



THE ROLE OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR FASHION E-TAILERS

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the MSc in Management
with specialization in Strategic Marketing, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa,
January 2019

ABSTRACT

Title of the dissertation: “The Role of Brand Authenticity on Social Media for Fashion E-Tailers”

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Keywords: Brand Authenticity, Authenticity Cues, Social Networked Media, Facebook, E-tailers, Fashion

Brands increasingly use social media to interact with prospects and customers and communicate their distinctive attributes, in order to adequately position themselves in the marketplace. Meanwhile, consumers increasingly look for authenticity in products and brands, resorting to brand-related cues in marketing communications to make authenticity assessments.

This dissertation investigated whether and how fashion e-tailers use brand authenticity cues in social media and their potential impact on audience response. To this end, a survey with 105 respondents was conducted to identify the level of perceived brand authenticity of four fashion e-tailers with significant brand activity on Facebook – Farfetch, mytheresa, MATCHESFASHION.COM, and Zalando – measured by Morhart *et al.*'s (2014) perceived brand authenticity scale.

Based on survey results, two brands were selected – Farfetch and Zalando –, as they were perceived to be the most and the least authentic, respectively. Data was collected (n=201) about their use of authenticity cues on Facebook posts and corresponding consumer response from September to November 2018. The use of authenticity cues was measured using Morhart *et al.*'s (2014) listed cues and response was measured by the number of reactions, comments, and shares of each post.

Results show that when controlling for brand and audience size, existential cues trigger users to comment on Facebook posts. Brands wanting to be perceived as authentic may emphasize and incorporate human attributes in their social media communications.

SUMÁRIO

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As marcas crescentemente usam redes sociais para interagir com clientes prospectivos e comunicar os seus atributos diferenciadores, para adequadamente se posicionarem no mercado. Simultaneamente, os consumidores progressivamente procuram autenticidade em produtos e marcas, recorrendo a pistas relacionadas com a marca para fazerem avaliações de autenticidade, em comunicações de marketing da marca.

A presente dissertação investigou se e como os e-retalhistas de moda usam pistas de autenticidade de marca nas redes sociais e o seu potencial impacto na resposta do público. Com este propósito, um questionário com 105 inquiridos foi implementado para identificar o nível de autenticidade de marca de quatro e-retalhistas de moda com atividade significativa no Facebook – Farfetch, mytheresa, MATCHESFASHION.COM, Zalando – medido pela escala de autenticidade de marca de Morhart *et al.* (2014).

Com base nos resultados do estudo, duas marcas foram selecionadas – Farfetch e Zalando –, sendo consideradas as marcas mais e menos autênticas, respetivamente. Dados foram recolhidos (n=201) sobre o uso de pistas de autenticidade nas publicações de Facebook e na respetiva resposta dos utilizadores, entre Setembro e Novembro (2018). O uso de pistas de autenticidade foi medido usando as pistas de autenticidade discriminadas por Morhart *et al.* (2014) e a resposta foi medida pelo número de reações, comentários e partilhas que cada publicação continha.

Resultados mostram que, controlando o tamanho da marca e da audiência, as pistas existenciais estimulam os utilizadores a comentarem em publicações do Facebook. Marcas que queiram ser percecionadas como autênticas, deverão enfatizar e incorporar atributos humanos nas suas comunicações em redes sociais.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without my supervisor, Professor Ana Isabel Costa, a knowledgeable and dedicated teacher, whose valuable feedback and help were crucial for the development of this dissertation.

I owe my deepest gratitude to the most loving family I know. Thank you for presenting me this invaluable opportunity to achieve my Masters degree. Thank you for being there for me when I thought I could not make it and for giving me the extra push when I needed. Thank you, mum, dad, and Miguel, for supporting my judgements and decisions, but most importantly, thank you for believing in me. I am forever grateful.

Obrigada.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Problem Statement

The advent of Social Media has radically transformed the way individuals communicate with each other, but also the way companies do business and convey their message to their consumers. This type of media plays an increasingly important role in influencing consumer behaviour, including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, and post-purchase communication and evaluation (Glynn Mangold & Faulds, 2009). It is thus a determining element for brands to effectively transmit their message to consumers.

Information is shared between Social Networked Media (henceforth referred to as SNM) users in the form of digital content (Bucklin *et al.*, 2010). Creating relevant content for users to react upon and share is therefore essential to firms, as it enables them to leverage the augmented user interaction that derives from these activities. By interacting with or sharing brand content, SNM users enable firms to reach other users, and thus widen the audience and help acquire potential new fans/consumers at no additional cost. When used in a business context, SNM function thus as a cost-effective marketing tool for firms, allowing them to reach more potential consumers at a relatively low cost (Paridon & Carraher, 2009).

Notwithstanding, there are two unique and unprecedented features that distance social media from traditional media and may hinder their appropriate use by brands: immediacy and lack of real-time control (Wang & Skovira, 2017). SNM's easy, convenient, and immediate access through any device has made it increasingly difficult for users to control and filter what they see, given its free flow content. The resulting outcome is that more content is generated, allowing for immediate feedback, but with lesser accountability and potentially lower quality. The immediacy of SNM has also enhanced the problem of lack of real-time control. Detrimental content, for instance, will likely generate more response in the online world than beneficial one, where a broader audience permits a more interactive and immediate feedback (Wang & Skovira, 2017).

With the advertising information overload brought about by the internet, and SNM in particular, users have become more sceptical about the merits of brands and the relationships these attempt to develop with their digital audiences. Accordingly, one of the main features of Millennials is their common quest for authenticity in objects, brands,

events, consumption, and experiences (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Peñaloza, 2000). Faust and Householder (2009) state that people increasingly look for brands perceived to be as more authentic and genuine than the remainders. Additionally, brands that highlight its authenticity trait benefit by enhancing consumers' level of connection to the brand (Park, 2017). In line with this, research suggests that advertisements communicating brand-related cues are increasingly being used by consumers to make authenticity assessments (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016).

More customized social media content, that makes use of relevant authenticity cues, should help decrease the level of information overload and aid in customer decision-making processes, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Nonetheless, literature has shed little light in regards to how brands make use of authenticity cues under a SNM context, and the impact and results such use has on their SNM activities.

1.2. Aim

The main aims of this dissertation are to investigate whether and how brands use authenticity cues in their social media content and what impact does this strategy have on audience response. In order to achieve this, the dissertation sought answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Do brands strive to express authenticity in their social media content and what type of brand authenticity cues do they use?

RQ2: Do users react positively to brand authenticity cues on social media by increasing their engagement?

1.3. Scope

The e-commerce fashion industry in Europe amounted to \$101B in 2017 and is expected to grow up to 9% until 2022, corresponding to \$154B¹. In this sense, given the increasing interest surrounding the topic of e-commerce, the sector under study is that of luxury fashion e-tailers with relevant posting activity on Facebook at an international level, during 2018. Fashion e-tailer brands are brands that specialize in selling luxury fashion items from renowned luxury brands and boutiques, through an online marketplace that

¹ <https://www.shopify.com/enterprise/ecommerce-fashion-industry>

displays the products and in which users can browse through the products and carry on with the purchase, all in one site. Four brands with similar positioning and image, all operating in the European market, were selected to be evaluated in terms of their perceived authenticity: Farfetch, Zalando, MATCHESFASHION.COM and mytheresa. London-based Farfetch was founded in 2007, and currently reports an online following of 1,919,136 fans (Farfetch’s Facebook page – 15/11/2018), and a net revenue of \$386M² in 2017. Zalando was founded in Berlin in 2008, being the current European leader in the sector, with 6,660,010 Facebook followers (15/11/2018), and a net revenue of €4.5B³ (2017). MATCHESFASHION.COM is another London-based brand, that launched its e-commerce ventures in 2007, having amounted to £293M⁴ in net revenues (2017) and 170,910 Facebook fans (15/11/2018). Finally, mytheresa was founded in Munich, 2006, and counts with 315,539 Facebook likes (15/11/2018) and net revenues of €245M⁵ (2017).

1.4. Research Methods

With the aim of answering this study’s dissertation questions, the first part of the methodology encompassed collecting quantitative primary data, through an online survey administrated to prospect clients of the brands contacted on Facebook, from November 13th to November 16th, 2018. It totalled 105 valid responses. The objectives entailed collecting relevant data from consumers’ perspectives. Respondents were asked how familiar with the brands they were, so that solely those familiar with the brands could evaluate them in terms of their perceived brand authenticity (as ascertained by Morhart *et al.* (2014)). Some relevant demographic information was also requested.

Having reached the conclusion that Farfetch and Zalando were, respectively, the most and the least authentic brands, the second part of the study involved a mixed methods analysis: content analysis of posts and regression of post forms of engagement on results from content analysis. The content analysis of the posts was performed by two independent researchers to eliminate possible bias and included the collection of data, such as authenticity cues, visual stimuli, brand audience, and forms of engagement (reactions, comments, shares), all subsequently coded. As for the regression analysis of

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/aug/20/online-fashion-retailer-farfetch-stock-market-flotation>

³ <https://craft.co/zalando>

⁴ <https://cpp-luxury.com/matchesfashion-com-reports-booming-financials-for-2017/>

⁵ <https://www.theindustry.fashion/mytheresa-com-posts-year-end-sales-34/>

post engagement, the data was analysed through the software SPSS, in order to investigate how authenticity cues and the remaining control variables were affecting the forms of engagement.

