often retaining perceived authenticity in the product and brand despite the lack of trust and perceived inauthenticity in the influencer (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Factors such as personal goals, age, emotion and life experience, as well as society and culture, can influence one's perception of authenticity, which all contribute to the dynamic and negotiable nature of the concept (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Casteran and Roederer, 2012; Chhabra, 2010; Goulding, 2000; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Peterson, 2005). This echoes Trilling's (1973, p.94) assertion that "[a]uthenticity is implicitly a polemical concept" that is continuously produced and negotiated between a number of social actors (Alexander, 2009; Hede and Thyne, 2010; Jones and Smith, 2005).

2.2.4 Towards an Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity

Marketing and consumer research literature on authenticity have provided critical insights that contributed to advancing the understanding of the concept, primarily through the numerous subtypes of authenticity. While most marketing scholars agree that authenticity embodies what is 'real', 'genuine', and 'true', there is no consensus on a shared meaning of authenticity (Dutton, 2003; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Lehman et al., 2019). A limited number of literatures that attempted to produce a comprehensive meaning of authenticity and inconsistent application and interpretation resulted in a fragmented understanding of the concept (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz, 2019; Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani, 2021). To address this long-standing fragmentation and inconsistent application, this research consolidates existing definitions from key works, primarily consulting the comprehensive conceptualsations of Lehman et al. (2019) and Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021)."

In particular, Lehman et al. (2019) identified the need for 'a systematic and comprehensive conceptual framework' to advance the understanding of authenticity. Hence, a review of authenticity literature across disciplines within management studies was conducted to seek clarification and integrate the different meanings of authenticity. The authors identified three meanings fundamental to authenticity: consistency, conformity, and connection (Table 1).

Table 1. Lehman et al. (2019)'s Perspectives of Authenticity

MEANING	DEFINITION
Consistency	An entity is authentic to the extent that it is consistent in terms of its external expressions and its internal values and beliefs.
Conformity	An entity is authentic to the extent that it conforms to the social category to which it has been assigned or that is has claimed for itself.
Connection	An entity is authentic to the extent that it is connected to a particular person, place, or time as claimed.

Similarly, Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021) point explicitly to idiosyncratic definitions describing authentic consumption as the cause of the conceptual ambiguity that impedes the advancement of the understanding of authenticity. The authors conducted a systematic and comprehensive reconstruction of the concept of authenticity

by integrating empirical data and definitions derived from existing literature. Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021) concluded that authenticity can be determined by judging these six components of authenticity: accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency, that consumption (Table 2). The reconceptualisation of authenticity resulted in a holistic approach to understanding authenticity that is applicable across different consumption contexts.

Table 2. Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021)'s Components of Authenticity

COMPONENT	DEFINITION
Accuracy	The extent to which a provider is perceived as transparent in how it represents itself and its products and/or services and, thus, reliable in terms of what it conveys to customers.
Connectedness	The extent to which a customer feels engaged, familiar with, and sometimes even transformed by a source and/or its offering.
Integrity	The extent to which a provider is perceived as being intrinsically motivated, not acting out of its own financial interest, while acting autonomously and consistently over time.
Legitimacy	The extent to which a product or service adheres to shared norms, standards, rules, or traditions present in the market.
Originality	The extent to which a product or service stands out from mainstream offerings present in the market and does so without unnecessary embellishments.
Proficiency	The extent to which a provider is perceived as properly skilled, exhibiting craftsmanship and/or expertise.

In their reconstruction of authenticity, Lehman et al. (2019) and Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021) acknowledged and integrated the existing and empirical meanings of authenticity from different disciplines and contexts. Their reconceptualisation of authenticity provided a framework to facilitate a more holistic and coherent understanding of the concept that can be applied to extant and future literature on authenticity.

The reconstructed and reconceptualised frameworks and definitions offered by Lehman et al. (2019) and Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021) guide the analysis of the exemplars of (in)authenticity to address the research questions. Both frameworks present a systematic and comprehensive understanding of authenticity while retaining its complexity and nuance.

Table 3. Working Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media

INFORMED BY Lehman et al. (2019) Nuñes, Ordanini & Giambastiani (2021)	COMPONENT OF AUTHENTICITY	WORKING DESCRIPTION
Connection **Accuracy**	**Accuracy**	The exemplar is perceived as truthful and transparent. Content tends to be a reliable and realistic representation of a person, event, place, and time.
Consistency **Integrity**	**Consistency**	The exemplar is perceived as intrinsically motivated and unperturbed by external pressures, conveying its creator's autonomy. The content demonstrates a consistent style or message over time.
Conformity **Legitimacy**	**Legitimacy**	The exemplar is perceived as normal and acceptable. Content tends to adhere to the traditions, standards, shared social rules, and norms within the social media context and signal its creator's social acceptance and/or approval.

A thorough understanding of authenticity is critical to investigating (in)authenticity within the context of social media in the research. Particularly to the first research question (RQ1) that seeks to uncover the different ways in which (in)authenticity is expressed within social media. Due to the intricacy of the concept, this research focuses on the components of authenticity emphasised in the exemplars of (in)authenticity: *accuracy, consistency* and *legitimacy* (Table 3).

A preliminary review of the selected exemplars suggests that the central challenge in defining online authenticity relates to issues of verisimilitude. Consequently, the manifestations of (in)authenticity examined in this study primarily foreground the interrelated components of *accuracy* and *consistency*, which will serve as the immediate analytical focus for the first research question (RQ1).

The holistic approach to the analysis ensures that the multifaceted and complex concept of authenticity is captured while also emphasising the specific components of authenticity that social actors seek in their consumption. The conceptual clarity gained in this stage of the analysis, in turn, supports and informs the analysis and discussions of the subsequent research questions that examine the roles of social actors, the regime of governmentality and the techniques of power exercise in the governance of (in)authenticity on social media.

In addition to *accuracy* and *consistency, legitimacy* is a prominent component of authenticity in the exemplars. This component is central to the second research question (RQ2) that focuses on the broader social aspect of authenticity. *Legitimacy* is informed by Lehman et al.'s (2019) *conformity* perspective of authenticity and Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani's (2021) *legitimacy* component of authenticity (Table 3). In this research, unlike *accuracy* and *consistency,* the component of *legitimacy* extends beyond the content and includes its creator's attitude and behaviour. In this instance, *legitimacy* refers to the content and its creator's compliance, adherence and conformance to the prevailing social rules and norms of the categories and contexts it has been assigned to or claimed for itself (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). The analysis heavily relies on social actors' responses to the exemplars of (in)authenticity compiled by media authors as part of their coverage of each exemplar.

2.3 Theoretical Lens

Foucault's approach to power and discipline and the concept of legitimacy from institutional theory facilitate an understanding of the mechanisms of power within the regime of governmentality (Beckett, 2012; Foucault and Rabinow, 1994; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2004). The enabling theories inform how the research examines the role of social actors in the power relations that shape their attitudes and conduct with regard to authenticity. The section provides an overview of the Foucauldian approach to power and the conceptualisation of governmentality. This is followed by a brief outline of the concept of legitimacy, a key element to institutional theory, that supports the Foucauldian concepts in providing a theoretical framework in this research.

2.3.1 Foucault's Power/Knowledge

Foucault conceptualised power as both productive and repressive, viewing it as dispersed and ubiquitous, circulating throughout society rather than being confined to specific institutions or held by a particular agent or entity (Dore, 2010; Foucault, 1990, 1980, 98; Mills, 2003; Pickett, 1996). To Foucault, power intentional and objective, and is best understood as a complex set of relations that operate within an institution and is only realised when it is enacted over the powerless, forcing individuals to act against their will (Foucault, 1979, 1990; Mills, 2003; Shankar et al., 2006). Crucially, power is productive, "it produces reality, it processes domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1979, p.194). Foucault established the critical link between power and knowledge, asserting that "[i]ndeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault, 1990, p.100). The power/knowledge dynamic recognises the role of power in reproducing knowledge, establishing truth claims and restricting what is knowable through dominant discourses (Foucault, 1979; Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault and Gordon, 1980; Foucault and Kritzman, 1988; Gutting and Oksala, 2022). Notably, discourse itself has a duality, simultaneously a mechanism and a hindrance in reinforcing and undermining power (Foucault, 1990, p.101). However, Foucault recognised the constraints and tensions of power that limit an individual's autonomy and liberty, asserting, "[w]here there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1990, p.95). This acknowledgment is fundamental, as social actors can both reinforce and resist dominating knowledge and discourses (Beckett, 2012; Danaher et al., 2000). Consequently, social media discourse may construct a certain truth and knowledge that defines what is acceptable, normalised and legitimate, thereby

establishing what is unacceptable, deviant and illegitimate (Danaher et al., 2000; Young, 1995).

2.3.1.1 Discipline

Foucault's conceptualisation of power marks the shift from the violent exertion of sovereign power in the form of public torture and execution towards a more humane mechanism of power and discipline (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979, p.137). In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), he examines the way disciplinary power is in the form of self-regulation that proliferate in institutions and subsequently permeate modern society (Mills, 2003, p.43; Schlosser, 2013). Discipline produces subjects through the imposition and invasion of one's bodies and souls to control and regulate their identities and behaviours to ensure their conformity to societal truths, rules, and norms (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006; Skålén et al., 2006). Foucault outlined three means of corrective training including *hierarchical observation*, *normalising judgement*, and *examination*.

Hierarchical Observation

Hierarchical observation is where power and discipline manifest and are exercised through the *governor* and the *governed* (Foucault, 1979). Foucault (1979) described *hierarchical observation* as "[t]he perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly…that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned (173)." Consequently, he drew on the concept of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a prison architectural and disciplinary device to demonstrate how discipline, and in particular *hierarchical observation,* can be used to coerce, monitor and train prisoners under a permanent possibility of visibility, limiting their freedom of expression (Foucault, 1979, p.100; Mills, 2003; Rouse; 2005).

The architecture of multiple institutions, such as military camps, hospitals, schools, and factories, are also built to maximise surveillance, "to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control - to render visible those who are inside of it" (Foucault, 1979, p.171). In the Panopticon, individuals experienced an internalised disciplinary practice where "one is forced to act as if one is constantly being surveyed even when one is not," where discipline "acts directly on individuals; it gives 'power of mind over mind'," (Foucault 1979, p.206; Mills 2003, p.45).

The disciplinary success of the Panopticon relied on the isolation of the subject where they are under the possibility of permanent visibility, an optimised environment to control the subject as well as ensuring order (Kasabov, 2004). This is because power and discipline are most effective when it is hidden from those who are being controlled and are regulated (Danaher et al., 2000; Mills 2003; Schlosser, 2013). Using the Panopticon, Foucault was able to demonstrate that power and discipline, particularly *hierarchical observation,* can be exerted without the need for excessive force or violence. Yet, it is subtly physical and highly visible in the way in which power is held over the body (Kasabov, 2,004; Foucault, 1979, p.177). Corporeal punishment is no longer a necessity to ensure order and was replaced by a measure of control using collected information and correction of deviant behaviours where power may be "non-verifiable yet highly visible" (Kasabov, 2004). Like the Panopticon, SNSs induce a sense of permanent visibility where the users are always seen and observed but are unaware of when said observation occurs (Foucault, 1979, p.195).

Normalising Judgement

Normalising judgement is as a penal system that imposes penalties and punishment individuals whose conduct and behaviour are non-conformant and deviate from the societal rules and norms (Foucault, 1979). This penal system categorises individuals through the binary oppositions of good/evil, sane/mad, dangerous/harmless, and normal/abnormal, creating social pressure to conform (Foucault, 1979, p.304; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006; Rouse, 2005).

While punishment is a key element in Foucault's analysis of power and discipline, it is ultimately a means of 'correct training' (Foucault, 1979). Discipline operates through a gratification-punishment system, where individuals are encouraged to conform and achieve to gain rewards and avoid punishment and demotion (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979, p.180). Penalties and punishment are imposed to reduce differential gaps to correct attitudes and behaviours and promote homogeneity within the system of power whilst simultaneously marginalising those who did not fall in line (Foucault, 1979; Rouse, 2005). That is, non-observance and non-conformance are punishable where if one "does not measure up to the rule, then departs from it" (Foucault, 1979, p.178-179.) As such, those who fail to conform are considered to be *evil, mad, dangerous* or *abnormal,* perceived as threats to society, bringing "multiple dangers of disorder, crime and madness" (Foucault, 1979, p.199, 300).

The effectiveness of normalising judgement lies in the consequences of penalties and punishment, specifically the mechanism of exclusion (Danaher et al., 2000). Exclusion serves as a common disciplinary practice, marginalising and separating individuals from society and reinforcing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979). Knowledge of who is excluded defines legitimate membership within a group or community, making exclusion a fundamental aspect of many social institutions (Danaher et al., 2000). As a result, the *good, sane, harmless,* and *'normal'* label becomes a desirable status in the system of power (Foucault, 1979; 1991; Rouse, 2005). The disciplinary system that perpetually constrains, hierarchises, homogenises, and excludes individuals ensures conformity, ultimately normalises them (Foucault, 1991). As a result, the 'normal' label becomes a desirable status within the system of power, as it signifies conformity and acceptance (Foucault, 1979; 1991; Rouse, 2005).

Examination

Examination. Examination combines hierarchical observation and normalising judgement. This means of correction includes exercising power through the qualification, classification, and punishment of individuals through the economy of visibility (Foucault, 1979). The technique of examination also paved the way for the field of documentation, where individuals produce and co-create meticulous archives and records that are described, judged, and compared with others (Foucault, 1979). The technique of examination can be observed in the carceral system where surveillance perpetuates and enables individuals to impose normalising power, which includes the assessment and recognition of what is considered normal and abnormal, onto other individuals to punish and objectify their behaviour (Foucault, 1979).

2.3.1.2 Governmentality

Foucault's work on power traces a progression from sovereign power, rooted in violence, to disciplinary power, a non-violent form exercised through self-regulation and surveillance to ensure adherence to social rules and norms (Foucault, 1979, p.137; Mills, 2003, p.43). Foucault's concept of governmentality broadens his previous approach to the understanding of power and discipline to include the rationality and art of government (Foucault, 1979, Gordon, 1991; Mills, 2003). Governmentality is defined as the activities

and practices that "shape, guide, or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon, 1991, p.2).

This conceptualisation encompasses both state governance and the governance of oneself, utilising 'technologies of power' and 'technologies of the self' (Danaher et al., 2000; Huff, 2020; Yngfalk and Fyrberg-Yngfalk, 2015). In particular, ‘technologies of the self’ are key to understanding the governance of (in)authenticity, they are processes through which individuals determine or transform their identity through self-knowledge and self-governance to achieve wellbeing. This process ultimately produces docile subjects who internalise discipline, making external surveillance unnecessary (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.225; Yngfalk and Fyrberg-Yngfalk, 2015).

‘Technologies of power’ are procedures used to shape individual conduct towards a desired outcome (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994). ‘Technologies of the self’, a key feature of governmentality, are central to understanding the governance of (in)authenticity in this research (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994). They are processes through which individuals determine, maintain, or transform their identity through self-knowledge and self-governance to achieve wellbeing (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p. 87, 225). Simultaneously, ‘technologies of the self’ are informed by the concept of subjectivity, which enables social divisions and the constitution of ‘normal’ and ‘rational’ subjects (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994).

Truth is crucial to ‘technologies of the self’ and governmentality, being subject to social, institutional, and historical conditions, and is directly linked to power (Foucault, 1980). The concept of subjectivity is inseparable from the power/knowledge paradigm, affirming that power produces truth, which is then sustained and reinforced (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979; 1980; Leachman, 2009; Power, 2011). Obedience, a legacy of the religious origins of ‘technologies of the self’, involves the individual's permanent and complete control by a master, a self-renunciation of will and autonomy (Foucault and Rabinow, p.246). Studying power through governmentality acknowledges its exercise over individuals to produce obedient and ‘normal’ subjects and truths in the form of socially embedded rules and norms (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006).

‘Technologies of the self’ are rooted in Christian principles, reflecting the religious and spiritual influence on Foucault's initial conceptions (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p. 242). *Exomologesis* and *exagoreusis* are foundational to his thinking on truth and ‘technologies of the self’. *Exomologesis* refers to confessions of sins to God, a theatrical and ritualised

truth obligation (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.243, 249). Acknowledging sinfulness allows individuals to purify their souls through self-punishment and self-revelation as penance (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.244). Penance demonstrates suffering, shame, humility, and modesty, accepting confession and truth obligation (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.244).

Exagoreusis encompasses obedience and contemplation (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.246), principles central to Christian faith. Both involve the domination of thoughts and consciousness. Followers renounce self, will, and autonomy to the teacher or master as penance (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.246), continuously controlling thoughts to achieve permanent purity and constant contemplation of God (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.247). These practices aim to purify thoughts and consciousness, leading individuals to God, while desire draws the spirit away (Foucault and Rabinow, 1994, p.247).

Governmentality is central to effective individual discipline and the production of docile subjects. Governance is linked to 'subject formation', directly related to personal autonomy and freedom (Danaher et al., 2000). Individual subjectivity is linked to the power/knowledge paradigm and truth (Skålén et al., 2006). For Foucault, truth, subject to social, institutional, and historical conditions, is linked to a system of power that not only produces but also sustains it (Foucault, 1980, p. 132; Power, 2011).

While 'governmentality' implies institutional leadership, direction, guidance, and regulation, it also encompasses self-regulation and reflexive self-control – internalised discipline – where surveillance becomes unnecessary as individuals become objects of their own gaze (Skålen et al., 2006). A governmental rationality suggests a progression in social media discourse from superficially controlling situations to regulating all aspects of an individual, potentially becoming a governmentalised discourse (Skålén et al., 2006). Governmentality can construct reality by creating its own population and community (Busca, 2016).

Foucault (1979) highlighted technology's role in power, citing the telescope and lens as employing "techniques of subjection and method of exploitation" for discreet observation (p. 171). Surveillance, a highly effective disciplinary technique, exerts power subtly yet physically, creating a new form of social control, so that performance becomes habitual, innate, and normalised (Danaher et al., 2000; Dore, 2010; Foucault, 1979, p.177; Couch et al., 2015). The architecture of institutions like military camps, hospitals, schools, and

factories maximises surveillance, “to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside of it” (Foucault, 1979, p.171).

Social media, under the guise of maintaining relationships and networks, has become a disciplinary institution for surveillance under panoptic permanent visibility, “a machinery of control that functioned like a microscope of conduct” (Foucault, 1979, p.173). Institutionalised surveillance makes individual actions visible while limiting freedom of expression (Rouse, 2005).

In the current social media landscape, users are hyperaware of their content and how they portray their identities due to social media's internalised disciplinary nature (Mills 2003, Schlosser, 2013; Smart, 1985, p. 86). This demonstrates the productive and repressive duality of social media discourse: repressing undesirable behaviours and reinforcing desirable ones through features like likes, shares, and comments (Busca, 2016). Through biopower apparatuses and institutions, normative categories are continuously produced and inadvertently create deviant categories (Danaher et al., 2000).

While biopower cannot holistically regulate individuals, as other forces are involved (Danaher et al., 2000), SNSs are implicated in producing ‘docile bodies’ through surveillance and regulation through the features afforded by SNSs to control and regulate individuals in the institutionalised space to the extent that social media gains the ability to construct truth and reality (Busca, 2016; Skålén et al., 2006). Once users become docile, the cycle continues through self-surveillance to maintain the image set by institutional discourse (Danaher et al., 2000), mirroring the disciplinary techniques initially used to rehabilitate prisoners, then to dominate and mould them for state conformity (Danaher et al., 2000). However, Foucault stressed that power cannot exist without resistance, particularly from those excluded through opposition, non-compliance, and non-conformance, through the production of truth and knowledge of biopower (Danaher et al., 2000).

2.3.2 Foucault's Power, Discipline, and Governmentality in Social Media

This section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the research, drawing upon Foucauldian concepts of governmentality to understand the power dynamics within the social media context and the construction of authenticity discourses. In particular, the

techniques of power employed by social actors to control and regulate perceptions of authenticity in the social media institution and the dynamic interplay between power and submission of social actors, playing the dual role of *governors* and the *governed*. The resulting subjectification from the governance of social actors' perceptions of (in)authenticity reproduces authenticity discourses, a direct product of our culture and social interactions with the regime of power (Hull, 2015; Skålén et al., 2006).

The governmentality of (in)authenticity involves a hidden system of rules that dictates the authorised statements of knowledge and 'regimes of truth' by providing platforms that facilitate mass surveillance through users' self-disclosure (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014; Power, 2011). This process aligns with Suchman's (1995) concept of legitimacy, which suggests that an entity's actions are deemed desirable or appropriate based on socially constructed norms, values, and beliefs.

The use of Foucault's (1979, 1980, 1990) concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality provides the conceptual foundation for this exploration to help understand how power operates within the social media institution. Governmentality is defined as the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1994). In the context of the research, governmentality encompasses the techniques of power used to control and regulate social actors' attitude and behaviour through the design and features of SNSs. This creates an environment of surveillance and self-regulation that leads to the internalisation of social norms shape the perceptions of (in)authenticity.

Consequently, Foucault's (1979) notion of the Panopticon, a prison design where inmates are constantly under surveillance, can be applied to social media. Social networking sites (SNSs) induce a sense of permanent visibility where users are always seen and observed but are unaware of when such observation occurs. As such, there is a continual power struggle between social actors, including social media users, media authors, and microcelebrities, where power is continuously exerted and exchanged through a network of practices, discourses, and knowledge (Busca, 2016; Lillqvist, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2016). The governmentality of (in)authenticity produces subjectivities where individuals' identities are conceptualised and obligated to participate in the practices regulated by society (Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006).

However, power is not static; it circulates and disperses between different groups according to specific circumstances and time (Danaher et al.,2000). Therefore, truth is subjected to social, institutional, and historical conditions before it can be considered as such because

'truth' is linked to a system and effect of power that not only produces power but sustains it (Foucault, 1980, p. 132; Power, 2011). Foucault was concerned with how governance is practised through power in society as it is linked to 'subject formation', which allows individuals to gain freedom and personal autonomy (Danaher et al., 2000). In this case, subjectivity is inseparable from the power/knowledge paradigm, where knowledge represents the world and produces its perceptions and subjects (Skålén et al., 2006). One could argue that social media employs subjectification techniques, such as self-management, authorisation, and notice and consent, where individuals' identity and self-understanding are the product of our culture and interactions with regimes of social and legal power (Hull, 2015).

Social media has become a contested space where the system of governmentality facilitates the institution's constantly changing and evolving social rules and norms. Governmentality comprises a set of disciplinary techniques of power that help shape, control, and correct attitudes and behaviours as part of self-governance in the social media institution. Notably, neither power nor discipline is imposed on social media users; instead, users submit themselves to the new regime emerging from the disciplinary institution of social media (Danaher et al., 2000). (In)authenticity is one element of the social media disciplinary institution governed by several social actors who act as *governors* and the *governed*, guided by the social rules and norms. Individuals' expressions that conform to the existing rules and norms, authentic and otherwise, are considered to be 'normal' and acceptable. However, portrayals that depart from the current rules and norms are stigmatised and labelled with the stigma of authenticity or the stigma of inauthenticity, respectively.

Social media users constantly perform to the omnipresent audience where they volunteer themselves to "a panoptic form of constant scrutiny" (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014; Sauter, 2014, p.834). Like the guards in the Panopticon, social media users become their own agents of surveillance and their own judge of normality, imposing social control whilst conforming to the normative conventions (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). The use of power may help social actors gain control through the normalisation and subjectification of individuals (Dore, 2010). The consequence of surveillance and normative judgement is the examination, a gaze and ritualised technique utilising power, force and truth to classify and punish the subjects (Foucault, 1979, p.185).

The social media discourse has already imposed its power of normativity on various aspects of one's social and cultural life, one of which is the area of privacy. Hull (2015) argued that the meaning of privacy has changed, and that past understanding of privacy is no longer valid and applicable in the age of social media. The act of sharing and disclosing personal information has become normalised, so much so that reluctance or denial to disclose information can become a stigma. Social media have habituated and reinforced the notion that diminishing privacy is the norm and desirable to others in the social network (Hull, 2015). SNSs allow users' identities to be revealed and used for impression management and self-promotion (Sauter, 2014). This feature afforded by SNSs subsequently led to the establishment of normative social media behaviours, conducts, and etiquette, which was previously outlined by SNSs and their users, which can be commonly seen today (Sauter, 2014).

2.3.3 Legitimacy

Institutional theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how organisations and individuals navigate their social and cultural environments, explaining how actors are pressured to conform to shared rules and norms, which results in changes in practices, behaviours, and perceptions (Bharati, Zhang, and Chaudhury, 2014; Scott, 1995). A key indicator of an entity's standing is its legitimacy, demonstrated through adherence to prevailing social and cultural norms. Institutional theorists posit that rationalised rules are fundamental to formal organisations, enabling survival in competitive markets and securing legitimacy, resources, continuity, and stability (Humphreys, Chaney, and Slimane, 2017; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995).

Legitimation is defined by Suchman (1995, p.574) as “a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” Norms, as systems of rules, guide actors to assure themselves and others of their behaviour’s reasonableness (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, pp.1-38). Organisations conforming to these norms are often rewarded with support (Elsbach, 1994; Handelman and Arnold, 1999). However, pursuing legitimacy can sometimes decrease internal coordination, control, and efficiency (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, some scholars argue that conformity to institutional rules can be merely ceremonial, adopted solely to enhance

legitimacy and survival prospects (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Lounsbury, 2001; Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

The institutional theory framework has limitations, as it can be reductive, sometimes focusing primarily on the consumer-organisation dyad and overlooking other influential social actors, such as state regulators or the mainstream media (Chaney et al., 2016). Another critique is that neo-institutional theory may neglect social actor agency when discussing institutional fields and their taken-for-granted rules (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015). However, as Lawrence and Phillips (2004, p.692) contend, "[n]o institutional field is born in a vacuum: new areas of life are developed as actors work to overcome the limitations of existing fields through innovative concepts and patterns of interaction...," suggesting that the framework highlights the crucial interplay between agency and structure in the emergence of new industries.

Legitimation, a social process underpinning institutional theory, structures individual practices and perceptions, enabling changes in previously illegitimate practices to align with social rules and norms (Kuruoğlu, 2012). It's a collective construction of social reality through the interactions of key actors within the institutional environment (Ferreira and Chimenti, 2020; Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway, 2006; Lawrence and Phillips, 2004). The process allows multiple actors, including consumers, organisations, and the state, to influence public opinion and drive social change regarding previously illegitimate practices (Kuruoğlu, 2012). Essentially, legitimacy is a social evaluation made by other actors, which can positively or negatively impact an entity's standing (Bitektine and Haack, 2015).

Suchman (1995) identifies three key types of legitimacy, pragmatic, moral, and cognitive, which contribute to the system of norms and beliefs underpinning an entity's legitimacy while differing in their behavioural dynamics. Pragmatic legitimacy is based on exchange, where individuals support a legitimated entity in return for perceived benefits, reflecting a power-dependent exchange process (Ferreira and Chimenti, 2020; Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy rests on the evaluation of whether the legitimated entity conforms to specific social norms and values (Ferreira and Chimenti, 2020; Suchman, 1995). It is sociotropic, focusing on the perceived 'rightness' of the actions, promoting societal welfare and perceptions of 'right' and 'good' (Suchman, 1995). Cognitive legitimacy is based on activities and behaviours that enhance understanding of the legitimated entity and the 'taken-for-grantedness' of its existence (Ferreira and Chimenti, 2020; Suchman, 1995).

Unlike the other two types, it doesn't depend on personal interest or individual evaluation (Ferreira and Chimenti, 2020).

2.3.4 Legitimacy in Social Media

The concept of legitimacy extends beyond individual actors and organisations to encompass broader social practices and discourses, particularly within the dynamic context of social media platforms. These platforms function as institutional fields that actively shape and legitimise certain attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, social media platforms influence the perceived legitimacy of certain actions and expressions by establishing these hidden systems of rules, thereby shaping social actors' behaviours and practices.

Legitimacy, as a social evaluation of desirability and appropriateness (Suchman, 1995), is constantly negotiated as social actors' response shape and regulate the norms and legitimacy of (in)authenticity. Legitimacy is achieved by conforming to the social and cultural norms of an institutional environment (Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), SNSs and social media users alike are constantly negotiating legitimacy through their interactions and performances

Practices such as taking selfie, using filters in photographs, curating aesthetic feeds and other impression management tactics have become widely acceptable and normalised behaviours on platforms like Instagram. Once contested and marginalised, these have gained legitimacy through widespread adoption and the design choices of social media platforms, which encourage and facilitate these practices through their features and design. This form of institutionalisation process aligns with the argument that organisations gain legitimacy by conforming to the social and cultural norms of their institutional environment (Rouse, 2005; Silverblatt, 2004).

However, the pursuit of legitimacy on social media can drive isomorphism and lead to conformity and homogeneity, as users strive to adhere to prevailing norms and expectations. This can stifle innovation, diversity and creativity, as individuals may feel pressured to conform to established practices rather than exploring alternative forms of self-expression (DiMaggio and Powell; 1983). This results in the proliferation of

"Instagrammable" lifestyles, multitude of viral trends, and challenges on different social media platforms.

Cultural congruence with societal rules is a component of an entity's legitimacy, and those adhering to these rules and norms are considered legitimate, with their practices perceived as credible, reasonable, and appropriate (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Elsbach, 1994; Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Humphreys, Chaney, and Slimane, 2017; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). Although social actors involved in the legitimation process may not personally agree with every aspect of the legitimated institution's practices and beliefs, they "must conform their behaviour to its existence" (Cross, Harrison, and Gilly, 2017; Humphreys. 2010a). For instance, influencers carefully curate and strategically crafted their online personas to reflect values of transparency and relatability as adherence signals trustworthiness and stability, which are essential for maintaining legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995).

Legitimacy significantly shapes perceptions of entities where legitimated entities are perceived as more worthy, meaningful, and trustworthy (Suchman, 1995, p.575). Conversely, organisations that lack acceptable legitimated accounts of their activities are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). Consequently, legitimated entities are often rewarded with support. For example, influencers promoting socially responsible practices often gain higher levels of audience trust and loyalty, reinforcing their legitimacy (Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Suchman, 1995).

While the legitimation process creates stability and structure, it can impose constraints on creativity and innovation. The pressure to conform to established norms and rationalised myths, such as unrealistic idealised beauty standards and curated lifestyles, can limit diversity and individuality, perpetuating homogeneity across platforms (Creed, Scully, and Austin, 2001; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Firms may adopt institutional rules ceremoniously, solely gain legitimacy, stability and resources (Humphreys, Chaney, and Slimane, 2017; Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

The underlying process of legitimation, which structures practices and perceptions, is complemented by Foucault's framework. Legitimacy is a social evaluation of desirability and appropriateness that is constantly negotiated within the social media landscape. Social actors contribute by rewarding or punishing certain expressions of (in)authenticity,

thereby reinforcing or challenging existing norms. This integrated approach provides a nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics and ongoing negotiation of authenticity, contributing to the field by elucidating the mechanisms through which social actors, as both the *governors* and the *governed*, actively navigate social rules and norms through the regime of governmentality.

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review has explored the multifaceted concept of (in)authenticity within the dynamic landscape of social media, drawing on a range of scholarly perspectives to provide a comprehensive foundation for the empirical research in this thesis. By examining the historical development of authenticity, its diverse manifestations in online contexts, the power dynamics that shape its perception, and the impact of (in)authenticity on individuals and communities, this review has laid the groundwork for addressing the research questions and extending our knowledge of this complex phenomenon.

The research moves beyond the fragmented and ambiguous conceptualisation of authenticity by adopting a framework that focuses on the key components of *accuracy*, *consistency*, and *legitimacy*. Drawing upon extant authenticity literature, particularly, the works of Lehman et al (2019) and Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021). This approach allows the research to systematically define how social actors perceive and interpret various manifestations of (in)authenticity in the exemplars included in the analysis. The framework elucidates the mechanisms through which actors actively navigate, shape, and negotiate social rules and norms, and ultimately influence the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable expressions of (in)authenticity.

A significant portion of this review was dedicated to unpacking the concept of authenticity itself, acknowledging its elusive and contested nature. The review traced the historical trajectory of authenticity, highlighting its philosophical roots and its evolving meaning in contemporary society. This exploration revealed the inherent tension between essentialist notions of a "true self" and the more fluid, constructed nature of identity in the digital age. By acknowledging this tension and drawing on diverse perspectives, including existentialist and postmodern thought, the review has established a nuanced understanding of authenticity that recognises the interplay of individual agency, social norms, and technological affordances. This nuanced understanding will be crucial in analysing the

chosen exemplars, allowing for a deeper interpretation of the motivations, strategies, and interpretations surrounding authentic performances online.

A central theme in this review has been the exploration of power dynamics in the construction and regulation of authenticity online. Drawing extensively on Foucault's (1977, 1978, 1980) concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality, the review has illuminated how various actors, including influencers, brands, social media platforms, and online communities, contribute to the production and circulation of authenticity discourses. This Foucauldian lens has revealed the subtle and pervasive ways in which power operates to shape online behaviour, normalise certain practices, and marginalise others.

Foucault's work challenges traditional notions of power as something held and wielded by specific individuals or institutions. Instead, he argues that power is diffuse, relational, and embedded within everyday practices and discourses. In the context of social media, this means that power is not simply located in the hands of platform owners or influencers but is also exercised and negotiated by users themselves through their interactions and performances of self.

This review has examined how power operates through the creation and enforcement of norms of authenticity. These norms, often implicit and unspoken, dictate what is considered "genuine" and "acceptable" (in)authentic expressions online. They are produced and reproduced through a complex interplay of forces, including social pressure, reputational risks, and the fear of public shaming or "cancel culture." Influencers, for example, may feel pressured to conform to certain expectations of authenticity to maintain their followers and brand partnerships. Brands may carefully craft their online presence to project an image of authenticity that resonates with their target audience. Even individual users may internalise these norms, engaging in self-discipline and self-regulation to ensure their online performances align with prevailing expectations.

This Foucauldian perspective highlights the ways in which power relations shape individual behaviour and contributes to the creation and maintenance of a regime of truth regarding authenticity online. This regime of truth defines what is considered real, genuine, and valuable, and it operates through various disciplinary mechanisms that encourage conformity and discourage deviation from established norms.

Specifically, the review has highlighted the role of disciplinary mechanisms in enforcing norms of authenticity. These mechanisms can be both explicit, such as platform policies

and community guidelines that regulate user behaviour, and implicit, such as social pressure and the fear of reputational damage. The constant surveillance and self-monitoring that characterise social media interactions contribute to the internalisation of these norms, leading individuals to self-regulate their behaviour and conform to prevailing expectations of authenticity. This can be seen in the pressure to present a curated and idealised version of oneself online, the careful crafting of captions and hashtags, and the strategic engagement with trending topics and challenges.

The review has also examined how these disciplinary mechanisms contribute to the production and reproduction of discourses that define what is considered "authentic" and "inauthentic" online. These discourses are not neutral or objective; they reflect and reinforce existing power structures and inequalities. For example, the pressure to conform to certain beauty standards or lifestyle ideals can marginalise those who do not fit these narrow definitions of authenticity. Similarly, the policing of online behaviour through public shaming and "cancel culture" can disproportionately impact marginalised groups and stifle dissenting voices.

This critical analysis of power relations, drawing on Foucault's insights, will be essential in addressing the research questions related to the governance of authenticity and the role of various actors in shaping online behaviour. By understanding how power operates through social media platforms, this research will contribute to a more nuanced and critical understanding of the complexities of authenticity in the digital age.

By synthesising these diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives, this literature review has not only provided a comprehensive foundation for the empirical research in this thesis but has also identified key areas where this research can contribute to extending our knowledge of (in)authenticity in the digital age. The analysis of the chosen exemplars, guided by the theoretical framework established in this review, will provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of individual agency, social norms, and technological affordances that shape the performance and perception of authenticity online. This research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural significance of authenticity in the digital age, with implications for individuals, organisations, and society as a whole.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology employed in this study to examine the concept of authenticity on social media. It provides a detailed account of the research process, including the selection of research methods, data collection techniques, and data analysis strategies. The chapter also discusses the rationale behind the chosen methodology and addresses ethical considerations related to the research.

This research adopts a qualitative approach, as it seeks to explore and understand the complex social dynamics and nuanced interpretations of authenticity within the social media landscape. Qualitative research is well-suited for investigating subjective experiences, meanings, and social processes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2014; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Unlike quantitative approaches that primarily focus on measuring and quantifying phenomena, qualitative research aims to delve into the 'why' and 'how' of human experiences and social interactions (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Creswell, 2014).

Authenticity is not a fixed or objective concept; it is shaped by individual perceptions, social norms, and cultural contexts. Qualitative research provides the tools to delve into these subjective understandings (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Bryman, 2016), capturing the diverse range of meanings and interpretations associated with authenticity in the social media landscape. This approach enables the research to go beyond simply identifying what is considered "authentic" or "inauthentic" and providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, particularly in the context of a complex and ever-evolving social environment like social media. In this study, a qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of how authenticity is constructed, negotiated, and contested.

The specific qualitative approach employed in this study is netnography, a research methodology adapted from ethnography, specifically designed for studying online communities and cultures (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b). It involves the immersion of the researcher in the online environment, observing and analysing social interactions and cultural practices, and the construction of meaning within that space (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2002b, 2010b). The netnographic approach is particularly relevant to this research, as it focuses on the social media landscape, specifically Instagram, as the primary site of inquiry, allowing unobtrusive observation of

how social norms are enforced and contested in a natural online setting (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier, 2018).

The research design is exploratory in nature, as it seeks to uncover the various manifestations of authenticity and inauthenticity on social media, as well as the complex power dynamics and negotiation processes that shape perceptions of authenticity. The research does not aim to test pre-existing hypotheses or theories but rather to generate new insights and understanding through an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. Netnography is utilised as a critical tool to examine the power dynamics within the social media disciplinary institution. It allows for the observation of Foucault's disciplinary gaze and the resulting normalising judgements and analysis of the publicly articulated response and reactions. This is essential for capturing how social actors, acting as both *governors* and the *governed* construct and enforce the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, a key aspect of the governance of (in)authenticity.

The focus is on visual data due to its high engagement rates and role in showcasing social lives and aesthetic strategies online. It allows for an examination of the diverse range of practices and performances associated with authenticity, the power dynamics that shape its perception, and the impact of (in)authenticity on individuals and communities. By employing qualitative methods such as netnography and textual analysis, this research can capture the nuances and complexities of this phenomenon, going beyond surface-level observations to uncover the underlying social and cultural meanings that shape individuals' experiences with authenticity online.

