The Dissertation Committee for Jung Ah Lee Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

What Makes Social Media Influencers Authentic?
Understanding Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

Committee:

Matthew S. Eastin, Supervisor

Laura F. Bright

Natalie Brown-Devlin

Thomas J. Johnson

Jeeyun Oh

What Makes Social Media Influencers Authentic?

Understanding Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

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Jung Ah Lee

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What Makes Social Media Influencers Authentic?
Understanding Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

Jung Ah Lee, Ph.D.

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Supervisor: Matthew S. Eastin

This research explores how consumers' perception of social media influencers' (SMI) authenticity is constructed. To that end, a measurement scale that hinges on consumers' authenticity cues is developed to delve into the structure of perceived SMI authenticity. Additionally, the role of perceived SMI authenticity on consumer behavior variables is examined. To develop and validate the scale, a mixed methods research design is used in which qualitative responses were collected via an open-ended survey and quantitative data were collected via two online surveys. Results suggest perceived SMI authenticity is a multidimensional construct consisting of: *Sincerity*, *Transparent Endorsements*, *Visibility*, *Expertise* and *Uniqueness*. Each of the five dimensions had varying effects on consumers' evaluation of a SMI, willingness to follow a SMI and intention to purchase products they recommend. This research extends theoretical work on authenticity by shedding light onto the construct of perceived SMI authenticity and provides practical implications for marketers and social media influencers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

With more than 70% of shoppers relying on Instagram to discover new products, the visual platform is blurring the lines between social networking sites and e-commerce (Facebook, 2019). A catalyst to this transition into an interactive e-commerce hub are the 500,000 social media influencers (SMIs) who are making Instagram one of the most vivacious places to tap into (Droesch, 2019). SMIs are "a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media" (Freberg et al. 2011, p. 90). As the reputation of social media influencers often emerge from expertise in a specific area such as fashion, beauty, health, or lifestyle, they serve as knowledgeable opinion leaders for consumers (Freberg et al., 2010; De Veirman et al., 2017).

For brands, the follower base of SMIs are golden. Followers of a SMI are opinion seekers who are highly involved in the SMI's area of expertise. As a result, influencer marketing has become one of the most prominent forms of advertising today – in fact, brands are estimated to spend approximately $15 billion on influencer marketing by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). On Instagram, the number of brand sponsored posts by influencers is expected to surpass six billion in 2020 (Guttman, 2019). Influencer marketing refers to a product placement strategy in which the product or service of a sponsoring brand gets featured in an influencer's content. Breves and colleagues (2019) describe influencer marketing as "a type of native advertising, branded entertainment, or highly credible word of mouth" as the advertised product or service is integrated in the daily logs shared by SMIs. By partnering up with SMIs, brands are able to seamlessly expose their products to a highly involved group of consumers and also take on some of the positive image radiated by the SMI (Knoll et al., 2017).

Much of the research that explores SMI marketing has been heavily influenced by literature on traditional celebrity endorsers. Most noteworthy is the utilization of Ohanian's (1990) source credibility construct which proposes perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as three main attributes of a persuasive celebrity endorser (Gong & Li, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Torres, Augusto, & Matos, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). However, while SMIs and traditional celebrities share many similarities, fundamental differences exist between the two. For example, compared to traditional celebrities, SMIs are much more active on social media as their main source of income comes from brand partnerships on social media. They therefore initiate an intimate relationship with their followers to grow their social capital so that they can look appealing to brand managers (Zhang et al., 2020). This accessibility frames influencers as more authentic and fosters a sense of closeness, making their brand recommendations trustworthy (Audrezet et al., 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In other words, the success of influencer marketing rests on authenticity, an attribute that has not been captured comprehensively by the original source credibility construct (Audrezet et al., 2018; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013).

While both industry reports (e.g., El Qudsi, 2019; Suciu, 2020) and academic research (e.g., Duffy, 2017) repeatedly underscore the significance of authenticity in influencer marketing, the concept has been somewhat vague. Loosely, the term authenticity refers to the quality of being genuine, real, and true (Arnould & Price, 2000; Moulard et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2006). However, literature suggests that authenticity judgments are highly context specific, subjective, and dependent on the audience (Lehman et al., 2019; Schlegel et al., 2011). Individuals refer to various cues to make authenticity-judgments suggesting that authenticity lies in the eyes of the beholder

(Leigh et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Peirce, 1998). Therefore, there warrants a more systematic approach in defining what an authentic SMI is from the consumer perspective, as well as a way of measuring SMI authenticity.

The purpose of the current research is two-fold. First, this research seeks to provide a conceptual framework of perceived SMI authenticity by exploring the underlying dimensions. To that end, a measurement scale that hinges on authenticity cues used by consumers to assess SMI authenticity is developed. Second, the relationship between the identified authenticity dimensions on consumers' evaluation of the influencer, intentions to follow the influencer, and willingness to purchase products they recommend will be investigated. Study one focuses on scale development employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches (i.e., open-ended responses, exploratory factor analysis). In Study two, an online survey is conducted to validate the scale and test the positive relationships between perceived authenticity and consumer behavior variables.

This research seeks to provide a baseline understanding of perceived SMI authenticity. It hopes to advance theory by delving into the structure of perceived SMI authenticity. To contribute to the growing literature on SMI authenticity, a comprehensive and unified measure of perceived SMI authenticity is needed to not only examine how authenticity perceptions are formulated by consumers but also to examine its subsequent impact on consumers' evaluations and behaviors. It is believed that the findings will inform current SMIs on ways to effectively manage and display an authentic personality, as well as provide brand managers better guidance on assessing SMIs' authenticity prior to a potential partnership.

Chapter 2: Social Media Influencers

Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

Social media influencers are those who have self-cultivated a large audience on social media by successful self-presentation. The concept of social media influencers is not new and dates back to the mid-2000s during the blogosphere era (Borchers, 2019). Personal bloggers became a topic of interest for early scholars as ordinary users started to take on the role of gatekeeper of political information (Borchers, 2019). Scholars such as Herring et al. (2005) and Senft (2008) noticed the transition of blogs as solely an information outlet to a platform for creative self-expression. Senft's (2008) ethnographic study of camgirls and their audience from 2000 to 2004 is a seminal piece that serves as a groundwork for today's blooming research on SMIs (e.g., Borchers, 2019; Marwick, 2013, Duffy, 2017).

Senft (2008) also termed the phrase *micro-celebrity*, a phrase synonymous to social media influencers (Marwick, 2013). Micro-celebrity is defined as "a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to 'amp up' their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online" (Senft, 2008; p. 25). This definition distinguishes SMIs from traditional celebrities by emphasizing the notion of self-branding, or the engagement of various self-promotion practices to achieve celebrity status, more so than the state of being famous (Marwick, 2013).

For SMIs, social media is their debut stage and oftentimes the only stage that demands their presence. SMIs' fame is therefore restricted to a niche audience, while traditional celebrities are known to a mass audience (Zhang et al., 2020). SMIs aggressively strive to increase their celebrity capital via their social media accounts to

have a large enough reach where they can monetize their social media content through brand partnerships. As a result, SMIs strategically display themselves as authentic[1] so followers can identify with and feel intimately connected to them (Zhang et al., 2020). Successful SMIs who induce parasocial interaction or the "illusion of intimacy" (Horton & Wohl, 1946, p. 217) with their followers become *professional Instagrammers* who make a living out of content sharing (Duffy & Hund, 2019). In contrast, for most traditional celebrities, social media is merely a tool for self-expression and a means to maintain their fame that embarked somewhere else (e.g., film, album etc.). Consequently, they do not have to put in the same amount of effort nor purposefully manage an authentic persona to maintain their fame and income.

While audience size[2] is used as a metric to rate the cost of brand endorsements[3], it is no longer considered the leading measure for assessing the return-on-investment from an influencer campaign (Suciu, 2020). In order to drive engagement (e.g., likes, shares, comments) and conversions (i.e., purchase), influencers who are perceived like a real friend are more effective than high-tier influencers (Suciu, 2020). In fact, partnerships with traditional celebrities and mega-influencers are decreasing while partnerships with micro-influencers are on the rise (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020; Suciu, 2020). This suggest that having a relatable number of followers has become one of the indicators of SMI authenticity for marketers as micro-influencers are often ordinary consumers who are only part-time professional Instagrammers (Suciu, 2020).

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[1] Refer to Chapter 5 (Social Media Influencer Authenticity) for a more detailed literature review.

[2] SMIs are categorized into micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers based on the size of their audience. Those who have a following between 5,000 to 100,000 are categorized as micro-influencers. Macro-influencers have more than 100,000 followers and mega-influencers boast half a million to millions of followers (Schomer, 2019).

[3] Instagram influencers are paid about $100 per 10,000 followers for posting a single sponsored post (Kelly, 2019).

Influencer Marketing on Instagram

Instagram has shown the most noteworthy growth in influencer marketing and has been ranked as marketers' favorite platform for influencer marketing compared to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn (Feldman, 2019). Instagram affords various modes of visual communication – including ephemeral content featured in *Stories*, as well as archival posts that get displayed in followers' *Newsfeed* – for influencers to naturally seed in brands in their posts. Therefore, it is common for social media influencers to use Instagram as their primary playground, while also managing other social media accounts including YouTube and Twitter.