The resulting findings from the secondary data enable to assess if content with authentic cues performs better, and thus if companies should capitalize on this type of content.

1.5. Relevance

The dissertation assists managers and marketers in developing effective SNM content strategies that lead to more effective and engaging interactions with the companies' consumers. Not many scholars have addressed the issue of authenticity cues on brand's Facebook posts, hence the relevance of thoroughly analysing this topic. By assessing how users react to these cues, companies can learn how to benefit from such posts, and how these lead to users further interacting (e.g. reacting) with the content. Businesses can learn to effectively cut costs by reducing the number of posts on Facebook, as only effective ones end up being posted.

Generally speaking, some relevant inferences and implications are drawn for content strategy in SNM. Accordingly, it is assessed how these authenticity cues and content strategy impact engagement and brand image.

Furthermore, the dissertation suggests a different approach to the analysis of Facebook posts, by studying its content and linking it to post performance. It thus proposes a complementary analysis for marketers to better implement communication strategies.

1.6. Dissertation Outline

The rest of this dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter 2 reviews strands of literature relevant to the research, namely brand authenticity and authenticity cues, and authenticity on social media and e-commerce, concluding with the takeaways relevant to the next stages of the dissertation. Chapter 3 presents the methodology implemented to collect and analyse the data from the implemented survey and the Facebook posts of the brands. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the results of the studies performed. Chapter 5 derives main academic and practical implications of the findings obtained, discusses potential limitations and proposes areas for future research.

2. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

This chapter reviews extant literature on brand authenticity and brand authenticity cues, including concept definition, measurement and analysis of impact on consumers and businesses. Furthermore, it presents literature findings on the authenticity trait on social media and e-commerce. The chapter concludes with the key takeaways, theories, and literature to be applied in the subsequent analyses taking place.

2.1. Branding and Brand Authenticity

The American Marketing Association defines brand as the “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers”⁶. Furthermore, despite the evolution of branding, more complex definitions are still not consensual among researchers, and are becoming increasingly more subjective and “each expert comes up with his or her own definition, or nuance to the definition” (Kapferer, 2012). Nevertheless, brands provide a differentiation point from the competition (Wood, 2000), hence their importance for companies’ strategy and success.

For companies, brand name is linked with business performance (Dawar, 2004; Munoz & Kumar, 2004), it facilitates brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990), and allows for better segmentation and targeting, avoiding “marketing myopia by thinking in terms of broad needs” (Park *et al.*, 1986). Brands also have an impact on consumers, as they enable them to identify products more easily, reducing the search costs (Ward & Lee, 2000) and diminish the consumption risk (Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2010). Furthermore, consumers take some attributes into consideration – namely price, brand name, packaging, and colour –, to decide on a brand purchase and infer product quality (Kardes *et al.*, 2004; Olson & Jacoby, 1972). Hence, brand plays a definite role in facilitating the decision-making process upon a purchase.

Brand name by itself seems to have become insufficient for consumers, who now look for ways to decipher if brands are genuine in their message and offerings. Perceived authenticity is deemed to be increasingly crucial for successful brands and it appears to be closely related to brand essence and uniqueness (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Consumers seek for authenticity in the current postmodern cultural context (Rose & Wood, 2005; Zavestoski, 2002). They further demand authenticity in various market offerings. These

⁶ <https://www.ama.org/resources/Pages/Dictionary.aspx?dLetter=B>

may range from frequently-consumed offerings, like reality television (Rose & Wood, 2005) and ethnic food restaurants (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Wang & Mattila, 2015), to less-consumed ones, as in the tourism (Buchmann *et al.*, 2010; Castéran & Roederer, 2013) and luxury wine industries (Beverland, 2005, 2006; Kniazeva & Charters, 2011).

Brand is a fundamental cue in the decision-making process upon a purchase of products with “multiple performance-related, aesthetic, and symbolic attributes” (Choi *et al.*, 2015). Brand authenticity plays a particularly important role in fashion brands, as attributes of authenticity may be transferred to luxury brands (Miller & Mills, 2012). For fashion brands, authenticity consists of seven factors: *authority*, *fashionability*, *consistency*, *innovativeness*, *sustainability*, *origin* and *heritage* (Choi *et al.*, 2015). From the analysis of several cases studies with fashion brands, it was concluded that fashion brands are perceived to be more authentic when: they are up-to-date with trends and are innovative, their products’ attributes are consistent across offerings, they are concerned with environmental and social causes, and when their activities reflect the brand’s origin and history. Furthermore, consumers in fact do not shop-around in different e-tailers, instead, they buy from one in which they trust and which they believe to be authentic (Choi *et al.*, 2012).

Bridger and Lewis (2011) associated the need for authenticity in consumption to the emergence of the *New Consumers*, characterized as being “individualistic, involved, independent, and well informed in their tastes and behaviours” (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This new segment entails the SNM savvies, with wide access to the internet. The internet enables them to be more involved and informed about market offerings, and hence supports their quest for authenticity. They can easily spot what may be fake or inauthentic, and are overall less loyal to a brand (Bridger & Lewis, 2011).

How firms can create and maintain images of authenticity is an area of study that is still greatly underdeveloped (Fine, 2003). Most literature depicts *authenticity* from a self and personal perspective. Taylor (1992), for instance, describes it as part of a process of dialogue between individuals with the aim of discovering and articulating their own identity. In the current postmodern world, consumers judge authenticity largely based on their emotional experiences (Lu *et al.*, 2015). From a business perspective, authenticity has been studied in the field of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Scholars here have assessed how authenticity can enrich the way firms think about core issues and how connected ethics and business practices are (Driver, 2006; Jackson, 2005; Ladkin, 2006). Liedtka (2008) also studied the search for creating a more authentic

corporate self, which brings the possibility of improving moral good and business outcome.

It is becoming increasingly imperative to manage the perceptions of real or fake held by consumers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). People increasingly make purchase decisions based on how authentic they perceive an offering to be. Holt (2002) argued that consumers' acceptance of a brand derives from the way it contributes to identity projects. This author described authenticity as a high cultural consumer process resulting in two types of consumer behaviours: cultivating or avoiding mass-produced objects (Holt, 1998). Authenticity seems also to be more present in unique objects, as opposed to mass-marketed brands. Corroborating this view is the existence of some consumers that ban popular brands to emphasize their own artistic creations (Kozinets, 2002). Notwithstanding, highly self-authentic consumers are more likely to choose an authentic brand, compared to less authentic consumers, as the latter assign less significance to authenticity and are thus more indifferent to a brand's degree of authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2014).

Brand authenticity can be considered as a trait of brand image (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012). It relates to the extent to which a brand is perceived to be honest and real (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial for brands to control how authentic consumers perceive them to be and prevent any ambiguities about this. Some scholars have established that consumers see authenticity as beneficial because provides them with an escape from fake and inauthentic marketing practices (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999; Holt, 2002) and hence helps guide their consumption choices (Liao & Ma, 2009). Accordingly, managing and exploiting consumers' perception of authenticity has become a new source of competitive advantage, from which firms can derive brand value (Beverland & Luxton, 2005). Some businesses have been emphasising the history behind the brand as an indicator or cue of legitimacy and authenticity (Brown *et al.*, 2003). In this way, brand history has also become a source of market value (Beverland, 2005; Peñaloza, 2000). On the other hand, other businesses are actually reducing perceived authenticity in the technology world by continuing to employ cost-cutting technologies. Still, to counterbalance the loss of personal interaction, they can make these technologies and interactions more playful, personal, and thus equally desirable.

2.1.1. Authenticity Cues

Consumers consider cues and choose brands as part of an authenticating act (Arnould & Price, 2000; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). They experience authenticity differently, using cues to assess the authenticity of an object based on their previous knowledge or personal interests (Grazian, 2005). The construction of authenticity is, therefore, subjective and depends on social and personal influences (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). Beverland and Farrelly (2010) argue that consumers focus on cues in objects that for them convey an authenticity trait. This trait emerges from consumers' perceptions (e.g., the brand's essence as communicated through its marketing cues) (Brown *et al.*, 2003), as opposed to the brand's objective properties (Morhart *et al.*, 2014). In particular, consumers may draw on indexical, iconic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart *et al.*, 2014), or existential (Morhart *et al.*, 2014) cues to make authenticity judgements.

Indexical cues refer to the attributes of a brand providing a physical or behavioural confirmation of what the brand claims to be, or to deliver (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart *et al.*, 2014). Brand authenticity perceptions arise in this case from observable evidence that can be verified, with the presence of cues that reinforce continuance of historic practices (Beverland *et al.*, 2008), such as labels of origin, method of production, age, ingredients, or performance (Morhart *et al.*, 2014). Advertisements containing indexical cues were shown to be more successful (Beverland *et al.*, 2008) than those relying on other types of authenticity cues.