The research questions aim to explore authenticity, a concept that arises from the intersection of human behaviour and technological advancements in the 21st century, including smartphones and social media (Kozinets et al., 2017). It is estimated that 80% of all internet traffic is visual or video-based, likely due to the popularity of visual-based applications like Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and Snapchat (Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier, 2018). Visual-based posts attract over six times the engagement compared to text-based posts (Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier, 2018). Photographs and selfies on social networking sites (SNSs) allow individuals to showcase their social lives through a visual form that is "seemingly controlled by themselves through the mediated aesthetics of Instagram" (Iqani and Schroeder, 2016). Similarly, Gannon and Prothero (2016) posit that snapshot aesthetic strategies on social media are associated with a kind of "calculated

sincerity" where poses, context, subjects, and style are intended to look as natural and unedited as possible.

Although this study primarily focuses on visual authenticity in social media content, it may inadvertently uncover insights into participants' close social networks and connections. Belk, Tian, and Paavola's (2010) study of 'cool' found that it is an impression-related, verbalised, and embodied performance that requires validation by an audience, making it a main source of status in consumer culture among adolescents. They found that what is considered 'cool', similar to fashion trends, tends to 'trickle down' from the elite population to the masses, undergoing multiple changes in meaning and manifestation while retaining its core definition (Belk, Tian, and Paavola, 2010). Therefore, it is important to fully understand and unpack the potentially deeper significance of 'authenticity' that may be present in the visual data, particularly visuals capturing everyday life.

In light of the literature and research rationale, the following research questions will address the gaps within the literature regarding visual authenticity in social media, where past literature has failed to reach a consensus on the definition of 'authenticity', and different disciplines define the term contrastingly. The concept of legitimation may be used to understand the 'authentic' practices that may have gained or lost legitimacy over time, where the meaning of 'authenticity' is actively constructed and changed by social actors in the institutional field (Chaney, Slimane, and Humphreys, 2016).

Foucauldian concepts of power, discipline, and surveillance may be used to further understand consumers' increasing vigilance of the content and portrayal of their identities shared on SNSs (Humphreys, 2006; Mills 2003; Rouse, 2005; Schlosser, 2013; Smart 1985, p.86). Some users have resorted to using social media to dictate self-esteem and self-worth, particularly through the number of 'likes', 'friends', and comparisons to others' 'perfect lives' (Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Chia, 2010; Papacharissi, 2011; Liu and Baumeister, 2016). This is particularly important as social media usage has been linked to promoting and perpetuating unrealistic lifestyle and body images, reinforcing and triggering various psychological and behavioural outcomes as the number of users frequenting SNSs increases (Liu and Baumeister, 2016; Ong et al., 2011; Sheldon and Bryant, 2015).

The research adopts an abductive approach that is theoretically informed and data driven. This iterative process allowed the initial abstract concepts to be systematically refined based on empirical evidence (Belk and Sobh, 2018; Maclaran, Hogg and Bradshaw, 2010, p.333), resulting in the integrated conceptual framework defined by three data-driven

components: *accuracy, consistency,* and *legitimacy* (Table 3). The methodology then utilises the exemplars, and their associated media stories, as the observable data source for the institutional dynamics. This allows the study to analyse how the disciplinary gaze is internalised, leading individuals to self-regulate primarily to avoid ridicule and emotional distress from being seen as deviant (Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Papacharissi, 2011; Liu and Baumeister, 2016; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). These narratives act as a powerful policing device that reflects and reinforces social values (Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs, 2004). This combination of Foucault's power/knowledge and institutional legitimacy provides the essential analytical instrument to classify and understand the specific strategies and techniques of power observed in the data for the governance of (in)authenticity.

This research examines how media stories and the relevant actors frame and shape social media (in)authenticity as part of an ongoing cultural narrative of the social media discourse (Benoit, 1997, 2006; Brewer, 2009; Yioutas and Segvic, 2003). Regardless of its accuracy and leading narrative, media stories can reinforce and modify consumers' values and beliefs by projecting an image, a perceived reality, to promote, interpret or evaluate the events described (Brewer, 2009). Using the theoretical lens of Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge and institutional legitimacy, social and mass media are thereby construed as disciplinary institutions that actively participate in dictating and producing the regimes of truth (Rouse, 2005; Silverblatt, 2004) concerning authenticity. In particular, when a media story (e.g., gossip) is a form of social learning with its own rules and norms, "a policing device that cultures employ as a low-cost method of regulating members' behaviour" (Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs, 2004, p.115), which can reinforce ones' place in society through conformance to the group norms (Brewer, 2009; Yioutas and Segvic, 2003). This mechanism of generating and reinforcing truth claims is central to both the Foucauldian lens and the resulting concepts of normative and legitimate practice (Foucault, 1980; Power, 2011; Rouse, 2005; Silverblatt, 2004).

The following two research questions guide the research, where different (in)authentic practices and dimensions can be uncovered and explored. These research questions will explore the legitimation processes in normalising and legitimising various social media practices, particularly those associated with expressing 'authenticity', as well as investigate how visual 'authenticity' is portrayed and represented on social media, where the concept of 'authenticity' may have been distorted. This is particularly important as social media usage has been linked to promoting and perpetuating unrealistic lifestyle and body images,

reinforcing and triggering various psychological and behavioural outcomes as the number of users frequenting SNSs increases (Liu and Baumeister, 2016; Ong et al., 2011; Sheldon and Bryant, 2015).

1. **How does (in)authenticity manifest on social media?**
2. **How do social actors govern the perceptions of (in)authenticity on social media?**

Scholars have attempted to define the meaning of authenticity differently across various disciplines. What is consistent in the wide range of definitions is that "authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true" (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010, p.849). To address the first research question, Foucauldian concepts are used to investigate how disciplinary strategies participate in the perception and construction of (in)authenticity in social media through the point of view of the media.

The second research question focuses on the broader and social aspect to power and examines the power dynamics between the social actors in the social media landscape through a Foucauldian lens. The aim is to focus on the power struggles involves in producing the regimes of truth, and the specific strategies and techniques utilised by social actors as part of their governance and negotiation of authenticity in the digital age. (Busca, 2016; Danaher et al., 2000; Lillqvist et al., 2016). The investigation includes the examination of the disciplinary strategies utilised and expressed by the multiple actors as conceptualised by Foucault, primarily in *Discipline and Punish* (1991) (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1991; Skålen, Fellesson and Fougère, 2006).

3.2 Research Epistemology and Ontology

This research is anchored in the interpretivist theoretical perspective and the social constructivist epistemology (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; The Open University, 2019b). This choice is an ideal philosophical grounding, as the concept under investigation, authenticity, is inherently complex, subjective, and socially created, rather than being an objective, fixed quality (Crotty, 1998).

The interpretivist tradition emerged in contradistinction to positivism, seeking to understand and explain human and social reality by delving into the meanings and understandings that individuals and groups hold about the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011;

The Open University, 2019b). This contrasts sharply with positivism, which assumes that truth and meaning reside in objects independently of consciousness, thereby seeking objective certainty (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism, conversely, embraces the complexity and diversity of human experience, recognising that knowledge is created through the interpretation of meanings and is not simply discovered (Crotty, 1998, p.9; Creswell, 2003).

The research adopts a social constructivist epistemology, which specifically mandates that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and shared understandings (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998; The Open University, 2019a). This approach recognises that meanings and interpretations are shaped by individual experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998). Crucially, this perspective mandates that authenticity is understood not as an objective quality, but as a discourse, or regime of truth, constantly produced and sustained by power relations within the social media institution (Crotty, 1998). This focus enables a deeper exploration of the meanings and interpretations individuals ascribe to authenticity, aligning directly with the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge and enabling the investigation of how truth claims are negotiated and contested among social actors (Chandola and Booker, 2021).

The corresponding ontological stance is relativism, which posits that reality is multiple and subjective, constructed through individual and collective interpretations (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; The Open University, 2019b). This relativist ontology is essential for analysing how the boundaries of (in)authenticity are constantly contested and renegotiated, rejecting a fixed dichotomy (Chandola and Booker, 2021; Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998). Instead, it recognises that "authentic" practices are fluidly granted or stripped of legitimacy based on dynamic social and contextual interpretation (Crotty, 1998; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Morton, 2017; Södergren, 2019; The Open University, 2019a; Thompson and Kumar, 2022; Wang, 1999). By embracing this philosophy, the research is positioned to capture the nuanced dynamics of governance of authenticity, moving beyond idiosyncratic and reductive definitions.

3.3 Research Design: Netnography

Netnography is the core methodological choice for this research, adapted from ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities mediated by computer networks (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2013; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b). This interpretive method is a particularly suitable and arguably superior methodological choice for researching (in)authenticity on social media (Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018). Its strengths directly address the research questions, specifically the "how" questions concerning how (in)authenticity manifests, how it is *governed*, and the power dynamics at play (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2013; Kozinets, 2010b). Netnography achieves this by providing a deep dive into social interactions and meaning-making processes, emphasising the understanding of culture from the members' perspective (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b).

3.3.1 Justification for Pure Netnography

The methodology is inherently and conceptually linked to the theoretical framework of power and governance. The research conceptualises social media, specifically Instagram, as a disciplinary institution within which the entire social field operates (Fuchs, 2018; Foucault, 1979).

The adoption of a "pure" netnographic approach, where the researcher acts as an unobtrusive participant observer, is crucial to this study (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2013; Foucault, 1979; Kozinets, 2010b). This choice minimises researcher influence, thereby ensuring the observation of naturally occurring interactions. Netnography entails the researcher's immersion in specific online communities and relies considerably on observation (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2002b; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018). However, for this research, the passive, observational stance is particularly vital when studying sensitive topics, where direct engagement could alter behaviours or responses (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2013; Langer and Beckman, 2005; Kozinets, 2010b).

This passive and observational is central to Foucauldian theoretical lens, enabling the *hierarchical observation* of social actors navigating an environment of permanent visibility, akin to Bentham's Panopticon (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Foucault, 1979). This allows the researcher to empirically access the effects of the disciplinary gaze and internalised

self-regulation as demonstrated through observed language and attempts to police the boundaries of authenticity (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier, 2018). This methodological depth is essential for observing the spontaneous interactions where social norms surrounding authenticity are enacted, negotiated, and contested in a natural setting (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier, 2018). This directly captures how social actors, acting as both the *governors* and the *governed*, collectively define, maintain, and challenge the *legitimacy* of specific online practices (Suchman, 1995).

In comparison, pure netnography proves superior to alternatives like content analysis or media analysis could quantify themes, which could quantify themes but often lack the ethnographic depth necessary to interpret the cultural meanings and the *why* and *how* of online interactions (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Kozinets, 2010b). This unique capability results in a comprehensive understanding through "thick description" that yields "rich, encompassing, and influential" insights (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; De Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga, 2009, p.200; Kozinets, 2010b).

3.3.2 Media Stories as Primary Source of Data

Although this research utilises media stories and associated discourse rather than original social media posts as the primary data source, the methodology remains appropriately labelled as a netnography. This is because the key feature of the netnography approach is its ability to capture the collective response of online communities and publics engaging in meaning-making (Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto, and Parmentier, 2018). This specific approach solely examines secondary data, i.e. the media stories and public comments associated with the selected exemplars, collected from online communities “without any participation or intervention on the part of the researcher(s)” (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019, p.422)

Media stories and the associated discourse act as institutionalised mechanisms for capturing the collective *normalising judgements* of social actors, which is central to the Foucauldian framework (Fuchs, 2018; Lucas, 2021). They provide the necessary context for identifying the acceptable and unacceptable expressions of (in)authenticity, revealing the prevailing regimes of truth (Lucas, 2021). The analysis of media stories can uncover the dominant discourse on authenticity, identify the key themes and messages that are being circulated, and examine how these messages shape individuals’ understanding of what it

means to be authentic in the digital landscape (Kozinets, 2010b). Furthermore, media stories often highlight the social norms and expectations that govern online attitudes and behaviour, particularly in relation to self-presentation and the construction of online identities.

The use of media stories is particularly valuable when studying sensitive topics, such as body image, grief, or addiction, because such discussions often shielded in private become public through news reports and commentary, providing access to rich data (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2013; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Langer and Beckman, 2005; Kozinets, 2010b). To ensure data integrity, the research utilising publicly available English-language media stories and avoiding social desirability biases associated with primary data collection methods like surveys, interviews or focus groups (Fischer and Parmentier, 2010; Kozinets, 2010b; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Furthermore, focusing on publicly reported data about public figures simplifies the process of ethical compliance concerning personal data (University College London, 2024; Townsend and Wallace, 2016). In summary, the use of a pure netnographic approach applied to media-reported cases of (in)authenticity provides the rich, contextualised, and non-reactive data required to comprehensively analyse the mechanisms of power and the governance of authenticity in the digital sphere.

3.3.3 Significance of Microcelebrities

This research focuses on examining the content of content creators' or microcelebrities that were reported and discussed in the media as core exemplars of (in)authenticity within the social media context. Microcelebrity is defined as a strategic style of online performance where individuals use platforms like SNSs to amplify their popularity (Senft, 2008). These individuals employ strategic employ strategic self-presentation practices to cultivate an audience in the attention economy by revealing certain aspects of themselves for online attention and popularity (Marwick, 2013).

Microcelebrities are theoretically significant because they function within the social media institution as primary sites for the operation of disciplinary power. Unlike traditional celebrities, microcelebrities can become public figures with a large-scale following, but it is often the case that they are famous to a niche group of people where their persona feels authentic to the consumers (Abidin, 2016). This perceived intimacy and rapport is partially

achieved through organic interactions across mediated platforms, simulating face-to-face communication (Coupland and Jaworski, 2003; Södergren, 2021).

Their performance, i.e. the curated and idealistic self-presentation, is inherently visible to all, marking them as key subjects for continuous *hierarchical observation*. This high-visibility performance links directly to the research's theoretical framework consisting of Foucault's power/knowledge paradigm and governmentality, and institutional legitimacy. That is, when a microcelebrity's (in)authenticity is noticed or exposed, the ensuing public debates (captured through the media stories) provide rich data on the community's *normalising judgements* and the enforcement of social rules and norms. Thus, microcelebrities are instrumental to this study as they demonstrate the direct and visible operation of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979) and reveal how social actors, acting collectively, define the legitimacy of (in)authentic expressions (Suchman, 1995).

The netnographic approach, coupled with the analysis media stories associated specific microcelebrities, reveals the explicit mechanisms of discipline, including the normalisation of certain online personas and the policing of deviations, thereby uncovering specific strategies and techniques of power that directly inform the analysis of legitimacy and governance of (in)authenticity (RQ2).

3.4 Sampling

3.4.1 Sampling Method

This research employs a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling, to select media stories as the primary data source (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). This strategy is considered superior to probability sampling methods because the research, being qualitative and interpretive, aims for depth of understanding of specific social phenomena, rather than statistical representativeness of the entire social media user base (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Crotty, 1998). Purposive sampling is used to strategically select nine exemplars that are maximally informative about the research topic Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). This targeted approach allows the study to focus on instances where the negotiation of authenticity is highly visible and publicly contested (Kozinets, 2010b). It prioritises depth of understanding over breadth of generalisability (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019), offering valuable insights into the wide range of interpretations and perceptions of authenticity within the online landscape.

The selected exemplars, and the associated media stories and public debates serve as a crucial lens, reflecting the broader social context surrounding online interactions and providing insights into prevailing narratives, values, and expectations concerning authenticity (Kozinets, 2010b). Analysing these stories allows for the identification of dominant discourses and key themes that shape individuals' understanding of online authenticity (Kozinets, 2010b). Critically, media coverage highlights social norms and expectations governing online behaviour, providing insights into broader influences such as prevailing beauty standards, gender norms, and cultural expectations (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2013; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Analysing these narratives reveals the unwritten rules social actors are expected to follow, examining how media portray "ideal" online personas, the consequences of deviating from these ideals, and the pressure to conform (Kozinets, 2010b). The selected exemplars, which represent real-world examples of (in)authentic expressions, are invaluable for understanding the lived experience of (in)authenticity, something other sampling methods and data sources might struggle to capture with the same detail and contextual relevance (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

The rigorous sampling criteria were threefold, designed to maximise the relevance and richness of the data for an in-depth, nuanced exploration.

1. **Emphasis on (In)authenticity.** The exemplar and associated media stories must explicitly address and emphasise the negotiation of (in)authenticity, ensuring the sample directly aligns with the research questions on perception and contestation in the digital sphere (Kozinets, 2010b).
2. **Range of Followers.** The content creators at the centre of the exemplars must represent a wide range of followers counts. This criterion allows the research to explore whether perceptions and pressures surrounding (in)authenticity vary across different levels of online visibility and influence.
3. **Diverse Range of (In)authenticity.** The selected exemplars must represent a diverse range of (in)authenticity, capturing the nuances across deceptive editing, fabricated endorsements, and misleading narratives, which is crucial for building the comprehensive conceptual framework of authenticity.

The resulting purposive sampling of the nine exemplars offers a targeted and effective way to gather rich, contextualized data directly relevant to the research questions. The selected exemplars and associated media stories allow for the examination of how (in)authenticity

is constructed, negotiated, and portrayed within the public discourse and digital landscape, providing valuable insights into its impact on individuals' online experiences (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

3.4.2 Exemplars of (In) Authenticity

This research examines nine carefully selected exemplars of (in)authenticity on social media (Table 1), framing each as a vignette. This approach allows for a deep and nuanced exploration of the phenomenon, emphasising the contextual depth and narrative power inherent in each instance. By analysing these exemplars through a structured framework, the research aims to uncover the complex interplay of social actors, power relations, and discursive practices that shape perceptions of (in)authenticity within the social media landscape.

The selection adheres to the three core criteria set out in the previous section, ensuring the exemplars directly align with the research questions.

1. **Emphasis on (In)authenticity.** This criterion is satisfied where each exemplar addresses and triggers intense public negotiation of (in)authenticity in the social media landscape, from *Chrissy Teigen*'s raw portrayal of grief to *Amelia Liana*'s and *Johanna Olsson*'s deceptive image manipulations.
2. **Range of Followers.** The criterion is met as the following of each content creator that is central to the exemplars varied widely, from the smaller following of *You Did Not Sleep There* (~38K) to the mega-celebrity status of *Chrissy Teigen* (~31M), allowing the research to explore if perceptions and pressures vary across different levels of visibility and influence.
3. **Diverse Range of (In)authenticity.** The criterion is fulfilled as the selection of exemplars encompassed various manifestations of (in)authenticity, such as *Chrissy Teigen* and *Danae Mercer*'s transparent posts, *Carolyn Stritch* and *Louise Delage*'s fabrication, and *Sadelle Yeung*'s outright plagiarism, providing the necessary scope to build the integrated conceptual framework of authenticity (Table 3).

The sample is comparable as the exemplars are prominent representations that centre on the negotiation and contestation of (in)authenticity on social media that generated significant media coverage. The nine exemplars collectively reflect the public debates and provide rich data on the *normalising judgements* and the governance of authenticity by

various social actors, allowing for the empirical assessment of the three core analytical components: *accuracy, consistency* and *legitimacy.* The crucial difference lies in the *nature* of the inauthenticity expressed as per the final sampling criterion which ensures the research's robust findings across a broad spectrum of (in)authentic practices.

Framing the exemplars as vignettes allows the research to tap into the narrative power inherent in each instance of (in)authenticity. Each case tells a story about how (in)authenticity manifests, the strategies employed to project a particular image, the challenges faced in maintaining that image, and the consequences of perceived inauthenticity. These narratives reveal the underlying values, beliefs, and anxieties surrounding authenticity in the digital age.

The contextual richness is crucial for understanding how (in)authenticity is constructed and perceived differently across various online spaces and situations. Each vignette delves into the specific circumstances, including the social media platform in question, the relevant and/or impacted community or audience, the content format (e.g., image, video, text), and any relevant real-world events or cultural trends that might have influenced the interpretation of the (in)authenticity.

The analysis of each exemplar in this research follows a rigorous, structured approach, treating each case as a vignette to ensure comprehensive and nuanced investigation. The analysis is guided by four key elements: manifestations of (in)authenticity, social actors' reactions, power dynamics and governance, and relationship between social actors.

1. **Manifestations of (In)authenticity.** The specific ways in which (in)authenticity comes to light in each exemplar are explored in detail. This includes examining the particular techniques employed, such as deceptive editing, fabricated endorsements, or misleading narratives, along with the intended message and its potential impact on the audience.
2. **Social Actors' Reactions.** This element considers the responses and reactions of various social actors. This involves analysing online engagement, particularly comments and the overall public discourse and media coverage surrounding the exemplar. This process reveals the diverse interpretations and the spectrum of responses elicited, ranging from outrage and distrust to amusement or indifference.
3. **Power Dynamics and Governance.** Drawing extensively on Foucault's concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality, the analysis investigates how social actors, including social media users, media authors and content creators, influence over

perceptions of (in)authenticity. It explores how specific disciplinary mechanisms are employed to enforce norms of authenticity, and how these norms become institutionalised, connecting directly to institutional theory's concept of legitimacy.

4. **Relationship Between Social Actors.** The analysis examines the relationship between those who attempt to *govern* authenticity and those who are *governed* by these norms. This exploration considers how power is exercised and resisted, and how individuals and communities negotiate and challenge dominant discourses in the context of (in)authenticity.

Extensive netnographic fieldwork is undertaken to fully immerse in the netnographic site where manifestations of (in)authenticity in social media will be analysed to investigate how social media (in)authenticity is perceived and constructed. The nine carefully selected exemplars for this research are: *Amelia Liana, Carolyn Stritch, Chrissy Teigen, Danae Mercer, Johanna Olsson, Louise Delage, Sadelle Yeung, Tupi Saravia*, and *You Did Not Sleep There*. The vignettes provide an overview of the background and context associated with each exemplar concerning their expression of (in)authenticity is presented in the following sections. A summary of the exemplars' profiles is provided in *Table 4*.

Table 4. Summary of the Selected Exemplars of (In)authenticity

EXEMPLAR	No. of Followers*	BRIEF PROFILE
Amelia Liana's Dreamy Travel Aesthetics	450K	**Amelia Liana** is a London-based microcelebrity who was criticised for heavily editing her several travel images on her Instagram account.
Carolyn Stritch's Fake Trip to Disneyland	189-192K	**Carolyn Stritch** is a 32-year-old microcelebrity who faked a 22nd birthday trip to Disneyland as a social experiment to highlight the nature of social media.
Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss	29.2-32.8M	**Chrissy Teigen** is American model and microcelebrity who was simultaneously criticise and praise for sharing her honest and realistic account of her experience with pregnancy loss.
Danae Mercer's Representation of Real Women's Bodies	2.2-2.3M	**Danae Mercer** is Dubai-based microcelebrity was simultaneously criticise and praise for her 'imperfectly perfect' photos of realistic women's bodies.
Johanna Olsson's Crudely Altered Photographs	510K	**Johanna Olsson** is a UK-based Swedish microcelebrity who was criticised for poorly photoshopping three photographs in an Instagram post of a trip to Paris.
Louise Delage's Imaginary Existence	59-65K	**Louise Delage** is a fictional microcelebrity created as part of the 2016 #likemyaddiction campaign by Addict Aide, a French organisation that provides addiction support for young people.
Sadelle Yeung's Misappropriation of Other's Images	90-91K	**Sadelle Yeung** is a freelance model and a travel and lifestyle microcelebrity from Hong Kong, was criticised for misrepresenting others' images as her own.
Tupi Saravia's Accompanying Clouds in Holiday Photographs	280-315K	**Tupi Saravia** is an Argentinian microcelebrity, reach a global audience when a number of her Instagram images were found to have identical cloud formations.
You Did Not Sleep There's Curation of Improbable Campsites Photographs	35-40K	**You Did Not Sleep There** [@youdidnotsleepthere] is an Instagram account that curated absurdly located and unlikely photographs of campsites.

**At the time of media coverage*

3.4.2.1 Amelia Liana's Dreamy Travel Aesthetics

Amelia Liana is a British beauty, fashion, travel, and lifestyle microcelebrity who is primarily active on YouTube and Instagram. Liana's heavily edited images became the focus of media attention when the Times reported on the manipulated content, whose experts found that Liana heavily edited and/or replaced the backdrop in five of the images analysed (Figure 1). The media coverage led to intensifying media attention and debates amongst social actors where the majority of the responses from journalists and social journalists were negative, criticising Liana for the excessive manipulation of images and dishonesty. However, a subset of social media users commended Liana for the beautifully curated and aesthetically pleasing travel images she shared.

Figure 1. The Times's article reporting on Amelia Liana's manipulated travel images on Instagram (Bridge, 2017)

THE TIMES | Saturday July 15 2017 2GM 3

News

Fake views: blogger doctored holiday pics

Mark Bridge Technology Correspondent

When Amelia Liana, the Instagram star and beauty blogger, touched down in New York in May there was only one place to go to take in the city that never sleeps. Or so it appeared.

The 26-year-old graduate of Nottingham University posted a photograph of herself admiring the view from the top of the 70-storey Rockefeller Centre in Manhattan. "What a welcome to NYC #TopOfTheRock," she wrote. However, people noticed that something strange was going on. The skyline appeared to be years out of date, with no sign of the Freedom Tower, which was completed in July 2013.

Analysis by *The Times* picture desk confirms that a cutout of the blogger was superimposed on to the old image.

Another photo from the city showed a hand holding an unmelted ice cream in a fish-shaped cone but viewers pointed out that the treat was sold at a shop 20 minutes from the street pictured in the background. A third picture showed her on Brooklyn Bridge. A closer look showed that she was pasted on to a photo of the bridge that had been altered to be entirely symmetrical, with the left side mirroring the right.

There is no doubting that Ms Liana, who is from London, travels to the cities pictured in her account: videos on her YouTube channel and some of the less edited Instagram pictures prove this. However, an increasing number of her followers have called her out on the photoshopping, accusing her of cheating her audience.

Other photographs included one in front of the Taj Mahal with other tourists removed and her cutout superimposed. In one of her most striking images she is pictured in bed, against an impossible backdrop of the London skyline. She hasn't denied editing but said: "I would never cheat on [followers] by putting myself in a picture where I wasn't in a natural location."

Ellie Dickinson, 22, who writes the *Life of Ellie Grace* blog, pointed out some of the most obvious examples of photoshopping on Twitter after studying the images. She said: "It's considered normal to change things like brightness levels but moving buildings and people and adding sunsets is something else. The problem with fake photos comes down to the premise of blogging. It's supposed to be accessible and authentic, not a glossy magazine. People want to see a lifestyle that's amazing, but attainable."

Social media experts said the hugely competitive nature of professional blogging, where "influencers" can earn over £1,000 per post by plugging brands and products, could encourage people to take liberties in an effort to stand out.

Agencies said that allegations of fakery would be especially problematic in cases where influencers did not declare that posts were adverts. Ms Liana shows off brands in many of her posts but only marks some as adverts. Her agent said that she correctly labelled all sponsored posts.

In a statement, Ms Liana said: "I have lots of loyal followers that I consider my friends and I would never cheat on them by putting myself in a picture where I wasn't in a natural location. I do strive to present my photographs in the best possible way but always remain faithful to my followers by taking my pictures in real locations.

"It's because I feel a strong connection with my followers… that I really value their friendship, so I always try to strike a balance between authenticity and creativity."

Her agency, Storm, said: "Instagram fundamentally is a creative platform; it's distinctive nature promotes visual narratives which have become more sophisticated in a market which demands quality. She genuinely has visited all the locations she has posted about and she declares her sponsored posts in the correct way. The fact is that filtering is a common practice used… in order to create aesthetically desirable content, and this is not unusual."

Additional reporting by Sebastian Allan

Birds: Allegedly added into the picture, which was taken in April

Crowds: Are far away from Amelia Liana, below

Tower: People visiting the Taj Mahal at the same time said the tower had scaffolding

Above: Picture of the skyline in New York in May is missing the Freedom Tower, built four years ago

Below: An unlikely view of London from Liana's own bed

Social media scandals

- Louis Cole, a YouTube star from Surrey, was criticised last year for posting videoblogs and Instagram pictures of a trip to North Korea painting the totalitarian state as a land of plenty. He posted the pictures after the trip because Instagram is blocked in the country. He said he was not an investigative reporter and posted only what he saw.
- Lele Pons, an actress who has more than 18 million followers on Instagram, last week shared a post purporting to show a ponytail she had chopped off for charity. After fans pointed out that she was holding up hair extensions, Ms Pons, 21, said that she had intended to donate but found that charities that create wigs for cancer patients did not accept coloured hair.
- Calvin Klein posted an "upskirt" photo of the model Klara Kristin, captioned: "I flash in my Calvins".

3.4.2.2 Carolyn Stritch's Fake Trip to Disneyland

Stritch is a UK-based freelance photographer and content creator whose Instagram, @theslowtraveler, is filled with aesthetically pleasing and 'dreamy' lifestyle photographs. On the 10th and 11th of March 2018, Stritch shared two Instagram posts on her trip to California to celebrate her 22nd birthday at Disneyland as a 'crazy and self-indulgent present' for herself. The posts accumulated over 15,000 likes with many commended Stritch for the 'stunning', incredible' and 'beautiful' images. Within days, Stritch shared her inspiration, motivation and the specific steps taken to fake an imaginary trip in an Instagram and blog post. Stritch's fictitious trip drew media attention, and social media users and journalists praised Stritch's social experiment for initiating dialogue on the prevalence of fakery on social media (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Independent's article reporting on Carolyn Stritch's faking Disneyland trip on Instagram (Ritshel, 2018)

3.4.2.3 Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss

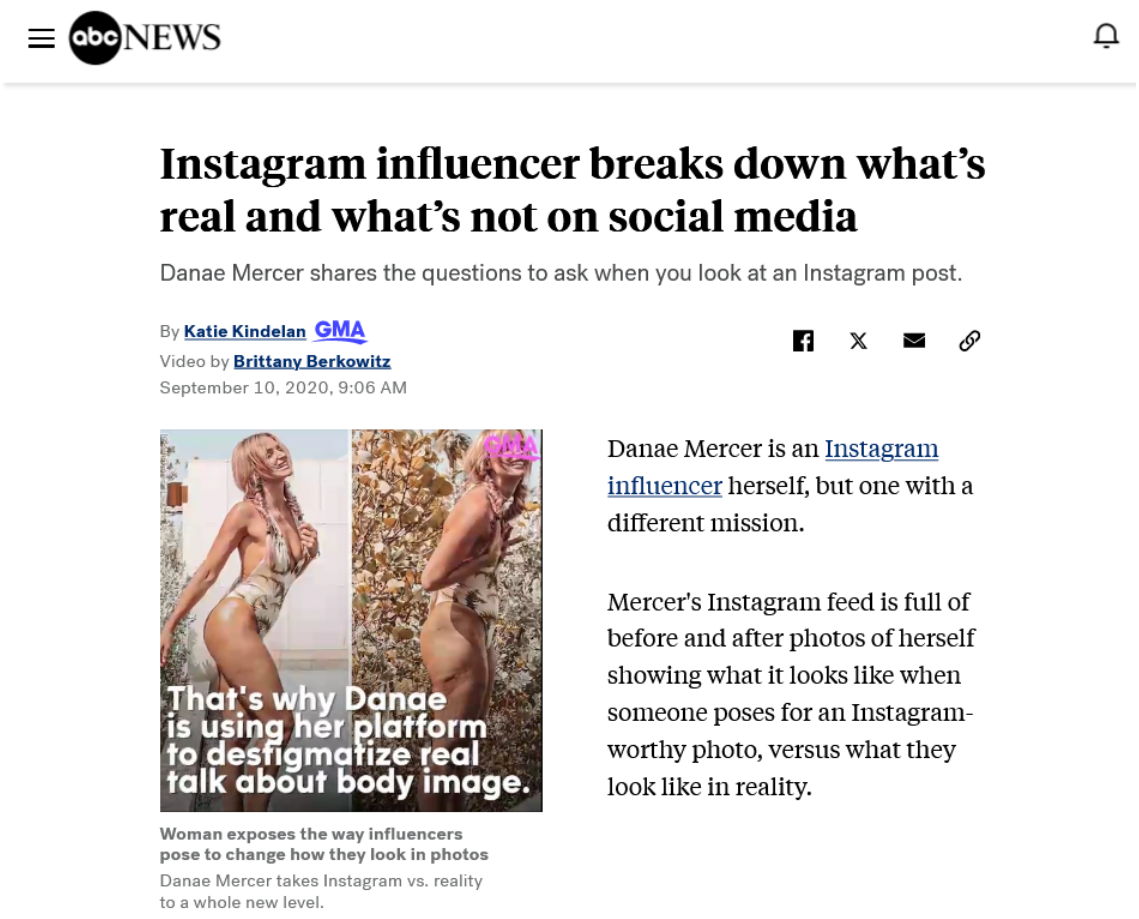
The exemplar of *Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss* became the focus of intense media attention and coverage (Figure 3). A considerable volume of responses and public debates from social actors, including social media users, journalists and personalities, celebrities and healthcare professionals were generated. Several social actors commented on the post to share their thoughts as well as debate and contest the authenticity and appropriateness of Teigen's actions and shared content. Responses from social actors ranged from admiration, support and compassion to scepticism and criticisms of the post, as well as Teigen's character and motive in sharing the authentic content.

Figure 3. The Guardian's article on Chrissy Teigen's sharing her pregnancy Loss on Instagram (Convery, 2020)

3.4.2.4 Danae Mercer's Representation of Real Women's Bodies

Danae Mercer is a Dubai-based freelance writer, journalist and microcelebrity who utilises her Instagram account to showcase real women's bodies and promote body positivity. The posts, particularly the 'before and after' comparison photographs, attracted considerable amount of media attention. Responses from social actors ranged from appreciating the valuable message that Mercer conveys to derision of the raw images of bodies shared. This resulted in intense debates amongst journalists and social media users around the topic of authenticity and aesthetic of images as well as the implication of the portrayal and perception of women's bodies in mainstream and social media, a screenshot of one media story is shown in *Figure 4*.

Figure 4. ABC News's article on Danae Mercer's realistic representation of her body Instagram (Kindelan and Berkowitz, 2020)



3.4.2.5 Johanna Olsson's Crudely Altered Photographs

Johanna Olsson is a Swedish social media influencer who is primarily active on Instagram. Olsson became the focus of increasing media coverage and negative attention when social media users noticed the discernible photoshopped images shared during a trip to Paris in October 2018. One of such media stories is shown in *Figure 5*. Social actors were largely unanimous in their disapproval of Olsson, who was criticised for heavily manipulating the images, ridiculed for the lack of proficiency in her editing skills, and many questioned her integrity and character. Whilst Olsson felt that the negative reactions were harsh and unjustified, social actors were disappointed with Olsson's failure to take responsibility.

Figure 5. Lad Bible's article on Johanna Olsson's photoshopped images on Instagram (Wood, 2018)

3.4.2.6 Louise Delage's Imaginary Existence

Louise Delage is a 25-year-old Parisian influencer who documented a seemingly perfect and carefree life alongside simple captions and multiple trendy hashtags on her Instagram account. 7 weeks after the first post, Delage gained over 50,000 likes from the 149 posts. A subsequent post disclosed that Delage is an imaginary figure created as part of the award-winning *Like My Addiction* campaign to highlight the challenge of recognising the signs of alcoholism amongst young people. The message was further emphasised by the inconspicuous presence of alcohol in every photo and video posted on Delage's account, which went largely unnoticed. Delage and the campaign she was an instrumental part of attracted media attention with mixed reactions from social actors, though many remarked on the novel approach to raising awareness of alcoholism, one of the media stories from the Guardian is shown below:

Figure 6. The Guardian 's article on Louise Delage's unexpected backstory and Instagram account (Hunt, 2016)

3.4.2.7 Sadelle Yeung's Misappropriation of Other's Images

Sadelle Yeung is a freelance model and lifestyle microcelebrity from Hong Kong who became the focus of media attention and discussion online when social media users noticed similarities between the numerous lifestyle Instagram photographs to those found on other online sites. An article from Buzzfeed is one of the media stories the covered her deception (Figure 7). The majority of social actors' reactions were negative; many chose to criticise and mock Yeung once her dishonesty was discovered. One parody account, *Copy with Sadelle,* was generated with the intention of holding Yeung accountable by reposting the plagiarised content alongside its original sources. It was estimated that Yeung misrepresented images in approximately 95 posts as her own.

Figure 7. Buzzfeed News' article on Sadelle Yeung's plagiarised images on her Instagram account (Krishna and Cho, 2018)

3.4.2.8 Tupi Saravia's Accompanying Clouds

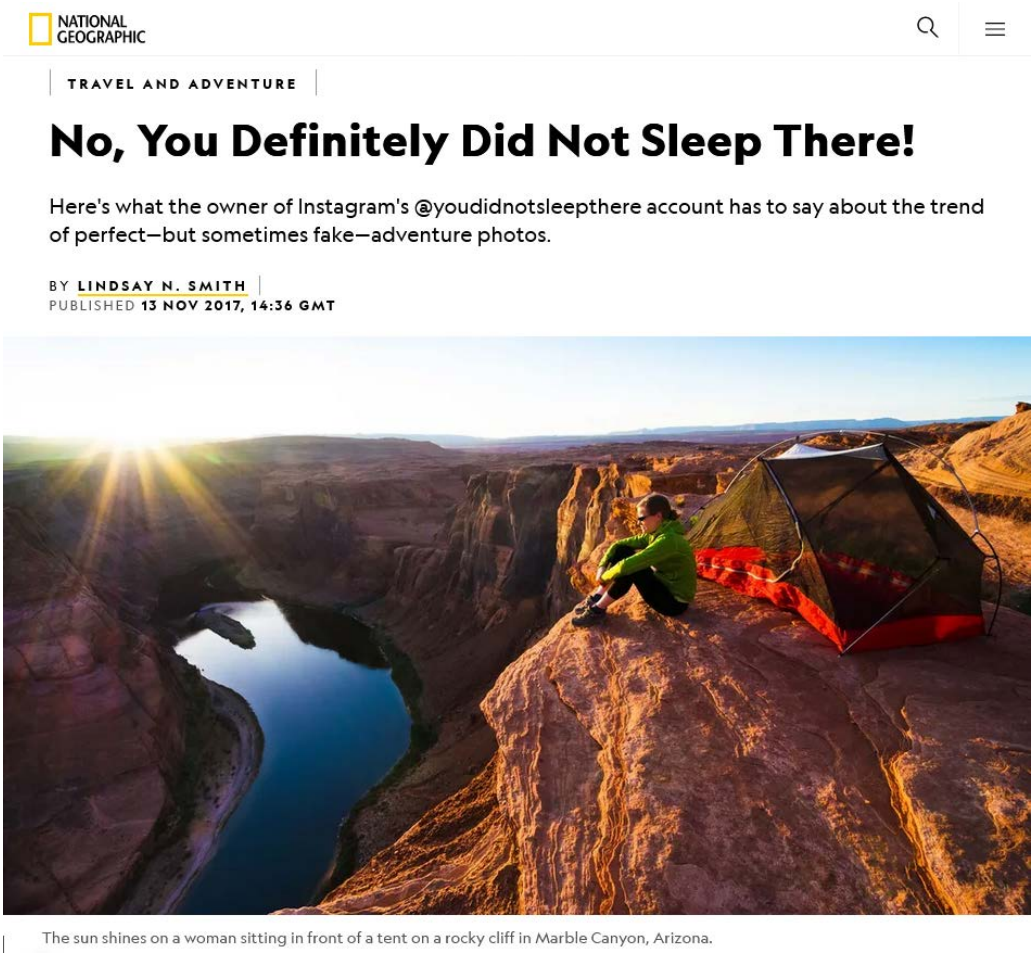
Tupi Saravia is a photographer and travel blogger from Buenos Aires who gained wider prominence and increased media attention when social media users noticed the same cloud formations in several travel images from various destinations on her Instagram account. In response, Saravia openly share the specific details and steps taken to edit and enhance the images. Social actors' reactions ranged from critiques, ridicule, and disappointment of Saravia to supportive and admiration of the aesthetic of the edited travel images and her honest response. The media coverage also initiated discussions and debates surrounding the acceptability and severity of the fakery, as displayed by Saravia, as well as the increasing prevalence and acceptability of fabricated reality in social media content. An article from the Sun is one of media stories that covered Saravia's shadowing cloud (Figure 8).