On *Stories* (Figure 1), photos and videos are stored up to 24 hours. The ephemerality encourages users to post spontaneous photos and videos throughout the day. Most SMIs post multiple posts in this format to keep their followers updated on their daily narratives. Placed at the very top of the interface, it is the most actively used feature on Instagram, growing 15 times faster than Newsfeed (MediaKix, 2019). The feature is effective in garnering instant engagement from consumers with its "swipe up" feature that directs consumers to a third-party website where they can directly purchase a brand's product. It is also often used to advertise a sales promotion by giving away a discount code that integrates the SMIs' name (e.g., LEE25).
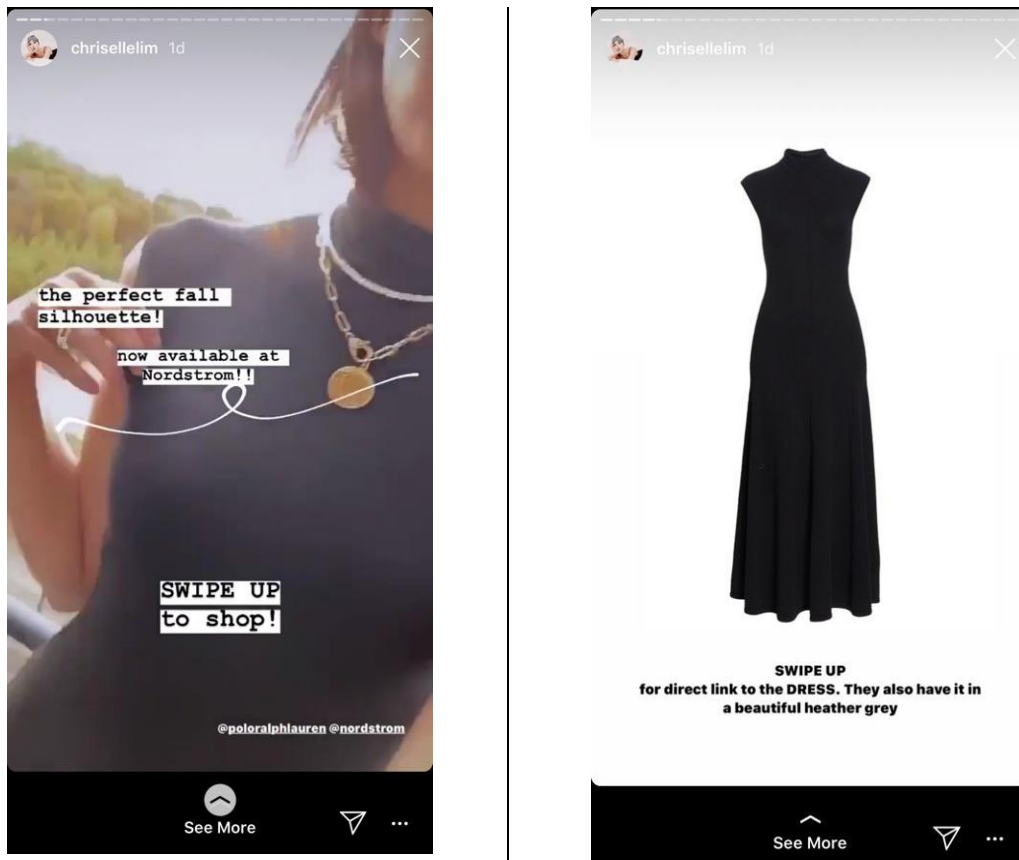
Figure 1:   Image of sponsored brand endorsement on Stories.

Newsfeed (Figure 2) is the most preferred format for influencer marketing by marketers (MediaKix, 2019). Brand endorsements in this format gets displayed in followers' home feed and are archived in the influencer's profile, reaching a greater number of consumers. More importantly, being present in the influencer's profile for long periods of time allow brands to affiliate with the influencer more strongly. In other words, the positive meanings and values of the influencer should transfer to the brand more thoroughly (Abimbola et al., 2010). Brands that seek to improve brand awareness and brand image through influencer partnerships should benefit from this type of endorsements.

Figure 2:   Image of sponsored brand endorsement on Newsfeed.

Brands can have varying degrees of control over how an influencer features the product or service in their post. For example, brands can send their products as gifts to an influencer hoping that they will feature the brand in their posts, which Audrezet et al. (2018) describe as minimal brand encroachment. While brands cannot ask nor force the influencer to promote the product a certain way, their products can naturally blend in with the influencer's life which comes as authentic to followers. Maximum encroachment

refers to endorsements in which brands pay SMIs to advertise their product or service (Audrezet et al., 2018). This way, brands can set restrictions and guidelines for the SMI so that they can have a great degree of control over the sponsorship. However, when brand restrictions take over influencers' personality, the endorsement come as ingenuine and unnatural to followers. Hence, it is important for brands to ensure influencers have some leeway in choosing how to carry out the sponsorship (Audrezet et al., 2018).

Chapter 3: Social Media Influencers as Digital Opinion Leaders

Theoretical Frameworks

The concept of opinion leadership has its roots in the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) *two-step flow of communication hypothesis* and Roger's (1983) *diffusion of innovations theory*. The two-step flow hypothesis stems from a study of voters' decision-making process in a presidential campaign (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). To illustrate, the voter study showed that for individuals who changed their decisions or made up their minds later in the campaign were likely to have been impacted by word-of-mouth from an opinion leader more than directly from the media campaign (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Katz, 1957). In sum, the theoretical model posits that media messages flow from media to opinion leaders to the less informed audiences, challenging the popular view that mass media has a direct and powerful effect on the masses (Katz, 1957; Rogers, 1983). Moreover, opinion leaders are conceptualized as individuals who play key communication roles within close interpersonal relationships - between small groups, friends and family - in which their influence is often practiced unintentionally and casually (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2005).

Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1944) two-step hypothesis served as a key framework underlying Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations theory, which delineates the process of new ideas or objects (i.e., innovations) spreading within a social system. Rogers (1983) defines diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (pg. 5). The theory takes on a panoramic lens conceptualizing communication flow as more dynamic involving distinct categories of individuals that take part in information dissemination (i.e., innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards) and

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portraying opinion leadership as exerting varying degrees of influence in different phases of the decision-making process (i.e., knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation) (Rogers & Cantano, 1962). While the two-step flow model underscores opinion leadership as simply carriers of mass media messages to the less informed, diffusion of innovations theory portrays opinion leaders as fulfilling distinct roles based on the opinion seeker's needs.

Moreover, both the two-step flow model and diffusion of innovations theory suggest that opinion leaders are not individuals with greater authority but respectable individuals who disseminate information and advice within a social group. In other words, opinion leadership is a practice of informal influence where leadership is "earned and maintained by the individual's technical competence, social accessibility, and conformity to the system's norms" (Rogers, 1983, p. 27). Similarly, while social media influencers do not operate within small interpersonal groups, their opinion leadership comes from being perceived as more relatable, approachable, and socially accessible compared to traditional celebrity endorsers (Jin et al., 2019; O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016; Schouten et al., 2020). Both theories agree that opinion leaders are "communicative, well informed, and well connected" (Jugnickel, 2018, p. 2702), affording them to play three main roles in information flow including (1) disseminating information, (2) reinforcing certain attitudes, values and beliefs, and (3) reducing the uncertainty of opinion seekers with less knowledge.

Regarding their role as disseminators of information, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2006) compare the course of information dissemination to relays, highlighting the transference of information from opinion leaders who are more exposed to information sources to individuals who are less exposed and therefore less knowledgeable. Burt

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(1999) also describes opinion leaders as opinion brokers who deliver information from media to close interpersonal networks. Similarly, within the diffusion of innovations theory, early adopters (i.e., the adopter category with the highest rate of opinion leaders; Rogers, 1983) outsource information obtained from innovators to the less knowledgeable (i.e., early majority, late majority, and laggards), as they are highly integrated in the social system. In the same vein, social media influencers pursue the role of opinion brokers between brands and consumers. They not only have greater knowledge about certain product categories, but brands also approach SMIs directly in hopes that they will agree to endorse the brand and introduce their product to SMIs' niche target audience (Audrezet et al., 2018). In an age where consumers actively try to avoid advertisements and are bombarded with countless brand options (eMarketer, 2019), SMIs, who are regarded as trustworthy information sources, are an attractive gateway for brands to reach their target audience (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

Opinion leaders also serve a reinforcement function when they advocate particular attitudes. Rogers (1983) defines opinion leadership as "the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way," (Rogers, 1983, p. 271). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2006) further state that influence is often passed along invisibly and unknowingly from opinion leaders given that leadership is a function of casual, everyday social interactions. For example, insights on business management is casually shared among businessmen playing golf with one another. Such non-purposiveness is said to lead to greater perceptions of trust and credibility of information compared to information that deliberately tries to persuade (Burt, 1999; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). SMIs also genuinely, without any monetary incentive, share information about their favorite brand as well as their most disliked

brands. For example, beauty influencer Bretman Rock (13.7M followers) posts Instagram videos of his daily product reviews on a specific product category, such as coconut water or mascara, comparing different brands and providing his honest ratings for each. Later, surprised by the attention his coconut water reviews on Instagram were getting, Bretman Rock posted on Twitter (2019): "It's so weird to me how many people are actually invested in my Coconut water of the day series… thank you but y'all weird." Following his post, a follower commented: "I'm dying to find a coconut you actually rate 10/10. Prolly [probably] only coconut water from an actual coconut lol." In line with opinion leadership theory, these types of non-sponsored, casual brand information sharing come as insightful to followers.

Lastly, opinion leadership is valued by opinion seekers as they help make decisions in an area where one lacks sufficient knowledge (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Rogers (1983) postulates that opinion leaders are most influential during the persuasion stage and decision stage where information is actively sought from close peers who have greater knowledge and experience. Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1996) underscore the informational value of opinion leaders, stating that opinion leadership cannot exist without opinion seekers who request advice. On social media, followers also actively seek information from SMIs. For example, followers of mukbang influencers (i.e., individuals who post videos of themselves eating large amounts of food) often ask which brand of lipstick they use after seeing the durability of their lip color even after wiping their mouths several times throughout the mukbang video (Janae, 2019). In addition, influencers also solicit questions from their followers, who ask a variety of product-related questions.