In the absence of other objective information, consumers may rely on brand behaviour as source of indexical information. Brand behaviour manifests, for instance, in the form of corporate scandals (e.g., ecological, financial, quality, or child labour scandals) (Morhart *et al.*, 2014), that portray a perception of irresponsibility (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Brand scandals are hence indexical cues for a brand's inability to act according to moral acts. Other observable cue is the behaviour of employees who represent the brand. Employee behaviour congruent with the brand's (i.e., employee behaviour aligned with the brand's promises) reinforces consumers' perceptions of authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2014). Such congruence happens when employees act according to the brand's values and mission, demonstrating that the brand is true to itself.

Iconic cues are impression-based brand characteristics, i.e., qualities that suggest a fit between a consumer's mental picture of what an authentic market offering should be like and a particular brand (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). An authentic image can be projected

by a communication style focused on brand motivations, which encompass a brand's moral values, sincere motivations in execution and care for customers (Morhart *et al.*, 2014). These messages convey the brand's commitment of going beyond business interests (Beverland *et al.*, 2008). Iconic cues may be transformed into indexical ones, when consumers take a personal ownership of experiences, giving brands/objects/events an indexical character (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

Lastly, existential cues relate to self-referential characteristics of a brand in consumer-brand relationships (Morhart *et al.*, 2014). Such cues accrue from brand anthropomorphism, i.e., the extent to which consumers humanize and personify a brand (Aaker & Fournier, 1995) and may arise when consumers connect their childhood and feelings of nostalgia to a brand (Morhart *et al.*, 2014).

Researcher suggests that advertisements communicating brand-related cues are used by consumers to make authenticity assessments (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016). The impact of different types of authenticity cues embedded in advertisements may imply that consumers responses to brands are context-dependent (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016). Consumers can perceive a brand as authentic if its brand managers are perceived to be intrinsically motivated (that is, "passionate about and devoted to providing their products") (Moulard *et al.*, 2016). Thus, behavioural (extrinsic) cues can be perceived to be more authentic and truthful than those in brand communications (Moulard *et al.*, 2016).

In order to engage consumers, marketers can embed authenticity cues in their social media activity. Engaging communications demand trust and the use of persuasive cues. Brands can incorporate such cues in their campaigns by attaching pictures of testimonials from customers and employees, signalling for social presence behind the technology. Van Koningsbruggen *et al.* (2017) hypothesised that SNM users associate social media networks usage with a hedonic state. Such state is activated through both perceptual (e.g. seeing the icon of the Facebook app on the smartphone) and internal cues (e.g. thinking about checking Facebook), thus inducing users to desire to access SNM. Frequent Facebook users have a more favourable reaction in response to Facebook cues and media content than those who do not use it as regularly. Companies can leverage on the heavy use of social media nowadays, as well as in the fact that most people have a truth bias and are consequently likely to consider the information they come across as being genuine rather than false (Levine, 2014; Williams & Muir, 2016).

The wide reach and information overload of SNM have redesigned how users navigate them, relying on cues representing personal interests (Sundar, 2008). Based on Sundar's model (2008), further researches have established that authority cues (i.e., cues that consumers use to assess how credible a website is, by evaluating if the source is or not an official authority) are the most credible (Lin *et al.*, 2016).

Teng and Khong (2015) studied the use of cues as a form of persuasion in online social relationships (Pan & Chiou, 2011), assessing its impact on users' degree of interaction with brands (Zhang *et al.*, 2014) and the volume of online reviews (Li & Wang, 2013). Peripheral cues are those that play a role in psychological information processing in attitude formation and change, and encompass source attractiveness, endorsement, source expertise, reputation, source credibility, argument quantity, moods, price, message framing, and group consensus. Individuals who lack motivation to process cues fully resort to peripheral cues as shortcuts to make judgements and form attitudes. In this context of persuasion in SNM, most users were found to be using peripheral cues (e.g. friend's recommendation or celebrity endorsement) in the decision-making process, possibly due to the information overload they are exposed to (Teng & Khong, 2015). Managers are then advised to use this type of cues in a SNM setting, for better persuading their audience through advertisement.

Consumers are still reticent about purchasing online due to the lack of social contact with brands and their employees (Lowry *et al.*, 2010). To address this, e-tailers can integrate cues in their communications that enhance the level of social presence. Karimov & Brengman (2011) concluded that retailers selling products of higher symbolic and monetary values, as is the case of luxury fashion e-tailers, utilize more SNM cues to compensate the lack of social interaction. The cues comprised the use of pictures of testimonials and employees, integrated SNM and reviews and ratings left by other users.

2.1.2. Measuring Brand Authenticity

In a consumption context, consumers develop their own interpretations of what is authenticity (Lu *et al.*, 2015), which makes it difficult to measure. Still, many authors have attempted to develop techniques and measurement instruments to assess brand authenticity. Consumers' search for authenticity in consumption and experiences is driven by individual goals and motivations (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Thus, most literature depicts tools to measure brand authenticity from a consumer perspective (Bruhn

et al., 2012; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Morhart *et al.*, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014).

Bruhn *et al.* (2012) developed a psychometric scale that attempted to reflect consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity. Based on qualitative research, these authors proposed that brand authenticity was composed of four underlying dimensions:

1 – *Continuity*, consisting on the brand perpetrating the sense of tradition and heritage across time;

2 – *Originality*, which has to do with the brand stimulating the “local icon value”, i.e., symbols and values that represent a local/culture are embodied in the company's culture. Such dimension can be transmitted to consumers through storytelling techniques in advertising.

3 – *Reliability*, which has to do with the brand being able to keep promises and being reliable, by “creating a unified brand perception” (e.g., establishing fixed brand references, like logo, images, font) and having a consistent communication across different target groups.

4 – *Naturalness*, which refers to a brand being “genuine and/or natural”.

Napoli and colleagues (2014) resorted to quantitative research to develop and validate a consumer-based psychometric scale to measure brand authenticity, which is composed of three main dimensions: quality commitment, sincerity and heritage. *Quality commitment* relates to craftsmanship and attention to detail, so that firms commit to “providing enduring high quality products and services” (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). *Sincerity* reflects how the brand sticks to its values and principles. *Heritage* is associated with nostalgia and design consistency, and the notion that market offerings should reflect brand heritage and not deviate from its core principles.

Morhart *et al.* (2014) also developed a scale to measure brand authenticity from the consumers' perspective, which entails four dimensions: *continuity*, *credibility*, *integrity*, and *symbolism*. These arose from both literature review and in-depth interviews. *Continuity* reflects a brand's consistency with its history across time and “ability to transcend trends”. *Credibility* encompasses the extent to which a brand delivers on its promises. *Integrity* is based on the virtue the brand's intentions and values communicated. The dimension *symbolism* concerns the ability a brand has to reflect the values and relationships consumers consider meaningful for their identity construction (Morhart *et al.*, 2014).

Overall, literature describes the need for authentic brands to be true to their story, tradition and heritage in order to subsist across time (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, some scholars suggest that a brand should be “reliable” and thus “keep its promises” (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Morhart *et al.*, 2014; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014), as well as being able to provide consumers with original and innovative market offerings (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). Other authors propose that a brand is perceived to be authentic the more it reflects its own and consumers’ values and principles in its practices and offerings (Morhart *et al.*, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014).

2.1.3. Outcomes of Brand Authenticity

With consumer’s recent quest for authenticity, many brands have tried to integrate authenticity claims in their experiences, products, and communications. These claims need to capture what the target expects and desires (Molleda, 2010). As mentioned earlier, for an unknown or new brand, consumers use extrinsic cues to *predict product quality* (Moulard *et al.*, 2016). Taking a more a self-focus perspective, it can be said that consumers derive benefits from authentic “commercial objects”. These confer them with self-authentication goals, including the goals of *being in control* (i.e., responding to the desire for personal sovereignty), *being connected* (to place, others, community) and *being virtuous* (representing their “authentic self” as judged by their set of moral values). Guèvremont & Grohmann (2016) identified two moderators of brand authenticity effects – situational and individual differences variables –, in this way showing that consumers’ need to self-authenticate by resorting to authentic brands may differ widely across individuals and contexts.

Perceived brand authenticity can help sustain *enduring brand-customer relationships*. It is therefore advisable that brand management prioritises the establishment of brand authenticity, as strategically this is a source of economic value (Choi *et al.*, 2015). While most brands still continue to positioning themselves purely on the basis of quality, they should consider positioning as being more authentic, by demonstrating that such trait is core to the brand (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, several positive outcomes can arise from consumers perceiving a brand to be authentic. It has been argued that perceived authenticity increases the level of *brand trust* (Moulard *et al.*, 2016), for instance, i.e., the belief consumers have that the brand will fulfil its promise (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This, in turn, enhances perceptions of

competence and integrity, thereby decreasing the level of perceived purchase risk (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014).