Figure 8. The Sun's article on Tupi Saravia's identical cloud formations in several Instagram images (Husselbee, 2019)

3.4.2.9 You Did Not Sleep There's Curation of Improbable Campsites Photographs

You Did Not Sleep There is an Instagram account created by Luisa Jeffery who curated images of the absurdly located campsites that were previously shared by travel influencers and photographers by shared on the platform. The account began to gain media attention from various mainstream and online media outlets in 2017. Social actors' reactions were largely positive, sharing Jefferey's scepticism of the improbable and misleading photographs of campsites. Many discussed health and safety, and environmental concerns stemming from the imperious campsites portrayed. Social media users and media authors have also noted and discussed the growing popularity and prevalence of aesthetically pleasing yet unrealistic outdoor travel images on social media, one of which is from the National Geographic (Figure 9).

Figure 9. National Geographic's article on You Did Not Sleep There and the ubiquity of perfect yet unrealistic travel photography on Instagram (Smith, 2017)



3.5 Data Collection

The initial data collection phase began in September 2019. During this phase, the focus was on gathering relevant media stories and related materials from various online sources. These sources included mainstream news outlets, internet-based news aggregators, specific genres of news (e.g., technology, business, culture), tabloid and gossip media, niche websites and blogs, and social media platforms. To ensure a comprehensive collection of data, the research employed various databases such as Nexis and other media databases, digital/online archives, and search engines. This multifaceted approach aimed to provide a full picture of the media landscape surrounding the chosen exemplars and the broader phenomenon of (in)authenticity on social media.

Identifying and selecting relevant media stories involved the following process:

- Using a range of search terms and keywords related to the research topic and the chosen exemplars of (in)authenticity across the various databases and search engines.
- Reviewing each media story to ensure relevance to the research questions.
- Downloading or saving copies of the media stories, this included text-based media stories, images, videos, and screenshots.
- Creating detailed field notes that documented the source of each media story, the date of publication and access, and any observations or reflections on the content.

Different aspects of each media story were examined, including the author's gender, media format, general tone, keywords used, sources and evidence presented, and the social actors involved or implicated in the stories. Emerging themes and patterns were noted during this initial analysis. The investigation of these dimensions aims to uncover the power dynamics and struggles involving different actors and factors that participate in the perception and construction of (in)authenticity on social media.

3.5.1 Summary of the Dataset

The dataset collected across the nine exemplars used in the research, showcasing the wide variability in media coverage and content volume (Table 5). The accumulative dataset comprises of 283 media stories with an approximate word count of 199,507, alongside 570 visual files, amounting to 1,053 files in total.

The data distribution highlights varying levels of media attention. The exemplar generating the most extensive media coverage was *Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss,* with 68 media stories. Several exemplars demonstrate substantial media engagement, notably *Amelia Liana's Dreamy Travel Aesthetics* (39 media stories) and *Johanna Olsson's Crudely Altered Photographs* (39 media stories). While the exemplar with the least overall media coverage was *Sadelle Yeung's Misappropriation of Other's Images*, documented by only 7 media stories. This is likely due to the creator who is based in Hong Kong, as such the majority of the media stories were not in English. The overall number of media stories per exemplar ranged significantly, from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 68.

Notably, there is no there is no strong, direct correlation between an exemplar's number of followers and the volume of media coverage they received. Whilst *Chrissy Teigen* confirms the expected pattern, having the highest follower count (~31M) and the highest media coverage (68 media stories). The same cannot be said for the majority of the exemplars selected in the research, as such, it is like that Teigen's existing celebrity status amplified her coverage.

Many exemplars with lower follower count were able to generate substantial media attention. *You Did Not Sleep There* have the lowest follower count (~38K) but received a high media coverage (28 media stories), comparable to *Danae Mercer* (28 media stories), who has approximately 2.3 million followers. The controversy surrounding "improbable campsites" likely drove this coverage. Similarly, *Louise Delage* had one of the lowest follower counts (~ 62K) but still garnered 21 media stories, suggesting the shocking nature of her fictitious existence and its use in an alcoholism awareness campaign attracted media interest despite her small audience.

The data demonstrate that the specific expression of (in)authenticity may be responsible for the level of media coverage rather than the creator's follower count. *Amelia Liana* and *Johanna Olsson*, with followings of 450K and 510K, respectively, were under intense media scrutiny for their extensive image manipulations, receiving an identical number of media stories (39), showing strong public interest in photo fakery regardless of regardless of the

number of followers. Coverage appears to be driven more by the nature and controversy surrounding the (in)authenticity expressed rather than by the size of the audience.

In summary, while a large following, like *Chrissy Teigen*, guarantees high coverage, a smaller following does not preclude it; instead, the specific display of (in)authenticity, as demonstrated by *Amelia Liana* and *Johanna Olsson*'s image manipulation, is likely a strong predictor of media attention.

Overall, the data demonstrates that the final collected resource provides rich, multi-faceted material for analysing the different manifestations and governance of (in)authenticity on social media.

Table 5. Summary of Each Exemplar's Following and Dataset

EXEMPLAR	No. of Followers*	No. of Media Stories	No. of Visual Files	Approx. Word Count	Total No. of Files
***Amelia Liana*'s Dreamy Travel Aesthetics**	450K	39	70	28624	148
***Carolyn Stritch*'s Fake Trip to Disneyland**	189-192K	27	53	19723	110
***Chrissy Teigen*'s Experience with Pregnancy Loss**	29.2-32.8M	68	85	34911	155
***Danae Mercer*'s Representation of Real Women's Bodies**	2.2-2.3M	28	55	25545	89
***Johanna Olsson*'s Crudely Altered Photographs**	510K	39	55	23799	134
***Louise Delage*'s Imaginary Existence**	59-65K	21	50	17802	92
***Sadelle Yeung*'s Misappropriation of Other's Images**	90-91K	7	93	4109	107
***Tupi Saravia*'s Accompanying Clouds in Holiday Photographs**	280-315K	26	50	15274	103
***You Did Not Sleep There*'s Curation of Improbable Campsites Photographs**	35-40K	28	59	29720	115
ACCUMULATIVE DATASET	N/A	283	570	199507	1053

**At the time of media coverage*

3.6. Ethical Consideration

This research is committed to upholding the highest ethical standards. It is guided by key ethical frameworks, including the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the UK Data Protection Act 2018, and the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2017). These frameworks emphasise the importance of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and responsible data handling, particularly when dealing with personal data and online research. This section outlines the specific ethical considerations relevant to this research project, addressing the challenges and complexities of conducting ethically sound research in the context of social media.

Collecting data directly from social media platforms is becoming increasingly challenging due to restrictive terms of use and evolving data access policies. This is particularly true for platforms like Facebook and Instagram, where concerns about data privacy and misuse have led to stricter regulations and limitations on researcher access.

Instagram's terms of use explicitly prohibit unauthorised data collection, including automated collection, without express permission. This poses significant challenges for researchers who wish to collect data directly from the platform. While gaining explicit consent from Instagram or individual users is ideal, it is often impractical or impossible due to the platform's policies and the scale of data involved. This research, therefore, primarily focuses on analysing media stories and publicly available data related to the chosen exemplars of (in)authenticity on Instagram, rather than collecting data directly from the platform.

Similarly, Facebook has implemented stricter data access policies in recent years, making it more challenging for researchers to collect data directly from the platform. This is partly due to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which exposed the misuse of user data and led to increased scrutiny of Facebook's data practices (Gonzalez, 2018). As a result, Facebook has limited access to its API and implemented stricter approval processes for research projects.

The landscape of social media data access is constantly evolving, with platforms regularly updating their terms of use and data policies. This research acknowledges the challenges this poses for researchers and remains vigilant about changes in platform policies. It is committed to adapting its approach as necessary to ensure that data collection and handling practices remain ethical and compliant with the latest regulations and guidelines.

The research also recognises the ongoing debate surrounding public and private online spaces and the complexities of informed consent in the context of social media research. It is committed to adhering to the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines to produce robust and ethically sound research (Beninger, 2017; British Psychological Society, 2017).

The increasing restrictions on direct data collection from social media platforms highlight a tension between the platforms' efforts to protect user privacy and the need for research access to understand the social and cultural impact of these platforms. This research navigates this tension by utilising alternative data sources and methods while remaining committed to ethical data handling practices.

3.6.1 Informed Consent, Restrictive Access, and Legal Frameworks

The issue of informed consent is central to ethical considerations in social media research. Ideally, researchers would obtain informed consent from individuals before collecting and analysing their data. However, the restrictive terms of use imposed by many platforms, coupled with the often-impractical nature of obtaining individual consent from a large number of users, creates challenges for researchers.

This tension between restrictive access and informed consent also highlights a potential conflict between platform policies and legal frameworks such as the GDPR and the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. The GDPR emphasises data subject rights and the importance of informed consent, while the UK Copyright Act allows for certain exceptions for non-commercial research and private study under "fair dealing" provisions. However, the platforms' restrictive terms of use can make it difficult to exercise these rights and exceptions, potentially hindering research that could contribute valuable insights to society.

This research primarily utilises secondary data, which consists of media stories and publicly available information that is already in the public domain. While this approach mitigates some of the challenges related to informed consent, it is still crucial to acknowledge the ethical considerations surrounding data access and user privacy. The research strives to balance the need for research access with the responsibility to protect

individuals from potential harm and to respect their privacy, even when dealing with publicly available data.

3.6.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Whilst this research primarily analyses secondary data, specifically publicly available media stories and commentary regarding prominent social actors, the research aims to maintain the highest ethical standards. Due to the public nature of the subjects involved in the research, including microcelebrities, media authors and other named individuals in media stories, the research requires a nuanced approach to anonymity and confidentiality.

The core subjects off the research are the microcelebrities at the centre of the exemplars who are widely known public figures with significant followings and fame through their strategic online self-presentations (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008). In addition to microcelebrities, subjects such as media authors and individuals are also specifically named in the media stories. Data related to these figures, including their names and content, is publicly accessible and presented in the media stories, and is considered publicly available archival material (Chandola and Booker, 2021). Therefore, their real names and identities are cited and discussed as this information is publicly documented and integral to the context of the research.

In contrast to the public figures and named individuals, the different measures are implemented to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality social media users whose reactions and comments featured prominently in media stories and in this research. Researchers typically make use of pseudonyms and/or anonymisation and to protect participants' identities (Bryman, 2016). In this research, social media users who are not key public figures central to the exemplars are not provided with any identifiers when their comments and response are cited. No real names, usernames or any identifiers are used in the textual data presented, and any that are apparent in the visual data are wholly obscured by the researcher to ensure anonymity of the applicable social media users.

Researchers typically employ data masking and paraphrasing measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (Bryman, 2016). In this research, direct quotations from social media users, media authors, and content creators are used as part of the analysis. This data is present and included in the media stories by choice of the media authors and can be part of the visual presented through screenshots of social media posts and

comments. As such, this data is considered publicly available archival material (Chandola and Booker, 2021), therefore, no data masking and paraphrasing was used to altered or mask the direct quotations presented in the research.

These comprehensive and layered measures ensure that, while the transparency inherent in public discourse is maintained for analysis, the anonymity and welfare of all private individuals and non-public social actors are rigorously protected, thereby fulfilling the highest ethical obligations of this research.

3.6.3 Copyright and Fair Dealing

This research acknowledges the importance of respecting copyright laws and intellectual property rights. The UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 grants copyright protection to various types of original works, including literary, dramatic, musical, and artistic works. Social media content, such as images, videos, and text, may also be protected by copyright.

However, the UK Copyright Act also allows for certain exceptions to copyright infringement for the purpose of non-commercial research and private study under "fair dealing" provisions. These provisions permit the copying of limited extracts of works for non-commercial research or private study, provided that the use is fair dealing and does not negatively impact the copyright owner.

This research operates within these fair dealing provisions. The data used in this study, including media stories and social media content, is used for non-commercial research purposes and is properly attributed to its original source where appropriate. In cases where individual authorship of specific comments or posts is not acknowledged, this is done to protect anonymity and confidentiality, as well as for practical reasons, as it would be unrealistic to seek permission from every individual whose data is included in the analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis

This research employs a combination of textual and visual data analysis, focusing primarily on a rigorous form of qualitative content analysis applied to social media content and associated media discourse related to each exemplar.

Content analysis is a systematic technique for analysing documents and texts, originally aimed at categorising the objective and quantitative descriptions of content (Bryman,

2016). In contrast, qualitative content analysis extracts the underlying themes from the data, illustrating them with quotations and examples (Bryman, 2016). This approach aligns with methodologies that extend the traditional visual analysis framework to incorporate supporting textual data, such as comments, tags, captions, and related articles (e.g., Gannon and Prothero, 2016; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010; Chalfen; 1987). The use of qualitative content analysis is essential to the research as it allows the themes to emerge from the data rather than relying on predefined categories (Bryman, 2016). This method of analysis enables the extraction and interpretation of latent content, such as the underlying social norms and power dynamics that govern the perception of (in)authenticity on social media in this research. The interpretive attribute of qualitative content analysis surpasses beyond superficial categorisations and hones in on the meaning and context within the discourse, aligning with the research's overall interpretivist stance.

Content analysis is applicable to a wide variety of unstructured data, including social media posts and comments and visual images and, making it ideal for analysing the complex, visually driven discourse surrounding the sampled exemplars (Altheide and Schneider, 2013; Bryman, 2016). The specific qualitative content analysis approach utilised here draws heavily on Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). ECA emphasises the role of the researcher in the meaning-making and recognises the significance of context in understanding these meanings (Altheide and Schneider, 2013; Bryman, 2016). ECA is an inherently iterative and systematic analytical process that encourages the emergence of categories and nuances (Bryman, 2016). This iterative approach supports the research's abductive methodology, strengthening the research's ability to empirically develop the comprehensive conceptual framework of authenticity.

The analysis hinges on the secondary analysis of qualitative data, which involves analysing available archival materials, placing the researcher 'at a distance' from the data, and promotes objectivity (Chandola and Booker, 2021; University College London, 2024). The focus on secondary archival data and unobtrusive research, i.e., media stories, offers the advantage of being a non-reactive method, as the data was not collected with this specific research and analysis (Bryman, 2016; Chandola and Booker, 2021; University College London, 2024).While this method saves significant time and resources, it requires the researcher to become thoroughly familiar with the data's original context, as the meanings and contexts of the data collection process may otherwise be unknown (Chandola and Booker, 2021; University College London, 2024). This analytical approach offers opportunities for the researcher to uncover underlying meanings and new interpretations of

previously documented events, thus making it suitable for investigating the perceptions and meaning of (in)authenticity, and enabling the accurate detection of implicit messages within the data (Bell, 2001; Bryman, 2016; Rose, 2007). This strengthens the interpretation of authenticity by providing quantifiable data and contextual validation through audience responses, moving beyond superficial descriptions to latent nuances (Bryman, 2016).

The systematic content analysis is explicitly guided by the two core theoretical frameworks of this study, Foucault's concepts of power and governmentality, and institutional theory's concept of legitimacy. The integrated use of the theoretical lens with qualitative content analysis strengthens its ability to address the research questions and provides a more comprehensive understanding of authenticity and its prevailing rules and norms on social media.

The Foucauldian framework is utilised to categorise and interpret the explicit and implicit rules and norms surrounding authenticity. The content analysis is specifically structured to identify repeated themes, language, and patterns in the data that demonstrate the mechanisms of *hierarchical observation* and *normalising judgement* (Foucault, 1979). By examining the discourse of social actors through their commentary and responses, the analysis empirically identifies how power is exerted through self-regulation and external surveillance within the disciplinary institution of social media (Hardy and Maguire, 201; Lillqvist et al., 2016; Young, 1995). This approach allows for the examination of the power relations involved in producing and maintaining the regimes of truth regarding authenticity (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1990; Leachman, 2009). This is critical since "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together," and power struggles arise between social actors within the institution (Foucault, 1990, p.100).

Meanwhile institutional legitimacy directs the analysis toward identifying how social acceptance is managed and maintained. The analysis specifically tracks language of desirability, appropriateness, and adherence to shared norms (Foucault, 1979; Humphreys, Chaney, and Slimane, 2017; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Mills, 2003; Suchman, 1995). The resulting categories of *reward, punishment,* and *resistance* strategies emerge directly from the language used by social actors to maintain, reinforce or challenge the *legitimacy* of specific expressions (in)authenticity (Elsbach, 1994; Foucault, 1979; Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Mills, 2003). This empirically connects actors' responses to the institutional pressures shaping conformity and challenging deviation.

By framing the content analysis through these theoretical perspectives, the research moves beyond simply cataloguing to empirically classify and understand the specific strategies and techniques of power employed in the governance of (in)authenticity.

In summary, the combined methodologies of netnography and qualitative content analysis (QCA), informed by the principles of ethnographic content analysis (ECA), establish a robust framework for investigating the complex dynamics of (in)authenticity. By employing secondary data analysis on publicly available archival materials, the research achieves an unobtrusive and non-reactive engagement with contested discourse. The structured yet iterative process of ECA, coupled with the integrated theoretical lens of Foucauldian power and institutional legitimacy, allows the empirical findings to emerge from the data, providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how social actors collectively govern and negotiate authenticity within the social media disciplinary institution.

Chapter 4. Findings and Discussion to RQ1: Manifestations of (In)authenticity

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the findings to the first research question that are analysed through the integrated theoretical lens of Foucault's governmentality and institutional theory's concept of legitimacy. This particular research question is positioned to address a critical gap in authenticity literature, the lack of comprehensive conceptualisation of authenticity and the understanding of its contestation and ultimately governed by social actors in the digital and social media landscape. Particularly when prior research often presents a fragmented and ambiguous conceptualisation of authenticity, typically focusing only on identifying and examining specific subtypes (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021).

In this chapter, research addresses limitations in existing work by contributing to the development of an integrated conceptual framework of authenticity (Table 3). These findings are instrumental in refining this framework, moving beyond the fragmented conceptualisation of authenticity (RQ1). This groundwork allows for the ascertaining of the governance mechanisms within the regime of governmentality of (in)authenticity in the social media landscape (RQ2). Specifically, it enables understanding authenticity's governance as a contested social process within the disciplinary institution of social media which will be addressed in the next chapter.

The qualitative content analysis conducted for nine high-profile exemplars of (in)authenticity through the netnographic approach facilitated the development of a comprehensive, integrated conceptual framework of authenticity defined by three core, interconnected components: *accuracy, consistency*, and *legitimacy*. This provides the necessary clarity to systematically analyse how authenticity manifests in practice, directly answering the first research question (RQ1).

1. How does (in)authenticity manifest on social media?

Section 4.2 and 4.3 addresses the first research question (RQ1), detailing how (in)authenticity is expressed through the essential components of *accuracy* and *consistency,* as established in the integrated conceptual framework (Table 3). This section

also presents the empirical dimensions that emerged from the netnographic data: *veracity* and *content staging* for accuracy, and *scrutiny* for consistency.

4.1.1 Components of Authenticity

This chapter addresses the first research question (RQ1): *How does (in)authenticity manifest on social media?* The initial exploration, guided by the integrated conceptual framework summarised in *Table 3*, revealed that expressions of (in)authenticity is a complex and multifaceted. The systematic analysis of the nine exemplars led to an empirical refinement of this framework. While *accuracy* and *consistency* remain the core conceptual components, the data unveiled specific and empirically derived dimensions that precisely capture how social actors perceive and judge each component

This approach moves beyond fragmented and ambiguous theoretical definitions to ground the meaning of authenticity directly in the observed practices of the social media landscape. The analysis of these two components and their empirically derived dimensions further demonstrates the multifaceted concept of authenticity within this concept.

This section presents the analysis of these two components and their empirically derived dimensions that further the understanding of the multilayered concept of authenticity within the context of social media and beyond. In capturing this complexity of authenticity, the characteristics initially associated with each component in *Table 3* will be updated following the iterative process of analysis as nuances to the components and dimensions emerge.

The analysis ultimately demonstrates the diversity of (in)authenticity that manifests on social media and captures the synergy, similarities and contrasts amongst the different components of authenticity and exemplars of (in)authenticity. The assessment offers valuable insights into social actors' nuanced perceptions of authenticity, and the specific dimensions they value and seek, reflecting the tacit social rules and norms associated within the context of social media.

4.2 Dimensions to the Component of Accuracy

Accuracy is one of the core components of authenticity that is concerned with truthfulness and reliability. Content is perceived as accurate when social actors conclude that it faithfully represents its intended subject – be it a person, place, or event at a specific time - with minimal alteration or exaggeration. Conversely, a lack of *accuracy* is observed when content displays noticeable discrepancies or limited resemblance to what was originally captured.

The complex digital and social media landscape with increasingly discerning consumers who demand authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003; Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani, 2021) necessitate the need to further examine the component of *accuracy* and its two dimensions that capture the different ways in which truth claims and deceptions manifest on social media.

While the perception of *accuracy* may involve the evaluation and verification of truth and fact, this process is inherently subjective and can vary according to one's personal experiences (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006; Wang, 1999). This perception can also be shaped by other factors such as, familiarity with the creators and their content, participation and consumption of social media, and proficiency in media literacy.

The analysis defines two dimensions of *accuracy, veracity* and *content staging*. The following sections presents the manifestation of these dimensions, beginning with *veracity* and followed by *content staging*.

4.2.1 Veracity: A Dimension of Accuracy

The data identifies *veracity* as the first dimension for *accuracy. Veracity* refers to social media content that reliably represents its creator's stated or implied experiences, truthfully conveying their emotions, reality, and credibility in the information disclosed. A content creator demonstrating strong *veracity* is perceived as transparent and trustworthy in their self-representation. Whilst a lack of veracity is characterised by representation that are perceived as manufactured, fake, and inaccurate, possessing limited connection to verifiable truth and fact. This dimension is observed across eight out of the nine exemplars including: *Amelia Liana's Dreamy Aesthetics Style, Carolyn Stritch's Fake Trip to Disneyland, Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss, Danae Mercer's Representation of Real Women's Bodies, Johanna Olsson's Crudely Altered Photographs, Louise Delage's*

Imaginary Existence, Sadelle Yeung's Misappropriation of Other's Images and *Tupi Saravia's Accompanying Clouds in Holiday Photographs*.

4.2.1.1 Exemplar: Amelia Liana's Dreamy Aesthetics Style

Social media users started to notice the extent of manipulation in Liana's travel photographs. However, the story gained widespread public attention when the Times newspaper published an article on July 15, 2017, discussing five specific photographs that Liana posted on her Instagram account between April and June 2017 (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Five photographs from Liana's Instagram that were part of the Times newspaper coverage in the article entitled, 'Fake views: blogger doctored holiday pics' on the 15th of July 2017 (Bridge, 2017)

Social media users and media authors have speculated that Liana manipulated numerous travel photographs, in which she frequently superimposed herself onto an entirely different and/or heavily altered background. For example, the image of Liana holding an unmelted fish-shaped ice cream cone was suspected of manipulation, as it is highly improbable that the treat was photographed 20 minutes from where it is sold (Figure 11, *left*).

> "How is this possible?! That ice cream place is nowhere near where you took the pic"

The photo of Liana in bed with the London skyline as a backdrop was suspected of editing due to its unrealistic appearance (Figure 11, *right*).

Figure 11. Left: Image of Liana holding an ice cream cone in the middle of the street (5th June 2017). Right: Image of Liana in bed against the backdrop of the London skyline (22nd June 2017)

Figure 12. Left: Image of Liana overlooking the New York City skyline (25th May 2017). Right: Image of the New York City skyline containing the Freedom Tower

The photograph of Liana overlooking the New York City skyline was found to have been manipulated, as evidenced by the absence of the Freedom Tower, which was completed in 2013 (Figure 12). Several social media users noted this discrepancy and discerned that Liana was superimposed onto a dated image of the skyline:

> "That's pre-World Trade Center (the new one) though...the skyline is very, very different now."

Liana was also found to have made extensive enhancements and alterations to the background of her travel images, as demonstrated by photographs of her in front of the Taj Mahal and on the Brooklyn Bridge (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Left: Image of Liana before the Taj Mahal (10th April 2017). Right: Image of Liana on the Brooklyn Bridge (17th June 2017).

Liana's extensive manipulation of her travel photographs demonstrated a lack of *veracity* because the images were not accurate or truthful representations of the sites and events. As one media author observed, recreating these scenes is impossible, as many images required the backgrounds to be heavily edited or replaced entirely.

> "By projecting a life of perpetually sunny locales, pristine hotel beds, and, in Liana's case, virtually empty landmarks, they are creating a false representation of a place — an experience their millions of followers might find impossible to replicate for themselves."

Whilst Liana never directly addressed the lack of *veracity* stemming from the extensive manipulation of images, she posted a blog post entitled 'My Image Principles' following the increased media attention and shared the following:

> "I feel a great bond with you, my followers, and I would never wish to deceive you, and so I have established these principles and shared them with you, so that you understand that I am striving for authenticity as well as giving you imagery that is stylish, progressive and inspiring."

Some of the principles are:

> "All my imagery is actually shot at the time in the location I specify."

> "I strive as far as possible to present images that have been shot using natural light and in real conditions."
>
> "I'm always striving to find new techniques to make my imagery progressive and aesthetically pleasing representations of an authentic scene.
>
> I like to develop my skills and may use all available techniques to enhance, sharpen or smarten my images. This may include improving the light, tidying the background and other enrichments, but always in a way that is representative to the true setting and always in a way that reflects my aesthetic."

Assuming that the five photographs were taken at the specified time and location and given the extent of enhancements and alterations made by Liana, it is highly improbable that the images are realistic and authentic representations of the scenes depicted. Liana's use of various techniques may produce aesthetically pleasing images that are true to her style but are not realistic or reliable representations of reality. This perspective is shared by a small portion of social media users with one comment stating:

> "I think everyone is missing the point here, this page in whole is to show dreamy side of things..."

Findings

Liana's content displayed a clear and confirmed lack of *veracity*. Her travel images were revealed to be extensively manipulated, including replacing entire backdrops of a New York City skyline (Figure 12) and heavily altered scenes in front of the Taj Mahal and the Brooklyn Bridge (Figure 13), making them unreliable and inaccurate representations of reality. As the creator, Liana insisted she was striving for authenticity while admitting to enhancements and alterations. Social media users noted the alterations and questioned its realism. As the creator, Liana responded evasively, insisting the content was still "authentic" and true to her style, rather than addressing the factual deception. This evasion and the magnitude of the fakery resulted in widespread criticism from media authors and social media users who demanded honesty and confirmed Liana's low perceived *veracity*.

4.2.1.2 Exemplar: Carolyn Stritch's Fake Trip to Disneyland

Through manipulated images and fictitious captions, Stritch convinced the majority of social media users that she was taking a trip to Disneyland to celebrate her 22nd birthday as a 'crazy and self-indulgent present' for herself.

In the first post, Stritch explained the upcoming trip in the caption alongside a photograph of herself in bed (Figure 14, *left*). The next day, Stritch shared a post with a picture of herself in front of Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle (Figure 14, *right*).

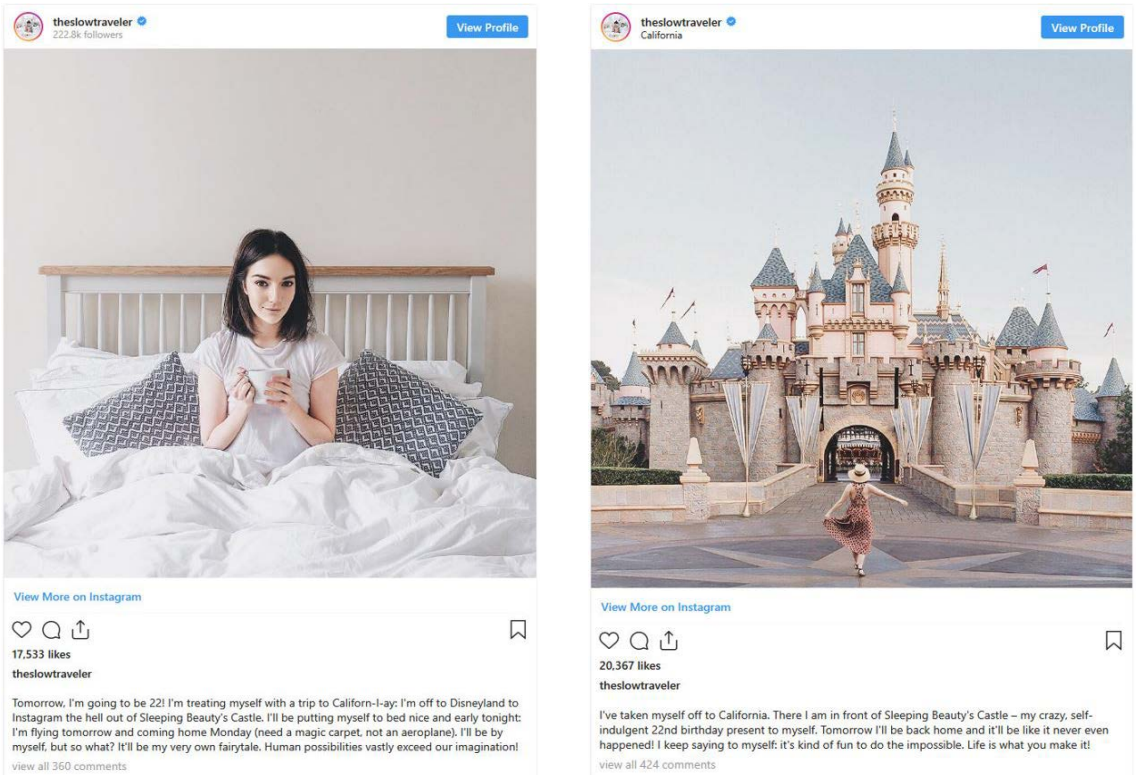
Stritch then shared a cryptic post the next day that hinted at the fabrication of the trip; the caption is shown below:

> "I'm not feeling entirely myself after that trip. Strange. Tomorrow I'll share a blog post telling you all about it. It's not every day you get to say: 'I'm going to be 22 and I'm taking my self to Disneyland.' Well, back to reality. Hard to believe that just yesterday I was standing alone outside Sleeping Beauty's Castle. But I'll always have The Image."

The very next day, Stritch shared an Instagram and a blog post, revealing that she is, in fact, 32 years old, not 22, and she has never embarked on a trip to Disneyland. She divulges how her foray into FaceApp prompted her to question everything, especially her work:

> I download FaceApp, £1.99! I take a selfie…I tap "Impression" and my face changes quickly and dramatically…I uploaded the selfie as a profile picture on Facebook as a sort of experiment and nobody questioned it. Not my best friend, my sisters, or even my own mam!

Figure 14. Screenshots of Stritch's Instagram post on the 10th (Left) and 11th of March 2018 (Right)



Stritch also shared the original unedited images (Figure 15) and offered the following explanation:

> "I came up with a story: my FaceApped perfect self, who's ten years younger than I am, flies off to Disneyland for the day, and somehow manages to photograph herself all alone in front of Sleeping

> Beauty's Castle. I manipulated images, captioned them with a fictional narrative, and presented them as real-life."

However, Stritch's subsequent explanation of her actions could be interpreted as a form of transparency, albeit a belated one. By revealing the truth about the fabricated trip, sharing her motivations, and even displaying the unedited images, she acknowledged the content's lack of *veracity* and provided insight into her creative process (Figure 15). This act of transparency, while not directly related to the veracity of the initial content itself, demonstrated Stritch's willingness to be honest about her actions and their implications, aligning with the core characteristics of veracity

Figure 15. Unedited images Stritch utilised in the Instagram posts on the 10th and 11th of March 2018 to fake a trip to Disneyland (Chan, 2018)

As such, the exemplar of Stritch simultaneously demonstrates expressions of *veracity* and a lack of *veracity*. This duality, characterised by the tension and ambivalence between reality and fantasy, resulted in cognitive dissonance for some social media users, as evidenced by one comment:

> "…when images AND text tells you a reality which turns out to be untrue, it is very confusing for the reader and it can feel cheated…"

Findings

Stritch's content initially exhibited an intentional lack of *veracity*. As a content creator, Stritch manipulated images and a fictitious narrative to convincingly simulate a trip to Disneyland. However, Stritch followed this deception by publicly disclosing the fabrication shortly after, revealing it as a social experiment and detailing the steps taken to achieve the fabricated content to highlight pervasive fakery. Media authors and social media users

largely praised her honesty, expressing appreciation for Stritch's critique of social media culture and her ability to start dialogue about the prevalence of fakery on social media. Social actors ultimately found conditional *veracity* in her truthful explanation of the deceptive experiment although some found the duality ambivalent.

4.2.1.3 Exemplar: Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss

In an Instagram post, Teigen disclosed that she has suffered a pregnancy loss with her third child. In the caption, Teigen described her experience and details of the pregnancy loss (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Photograph 1 of 4 and snippets of Teigen's Instagram post caption from 1st October 2020.

We are shocked and in the kind of deep pain you only hear about, the kind of pain we've never felt before. We were never able to stop the bleeding and give our baby the fluids he needed, despite bags and bags of blood transfusions. It just wasn't enough…

Jack worked so hard to be a part of our little family, and he will be, forever.

To our Jack - I'm so sorry that the first few moments of your life were met with so many complications, that we couldn't give you the home you needed to survive…

We are so grateful for the life we have...[b]ut everyday can't be full of sunshine. On this darkest of days, we will grieve, we will cry our eyes out. But we will hug and love each other harder and get through it.

A series of black-and-white photographs also captured Teigen's experience with pregnancy loss. The poignant images depict her sitting up in a hospital bed with tears streaming down her face (Figure 16) whilst another showed Teigen and her husband in her hospital bed, cradling their stillborn son, Jack (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Left to Right: Photographs 2, 3 and 4 of 4 from Teigen's Instagram post from 1st of October 2020

Several social media users described Teigen's documentation of her pregnancy loss as 'raw'. Many social media users empathised with Teigen's pain, as depicted in the photographs and captions, one of whom shared:

> "…we all felt Teigen's pain so viscerally. Her photos transported us back to our own deliveries, knowing that we could have taken those same pictures in the hospital

Findings

Teigen's content was perceived to be highly *verocious*. This perception achieved through vulnerable and unvarnished self-disclosure that is captured by the raw photographs and descriptive caption of her transparent display of play and profound grief following experience with pregnancy loss. Social media users reinforced this perception admiration and empathy. They viewed her honesty as performing a "profound service" by validating the grief experienced by other parents. However, some social media users questioned the content's *veracity*, suggesting the moment was inappropriately *staged* for attention.

4.2.1.4 Exemplar: Danae Mercer's Representation of Real Women's Bodies

Mercer promoted body positivity by using comparative photographs of her body. A typical post resembles a before-and-after snapshot showed side-by-side snapshots with one noticeably polished and flattering whilst the other will be flawed and less flattering (Figure 18). The flawed 'before' image was an unembellished depiction, captured with unflattering angles and lighting to make imperfections like cellulite, stretch marks, and stomach rolls visible (Figures 18, 19). In the captions, Mercer revealed the techniques used to achieve the flattering 'after' visual (Figure 19).

Figure 18. A selection of before-and-after snapshots and screenshots shared on Mercer's Instagram

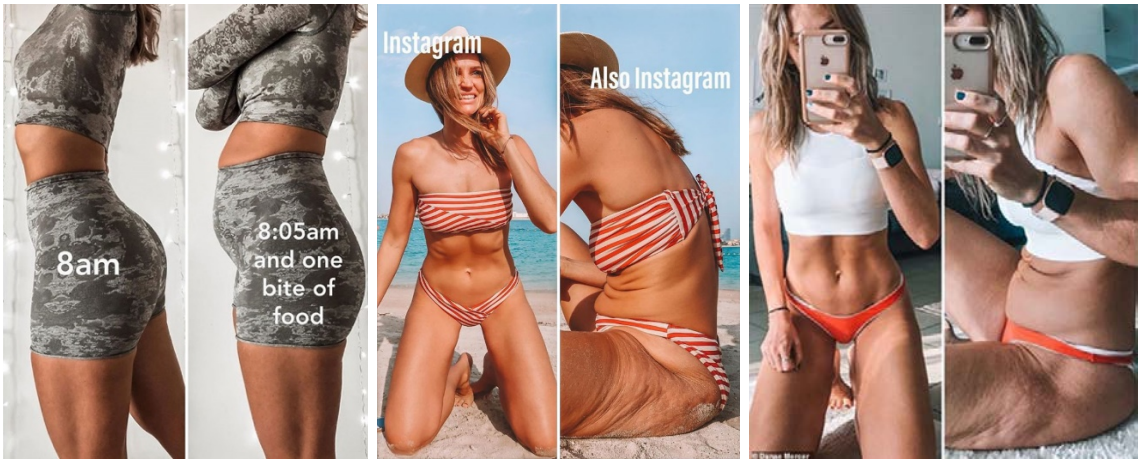


Figure 19. A snippet of Mercer's Instagram post from 27th June 2020

BEFORE and AFTER transformations are so gosh darn easy to FAKE…here's what I did:

Pulled my bottoms up higher (longer leg line).