Social Media Influencers vs. Traditional Opinion Leaders

Before the advent of the Internet, gatekeepers of information were media companies (e.g., Fox, CNN). Opinion leaders served the role of opinion brokers who deliver information provided by the media to the less informed individuals (Katz, 1957). The main mode of communication for traditional opinion leaders was through interpersonal exchanges including face-to-face contact and one-to-one communication channels (e.g., telephones, emails). Nowadays, the public acquires information not only from those originated by media companies but directly from SMIs who have their own social media channels where they broadcast their opinions and knowledge to millions of followers. On major social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, there is no distinction in the way consumers follow media companies and influencers. Opinion leadership is no longer solely practiced within small social groups, but to much larger audiences (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). This can also easily lead to viral marketing as information gets shared among followers and their respective social networks (De Veirman et al., 20017; Thomas, 2004)

And unlike traditional opinion leaders, a social media influencer's audience is boundless and even imaginary (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010). When a SMI shares a post, not only will followers receive the post, but other non-followers might stumble upon the post weeks later while they are lurking on various profiles (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This makes it challenging for social media influencers to accurately determine who their audience is. Social media influencers envision their audience based on limited cues and tailor their message to an imagined audience, or "the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience" (Litt, 2012, p. 331). For example, from interviews with 181 Twitter users, Marwick and boyd (2010) illustrate that

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users have different abstractions depending on the number of followers they have. Users with a relatively smaller audience size perceive his or her audience members as close friends, while users with a larger audience perceive their audience as fans.

Although SMIs do not personally know each individual audience and hence, may lack the intimacy that was present in traditional opinion leaderships, SMIs foster the illusion of interpersonal relationships. This type of relationship is said to be parasocial, which is when an individual identifies with a media persona they have never met in real life, perceives them as real life friends and develops a sense of intimacy making it an illusion of interpersonal relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, Daniel et al. (2018) found that 68% of comments on a SMI's YouTube video featured parasocial interaction. Many followers cheered the SMI for their accomplishments and left compliments as if they knew the SMI personally. Many researchers attribute the success of SMIs as digital opinion leaders to parasocial relationships (e.g., Chung & Cho, 2017).

Given that the main mode of communication for today's SMIs are predominantly through photos and videos, the quality and quantity of content a SMI generates has become an important antecedent opinion leadership (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). SMIs are expected to generate creative and unique posts to maintain their opinion leadership status (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). A common type that SMIs post are aspirational ones that induce envy from the followers, whether it is a snippet of their luxury homes or being fashionably dressed (Lee & Eastin, 2020; Marwick, 2013). While being positioned higher in social and economic status is a common characteristic for traditional opinion leaders, SMIs exaggerate this quality by purposefully generating aspirational content (Marwick, 2013). Ki and Kim (2019) show that followers' desire to mimic a SMI mediates the relationship between a SMI's opinion leadership and

consumers' intention to purchase products a SMI endorses. Followers who are fascinated by the unrealistic lifestyles of SMIs are more likely to seek information from them, making their opinions more powerful.

Parasocial interaction and aspirational content are some of the many self-promotion techniques that SMIs strategically put forth to build and maintain their influence. Traditionally, opinion leadership status was rather discreet as there is no visible mark that differentiates an influential from non-influential. On the other hand, social media influencers have various cues that indicate their leadership status, including a blue tick that accompanies their account name and verifies their public figure status (Dai & Walther, 2018). Additionally, the size of their audience functions as a credibility cue (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2020). Users perceive individuals who have a greater number of followers as having greater social influence (Jin & Phua, 2014). Consequently, to expand their social network, social media influencers engage in self-promotion techniques to attract new followers as well as maintain relationships with existing followers (Khamis et al., 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

In summary, technological advancements have changed the dynamics of opinion leadership. Information is exchanged more efficiently as SMIs diffuse first-hand information to a boundless audience. The visual-oriented communication practices have introduced the importance of aspirational and engaging content. Moreover, the palpability of opinion leadership promotes SMIs to constantly practice micro-celebrity status (Senft, 2008).

Chapter 4: Conceptualizing Perceived Authenticity

According to Trilling (1971), the word 'authenticity' originates from museum professionals who determine the value of artwork by distinguishing whether it is real and comes from where it claims to have originated. The concept has evolved to allude to notions of human morality, in which society associates authentic behavior with being ethical and good (Gino et al., 2015; Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016). While it is broadly understood as the quality of being genuine, real and true (Arnould & Price, 2000; Moulard et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2006), the disparate usage of the word across various domains has generated distinct conceptualizations (Lehman et al., 2019; Newman & Smith, 2016).

The Existentialist Perspective

From the vantage point of existentialist perspective, authenticity refers to being true to one's self (Mohart et al., 2015). Goffman's (1959) classical work on impression management is particularly useful for understanding notions of authentic self-concept. In Goffman's social interaction framework (1959), people are depicted as performers on a theatrical stage who play varying roles depending on the social setting. A performer's social setting can be categorized into either the *frontstage,* where the performer presents his act in front of an audience, or the *backstage,* where the audience is prohibited from entering, hence, allowing the performer to relax and not fabricate his identity. Frontstage behavior refers to a conscious type of strategic self-display that is practiced during social interactions with distant others whom one lacks an intimate relationship with. Individuals decide which type of appearance, behaviors and communication styles to display based on a specific goal in mind (e.g., to make a good impression on others, approval needs). Marwick (2013) describes such self-presentation as the *edited persona*. On the other hand,

backstage behavior refers to the display of an unpolished, true self that is practiced behind the screens or with trusted companions. Nothing is disguised nor motivated by extrinsic rewards or consequences. To manage authenticity, SMIs frequently display their backstage self by opening up about their personal life matters and flaws whether it's about their romantic life, family issues or health problems (Duffy, 2017).

Similarly, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), which postulates human behaviors as functions of different types of motives, conceptualizes authentic acts as representations of one's intrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations refer to engaging in an activity because one simply enjoys and values the experience (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In other words, the activity itself is perceived as innately rewarding and satisfying. On the other hand, inauthentic acts are actions motivated extrinsically or "performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71) whether it is to attain a reward (e.g., make a good impression in front of a potential romantic partner) or avoid a punishment (e.g., to not embarrass oneself in front of a big crowd; Deci & Ryan, 2008). In influencer marketing, when influencers endorse brands that do not coincide with their personality and values, consumers perceive the partnership to be extrinsically motivated (i.e., monetary reward) and therefore inauthentic (Audrezet et al., 2018).

The Constructivist Perspective

There is wide agreement that authenticity is not inherent but is personally defined and socially constructed (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Marwick, 2013). Interpretation of authenticity is sensitive and dependent on one's "dreams, stereotyped images, and expectations" (Wang, 1999, p. 351). Some scholars even describe authenticity as a *feeling*

underscoring its subjective nature (Lehman et al., 2019; Schlegel et al., 2011). This perspective, which is referred to as the constructivist perspective, assumes that reality, knowledge and truth are products of individuals' unique interpretations rather than something that is predefined (Schwandt, 1994; Wang, 1999). Similarly, authenticity is not static, but flexible and negotiable with time (Wang, 1999).

Grayson and Martinec's (2004) conceptualization of *iconic authenticity*, which they define as "something whose physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic" (p. 298), resonates with the constructivist perspective (Peirce, 1998). Given that knowledge of what is indexical or original can itself differ by observer, iconic authenticity therefore describes the state in which something fits one's expectations of how something should be. In other words, the frame of reference for iconic authenticity is one's expectations rather than the original source (Ewing, Allen & Ewing, 2012). Moreover, iconic authenticity is symbolic, as it encompasses a wide range of cues to construct perceptions of authenticity. For example, Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink (2008) showed that consumers examine the style and design of advertisements (i.e., iconic cues) to construe overall impressions of authenticity. In the same vein, consumers may refer to various cues such as visual, verbal, behavioral and overall personality, to interpret the degree of truthfulness behind one's actions (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). For example, consumers may interpret photos and videos that are unprocessed, natural and unrefined as showcasing a true persona (Hall, 2009; Moulard et al., 2015). Specific communicative styles the social media influencer uses also exhibit an authentic personality (Shane, 2018), as well as engaging in personal discussions with followers (Marwick, 2013).

The Objectivist Perspective

Contrastingly, some argue that authenticity is an inherent and objective attribute (i.e., objectivist perspective). In this perspective, authenticity refers to being original, "not to be a copy or an imitation" (Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 297), real, and therefore unique. For example, artwork by renowned artists such as Pablo Picasso are considered authentic (Newman & Smith, 2016) because they have a "factual and spatio-temporal link that is claimed" (Grayson & Martinec, p. 298). Consequently, consumers value work by celebrated artists regardless of the quality because of the inherent connection to historical time periods, scenes, and narratives (Dutton, 2004). Peirce (1998) refers to such type of factual and binary (real vs. not real) cues that are used to distinguish "the real thing" from copies (Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 297) as *indexical cues* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Newman & Smith, 2016; Peirce, 1998). In this view, SMIs who are perceived as original, rare and one-of-a-kind are considered authentic (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2014).

Furthermore, literature suggests that both subjective and objective cues collectively influence one's authenticity judgement (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Peirce, 1998). Existing research that explores authenticity perceptions demonstrate that the concept is often multidimensional, complex and subjective (Bruhn et al., 2012; Hall, 2009; Morhart et al., 2015). For example, Morhart et al. (2015) developed a comprehensive scale that measures Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) which comprises four constructs: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. In the context of TV ads, Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz (2019) demonstrate a four-dimensional construct of advertisement authenticity (*brand essence, brand heritage, realistic plot, message credibility*).

Chapter 5: Social Media Influencer Authenticity

This section provides a comprehensive review of research pertaining to authenticity of social media influencers. Existing research explore how social media influencers consciously manage authenticity, contravening the main premise of authenticity which is to be guileless and not strategic about self-presentation (e.g., Duffy, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mariwck, 2013). In fact, researchers conclude that online authenticity is "inherently contradictory" (Marwick, 2013, p. 2676) because while being true to one's inner desires is what an authentic identity should be, it is highly demanded by brands and audiences – making it something that is strategically negotiated.