Several studies have revealed that brand authenticity can positively influence *brand choice likelihood, attachment, commitment* and *loyalty* (Choi *et al.*, 2015; Morhart *et al.*, 2014), thereby contributing to an extended consumer-brand relationship. Brand attachment relates to the emotional connection and/or response to brands (Fritz *et al.*, 2017), and it may arise from brand trust, emotional experience or quality (Paxton & Moody, 2003). Perceived authenticity fosters stronger emotional bonds, enhancing consumer loyalty and “consumer tolerance for bad brand experience (i.e., the willingness to forgive mistakes)” (Fritz *et al.*, 2017). The second effect, brand commitment, despite being also significantly influenced by attachment, refers more to the wish of consumers to maintain a long-term and valuable relationship with a brand. Assiouras *et al.* (2015) have further uncovered that brand authenticity affects brand attachment, which, in turn, positively *purchase intention, willingness to pay* and *word-of-mouth* (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, brand loyalty is intrinsically connected to the previous effects, referring to consumers who consistently purchase products from the same brand and have little intention to switch to other brands. Once marketers and managers succeed at assessing and measuring authenticity, they may identify new ways for positioning and value creation, consequently contributing to greater consumer loyalty and brand attachment (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Finally, other scholars have concluded that developing the authenticity trait may enable brands to effectively *deliver value* and *satisfy human needs* (Moore & Wurster, 2007), and *improve communications and business performance* (Molleda, 2010). Under the context of the luxury wine industry, firms specifically rely on perceived authenticity for wanted outcomes that encompass “*status, command price premiums* and *ward off competitors*” (Beverland, 2005).

2.2. Authenticity in SNM and E-commerce

SNM are the new “contextual environment” to shape authenticity (Wang & Skovira, 2017). The use of this digital marketing tool, when aligned with the use of content deemed authentic, can dictate more meaningful market relationships and competitive advantage. Wang and Skovira (2017) point out that given SNM’s lack of real-time control and immediacy, content may become dubious. As consumers increasingly search for authenticity in any market offering, they will also look for authentic content. By providing

users with authentic content, marketers may propel the rate of engagement on SNM, and consequently improve their marketing performance.

Some concerns were raised about the fact that branding is an often underused and under-recognised resource in e-commerce (Ind, 2001), namely due to the apparent ease with which this type of businesses have been established and their speed of growth. Brands have first to establish a reputation for quality products and build trust with e-shoppers, in order to drive demand and be perceived as an authentic business (Mukherjee & Michael, 2016). Furthermore, e-commerce businesses face a serious online security threat, meaning that consumers need to trust the integrity and honesty of e-dealers (Mukherjee & Michael, 2016). Cai *et al.* (2018) have asserted that a high-quality user experience on the e-commerce platform stimulates online purchases, whereas the level of content authenticity and detail considerably impacts the user experience. On another note, users have become more sceptical about other users' e-evaluations. Therefore, the authenticity of product evaluations is increasingly crucial, as it may help guide consumers' purchase decisions (Qiu, 2018).

2.3. Conclusions

The quest for authenticity has affected all sides of the economy. Consumers are increasingly looking for authenticity in any market offering, including brands themselves. Furthermore, marketers have been resorting to SNM to shape perceived authenticity among consumers, for which the presence of authentic content is key. Under this context, consumers evaluate authenticity thanks to a set of cues. By providing users with authentic content, marketers may propel the rate of engagement on SNM, and consequently improve their marketing performance.

Notwithstanding, little is still known about how brands objectively put perceived authenticity to use, i.e., how brands express authenticity in their social media content and what type of brand authenticity cues they use. In addition, it is important to ascertain if, in fact, users are positively reacting to brand authenticity cues on SNM by, for instance, increasing their engagement. In this regard, the present dissertation intended to uncover these matters, taking into consideration the findings of prior research revised in this chapter.

Table 1 summarizes the main conclusions derived from the review of studies on brand authenticity, including authenticity cues and forms of measuring this concept.

Table 1 – Overview of Brand Authenticity studies: concept, cues and measurement.

Author(s)/ Year	Methodology/ Approach	Dimensions of Brand Authenticity/Main Conclusions	Authenticity Cues
Bruhn <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measurement scale that reflects consumer’s perceptions of brand authenticity. - Brand authenticity is a construct consisting of four distinct dimensions: <i>continuity</i>, <i>originality</i>, <i>reliability</i>, and <i>naturalness</i>. Respondents asked to rate statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 ‘not at all’ – 7 ‘very much’). <i>Continuity</i>: “to be stable and/or continuous over time”; associated with tradition and brand’s heritage. <i>Originality</i>: “to be creative, original, and/or innovative”; based on stimulating “local icon value” (i.e. symbols and values that represent a local/culture incorporated in the company’s culture; e.g., storytelling through advertising). <i>Reliability</i>: “to keep promises and/or be reliable”; through “creating a unified brand perception” (which entails establishing fixed brand references, e.g. logo, font, images); communication needs to be consistent across different target groups. <i>Naturalness</i>: “to be genuine and/or natural”. 	- n/a
Choi <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Qualitative analysis of brand cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Holistic approach: to assess dimensions of brand authenticity and to examine the causal effect of brand authenticity on brand attachment, brand commitment, and brand loyalty. - Fashion brand authenticity consists of seven factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Authority</i>: relates to how the brand is perceived by the consumers. <i>‘Fashionability’</i>: if the products and brand are up-to-date in terms of trends and customer’s taste. <i>Consistency</i>: if the image, style, and price are consistent across products. <i>Innovativeness</i>: if it is distinguishable from other brands and offer innovative products. <i>Sustainability</i>: associated with environmental and social causes/responsibility. <i>Origin</i>: related to the brand’s country of origin and identity. <i>Heritage</i>: the continuity and respect for the brand’s history. - <i>Authority</i>, <i>‘Fashionability’</i>, <i>Innovativeness</i>, and <i>Sustainability</i> were significant predictors of brand attachment. - <i>Authority</i>, <i>Consistency</i>, and <i>Innovativeness</i> were significant predictors of brand loyalty. 	- Brand (authenticity) is a critical cue in the consumer decision-making process, for brands with similar attributes.
Napoli <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Four studies - quantitative methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consumer-based brand authenticity (CBBA) psychometrical scale, comprising three dimensions of brand authenticity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Quality commitment</i>: craftsmanship <i>Sincerity</i>: related to a brand’s values and principles. <i>Heritage</i>: nostalgia and design consistency - Brand authenticity is a significant predictor of purchase intentions and empirically discriminated from brand trust and credibility. 	- Consumers use the three dimensions of BA as cues to assess the authenticity of a brand.
Morhart, Malär, & Grèvermont (2014)	Literature review & interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scale measuring consumers’ perceived brand authenticity (PBA) in four dimensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Continuity</i>: “reflects a brand’s timelessness, historicity, and its ability to transcend trends”. <i>Credibility</i>: “brand’s willingness and ability to deliver on their promises”. <i>Integrity</i>: “based on virtue reflected in the brand’s intentions and in the values it communicates”. <i>Symbolism</i>: “ability to reflect values or relationships consumers deem important for identity construction”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cues’ influence is moderated by consumers’ level of marketing scepticism. - Brand authenticity perceptions are influenced by indexical, existential, and iconic cues. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Indexical cues</i>: evidence-based brand characteristics. <i>Iconic cues</i>: impression-based brand characteristics. <i>Existential cues</i>: self-referential brand characteristics.

The analysis of brand authenticity measurement scales reported in literature resulted in four relevant scales (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Morhart *et al.*, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014) that measured the construct in several dimensions, from a self-perspective. As for the authenticity cues, extensive literature was also analysed, from which it was concluded that consumers may draw on indexical, iconic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart *et al.*, 2014), or existential (Morhart *et al.*, 2014) cues to make object authenticity judgements

Morhart *et al.* (2014) present a perceived brand authenticity scale consistent across industries and products, whose dimensions and brand authenticity construct are intrinsically related to the authenticity cues mentioned above. Therefore, these measures and approach will be used to guide the subsequent steps of this research, given that it provides with the most useful insights for this study. Namely, the scale will be used to identify the brands to be further studied, by measuring their differing levels of brand authenticity, whereas the cues will be used in the analysis of SNM communications of selected brands.

3. METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach used in this dissertation, in order to answer the research questions earlier proposed. This chapter presents the research approach adopted, as well as the data collection methods – for both primary and secondary data – and the data analysis tools employed.

3.1. Research Approach

Saunders *et al.* (2013) distinguish two types of research approaches. The first, deductive research, looks to test a theory. It is concerned with developing hypotheses derived from the theory/literature. From that, an empirical research strategy is designed in order to test them. In sum, it is based on positivism scientific principles, moving from theory to data, and aims at explaining causal relationships between variables. In the inductive approach, conversely, data are collected, analysed, and then a theory is developed based on the empirical results.

The research purpose of a study can be one of three (or a mix): exploratory, descriptive, and/or explanatory studies. Exploratory research wishes to clarify the nature of a problem which has not previously been thoroughly studied. Its purpose is to identify and broadly describe new phenomena (i.e. theory-building), through the collection and analysis of qualitative primary data. Descriptive studies are used for clarifying and detailing a phenomenon previously studied. Theories are built based on empirical generalization regarding relationships among variables. This approach entails collecting and analysing quantitative secondary data. Lastly, explanatory research is used for testing the causal relationships between variables that underlie a problem, and for which there are theoretical insights that allow the formulation of hypotheses. This is a deductive approach, i.e., it is a theory-testing approach, for which quantitative primary data is collected and analysed to test the hypotheses.