Arched my back (waist looks smaller, bum bigger).

Popped into my hips.

Squeezed my core.

Played with light and shadows to hide my cellulite.

Swapped into more flattering clothes.

And BAM. Before to After in 10 seconds flat.

Try it if you fancy. It's pretty much a back workout.

Findings

For Mercer, the perceived *veracity* can be attributed to the unembellished photographs in the 'before' images and willingness to share the techniques used to achieve the 'after' images. The perception of *veracity* is further enhanced by Mercer's willingness to share her vulnerabilities through photographs with visible imperfections, like cellulite and stomach rolls, and her experience with body insecurities. Simultaneously, she explicitly disclosed the techniques, e.g. strategic poses and lighting, used to achieved the flattering, idealised visuals. Social media users and media authors were highly supportive, expressing appreciation for her candour. They highlighted how her actions exposed the curated nature of online presentations, illustrating that the visual content on social media are not images are a reliable account of reality.

4.2.1.5 Exemplar: Johanna Olsson's Crudely Altered Photographs

Olsson's Instagram posts featuring a series of photographs taken during her trip to Paris drew negative attention and intensified media coverage after social media users detected signs of image manipulation. Out of the several photographs shared, the public attention and media coverage primarily focused on three (Figures 20).

Figure 20. Left to Right: Image of Olsson at Loulou, a restaurant in Paris; Image of Olsson before a bridge over the River Seine in Paris; Image of Olsson before a on over the River Seine in Paris (Harding, 2018)

Social media users' reactions towards Olsson's content were primarily negative with many noted the obvious signs of manipulations in the images that Olsson posted (Figure 21), with one media author remarking:

> "There have been a few notable Instagram Photoshop fails over the years, but you've never seen one quite like this."

Alongside social media users' observation, media authors also shared their view alongside visual aids to further support their comments (Figures 21; 22).

Figure 21. Media author's evidence of manipulation in the photograph of Olsson at Loulou, a restaurant in Paris, alongside their commentary (Harding, 2018)

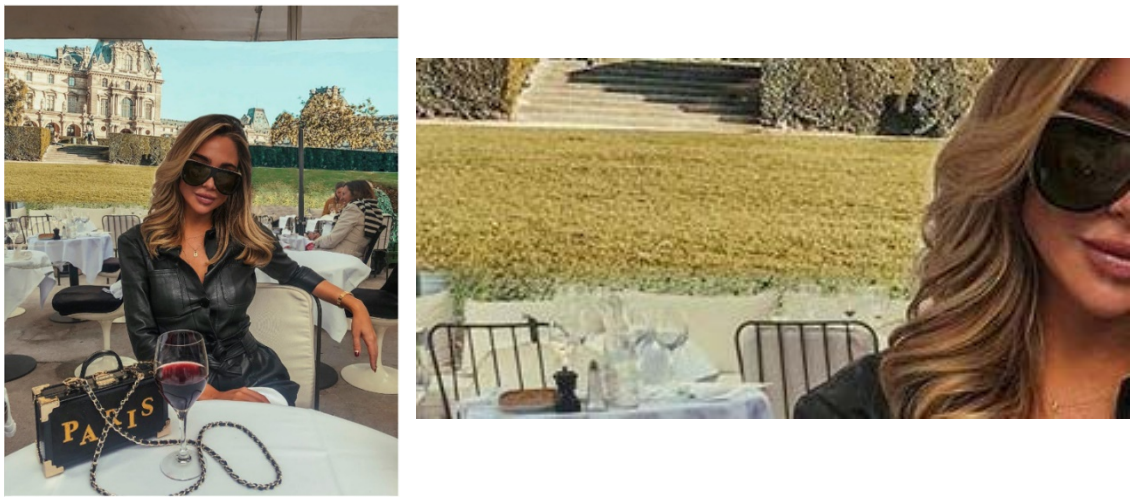


Figure 22. Media author's evidence of manipulation in the photograph of Olsson before a bridge over the River Seine in Paris alongside their commentary (Harding, 2018).

Following the media coverage, Olsson explained how she altered the images in an Instagram Story; a snippet is presented here:

> "So I did one picture, shot it and didn't think it looked that nice, so I took a different background and put the background into it. And when I put it up, nobody noticed, so I thought 'this is good'…I admit it wasn't my finest Photoshop skills"

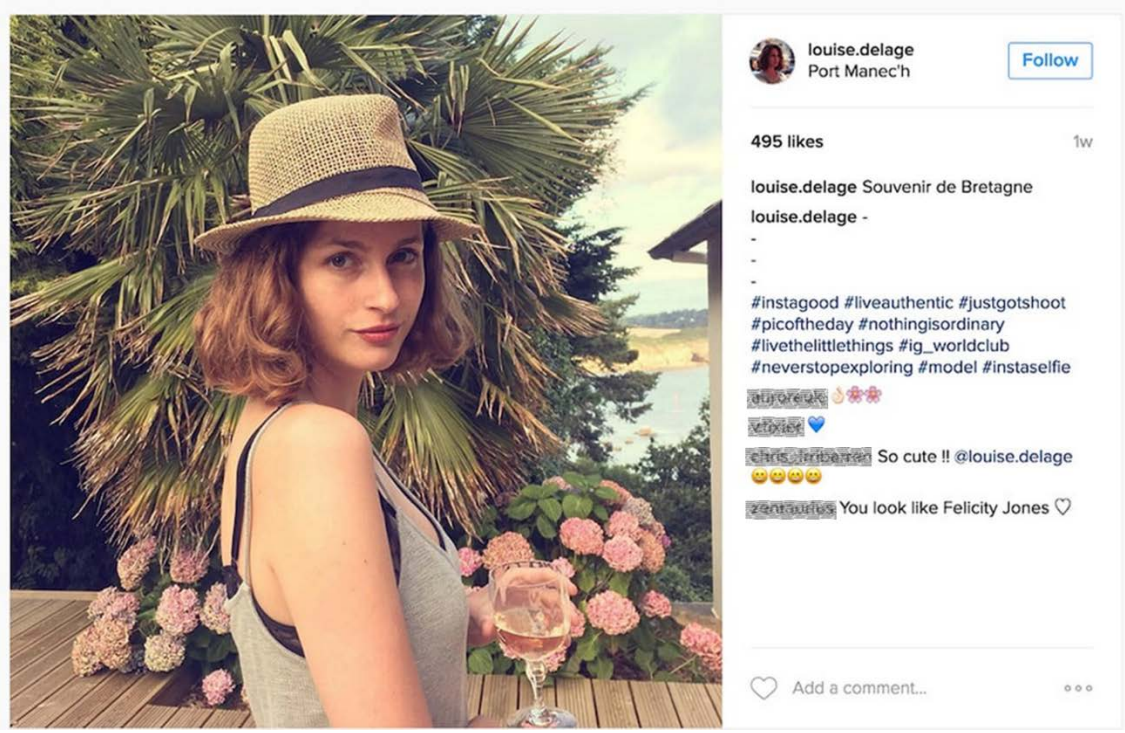
Findings

Olsson's three photographs shared from Paris showed a clear lack of *veracity* due to the conspicuous and crude image manipulations that did not truthfully or reliably depict their respective settings. Social media users and media authors were able to detect the egregious errors visible through the poorly blended outlines, obvious colour mismatch, and Olsson appearing to be levitating in one of the images. This amateurish execution further contributed to Olsson's perceived lack of *veracity*.

4.2.1.6 Exemplar: Louise Delage's Imaginary Existence

Over seven weeks, Delage shared over 149 Instagram posts containing photos and videos of herself alongside captions and multiple hashtags, gaining over 50,000 likes. One of Delage's Instagram posts is shown in Figure 23.

Figure 23. Screenshots of Delage's Instagram post (Cade, 2016)



The 150th post contains a video which reveals that Delage is a fictitious figure created by the Paris agency BETC as part of the Addict Aide's *Like My Addiction* campaign to raise awareness of the difficulty in detecting signs of alcohol addiction alcoholism among young people. Delage's social media presence was designed to mimic the style of fashion bloggers

and industry figures to enhance the realism of her portrayal, as described by one media author (Figure 24).

> "Nothing about her Instagram account seemed out of the ordinary."

The video further divulged the presence of alcohol in every post. This crucial detail went largely undetected, which further emphasised how signs of alcohol addiction can be easily overlooked, with one media author stating:

> "…most people just saw a pretty girl living a glamorous lifestyle."

Figure 24. A selection of images posted on Delage's Instagram account (Natividad, 2016)

Whilst Delage may succeed in encouraging social media users to question the assumptions of what someone with alcohol addiction may look like on social media, BETC president and creative director Stéphane Xiberras added:

> "We hoped for more followers to take notice of Louise's behaviour… but in the end, the majority just saw a pretty young girl of her time and not at all a kind of lonely girl, who is actually not at all that happy and with a serious alcohol problem."

The agency's response highlights the extent of Delage's convincing and realistic online persona in spite of her fictitious existence. This view is similarly echo by one media author:

> "It just goes to show, in the most sobering display yet, how the glamorous slice of someone's life that you see online isn't always what it seems to be… in fact, sometimes it's not real at all."

Findings

Delage's entire social media presence and existence demonstrated a had a fundamental lack of *veracity* as her persona is wholly fabricated by Paris agency BETC for the Addict Aide alcoholism awareness campaign. However, the campaign successfully mimicked the iconic cues and style of fashion bloggers, making the persona highly believable. In this exemplar, media authors played a crucial role in the subsequent reveal that disclosed the hidden presence of alcohol in every photo. This revelation was met with mixed reactions

from social actors where some actors to question the effectiveness the campaign that glamourises alcoholism through Delage's enviable lifestyle. Primarily, social media users and media authors appreciate underlying truth of the campaign's message that illustrate "the difficulty of detecting the addiction of someone close to you," highlighting this conditional *veracity* in the successful execution of the campaign.

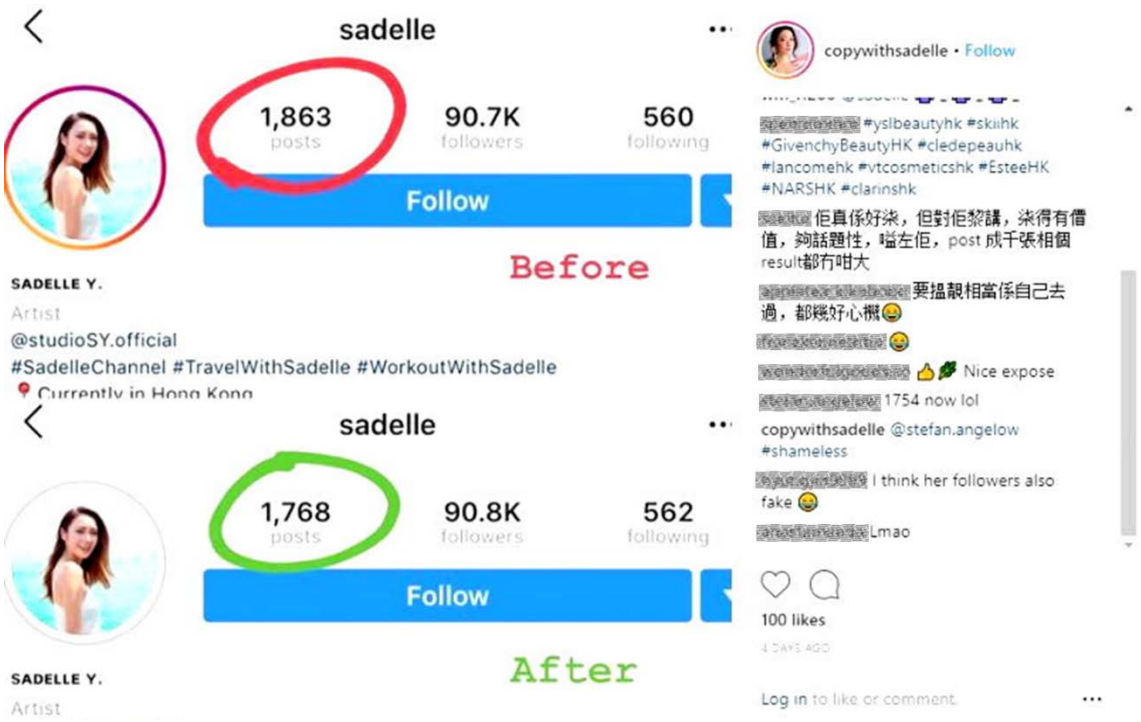
4.2.1.7 Exemplar: Sadelle Yeung's Plagiarism of Other's Images

Yeung is a self-described freelance beauty and fashion model who shares lifestyle posts documenting her daily lives and travels on her Instagram account. Yeung was found to misrepresent multiple images as her own when savvy social media users noticed the similarities between the details in her Instagram images, such as angles and lighting, and those found on travel websites, blogs, and search engines. Once her plagiarism was discovered, Yeung deleted 95 posts from her Instagram (Figure 25) leading one social media user's remark:

> "This entire Instagram account is fake."

At first glance, the content of Yeung's Instagram is expected of a young beauty and lifestyle influencer. However, evidence of Yeung's plagiarism in the form of screenshots of the now-deleted posts alongside its sources was compiled and shared by social media users in a LIHKG online forum and by a parody account, *@copywithsadelle* (Figure 25, 26, 27).

Figure 25. A screenshot of @copywithsadelle's Instagram post showing the number of Instagram posts before and after Yeung's misappropriation of images was discovered (Samson, 2018)



Yeung was shown to be using the stolen images for numerous travel photographs and food photographs that she claimed to have cooked herself, using the hashtags #travelwithsadelle and #sadellecancook in the posts (Figure 26; 27).

Figure 26. A screenshot of @copywithsadelle's Instagram post shows Yeung's misappropriated use of the image of the avocado toast alongside its source (Samson, 2018)

Figure 27. A screenshot from @copywithsadelle shared on an LIHKG forum (2018) evidenced Yeung's plagiarised image of the Amalfi Coast alongside its source

Social media users noted Yeung's deception and, evidenced by the comments on LIHKG and in her Instagram posts commenting on her Instagram (Figure 28):

Figure 28. A screenshot of a comment from a LIHKG forum, a translation is provided in the third comment (Krishna and Cho, 2018)

> "wow, she stole so many photos."
>
> "Stealing photos for selfies? Instagram model Sadelle has been exposed!!! This instagram model is so bad!!! Using Google Images? I didn't even need to check her IP."

Findings

Yeung demonstrated a total lack of *veracity* by intentionally plagiarising an estimated 95 images of lifestyle photographs, often accompanied by the misleading hashtags #travelwithsadelle and #sadellecancook, and fraudulently presenting them as her own work. Social media users and the parody account, *@copywithsadelle*, were shown to policed Yeung's lack of *veracity* by compiling and sharing evidence of the deception in the media coverage. This led to widespread disappointment and condemnation from the social media authors and media authors alike. Yeung's attempt to minimise the plagiarism as

simply "spacing out" her profile was rejected due to a consensus on the absence of *veracity* in the content amongst social actors.

4.2.1.8 Exemplar: Tupi Saravia's Accompanying Clouds in Holiday Photographs

Saravia gained prominence and increased media attention when social media users noticed identical cloud formations in her travel photographs from various destinations, including Indonesia, Italy, and Thailand (Figure 29).

Saravia explained that she used the Sky Control feature in Quickshot, a photo editing application, to place clouds on the background of her travel photographs when overexposed. The image manipulation became apparent when Saravia chose the same cloud formations in several travel images (Figure 29). Saravia comments on the alterations made to her travel photographs:

> "Adding clouds to bright, outdoor photos doesn't change the subject of the photo. It doesn't mean that I wasn't really where the photo was taken. It's the most innocuous kind of compositing one could possibly do."

Several social media users seemed to share Saravia's point of view with one commented:

> "This is the least fake and tamest form of content manipulation that exists."

Figure 29. A series of Saravia's travel photographs from various destinations containing identical cloud formations

Many social media users remarked that the manipulation was a non-issue and common practice

> "So [Saravia] could be a bit more creative with the placement of the cloud…but what's the issue with this exactly? This is common practice…"

Following the increased attention and media coverage, Saravia responded with the following:

> "I used an app called Quickshot to help the composition of the photograph when the sky is burned or overexposed…[followers] were always aware about this because I never hide it"

Findings

Saravia's content demonstrated a lack of *veracity* as evidenced by her use of photo editing application, notably the recurring addition of identical cloud formations across multiple travel images from various destinations. Despite their close resemblance to reality, Saravia's manipulated photographs are not wholly truthful or credible representations of their respective settings. When this was brought to light by social media users, Saravia immediately responded to the media authors and on her social media platform by confirming her actions, openly detailing the editing process. This commitment to transparency led many social media users and media authors to mitigate their judgment, arguing the manipulation was minor and granting conditional *veracity* to the edited images.

4.2.2 Content Staging: A Dimension of Accuracy

The analysis revealed that social media users, personalities, and authors perceived content from specific exemplars as staged. Social actors believed that elements of the content might be planned, concealed, omitted, and/or obscured, thus precipitating the content's perceived *inaccuracy*.

The dimension of *content staging* was found in *Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss, Danae Mercer's Representation of Real Women's Bodies, Louise Delage's Imaginary Existence,* and *You Did Not Sleep There's Curation of Improbable Campsites Photographs*.

4.2.3.1 Exemplar: Chrissy Teigen's Experience with Pregnancy Loss

A small portion of social media users have suggested that Teigen may have staged the photographs for attention. A snippet of one user's comment is shown below:

> "Chrissy Teigen is so distraught over her miscarriage that she took the time to pose for a photo of herself crying, in black and white for dramatic effect, then shared that photo with the world along with her words."

Several social media users questioned the photographer's presence in documenting such an event.

> "Why would you bring a photographer in to capture all of this when this is a matter between and husband and a wife…"

> "How do you conveniently have someone taking photos of you in the midst of a painful experience…"

Whilst many may assume that Teigen's photographic documentation of pregnancy loss is merely a celebrity trend, this is not the case, as one media author pointed out:

> "[Bereavement photographs] offer a way for families to cope with the loss of a life that was too short to make many memories,,,"

Findings

The content exhibited a core tension between perceived high *veracity*, derived from the raw, truthful emotional expression in the photographs and caption posted, and questioned *content staging*. A minority of social actors challenged the content's *accuracy* due to the perceived advance planning, specifically questioning the presence of a photographer during such an intimate and painful event. This criticism suggested the photographs were a performative or *staged* act for attention rather than an authentic, spontaneous moment.

However, the majority of social media users, media authors and several public figures defended the photographic documentation as a legitimate practice for coping with loss, framing it outside the typical norms of social media performance.

4.2.3.2 Exemplar: Danae Mercer's Representation of Real Women's Bodies

Mercer's Instagram posts often feature side-by-side snapshots of one that is less flattering and another that appears more polished. A significant aspect of her Instagram content is a detailed step-by-step explanation of how she could stage the less flattering and more flawless snapshots as annotations on the photographs or videos (Figure 30) or in the captions (Figure 31) of her posts.

Figure 30. A screenshot of a video shared on Mercers Instagram

Many of Mercer's posts consist of her divulging the specifics and details of how she was able to plan and stage the flattering 'after' photographs, one of which is shown below:

Figure 31. A snippet of Mercer's Instagram post from 25th June 2020

In one, my bum is deliberately angled into the shadows. The softer light hides my cellulite and smooths most of my stretchmarks. It's flattering.

In the other, I'm just casually squatting (lol) beside the mirror. My hips and thighs are in the sunlight. Lumps and bumps are on show.

There are a few posing differences (core tight, hips popped back, squeeeezzzinnnggg), but mostly this pic is about LIGHT working its magic…

But I also want to remind you about how SO MUCH on here is FILTERED. POSED. PERFECTED.

In conjunction with the explicit details given on how she posed for both the 'before' and 'after' photographs, Mercer also highlighted how these techniques are commonly used by influencers.

> "[Influencers] know LIGHTING too…Like how SIDE LIGHT, diffused from a window, is the most flattering for abs, but usually pretty harsh on the face. It's why you'll often see a phone covering the face. Or how SHADOWS can gently eliminate certain LUMPS and BUMPS."

Findings

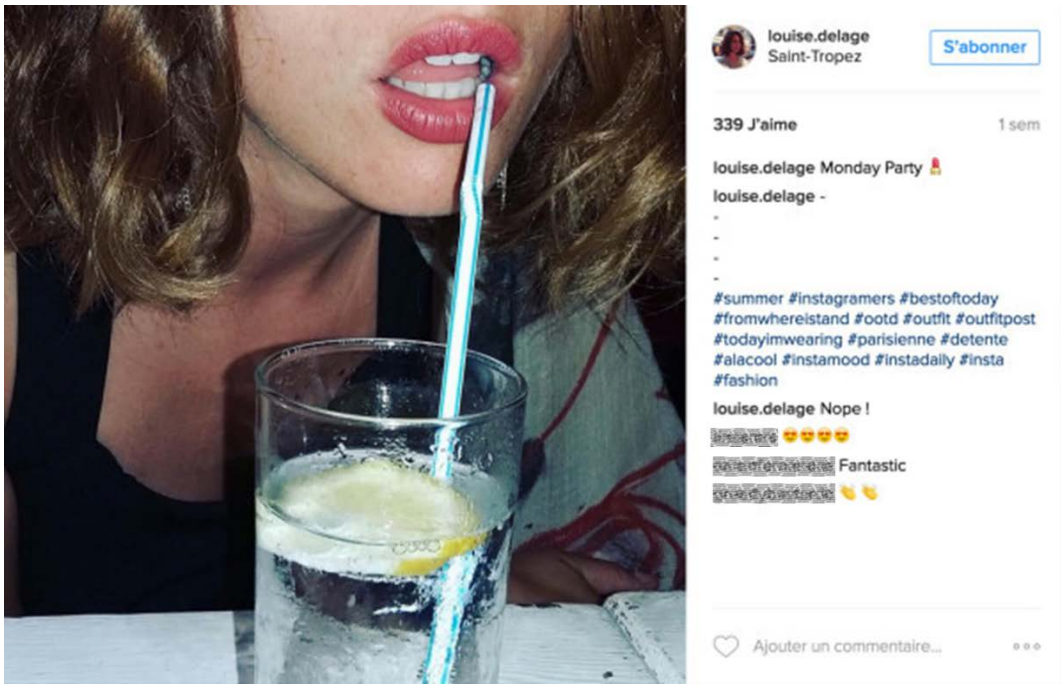
The perceived *accuracy* of Mercer's content stemmed from a deliberate and highly *transparent* use of *content staging*. Mercer explicitly detailed the techniques, such as specific lighting and posing angles, used to create both the unflattering 'before' and the idealised 'after' photographs, the latter of which are often seen on social media. This voluntary and *transparent* disclosure of the artifice underlying the ideal snapshots effectively mitigated the inherent *inaccuracy* of the visuals, successfully reframing the performance of *staging* into an act of authenticity that critiques social media's unrealistic and curated perfection. This explicitly demonstrated that *transparency* serves as the critical mitigating factor against the inherent *inaccuracy* of staged content.

4.2.3.3 Exemplar: Louise Delage's Imaginary Existence

Paris agency BETC created Delage for the "Like My Addiction" campaign for Addict Aide, an organisation that provides resources for those affected by alcohol addiction by setting up a fake Instagram account.

> "We were briefed on the difficulty of detecting the addiction of someone close to you—a friend, a child or a parent…[Delage]'s the girl next door, she could be your daughter or someone you know."

Figure 32. One of Delage's Instagram Posts (Natividad, 2016)



In order to *stage* a convincing online persona for Delage, a study of fashion bloggers provided minute details of her presence, including her attitude, the filters and hashtags used, and the timing of her posts (Figure 32; 33), media authors reported the detailed strategy in building a following and credible content:

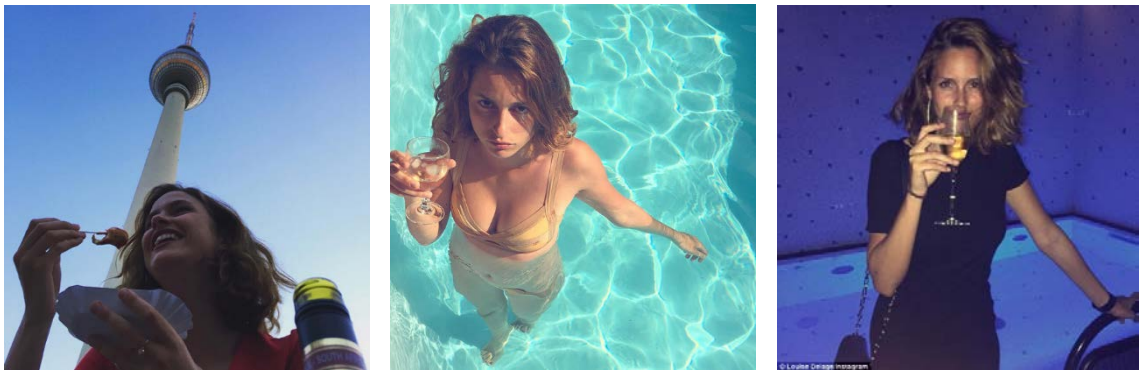
> "A bot was created to like and follow carefully chosen accounts on Delage's behalf – thus prompting them to follow back – while influential teenage thought-leaders were shoulder-tapped to "spread the Louise Delage profile among their own followers"

> "The look and tone of her posts, even down to her favourite filters, were informed by study of fashion bloggers."

> "Two to three images were posted each day at periods of high traffic: morning, lunchtime and late at night."

> "At least 20 fashion or food-related hashtags were included in each post and a highly efficient bot was created to like and follow specific people -- such as women interested in fashion bloggers, journalists and celebrities."

Figure 33. A selection of images posted on Delage's Instagram account (Chong, 2016; Natividad, 2016)



The feat was seemingly accomplished, most social actors did not question or suspect Delage's identity, as evidenced by several media authors' descriptions, some of which are shown below:

> "Louise Delage looked like a glamorous young French woman having the time of her life"

> "The posts were classic Instagram fodder - photos of boat parties, beach holidays and enjoying an active social life with friends."

The BETC president and creative director Stéphane Xiberras confirmed this:

> "…few people noticed the Instagram account wasn't genuine, 'but that is the point. No one noticed…'"

He also added:

> "Sometimes it seems like in this era, the more people stage their ideal life on social media, the more that serves to hide a not-so-ideal reality."

Findings

The exemplar of Delage demonstrated meticulous *content staging* over seven weeks, engineered by Paris agency BETC, to mimic the social media persona of a young, chic influencer. This intensive planning and *staging*, which included the inconspicuous presence of alcohol in every post, established high believability and realism but rendered the persona fundamentally *inaccurate,* fictitious and absent of *veracity*. The campaign successfully employed this elaborate *staging* to convey the underlying authenticity in two key ways: first, by portraying the difficulty of detecting signs of addiction among seemingly normal individuals, and second, through Delage's practically imperceptible fictitious persona. This suggests that even deliberately *staged* content can effectively convey an underlying truth and *veracity*.

4.2.3.4 Exemplar: You Did Not Sleep There's Curation of Improbable Campsites Photographs.

You Did Not Sleep There is an Instagram account that reposted photographs of aesthetic but improbable campsite photographs (Figure 34; 35). The posts' captions and hashtags are often humorous, sarcastic, and/or may hint at the *staging* aspect of the photographs alongside the Instagram handle of their creators, as one media author described:

> "@youdidnotsleepthere, the popular Instagram account that reposts infinite variations of one classic shot: photos of tents pitched on razor-sharp cliff edges and other improbable locations."

Luisa Jeffery, the creator of *You Did Not Sleep There*, cited the growing prevalence of absurdly located campsites taken by travel influencers and photographers as one of her motivations for starting the account.

> "My friend was like, 'Let's set the tent up over here and take a picture.' And I was like, 'What? Why are you doing that?' And she was like, 'People do that all the time!'…I started noticing how much people really do do that…"

Figure 34. A selection of campsite images reposted by You Did Not Sleep There

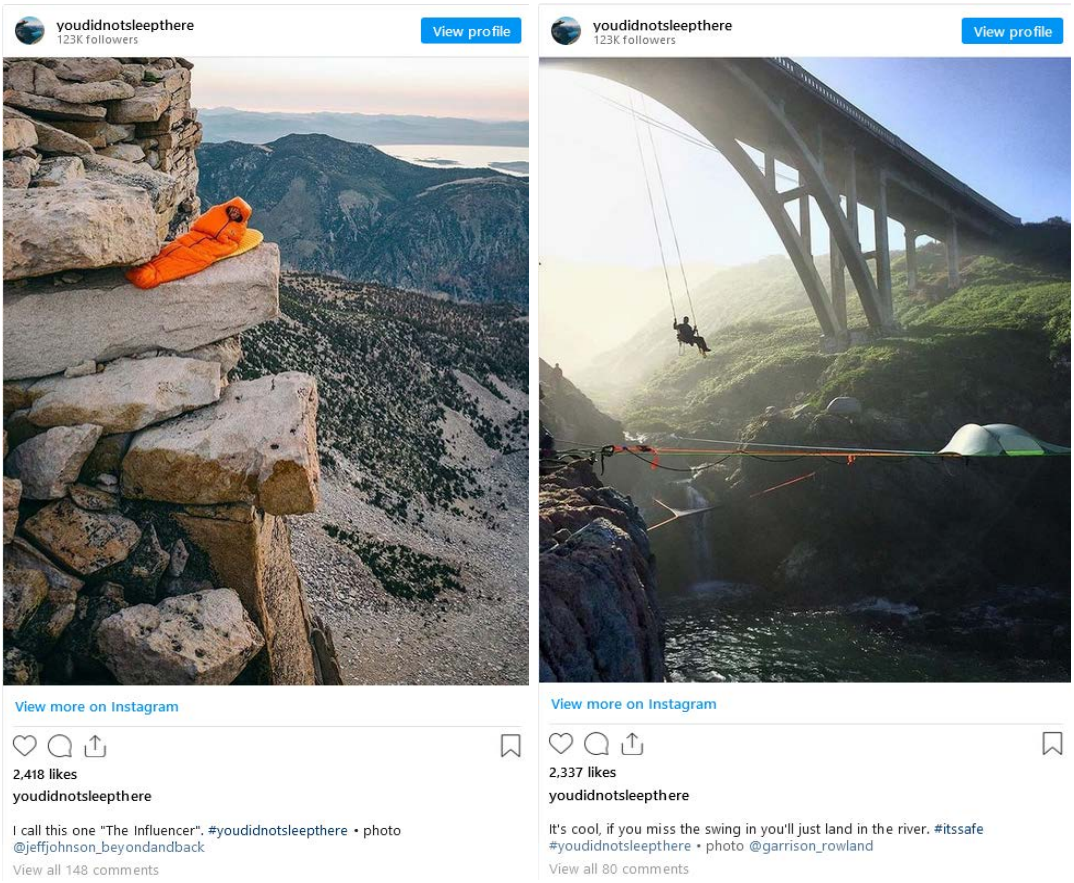
Luisa Jeffery, the creator of *You Did Not Sleep There*, cited the growing prevalence of absurdly located campsites taken by travel influencers and photographers as one of her motivations for starting the account.

> "My friend was like, 'Let's set the tent up over here and take a picture.' And I was like, 'What? Why are you doing that?' And she was like, 'People do that all the time!'…I started noticing how much people really do do that…"

Many media authors shared their scepticism of the aesthetically pleasing campsites shown in the photographs as part of the media coverage of the exemplar.

> "An amazing picture - but how long did the subject spend there? That's another matter."

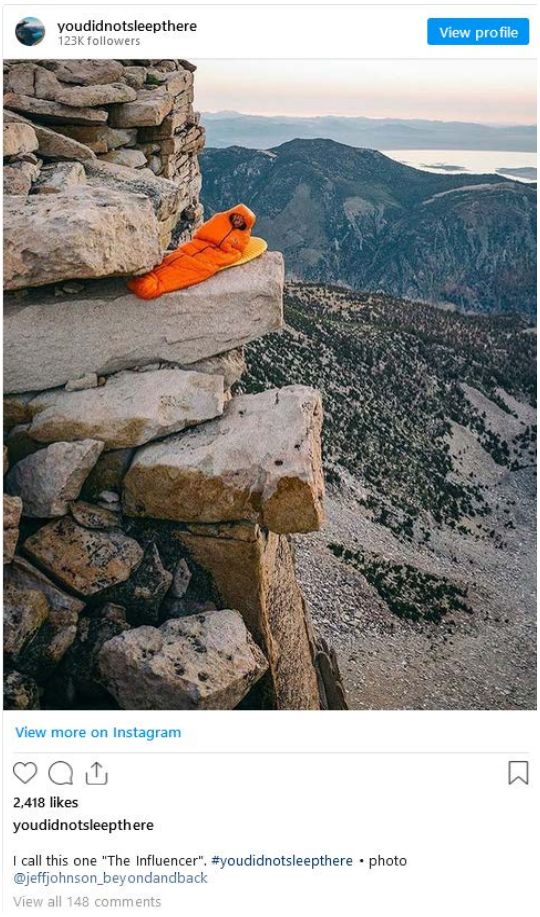
Figure 35. A selection of You Did Not Sleep There Instagram posts. Left: 19th March 2017; Right: 14th May 2016



An example is the campsite at Norway's Trolltunga rock formation, as reposted in *You Did Not Sleep There*'s Instagram post. James Booth (2018) used a photograph taken on a typical day at Trolltunga to demonstrate the contrast between reality and staged representation on social media (Figure 36).

> "…a famous overhang in Norway called Trolltunga, notorious for the hundred of snaps a day that backpackers take there… the primary reason not to sleep here isn't the imminent risk of death, it's the certain risk of being woken up by hordes of tourists impatient to get a shot…"

Figure 36. Left: Booth (2018)'s Image of Trolltunga rock formation with the caption: "There's no easy way to get to this rock…Yet somehow, we're all here." Right: You Did Not Sleep There Instagram post, dated 9th August 2018, of a campsite image at Trolltunga rock formation (Booth, 2018).



Findings

You Did Not Sleep There highlights the pervasive nature of *content staging* among travel photographers and by intentionally challenging the *accuracy* of aesthetic travel photos. The content featured absurdly located campsites, such as impractical cliff edges or crowded tourist spots, that were clearly only selected and *"staged"* for a picture and were not viable or safe for sleeping. The account uses satirical captions to critique and expose this *staging*, effectively serving as a mechanism of collective *scrutiny* by inviting social actors to critically examine its implausibility and inherent *inaccuracy*. This *scrutiny* validates the perceived lack of authenticity behind the unrealistic aesthetics of outdoor photography prevalent on social media.

4.2.3 Discussion of Accuracy: Veracity, Content Staging, and the Negotiation of Authenticity

The analysis of exemplars concerning *accuracy* is defined by two key dimensions, *veracity* and *content staging* which collectively capture the nuances and tensions between objective truth claims and subjective interpretation in the social media landscape. This interplay demonstrates that *accuracy* is not a static measure of verifiable facts but a constantly negotiated social construct.

4.2.3.1 Veracity: The Objective Anchor to Authenticity

Veracity establishes the foundational expectation that authentic digital content should possess objective truth and truthful expression, reflecting a truthful and reliable depiction of a person, place, or event at a specific time (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Dutton, 2003; MacCannell, 1973; Morhart et al., 2015; Peirce, 1940). Authenticity scholars across disciplines, including art (Dutton, 2003), anthropology (Theodossopoulos, 2013), tourism (Wang, 1999) and consumer research (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), have recognised truthfulness as an attribute of authenticity. This dimension firmly aligns with the objectivist perspective of authenticity, relying on indexical cues, which is the direct physical or spatiotemporal connection to reality (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Lehman et al., 2019; Peirce, 1940). The uncompromising portrayal of a creator's lived experience is inherently valued for enhancing perceived *accuracy*.

Veracity is underscored by creators like Teigen and Mercer, whose respectively raw and honest account of their personal experience with pregnancy loss and body insecurities elicited perceived *veracity* through their unvarnished and truthful depictions. The harsh reality of their portrayals can be a source of discomfort and distress for creators and consumers alike but it is the alignment of external expressions with internal experience which further enhances their perception of *authenticity*.

On the other hand, the absence of *veracity* refers to instances of outright deceptive representations with limited connection to verifiable fact and perceived truth. Liana and Olsson's extensive alterations and image manipulations, Stritch's fabricated trip to Disneyland, Delage's fictitious existence, and Yeung's plagiarism are immediately perceived to be inauthentic due to the absence of *veracity*. This demonstrates that such

outright deceptive representations, lacking verifiable facts defy the core tenet of *veracity,* which is objective truth.

The consistent demand for verifiability underscores the enduring societal value placed on objective truth in media (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Dutton, 2003). However, social actors are not simply passive evaluators of objective truth; they actively participate in policing these boundaries through *scrutiny*, recognising that authenticity often requires more than just the absence of objective lies.

4.2.3.2 The Paradox of Content Staging

In contrast to *veracity, content staging* represents the constructivist perspective of authenticity which prioritises subjective evaluation, feeling, and interpretation over objective truth or indexical links (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). This dimension captures instances where content is perceived as premeditated or deliberately manipulated to construct a specific, desired impression (MacCannell, 1973; Lobinger and Brantner, 2015), echoing the earlier definition of authenticity that concerned "the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence" (Trilling, 1972, p.13). When *content staging* is perceived as contrived or concealed, it raises immediate doubts about the content's accuracy and trustworthiness.

The findings reveal paradoxical aspect of *content staging*. That is, extensively manufactured content, when used strategically, can be deployed to convey objective truth despite its perceived inauthenticity and lack of *veracity*. This aligns digital authenticity with the constructivist perspective, which prioritises subjective evaluation, feeling, and interpretation over objective truth or indexical links (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999).