Previous research on SMI authenticity illustrate the concept's multidimensionality. In her exploration of fashion bloggers, Duffy (2017) demonstrates how social networking platforms have encouraged society's advocacy for authenticity and reveals that the active display of *realness, visibility,* and *uniqueness* contribute to an authentic identity of micro-celebrities. According to her interviewees (i.e., fashion bloggers), *realness* is a function of relatability. Being relatable means that an influencer should be perceived as a real person who shares a similar lifestyle, concerns, and tastes, rather than a superstar who lives an inordinate life. The notion of working class ordinaries is also emphasized by the interviewees – although they create inspirational fashion content, the fashion items they display in their posts should consider the social class of the audience and be affordable to the general public. *Visibility*, or being able to disclose the influencer's private and personal life openly, further creates a sense of intimacy and community, which frames the influencer as approachable. Lastly, influencers are also expected to be *unique* to successfully compete with other bloggers.

Marwick (2013) also underscores society's high demand for authenticity and describes authenticity as a strategy for appeal put forth by social media influencers in her ethnography of the social media scene between the years 2006 to 2010. Marwick notes that the notion of *visibility* or revealing deeply personal information is a common expectation from social media influencers by the audience, corroborating Duffy's (2017) assessment. Ultimately, high levels of self-disclosure blur the frontstage and backstage distinction, framing the influencer as exhibiting his or her true self in both the real and virtual worlds. Another element of micro-celebrity authenticity is being more available to the audience compared to mainstream celebrities through frequent and "direct interaction" (p. 1836) with the followers. This leads to a sense of intimacy and personal connection, leading to more favorable evaluations of the influencer (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

More recently, Audrezet, Kerviler and Moulard (2018) examined various tactics that social media influencers consider when deciding to endorse a brand in their posts. They identify *passionate authenticity* and *transparent authenticity* as the two core strategies implemented by influencers. *Passionate authenticity* is the idea that influencers solely endorse brands they are passionate about and fit their personality. It also involves being creative with the branded content which allows influencers to freely express themselves as well as their affinity to the brand. *Transparency authenticity* refers to clearly disclosing the incentivized content to not confuse the audience and providing honest opinions about the brand. Both passionate authenticity and transparency authenticity cultivate the impression that brand partnerships are not necessarily a means for influencers to profit by deceitfully taking advantage of their network, but a self-extension opportunity through associating with brands the influencer feels enthusiastic about.

By analyzing the conversation among participants in an anti-fan forum of travel influencers, McRae (2017) identifies inauthentic practices put forth by SMIs that consumers pay attention to. The first inauthenticity cue revolves around self-disclosure practices. Her analysis suggests that while consumers highly demand SMIs to open up about their personal struggles and private life matters, topics that seem insincere or unrelatable are targets of criticism. For example, consumers taunt influencers for being ignorant when they talk about their struggles of being a full-time influencer living a sponsored life. Another common verdict among anti-fans is that monetization and authenticity are not allowed to co-exist. Consumers become skeptical as soon as SMIs partner with brands and their content becomes sponsored. This skepticism is bolstered when SMIs promote brands that do not align with their brand personality. Lastly, consumers demand influencers to be unique. Consumers feel that SMIs who produce ordinary and unoriginal content are taking it too easy, just for the sake of updates. For example, consumers disapprove sponsored or pre-planned trips by influencers who claim themselves as adventurous and risk taking because it goes against their unique persona.

As suggested by the literature, the concept of authenticity is assembled by distinct elements. Extending this line of inquiry, to better understand the constituents of perceived SMI authenticity, this study seeks to provide a conceptual framework of perceived SMI authenticity by exploring its underlying dimensions and by developing a measurement scale that hinges on authenticity cues used by consumers to assess SMI authenticity. Hence, the following research question is put forth:

RQ1: What are the underlying dimensions of perceived authenticity of social media influencers?

Chapter 6: Study 1

Overview

The first study is aimed at answering RQ 1 by developing a measurement scale that identifies the underlying dimensions of perceived SMI authenticity. In line with previous scale development studies (Devellis, 2016; Sung et al., 2016; Yadav & Rahman, 2017), it consists of three key phases including: (1) generation of the item pool through literature review and open-ended responses, (2) reduction of items through expert review, and (3) identification of factors through exploratory factor analysis.

The sample of interest for this study are Instagram users between the ages 18 – 29 who follow at least one social media influencer on Instagram. The specific age group is deemed appropriate as they are the most active in terms of social media usage among other age groups (Clement, 2019; Pew Research, 2019).

Phase	Process	Sample/Method	Findings
1	Item generation	Literature review and open-ended responses (n = 58)	71 items
2	Evaluation by experts	Paper-pencil survey In-depth interview (n = 16)	41 items
3	Survey administration	Online survey (n = 473)	18 items

Table 1:   Scale development process overview.

Phase 1: Item generation through literature review and open-ended responses

Item generation focuses on gauging unique authenticity cues that constitute consumers' perceptions of SMIs' authenticity. For the literature review, existing scales on perceived authenticity were adapted from the branding (Bruhn et al., 2012; Mohart et al.,

2015), artist (Moulard et al., 2014) and celebrity (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015) literature. Literature on influencers' authenticity management were also reviewed (Audrezet et al., 2018; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013).

For the open-ended responses, college students in an introductory course in advertising research from a large southwestern university were invited to participate in exchange for class extra credit. College students were deemed appropriate as they are part of the most active generation (Gen Z) of social media users (Clement, 2020) and are knowledgeable about social media influencers (Kay, 2019). The responses were collected via an online open-ended survey. The questionnaire began with a definition of social media influencers:

Social Media Influencers are those who have built a reputation for being knowledgeable on a particular topic; they become famous through their social media accounts - which makes them different from traditional celebrities such as Hollywood singers, actors, entertainers, and/or reality TV show stars; and often range from industry experts, bloggers, to ordinary users.

After reading the definition, participants were asked to name an Instagram influencer who they think is *authentic* and provide as many reasons why they think they are authentic. The next question asked for the name of an *inauthentic* Instagram influencer and reasons why they think so. Lastly, demographic questions were asked.

In total, 58 participants completed and submitted the questionnaire. On average, participants were 20 years old (SD = 2.27; ranging in 18 – 29). Sixty five percent identified as female and 35% identified as male. Most of the participants were Caucasian in ethnicity (57%), followed by Multiracial (19%), Asian (16%), Hispanic (3%), American Indian (2%) and African American (2%).

These two processes (i.e., literature review and open-ended survey) yielded a total of 130 items. To reduce the items to a more manageable amount, items were grouped into similar themes then scrutinized for relevancy and redundancy. Items related to: identity (e.g., "They celebrate their cultural or sexual identity,"), positivity (e.g., "Their content is ultimately based around wellbeing"), humor (e.g., "The content s/he posts is comedic"), and entrepreneurial (e.g., "S/he has her own business that s/he has built from the ground up,") were screened out as they were deemed as too specific and ungeneralizable. There was also a substantial amount of redundancy among the items in which only the most unambiguous items were retained. Seventy-one items were retained from this process. Refer to Appendix B for the full list of items.

Phase 2: Evaluation by experts

To maximize the content validity of the scale or ensure the appropriateness of the items in defining authenticity (Devellis 2016), a total of sixteen experts (academic scholars in social media and consumer behavior research) examined the list of items developed in phase one. The review was administered like a pilot test in which the reviewers completed a paper questionnaire. They were asked to write down the account name of an Instagram SMI they think is authentic and indicate how much each of the items describe the self-selected influencer on a five-point scale (1 = Not at all descriptive, 5 = Exactly descriptive). Reviewers also assessed and provided hand-written comments regarding the relevancy, clarity, and redundancy of the items (DeVellis, 2016). Subsequently, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the reviewers allowing them to elaborate on their comments and assessment of the scale. Refer to Table 2 for descriptive statistics of the reviewed items.

Item	M	SD
1. They use social media to spread awareness for issues in the world	3.44	.84
2. S/he frequently posts messages advocating a cause	3.22	1.09
3. Exemplifies how to support and help a cause s/he is passionate about	3.80	1.03
4. Changes his/her morals and values frequently	1.90	.74
5. Has moral principles (Mohard et al, 2015)	4.00	.87
6. Is true to a set of moral values (Mohard et al, 2015)	4.10	.88
7. Is true to themselves	4.40	.84
8. Their content is consistent with their personality	4.60	.52
9. Has stayed the same over the years	4.11	.78
10 They are consistent over time (Bruhn et al., 2012)	4.00	.87
11 Looks the same every time I see him/her	4.56	.53
12 What she promotes is relevant to my life	3.69	1.17
13 Lives a life congruent with my own personal goals	3.40	1.07
14 S/he is relatable	3.70	.82
15 S/he proves she is just a normal person	3.50	1.27
16 S/he goes through a lot of the same problems that I do	2.50	1.08
17 S/he reveals a lot of their lives to the public	3.50	1.08
18 Tries to keep his/her private life private	2.50	1.18
19 S/he talks about real life issues going on in her/his life	3.50	1.08
20 Not only posts about the good in their life but also posts about hardships	3.40	1.35
21 Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed of showing them to the public	3.80	1.14
22 Often posts content of their partner, family, and friends	3.90	.88
23 S/he seems to be a very family-oriented person	3.67	1.00
24 They come off as very genuine, kind, and good-hearted	4.60	.52
25 Is sincere	4.60	.97
26 Has a good sense of humor that makes them down-to-earth	4.00	1.25
27 Doesn't take him/herself too seriously	3.40	1.26
28 S/he has a very bubbly personality	3.60	1.17
29 Is entitled	2.50	1.18
30 Is narcissistic and self-centered	2.20	1.14
31 Is attention seeking	2.80	1.40
32 S/he frequently posts real time content that doesn't seem too posed or polished	3.20	1.40
33 Pictures seem very staged and lack natural movement	2.20	.79
34 S/he doesn't try to be perfect on Instagram	3.30	1.34
35 There a very few pictures of them smiling	1.30	.48
36 Whenever it is a brand promotion, s/he clearly informs the audience that it is an ad (Audrezet et al., 2018)	4.20	.79
37 S/he is honest with followers	4.40	.84
38 Is known for being straight forward	4.30	.82
39 Is upfront	4.10	.57
40 S/he makes me believe that s/he is very passionate about their work (Moulard et al., 2014)	4.70	.48
41 S/he is very knowledgeable in their field	3.90	.99
42 Is skilled at his/her craft (Moulard et al., 2015)	4.00	1.05
43 Demonstrates a natural ability in his/her field (Moulard et al., 2015)	4.00	.82
44 Just posts what she wants	3.40	1.07
45 Is not afraid to be who they are	3.90	1.20

Table 2:   Descriptive statistics of the 71 items reviewed by experts.