The present dissertation followed both deductive and descriptive approaches, as they best fitted its aims. Firstly, quantitative primary data were collected through an online survey (descriptive approach), as a means to evaluate the perceived brand authenticity of a set of luxury fashion e-tailers. This method was chosen given its standardized format, which allows for easy comparison (Saunders *et al.*, 2013) of all tested brands. The second part of the study (deductive approach) encompassed a mixed methods analysis (content analysis of posts and regression of post forms of engagement on results from content

analysis) of data collected from the two chosen brands' Facebook pages, guided by extant theory on brand authenticity.

Content analysis is a qualitative research method intended at examining communication messages from a variety of data sources (e.g. textual data, images, videos), according to previously specified rules and procedures (Krippendorff, 2018; Riffe *et al.*, 2014; Stemler, 2015). Facebook posts were analysed in terms of authenticity, according to Morhart *et al.*'s (2014) specified cues (iconic, indexical, existential). Other collected information included the number of fans each page had for a continuous number of days (brand audience), as well as the type of visual stimuli used (video vs image), and the reactions, comments, shares, and date of each post.

3.2. Online Survey: population and sampling

The statistical population of this study can be defined as European citizens who use SNM as a means to interact with brands. A convenience sampling method and a snowballing technique were employed to recruit respondents, resulting in a sample composed not only of prospect clients of the brands (e.g., brand fans), but also their peers and acquaintances. Respondents were contacted and asked to participate in the study via Facebook, to ensure all of them used this SNM to some extent. The survey was designed and administrated through Qualtrics for three days, from November 13th to November 16th, 2018. A total of 125 responses were obtained. From these, 20 were disregarded given that they corresponded to incomplete survey responses, yielding a final valid sample of 105 observations. Table 2 presents the main socio-demographic characteristics of the corresponding respondents.

Table 2 – Age, gender and nationality distribution of survey respondents (N=105).

Gender	Female	77,1% (81)
	Male	22,9% (24)
Age	18-21	18,1% (19)
	22-25	71,4% (75)
	25-33	5,7% (11)
Nationality	Eastern Europeans	3,8% (4)
	Northern European	1,9% (2)
	Southern European	88,6% (93)
	Western European	4,8% (5)
	Non-European	1% (1)

3.3. Online Survey: design

Four fashion e-tailer brands with similar positioning and image, all operating in the European market, were selected to be evaluated in terms of their perceived authenticity: Farfetch, Zalando, MATCHESFASHION.COM and mytheresa.

To ensure that respondents only evaluated the authenticity of e-tailer brands they knew to some extent, the survey was structured into four blocks of questions (each concerning one of the brands under evaluation), presented to respondents in random order. depicts the structure of questions in each block. It was assumed that if respondents followed a brand on SNM, then they were sufficiently familiar with it to evaluate its authenticity. When this was not the case, respondents' brand familiarity was assessed through the administration of a 3-item scale, assessing familiarity, experience and knowledge relatively to the focal brand (Kent & Allen, 1994). Answers were provided in anchored 7-point response scales (1=unfamiliar/unexperienced/unknowledgeable, to 7=familiar/experienced/knowledgeable). Only respondents that did not rate any of the three items with a 1 proceeded to evaluate brand authenticity. The remainder were directed to the following block, where the structure of questions about another brand was repeated.

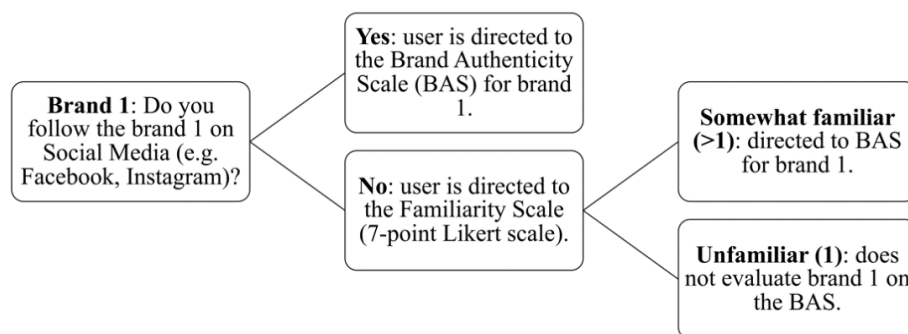


Figure 1 – Survey Structure per block/brand.

Brand authenticity was measured using the psychometric scale developed by Morhart *et al.* (2014) (Figure 2). To this end, respondents indicated their level of agreement with the 15 items composing the scale by rating them on 7-point Likert-type response scales (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

At the end of the survey, some basic demographic information (age, gender and nationality) was also collected from respondents.

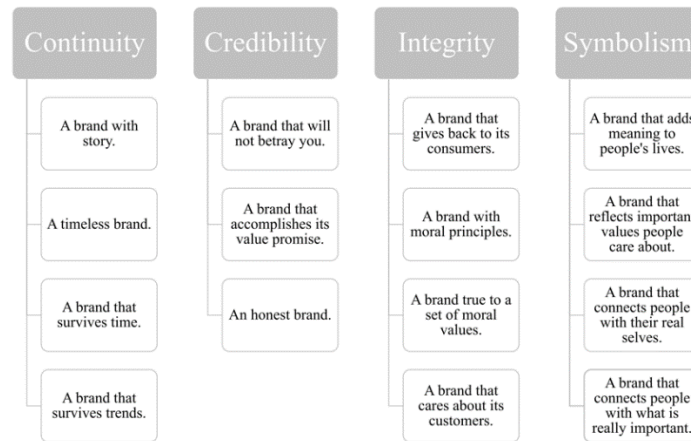


Figure 2 – The brand authenticity scale used in the survey: dimensions and items (Morhart et al., 2014).

3.4. Online Survey: data analysis

The reliability of the familiarity and authenticity scales employed in the survey was measured for each brand. Regarding the familiarity scale, Cronbach alpha values were .71 ($N=35$) for Farfetch, .54 ($N=22$) for mytheresa, .74 ($N=19$) for MATCHESFASHION.COM, and .82 ($N=16$) for Zalando. A correlation analysis showed that the item ‘experience’ correlated poorly (.17) with the other two scale items for the brand mytheresa, which explained the low alpha value observed. In view of this, new variables were computed for the mean familiarity of the four brands, referring to the scores on three items, with the exception of mytheresa, whose new mean familiarity variable entailed only the scores on the ‘familiarity’ and ‘knowledgeable’ items. Regarding brand authenticity, the Cronbach alpha values obtained were .96 ($N=95$) for Farfetch, .97 ($N=45$) for mytheresa, .96 ($N=44$) for MATCHESFASHION.COM, and .96 ($N=54$) for Zalando. In view of this, new variables were computed for the mean authenticity of the four brands, referring to the scores on the items considered.

Table 3 presents the descriptives for number of followers, brand familiarity and brand authenticity. Farfetch had the highest number of followers among respondents, followed by Zalando, MATCHESFASHION.COM, and mytheresa. The remaining respondents, who did not follow the brands on Facebook, declared to be familiar the most with mytheresa and MATCHESFASHION.COM, and least familiar with Farfetch and Zalando. From these, familiar respondents evaluated brand authenticity to be highest for Farfetch and lowest for Zalando.

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Table 3 – Descriptives of number of followers, brand familiarity and brand authenticity in regard to the four e-tailers assessed by survey respondents (N =105).

	SNM followers	Brand familiarity		Perceived brand authenticity	
		N	(Mean ± SD)	N	(Mean ± SD)
FARFETCH	58% (61 respondents)	35	3.85 ± 1.50	95	5.18 ± 1.18
MYTHERESA	22% (23 respondents)	22	4.40 ± 1.56	45	4.90 ± 1.18
MATCHESFASHION.COM	24% (25 respondents)	19	4.15 ± 1.78	44	4.87 ± 1.08
ZALANDO	34% (36 respondents)	16	3.89 ± 1.93	54	4.79 ± 1.18

To test the statistical significance of mean differences (i.e. whether the mean difference between two sets of observations is null), a *paired samples t-test* was conducted by pairing up the mean values for the brand authenticity of all brands. The hypotheses were as follows: $H_0: \mu_{\text{difference}} = 0$; $H_1: \mu_{\text{difference}} \neq 0$. With a confidence level of 95%, the results showed that the mean brand authenticity of Farfetch was significantly higher than that of all other brands ($t=3.990$, $p=.000$, for mytheresa; $t=3.844$, $p=.000$, for MATCHESFASHION.COM; $t=4.190$, $p=.000$, for Zalando) (Table 4).

Table 4 – Results of the Paired Samples T-Tests for the different pairs formed by the brands, to assess significant mean differences in the brand authenticity scale among them.

Pairs	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
<i>Farfetch & mytheresa</i>	3.990	40	.000
<i>Farfetch & MATCHESFASHION.COM</i>	3.844	41	.000
<i>Farfetch & Zalando</i>	4.190	45	.000
<i>mytheresa & MATCHESFASHION.COM</i>	1.559	31	.129
<i>mytheresa & Zalando</i>	-.354	32	.726
<i>MATCHESFASHION.COM & Zalando</i>	.634	32	.531

However, there were no statistically significant differences between any of the pairs formed by MATCHESFASHION, mytheresa and Zalando ($p>.05$). In view of this, another criterion had to be employed to select the brand with the lowest level of authenticity. As mentioned earlier, Zalando is the European leader in terms of net revenues. Indeed, according to Paton (2015), “Berlin’s mass-market platform Zalando” is the most distinct brand (net revenues) compared to its competition. Therefore, given its mass-market status, it could be said perhaps it is seen by the public as the least authentic of the listed e-tailers.