For example, the staging employed by Mercer and the campaign for Delage exemplify this paradoxical effect. Mercer's before-and-after photographs became an act of *veracity* through her disclosure of the common tricks of trade behind the meticulously *staged* photographs to expose the common tricks of the trade to critique the illusion of social media perfection itself. Likewise, Delage's persona, though entirely fabricated, was constructed to deliver a poignant *truth* about the difficulty of detecting addiction. In the exemplars of Delage and Mercer, the *staged* content served as a vessel for delivering objective *truth*, effectively reframing the meticulously planned and constructed *staged* content into expressions of authenticity and *veracity.*

This acceptance of *staged* authenticity aligns with the postmodern observation that consumers' perception of authenticity is often a blend of reality and fantasy, combining indexical cues that is linked to their lived experiences and the simulated elements that engages their creativity and imagination (Rose and Wood, 2005). Consumers may pursue staged experiences to escape the mundane (MacCannell, 1973), with the content's ability to closely mimic an idealized or achievable lifestyle being paramount to its initial perceived accuracy. This demonstrates that consumers are not only willing to suspend disbelief, but may also actively pursue *staged*, simulated experiences to gain fulfilment or escape the mundane (Cohen, 1988; Goulding, 2000; Leigh Peters and Shelton, 2006).

4.2.3.3 Mitigating Factors: Transparency and Proximity to Reality

The divergence between the objective demands of *veracity* and the subjective acceptance of *staged* content is reconciled by two mitigating factors: *transparency* and *proximity to reality*. The mitigating factors can enhance, compensate, and/or negate the absence of indexical cues and connection to objective truth and verifiable facts in perceived *veracity*. This demonstrates that *accuracy* is fundamentally a dynamic concept that is continually negotiated and governed by social actors.

Transparency

Transparency functions as the critical mitigating factor has the ability to transform previous perception of inauthenticity to perception of authenticity. content. When content is *staged* or lack *veracity, transparency* can shift the focus from determining *what* was done to *why* it was done (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020).

The perceived *veracity* of Teigen and Mercer's self-disclosures of sensitive and vulnerable experiences with grieving pregnancy loss and body insecurities was further enhanced by their willingness to share deeply personal experiences and address challenging topics. The truthful *transparency* display by Teigen and Mercer suggests a lack of artifice and adds to their perceived *accuracy* and *veracity* (Dutton, 1994; Lobinger and Brantner, 2015), underscoring the value placed on emotional truth and transparency in the digital age.

Liana and Olsson, who attempted to conceal their extensive *staging* and deny the lack of *veracity* in spite of evidence was perceived as lacking in *transparency*, this resulted in mass condemnation and perceptions of deceit. Here, the absence of *transparency* further

validates and reinforced the initial perceived inauthenticity. Conversely, when *staging* is immediately and voluntarily disclosed, this act of self-disclosure is perceived as a form of *transparency*.

For the exemplars of Mercer and Stritch's explicit honesty about the manipulation transformed their content from *staged* presentations that lacked in *veracity* to honest and genuine commentary on digital culture, shifting the previously perceived inauthenticity to authenticity. In a similar vein, the perceived lack of *veracity* in Saravia's enhancement of travel images with identical cloud formations was somewhat compensated by her consistent *transparency* about her photo editing process despite the lack of *veracity* and perceived inauthenticity. This convinced many social actors that the manipulation was 'innocuous' and consistent with her established persona.

The understanding of *content staging* coupled with *veracity* suggests that in addition to the iconic and intangible cues, consumers' desire for authenticity can positively influence their perception. However, the opposite is true for a minority of social actors who perceived Teigen's content as *staged* despite consumers' overwhelming desire for authenticity although it is likely that some may be motivated by opposing political views. While the exemplar of Teigen may suggest that consumers' desire for authenticity may not have a meaningful influence on consumers' perception of authenticity, it represents a minority viewpoint. Therefore, consumer's desire for authenticity within the postmodern society remains a likely factor. *Transparency* can somewhat negate the lack of veracity and *content staging* as it compensates for the lack of indexical cues as well as enhance the exemplar's truthworthiness (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015).

Proximity to Reality

Perceived authenticity is also mitigated by the content's *proximity to reality,* enabled by the use of intangible, iconic cues that can evoke comparable experiences and sensations (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). The findings show that content can maintain a perception of authenticity and *accuracy* despite lacking factual indexical links, provided it closely resembles "an idealized representation of reality" (Grazian, 2003, p.10). This means that content can lack *veracity* in one aspect yet convey it in another, as such, indexical cues from physical spatiotemporal connections are not always necessary for conveying authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Lehman et al., 2019).

Stritch's fabricated images and fictitious narrative of her Disneyland trip was able to maintain its perceived veracity prior despite the lack of indexical and disconnection to reality as they closely mimic depiction of reality (Grazian, 2003). Similarly, Delage's fictitious social media persona, aesthetics and lifestyle was modelled after fashion bloggers, and in spite of her imaginary existence as well as lack of indexical cues and objectively verifiable links to reality, was able to maintain perceived *veracity*. While Saravia's travel images with the persistent appearance of identical cloud formations due to her use of photo editing application can be deemed *inaccurate* as they are not credible representations of reality. However, they were able to maintain perceived *veracity* due to its proximity to reality and iconic cues, which drive its resemblance to reality. The fabricated content of Stritch, Delage and Saravia successfully maintained perceived *veracity* prior to disclosure precisely because they were meticulously constructed using iconic cues that depicted an idealised and achievable reality.

In contrast, Liana's image manipulations resulted in aesthetically pleasing content that is an *inaccurate* and implausible representation of reality, and perceived to lack *veracity*. Despite her skilful editing, the extensive alterations undermine the content's *proximity to reality* where the images bear limited resemblance to their original setting. Olsson's ccrude and amateurish alterations left peculiar remnants of manipulation, confirming that the images were not an achievable reality and thus failing to sustain *proximity*.

4.2.3.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, the analysis of accuracy demonstrates that while an absence lack of veracity is condemned, social actors must navigate the complex digital environment in their negotiation of authenticity by actively balancing objective truth claims and subjective performance. This contested space is *governed* by social actors who are willing to grant legitimacy to content that lack *veracity* and utilises staging, provided the creator is transparent about the manipulations and fabrications. This indicates that for many consumers, the objective truth lies not in the content itself, but in the honesty of the creator who admits to manipulating it.

4.3 Dimension to the Component of Consistency

Consistency is another component that contributes to the perception of authenticity. Within the context of social media in the research, this refers to the *consistency* between social media content and its creator's persona, values, and beliefs, resulting in a consistent persona, style, or message over time (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). This consistency also demonstrates the creator's autonomy and indicates their intrinsic motivation unperturbed by external influences (Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). In contrast, a lack of *consistency* refers to content that is incongruous with its creator's persona, values, and beliefs, exhibiting an *inconsistent* persona, style, or message. These inconsistencies have been attributed to creators' attempts to gain mass appeal and popularity or their response to external pressures or monetary incentives.

Unlike *accuracy,* the perception of *consistency* stems primarily from the content creator rather than the content itself. Analysis of the exemplars of (in)authenticity revealed *scrutiny* as a dimension that encompasses the consistency between the creator's intrinsic motivations and external expressions.

4.3.1 Scrutiny

Examination of the exemplars revealed social actors' keen interest in *consistency* and its considerable contribution to the perceptions of authenticity. This interest manifests as *scrutiny,* which entails the critical examination of social media content by creators, social media users and media authors to ascertain its creators' autonomy. This dimension of *consistency* often involves research and investigative work that examines the exemplar's content and considers its creator's persona, style, and message, as well as values and beliefs over time. This examination provides insights into their autonomy and credibility, determining the exemplar's *consistency*. This *scrutiny* can be evidenced in creators' content highlighting (in)consistencies, social media users' comments articulating their curiosity, doubts, and suspicions, and media authors' dedicated attention and coverage.

The dimension *scrutiny* is observed in *Amelia Liana's Dreamy Travel Aesthetics, Sadelle Yeung's Misappropriation of Other's Images* and *Tupi Saravia's Accompanying Clouds in Holiday Photographs*

4.3.1.1 Exemplar: Amelia Liana's Dreamy Aesthetics Style

Liana gained mainstream media attention when the Times newspaper reported on her manipulated images, which included experts' analysis came to the following conclusion (Figure 38).

Figure 37. Snippets of the analysis from the Times news article on multiple of Liana's travel photographs. (Bridge, 2017).

"…one in front of the Taj Mahal with other tourists removed and her cutout superimposed."

"The skyline appeared to be years out of date with no sign of the Freedom Tower, which was completed in July 2013."

"…she was pasted on to a photo of the bridge that had been altered to be entirely symmetrical, with the left side mirroring the right."

"In one of her striking images she is pictured in bed, against an impossible backdrop of the London skyline."

"…photo from the city showed a hand holding an unmelted ice cream…but viewers pointed out that the treat was sold at a shop 20 minutes form the street pictured in the background."

> "Analysis by *The Times* picture desk confirms that a cutout of the blogger was superimposed on to the old image.."

Analysis of the exemplar has shown that social media users, media authors, and content creators found the manipulated travel images shared by Liana to lack veracity because they are inaccurate and unreliable depictions of the settings captured. This demonstrates the absence of *accuracy*, one of the key attributes to the perception of authenticity, from the exemplar. Despite this, the exemplar conveyed a sense of authenticity through *consistency* in the content's aesthetic style and Liana's response following the increasing media attention. The analysis of Liana's Instagram revealed Liana's established and *consistent* style in her visual content as seen in *Figure 10, 11, 12, 13, 37, 38, 39 and 40*, for example.

This was also noted in a small subset of social media users.

> "I think everyone is missing the point here, this page in whole is to show dreamy side of things, everyone has their own style of editing and she has this one."

Figure 38. A selection of images Liana shared on Instagram

Liana reiterated her signature style of imagery in her response to the mounting public attention. She also insists on the content's authenticity while concurrently providing details on the various editing techniques that were used.

> "I am striving for authenticity as well as giving you stylish, progressive and inspiring imagery.".

> "I aim to produce unique and visually inspiring images."

> "I'm always striving to find new techniques to make my imagery progressive and aesthetically pleasing representations of an authentic scene".

> "…[I] may use all available techniques to enhance, sharpen or smarten my images. This may include improving the light, tidying the background and other enrichments, but always in a way that is representative to the true setting and always in a way that reflects my aesthetic."

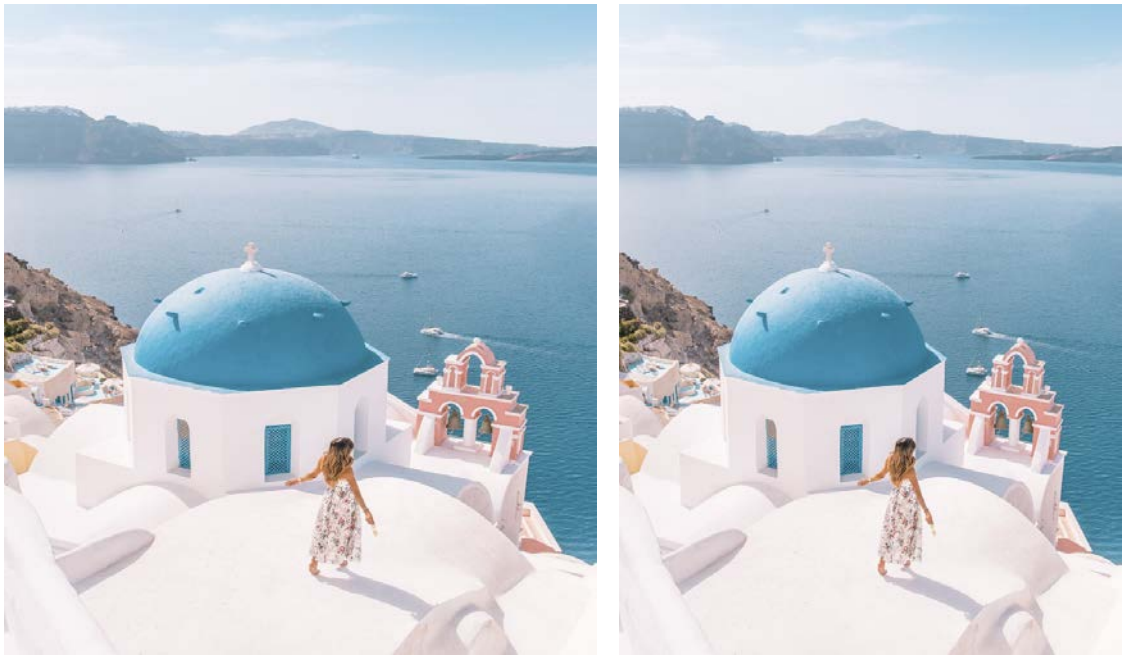
Social actors were generally unsatisfied with Liana's evasiveness.

> "…this really didn't address anything or answer most people's questions though…you're not just lightly retouching images are you?"

Many respondents found the response misleading, dishonest, contradictory, and inconsistent, considering the lack of *veracity* in the content.

> "I think [Liana] should be honest and not deny what is obviously an edited photo…denying it isn't ethical."

Figure 39. A selection of images Liana shared on Instagram (Tatler, 2019)



Findings

Liana's deceptive image manipulation demonstrated a profound lack of *veracity* in her confirmed by expert media analysis. Intense scrutiny by social media users and media authors focused on the discrepancy between Liana's aesthetic, which remained visually *consistent* over time, and her public response insisting on the content's authenticity despite proven, extensive manipulation and deception. This demonstrated a lack of *consistency* between her proclaimed honesty and the confirmed extent of deception in her content, triggering widespread condemnation.

4.3.1.2 Exemplar: Johanna Olsson's Crudely Altered Photographs

Olsson shared photos from a Paris trip on her Instagram account, but they quickly came under *scrutiny* after social media users noticed poor editing and obvious signs of manipulation. Some social media users and media authors highlighted these blatant signs.

> "The best part is the missing umbrella in the background 🤦."

> "…the table isn't even straight, the lines are all crooked."

> "..a wonky table… some terrible colour matching…embarrassingly obvious cut-out action along the hairline"

Social media users also added their own commentary alongside their critiques to further reiterate their disapproval Olsson's display of (in)authenticity.

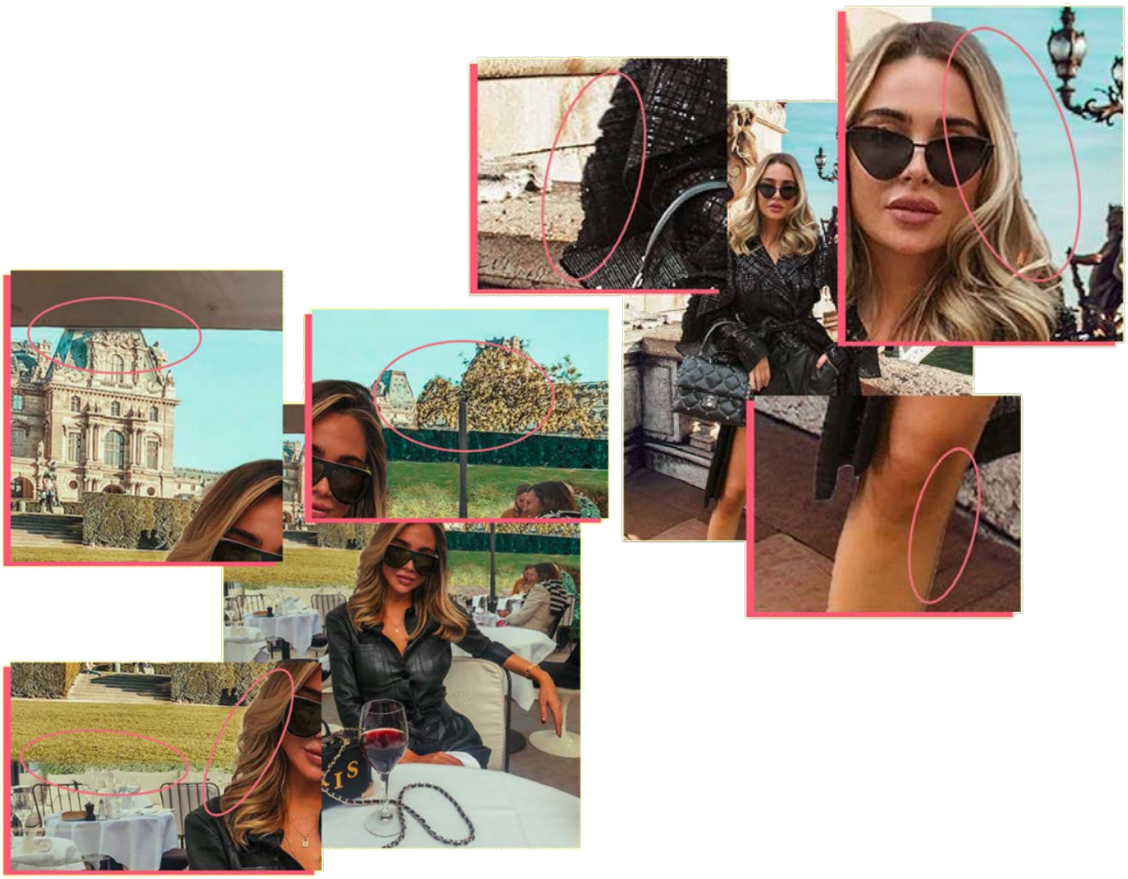
> "Then there's this very questionable hair halo/changing colour grass situation. Wow. Just WOW" "

> "Check out this not-so-seamless overlay of hair onto sky…This is so awkward."

In the ensuing public interest that followed, media authors conducted their own analysis and present the findings as part of the coverage, some of which are presented below (Figures 41, 42).

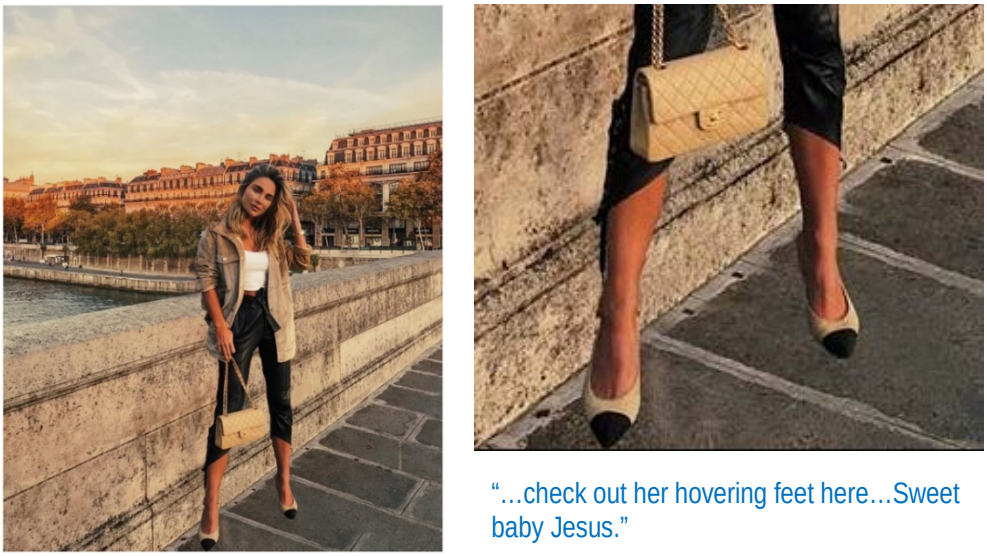
> "…one image shows her feet floating above the road, indicating that she has literally pasted herself into a landscape, while a second shows some pretty shoddy work blending her hair into a background."

Figure 40. Media author's detailed analysis of manipulations in two of Olsson's images. Bottom left*: Image analysis of Olsson at Loulou, a restaurant in Paris.* Top right*: Image analysis of Olsson on a bridge over the River Seine in Paris (van Velzen, 2018)*



Media authors' investigation reveals that an image Olsson at Loulou restaurant the background showed peculiarities around the grass, trees, and shadows, and white outlines around Olsson was also observed (Figure 40, *bottom right*). Moreover, the image of Olsson before a bridge similarly showed jagged white outlines around Olsson (Figure 40, *top right*). The image of Olsson on a bridge not only had inconsistent lighting as well as a crude and jagged outline around Olsson, but she also appears to be levitating (Figure 41).

Figure 41. Media author's evidence of manipulation in the photograph of Olsson before a bridge over the River Seine in Paris alongside their commentary (Harding, 2018)



"…check out her hovering feet here…Sweet baby Jesus."

In response to the 'crazy' and 'ridiculous' media scrutiny, Olsson shared her thoughts, a snippet is provided here:

> "I admit it wasn't my finest Photoshop skills…There are a lot of influencers out there that Photoshop in birds, rainbows or crazy skies and I could do that, but I don't like that. I just wanted to make that clear that I was in Paris, but I did Photoshop the background…"

In addition to her response via an Instagram Story, Olsson offered further clarifications concerning the extensive alterations made in her photographs, a snippet of the caption is presented here:

> "I was in Paris, at this restaurant, they seated me at a table with no view. I really wanted a picture with the best view to get that perfect Paris vibe to inspire you guys…I simply took a picture of the background I wanted from a better table and photoshopped it. That's it…you can still go here and have this exact view if you are ever in Paris…And I have done this to 3 pictures…where I have changed the background to make it prettier."

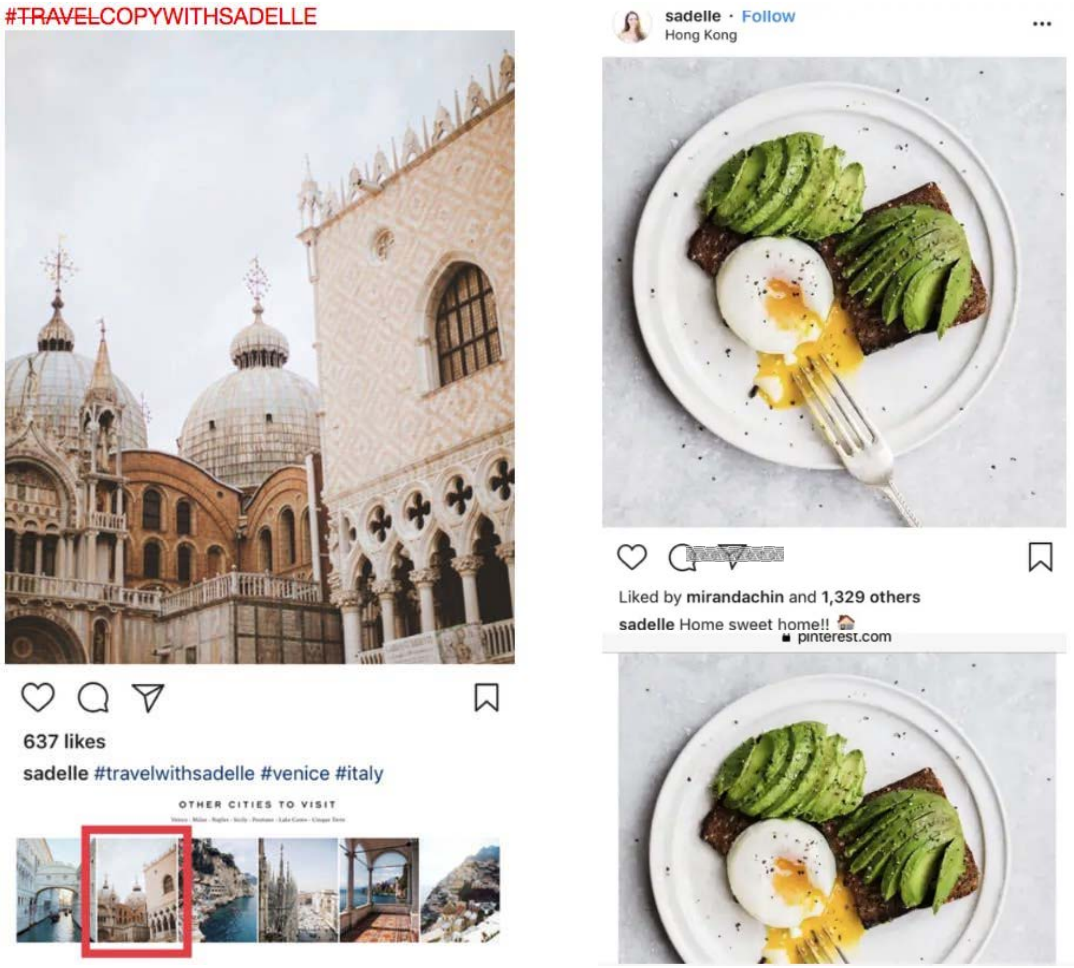
Findings

Olsson's three photographs from Paris were subjected to intense *scrutiny* by social media users and media authors who detected obvious, crude image manipulations, confirming a lack of *veracity.* Olsson clearly displayed a lack of *consistency* in her actions and response when she acknowledged replacing the backgrounds but minimise the extent of the deception by claiming that the "exact view" was easily recreatable and insisted that her manipulations were modest compared to other influencers. This contradictory and minimising response prompted widespread ridicule that further contributed to her perceived *inauthenticity*.

4.3.1.3 Exemplar: Sadelle Yeung's Misappropriation of Other's Images

Analysis revealed that in addition to the lack of *veracity,* Yeung's plagiarism and misrepresentation of others' images as her own also exhibited *inconsistencies* that contributed to its perceived inauthenticity. The absence of *veracity* in Yeung's plagiarised content came to attention when social media users discussed and shared the screenshots that evidenced the lack of *accuracy* of her content on LIHKG, an online forum based in Hong Kong. The screenshots juxtaposed Yeung's posts of travel, lifestyle, and food images with their sources (Figure 43). Whilst the evidence demonstrates Yeung's lack of *veracity* is apparent, it also demonstrates the lack of *consistency* of her content.

Figure 42. A selection of screenshots that evidenced Yeung's plagiarism shared on a LIHKG forum (Krishna and Cho, 2018)

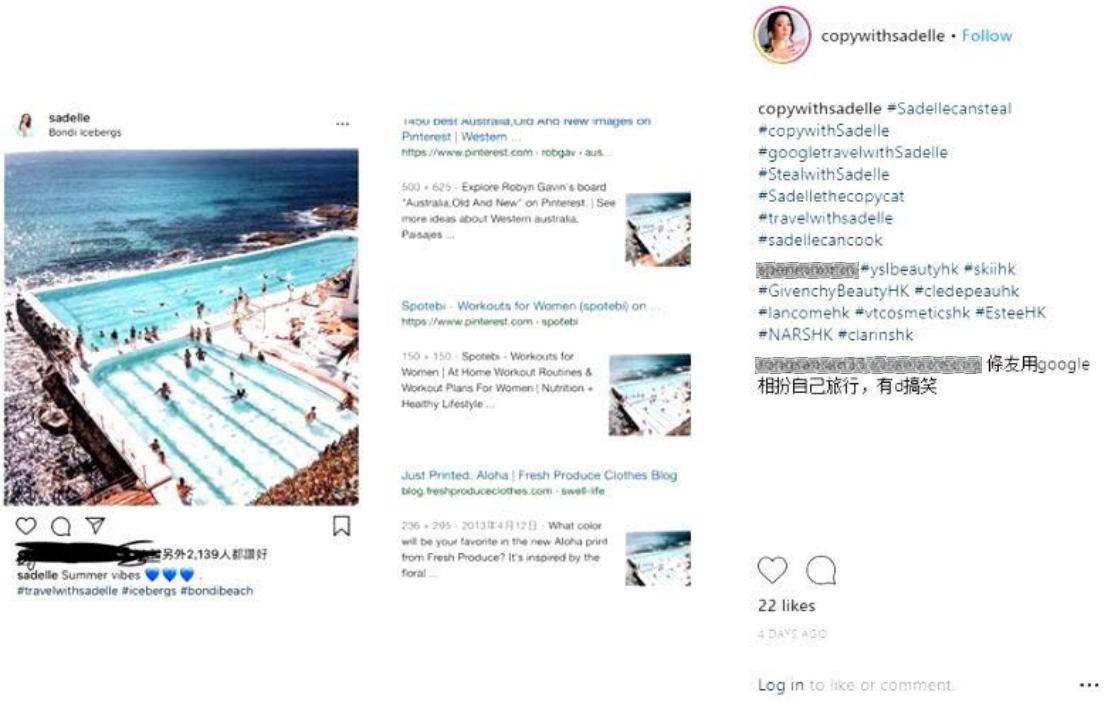


Specifically, Yeung's frequent usage of hashtags like *#travelwithsadelle* and *#sadellecancook* contradicts the travel and food images shared once the plagiarism came to light, as noted by one social media user's comment:

> "Now I've found out that you steal your photos and also pretended like you're a great cook, and when you were exposed you deleted the photos and comments. I really was a fan but now I'm just disappointed."

This inconsistency is further highlighted by *@copywithsadelle*, a parody account that posted side-by-side comparison screenshots of Yeung's now-deleted plagiarised photographs alongside its source (Figure Y). In some of the posts, hashtags in a similar style to Yeung's, such as *#sadellecansteal, #copywithsadelle, #googletravelwithsadelle, #stealwithsadelle,* and *#sadellethecopycat,* also accompanied the two original hashtags used to reiterate the lack of *veracity* and *consistency* of the plagiarised content (Figure 44).

Figure 43. A screenshot of @copywithsadelle's Instagram post (Samson, 2018)



Social media users also surmised the potential incentives that could have motivated Yeung's plagiarism.

> "…to what extent should someone manipulate their content for the sake of fame and popularity…But to create a platform where the aim is to amass a following in the hopes of getting brand partnerships is a whole new different discussion."

In response to the intense media coverage, Yeung offer the following as the reasoning behind her plagiarism.

> "Sometimes I just wanted to use photos to space out the photos on my profile."

Findings

Yeung demonstrated a fundamental lack of *veracity* by fraudulently plagiarising an estimated 95 lifestyle images and presenting them as her own. Yeung's lack of *consistency* was revealed through the mechanism of intense *scrutiny* from social media users, media authors, and a dedicated parody account, *@copywithsadelle*. This *scrutiny* revealed the profound lack of *consistency* between Yeung's deceptively curated persona and her habitual use of misleading hashtags like *#travelwithsadelle* and *#sadellecancook* on stolen travel and food content, also confirmed her lack of *veracity,* leading to widespread disappointment and strong condemnation from social actors.

4.3.1.4 Exemplar: Tupi Saravia's Accompanying Clouds in Holiday Photographs

Analysis of the exemplar previously found that social media users acknowledge that Saravia's enhanced travel photographs may lack *veracity* but did not perceive the content as inauthentic due to their proximity to reality. In this instance, Saravia's *consistency* is examined.

Saravia's image manipulation came to light when social media users noticed the same cloud formations in several travel images from various destinations on her Instagram account. One social media user and social media consultant, Matt Navarra, shared screenshots of Saravia's Instagram posts showing the near-identical cloud formations (Figure 45) to demonstrate her lack of *veracity* on X with the following tweet:

> "This travel 'influencer' spookily has the same clouds in every photo. 😳🤔😆"

Figure 44. Screenshots of @MattNavara's tweets that evidenced Saravia's lack of veracity (Anabel Magazine, 2018)

However, Saravia noted that she has always been open and honest about her image manipulation to her followers.

> "[Followers] were always aware about this because I never hide it."

This was also observed in her response to the media, a snippet of her response is shown below:

> "…people don't know me and believe they've 'discovered' something I was always honest about. Editing photos means changing color balance, exposure, clarity, and contrast. They're all to enhance the image to have it fit an artistic vision. Adding clouds to bright, outdoor photos doesn't change the subject of the photo. It doesn't mean that I wasn't really where the photo was taken."

Several media authors made note of Saravia's transparency and openness with regards to the image manipulations in the media coverage whilst social media users' view on this issue is not well-represented, one social media did comment:

> "[Saravia] didn't try to justify, or cover up, or deflect. She did what she did, and she said she did what she did."

Most social media users did not find issue with Saravia's image manipulations, one shared:

> "…simply adding a few clouds to a pic was hardly distorting reality in a harmful way and is actually quite common practice."

Saravia's *veracity,* specifically her openness and transparency, is evidenced further in the highlighted Instagram Story where she demonstrates how she manipulates the sky in followers' photographs (Figure 46) which predates her public prominence.

> "I never lied nor do I underestimate my audience… you can see in my highlight stories (from a month ago) how I openly edit pics with skies showing the before-after"

Figure 45. A before-and-after image of her follower that Saravia used to demonstrate how she edits the sky in her travel photographs (Cosmopolitan, 2019)

Findings

The conspicuous manipulation initially exposed a lack of *veracity* in Saravia's travel photographs that featured the same distinct cloud formations across various destinations. *Scrutiny,* however, ultimately reinforced her perceived *consistency*. This was due to Saravia's immediate and open disclosure of her photo editing techniques, a practice she demonstrated she was *consistently transparent* about even before the controversy arose. Her consistent candour and the content's perceived *proximity to reality* substantially mitigated the deception. Therefore, *scrutiny* resulted in a public validation of her *transparency* and persona, establishing a conditional *authenticity* for her otherwise inaccurate content.

4.3.2 Discussion of Consistency: Scrutiny

The analysis demonstrates that social actors' concerns with authenticity extend beyond the mere evaluation of objective truth – i.e. *accuracy*, evidenced in *accuracy*'s dimensions of *veracity* and *content staging* – to encompass *consistency.*

The component of *consistency* refers to the perceived and verifiable alignment between a content creator's persona, intrinsic values, and external expressions, including their persona, style and message, over time. (Dutton, 2003; Lehman et al 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). The process of verifying *consistency* is operationalised the dimension of *scrutiny,* a collective, active dimension of power utilised by social actors to continuously monitor and verify this internal and external alignment. This alignment is paramount, as *consistency* ultimately underpins the creator's credibility and trustworthiness.

4.3.2.1 Consistency as a Subjective Measure of Authenticity

Unlike *veracity,* which relies on indexical cues and objective truths, *consistency*, much like *content staging*, represents a constructivist perspective of authenticity that inherently depends on subjective interpretation (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Social actors' subjective interpretations prioritise the creator's intrinsic motivations and character over verifiable facts and objective truths, leading deviation from the norms to be rationalised by the creator's persona and aesthetic style, and *transparency*. This subjectivity shifts the focus from examining the verifiable facts of the content to *scrutinising* the intentions of the creator.

The perceived *consistency* of an established aesthetic style or authentic self-expression often privileges the true expression of a creator's values and beliefs over objective truth (Dutton, 2003; Lehman et al 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). For a subset of social actors, Liana's extensive image manipulation, despite the profound lack of *veracity,* were interpreted not as deception but as an act of genuine commitment to her signature "dreamy" aesthetic style, regardless of its rejection of the rules and norms concerning *accuracy* (Moulard et al., 2014; Newman, 2019; Södergren, 2021). This demonstrated a perceived *consistency* between Liana's intrinsic artistic vision and the external expressions of her content (Lehman et al 2019; Moulard et al., 2014; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021; Södergren, 2021).

The analysis showed that social actors are willing negotiate an exemplar's explicit lack of *accuracy* if they perceive an overriding *consistency* in the creator's persona, style, or message, notably when mediated by *transparency*. Saravia's constant and candid disclosure of her editing practices transformed the glaring lack of *veracity* in her repeated use of identical cloud formations in travel images into an act of conditional authenticity. Here, social actors granted *legitimacy* to Saravia because of her consistent disclosure and intrinsic values despite of the content's lack of *accuracy*. This confirms that authenticity in the digital landscape is a dynamic and negotiated construct, a view consistent with prior authenticity research (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Casteran and Roederer, 2012; Chhabra, 2010; Goulding, 2000; Goulding and Dermaix, 2019; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Hede and Thyne, 2010; Peterson, 2005) and foundational to the interpretivist approach of this study (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

4.3.2.2 Scrutiny as a Disciplinary Mechanism

Scrutiny functions as a disciplinary mechanism, enforced upon content creators, that is grounded in Foucault's disciplinary power, embodying both *hierarchical observation* and *normalising judgement*. Through *scrutiny,* social actors participate in the control and regulation of the creator's attitude and behaviour to ensure their conformity to the social rules and norms (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006; Skålén et al., 2006).

Hierarchical observation is facilitated through the inherent panoptic architecture of the social media disciplinary institution that maximises surveillance to regulate and control the expressions of its occupants (Foucault, 1979). This constant possibility of visibility compels social actors both to exert this disciplinary power and to internalise it, leading to self-regulation to avoid potential non-conformance to the rules and norms (Foucault 1979; Kasabov, 2004).

This perpetual *hierarchical observation* resulted in *normalising judgement* (Foucault, 1979). *Normalising judgement* is a form of penalty and a corrective measure that utilises binary categories (e.g. normal/abnormal, acceptable/unacceptable) to create pressures to conform and marginalise those who do not, commonly in the form of public outcry (Foucault, 1979 Danaher et al., 2000; Rouse, 2005). When a lack of *consistency* is detected,

social actors apply *normalising judgement* to enforce the regimes of truth surrounding authenticity and draw boundaries on acceptable (in)authentic expressions.

Creators like Liana, Olsson, and Yeung experienced severe punitive effects, in the form of intense public outcry, as the *scrutiny* affirmed their lack of *consistency* and their non-conformance to the rules and norms. This was demonstrated in Liana's insistence on the content's authenticity in spite of multiple sources evidencing the extensive manipulations; Olsson's minimising the content's lack of *veracity* despite the blatant signs of crude alterations in her travel images; and Yeung's plagiarised content, her frequently deceptive use of *#travelwithsadelle* and *#sadellecancook*, and her unconvincing response. Their evasive and deceptive responses were deemed flagrantly non-conformant. This process resulted in a *normalising judgement* that classified them as deviant and unacceptable, promptly stripping them of *legitimacy* as well as their credibility and trustworthiness.

In contrast, the *scrutiny* applied to Saravia's travel images accompanied by identical cloud formations ultimately deemed her conformant, granting her *legitimacy* due to her *consistent transparency* that predated any media coverage. This demonstrates that the binary of normal/abnormal or acceptable/unacceptable is actively policed by social actors, with *consistency* acting as a contingency against delegitimisation.

4.3.2.3 Consistency, Legitimacy, and Credibility

Therefore, *consistency* is inextricably linked to *legitimacy* in the social media landscape where it serves as the institutional mechanism that demonstrate a creator's credibility and trustworthiness – a vital characteristic of perceived authenticity. That is, the lack of *consistency* undermines *legitimacy,* while perceived *consistency* reinforces *legitimacy*.

When *scrutiny* reveals a profound lack of *consistency* between the creator's claims, and their actions, it directly delegitimises the creator and their entire persona and content library. This perceived breach of trust is followed by swift and widespread condemnation. This was exemplified by Liana and Olsson, whose response attempted to diminish the extent of their inauthentic travel images despite overwhelming proof; and Yeung, whose outright plagiarism, habitual use of deceptive hashtags, and questionable response were perceived to lack *consistency* and considered to be illegitimate by the majority of social actors.