46	S/he's not afraid to act silly and ridiculous	3.90	1.20
47	S/he's different from the traditional image of an influencer	2.80	1.23
48	Their style is original and not a copy of somebody else's	3.90	1.37
49	Has something about him/her that makes him/her stand out (Moulard et al., 2015)	4.00	1.25
50	Has distinctive characteristics (Moulard et al., 2015)	4.30	.68
51	Is unique (Moulard et al., 2015)	4.10	.99
52	S/he doesn't post unnecessary content just for likes and follows	3.00	1.33
53	Topics of some of their posts don't seem they are of much value or substance	2.40	1.26
54	The way they present themselves in the posts seem very shallow	2.30	1.42
55	Shares information on where to get the products they use	4.30	1.06
56	S/he provides discount codes to make products more affordable for the followers	3.00	1.41
57	Their content is full of life hacks and everyday informational content	3.00	1.15
58	S/he responds to and interacts with followers	3.90	.88
59	S/he cares about their followers and keeps them engaged	4.20	1.23
60	Doesn't seem to have a genuine connection with followers	2.10	1.37
61	S/he actively posts new content in a timely manner	4.10	1.20
62	Posts too much on social media	2.70	1.34
63	Uses a lot of hashtags so their posts reach a larger audience	2.50	1.35
64	Uses a lot of clickbait captions at times	1.90	.74
65	Started out as being relatable and honest to seeing to be 'in it for the money'	2.44	1.33
66	They don't post a lot of sponsored content	3.30	1.25
67	Although they post ads, they actually give meaningful insights into the products	4.10	.88
68	They give very honest reviews on brands	4.00	1.15
69	They promote products that s/he actually would use	3.90	1.29
70	The products the influencer endorses do not seem to vibe well with their personality	1.60	.97
71	S/he often promotes brands that are not "big brands"	3.80	.79

Note: All items were measured on a 5-point scale.

Table 2, continued

For the first part of the interview, reviewers were asked to share their initial thoughts regarding their overall experience taking the survey. One of the most common feedback was regarding the length of the survey. Many of the reviewers felt the list was lengthy and that they became distracted towards the end of the survey. They advised rewording some of the items as well as reducing the number of items by eliminating redundant and/or reverse-coded items. These suggestions were consistent with that of Devellis' (2016) recommendations on preventing respondent fatigue.

Subsequently, when reviewers were asked to elaborate on each of their comments, many reviewers pointed out that they had a hard time answering items that did not pertain

to their respective influencer. Especially, items related to morality (e.g., "They use social media to spread awareness for issues in the world," "They frequently posts messages advocating a cause") seemed ungeneralizable to most of the SMIs selected by reviewers. Reviewers also shared that they struggled with providing answers to items that focus specifically on influencer's use of texts (e.g., "Uses a lot of hashtags so their posts reach a larger audience," and "Uses a lot of clickbait captions at times") given that Instagram is a visual-oriented platform where many are inattentive to text descriptions. Reviewers also commented on the relevancy of some of the items. Specifically, they indicated that some of the items focused more on consumers' motives for following influencers rather than authentic qualities (e.g., "Their content is full of life hacks and everyday informational content"). After purifying the list based on the feedback provided by the reviewers, a total of 41 items remained. Please refer to Appendix B for the full list of items.

Phase 3: Survey administration

Procedure

To further reduce the measurement items and identify the underlying structure of authenticity, an online survey was constructed using Qualtrics. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. First, participants were provided with the definition of social media influencers (defined as above) and asked about their influencer following status and general Instagram usage. Second, similar to the pilot test administered in phase two, participants provided the account name of an Instagram influencer who they think is authentic and indicated how much each of the authenticity items describe the self-selected SMI on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all descriptive, 7 = Exactly descriptive). Lastly, demographic questions were asked.

Participants

Participants residing in the United States were recruited from Dynata (an online survey panel provider based in Texas) and were compensated $3.12 for participating. A total of 641 participants completed the survey. Participants who provided the names of mainstream celebrities, ordinary users with a small number of followers (i.e., less than 1000) or irrelevant responses (e.g., "no answer," "I don't know" etc.) were dropped from the final sample (Ki & Kim, 2019), resulting in 473 for subsequent analysis.

Of the total respondents included in the sample, 76% were female, 22% were male and 2% identified as non-binary. This gender ratio roughly reflects the heavy makeup of female influencers (84%) compared to male influencers (16%) who create sponsored posts (Guttmann, 2020). Participants ranged in age from 18 – 29 years old (M = 23.50, SD = 3.61). Containing a diverse ethnic breakdown, 63% identified as Caucasian, 12% identified as African American, 11% identified as Hispanic, 7% as Asian, 4% as Multiracial, and 3% as Other. While most participants indicated they were high school graduates (62%), 29% indicated earning a bachelor's degree, 6% a master's degree, 1% as Ph.D. or higher and 3% preferred not to say.

The majority of the participants (72%) were heavy Instagram users, indicating they accessed the platform several times a day, followed by once a day (16%), every other day (5%), one to two times a week (5%), every few weeks (1%) and every few months (1%). On average, participants were following 13 influencers (SD = 20.71) on Instagram. Sixty-one percent were following influencers specializing in beauty, 55% were following entertainment SMIs, followed by fashion (54%), fitness (41%), food (34%), travel (25%), gaming (24%), parenting (17%) and interior design (17%).

Sample profile (*N* = 473)	
Age, mean (min, max)	23 years (18 – 29 years)
Gender	
Male	22%
Female	76%
Non-binary	2%
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	63%
African American	12%
Hispanic	11%
Asian	7%
Multiracial	4%
Other	3%
Educational Background	
High school graduates	62%
Bachelor's degree	29%
Master's degree	6%
Ph. D or higher	1%
Preferred not to say	3%
Instagram access frequency	
Several times a day	72%
About once a day	16%
Every other day	5%
1-2 days a week	5%
Every few weeks	1%
Every few months	1%
SMI-related behaviors on Instagram	
Number of SMIs currently following	13
SMI categories	
Beauty	61%
Entertainment	55%
Fashion	54%
Fitness	41%
Food	34%
Travel	25%
Gaming	24%
Parenting	17%
Interior design	17%

Note: Respondents chose multiple SMI categories.

Table 3:   Sample characteristics for Study 1.3.

Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to identify the underlying structure of authenticity. The EFA was evaluated using the following criteria: eigenvalue (greater than 1.0; Kaiser, 1974), variance explained by each component, and loading score for each factor (greater than or equal to |0.60|; Pituch & Stevens, 2016). After the first round of the EFA, twenty items that had a loading score below |.60| or that cross loaded on more than one component (i.e., had a loading score above |.40| on more than one factor) were eliminated. Subsequent EFAs eliminated three more items, resulting in a final set of eighteen items.

Results

The EFA resulted in a meaningful and interpretable five-component solution. The five-factor solution with eighteen items accounted for a total variance of 75.31%. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value (0.91) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.000$) reflect the suitability of the data (Cerny & Kaiser, 1977; Kaiser, 1974). The Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.79 to 0.90, showing good reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

As shown in Table 4, the first dimension (four items; α = .90), *sincerity*, explained 44.19% of the variance. The second dimension (four items; α = .86), *transparent endorsements*, accounted for 10.81% of the variance. The third dimension (four items; α = .83), *visibility*, explained 7.35% of the variance. The fourth dimension (three items; α = .90), e*xpertise*, accounted for 6.86% of the variance. The fifth dimension (three items; α = .84), *uniqueness,* explained 6.11% of the variance.

	1	2	3	4	5	*M*	*SD*
Sincerity (α = .90)						5.99	1.02
Seems kind and good hearted.	**.82**	.20	.21	.21	.09		
Is sincere.	**.79**	.30	.22	.17	.13		
Comes off as very genuine.	**.77**	.22	.23	.17	.21		
Is down-to-earth.	**.73**	.22	.14	.17	.23		
Transparent endorsements (α = .86)						5.53	1.12
Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	.16	**.79**	.17	.14	.11		
Gives very honest reviews on brands.	.18	**.77**	.21	.21	.19		
The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	.28	**.74**	.10	.18	.19		
Promotes products they would actually use.	.27	**.72**	.18	.21	.20		
Visibility (α = .83)						5.22	1.23
Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	.21	.08	**.84**	.08	.15		
Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	.22	.17	**.82**	.03	.00		
Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.	.21	.11	**.73**	.10	.29		
Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	.04	.20	**.71**	.08	.03		
Expertise (α = .90)						5.81	1.10
Is skilled in their field.	.15	.20	.12	**.87**	.20		
Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.21	.21	.07	**.84**	.16		
Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.24	.22	.08	**.81**	.18		
Uniqueness (α = .84)						5.89	1.10
Is unique.	.37	.18	.13	.23	**.72**		
Has distinctive characteristics.	.34	.20	.07	.18	**.71**		
Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.30	.14	.10	.17	**.70**		
Eigenvalue	7.95	1.95	1.32	1.24	1.10		
% of variance	44.19	10.81	7.35	6.86	6.11		
Cumulative %	44.19	55.00	62.35	69.21	75.31		

Note: Loadings that were .60 or larger are set in bold

Table 4:   Initial EFA results.