3.5. Analysis of SNM content and performance: population and sample

All contents posted by Farfetch and Zalando on their brand Facebook pages between September 20th and November 27th, 2018 were collected and analysed. This corresponded to an analysis timeframe of roughly two months in the brands' SNM activity. The chosen unit of analysis was day within this timeframe, to which one or more posts for each brand could correspond. Relevant Facebook metrics assessing user responses to a post, namely reactions, comments, shares, and number of fans, was equally collected and analysed. The analysis of the Facebook pages of both brands, Farfetch and Zalando, resulted in a total of 201 post observations (101 from Farfetch, 100 from Zalando).

3.6. Analysis of SNM content and performance: study design

For the analysis of the posts' content (e.g., text, image, video), the used method was content analysis. This entails a thorough qualitative analysis of all posts and, subsequently, their codification according to previously specified rules (namely, the authenticity cues' classification). Several other characteristics of the posts were also scrutinized, such as the presence of any sort of visual and video stimuli, besides the textual data and links, as this could moderate response to authenticity cues. For feasibility reasons, images were considered to be any photography, previews of links containing pictures, and digital illustrations; videos encompassed both videos (embed or not) and gifs.

As for the brand audience size, it was estimated by the mean number of Facebook likes, collected for a set of days (from November 15th to November 27th, 2018). Farfetch's brand audience totalled 1,911,934, whereas Zalando's was 6,667,877. This variable may be useful, given the differing numbers that may be encountered between the two brands' posts, i.e., it may act as a control variable, given the different followings of the brands.

3.7. Analysis of SNM content and performance: data analysis

The content of posts was analysed by two independent coders, who counted how many indexical, iconic and existential cues appeared in them. Cue classification followed the definitions provided by Morhart *et al.* (2014) (Table 5).

Table 5 – Definition and classification of brand authenticity cues (Morhart et al., 2014).

Cues	Definitions
<i>Iconic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cues that reinforce the continuance of historic practices, i.e. posts may address <u>historicity</u>, <u>heritage</u>, <u>locality</u>, <u>tradition</u>, and <u>pedigree</u> (brand’s roots) features. - Cues may be present not only in textual data (e.g. hashtags), but also in the visual stimuli (e.g. video, image).
<i>Indexical</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Iconic authenticity are impression-based brand characteristics, which create a fit with consumers’ expectations and perceptions. - Brands show to be committed by displaying dedication to consumers, i.e., they try to portray their <u>motivation to serve customers well</u> as sincere, and include a human factor (<u>care for consumers</u>) in their communications. - Cues show they are committed to <u>go beyond profitability</u> and economic interest by putting <u>the consumer first</u>, <u>establishing personal relationships</u> with consumers and/or <u>exclusive partnerships with other brands</u> their consumers value, by <u>highlighting their customers know best</u>, etc.
<i>Existential</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These cues entail the attribution of <u>human characteristics and features to nonhuman entities</u>. Brands can achieve it by acting and typing as if they were in fact a human person directly addressing the consumers or giving the own brand and brands they collaborate with workers’ face.

Figures 3 and 4 exemplify the coding of indexical and existential cues, respectively, according to the cue classification system considered. The post in Figure 3 highlights that the customers know best, giving freedom to consumers to customize the advertised items, portraying the idea that there is an intrinsic intention from the brand to demonstrate care for the consumer. Furthermore, it includes an exclusive partnership with a fashion brand consumers value. The post in Figure 4 depicts human characteristics, namely the brand uses the first person to address users and emojis as a way to show emotions.



Figure 3 – Example of a post from Farfetch deemed to contain an indexical authenticity cue.



Figure 4 – Example of a post from Zalando deemed to contain an indexical authenticity cue.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present chapter presents and discusses the results of the data analysis from the Facebook posts of the brands. The collected data was prepared and followed the methodology described in the preceding chapter.

4.1. Effects on post engagement

4.1.1. Descriptives

Sampled posts for Farfetch generated a mean of 41 reactions ($SD=38$), 1 comment ($SD=3$) and 1 share ($SD=1$), whereas sample posts for Zalando generated a mean of 999 reactions ($SD=806$), 12 comments ($SD=20$) and 10 shares ($SD=10$) (Table 6).

Table 6 – Mean values and standard deviations of reactions, comments, and shares of Farfetch and Zalando's Facebook posts.

Forms of Engagement	Farfetch (N=101) (Mean \pm SD)	Zalando (N=100) (Mean \pm SD)
<i>Reactions</i>	41 \pm 38	999 \pm 806
<i>Comments</i>	1 \pm 3	12 \pm 20
<i>Shares</i>	1 \pm 1	10 \pm 10

Moreover, to ascertain if there were significant differences between the mean values of both brands' forms of engagement, an *independent samples t-test* was performed (Table 7). Levene's test, concluded that the variance in the *reactions*, *comments*, and *shares* of Farfetch is significantly different than that of Zalando, thus violating the assumption of homogeneity of variances ($p<.05$). Furthermore, the *t-test* found that the post performance metrics verified a statistically significant difference in the mean values, for Farfetch and Zalando (*reactions*: $t=-11.888$, $p=.000$; *comments*: $t=-5.560$, $p=.000$; *shares*: $t=-9.055$, $p=.000$). Meaning that there was a significant difference in mean *reactions*, *comments*, and *shares* between Farfetch and Zalando. The average number of *reactions* for Zalando was superior in 959 reactions, compared to the average of Farfetch. For the remainder forms of engagement, Zalando had 11 more *comments* and 9 more *shares* than the average of the same metrics of Farfetch. Additionally, given that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not met and Levene's test results were statistically significant, a *Mann-Whitney U test* was also conducted. This test yielded the same results as the *t-test*.

Table 7 – Independent Samples t-test and Levene’s test for reactions, comments, and shares.

Forms of Engagement	Levene’s Test		Independent Samples t-test			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean difference (Zalando vs Farfetch)
<i>Reactions</i>	180.801	.000	-11.888	99.440	.000	959
<i>Comments</i>	28.626	.000	-5.560	103.553	.000	11
<i>Shares</i>	61.326	.000	-9.055	101.746	.000	9

In terms of the visual stimuli present in the branded posts, both Farfetch and Zalando gave clear preference to images relatively to video, with images being present in approximately 90% (for Farfetch) and 80% (for Zalando) of posts. Regarding the use of authenticity cues in posts (Table 8), both brands under study clearly prioritised the use of iconic cues over existential and indexical cues. However, Farfetch used more existential than indexical cues in its posts, whereas the opposite was true for Zalando (Table 8). In such regard, it can be inferred that both brands follow dissimilar strategies in terms of authenticity cues use on Facebook posts. Despite both Farfetch and Zalando using iconic cues in most of their activity, Farfetch prefers using existential cues, as opposed to Zalando, which prefers using indexical cues. The different content strategies may be presumably affecting the degree of brand authenticity perceived by customers.

Table 8 – Use of authenticity cues (indexical, iconic, existential) by Farfetch and Zalando (N = 201).

		Indexical Cues		Iconic Cues		Existential Cues	
		# posts not containing cue	# posts containing cue	# posts not containing cue	# posts containing cue	# posts not containing cue	# posts containing cue
Brand	<i>Zalando</i>	73	27	5	95	83	17
	<i>Farfetch</i>	82	19	4	97	74	27
Total		155	46	9	192	157	44

4.1.2. Regression Analyses

Three linear regressions were ran to assess how the independent variables considered (*AC_Indexical*, *AC_Existential* - *AC_Iconic* left out as dummy variable) affected the dependent variables (*Reactions*, *Comments*, *Shares*), when controlling for the existence

of visual stimuli in the posts and size of brand audience (*Visual_Stimuli*, and *Brand_Audience*, coded as dummies).

The regression equations assumed were as follows:

Model 1:

$$\text{Reactions} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot AC_Indexical + \beta_2 \cdot AC_Existential + \beta_3 \cdot Visual_Stimuli + \beta_4 \cdot Brand_Audience + \varepsilon$$

Model 2:

$$\text{Comments} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot AC_Indexical + \beta_2 \cdot AC_Existential + \beta_3 \cdot Visual_Stimuli + \beta_4 \cdot Brand_Audience + \varepsilon$$

Model 3:

$$\text{Shares} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot AC_Indexical + \beta_2 \cdot AC_Existential + \beta_3 \cdot Visual_Stimuli + \beta_4 \cdot Brand_Audience + \varepsilon$$

Table 9 presents the main model results. All models reached statistical significance. In the case of **Model 1**, the independent variables helped explain 54.5% of the total variation of *Reactions*. As for **Model 2** (*Comments*), the R²-value was considerably lower, standing at 16.9%. Finally, *cues*, *visual stimuli*, and *brand audience* helped explain 29.5% of the total variation in *Shares*. All in all, the models explained some of the variance in post engagement metrics.

Table 9 – Regression Models’ summary statistics (R-Square and ANOVA Test) for reactions, comments and shares of posts.