Conversely, when *scrutiny* reveal evidence of genuine, enduring *consistency,* even in the face of initial deception, can enhance and reinforce a creator's *legitimacy*. *Saravia*'s *consistent* candour of her editing process transformed the narrative from one of outright deception to one of *transparent* artifice. The perceived *consistency* granted her conditional *authenticity* and *legitimacy,* illustrating that relational honesty can outweighs objective truth and verifiable facts in validating the social acceptance of a creator and their content within the social media landscape.

4.3.2.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, *scrutiny* demonstrates that a creator's survival in the disciplinary institution of social media hinges on maintaining perceived *consistency* for its ability to mitigate the lack of *veracity* and *content staging*. *Scrutiny* offers a powerful mechanism by which the social actors can dictate the bounds of acceptable and *legitimate* (in)authentic expressions within the digital landscape.

4.4 Conclusion to RQ1: The Manifestation of (In)authenticity

This section synthesises the findings to the first research question (RQ1):

1. How does (in)authenticity manifest on social media?

The analysis of nine high-profile exemplars reveals that authenticity is not monolithic but a complex and dynamic construct. It is actively shaped by the interplay between objective truth and subjective interpretation where it is structured around two key components: *accuracy* and *consistency*.

4.4.1 Accuracy: Manifestation through Veracity and Staging

Accuracy, as a core component of authenticity, refers to the extent to which content is perceived as truthful, reliable, and a faithful representation of reality. . Analysis revealed two critical dimensions governing this perception: *veracity* and *content staging*.

4.4.1.1 Veracity

Veracity is a primary indicator of *accuracy*, referring to the truthfulness and credibility of content, specifically its genuine reflection of the creator's experiences, emotions, and the reality it purports to represent. A reliable depiction of a scene or setting is a key factor in authenticity perception.

High veracity is demonstrated by raw, unvarnished self-disclosure, often aligning with prior authenticity research that emphasises objective truth and indexical cues (Dutton, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). For instance, Chrissy Teigen's honest portrayal of grief amidst pregnancy loss resonated strongly due to its unfiltered depiction of pain and vulnerability. Similarly, Danae Mercer also achieved high *veracity* by exposing the curated nature of online presentations through her transparent comparisons of flawed and flattering images.

Content lacking *veracity*, such as manipulated images or fabricated experiences, is frequently perceived as inauthentic. Amelia Liana and Johanna Olsson's heavily edited photos were criticised for lacking *veracity* and deviating significantly from reality, showing that even visually appealing content can be perceived as inauthentic. Sadelle Yeung's

plagiarism showed a clear lack of veracity that consistently drove perceptions of inauthenticity.

Interpretations of *veracity* are fundamentally subjective and context-dependent, influenced by individual experiences, media literacy, and cultural expectations (Wang, 1999; Leigh, Peters, and Shelton, 2006).

4.4.1.2 Content Staging

Content staging refers to the extent to which content is perceived as planned, manipulated, or deliberately constructed to create a specific impression. When elements are concealed or planned, *staging* typically contributes to perceptions of *inaccuracy* and inauthenticity, aligning with the concept of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973).

Staging is evident in the meticulously crafted personas and settings, such as Louise Delage's fabricated existence and You Did Not Sleep There's curation of improbable campsites. This highlights the tension between the desire for authenticity and the acceptance of curated presentations (MacCannell, 1973; Rose and Wood, 2005).

Critically, the deliberate use of *content staging* challenges objective truth, but its inherent *inaccuracy* is often mitigated by *transparency*. When creators acknowledge the *staged* nature or reveal their motivations, the performance can be reframed as honesty or a challenge to existing norms. This demonstrates that authenticity is subjective and negotiated, with audiences willing to prioritise relational honesty over objective truth. This challenges the traditional notion that authenticity is solely tied to the objective truth (Dutton, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

While veracity is often tied to authenticity, staged content can also be perceived as authentic if it aligns with viewers' expectations or desires, or is presented in a transparent and self-aware manner. This challenges the traditional notion of authenticity being solely tied to truthfulness and originality, echoing the work of Dutton (2003) and Grayson and Martinec (2004).

4.4.2 Consistency: The Mechanism of Scrutiny

Consistency, a core component of authenticity, refers to the alignment between an established social media persona and its creator's internal values and external expressions across different channels and over time. A lack of *consistency*, such as contradictory actions or statements, contribute to perceived inauthenticity.

4.4.2.1 Scrutiny

Consistency is actively implemented and verified by social actors through the dimension of *scrutiny.* Scrutiny acts as a vital enforcement and verification mechanism that validates or invalidates a creator's perceived consistency, making it the central dimension for this component.

Scrutiny often involves analysing past content, comparing online and offline behaviour, and evaluating responses to controversy. This process is instrumental in uncovering the lack of *consistency* that drive perceptions of inauthenticity, such as Amelia Liana and Johanna Olsson's contradictory statements regarding image manipulation and Sadelle Yeung's plagiarism, which exposed a profound mismatch between their online personas and their actions, leading to widespread criticism and a loss of trust.

Since authenticity is subjective, the associated consistency cannot be simply assumed. *Scrutiny* act as a vital enforcement and verification mechanism that validates or invalidates an exemplar's perceived consistency, making it the central dimension for this component of authenticity. This is supported by extant research on consistency in self-presentation and brand authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021).

Conversely, *scrutiny* can reinforce perceptions of authenticity when it reveals *consistency* between the creator's claims and actions. Tupi Saravia's case exemplifies this, where her *consistent* openness about image editing practices, despite the inherent manipulation, reinforced her authenticity.

Scrutiny is a collective effort involving social media users, media authors, and other stakeholders who actively shape norms and expectations through accountability, highlighting the collective nature of authenticity governance.

Notably, the mechanism of *scrutiny* has been demonstrated to reinforce the *legitimacy* of specific expressions of authenticity. However, the interpretation of authenticity remains

subjective where deviations from the norms can be viewed as either inauthentic or the creator's artistic expression.

4.4.3 Refining Components of Accuracy and Consistency in the Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media

The empirical findings necessitate a refinement of the Integrated Conceptual Framework (Table 3), which initially considered the perspectives of Lehman et al. (2019) and the components of authenticity of Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021). These findings substantiate the inclusion of *veracity* and *content staging* as dimensions of *accuracy*, and *scrutiny* as a dimension of *consistency*. The transition from the initial integrated framework (Table 3) to the refined framework (Table 6) is driven by the empirical finding that authenticity is a negotiated rather than a static concept.

Table 6. Refined Description of Accuracy & Consistency in the Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media

COMPONENT OF AUTHENTICITY	WORKING DESCRIPTION	REFINED DESCRIPTION
Accuracy	The exemplar is perceived as truthful and transparent. Content tends to be a reliable and realistic representation of a person, event, place, and time.	Authentic exemplars are perceived as *accurate* when they exhibit *veracity* (truthfulness) and refrain from *content staging* (advance planning and manipulation). This perception is negotiated through the tension between objective truth and premeditated planning, mitigated by the creator's *transparency* and the content's *proximity to reality*.
Consistency	The exemplar is perceived as intrinsically motivated and unperturbed by external pressures, conveying its creator's autonomy. The content demonstrates a consistent style or message over time.	Authentic exemplars and content are perceived as *consistent* when they demonstrate a relational alignment between a creator's intrinsic motivation and their external expressions over time. The perception of *consistency* is rooted in the perceived autonomy of the creator, which appears uninfluenced by external pressures, and the stability of their established persona maintained against collective scrutiny.

While the literature suggests *accuracy* is a baseline for trust (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021), the exemplars analysed here demonstrate that *accuracy* and *veracity* are frequently sacrificed for *transparency,* relational honesty and aesthetic

ideals. Similarly, while previous literature references the temporal stability of *consistency* (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021), the findings further uncover that this component is not in a passive or static state – it is a defensive one.

The analysis reveals *scrutiny* as an active force in the perception of *consistency* where the focus is not solely on the creator's internal values but on their ability to withstand the discerning panoptic gaze within the social media disciplinary institution. As shown in *Table 6,* the framework was refined to include *veracity* and *content staging* for the component of *accuracy,* and *scrutiny* for the component of *consistency.* This refinement accounts for the active social policing that dictates how these components are valued in the social media disciplinary institution, representing a critical shift from theoretical ideals to empirical realities.

4.4.3.1 Dimensions to the Component of Accuracy

The initial core description of *accuracy* focused broadly on the exemplar being 'truthful and transparent' with content that is a 'reliable and realistic representation'. Following the analysis of nine exemplars, this understanding is expanded to reflect an empirical divergence into two dimensions: *veracity*, which emphasises objective truth, and *content staging*, which emphasises advance planning (Table 6). Consequently, the perception of *accuracy* is negotiated through the inherent tension between objective truth and premeditated planning. In this process, the creator's transparency and the content's proximity to reality serve as key mitigating factors; a perception of *accuracy* is maintained or restored if these factors allow subjective interpretations of authenticity to outweigh objective truth.

Veracity

Veracity is included as a dimension of *accuracy* because it addresses the foundational expectation that authentic content must possess objective truth. It aligns with objectivist perspectives of authenticity, which rely on verifiable facts and indexical cues.

Veracity serves as the objective anchor to authenticity, its absence marks outright deceit, where content is deemed inauthentic because it is demonstrably *inaccurate* (e.g., Amelia Liana's image manipulation or Sadelle Yeung's plagiarism). Conversely, its presence

signifies a genuine depiction of the creator's actual experiences and emotions (e.g., Chrissy Teigen's raw portrayal of grief).

Content Staging

Content staging is included as a dimension of *accuracy* because it addresses instances where content is deliberately planned, manipulated, or constructed to create a specific, idealised impression. This dimension acknowledges the performative nature of social media where users actively curate their presence. *Staging* captures the inherent *inaccuracy* that results from prior planning, blurring the line between reality and fabrication (e.g., Louise Delage's fictitious persona, You Did Not Sleep There's curation of impractical campsites).

Critically, the inclusion of *staging* recognises the paradox that manipulated content displaying 'calculated sincerity' can still be perceived as authentic if coupled with *transparency* and self-awareness (e.g., Danae Mercer's disclosure of posing techniques). This validates the constructivist view that subjective alignment can outweigh verifiable facts. Thus, *content staging* represents the shift from an objectivist to a constructivist appraisal of content.

Mitigating Factors in Negotiating Accuracy

The empirical evidence suggests that two mitigating factors fundamentally shape the negotiation of *accuracy,* enabling content lacking *veracity* to maintain perceived authenticity:

1. **Creator's Transparency:** This factor can mitigate a lack of indexical cues (physical evidence) and perceived lack of *veracity* (e.g., Stritch, Saravia). It can further enhance the perceived *veracity* of the content in instances where the creator 'owns' the *staging* (e.g., Teigen, Mercer).
2. **Content's Proximity to Reality:** This factor mitigates a lack of *veracity* and indexical cues by utilising iconic cues to ensure the content's resemblance to reality, thus maintaining perceived authenticity despite the *staged* or fabricated nature (e.g., Saravia, Delage).

These mitigating factors underscore the dynamic and subjective nature of authenticity, validating the need for the integrated framework to account for the interpretation and negotiation, beyond simple objective measurement. The findings necessitate a re-

evaluation of how *accuracy* is understood in a social media context where it has evolved from a static, objective trait into a dynamic, negotiated construct. While the working framework (Table 3) initially prioritised *veracity,* the empirical data suggests that a lack of truthfulness does not automatically result in a loss of authenticity. Instead, *accuracy* is a constantly negotiated component of authenticity where mitigating factors can restore a creator's *legitimacy* despite *staged,* manipulated, or fabricated narratives.

4.4.3.2 Scrutiny as a Dimension of Consistency

The initial core description of *consistency* was concerned with the relational alignment between the creator's intrinsic motivation and external expressions, the content produced as well as a consistent style or message that remains largely unchanging over time (Table 6). As a critical second component of authenticity, *consistency* is operationalised through the dimension of *scrutiny* to monitor and verify the creator's autonomy from external pressures, and the enduring stability of their established persona.

The empirical findings necessitate a shift in the conceptualisation of *consistency* from a passive trait to a defensive, relational state driven by *scrutiny*. While the initial framework (Table 3) viewed *consistency* as the alignment of internal values with external expressions over time, the analysis reveals that in the social media disciplinary institution, *consistency* is operationalised through the active policing of social actors.

Scrutiny

Scrutiny acts as the collective, active social policing mechanism, involving the panoptic gaze that perpetually evaluates a creator's expressions and practices. This verification process is particularly significant as the perception of *consistency* not only establishes the creator's credibility and trustworthiness but also possesses the ability to counteract a lack of *veracity* and *content staging*. This allows the perception of authenticity to be maintained even in the absence of objective truth.

The disciplinary mechanism of *scrutiny* reveals that a lack of *consistency,* evidenced by Yeung's plagiarism, Liana's and Olsson's evasiveness and crude image manipulation, results in a normalising judgement (Foucault, 1979) that strips the creator of *legitimacy* and credibility. Conversely, *consistent transparency*, such as Saravia's candid disclosure of editing, can transform an initial perception of low *veracity* into an act of acceptable

authenticity. This illustrates that relational honesty can outweigh objective truth in securing legitimacy and maintaining the perception of consistency.

The exemplars demonstrate that when a creator deviates from their established norms, it triggers an aggressive verification process by social actors. Furthermore, the maintenance of *consistency* serves as a defensive tactic to avoid the punishment strategy (Section 5.3.2) in the governance of (in)authenticity. The findings demonstrate that the perception of *consistency* is contingent upon the creator's ability to navigate the *collective scrutiny* of the relational alignment, a process that prioritises their autonomy, relational honesty, and the maintenance of their established persona over time. By including *scrutiny*, the refined framework acknowledges that *consistency* is not merely about the *accuracy* or *veracity* of content but about how well their *staged* content or fabricated narratives hold up under the weight of collective surveillance. This social policing mechanism allows for a more dynamic and nuanced approach to authenticity that can either reinforce or challenge a creator's institutional *legitimacy*, shifting the focus from the creator's internal state to the power dynamics of the social media disciplinary institution.

4.4.4 Conclusion

This systematic refinement substantiates the research's abductive methodology, where initial abstract concepts are iteratively developed and empirically grounded by the data, resulting in a comprehensive and nuanced framework for understanding authenticity in the digital age. This chapter addressed the first research question (RQ1) by demonstrating how (in)authenticity manifests as a complex, negotiated construct defined by two key components: *accuracy* and *consistency*.

Accuracy is expressed through the tension between *veracity* and *content staging,* representing the conflict between objective truth and premeditated planning. The negotiation of this component is mitigated specifically by the creator's transparency and the content's proximity to reality. *Consistency,* meanwhile*,* functions as a subjective measure of authenticity that is actively enforced through *scrutiny.* This social policing mechanism ultimately determines a creator's credibility and *legitimacy* by assessing the alignment between their internal values and external expressions. These findings suggest that consistency on social media is less about the absence of change and more about the presence of a disciplined alignment, where the creator's ability to successfully navigate scrutiny ensures the ongoing maintenance of their legitimacy.

The findings related to both *accuracy* and *consistency* confirm that authenticity is dynamic and negotiated, establishing the necessary theoretical groundwork for understanding its governance. The analysis revealed that this governance is executed by social actors, acting as both the *governors* and the *governed,* through three primary strategies: *reward, punishment,* and *resistance*. Consequently, this chapter offers a robust empirical foundation for exploring the complex interplay of power relations and institutional pressures that shape and contest the very boundaries of what is considered authentic and acceptable in the digital landscape.

Chapter 5. Findings and Discussion to RQ2: Governance of (In)authenticity

5.1 Introduction

In employing Foucault's power/knowledge paradigm in conjunction with institutional legitimacy to inform the analysis reveals hidden mechanisms of power through which social actors maintain, enforce and challenge authenticity norms. This analysis, specifically examines the role of social actors as both *governors* and the *governed*, directly addresses the second research question (RQ2) concerning the regime of governmentality of (in)authenticity.

How do social actors govern the perceptions of (in)authenticity on social media?

This chapter addresses the second research question (RQ2), investigating the social governance of authenticity via the component of *legitimacy*. The analysis uses Foucault's approach to power, specifically governmentality, alongside the institutional theory concept of *legitimacy*. Section 5.2 contextualises the crucial role of social actors, highlighting their duality as both the *governors* and the *governed* of authenticity discourses within the perceived disciplinary institution of social media. The section facilitates the understanding the power relations and dynamics that govern and legitimise (in)authenticity observed within the exemplars. Finally, section 5.3 delves deeper into the mechanisms of power in the regime of governmentality, exploring the specific strategies and techniques social actors utilise to shape, maintain, and challenge the social rules and norms associated with authenticity.

5.2 Contextualising the Regime of Governmentality

Section 5.2 shifts the focus to *legitimacy,* another core component of authenticity that acknowledges the broader societal context and power dynamics associated with authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani, 2021). This section establishes the theoretical groundwork crucial in addressing the second research question (RQ2): How do social actors govern perceptions of (in)authenticity on social media? The analysis draws upon Foucault's concept of governmentality and institutional theory's notion of *legitimacy* to understand the governance of authenticity within the social media landscape.

5.2.1 Social Media as a Disciplinary Institution

Social media platforms are conceptualised as disciplinary institutions where Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of disciplinary power is applied. Similar to Bentham's Panopticon, the architecture of social media is designed to maximise surveillance and induce a sense of permanent visibility. Features such as likes, comments, and follower counts act as continuous mechanisms of *hierarchical observation* and *normalising judgement*, creating a system of continuous monitoring and evaluation, fostering self-regulation and encouraging conformity to established social rules and norms (Suchman, 1995). Within this framework, social media acts as a site where techniques of power are exercised to shape, control, and regulate conduct, attitudes, and behaviours, contributing to the ongoing process of governing others and oneself.

The disciplinary nature of social media is reinforced by platforms' terms of service and community guidelines, which explicitly outline acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. These rules, while often presented as neutral, reflect and reinforce values, shaping the landscape of acceptable online expression where violations can lead to consequences such as account suspension, further reinforcing the disciplinary power of the platforms.

5.2.2 Duality of Social Actors: *Governors* and the *Governed*

Within this disciplinary institution, social actors play a dual role as both *governors* and the *governed* in the negotiation of authenticity. This analysis operates within the framework of Foucauldian governmentality. In this context, *legitimacy*, a component of authenticity, is closely tied to the adherence to social rules and norms, and the institutional theory's concept of legitimacy extends the understanding of how legitimacy is constructed, maintained, and challenged within the social media and digital landscape.

As *governors,* social actors actively participate in shaping and reinforcing authenticity norms. They exercise this role by actively contributing to the disapproval or approval of (in)authentic content through their responses. By expressing approval or disapproval, praising or criticising, they collectively construct and enforce authenticity norms, actively shaping the landscape of acceptable perceptions and influencing the legitimacy of certain expressions. This aligns with institutional theory's emphasis on how social actors

contribute to an entity's legitimacy by conforming to or deviating from established norms (Suchman, 1995).

As the *governed*, social actors are subjected to these norms, internalising them and shaping their online behaviour and self-presentation to align with what is considered authentic and legitimate within their communities. This can result in potential consequences, such as undermining the legitimacy of their own self-presentation if they deviate from established norms. This internalisation is key to Foucault's concept of governmentality, where individuals become docile, self-regulating subjects.

This dynamic interplay between *governing* and being *governed* highlights the complex and dynamic nature of power relations within social media, demonstrating that individuals are not simply passive recipients of power where they actively participate in its exercise and negotiation, contributing to the fluidity and contested nature of authenticity (Suchman, 1995). The interplay between *governors* and *governed* enable tensions to build, the following sections explore further the tensions between social actors that potentially lead to conflicts and power struggles that impact the dynamics of power and legitimacy of authenticity in the social media landscape.

5.2.2.1 Tension: Content Creators vs. Social Media Users

The most prominent tension exists between content creators and social media users, stemming from their often conflicting motivations and expectations. Content creators, seek to cultivate an online presence that aligns with their personal or professional goals, often involving aesthetically pleasing, entertaining, or persuasive content (Moulard et al. 2014; Newman, 2019; Södergren, 2021; Whitmer, 2019). Social media users, on the other hand, seek connection, entertainment, and information, often demanding content that is authentic, relatable, and trustworthy (Abidin, 2016). This conflict results in negative response and criticisms when creators manipulate content. For example, Amelia Liana's heavily edited travel photographs were criticised for their lack of veracity and for perpetuating unrealistic expectations. Similarly, Johanna Olsson's manipulated backgrounds were condemned for their deceptive nature, highlighting the audience's demand for authenticity and transparency. In this instance, social media users act as a crucial accountability mechanism, exerting pressure and enforcing norms through the comments, critiques, and even public shaming. This is seen in responses to Sadelle Yeung's

plagiarism, where users condemned her for misrepresenting others' work, showcasing their power to challenge the legitimacy of deceptive creators. This tension is exacerbated by social media platforms affordances, such as features, design, algorithms and emphasis on visual content, which contributes to a "culture of curated perfection" where users feel pressured to present an idealised version of themselves (Gannon and Prothero, 2016; Iqani and Schroeder, 2016).

5.2.2.2 Tension: Media Authors vs. Social Media Users

The findings reveal a notable tension between media authors and social media users. Media authors, often representing established media outlets, tend to adopt a more critical stance towards (in)authenticity, emphasising the importance of truthfulness, accuracy, and responsible online behaviour, and highlighting the potential negative consequences of manipulation and deception, particular towards creators with significant followings and influence. Their critical coverage of Amelia Liana's and Johanna Olsson's manipulation emphasised the potential harm of misleading users. In this instance, media authors act as an enforcer, upholding traditional journalistic values of truth and accuracy. Social media users, on the other hand, maybe more forgiving or even celebratory of certain forms of inauthenticity, particularly when they challenge norms, provide entertainment, or spark conversations. Responses to Carolyn Stritch's fabricated trip to Disneyland praised her creativity despite its deceptive elements, evidenced that users may be more willing to embrace the (in)authentic content that may not be objectively accurate or consistent.

This tension reflects a broader societal debate and highlights how user-driven consensus can grant *legitimacy* to expressive content, exemplified by Stritch, potentially overriding the critical authority exerted by traditional media in the overall governance of authenticity.

5.2.2.3 Tension: Media Authors vs. Content Creators

Another tension exists between media authors and content creators. Media authors often scrutinise the practices of content creators, holding them accountable for (in)authenticity. This scrutiny is an exercise of power, as media coverage can significantly impact a creator's reputation and legitimacy. For instance, content creators may resist this scrutiny by defending their practices or dismissing criticisms, asserting their agency and challenging

the perceived authority of traditional media in the digital age. This tension is evident in the exemplar of Sadelle Yeung's plagiarism. While some media authors focused on the ethical implications, others criticised her lack of professionalism and the damage caused to the influencer industry. Yeung, in response, attempted to minimise her actions and deflect blame, highlighting the tension between accountability and self-preservation. Ultimately, the conflict highlights the continuous renegotiation of accountability, demonstrating a direct struggle for authority over the *legitimacy* of microcelebrities' practices and the *governance* of ethical and professional standards in the digital age.

The analysis of these prominent tensions confirms that the negotiation of authenticity is a fluid and contested process. The conflicting motivations between creators who seek professional goals and idealised online persona, and social media users who demand authentic and trustworthy content empower users to act as a crucial accountability mechanism against manipulation and deception. The resulting dynamics between media authors who champion journalistic truth and *accuracy*, and users who may appreciate instances of inauthenticity reflect a larger societal debate and is indicative of the power struggle for control over the dominating norms and discourses, and *legitimacy* of (in)authenticity within the social media and digital landscape.

5.2.3 Transparency as a Mechanism for Negotiation in the Governance of (In)authenticity

The negotiation of authenticity on social media is a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of power relations, individual agency, and the pursuit of *legitimacy*. Within this process, *transparency*, which is defined as the open disclosure of motivations and practices, emerges as a crucial but contested mechanism of governance that shapes social actors' perceptions. *Transparency* widely considered a virtue that signals a creator's willingness to be vulnerable and open to scrutiny in a digital landscape that is typically characterised by curated perfection and concealed motives.

While prior research suggests that perceived honesty and reliability are core drivers of authenticity (Nuñes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani, 2021), the current findings indicate that *transparency* often outweighs objective truth in mitigating perceptions of (in)authenticity. This suggests that *transparency* is not a static quality but a contested virtue that is subject to continuous negotiation and interpretation. The analysis reveals a central dichotomy in

which *transparency* is deployed and perceived by social actors as both a genuine virtue and a strategic performance.

As a genuine virtue, *transparency* can enhance the *legitimacy* of the (in)authenticity displayed. When creators are open about their previously inauthentic practices, acknowledge content manipulations or disclose their underlying motivations, they are perceived as more genuine and trustworthy despite a lack *accuracy* or *consistency*. For example, Danae Mercer's practice of disclosing techniques used to create flattering images contributed to her perceived authenticity, as it exposed the curated nature of online presentations and challenged unrealistic beauty standards.

Conversely, *transparency* can be utilised by content creators as part of a strategic performance, serving as a calculated and ceremonial move to deflect criticism and maintain *legitimacy* while continuing inauthentic practices. This is evident in Tupi Saravia's admission regarding the use of identical cloud formations in her travel photographs. Her strategic use of *transparency* compensated for a lack of *veracity*, securing relational honesty despite the manipulation of the images.

Ultimately, the perception of *transparency* often outweighs objective truth; social actors prioritise a creator's relational honesty over factual *accuracy* and the absence of objective truth. This demand for transparency acts as the primary tool through which the boundaries of acceptable self-presentation are negotiated.

5.2.4 Governmentality and the Disciplinary Power of Social Media

Driven by diverse motivations, social actors, acting simultaneously as both the *governors* and the *governed*, actively shape the perceived *legitimacy* of authenticity discourses by reinforcing, challenging, and redefining the boundaries within the social media disciplinary institution. Foucault's (1979) concept of governmentality offers a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics, referring to the subtle and pervasive ways power operates to shape individual conduct, regulating and normalising certain behaviours while marginalising others.

Within this context, the pressure to be *transparent* can be construed as a form of disciplinary power, encouraging individuals to perform under a panoptic, normalising gaze, and conform to the dominating rules and norms imposed in the social media disciplinary

institution (Foucault, 1979; Kelsey and Bennett, 2014; Salisbury and Pooley, 2017; Sauter, 2014). This ongoing negotiation highlights the fluidity of authenticity, which is constantly redefined by individual agency, social pressures, and technological affordances.

5.2.4.1 Resistance to the Norms of (In)authenticity

The interplay between *transparency*, governmentality, and *resistance* underscores the contested nature of authenticity, capturing the negotiation of acceptable online self-presentation. The data reveals that while social media users and media authors exert a disciplinary gaze to enforce institutional rules and norms, creators exercise their agency through *resistance* to maintain their *legitimacy*.

Resistance refers to instances where the creator deflects criticisms, evades accountability, or actively challenges the *legitimacy* of (in)authenticity rules and norms during public *scrutiny* (Foucault, 1979; Kozinets, 2010b). This is demonstrated when a creator refuses to delete (in)authentic content, declines to apologise, or fails to directly address the extent of their (in)authenticity. In challenging these established norms, creators prioritise their own subjective interpretation of authenticity, characterised by *consistency, transparency,* and *proximity to reality* over objective truth and *veracity*.

This act of *resistance* is exemplified by Amelia Liana's insistence on the authenticity of her content despite evidence of extensive image manipulation, and Johanna Olsson's defiant response, refusal to apologise and remove manipulated photos. Through these acts, creators exercise individual agency, challenge the dominant social rules, and outright reject the normalising gaze of the social media disciplinary institution. However, such *resistance* often triggers increased *scrutiny* from social actors, reflecting a consumer demand for honest communication within a complex network of power relations between social actors against the backdrop of creators' pursuing professional and aesthetic goals through their online persona (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

The governance of authenticity is a fluid process defined by pervasive disciplinary power and constant negotiation. This collective pressure serves as an enforcement mechanism against perceived deception, culminating in a perpetually contested regimes of truth. The following sections detail the specific strategies of *reward, punishment*, and *resistance*, and the associated techniques of power that social actors utilise to govern these boundaries.

5.3 Strategies and Techniques of Power in the Governance of (In)authenticity

This section addresses the second research question (RQ2):

How do social actors govern the perceptions of (in)authenticity on social media?

Drawing upon Foucault's (1979) gratification-punishment system, this analysis investigates how perceptions of (in)authenticity are governed within the disciplinary institution of social media. It uncovers the power relations that produce, maintain, and reinforce the norms dictating 'normative' versus 'deviant' conduct. Within this framework, social media functions as a panoptic site where (in)authentic expressions and practices are perpetually evaluated against established institutional rules and norms (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes et al., 2021; Suchman, 1995). By examining these dynamics, the research sheds light on how the production of truth and knowledge – embodied in dominant discourses – directly shapes individual conduct and institutional *legitimacy*.

The governance of (in)authenticity is empirically demonstrated through direct interactions between social actors, such as comments, likes, and shares. These interactions serve as the primary mechanisms of power through which actors exercise influence to determine what is considered 'authentic' (Alexander, 2009; Hede & Thyne, 2010; Jones and Smith, 2005). Under this system, individuals are subjected to a 'panoptic gaze', a form of constant, decentralised surveillance where their conduct is measured against evolving institutional and social norms (Foucault, 1979).

Conformance is incentivised through a regime of rewards, while non-observance is met with penalties – typically taking the form of social exclusion or marginalisation – effectively creating a division between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979). However, this regime is not absolute; as Foucault (1990, p. 95) asserts, "where there is power, there is resistance." This inherent tension ensures that the boundaries of authenticity are not static but are subject to ongoing negotiation (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Casteran and Roederer, 2012; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010) and discursive subversion.

To address the complexities of this digital governmentality, the analysis uncovers three broad strategies that social actors employ in their dual roles as both the *governors* and the *governed*. These strategies – *reward, punishment,* and *resistance* – provide the framework

for understanding how power is wielded to shape the perception and legitimacy of (in)authenticity.

The following sections analyse the specific techniques of power operating within these strategies:

1. **Reward Strategy (5.3.1):** Productive techniques used to reinforce legitimacy and normalise conformance.
2. **Punishment Strategy (5.3.2):** Corrective mechanisms used to delegitimise deviance and enforce boundaries.
3. **Resistance Strategy (5.3.3):** Discursive subversion used to challenge established norms and reclaim autonomy.

5.3.1 Reward Strategy

The reward strategy signals acceptance and approval of specific forms of (in)authenticity, typically by conferring or reinforcing *legitimacy*. This can manifest in the forms of *admiration, appreciation*, *resignation* and *advocacy.* By rewarding specific manifestations of (in)authenticity, social actors reinforce the norms and expectations inherent to the social media context, thereby encouraging conformance to the prevailing social rules and norms, and shaping collective perceptions of authenticity. Consequently, these rewards contribute to the establishment of authenticity discourses that define what is considered 'normal' and 'acceptable'. Importantly, rewards can also function to legitimise previously unacceptable or illegitimate expressions of (in)authenticity. As social norms evolve, expressions and practices once marginalised and considered deviant can gain acceptance through positive reinforcement, gradually moving them into the realm of legitimacy.

Reward, in this context, functions as a form of self-regulation. By rewarding certain expressions of (in)authenticity, individuals not only reinforce dominant norms but also participate in their own subjectification. They are both the *governors*, actively shaping the landscape of acceptable behaviour, and the *governed*, as they are simultaneously influenced by the same reward system they help maintain. The pursuit of engagement (such as likes, followers, and other forms of social validation) exemplifies this dual role where individuals internalise and perpetuate the very norms that dictate their own self-presentation.

5.3.1.1 Admiration

Admiration functions as a technique of power within the *reward* strategy operating as a form of positive reinforcement in Foucault's (1979) gratification-punishment system. Within the disciplinary institution of social media, *admiration* is expressed through social actors' high regard, approval, and commendation for a creator's (in)authentic expressions and practices. These responses often focus on the creator's perceived character, photography and editing skills, physical appearance, or the overall aesthetic quality of the content. By conferring moral or pragmatic *legitimacy* upon the creator and their content, these responses reinforce specific social norms and incentivise creators to align their conduct with the prevailing regimes of truth to maintain their *legitimacy* and social standing within the social media disciplinary institution.

Admiration challenges the normative expectations enforced by the majority by explicitly validating the creator's *transparency,* expressive agency or technical skill, subtly prioritising subjective interpretation of authenticity over objective *veracity*. This technique varies depending on whether the social actors are rewarding and legitimating *veracity* and *transparency* (as seen with Teigen, Mercer, Stritch), *consistency* (Mercer) aesthetic ideals (Stritch and Liana) or resistance against the dominating norms (Olsson).

Several social media users and media authors expressed awe toward Teigen for sharing an unvarnished account of a personal experience with pregnancy loss, as one observer noted:

> "[Teigen] performed a profound service to other mothers by chronicling her loss with such rawness."

Similarly, Mercer gained significant media attention for her side-by-side body shots comparing strategic, idealistic with realistic, imperfect photographs. In her posts, Mercer explained the different techniques such as lighting and flattering poses to achieve the 'before' and 'after' photographs. Several fellow social media users, media authors, and fellow content creators rewarded Mercer for her moral *legitimacy,* praising both the *veracity* of her flawed depictions and her *transparency* in sharing her methods. One user commented:

> "You're amazing! I really appreciate your openness and honesty about how photos can be perceived on social media,"

Mercer's *consistent* message of body confidence further earned commendation, with one media author stating:

> "[Mercer] was my inspiration…It's all smoke and mirrors…I would do anything to have the years back that I wasted… Obsessing about my 'flaws' when the only thing that was actually flawed was my 'stinking thinking.' I work every day at being more accepting of my beautiful warts-and-all body."

This collective approval empowers the creator and reinforces a new norm that prioritises vulnerable self-disclosure over curated perfection.

Conversely, *admiration* can also reinforce inauthentic norms when it focuses solely on technical proficiency and the curated aesthetic ideals. This validation and legitimation of non-conformant (in)authentic practices reveals a crucial tension in the governance of authenticity. For instance, despite the controversy surrounding her image manipulation, a subset of social media users continued to *admire* Liana's 'dreamy' aesthetics, commending the visual quality of her feed. Similarly, Stritch's fictitious trip to Disneyland accumulated over 15,000 likes per post, with many commending the 'stunning', 'incredible' and 'beautiful' images even after it was revealed to lack *veracity*. One response noted:

> "[Stritch's content is] such a great way to highlight the way we expect everything to be perfect and how that affects society at large."

In these cases, social actors granted *conditional legitimacy* for artistic vision and *transparency* rather than *veracity* and objective truth.

Despite the negative attention directed at Olsson's discernible image manipulations, a small number of social media users praised her for the *consistency* between her internal convictions and external expression. By commending her refusal to submit to the disciplinary gaze of public scrutiny, a small number of social actors rewarded her *defiance*, prioritising individual autonomy over social conformity. As one user remarked:

> "Olsson has just let us peer behind the curtain. By keeping the photos up on her profile, she's done something a lot more revolutionary than shamefully deleting them and issuing an apology."

The technique of *admiration* demonstrates the fluidity of authenticity by both reinforcing and challenging dominant discourses. By validating and legitimating a creator's technical skill or relational honesty, social actors negotiate and contest (in)authenticity norms, diminishing the emphasis on *veracity* and shaping the boundaries of what is considered *legitimate* and acceptable within the social media landscape.

5.3.1.2 Appreciation

Appreciation serves as a distinct technique of power within the reward strategy, characterised by social actors expressing gratitude and acknowledging the deeper value or meaning conveyed by a creator's (in)authentic expressions. While *admiration* (Section 5.3.1.1) often centres on aesthetic ideals or technical proficiency, *appreciation* operates as a form of social validation that recognises a creator's contribution to a wider discourse, be it through empowering transparency or the critical exposure of digital manipulation. By rewarding these expressions, social actors confer moral legitimacy upon the creator, reinforcing norms that prioritise *veracity, consistency*, *transparency* and emotional resonance over the prevailing ideals of curated perfection on social media. The technique of *appreciation* rewards the critique of inauthenticity prevalent within the social media landscape (as seen with Stritch, Mercer, and *You Did Not Sleep There*) and validates creator's willingness to share their personal vulnerabilities and lived experience (Teigen and Mercer).

For Teigen and Mercer, appreciation reinforces *legitimacy* for the *veracity* and *consistency* expressed by confirming the profound cultural and emotional impact of authentic self-disclosure. Teigen's unembellished account of pregnancy loss was met with profound gratitude from followers who viewed her rawness as a "profound service" that validated their own private experiences of grief.

> "Too often women who suffer stillbirths or miscarriages feel shame. No one wants to hear their stories. Their pain is invalidated. Thank you Chrissy for helping to change that."

Similarly, social actors expressed *appreciation* for Mercer's side-by-side body comparisons, with one stating that her *transparency* "helped [their] self-esteem" by exposing the artifice of influencer culture and social media. In these cases, *appreciation* rewards the creator for aligning their external expression with reality

> ""You have no idea how much these posts have helped my self-esteem. Everyone always used to tell me not to compare myself to influencers on Instagram but it was difficult for me to realize that there's more to it than just taking a picture. There is lighting, angles, filters and so much more…and they reflect the reality of it all."

Appreciation is also extended to acknowledged inauthenticity – specifically a lack of *veracity* or *content staging* – when it serves a critical or therapeutic purpose. Stritch's fabricated Disneyland trip received overwhelming praise because social actors valued the project for addressing the prevalence of fakery on social media, as one user shared:

> "Her posts are an important reminder that what we see on our feeds are often filtered, Photoshopped, and glossy versions of reality…even the most "perfect" images likely aren't as perfect as they seem."

Likewise, You Did Not Sleep There garnered appreciation for highlighting the absurd discrepancies between picture-perfect travel aesthetics and the reality of the outdoors. Here, *appreciation* validates the honesty of intent behind the artifice, rewarding the creator for challenging the performative 'calculated sincerity' that is ubiquitous on social media.

Ultimately, responses to Stritch, Mercer, Teigen, and *You Did Not Sleep There* demonstrate that *appreciation* can be extended to acknowledged inauthenticity when coupled with *transparency* or a challenge to conventional norms, underscoring the complex and evolving discourses of online authenticity. In sharing their gratitude, social actors do not merely validate specific expressions; they actively contribute to the ongoing negotiation of what constitutes authentic and meaningful self-presentation within the dynamic social media institution. This negotiation is particularly crucial given that many expressions of (in)authenticity, such as raw grief or physical imperfection, are currently considered illegitimate or deviant.