		Sincerity			
		Seems kind and good hearted.	Is sincere.	Comes off as very genuine.	Is down-to earth.
Sincerity	Seems kind and good hearted.	1	.78**	.73**	.64**
	Is sincere.	.78**	1	.73**	.69**
	Comes off as very genuine.	.73**	.73**	1	.65**
	Is down-to earth.	.64**	.69**	.65**	1
Transparent endorsements	Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	.39**	.45**	.38**	.35**
	Gives very honest reviews on brands.	.41**	.46**	.46**	.42**
	The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	.43**	.49**	.45**	.42**
	Promotes products they would actually use.	.44**	.52**	.46**	.46**
Visibility	Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	.38**	.40**	.38**	.33**
	Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	.38**	.39**	.38**	.33**
	Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public	.41**	.42**	.47**	.34**
	Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	.24**	.25**	.26**	.22**
Expertise	Is skilled in their field.	.39**	.38**	.38**	.38**
	Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.40**	.41**	.40**	.39**
	Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.45**	.44**	.42**	.40**
Uniqueness	Is unique.	.47**	.48**	.50**	.50**
	Has distinctive characteristics.	.43**	.42**	.46**	.44**
	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.38**	.39**	.43**	.41**

*Note: **p < .01*

Table 5:   Pearson correlation among items – Sincerity.

		Transparent endorsements			
		Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	Gives very honest reviews on brands.	The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	Promotes products they would actually use.
Transparent endorsements	Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	1	.66**	.55**	.55**
	Gives very honest reviews on brands.	.66**	1	.61**	.63**
	The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	.55**	.61**	1	.69**
	Promotes products they would actually use.	.55**	.63**	.69**	1
Visibility	Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	.25**	.32**	.28**	.34**
	Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	.30**	.37**	.29**	.31**
	Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public	.31**	.35**	.28**	.36**
	Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	.27**	.27**	.24**	.30**
Expertise	Is skilled in their field.	.35**	.42**	.39**	.43**
	Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.33**	.42**	.40**	.42**
	Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.37**	.41**	.42**	.42**
Uniqueness	Is unique.	.32**	.42**	.43**	.44**
	Has distinctive characteristics.	.32**	.39**	.43**	.40**
	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.28**	.33*	.37**	.40**

*Note: **p < .01*

Table 6:   Pearson correlation among items - Transparent endorsements.

		Visibility			
		Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships	Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.	Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.
Visibility	Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	1	.72**	.66**	.48**
	Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	.72**	1	.56**	.52**
	Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public	.66**	.56**	1	.43**
	Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	.48**	.52**	.43**	1
Expertise	Is skilled in their field.	.24**	.20**	.29**	.19**
	Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.21**	.17**	.23**	.18**
	Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.22**	.19**	.29**	.15**
Uniqueness	Is unique.	.33**	.26**	.37**	.22**
	Has distinctive characteristics.	.26**	.20**	.32**	.23**
	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.29**	.21**	.32**	.17**

*Note: **p < .01*

Table 7: Pearson correlation among items – Visibility.

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		Expertise		
		Is skilled in their field.	Is very knowledgeable in their field.	Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.
Expertise	Is skilled in their field.	1	.79**	.77**
	Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.79**	1	.70**
	Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.77**	.70**	1
Uniqueness	Is unique.	.45**	.43**	.43**
	Has distinctive characteristics.	.38**	.41**	.38**
	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.39**	.35**	.36**

*Note: **p < .01*

Table 8:   Pearson correlation among items – Expertise.

		Uniqueness		
		Is unique.	Has distinctive characteristics.	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.
Uniqueness	Is unique.	1	.74**	.63**
	Has distinctive characteristics.	.74**	1	.59**
	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.63**	.59**	1

*Note: **p < .01*

Table 9:   Pearson correlation among items – Uniqueness.

	Sincerity	Transparent endorsements	Visibility	Expertise	Uniqueness	*M*	*SD*
Sincerity	1	.59**	.48**	.50**	.57**	5.99	1.02
Transparent endorsements	.59**	1	.44**	.52**	.51**	5.53	1.12
Visibility	.48**	.44**	1	.28**	.37**	5.22	1.23
Expertise	.50**	.52**	.28**	1	.50**	5.81	1.10
Uniqueness	.57**	.51**	.37**	.50**	1	5.89	1.10

Note: **p < .01

Table 10:   Pearson correlation among the five authenticity dimensions.

Discussion in Brief

An 18-item perceived SMI authenticity measurement scale was developed through three phases of item generation and reduction. Findings of this study revealed that SMI authenticity is a multidimensional construct consisting of five dimensions: s*incerity, transparent endorsements, visibility, expertise,* and *uniqueness*. Influencers who display a sincere personality, are transparent with brand endorsements, engage in active visibility, are knowledgeable in their field, and are considered unique are perceived as authentic to consumers.

Chapter 7: Study 2

Overview

The goal of Study 2 is twofold. First, the reliability and validity of the measurement scale developed in Study 1 are assessed through confirmatory factor analysis. Additionally, the positive relationships between the five dimensions of perceived authenticity and consumer behavior variables (i.e., attitude toward the SMI, willingness to follow the SMI and intention to purchase products recommended by a SMI) are examined.

Authenticity's positive impact on consumer behavior

The positive role of authenticity on consumers' evaluations and behaviors has been examined in various fields including brands (e.g., Beverland, 2005; Spiggle et al., 2012; Lu, Gursoy & Lu, 2015), advertisements (e.g., Becker et al., 2019; Miller, 2015) celebrity endorsers (e.g., Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Ilicic & Webster, 2016) and artists (Moulard et al., 2014). Arnould and Price (2000) argue that an underlying motive to why consumers seek authentic brands, people, and experiences is because consumption of authenticity serves the role of allowing consumers to self-identify with authenticity. Consumers' quest for authentic brands is a goal directed behavior motivated by a quest for one's own authenticity or true, inner self (Berger, 1973). Leigh, Peters and Shelton (2006) also suggests that authenticity is a critical component of consumers' everyday lives.

Research indicates that authenticity promotes more positive evaluations of advertisements and brands including enhanced credibility of the advertisement, more favorable attitude towards the brand (Miller, 2015), perceived quality of the brand's

product (Lu et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2016), and brand trust (Moulard et al., 2016). It also enhances stronger brand relationship quality and emotional attachment towards the brand, which in turn leads to greater purchase intention, willingness to pay a price premium and recommend the brand to others (Assiouras et al., 2015; Fritz et al., 2017; Morhart et al., 2015). Further, Johnson and colleagues (2015) show that when consumers perceive a brand to be less authentic, they report lower identification with the brand, lower perceived quality of the brand and less likelihood to join the brand community.

Similar patterns of findings are illustrated for endorser authenticity. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) document in their qualitative analysis that authenticity of celebrities (i.e., perception that celebrities are also "real" people who share similar life problems) lead to feelings of a personal bond with the celebrity. Ilicic and Webster (2016) also illustrate that celebrity brand authenticity enhances consumers' intention to purchase celebrities' endorsements. Moulard et al. (2014) corroborate these findings by showing that artist authenticity positively influences consumers' attitude toward the artist, which in turn leads to a more favorable evaluation of the artist's artwork and intention to purchase the art piece.

It is evident that perceived authenticity has a positive impact on consumer evaluations, inducing more positive evaluations, greater emotional bond, and willingness to purchase a product. While limited research investigates how it influences one's willingness to begin a relationship with an authentic object (i.e., person, brand etc.), it can be speculated that more authentic influencers are likely to induce greater willingness to follow the influencer as well as more positive evaluations and willingness to try their product recommendations. Hence, the following hypotheses predict that each of the identified dimensions of authenticity will positively predict attitude towards the

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influencer, intention to follow a social media influencer and purchase products they recommend.

H1: Each of the five dimensions of authenticity (sincerity, transparent endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness) will positively predict consumers' attitude towards a social media influencer.

H2: Each of the five dimensions of authenticity (sincerity, transparent endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness) will positively predict consumers' intention to follow a social media influencer.

H3: Each of the five dimensions of authenticity (sincerity, transparent endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness) will positively predict consumers' intention to purchase products recommended by a social media influencer.

Participants

The same set of criteria used in Study 1 was applied for screening participants (i.e., 18 – 29 years old, following at least one SMI on Instagram). Participants residing in the U.S. were recruited from Qualtrics (online panel provider based in Seattle) and were compensated $5 for participation. The initial sample consisted of 317 participants. Respondents who failed the instructional manipulation check (described in the *Procedures* section) were dropped from the final sample (n = 6). Those who indicated their gender as non-binary were also dropped due to insufficient sample size (n = 6), resulting in 305 for subsequent analysis.

Participants were, on average, 23 years old (SD = 3.58) and 83% identified as female. Fifty percent identified as being Caucasian, followed by Asian (15%), African-

American (14%), Hispanic (12%), Multiracial (3%), Native American (3%) and Other (4%). Majority were high school graduates (53%), 34% indicated having a bachelor's degree, 7% had a master's degree, 1% had a doctoral degree or higher and 5% preferred not to say.

Regarding Instagram usage, the sample predominantly consisted of active Instagram users as 75% indicated they access the platform several times a day. Fourteen percent accessed the platform once a day, followed by every other day (5%) and one to two times a week (5%). On average, participants were following 13 influencers (SD = 22.34) on Instagram. The most popular influencer categories to follow were beauty (61%), followed by entertainment (57%), fashion (48%), food (37%), fitness (33%), gaming (25%), travel (23%), interior design (18%) and parenting (10%).

Sample profile (N = 305)	
Age, mean (min, max)	23 years (18 – 29 years)
Gender	
Male	17%
Female	83%
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	50%
Asian	15%
African American	14%
Hispanic	12%
Multiracial	3%
Other	4%
Educational Background	
High school graduates	53%
Bachelor's degree	34%
Master's degree	7%
Ph. D or higher	1%
Preferred not to say	5%

Table 11:   Sample characteristics for Study 2.