Dependent Variable	R-Square	ANOVA (F-test/P-value)
<i>Reactions</i>	54.5%	58.666 (.000)
<i>Comments</i>	16.9%	9.991 (.000)
<i>Shares</i>	29.5%	20.516 (.000)

depicts the values for the regression coefficients estimated by the models. It shows that brand audience was a significant and very strong predictor of the number of user *reactions*, *comments* and *shares* to posts, as expected. Meanwhile, the use of images as a visual stimulus in posts (compared to that of videos), was also a significant predictor of user *reactions* and *comments*, but not *shares*, presumably because videos represent a more shareable type of content to users.

When controlling for both these variables (brand audience and visual stimuli), and compared to iconic cues, model results showed that only existential cues were a

marginally significant predictor of *comments*, for a confidence level of 90%. Nonetheless, despite not statistically significant, indexical cues decrease the number of comments (compared to the use of iconic cues). Furthermore, the number of *reactions* a post gets is higher when it includes indexical cues, and lower when it includes existential cues, compared to the case of the presence of iconic cues. The number of *shares* decreases when either indexical or existential cues are present, versus when iconic cues are used. Nevertheless, it should be noted that none of these effects reached statistical significance.

Table 10 – Coefficients estimated by regressing post authenticity cues on post reactions, comments and shares (N=201).

Dependent Variable	Indexical Cue		Existential Cue		Visual Stimuli		Brand Audience	
	Beta	T-test (P-Value)	Beta	T-test (P-Value)	Beta	T-test (P-Value)	Beta	T-test (P-Value)
<i>Reactions</i>	.023	.472 (.637)	-.004	-.092 (.927)	.363	7.362 (.000)	.699	14.210 (.000)
<i>Comments</i>	-.024	-.366 (.714)	.111	1.674 (.096)	.134	2.021 (.045)	.404	6.080 (.000)
<i>Shares</i>	-.024	-.397 (.692)	-.022	-.357 (.721)	-.016	-.256 (.798)	.539	8.808 (.000)

4.2. Discussion

As stressed in the reviewed literature, consumers increasingly look for authenticity in brands. For such, they resort to authenticity cues to make judgements and assess a brand’s degree of brand authenticity. Hence, one of the main assumptions for this study was that the presence of authenticity cues on a brand’s Facebook post would boost the level of engagement of users with it. Likewise, the use of authenticity cues was expected to have a stronger effect in terms of user engagement the more authentic a brand was. In addition, indexical cues were expected to produce a greater effect on user engagement than the remainder cues (Beverland *et al.*, 2008). The e-tailers under study were predicted to embed more SNM cues to compensate the lack of social interaction, as retailers selling products of higher symbolic and monetary values, as is the case of luxury fashion e-tailers, tend to do so (Karimov & Brengman, 2011).

From the survey it could be attained that the respondents considered Farfetch to be the most authentic of the listed fashion e-tailers. Zalando was picked as the opponent brand, given its mass-market and European e-tailer-leader status, contrasting with Farfetch’s volume of operations and fanbase. Hence, it can be concluded that Farfetch’s consumers are more self-authentic, since highly self-authentic consumers are more likely to choose

an authentic brand, compared to less authentic consumers, as the latter assign less significance to authenticity and are thus more indifferent to a brand's degree of authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2014).

The results provided by this study indicate that brand audience was a significant and very strong predictor of the number of user engagement with posts. For instance, Zalando had significantly higher figures in its reactions, comments, and shares. The use of image as a visual stimulus proved to be a great predictor for *reactions* and *comments*, moreover, video content resulted in a higher number of user shares, presumably due to it being a more shareable type of content. As for authenticity cues, controlling for brand audience and visual stimuli, results showed that only existential cues were a marginally significant predictor of *comments*. This finding disproves that advertisements containing indexical cues are more successful than those relying on other types of authenticity cues (Beverland *et al.*, 2008).

Notably, Farfetch and Zalando follow different strategies in terms of content. For instance, despite both prioritizing the use of iconic cues, Farfetch resorts to the use of existential, rather than indexical cues, whereas for Zalando the opposite is observable. Given that it was observed that existential cues strongly predict comments, some inferences can be drawn. The use of existential cues may be linked with the fact that Farfetch is considered to be a more authentic brand. It seems that the use of this type of cues, that aims at embodying human characteristics, is positively contributing for Farfetch to be considered authentic. Notwithstanding, iconic and indexical cues seem to have a residual impact for such consumer judgement. Zalando, by adopting a strategy that favours indexical cues, as opposed to existential cues, ranks lower in terms of brand authenticity. All in all, the differing cue strategies seem to impact the degree of brand authenticity consumers perceive. As observed by Moulard *et al.* (2016), these results corroborate that brands leveraging the authenticity trait in their communications, reveal a greater level of consumer attachment (e.g., forms of SNM engagement) with the brands, including in SNM platforms.

Correspondingly, Farfetch's strategy to highlight the authenticity trait involves the use of existential cues, that look to attribute human characteristics to the brand, specifically typing in the first person and using emoticons to enhance it. By presenting itself in such way, it allows for it to seem more approachable and act as if it were, in fact, a peer or friend of the user. Hence, Farfetch, despite serving the same market and selling the same merchandise, positions as the friendly, approachable brand, avoiding any mass-market

connotation. As, in fact, consumers do not shop-around in different e-tailers (Choi *et al.*, 2012), if the brand perpetuates the intention of being the brand consumers trust and believe to be authentic, it may yield or enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, contributing for an enduring consumer-brand relationship.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Chapter five presents the main conclusions of the dissertation, as a means to answer the proposed research questions, and its ensuing implications. Furthermore, it also entails a section with the objective of presenting the limitations faced by this study and recommendations for future research.

5.1. Conclusions

This dissertation addressed the role of brand authenticity in social media, exploring how brands use authenticity cues in SNM and how users react to them. Having used Morhart *et al.*'s (2014) brand authenticity scale and authenticity cues, this dissertation sheds a light on the authenticity of companies' online activities, as is the case of social networking. At its core, the content analysis performed on the brands' Facebook posts contended assessing if authenticity cues leverage the level of engagement of users with the content, and if thus brands should capitalize on such posts.

In order to engage people, marketers can use cues as a way of persuasion (Teng & Khong, 2015). Research suggests that advertisements communicating brand-related cues are used by consumers to make authenticity assessments (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016), and that they also choose brands as part of an authenticating act (Arnould & Price, 2000; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Consumers then resort to a range of cues to evaluate the authenticity of a brand. Indexical cues intend to communicate and reinforce the continuance of historic practices, addressing historicity, heritage, location, tradition, and pedigree features. Iconic cues portray a brand's commitment and sincere motivation to serve consumers well in their communications. Under the context of this study, brands committed to go beyond profitability and economic interest, by embedding the idea that the consumers are first, establishing personal relationships with customers and exclusive partnerships with brands their consumers value. The last analysed cue type is existential cues, which entail the brand embodying human characteristics. Such was achieved by acting and typing as if the brand was indeed a human person, addressing the consumers directly or posting text in the first person.

The research that was undertaken in this dissertation resulted in many interesting findings. From the survey it was attained that the respondents considered Farfetch to be the most authentic of the listed fashion e-tailers. Zalando was picked as the opponent brand, given its mass-market status. The regression analyses indicated that brand audience was a significant and strong predictor of the number of user engagement with posts, as expected,

given that Zalando had significantly higher reactions, comments, and shares. The use of image as a visual stimulus was a great predictor for *reactions* and *comments*, moreover, video content resulted better for shares, presumably due to it being a more shareable type of content. As for authenticity cues, controlling for brand audience and visual stimuli, only existential cues were a marginally significant predictor of *comments*, disproving that advertisements containing indexical cues are more successful than those relying on other types of authenticity cues (Beverland *et al.*, 2008).

It was further concluded that Farfetch and Zalando follow different strategies in terms of content. Farfetch resorts to the use of existential, rather than indexical cues, whereas for Zalando the opposite is apparent, despite both brands prioritizing the use of iconic cues. As it was observed, existential cues strongly predict comments, for which it can be inferred that the use of existential cues may be linked with the fact that Farfetch is considered to be the most authentic brand. Arguably, the use of these cues is positively contributing for Farfetch to be considered authentic. Notwithstanding, iconic and indexical cues also affect how consumers make authenticity judgements. Zalando, by adopting a strategy that favours indexical cues, as opposed to existential cues, ranks lower in terms of brand authenticity. The differing cue strategies seem to impact the degree of brand authenticity perceived by consumers. In sum, Farfetch's strategy of emphasizing the authenticity incorporates the use of existential cues, by typing in the first person and using emoticons, as if it were in fact, a friend or peer.

Overall, the use of existential cues on a SNM context seems to trigger users to comment on Facebook posts, for which these type of cues should be favoured and prioritized by brands wishing to be perceived as more authentic. In order to be judged as authentic by its consumers, brands can incorporate human attributes in its SNM communications, namely addressing the audience as if it were indeed a human being. With such, brands will position as an approachable, friendly, and small-scale brand, avoiding possible mass-market connotations. Furthermore, as consumers do not shop-around in different e-tailers (Choi *et al.*, 2012), if the brand perpetuates the intention of being the brand consumers trust and believe to be authentic, it may yield or enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, contributing for an enduring consumer-brand relationship.