Appreciation, therefore, functions as a key mechanism for challenging established norms and hierarchies of *legitimacy*. By rewarding content once considered deviant or illegitimate, such as raw grief or physical imperfection, social actors actively renegotiate the boundaries of acceptable self-presentation. As such, *appreciation* can potentially pave the way for broader acceptance and normalisation of previously marginalised or condemned forms of self-expression. This technique demonstrates the fluidity of the regimes of truth within the social media disciplinary institution, where relational honesty can effectively supersede the demand for objective truth.

5.3.1.3 Resignation

Resignation refers to social actors' responses that express a begrudging or reluctant acceptance of (in)authenticity that deviates from the social rules and norms. Unlike *admiration*, *resignation* does not focus on the creator; rather, it acknowledges inauthenticity as an unavoidable cost of social media use. This strategy of power grants *legitimacy* not by endorsing it, but simply by resigning themselves to its presence. Social actors' *resigned* responses often convey a sense of inevitability, suggesting that challenging or resisting this expression of (in)authenticity is no longer feasible or desirable.

For example, while Liana's manipulated travel pictures were heavily scrutinised and criticised in *The Times* newspaper analysis for a lack of *veracity*, some social actors argued that enhancing images to ensure idealised self-presentation is a universal desire. As one media author shared:

> "Social media is a virtual theater to show off how successful you are, and we all want to make sure that we're putting on a good performance. Having a blemish-free photo backdrop seems like a big part of it."

A subset of social actors acknowledged that photo editing is a standard contemporary practice as evidenced by one user's comment:

> "Photos often don't look as good until I put up the brightness and make them more vibrant etc. You'd have to be silly not to realise that everyone does that."

This sentiment was mirrored in the case of Stritch, who fabricated an imaginary trip to Disneyland. Stritch acknowledged that her account is not always an accurate representation of reality, stating:

> "I'm sure some people look at my account and it makes them feel bad…Look at my account and you might think I'm always either travelling or I'm lounging by the window with a coffee and a book."

A media author covering Stritch's story added a broader critique:

> "Instagram dupes us all…we can find ourselves lost in a search for the authentic, always seeking and never finding…"

Similarly, Olsson was relentlessly criticised and ridiculed for poorly manipulated images, some commentators remarked on the normalisation of such practices among all content creators:

> "The expectations vs. reality nature of Instagram is damaging, yes, but we're all kidding ourselves if we think most influencers steer clear of Photoshop or if they're portraying the truth 100 per cent of the time. The platform is a fantasy and we're pretty clued in to that by now –"

While one social media user shared a blunt acceptance of this new norm:

> "I will just assume that every picture on this account is photoshopped like this one now."

The 'sobering' nature of this display was also highlighted in the reporting on Delage's account, where one media author remarked how the "glamorous slice of someone's life… isn't always what it seems to be."

> In response to Saravia's use of identical cloud formations, one media author urged critics to "put their phones away" if they were upset, advising social media users not to "conflate Instagram with reality."

Finally, one social media user was apathetic when confronted with the possibility of over 95 plagiarised images on Yeung's account, simply commenting:

> "I guess fake it till you make it… ¯_(ツ)_/¯"

Ultimately, *resignation* functions as a key strategy of power in the regime of governmentality by not only challenging the existing norms but extending the boundaries of what is perceived as 'normal' and *legitimate*. Social actors' apathetic and reluctant acceptance of the non-conformant (in)authentic expressions and practices signals their retreat from the role of the scrutinising *governors* to that of the disciplined *governed*. This withdrawal weakens the punitive mechanism of the disciplinary gaze, accelerating the normalisation of previously illegitimate (in)authenticity within the social media landscape.

5.3.1.4 Advocacy

Advocacy functions as a potent technique of power within the reward strategy, characterised by social actors actively challenging prevailing norms by defending expressions currently deemed non-conformant or illegitimate. This technique involves social actors impassionately shielding a creator against intense public *scrutiny* and harsh critiques whilst simultaneously arguing for the artistic, therapeutic, or critical value of the content. *Advocacy* ultimately *rewards* specific expressions of (in)authenticity despite their deviation from established rules and norms or lack of immediate *legitimacy*, thereby contributing to the establishment of alternative, valued norms. The rewarding mechanism of *advocacy* is observed in defending the artistic artifice of manipulated images (in the case of Liana, Saravia, and *You Did Not Sleep There*) and challenging the norms of privacy and authentic expression (Teigen).

Saravia, whose manipulated travel photographs that was accompanied by the same cloud formations became the subject of considerable public attention and media coverage, attracted a wide range of response from social actors. In response to the significant number of criticisms and mockery Saravia received, many social media users argued that editing is a normalised industry standard, with one user remarking:

> "God forbid people actually edit their photos. It's done all the time in marketing…Oh, the deception!!"

> "This is the least fake and tamest form of content manipulation that exists."

Similarly, *You Did Not Sleep There*'s curation of improbable, yet idealistic campsites photographs was popular amongst social media users and gained attention from various mainstream and online media outlets. Many social actors ridicule the obvious *staging* and lack of *consistency* in the misleading photographs. However, a small subset of social media users shares their support for the creators of the staged images and further condemned the critics who prioritised *veracity* over aesthetic ideals, evidenced by the snippet provided:

> "Fake or not, photos that follow this trend can certainly be beautiful and artistic."

> "Omg get the f off of your high horse! There are so many people destroying the environment and you choose to target a beautiful human sleeping on a rock…You actually make me sick!...I will troll you forever!"

Similarly, a small subset of social media users *advocated* for Liana's actions, defending her extensive alterations as a form of 'art' and a valid expression of her distinct, 'dreamy' aesthetic style, as shown in the snippets below:

> "I think everyone is missing the point here, this page in whole is to show dreamy side of things, everyone has their own style of editing and she has this one,"

> "Instead of saying that she 'faked' the photos, I'd rather take the alterations she has done as a form of art. I've been in Taj Mahal too, and I fully agree that a photo like this wouldn't have been possible without editing, but try to see it from a positive point of view: Did she make the scenery bad? No. Did she make people lose interest in the Taj Mahal? No. Do other photographers publish pictures in magazines without alterations? No. Is there any written rule that a Youtuber should post unedited photos? No."

Through this defence, social actors reward artistic vision over objective truth. In doing so, they confer *conditional legitimacy* and disrupt the dominant, reductive discourse that views any image manipulations as inherently deceptive.

Advocacy is also employed to reward authenticity that departs from the current rules and norms. In the case of Teigen, social actors not only defend the unvarnished and raw self-expression but also challenge the expectation that personal tragedies like pregnancy loss should remain private. Kate Beckinsale, an English actress shared a post to defend Teigen, a snippet is provided here:

> "I've noticed people criticizing [Teigen] for sharing deeply intimate photos of the loss of her baby…As if there's some protocol during soul-scouring calamity that, if not observed, emboldens people who do not know her or her family to say how she should be handling the unimaginable."

Through the act of countering her critics and *advocating* for her right to share such vulnerability, social actors rewarded Teigen's *veracity, consistency*, and relational honesty. This *advocacy* effectively reframed her non-conformant disclosure as a vital social service,

thereby expanding the boundaries of what is considered legitimate authentic expression within the social media landscape.

Ultimately, *advocacy* functions as a technique of power that bypasses the punitive mechanisms of public scrutiny. It demonstrates a collective willingness to negotiate and rewrite the rules of (in)authenticity, ensuring that the social media institution remains a contested space and allowing for the establishment and normalisation of previously deemed illegitimate and marginalised (in)authentic expressions and practices. By validating content that lacks *veracity* or violates established authenticity and privacy norms, *advocacy* highlights the inherent fluidity of authenticity, where subjective interpretations of authenticity can effectively supersede the demand for objective truth.

5.3.1.5 Summary of Rewarding Strategy

The rewarding strategy, enacted through *admiration, appreciation, resignation* and *advocacy*, constitutes the productive dimension of the disciplinary apparatus. While the punishment strategy (Section 5.3.2) functions through negative sanction and exclusion, the reward strategy operates through positive reinforcement and gratification. Collectively, these techniques serve to identify and encourage authentic expressions and practices, thereby providing the templates for what constitutes a 'normal' and successful subject within the social media landscape.

As illustrated in the analysis, these techniques represent an escalation in the distribution of social and moral capital. *Admiration* (Section 5.3.1.1) functions as the primary layer of gratification, acting as a form of positive reinforcement that signals to the creator and other social actors which specific expressions of (in)authenticity are desirable. When these expressions align with broader social values or critical purposes, they escalate into *appreciation* (Section 5.3.1.2), where social actors acknowledge the creator's conformance with evidence and quantifiable metrics, such as likes, shares, and affirmative comments. Even *resignation* (Section 5.3.1.3) serves this strategy by extending the boundaries of the 'normal' through a reluctant acceptance of non-conformant practices. Finally, *advocacy* (Section 5.3.1.4) acts as a potent reward by impassionately defending creators against *scrutiny* and conferring a high degree of moral and institutional standing through *legitimacy,* thereby contributing to the establishment of alternative, valued norms.

Rather than being mere 'kindness,' these rewarding measures create a productive network of governance. Social actors, comprising social media users and media authors, act as a

decentralised regulatory force. This collective disciplinary gaze ensures that the boundaries of (in)authenticity are not only policed through fear of punishment but are actively sought after through the promise of social reward. This reinforces the institutional social contract by demonstrating that adherence to norms of transparency results in tangible social gain.

The ultimate efficacy of the reward strategy lies in its ability to foster internalised discipline. By observing the social rewards and moral legitimacy granted to others, social actors are trained to emulate these behaviours. This transition from external validation to self-regulation is a core element of Foucauldian governmentality; the desire for gratification compels creators to rigorously self-regulate their performances to meet the 'normalising judgement' of social actors. Consequently, the reward strategy does not merely celebrate the subject; it secures the continuity of the social media disciplinary institution by transforming every social actor into a subject who actively desires to be *governed*.

5.3.2 Punishment Strategy

The punishment strategy demonstrates the collective rejection and disapproval of specific expressions of (in)authenticity, primarily by undermining or denying their *legitimacy*. This strategy manifests through three primary techniques: *criticism, insult*, and *disappointment*. By perpetually evaluating content and applying these negative sanctions, social actors operationalise social media platform's panoptic architecture, ensuring that content creators remain conscious of the permanent visibility and are subjected to the rigour of disciplinary normalisation.

In Foucault's (1979) gratification-punishment system, punishment serves to reinforce the *legitimacy* and boundaries of acceptable behaviour and maintain dominant norms. Conversely, it can also be utilised to *delegitimise* previously accepted or legitimised expressions of (in)authenticity. As societal values evolve through constant power struggles and negotiation, expressions and practices once deemed 'harmless' or 'standard' – such as excessive filtering or staged poses – can become targets of social sanction, effectively thrusting them outside the boundaries of legitimacy.

5.3.2.1 Criticism

Criticism functions as a primary technique of power within the punishment strategy, operating as a mechanism of *normalising judgement* (Foucault, 1979). Within the social media disciplinary institution, the *governors* employ *criticism* as a corrective tool to actively police the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Tactics include public shaming, expressing scepticism about content *veracity*, and demanding accountability. This process identifies and marginalises content deemed illegitimate, thereby maintaining the established power relations and the *legitimacy* associated with specific authenticity discourses within the regime of governmentality within the regime of governmentality.

The analysis reveals three primary ways in which *criticism* is utilised to police the boundaries of authenticity: establishing the threshold of *veracity* (exemplified by Liana, Olsson, Delage, Yeung, and *You Did Not Sleep There*), regulating professional conduct and public safety (Liana, Olsson, Delage and *You Did Not Sleep There*), and enforcing *consistency* (Stritch and Teigen).

Social media users' responses towards Stritch reveal ambivalent attitudes toward authenticity. Their uncertainty reflects the blurred lines between reality and performance:

> "…this isn't right…we are so used to seeing the filters and touch ups. Maybe it was right and I was wrong…I love that this community can make you feel normal about bad days or real moments but the images are always perfect…Insta reality or insta unreality…who really can tell?"

Analysis reveals *criticism* is most intensely applied when image manipulation crosses the line from acceptable enhancement and artistic license to outright fabrication and misrepresentation, as seen in the cases of Liana and Olsson. In their *criticisms* of Liana, social actors pointed out the absurdity of her edits and her subsequent lack of transparency:

> "It's actually ridiculous how much you photoshop your content. The fact that you've edited in these birds."

> "I think [Liana] should be honest and not deny what is obviously an edited photo. There is no shame in creating a beautiful image…but denying it isn't ethical."

The majority of social actors distinguished between minor adjustments (brightness, contrast) and significant manipulations (superimposing objects, replacing backdrops), viewing the latter as an ethical breach of the unwritten rules of photography. As expressed by one content creator:

> "The only time I think it's necessary to Photoshop a picture for any platform is to modify the colors of the image that our poor photography skills couldn't capture,"

This demonstrates an expectation of attainability reflected in the content's *proximity to reality*; social actors accept altered or fabricated content only if it remains within the realm of possibility. However, Liana's content violates the boundaries of what is considered normal and acceptable:

> "It's considered normal to change things like brightness levels but moving buildings and people and adding sunsets is something else…It's supposed to be accessible and authentic…People want to see a lifestyle that's amazing, but attainable."

> "Instagram is always a slightly fictionalised image of our lives but too many people believe it's the reality…We all adjust contrast and lighting but [Liana]'s taken it a step too far."

Many social actors criticised Liana's content due to its misleading and fraudulent representation, highlighting the potential harm to young audiences and the commercial incentives involved:

> "When you factor in money and young influential fans as well, I think such levels of delusion edges towards being fraudulent."

> "…some influencers are known for posting flawless grams that are often 'staged' and shot by semi-professional photographers — with some level of retouching involved. However, the lines are significantly blurrier when influencers are profiting from promoting destinations and hotels to their sizable followings."

Criticisms of Olsson's lack of *veracity* went beyond calling out manipulation; they specifically detailed the crude alterations apparent in her content:

> "Another shows a wonky table, indicating some more editing tomfoolery, with yet another showing some terrible colour matching…"

> "Then there's this very questionable hair halo/changing colour grass situation. Wow. Just WOW" "

> "Check out this not-so-seamless overlay of hair onto sky…This is so awkward."

While Saravia's use of identical cloud formations was *criticised*, its extent was relatively mild compared to Liana, Olsson, and Yeung. Even so, one commenter highlighted the perceived violation of professional standards:

> "Faking all the photos!?...as a photographer I can't stand this."

Social actors employ *criticisms* to police the boundaries of authenticity, reinforcing a threshold of *veracity* and conferring *legitimacy* only upon content that meets it. In their capacity as *governors*, social actors enforce social norms to discourage illegitimate practices and mandate conformance. When content fails to meet an expectation of

attainability, it is subjected to 'corrective training' (Foucault, 1979) through the mechanism of *criticism*.

Social actors, particularly media authors, also *criticised* Liana, Olsson, and Yeung for undermining the credibility of the influencer industry, using professionalism as a disciplinary standard. Criticism targeted Olsson's lack of rigour evident in her amateurish alterations:

> "[Olsson] was getting paid over $1,000. To show up with a dead phone battery and take crappy selfies."

> "There is privilege in this business…If you've decided to create content for a living, be a professional. Hire professionals. Trust me, word gets around *real quick*."

Media authors highlighted the problematic nature of these inauthentic practices given the creators' significant influence:

> "…the power of influencer marketing stems from the endorsement being 'authentic,' but how real can these portrayals really be?"

> "When an influencer with over 500k followers (!!!)... can't even be bothered to hire a photographer to take the actual photos she's getting paid for? Or even at the very least to professionally Photoshop the damn things, sheesh…"

Similarly, Yeung's use of plagiarised content for commercial gain led to a loss of *moral legitimacy*. Critics framed these creators as irresponsible actors who value social validation and profit over professional ethics and public safety.

> "…to what extent should someone manipulate their content for the sake of fame and popularity…But to create a platform where the aim is to amass a following in the hopes of getting brand partnerships is a whole new different discussion."

Though Delage's campaign aimed to raise awareness of alcohol addiction, it inadvertently glamourises frequent alcohol consumption and normalises binge drinking. Its deceptive tactics were *criticised* by users who questioned the *accuracy* of the portrayal:

> "…she is always looking so good and perfect, but in reality people start gain weight, looking not that fresh drinking everyday."

Critics also questioned whether a worthy objective justified the underlying dishonesty, fearing a loss of consumer trust and the risk of encouraging high-risk imitation among younger audiences:

> "They are now encouraged to make the same pictures + alcohol to get as much followers as this account."

Staged campsite photos reposted by *You Did Not Sleep There* were also subject to *criticism* regarding the realistic portrayal of outdoor experiences. This account functions as a mechanism for collective *scrutiny* regarding *proximity to reality*, condemning creators who prioritise 'Instagrammable' aesthetics over safety:

> "The next was taken in Durdle Door, Dorset…what is less impressive, however, is this candidate's assumptions regarding his or her followers' intelligence. First consideration: tide. Second consideration: hefty fines for camping on the beach. Third: waste elimination."

Criticism directed at creators' professional conduct and public safety serves to highlight impropriety while delegitimising inauthentic practices. Such critiques frame these creators as irresponsible actors, emphasising the inherent dangers associated with inauthenticity within the social media landscape. Ultimately, *professionalism* functions here as a proxy for *moral legitimacy*; by failing to meet these standards, creators lose the cognitive and moral standing required to operate as authoritative subjects within the field.

While the majority of criticisms target content that lacks *accuracy*, social actors also scrutinise *consistency*. Stritch's subsequent use of heavy filters after a project that championed *transparency* was viewed as a betrayal of her stated values:

> "Stritch notched up 20,000 likes…[for finding] a photo of the theme park online and Photoshopped herself onto it…It hasn't seemed to have much impact on the tone of her feed, though. Recent posts portray the same heavily-filtered life of leisure..."

Even perceived *veracity* does not grant immunity from the disciplinary gaze. Teigen's portrayal of pregnancy loss, though widely seen as authentic, was interpreted by some as performative vulnerability:

> "I just felt like this is not really something I should be witnessing...I'm not saying she's wrong to do it, but I don't know…it's such a private thing. I kind of question whether there are some things that you shouldn't have to share on social media."

This suggests that content is punished if it deviates from established norms of privacy or if the persona lacks stability. Through this disciplinary gaze, social actors correct behaviour that lacks a *consistent* and stable persona, ensuring that regardless of apparent *veracity*, even authentic expressions are subjected to disciplinary normalisation to maintain the regime of truth.

As such, the collective application of criticism serves a precise disciplinary function by delineating the acceptable boundaries of *accuracy* and *consistency*. *Criticism* punishes a lack of *veracity*; this is intensified when inauthenticity is perceived to cross the line into outright fabrication, particularly for commercial gain. Simultaneously, it enforces

consistency by criticising actions that betray established norms or the public persona. This rigorous, collective scrutiny highlights the constant struggle to maintain the credibility and professional integrity of content creators within the social media disciplinary institution. While these critical dialogues aim to bring the subject back into alignment with social norms, the perceived failure of such 'corrective training' or the perception of flagrant inauthenticity often leads to a more aggressive escalation of disciplinary power: the personal *insult*.

5.3.2.2 Insult

Insult is a technique of power within the punishment strategy, representing a more assertive form of social control. While *criticism* (Section 5.3.2.1) operates as a form of 'corrective training' (Foucault, 1979) aimed at regulating the creator's (in)authentic expressions and practices, *insult* functions as a spectacular form of punishment. Whereas *criticism* seeks the rehabilitation of the subject through accountability, this punitive technique is more personal and targets the content creator's character rather than just the content. The findings show that the majority of *insults* seek to marginalise the creators and emphasise their deviation from the norms of (in)authenticity. Analysis demonstrates that social media users primarily directed these *insults* toward the creators' skills and character, utilising descriptions such as 'attention seeking' and 'embarrassing' to perform a public ritual of humiliation.

The shift from *criticism* to *insult* marks a significant escalation in the exercise of power in the governance of (in)authenticity. While *criticism* represents the disciplinary gaze, a functional attempt at 'corrective training', the emergence of *insult* signals a return to the public spectacle. This transition is typically triggered by a creator's evasiveness; for instance, when Olsson or Liana met criticism with non-conformance or silence, they effectively resisted the rehabilitative goal of the disciplinary institution. In response, the social actors, acting collectively as '*governors*,' shift from being corrective agents to punitive ones that perform a ritualistic exclusion to reestablish the boundaries of (in)authenticity.

Some of the *insults* are specific to the inauthenticity conspicuously displayed in the content. Several social media users and media authors criticised the extent of Olsson's image manipulations, targeting her lack of proficiency in photo editing. Social media users'

comments ranged from dismissive to hostile, effectively turning her amateurish work into a site of public derision:

> "…her photo editing skills are… let's say rather mediocre…"
>
> "…just try to find someone who is good [at] this [photo]shop shit, it looks like u r doing it by using paint…"
>
> "Wtffff you are sooo damn fake girlll, every normal human can see that this is fk fak[e] girl…rip your instagram fk faker… i hate your account so damn hard you dont do anything for your account just photoshop you are all on news in my country…rip girll byeeee"

Some users also offered sarcastic suggestions for improvement, referencing Olsson's crude alterations.

> "Next time hire me, I photoshop much better,"
>
> "Please get a ticket and visit France, believe me it's gonna be cheaper than making photoshop 🔧"

Insulting remarks focused on the creators' perceived greed and an intense need for attention. Social actors related the inauthenticity of Olsson and Liana to a 'shallow' and 'materialistic' superficial lifestyle, as evidenced in the comments:

> "If you have to photoshop a life, are you genuinely happy??"
>
> "Johanna's lifestyle, appearance and so-called influence is the envy of hundreds of thousands of people, and yet it's still not enough for her."

In response to what was perceived as *staged* content, one user labelled Teigen an "attention seeker," while Liana and Olsson were dubbed "desperate" for their extensive manipulations.

> "…desperately trying to be a somebody!! LOOK AAAAATTTT"

In the absence of *veracity,* social media users and media authors used *insult* to humiliate the creators in order to further delegitimise the subjects and signal their loss of *moral legitimacy*. Social actors labelled Yeung's plagiarism and Olsson's crude manipulation as 'embarrassing'.

> "This is so gross and embarrassing."
>
> "…embarrassingly obvious…".

For Olsson, this culminated in derogatory name-calling that served to cement her status as 'abnormal' subjects:

> "Influenca-Failetta" "U stoopid" "Big fake" "Queen [of] Photoshop"

Interestingly, the normalising gaze of insult is also turned upon content that is considered to be 'too real'. Mercer shared that her authentic, unedited images were met with 'trolls' who used derogatory language to govern authenticity and police traditional beauty standards:

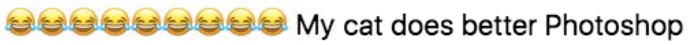
> "There were trolls, of course. Most sent barf emojis. Some offered pretty descriptive words to describe my "disgusting" and "lazy" tush (in more colourful terms). Others told me that if I ate less and trained more, I wouldn't look so unappealing."

This confirms that *insult* functions not just to punish any inauthentic expressions and practices, but to police any subject that deviates from the normalised and acceptable aesthetic of 'perfection' on Instagram, further reinforcing established power relations and norms within the social media disciplinary institution.

Mockery and belittling responses are employed by many social media users and a small subset of media authors to express their displeasure at the inauthenticity displayed. Saravia, whose travel images contain identical cloud formations, experienced gentle ribbing and playful teasing from social media users.

> "Those clouds are loyal followers 😂" "Maybe the clouds paid for endorsement?"

Similarly, Olsson also experienced light-hearted mockery from social media users and media authors, respectively shown in the snippets below.



> "…you can even spot the funny mistakes in her photo editing attempt in the dark."

However, the majority of social media users' mockery aimed at Olsson was notably dismissive and mean-spirited, many of which were sarcastic in nature.

> "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA This is the fakest picture I've ever seen. You're kidding right?"

> "Lmao girl no one is falling for your poor job at photoshopping."

Social media users and media authors further ridiculed Olsson for being forced to keep the obviously altered images on her Instagram account with one social media user commenting:

> "Yep, that's right – she's not taking the pics down because they're #sponsored. LOOOOOL."

Olsson also became a short-lived viral meme that made fun of her for the crude manipulation of her travel images. This form of *insult* transforms the punishment of their deviance from a ritual of humiliation into a public spectacle.

Insult, therefore, acts as a critical mechanism in the disciplinary regime by amplifying the visibility and negative sanction of the non-conformist subject. To ensure adherence to the rules and norms, social actors utilised character assassination, name-calling, mockery, ridicule, and derision in their public ritual of humiliation as a deterrent for others from engaging in similar inauthentic practices. This aggressive form of punishment serves to 'train' the subject by excluding and marginalising them, reinforcing the clear division between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal', thus reinforcing the dominant authenticity discourses.

5.3.2.3 Disappointment

Disappointment represents a subtler form of social control focused on the perceived failure of content creators to meet expectations of authenticity. While *insults* perform a visible, spectacular ritual of humiliation, *disappointment* represents a more internalised and emotional exercise of power: the withdrawal of *relational legitimacy* on the basis of the creator's professionalism and integrity.

Disappointment stems from a perceived breach of the implicit social contract between the content creator and other social actors within the social media disciplinary institution. In this relationship, there is an expectation of a fair exchange where social actors grant attention and engagement in return for the creator's *transparency* and (in)authentic truth. When creators like Yeung or Olsson are found to have deliberately deceived and fabricated their content, they are not merely committing a technical error but violating the *moral legitimacy* required to maintain their standing within the social media institution.

This form of punishment as expressed through comments and feedback, reinforces dominant norms and underscores the power of social expectations in shaping authenticity discourses. In highlighting the discrepancies between anticipated authenticity and perceived inauthenticity, *disappointment* subtly polices the acceptable boundaries of (in)authentic self-presentation.

In many instances, social media users, media authors, and content creators expressed *disappointment* at the lack of professionalism shown in Olsson's poorly edited photographs. These actors took the opportunity to comment on how such blatant inauthenticity undermined the credibility of the influencer industry as a whole:

> "Have we really come to this?"

"Come on guys. We have to be better than this."

Unlike the content creators discussed previously, Stritch largely avoided personal hostility. Instead, her content prompted reflection among social media users and media authors, many of whom expressed a broader *disappointment* upon realising how prevalent inauthenticity was in their everyday consumption. This reflects a disillusionment with the social media institution itself, where the 'real' is perceived as being perverted:

"I think the whole ideal of 'real' is being perverted today, people's faces are not real, pictures are photoshopped, headlines are fake, and it makes me yearn for things that are real."

In the case of Yeung, her misrepresentation betrayed social media users who expected or believed in her authenticity. The surprise at the extent of the plagiarism, especially from someone held in high regard, highlights the mismatch between her cultivated image and her actions – a direct breach of the social contract. This resulted in a loss of *moral legitimacy*, as fans transitioned from admirers to disappointed governors:

"Wow, she stole so many photos." "But Sadelle is so pretty and so refined."

"Now I've found out that you steal your photos and also pretended like you're a great cook... I really was a fan but now I'm just disappointed."

"Now I've found out that you steal your photos and also pretended like you're a great cook, and when you were exposed you deleted the photos and comments. I really was a fan but now I'm just disappointed."

Media authors expressed disappointment at Saravia's identical cloud formations, suggesting that such blatant inauthenticity detracted from their enjoyment of her content. This signals a weariness with the performative nature of travel influencer culture:

"…this drama is no longer fun and frivolous to indulge. It's sad and destructive…"

Disappointment, therefore, acts as a critical mechanism in the disciplinary regime by amplifying the visibility and negative sanction of the non-conformant subject. In the absence of *veracity*, social media users and media authors use *disappointment* to further *delegitimise* the subjects and signal their loss of *moral legitimacy*. This technique reinforces the implicit social contract – the fundamental exchange of audience attention for creator transparency – by marking its violation as a site of emotional betrayal. To ensure adherence to the rules and norms, social actors utilise *disappointment* as a deterrent for others. This ultimately shifts the burden of governance onto the creators themselves, whereby the threat of collective disappointment compels subjects toward a rigorous self-regulation to

maintain their moral standing, thereby ensuring the continuity of the social media disciplinary institution.

5.3.2.4 Summary of Punishment Strategy

The punishment strategy, as enacted through *criticism, insult,* and *disappointment,* constitutes a multifaceted disciplinary apparatus designed to uphold the institutional norms of authenticity. While each technique operates with different intensities and objectives, they collectively function to identify, correct, and sanction non-conformance within the social media landscape.

As illustrated in the analysis, these techniques represent an escalation in the exercise of disciplinary power. *Criticism* (Section 5.3.2.1) serves as the primary, functional tool of 'corrective training,' focusing on the content to bring the subject back into alignment with norms of *accuracy* and *consistency*. When this corrective gaze is met with resistance or evasiveness, power escalates into the spectacle of *insult* (Section 5.3.2.2). Here, the punishment shifts from the content to the creator's character, utilising public rituals of humiliation to marginalise the subject. Finally, *disappointment* (Section 5.3.2.3) acts as a relational sanction, withdrawing *moral legitimacy* and signalling a breach of the implicit social contract.

Rather than functioning as isolated incidents, these punitive measures create a diffuse network of governance. Social actors, comprising social media users, media authors, and content creators, act as a decentralised regulatory force that monitors the 'normal' and punishes the 'abnormal.' This collective surveillance ensures that the boundaries of (in)authenticity are not only defined but actively defended.

The ultimate efficacy of the punishment strategy lies in its ability to foster internalised discipline. By observing the spectacular downfall of others (e.g., Olsson's viral meme status) or the withdrawal of collective legitimacy (e.g., the disappointment directed at Yeung), other social actors are trained to govern themselves. This transition from external punishment to internalised self-regulation is the hallmark of Foucauldian governmentality; the threat of being corrected and marginalised compels creators to align their performances with dominant authenticity discourses. Consequently, the punishment strategy does not merely sanction the deviant; it secures the continuity of the social media

disciplinary institution by transforming every social actor into both a *governor* and a *governed* subject.

5.3.3 Resistance Strategy

Resistance within the social media disciplinary institution indicates an ambivalence toward, or active opposition to, the prevailing norms of (in)authenticity. As Foucault (1990) posits, where there is power, there is resistance; thus, resistance serves as the necessary counterpoint to the disciplinary regime, functioning simultaneously to challenge the legitimacy of normalising norms and to carve out a space for enhanced autonomy and agency. In this context, *resistance* functions as a form of strategic subversion, where the subject attempts to undermine the governance intended to correct their behaviour. This strategy manifests through two distinct techniques: *evasion of accountability* and *defiance*.

Evasion of accountability involves the use of tactics to obscure the subject from the disciplinary gaze, such as deleting critical feedback or selective narrative framing. In contrast, *defiance* represents a more assertive exercise of power intended to challenge the *governors*' authority in their governance of (in)authenticity. By resisting dominant discourses, creators do not merely defend their actions; they actively create space for alternative expressions of (in)authenticity and contribute to the ongoing evolution of what constitutes legitimate and acceptable expressions and practices. Ultimately, *resistance* highlights the contested nature of (in)authenticity and the potential for challenging established norms, demonstrating that the normal is not a fixed state but a site of perpetual power struggle between the *governors* and the *governed*.

5.3.3.1 Evasion of Accountability

Evasion of accountability is a technique of power within the resistance strategy where creators attempt to circumvent the public *scrutiny* enabled by the disciplinary gaze, and avoid the negative sanctions associated with perceived inauthenticity. Rather than engaging with the corrective training of the audience, creators utilise the platform's affordances – such as deleting comments, removing controversial posts, or remaining silent – to obscure their 'abnormal' conduct and preserve their *legitimacy* and status within the social media disciplinary institution.

One primary tactic identified in the findings is the obfuscation of criticisms. When faced with a deluge of *criticism*, creators often delete negative comments to prevent the formation of a public record of their deviance. For instance, several media authors and social media users noted that Yeung and Olsson systematically removed critical comments that pointed out their image manipulations:

> "Why are you erasing comments about your lousy Photoshop??"

In doing so, these creators were not merely managing their reputation, they were actively *resisting* the 'rehabilitative' goal of the disciplinary institution. By removing the evidence of their (in)authenticity, they attempted to detract the *governors* from effectively utilising the disciplinary gaze on their non-conformance.

Furthermore, the removal of content serves as a strategic retreat from the public spectacle of punishment. Yeung deleted the plagiarised content with the intention of resetting the boundaries of her legitimate identity. However, as noted in the findings, this act often backfired; social actors interpreted the *evasion of accountability* as an admission of deviance, leading to an escalation from *criticism* (Section 5.3.2.1) to *insult* (Section 5.3.2.2). This highlights the limits of *evasion of accountability* in a high-surveillance environment of social media; the attempt to hide often inadvertantly increases the visibility of the transgression.

Evasion of accountability also functions as a deflection tactic. In her limited responses to the plagiarism allegations, Yeung shifted the focus from the *veracity* of her content to the 'harshness' of the audience's judgment, appealing for 'fairness':

> "Sometimes I just wanted to use photos to space out the photos on my profile. But because everyone had opinions and thought it was wrong, of course I deleted it right away. Everyone makes mistakes, but I just don't think that there's any need for everyone to blow up over one person's mistakes…I accept the feedback and criticism, but I just think that it should be fair. Our lives should not just revolve around one thing…we have to move on instead of focusing on the same thing over and over again."

Similarly, Olsson minimised her manipulations by comparing them to others' more extreme edits. Her dismissive response reflected a choice to prioritise aesthetic and monetary benefits over genuine representation:

> "It's a bit ridiculous I think…There are a lot of influencers out there that Photoshop in birds, rainbows or crazy skies and I could do that, but I don't like that. I just wanted to make that clear that I was in Paris, but I did Photoshop the background, *but I'm not going to take them down because it's a collaboration and they're nice picture – it's a good outfit."."*

The majority of social media users and media authors did not find Olsson's response palatable nor her explanation acceptable, noting the disparity between the transgression and the deflection:

> "I'm not sure Photoshopping a 'crazy sky' into your image is quite the same as literally pasting yourself into Paris landscapes for paid collabs, but hey MAYBE THAT'S JUST ME."

Despite confirmed manipulation, Liana's reiteration of her content's authenticity left several social media users dissatisfied, further downplaying her non-conformance:

> "…this really didn't address anything or answer most people's questions though…you're not just lightly retouching images are you?"

The technique of *evasion of accountability*, exemplified by Liana, Olsson and Yeung, functions as a strategic, short-term resistance against the pressure of disciplinary normalisation. Each creator utilises these tactics to attempt to negotiate the power dynamic and positioning themselves as victims of harassment rather than subjects in need of correction. This strategic move aims to delegitimise the *governors* themselves, suggesting that their exercise of power is excessive and, therefore, invalid. This resistance is not aimed at changing the underlying authenticity discourse, but rather at preserving the creator's *conditional legitimacy* and commercial viability by prioritising narrative continuity and aesthetic presentation over *veracity, consistency* and *transparency*.

5.3.3.2 Defiance

Defiance represents an assertive technique of power within the resistance strategy, intended to openly challenge the authority of the *governors* and the *legitimacy* of prevailing (in)authenticity norms. These individuals, facing heightened public scrutiny, often concerning issues of *veracity* (Olsson and Saravia) or emotional *consistency* (Teigen), pointedly refuse to accept accountability or offer apologies for their practices. Unlike the *evasion of accountability*, which seeks to avoid the disciplinary gaze, *defiance* confronts it directly. By refusing to conform or apologize, creators attempt to shift the power dynamic from one of subjugation to one of agency and autonomy, asserting their right to define the boundaries of their own (in)authenticity.

Furthermore, these creators may continue their (in)authentic self-presentation, fully aware of the negative reactions such non-conformity is likely to generate. A key element of this defiance is the emphasis placed on the perceived injustice and exaggeration of the

criticisms levelled against them. Content creators often argue that their expressions of (in)authenticity, while perhaps not adhering strictly to conventional standards, are not egregious enough to warrant the intense negative reactions they receive. This defiance directly challenges established power relations, the legitimacy of dominant authenticity discourses, and the perceived authority of those enforcing these norms, highlighting the inherent tension between individual expression and societal expectations within the social media landscape.

One significant form of *defiance* is the reclamation of narrative power. When faced with accusations of *staged* or *sensitive* content, some creators choose to double down on their actions, framing them as a personal choice that falls outside the *governors'* jurisdiction. For example, in response to the backlash regarding her *staged* grief, Teigen shifted the focus to her personal needs:

> "I cannot express how little I care that you hate the photos. How little I care that it's something you wouldn't have done. I lived it, I chose to do it, and more than anything, these photos aren't for anyone but the people who have lived this or are curious enough to wonder what something like this is like. These photos are only for the people who need them. The thoughts of others do not matter to me."

By framing her content as a therapeutic and healing tool, Teigen effectively invalidates the disciplinary gaze. According to Teigen, in this instance, the social rules and norms do not apply to her in this instance thereby creating a private space of autonomy that is shielded from governance. This act of resistance allowed Teigen to exercise her autonomy and reclaim her narrative, while simultaneously challenging the *legitimacy* of the public's demands for conventional privacy over the personal value of shared vulnerability.

Defiance also serves as a tool for neutralising public humiliation. When the punishment strategy escalates to an *insulting* public spectacle (Section 5.3.2.2), creators may resist by conceding to the humiliation of ridicule and mockery to strip it of its power. Olsson's decision to repost the memes and jokes (Figure 47) made at her expense serves as a prime example:

Figure 46. Olsson's Instagram Stories reacting to social media users' memes that mocked her manipulated images

Olsson's response via Instagram Story was a direct, yet contradictory, act of *defiance* used to "face the haters and explain her side of the story":

> "There are a lot of influencers out there that use Photoshop in birds, rainbows or crazy skies and I could do that but I don't like that. It's a bit ridiculous I think. I just wanted to make that clear that I was in Paris, but I did photoshop the background, but I'm not going to take them down because it's a collaboration and they're nice picture – it's a good outfit."

Whilst Olsson admitted to altering the photos, she immediately trivialised the action by shifting attention to other influencers' supposed inauthenticity. By joining in on the joke as well as adopting a dismissive and self-deprecating tone, Olsson effectively neutralised the punitive power of the public ritual. She transformed herself from a passive victim of humiliation into an active participant in the spectacle, reconfiguring the intended ritual of shame into a performance of self-aware humour. In doing so, she was able to resist the disciplinary normalisation process and reassert autonomy over her digital persona.