Instagram access frequency	
Several times a day	75%
About once a day	14%
Every other day	5%
1-2 days a week	5%
Every few weeks	1%
SMI-related behaviors on Instagram	
Number of SMIs currently following	13
SMI categories	
Beauty	61%
Entertainment	57%
Fashion	48%
Food	37%
Fitness	33%
Gaming	25%
Travel	23%
Interior design	18%
Parenting	10%

Note: Respondents chose multiple SMI categories.

Table 11, continued

Procedure

The questionnaire was constructed using Qualtrics and consisted of three parts as shown in Figure 3 (i.e., prequestionnaire, stimulus, postquestionnaire). The prequestionnaire began with the definition of SMI (as defined previously) and included screening questions regarding their influencer following status on Instagram and Instagram usage behavior. Subsequently, participants were provided with four influencer categories (i.e., fashion, beauty, entertainment, and fitness) in which they were asked to select one of the categories that most of the influencers they were following on Instagram belonged to.

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Next, participants were randomly assigned to either a male or female SMI[4] who specialize in the category and asked to carefully observe the SMI's content provided. First, an overhead screenshot of their Instagram account was shown in which the presentation of the photos was similar to how they are displayed organically on Instagram. Then on the next page, twenty of the SMI's most recent posts were embedded in the Qualtrics software so participants could interact with the post as if they would on the actual platform. For example, participants were able to swipe to view a post with multiple photos and/or videos, play videos, 'like' the post or leave comments. See Appendix C for the stimulus.

After participants browsed through the embedded posts, they were asked to write down all the information they could recall about the posts. This served as the instructional manipulation check in which six poor quality responses (e.g., "nothing," "not sure") were identified and excluded. Participants were then directed to a postquestionnaire that included a series of questions about the influencer and demographic questions.

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[4] Forbes' list of top influencers of 2017 (Forbes, 2017) was used to select the influencer candidates for each category. This list is appropriate for the current study as it is the most recent list of influencers selected based on the audience size (reach), propensity for virality (resonance), and relevance to their area of expertise (O'Connor, 2017). In addition, the definition of social media influencers closely resembles that of the current research in that they "only included influencers who made it big by building their fame from the internet up, rather than celebrities who also happen to have large audiences online." And "only counted those who create original content" (O'Connor, 2017).

Pre-Questionnaire	• SMI definition • Instagram usage behavior • SMI following status

Stimulus	• Category selection • Browsing task of assigned SMI

Post-Questionnaire	• Instructional manipulation check • Questions about the SMI • Demographic questions
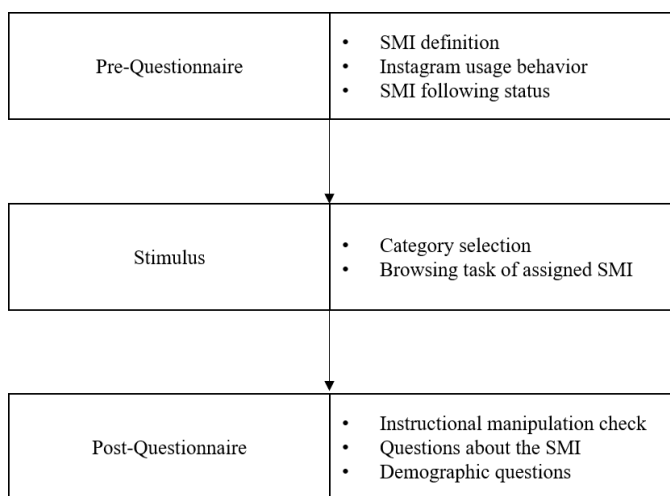
Figure 3:   Study 2 survey procedure.

Measures

Independent variable

Perceived authenticity of SMIs was measured using the scale developed in Study 1. Subjects were asked to indicate how much each of the items describe the influencer they viewed on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all descriptive, 7 = Exactly descriptive). All five dimensions had high intercoder reliability scores ranging from .86 to .94: *sincerity* ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .93$), *transparent endorsements* ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.35$, $\alpha = .90$), *visibility* ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .89$), *expertise* ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .94$), *uniqueness* ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.54$, $\alpha = .86$).

Dependent variables

Attitude towards the SMI is defined as the overall evaluation of the influencer along a dimension ranging from positive to negative (Petty, Wegner, & Fabrigar, 1997). It was measured using the items "interesting/uninteresting," "pleasant/unpleasant," "likeable/not likeable," and "good/bad" on a seven-point semantic differential scale (Silvera & Austad, 2003; $M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.62$, $\alpha = .94$).

Intention to follow the SMI measures how likely or unlikely the person intends to begin following the influencer on Instagram. Items were adapted from Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018), and Johnson, Thomas, and Jeffrey (2015). Items include: "I intend to follow this social media influencer in the near future," "I would consider following this influencer in the near future," "I intend to interact with this Instagram account in the near future," "I would like to get updates on this influencer's content on Instagram". Subjects were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $M = 3.75$, $SD = 2.00$, $\alpha = .96$).

Purchase Intention was measured using an established scale by Bearden, Lichtenstein, and Teel (1984). Participants were asked how likely or unlikely they are to purchase products or brands recommended by the influencer, and indicated their intention on a 7-point semantic differential scale (Unlikely/Likely, Definitely not/Definitely, Improbable/Probable, and Uncertain/Certain; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.99$, $\alpha = .96$).

Control variables

Perceived fit with personal interests is defined as how much the influencer's content is congruent or incongruent with the interests and taste of the participant. Research has shown that perceived fit of online content with personal interests impacts individuals' behavioral intentions (Casaló et al., 2018). It was measured with three items including "Content on this Instagram account is relevant to my values," "Content on this Instagram account is congruent with my interests," and "Content on this Instagram account match my personality" (Casaló et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2012; $M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.73$, $\alpha = .92$). Subjects were asked to indicate their level of agreement for each of the statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

Familiarity of the influencer which is defined as "knowledge of the source through exposure" (Erdogan et al., 2001, p. 40). Existing research suggests that more familiar endorsers are better at attracting and maintaining consumers' attention, and thus was included as a covariate (Premeaux, 2009). It was measured with a single item asking subjects to rate their familiarity with the influencer on a seven-point interval scale (1 = unfamiliar, 7 = familiar; Choi & Rifon, 2012; $M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.41$).

Gender was controlled based on previous research suggesting males and females evaluate online content dissimilarly (Sun et al., 2010).

Variable	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Sincerity	4.86	1.48	.93
Transparent Endorsements	4.89	1.35	.90
Visibility	4.85	1.48	.89
Expertise	5.44	1.40	.94
Uniqueness	5.10	1.54	.86
Attitude towards the SMI	5.01	1.62	.94
Intention to follow the SMI	3.75	2.00	.96
Purchase Intention	3.60	1.99	.96
Perceived fit with personal interests	3.95	1.73	.92
Familiarity of the influencer	4.25	2.41	-

Note: All items were measured on a 7-point scale.

Table 12:   Descriptive statistics of variables.

Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed with AMOS21 to assess the authenticity scale. To test the hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression was conducted for each hypothesis with SPSS 22. As presented in Table 17, the control variables (i.e., perceived fit of SMI's content with personal interests, familiarity of the influencer, and gender) were entered in Block 1. In Block 2, the five dimensions of perceived SMI authenticity were entered as independent variables. Attitude toward the influencer,

intention to follow the influencer and intention to purchase products the SMI recommends were entered in as the dependent variable for each analysis.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Although the chi square is significant for the correlated model, all other fit indices show satisfactory fit: χ^2 (125) = 286.40, p < .001 χ^2 /df = 2.29, CFI = .97, NNFI/TLI = .96, GFI = .90, AGFI = .86, PCFI = .80, NFI = .94, SMRI = .39, RMSEA = .07, (Bollen, 1989; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1995; Pituch & Stevens, 2015). Subsequently, composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha (α), and average extracted variance (AVE) scores were examined to assess the scale. The composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha scores exceed .70 showing adequate construct reliability of the scale items (Hair et al., 2014; Nunally & Bernstein, 1994). Additionally, the average extracted variance (AVE) for all five dimensions are above 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the factor loadings are above 0.6 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), providing support for convergent validity. Details can be found in Table 14. As shown in Table 15, discriminant validity amongst each dimension is also supported as the AVE for each dimension is greater than the squared correlation between the dimensions (Hair et al., 2014).

	Sincerity	Transparent endorsements	Visibility	Expertise	Uniqueness
Sincerity	1	.70**	.59**	.55**	.57**
Transparent endorsements	.70**	1	.52**	.70**	.69**
Visibility	.59**	.52**	1	.43**	.49**
Expertise	.55**	.70**	.43**	1	.68**
Uniqueness	.57**	.59**	.49**	.68**	1

*Note: **p < .01*

Table 13:   Pearson correlation among the five authenticity dimensions.

	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Sincerity	Seems kind and good hearted.	.90	.93	.94	.79
	Is sincere.	.92			
	Comes off as very genuine.	.93			
	Is down-to-earth.	.81			
Transparent endorsements	Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	.86	.90	.90	.69
	Gives very honest reviews on brands.	.84			
	The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	.79			
	Promotes products they would actually use.	.82			
Visibility	Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	.83	.89	.89	.67
	Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	.87			
	Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.	.89			
	Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	.67			
Expertise	Is skilled in their field.	.93	.94	.94	.84
	Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.96			
	Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.86			
Uniqueness	Is unique.	.87	.86	.86	.67
	Has distinctive characteristics.	.75			
	Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.84			

Note: CR: Composite Reliability, AVE: Average Variance Extracted

Table 14:   Validity and reliability test results.