In terms of the managerial implications, this research was able to conclude that, even though consumers have been questing for authenticity in brands, it is still not so clear how consumers are reacting to brands' social media posts, in the presence of authenticity cues. Nonetheless, this research shows that the use of iconic and existential cues is

prioritized by the most authentic brand under study. Particularly, existential cues seemed to be affecting the perceived degree of brand authenticity of users the most. Highlighting existential attributes may yield brand loyalty and, thus, enduring consumer-brand relationships.

As for the academic implications, this dissertation sheds a light on brand authenticity and the use of authenticity cues under a SNM context. Results showed that consumers perceive brands that use existential cues in their SNM communications to be more authentic.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. Although one brand, Farfetch, was identified as the most authentic, the study failed to discriminate a statistically significant difference between the level of brand authenticity of the remainder brands. A possible explanation for this result might be the fact that most survey respondents were from a specific European region (Southern Europe), mainly of Portuguese nationality. A study revealed that English-language questionnaire elicit middle responses, whereas those in a respondent's native language result in a more extreme response style (Harzing, 2006). The similar classifications could have happened due to the survey being in English, instead of, for example, Portuguese, leading to middle responses. Such conclusion implies the necessity to undergo in further research, to verify possible country-specific differences and assess if the levels do indeed differ across country, due to cultural differences. Another possible explanation arises from the fact that Farfetch, although a London-based brand, was founded by a Portuguese entrepreneur and has several branches in Portuguese cities, for which, out of the listed brands, respondents were familiar with this brand the most.

Moreover, the dissertation only comprised the study of brand authenticity for the context of e-tailers. Previous studies had determined that, when given the chance, consumers frequently mentioned consumers goods' brands when asked for authentic brands, due to them being "more salient and memorable" (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012). The industry of luxury fashion e-tailers, as a less salient industry, could result in less accurate results for brand authenticity. Future research should be extended to understand if differences arise across industries, i.e., assess if the level of brand authenticity consumers perceive and require is industry or product-relevant (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012). More brands and industries should be analysed as the conclusions of the present dissertation may not be universally applicable.

Likewise, longitudinal research could be used to understand and identify changes in brand authenticity across time. Changes could be subsequently connected with changes in society or certain events, as could be the case of a new online social media campaign, as brand authenticity is increasingly a concern among consumers and given that SNM is the new context marketers use to shape authenticity (Wang & Skovira, 2017).

In spite of the mentioned limitations, the findings of this dissertation provide relevant and insightful scientific contributions to the brand authenticity studies, and hopefully prompts further research on this topic.

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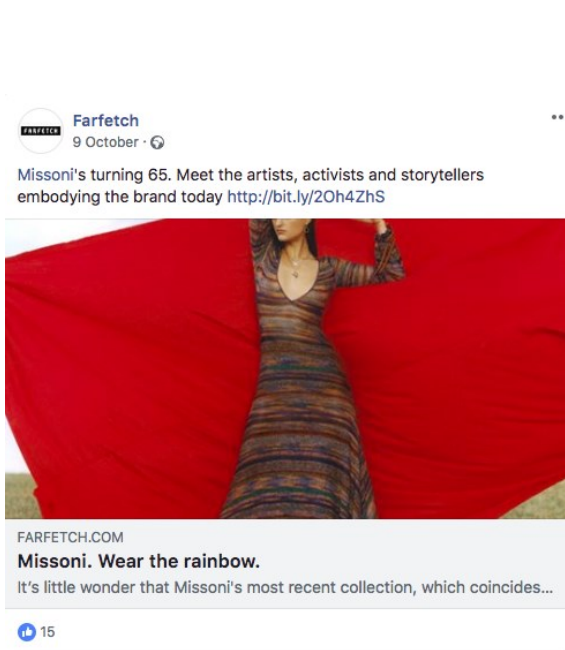
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Annex I – Representative examples of *Indexical*, *Iconic*, and *Existential* authenticity cues. Sources: Farfetch’s and Zalando’s Facebook pages.

▪ *Iconic Cues Examples*



– Farfetch, 09/10/2018



– Farfetch, 24/10/2018



– Zalando, 29/10/2018



– Zalando, 04/11/2018

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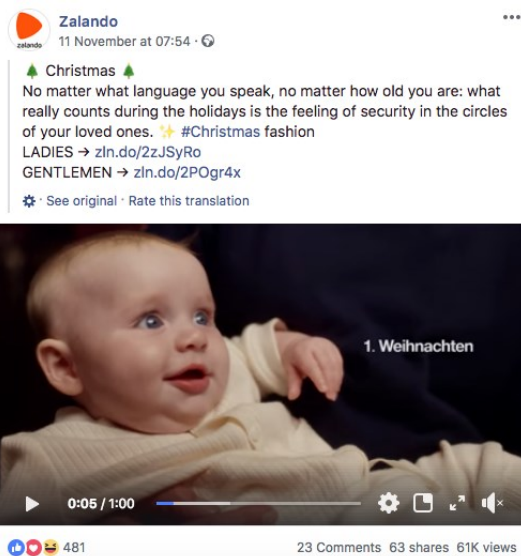
▪ *Indexical Cues Examples*



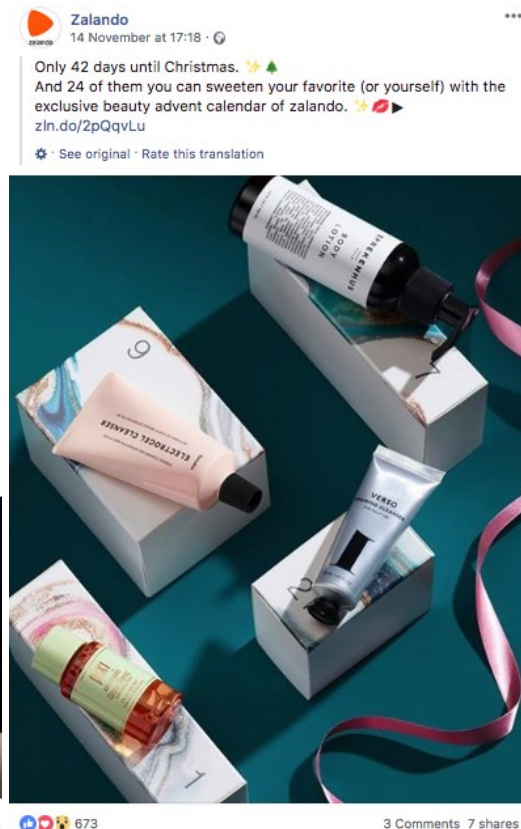
– Farfetch, 25/09/2018



– Farfetch, 11/10/2018



– Zalando, 11/11/2018



– Zalando, 14/11/2018

▪ *Existential Cues Examples*

Farfetch
22 September · 🌐

The smaller the streetwear, the more you should cop, right? At least, that's what we're thinking when it comes to Stone Island Junior
<http://bit.ly/2DmCpGy>

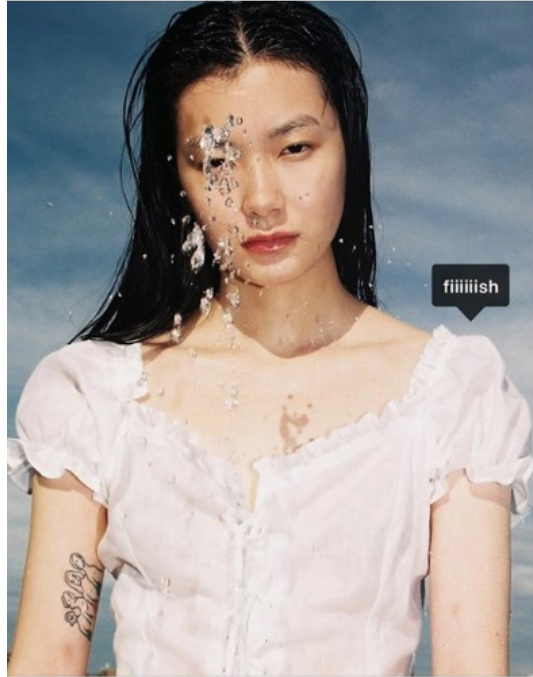


👍❤️👍 29 8 Comments

– Farfetch, 22/09/2018

Farfetch
9 October · 🌐 · 🌐

Introducing Fish Zhang. She's a Tokyo-based photographer with an eye for detail, and she's picked her favourite dresses for the season
<http://bit.ly/2DLLbhB>



👍❤️👍 25 1 Comment 1 share

– Farfetch, 10/10/2018

Zalando tagged **Mango BASQUIAT** - Blazer - grey and 2 others.
11 October · 🌐

My attitude today: 'Big Plaid' instead of petty. 🖤

🔗 See original · Rate this translation



👍❤️👍 1.1K 7 Comments 9 shares

– Zalando, 11/10/2018

Farfetch
17 October · 🌐

Your old trench coat, but better . . . and newer . . . and did we say better? <http://bit.ly/2OvsUKn>



👍❤️👍 39 2 shares

– Farfetch, 17/10/2018

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– Zalando, 15/11/2018