Crucially, her refusal to remove the images signified her prioritisation of commercial concerns over demands for *veracity*. Olsson's *defiant* stance reclaimed a measure of autonomy from the public gaze, with one media author even praising this non-compliance as a 'revolutionary' act:

> "The expectations vs. reality nature of Instagram is damaging, yes, but we're all kidding ourselves if we think most influencers steer clear of Photoshop or if they're portraying the truth 100 per cent of the time. The platform is a fantasy and we're pretty clued in to that by now – Olsson has just let us peer behind the curtain. By keeping the photos up on her profile, she's done something a lot more revolutionary than shamefully deleting them and issuing an apology."

Some social actors argued that by leaving the edited images up, Olsson allowed the *governed* a rare glimpse at the 'backstage' of her performance. This defence not only rewards Olsson's *defiance* but challenges the very legitimacy of the dominant punitive system. Ultimately, this form of resistance does more than preserve individual *legitimacy*; it actively seeks to evolve the authenticity discourse of the social media disciplinary institution.

Similarly, Saravia's response serves as a defence of her artistic agency. She reframes the addition of identical cloud formations as minor artistic enhancements:

> "I feel overwhelmed because people don't know me and believe they've 'discovered' something I was always honest about. Editing photos means changing color balance, exposure, clarity, and contrast. They're all to enhance the image to have it fit an artistic vision. Adding clouds to bright, outdoor photos doesn't change the subject of the photo. It doesn't mean that I wasn't really where the photo was taken."

Saravia rejected the label of 'deceptive' by asserting that her actions do not change the objective truth of the location. Her *defiance* stems from feeling unjustly targeted for a practice she views as part of consistent creative expression. This form of passive *defiance* was also adopted by the creator of the satirical account *You Did Not Sleep There* who embraces the punitive response of being blocked as validation:

> "…when people started blocking me I was like, Ahh this is what I'm talking about!"

Defiance can take the form of strategic subversion where the creator attempts to educate the *governors* to change the rules of the institution itself. Mercer's content frequently challenges traditional beauty standards through a pedagogical approach:

> "…what we can do instead is really empower women, girls [and] boys to know that so much of what we see on social media is curated, filtered, posed, taken 100 photos and chosen one, professionally shot…maybe we'll get to a point where we look at social media and think, 'OK, I see this, but that doesn't mean it's the truth.'"

Mercer's *defiance* is unique because it seeks to dismantle the disciplinary structure by increasing the media literacy of the *governed*. By exposing the tricks of the trade, she encourages social actors to abandon their roles as punitive *governors* and powerless *governed,* and instead become critical, autonomous actors.

Defiance represents the most direct and assertive challenge to the disciplinary institution, acting as a profound rejection of the audience's authority. Unlike the *evasion of accountability*, which seeks to preserve *legitimacy* through narrative control, *defiance* is utilised by content creators to reclaim their agency and define their own truth, irrespective

of collective *scrutiny*. This is demonstrated by creators who justify their inauthentic expressions through artistic vision (Saravia), therapeutic necessity (Teigen), or a refusal to submit to public shame (Olsson). This highly visible resistance not only creates a space for individual autonomy but compels social actors to confront the inherent tension between the platform's disciplinary structure and the fundamental right of self-expression.

5.3.3.3 Summary of Resistance Strategy

The resistance strategy, as enacted through the *evasion of accountability* and *defiance*, functions as the active reclamation of agency within the social media disciplinary apparatus. While the reward and punishment strategies (Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2) represent the audience's attempts to govern of the creator, the resistance strategy represents the creator's attempt to reclaim agency and autonomy. Collectively, these techniques function to challenge the *legitimacy* of the disciplinary gaze, negotiate the terms of (in)authenticity, and carve out autonomous spaces within the institutional framework.

As illustrated in the analysis, these techniques represent an escalation in the creator's subject-driven response to the governance of (in)authenticity. *Evasion of accountability* (Section 5.3.3.1) serves as a defensive tactic, a form of 'quiet' resistance designed to obscure the subject from the disciplinary gaze. By deleting comments or removing content, creators attempt to reset the boundaries of their *legitimate* identity and avoid the public spectacle of punishment. When this tactical retreat is insufficient or the pressure for normalisation becomes excessive, resistance escalates into *defiance* (Section 5.3.3.2). Here, the subject moves from obfuscating tactics to confronting and rejecting *governors'* authority, asserting a right to artistic, therapeutic, or commercial autonomy that exists outside collective jurisdiction.

Rather than merely being disruptive, these resistive measures reveal the instability of the disciplinary network. While the audience acts as a decentralised regulatory force, the resistance of social actors – such as Teigen's reclamation of narrative or Olsson's neutralisation of mockery – demonstrates that social rules and norms are constantly under negotiation. This struggle ensures that the boundaries of (in)authenticity are not static but are perpetually redefined by those who refuse to be *governed*. In particular, pedagogical defiance (e.g., Mercer) demonstrates a form of institutional contestation, where the creator

seeks to change the rules of the institution itself by increasing the media literacy of the *governors*.

The theoretical significance of this strategy lies in the duality of discourse. As Foucault (1990) asserts, "[i]ndeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (p. 100). Within the social media disciplinary institution, discourse functions as both a mechanism for reinforcing power and a potential hindrance to it.

Recognising that governance imposes structural limits on autonomy, Foucault (1990) maintains that resistance is a constant and necessary byproduct of power. This implies that the very mechanisms of discipline serve as the catalyst for discursive subversion. While social media discourse constructs the 'truth' and knowledge that defines what is acceptable, normalised, and legitimate, it also provides the very tools necessary for undermining that power (Danaher et al., 2000; Young, 1995). By resisting dominant discourses, social actors demonstrate that they are not merely passive recipients of disciplinary power; instead, they recognise that discourse can be utilised to establish alternative truth claims that challenge established rules and norms.

The ultimate efficacy of the resistance strategy lies in its ability to foster internalised autonomy. By observing the successful defiance of others or their ability to survive the spectacle of punishment, other social actors are reminded of their own agency and the fact that they can both "reinforce and resist dominating knowledge and discourses" (Beckett, 2012; Danaher et al., 2000). This transition from being a *governed* subject to becoming an autonomous actor is the hallmark of Foucault's power/knowledge paradigm. The refusal to be corrected or marginalised compels the institution to evolve its dominant authenticity discourses. Consequently, the resistance strategy does not merely defend the deviant; it ensures the fluidity of the social media disciplinary institution by preventing the total stagnation of its norms and preserving the subject's fundamental right to self-expression.

5.4 Conclusion

Chapter 5 addresses the second research question (RQ2):

How do social actors govern the perceptions of (in)authenticity on social media?

This analysis establishes social media as a formidable disciplinary institution and a primary site of contemporary governmentality. By grounding Foucault's disciplinary apparatus and institutional legitimacy in the empirical strategies of *reward, punishment*, and *resistance*, this chapter demonstrates that the governance of authenticity is not a vertical hierarchy, but a participatory regime of truth. Within the social media landscape, social actors function as both *governors* and the *governed*; they are the active enforcers of institutional norms even as they remain subject to perpetual *scrutiny*. The nine exemplars analysed throughout this chapter provide a clear illustration of how these decentralised power dynamics operate in practice.

5.4.1 Strategies in the Governance of (In)authenticity

The findings reveal that the governance of (in)authenticity is executed through a system of three overarching strategies, and their respective techniques of power, utilised by social actors to actively participate in shaping, reinforcing, and challenging the social rules and norms of (in)authenticity:

Reward Strategy (5.3.1): Comprising techniques of *admiration, appreciation*, *resignation,* and *advocacy,* this strategy functions as a productive mechanism. It confers and reinforces institutional legitimacy upon specific expressions of (in)authenticity, promoting their normalisation and incentivising creators to align their expressions and practices with evolving social norms.

Punishment Strategy (5.3.2): Utilising *criticism, insult*, and *disappointment*, this strategy acts as a corrective apparatus. It identifies deviant, non-conformant and 'abnormal' conduct, and actively undermines the creator's legitimacy, reinforcing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour through public rituals of marginalisation and internalised discipline.

Resistance Strategy (5.3.3): Encompassing *defiance*, and the *evasion of accountability,* this strategy represents the essential site of discursive subversion. It demonstrates that the regime of governmentality is neither static nor absolute. Creators utilise the duality of

discourse to challenge established norms, reclaim agency and autonomy, and negotiate the rules and norms to which they are subjected.

A critical finding of this chapter is the contested role of *transparency*. While *transparency* is often framed as a virtuous tool for accountability, the analysis demonstrates its capacity to be weaponised. Creators frequently utilise *transparency* performatively as a form of calculated sincerity, attempting to secure legitimacy through the mere appearance of authenticity. This underscores the perpetual tension within the social media institution between genuine self-disclosure and the strategic performance of authenticity required to satisfy the normalising gaze of collective *scrutiny*.

5.4.2 Refining the Component of Legitimacy in the Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media

While the initial framework (Table 3) identified *legitimacy* as a core component of authenticity, the empirical findings necessitate a significant refinement of its role and internal dimensions. Drawing on the works of Suchman (1995), Lehman et al. (2019) and Nuñes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021), *legitimacy* was originally viewed as an external validation of a creator's adherence to social norms. However, the analysis of the nine exemplars reveals that on social media, legitimacy is not merely a final 'stamp of approval'; it is a dynamic and contested state that is constantly negotiated through power relations.

The refined *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media* (Table 7) substantiates that *legitimacy* is operationalised through the strategies of *reward, punishment,* and *resistance*. This demonstrates that *legitimacy* is both the *reward* of conformance and *resistance,* and the *target* of subversion within the social media disciplinary institution.

Table 7. Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media

COMPONENT	WORKING DESCRIPTION	REFINED DESCRIPTION
Accuracy	The exemplar is perceived as truthful and transparent. Content tends to be a reliable and realistic representation of a person, event, place, and time.	Authentic exemplars are perceived as *accurate* when they exhibit *veracity* (truthfulness) and refrain from *content staging* (advance planning and manipulation). This perception is negotiated through the tension between objective truth and premeditated planning, mitigated by the creator's *transparency* and the content's *proximity to reality*.
Consistency	The exemplar is perceived as intrinsically motivated and unperturbed by external pressures, conveying its creator's autonomy. The content demonstrates a consistent style or message over time.	Authentic exemplars and content are perceived as *consistent* when they demonstrate a relational alignment between a creator's intrinsic motivation and their external expressions over time. The perception of *consistency* is rooted in the perceived autonomy of the creator, which appears uninfluenced by external pressures, and the stability of their established persona maintained against collective scrutiny.
Legitimacy	The exemplar is perceived as normal and acceptable. Content tends to adhere to the traditions, standards, shared social rules, and norms within the social media context and signal its creator's social acceptance and/or approval.	Authentic exemplars are perceived as *legitimate* when their expressions of (in)authenticity are authorised and normalised by social actors within the disciplinary institution. This perception of *legitimacy* is a dynamic, contested struggle for acceptability, where the creator must navigate a recursive power relation of *rewards, punishments*, and *resistance* to maintain their standing within the institution.

5.4.2.1 Legitimacy as a Negotiated Outcome

The findings indicate that *legitimacy* is not merely a dichotomy or a static outcome but a spectrum managed through social governance. The outcome of this process that feeds back into the negotiation of *accuracy* and consistency through a recursive power relation. Within the social media disciplinary institution, the strategies of *reward, punishment,* and *resistance* act as the mechanism that determines which expressions of (in)authenticity are granted institutional legitimacy. The research identifies *transparency* and *proximity to reality* as the primary mitigating factors that can negotiate *legitimacy* when objective truth is absent. These factors allow social actors to grant 'relational honesty' a higher value than *veracity.*

When social actors employ a *reward strategy*, such as admiration for aesthetic skill or appreciation for vulnerability – they effectively validate the mitigating factors of *transparency* and *proximity to reality*. This feedback loop signals to the creator that their 'calculated sincerity' or staged content has successfully met institutional norms, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of their specific negotiation between *veracity* and *content staging*. For instance, when Saravia utilises *transparency*, she successfully negotiates for *legitimacy* despite a lack of veracity, which in turn reinforces her perceived *consistency*. Furthermore, *legitimacy* is determined by how a creator navigates the normalising and panoptic gaze within the social media disciplinary institution. Conformance to these evolving norms is incentivised through a *reward strategy* (e.g., admiration, appreciation, resignation and advocacy), while deviance is met with a *punishment strategy* (e.g., criticism, insult and disappointment).

Conversely, *the punishment strategy* serves as a corrective feedback mechanism that drives the dimension of scrutiny. Techniques such as public criticism or 'normalising judgment' are triggered when social actors perceive a breach in consistency or a failure in transparency, stripping the creator of their social license. This downward pressure forces a re-negotiation of the authenticity components; a creator may respond with a *resistance strategy*, such as *evasion of accountability* or *defiance* to challenge the audience's *scrutiny* and attempt to reclaim *legitimacy* on their own terms. Ultimately, the interplay between these power techniques and the mitigating factors ensures that authenticity remains a dynamic, constantly negotiated state where *legitimacy* is both the price of conformance and the target of subversion.

In summary, Chapter 5 demonstrates that authenticity on social media is not a stagnant concept but rather a dynamic, collectively negotiated and contested struggle for acceptability. Authenticity is defined not only by its core components of *accuracy* and *consistency* but by the power relations that govern its *legitimacy.* This research provides a robust empirical framework to understand how social actors wield power through a regime of *rewards, punishments*, and *resistance* to determine what is considered *legitimate* and acceptable. By shifting the focus from the creator's intent to governance, this chapter reveals that the boundaries of (in)authenticity are perpetually redefined by the very actors subjected to its rules and norms.

The subsequent chapter will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, situating them within the broader academic discourse and offering directions for future research.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The pursuit of authenticity on social media can have profound implications for individuals and society. The pressure to present a curated and idealised version of oneself online can lead to anxiety, self-doubt, and social comparison, as highlighted by the research on the mental health effects of social media use among young people (Adcock, 2016; Donnelly, 2016; Guardian Labs, 2017; Udorie, 2015). The prevalence of inauthenticity, such as deceptive editing, fabricated personas, and undisclosed advertising, can erode trust and contribute to a culture of cynicism and distrust. Understanding the dynamics of authenticity on social media is crucial for mitigating these potential harms and fostering a more ethical and authentic online environment.

Social media platforms provide a unique space for individuals and communities to challenge stigma and promote more nuanced and accepting understandings of marginalised experiences. By sharing personal stories, raising awareness, and engaging in open dialogue, social media users can contribute to the destigmatisation of various issues, such as mental health, body image, and pregnancy loss (Betton et al., 2015; Boudewyns et al., 2015). This aligns with the research of Bauermeister et al. (2019), who highlight the role of microcelebrities advocating for marginalised groups.

The visual nature of social media platforms plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of authenticity. The ability to edit and filter photos to achieve an ideal look further contributes to the pressure to present curated and often unrealistic versions of oneself (Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Sheldon and Bryant, 2015). This visual culture drives social comparison and the pursuit of social validation through "likes," potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy (Adami and Jewitt, 2016; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Donnelly, 2016; Festinger, 1954). This research examines how visual representations of authenticity are constructed, negotiated, and contested on social media.

This research contributes to this understanding by examining how visual representations of authenticity are constructed, negotiated, and contested on social media. The analysis of various exemplars, such as Liana's heavily edited travel photographs and Mercer's body positivity posts, reveals the complex interplay between image manipulation, self-presentation, and audience expectations. By exploring these dynamics, the research sheds

light on the challenges and opportunities presented by the visual culture of social media, particularly for young people who are particularly vulnerable to the pressures of online self-presentation.

This research offers a new perspective on authenticity by emphasising the role of power, drawing on Foucault's (1977, 1978, 1980) concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality. It highlights the power dynamics that shape perceptions of authenticity online and examines how various actors contribute to a 'regime of truth' that governs (in)authenticity. Crucially, the analysis demonstrates that authenticity is not a static state, but a dynamic, negotiated construct. Perceptions of *accuracy* are negotiated through the tension between *veracity* and content *staging*, while *consistency* is maintained as a defensive state against the collective *scrutiny* of social actors.

Furthermore, the findings highlight social media platforms as disciplinary institutions where individuals are constantly monitored, evaluated, and encouraged to conform to prevailing norms. This surveillance, embedded in platform architecture, aligns with Foucault's (1977) concept of the panopticon, where the awareness of being observed leads to internalised discipline, self-regulation and conformity.

The analysis demonstrates the duality of social actors as both *governors* and the *governed* within this regime of governmentality as they simultaneously navigate and negotiate the perceptions of authenticity. As *governors*, they utilise *reward* and *punishment* strategies to enforce institutional rules and shape norms. As the *governed,* they internalise these norms and regulate their own behaviour or employ *resistance strategies* to reclaim agency and autonomy. This interplay between agency and structure highlights the complex power relations that underpin authenticity on social media. The following sections present the theoretical and practical contributions of the thesis, followed by limitations and directions for future research.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several theoretical contributions to the understanding of authenticity, particularly within the context of social media. By examining how authenticity is constructed, negotiated, and contested, this research extends and expands existing theoretical frameworks, most notably the refined *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media* (Table 7), offering new insights into the

complex dynamics of online identity and self-presentation. By identifying *veracity, content staging,* and *scrutiny* as core dimensions, the framework transcends the specific cases studied, offering a universal framework for analysing authenticity in various context.

6.2.1 Accuracy: The Negotiation of Veracity and Content Staging

The research demonstrates that *accuracy* is not a static assessment of truthfulness, but a complex interplay between *veracity, content staging*, and individual interpretation. These dimensions interact in dynamic ways, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of authenticity than traditional approaches that focus on single dimensions.

The analysis reveal *veracity* as a multifaceted construct. While truthful depictions remain a key to perceived authenticity, the analysis reveals that perceptions are influenced by more than just factual *accuracy*. The perceived motivations and intentions behind content creation, alongside the creator's values, contribute to a nuanced assessment of authenticity. Moreover, *transparency* was shown to be a mitigating factor in the evaluation of (in)authenticity. Findings show that *transparency* can transform an initial perception of low *veracity* into an act of acceptable authenticity. For example, Saravia's openness about image editing allowed her to maintain legitimacy despite a lack of objective truth, demonstrating that relational honesty can outweigh indexical *veracity*. *Content staging* also underscores the performative aspect of social media. While excessive manipulation typically leads to inauthenticity, *staged* content can be strategically utilised to convey truthfulness, as seen in the Delage's addiction awareness campaign.

6.2.2 Consistency and the Role of Scrutiny

The examination of (in)authenticity exemplars reveals consistency as a defensive, relational state rather than a passive trait. Authenticity is perceived when there is an alignment between a creator's expressed persona, values, and actions over time, reflecting the importance of *consistency* between internal and external expressions.

Consistency is operationalised through *scrutiny*, the active social policing mechanism involving a panoptic gaze that perpetually evaluates a creator's expressions and practices. This collaborative and distributed process involves social actors investigating a creator's past behaviours and statements to identify contradictions. The maintenance of

consistency serves as a defensive tactic to avoid institutional punishment. When creators like Liana or Olsson provide inconsistent responses to *scrutiny*, they are stripped of legitimacy through a 'normalising judgement'.

6.2.3 Legitimacy and Foucault's Approach to Power

A primary theoretical contribution of this research is the application of Foucault's concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality to the governance of authenticity. This approach moves beyond traditional notions of power as a commodity and instead dynamic, relational, and embedded nature within everyday social media practices.

Social media platforms are established as disciplinary institutions where surveillance is embedded in the architecture, fostering internalised discipline and conformity to prevailing norms. The governance of (in)authenticity is executed through a system of strategies utilized by social actors to shape and reinforce norms:

- **Reward Strategy**: A productive mechanism that reinforces institutional legitimacy.
- **Punishment Strategy**: A corrective apparatus that undermines the legitimacy of deviant conduct.
- **Resistance Strategy**: A site of discursive subversion where creators challenge established norms to reclaim agency.

Social actors function simultaneously as *governors*, enforcing rules, and the *governed*, internalising norms and regulating their own behaviour, highlighting the dynamic interplay between agency and discipline.

6.2.4 The Subjective and Negotiated Nature of Authenticity

Finally, the research reinforces that authenticity is a dynamic, subjective, and continuously negotiable concept. Interpretations are influenced by personal experiences and individual beliefs, illustrating that consumers actively construct their understanding of what is authentic and genuine. This subjectivity confirms that perceptions do not rely solely on objective markers or indexical cues but on the complex power relations that govern *legitimacy* within the digital landscape.

6.2.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity

While developed through the lens of social media, the *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity within the Context of Social Media* (Table 7) can be adapted to serve as a robust theoretical tool for analysing the perceptions, negotiation and governance of (in)authenticity across a wide range of context. By retaining and abstracting the three core components, the *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity* (Table 8) retaining the three core components, defined as follows:

Table 8. Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity

COMPONENT	REFINED DESCRIPTION
Accuracy	Accuracy is established through the perceived veracity of an actor's representations, and the apparent absence of advance planning and manipulation. This component is negotiated through the tension between subjective interpretations and objective truths, where the actor's transparency and the portrayal's proximity to reality and lived experience serve as the primary arbiters of truthfulness.
Consistency	Consistency is defined by the longitudinal alignment between an actor's internal convictions and their external expressions. This perception is rooted in the demonstrated autonomy of the actor, their ability to remain unmoved by external systemic pressures, and the stability of their established identity and character when subjected to collective or institutional scrutiny.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy is attained when an actor's conduct is validated and normalised by social actors within a specific context. Rather than a static state, legitimacy is a dynamic and contested negotiation for social acceptability. It requires the actor to navigate a system of rewards, punishment, and resistance strategies to maintain their standing and authority within the field

Accuracy, consistency and *legitimacy* are not components that is solely present within the context of social media but rather fundamental components for any entity seeking to be perceived as authentic, real, or trustworthy. The broad applicability of the *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity* (Table 8) lies in its focus on the mechanics of social perception rather than platform-specific features. By abstracting these dimensions into an evaluative matrix, the framework can be applied across multiple context:

- **Organisations** can be evaluated on the *accuracy* of their ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) claims, the *consistency* of their values across global markets and over time, and the *legitimacy* granted to them by regulatory bodies, third-party accreditation and consumers.

- **Political leaders** can be assessed on the basis of *accuracy* to ensure that their claims are credible and not a source of misinformation; the *consistency* between their campaign promises and subsequent legislative actions can be reviewed, and the way they navigate the *legitimacy* of their authority through systems of institutional rewards, and public resistance, and social sanctions.
- **Professionals and Experts** can be evaluated for the *accuracy* and *veracity* of their credentials, the longitudinal *consistency* of their character and output over time, and the resulting *legitimacy* and standing they hold within their organisation and wider industry.

By abstracting the components of authenticity into this evaluative matrix, the *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity* (Table 8) transcends its origins in the social media landscape to offer a robust and portable lens for inquiry. This theoretical flexibility allows for a deeper interrogation of the underlying power dynamics and social policing mechanisms that govern how authenticity and truth claims are established, contested, and maintained within any given context. Ultimately, the framework serves not only as a tool for academic analysis but as a foundational blueprint for understanding the complex, recursive negotiations of authenticity, namely *accuracy, consistency* and *legitimacy,* that define contemporary social, political, and institutional life.

6.3 Practical Contributions

This research, by delving into the complexities of authenticity on social media, offers several practical implications for consumers, creators, and policymakers navigating the digital landscape. These implications focus on empowering individuals to engage with social media in a more critical and self-aware manner, promoting both individual well-being and a healthier online environment.

6.3.1 Social Media Users: Critical Consumption and Empowerment

The findings equip consumers with the knowledge and tools to navigate social media in the post-truth era, where misinformation and manipulated content are rampant. In a landscape where truth has been increasingly replaced by believability, critical consumption is more crucial than ever (Boorstin, 1971; Keye, 2004; Kozinets, Gershoff and White, 2020). By

recognising tactics such as deceptive editing, fabricated personas, and undisclosed advertising, consumers can resist manipulation and avoid being swayed by misleading content. This critical lens allows users to evaluate information more effectively, separating fact from fiction and making informed judgements about the trustworthiness of sources and content. Furthermore, understanding that media coverage is itself a social construction shaped by the perspectives of journalists and editors encourages users to critically evaluate information rather than passively accepting it as truth (Brewer, 2009; Burguete and Lam, 2008).

Beyond literacy, this research empowers consumers to recognise and resist the pressure to present curated and idealised versions of themselves (DePaulo et al., 1996; Keyes, 2004). By understanding the constructed nature of online presentations, individuals can avoid harmful social comparisons and self-criticism, fostering a healthier relationship with social media and prioritising their mental well-being. This is particularly vital given the profound implications of curated perfection on the mental health of young people, including issues like anxiety and self-doubt (Adcock, 2016; Donnelly, 2016; Guardian Labs, 2017; Udorie, 2015).

Consumers can demand greater transparency from content creators and platforms, holding them accountable for their practices and contributing to a culture of openness and honesty. This can involve questioning the motivations behind online content, scrutinising sponsored posts and endorsements, and demanding greater transparency about data collection and usage practices.

This research offers practical implications for consumers by empowering them to engage with social media in a more critical, mindful, and self-aware manner. Ultimately, recognising their own agency and autonomy allows consumers to challenge dominant narratives and norms that perpetuate harmful stereotypes or unrealistic expectations within the social media landscape. By recognising their agency, consumers can move beyond passive observation to actively *govern* the platform; they do so by employing *punishment strategies*, such as public criticism or insults, to penalise perceived inauthenticity, while granting *rewards*, such as admiration and advocacy, to those who meet institutional norms.

6.3.2 Content Creators: Authentic Engagement and Ethical Responsibility

For content creators, the research provides a framework for navigating the complex landscape of authenticity by understanding the dynamics of power and social actors' expectations. Authentic engagement fosters trust, and creators can leverage this by cultivating *transparency* regarding their expressions, practices and motivations (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Marwick, 2015; Morhart et al., 2015; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013). For example, disclosing sponsorships, acknowledging image editing, or explaining the creative processes can enhance perceptions of authenticity and build trust with their audience (Marwick, 2015), much like the positive reception received by Saravia and Mercer when they openly admitted to their technical manipulations. This can involve responding to comments, participating in discussions, and creating a sense of community around their content, evidenced by Mercer's promotion of body positivity and Teigen's personal account of pregnancy loss, which can foster a sense of connection and empathy with social actors.

Additionally, creators must strive to maintain longitudinal *consistency* between their online persona, values, and actions to survive collective *scrutiny* (Cable, 2013, Lehman et al., 2019; Newman, 2018), especially since *transparency* is crucial for maintaining trust and *legitimacy* (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015). Contradictory statements or inconsistencies, as seen in the cases of Liana's and Olsson's image manipulation and Yeung's plagiarism, serve only to erode trust and undermine the creator's standing. Ultimately, the creator's ability to navigate these collective *punishment strategies* is the prerequisite for securing the *rewards*, such as audience appreciation and institutional legitimacy, that allow them to maintain their standing within the disciplinary institution.

Content creators have an ethical responsibility to use their influence responsibly, avoiding deceptive practices like plagiarism or misleading fabrications while promoting positive values such as body positivity and mental health awareness. While inauthenticity can be strategically employed to challenge norms or spark conversations, as demonstrated by Stritch and Teigen, *transparency* remains the most powerful tool for maintaining legitimacy even when content is perceived as staged or fabricated. By aligning their content with ethical values and utilising their influence to promote social responsibility, content creators can contribute to a more positive and inclusive online environment.

6.3.3 Policymakers: Governance and Accountability

Policymakers can utilise these insights to inform the development of an ethical and empowering social media environment. In a post-truth era where truth is often replaced by believability (Boorstin, 1971) and Keyes (2004), fostering critical thinking skills is paramount. Policymakers have a crucial role in integrating digital literacy and critical thinking into early education, ensuring that young people can identify logical fallacies, recognise personal biases, and analyse sources effectively. By equipping young people with critical thinking skills, policymakers can empower them to navigate this complex landscape and make informed judgements about the information they encounter, making them less likely to be swayed by misinformation and propaganda.

Furthermore, policymakers can strengthen regulatory frameworks to hold social media platforms accountable for the content they host and the misuse of consumer data. Particularly in combating fake news, misinformation, hate speech, and exploitation, proactive measures are needed to promote a safe online environment. Demanding greater transparency regarding algorithms and data collection practices is essential for protecting users. By collaborating with media organisations to develop ethical guidelines that prioritise *accuracy* and *transparency*, policymakers can combat the spread of misinformation and 'fake news,' fostering a more informed public discourse.

Finally, addressing the negative impacts of social media on mental health requires a multi-pronged approach that includes supporting mental health initiatives alongside proactive content moderation and media literacy education. This can involve collaborating with platforms to develop effective moderation strategies, critical thinking and media literacy education, and investing in research to better understand the root causes of online harms. By taking a proactive and multifaceted approach, policymakers can contribute to a more ethical, responsible, and empowering online environment.

6.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research acknowledges several limitations that may impact the generalisability and interpretation of the findings, primarily stemming from challenges in accessing social media data, the reliance on media stories as the primary data source, and the focus on specific demographics as exemplars of (in)authenticity.

6.4.1 Scope of Authenticity Framework

While this study draws on comprehensive frameworks to examine the components of *accuracy*, *consistency,* and *legitimacy*, this focus may not fully capture the multifaceted nature of authenticity. Future research would benefit from expanding this scope to include the remaining components: *connectedness, integrity, originality* and *proficiency,* as they may further contribute to the perception and governance of (in)authenticity within the context of social media.

Connectedness: Investigating how perceptions of (in)authenticity are influenced by the user's emotional or cultural connection to a community or creator is vital. This is particularly relevant in understanding the power dynamics between creators and social actors as stronger connections can lead to greater influence and perceived *legitimacy*, as seen in the relatable portrayals within Mercer's and Teigen's unvarnished content. This suggests that *connectedness* may potentially play a role in shaping authenticity perceptions, as users are more likely to trust and identify with creators to who they feel connected (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Lehman et al., 2019). Further research could examine how different types of connections, such as emotional, social, and cultural connections, influence authenticity perceptions and how content creators leverage these *connections* to gain influence and shape online narratives.

Integrity: While this was briefly though *consistency,* an dedicated examination of the role of intrinsic motivation and ethical values in the perception of (in)authenticity is warranted (Lehman et al., 2019; Nuñes, Ordanini & Giambastiani, 2021). Social media users often penalise creators perceived as being motivated purely by external factors like fame or financial gain (Audrezeta et al., 2020: Moulard et al., 2014), which was evident in the cases of Liana, Olsson, and Yeung. Future research should explore dimensions such as honesty and ethical behaviour thoroughly.

Originality: Exploration of the component can reveal how novelty, creativity, and uniqueness contribute to the perception of authenticity and subverting the established norms. The empirical data showed the value social actors placed on *originality* and creativity, as seen with Stritch's fabricated trip, Delage's fictitious identity and *You Did Not Sleep There*'s curation of improbably campsites. *Originality* signals a departure from conventional expectations and can serve as a marker of authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019; Wang, 1999). Future research should investigate how *originality* is used to gain legitimacy and challenge established power dynamics.

Proficiency. Examination of *proficiency* may reveal how technical expertise and mastery influence perceived authority and the ability to shape authenticity discourse. The research findings demonstrate that social actors value expertise and skill in content creation (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009), as seen in the criticism of Olsson's amateurish image editing. Further research could explore how highly *proficient* creators utilise expertise to establish themselves as authorities and shape the broader discourse on authenticity.

By examining the interplay of these various components, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how authenticity is constructed, negotiated, and contested in the digital age. This deeper understanding can shed light on the challenges faced by individuals navigating online identity, particularly in relation to power dynamics and institutional pressures. Moreover, it can inform the development of ethical guidelines aimed at promoting authenticity and mitigating the potential harms associated with inauthenticity on social media.

6.4.2 Methodology and Sampling Limitations

This research acknowledges several limitations that may impact the generalisability and interpretation of findings, as they are strictly bounded by the specific nature of the data collection and the selected subjects. Challenges primarily stem from the complexities of accessing social media data, the necessary reliance on media stories as a primary source, the specific demographics of the sample, and inherent biases present within the research process.

6.4.2.1 Limited Access to Social Media Data

Social media platforms offer vast insights into contemporary social phenomena through their dynamic user interactions, yet accessing this data raises significant ethical considerations, particularly regarding user privacy and informed consent. This study prioritised responsible navigation of these complexities.

A major challenge remains the evolving landscape of data access policies; for instance, platforms like Facebook and Instagram have imposed stricter restrictions on Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) following data privacy scandals and growing public concerns about data misuse (Gonzalez, 2018). These restrictions often limit how

researchers can collect data and frequently require complex approval processes, even for non-commercial academic work. Such barriers can limit the depth of research and hinder the ability to gain insights into how platforms influence individual well-being or the spread of misinformation (Gonzalez, 2018). Consequently, where direct collection was not feasible or ethically permissible, this research utilised alternative methods such as the analysis of public discourse and media coverage to address its research questions.

6.4.2.2 Reliance on Media Stories

The reliance on media stories and publicly available data presents specific challenges that may impact the comprehensiveness of the findings. While direct access to user data would provide a richer understanding of online community dynamics and user interactions, this study prioritised ethical data handling and respected the restrictive terms of service found on major platforms.

Furthermore, using media coverage as a primary source introduces potential bias, as news outlets may selectively report on cases of authenticity and inauthenticity that fit specific agendas or sensationalist criteria. This selective reporting can favour controversial stories over more nuanced expressions of authenticity, potentially reinforcing existing stereotypes. Media coverage is itself a form of social construction, shaped by the interpretations of journalists and editors, which in turn influences how the public perceives authenticity discourses. Despite these mediated limitations, this approach allowed for a broad overview of the phenomenon, capturing a diverse range of perspectives and revealing how various institutions contribute to shaping the meaning of authenticity.

6.4.2.3 Purposive Sampling: Over-representation of Microcelebrities

A primary limitation of this research lies in its approach to sampling. This study employed purposive sampling, focusing on nine specific high-profile exemplars. This choice was intentional, designed to maximise the diversity of (in)authentic expressions and practices to investigate the negotiation and governance of (in)authenticity where it is most highly visible and publicly contested. However, as a non-probability sampling method, the

findings are strictly bounded by the selected subjects, meaning the empirical data may not be statistically generalisable or representative of the broader population.

The value of this purposive approach lies in the informational power and richness of the data. These high-profile exemplars were selected because they represent 'extreme' or 'critical' cases of (in)authenticity where the governing strategies – *reward, punishment,* and resistance – are most visible and contested. This provides depth and insights that a broader, more representative sample might obscure. While the empirical findings are specific to these cases, a crucial distinction must be made between empirical and theoretical generalisability. This research does not claim that the manifestations of (in)authenticity presented in these nine exemplars are statistically representative of the average social media user; rather, it achieves analytical generalisability by using these rich cases to construct a broader theoretical foundation.

The resulting *Integrated Conceptual Framework of Authenticity* (Table 8) functions as a theoretical tool to assess (in)authenticity across different contexts. The underlying power dynamics and mechanisms of social policing identified here, such as the panoptic gaze of *scrutiny*, are foundational to how authenticity is *governed* in any disciplinary institution, whether digital or physical. Thus, the framework provides a robust lens for understanding the governance of authenticity across diverse contexts beyond the social media landscape.

Despite this theoretical reach, the focus on microcelebrities and celebrities remains a limitation as their experiences differ significantly from those of ordinary social media users. These individuals face heightened scrutiny because their online presence is inextricably tied to their public image and professional careers (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Ott and Theunissen, 2015). For these actors, authenticity is intertwined with a reputation for credibility and reliability (Ott and Theunissen, 2015), leading to an intensified focus on strategic self-presentation and impression management to avoid reputational damage.

Their engagement with authenticity is frequently driven by commercial considerations and the need to secure brand partnerships. Furthermore, the relationship between celebrities and their audiences is marked by a significant power imbalance; because these individuals with large followings can influence fan behaviour, and audiences may be more inclined to forgive inauthentic conduct from those they admire. This commercial and hierarchical dynamic limits the direct transferability of the empirical findings to ordinary users, whose online relationships are typically more reciprocal and less influenced by commercial and monetary incentives.

6.4.2.4 Gender Imbalance and the Opportunity for Intersectionality

It is noteworthy that the majority of individuals receiving significant media attention for their expressions of (in)authenticity in this study were women. This over-representation raises critical questions regarding the gendered nature of authenticity and potential biases in public discourse. These imbalances likely reflect societal norms where women are held to stricter standards of authenticity and face greater scrutiny regarding their online self-presentation (Abidin, 2016; Burns, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015). Such disproportionate focus means women's transgressions are often highlighted while men's inauthentic behaviours may go unnoticed. Media outlets may also be more likely to report on women's inauthenticity if the topic is controversial, potentially reinforcing harmful gendered stereotypes. Future studies should intentionally include a diverse range of exemplars to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of how authenticity is governed in contemporary society.

However, this limitation presents an opportunity for future research to adopt an intersectional approach. By considering how gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how these identities shape the performance and policing of authenticity. Particularly when marginalised groups – including people of colour and queers of all genders – are often subjected to greater surveillance of their online self-presentation (Senft and Baym, 2015), reflecting broader intersectional power inequalities that are worthy of exploring in future research.

6.5 Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive analysis of authenticity on social media, examining its manifestations, its governance, and the techniques of power used to shape perceptions of authenticity. The findings reveal that authenticity is a multifaceted, dynamic concept encompassing the components of *accuracy, consistency*, and *legitimacy*. Within the social media disciplinary institution, social actors, functioning as both the *governors* and the *governed,* actively participate in negotiating and contesting authenticity through a system of *rewards, punishments,* and *resistance*.

These findings further highlight the subjective nature of authenticity, where interpretations are filtered through personal experiences and individual beliefs. This underscores a complex interplay between reality and curated performance within an environment where the lines between the 'real' and the 'fantastical' are perpetually blurred. The tensions identified between content creators, social media users, and media authors are not mere interpersonal conflicts; rather, they reflect broader societal debates regarding the role of social media in shaping identity and the ethical implications of self-presentation.

Ultimately, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of authenticity on social media by highlighting the interplay of various components and dimensions, and the role of social actors in shaping the discourse. By providing a theoretical foundation for the governance of (in)authenticity, this research empowers individuals and policymakers to navigate the complexities of the digital age with a more critical and informed perspective.

Chapter 7. Bibliography

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