	AVE	MSV (r2)
Sincerity	.79	
Sincerity		-
Transparent endorsements		.60
Visibility		.42
Expertise		.33
Uniqueness		.45
Transparent endorsements	.69	
Sincerity		.60
Transparent endorsements		-
Visibility		.35
Expertise		.56
Uniqueness		.65
Visibility	.67	
Sincerity		.42
Transparent endorsements		.35
Visibility		-
Expertise		.21
Uniqueness		.30
Expertise	.84	
Sincerity		.33
Transparent endorsements		.56
Visibility		.21
Expertise		-
Uniqueness		.60
Uniqueness	.67	
Sincerity		.45
Transparent endorsements		.65
Visibility		.30
Expertise		.60
Uniqueness		-

Note: AVE: Average Variance Extracted; MSV: Maximum Shared Variance. The AVE should be greater that the MSV within its respective factors to support discriminant validity.

Table 15:   Discriminant validity test: Comparisons of AVE and MSV.

	1	2	3	4	5
Sincerity					
Is down-to-earth.	**.83**	.19	.08	.22	.13
Comes off as very genuine.	**.80**	.31	.23	.23	.17
Seems kind and good hearted.	**.79**	.28	.27	.25	.14
Is sincere.	**.77**	.29	.21	.29	.21
Visibility					
Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	.19	**.86**	.17	.18	.06
Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.	.25	**.82**	.14	.15	.20
Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	.18	**.81**	.27	.14	.02
Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	.25	**.71**	-.07	.10	.24
Expertise					
Is skilled in their field.	.21	.12	**.85**	.27	.21
Is very knowledgeable in their field.	.17	.16	**.81**	.31	.30
Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.23	.21	**.79**	.25	.24
Transparent endorsements					
Promotes products and brands they would actually use.	.25	.15	.28	**.74**	.31
The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	.24	.11	.38	**.71**	.20
Gives very honest reviews on brands.	.31	.31	.20	**.71**	.23
Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	.43	.22	.28	**.66**	.19
Originality					
Has distinctive characteristics	.11	.15	.21	.24	**.84**
Is unique	.27	.20	.40	.22	**.69**
Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	.30	.19	.34	.34	**.62**

Table 16:   Principal component analysis with varimax rotation (fixed factors).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 was partially supported as three of the five dimensions significantly and positively predicted the attitude towards the SMI. *Sincerity* ($\beta = .28$, $t = 4.96$, $p < .001$) was the strongest predictor, followed by *transparent endorsements* ($\beta = .13$, $t = 2.20$, $p < .05$) and *visibility* ($\beta = .10$, $t = 2.20$, p $< .05$). The effects of *expertise* ($\beta = .10$, $t = 1.81$, $p = .07$) and *uniqueness* ($\beta = .10$, $t = 1.82$, $p = .07$) on attitude towards SMI approached significance. For H2, *uniqueness* ($\beta = .13$, $t = 2.68$, $p < .01$) and *transparent*

endorsements (β = .13, t = 2.21, p < .05) significantly and positively predicted intention to follow the SMI, while *visibility* approached significance (β = .09, t = 1.92, p = .06). Regarding purchase intention (H3), *transparent endorsements* was the only significant predictor (β = .17, t = 2.30, p < .05)[5], while *expertise* (β = -.12, t = -1.92, p = .06) and *uniqueness* (β = .12, t = 1.86, p = .06) approached significance. Details can be found in Table 17.

	Attitude toward the SMI	Intention to follow the SMI	Purchase Intention
Block 1	β	β	β
Gender	-.08	-.10**	-.09
Perceived fit of content	.66***	.71***	.64
SMI Familiarity	.16***	.22***	.19
R^2	.52	.64	.51
Adjusted R^2	.51	.64	.50
F	107.99***	176.99***	102.72***
Block 2			
Gender	-.06	-.10**	-.10*
Perceived fit of content	.28***	.47***	.54***
SMI Familiarity	.03	.12**	.16***
Sincerity	.28***	.07	.01
Transparent endorsements	.13*	.13*	.17*
Visibility	.10*	.08	-.01
Expertise	.09	.06	-.12
Uniqueness	.10	.13**	.12
R^2	.67	.71	.53
Adjusted R^2	.66	.70	.52
F	75.19***	91.12***	41.75***
ΔF	27.25***	14.96***	3.06**
ΔR^2	.15	.07	.02

*Note: *p < .05; **p < .01, ***p < .001*

Table 17:   Hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

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[5] The magnitude of the effect was similar to previous studies that examine the effects of SMI attributes on consumers' purchase intentions (e.g., Breves et al, 2018).

Discussion in Brief

The CFA results demonstrated that the scale is reliable and valid. Among the five dimensions, *transparent endorsements* significantly and positively predicted all three dependent variables. It was also the only dimension that significantly predicted purchase intention. *Sincerity* was the strongest predictor for attitude towards the SMI but did not have an impact on neither follow intention nor purchase intention. Similarly, the effect of *visibility* was only significant when predicting attitude towards the SMI. *Uniqueness* was a significant predictor for follow intention while *expertise* did not have a significant effect on any of the dependent variables.

Chapter 8: General Discussion

Authenticity has become an imperative quality for social media influencers. A primary goal of this study was to develop a measurement scale of perceived SMI authenticity and confirm its reliability and validity. Five unique dimensions emerged corroborating previous findings that illustrate authenticity as a multicomponent construct (e.g., Mohart et al., 2015). Additionally, data from the second study showed that each of the five dimensions have a distinct impact on important consumer behavior variables.

Sincerity emerged as the first and most dominant factor in the exploratory factor analysis, explaining the greatest amount of variance. This is consistent with Marwick and boyd's (2011) observation in which they state that "fans carefully evaluate the sincerity of celebrity's [social media] accounts in determining whether the influencer is portraying a true, unedited persona" (p. 149). Furthermore, it can be inferred from the measurement items that sincerity is being *perceived* as warm (e.g., "seems kind and good hearted," "comes good as very genuine"). This resonates with the constructivist perspective which postulates that authenticity perceptions occur when things fit one's expectation of authenticity. Meaning, consumers evaluate an influencer to be authentic when they display a sincere personality regardless of the true intentions of the influencer.

From the existentialist perspective, one can act sincere but also be inauthentic if the display of sincerity is not an accurate reflection of one's inner, true feelings. Trilling (1972) states that sincerity is a product of what is expressed to others rather than what is defined internally. On the other hand, authenticity does not involve an external reference point as it "exist wholly by the law of its own being, which include the right to embody painful, ignoble or socially inacceptable subject-matters" (Trilling, 1972, p. 93). This

self-referentiality is what distinguishes authenticity from sincerity, which are often confused and used interchangeably (Erikson, 1995).

Sincerity was the strongest predictor for attitude towards the SMI. This corroborates findings by Lee and Eastin (2020) in which they demonstrated that consumers tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward a high-sincerity influencer compared to a low-sincerity influencer. When a media personality displays a sincere persona, it engenders psychological closeness from the audience, tapping on consumers' affective responses (Knoll & Matthes, 2017). The *sincerity* dimension, however, did not have a significant impact on follow intention nor purchase intention, suggesting that influencers need to go beyond being perceived as kind and genuine to influence consumers' behavior. This may be because sincere looking SMIs are ubiquitous given that displaying oneself as real and relatable is a widely practiced authenticity management strategy (Duffy, 2017). In other words, sincerity is no longer a unique feature of SMIs to induce purchase and followings. Indeed, the mean score for the *sincerity* dimension was the highest among the five dimensions, at 5.99 (SD = 1.02; 1 = Not at all descriptive, 7 = Exactly descriptive), in Study 1 (Phase 3: online survey).

One of the most noteworthy findings is the second dimension, *transparent endorsements*. The dimension specifically centers around brand endorsements practices suggesting that SMI marketing is an inseparable part of SMIs. The dimension closely resonates with SMIs' authenticity management strategies that Audrezet et al. (2018) identified. SMIs are thought to engage in authentic behavior when their brand endorsements seem truthful in that they are not only selective in endorsing brands that closely associate with their own personality, but also promote products they would actually use. The notion of being true to oneself and engaging in intrinsically motivated

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activities is underscored, reinforcing the existentialist perspective which regards "authenticity as consistency between an entity's internal values and its external expressions" (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 3). This also extends previous research that predominantly dwell on the match-up between brand and endorser without considering celebrities' or influencers' motives behind the endorsements (Breves et al., 2019; Kamins, 1990; Torres, Augusto, & Matos, 2019).

The emergence of the dimension further provide evidence that consumers have a keen eye towards SMIs' brand endorsements (Evans et al., 2017) and highlights the growing skepticism towards SMIs' endorsements due to the proliferation of sponsored posts and deceptive branding practices (e.g., neglecting to disclose the monetary intent of sponsored content) (Smith, 2017). More importantly, *transparent endorsements* had the most consistent impact on all three dependent variables and was the only dimension that significantly and positively predicted purchase intention. While inauthentic branding practices poison the credibility of SMIs (Audrezet et al., 2018; Smith, 2017), the current findings indicate that when done right, brand endorsements can have multiplicative benefits. Not only does it lead to better attitude towards a SMI, but also encourages consumers to consider following a SMI, and try their product recommendations.

The third dimension, *visibility,* denotes being open. Both Marwick (2013) and Duffy (2017) agree that influencers are motivated to "put themselves out there" (Duffy, 2017, p. 219) to boost their net worth, reflected by the number of likes, shares, and followers. While purposefully exposing intimate aspects of one's life does not necessarily mean that the person truthfully enjoys such public behavior (and therefore is not an authentic behavior), it functions as an iconic cue for the observers corroborating the constructivist perspective. In other words, because consumers regard frequent and high

self-disclosure as an indication that the person is intrinsically motivated to present their backstage self, visibility functions as signal of authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Given that social media afford influencers to express themselves through various modes of communication (e.g., photos, videos and text) and control how much personal information to share, visibility is unique to social media influencers. Indeed, *visibility* was not identified as an antecedent of perceived celebrity authenticity in Moulard, Garrity and Rice's (2015) study. Rather, *discreteness*, which they define as "the perception that a celebrity is inconspicuous" (p. 178), was identified as a sub-dimension of rarity.

Furthermore, the effect of *visibility* was similar to that of the sincerity dimension as it significantly predicted attitude towards the SMI. Social penetration theory suggests that interpersonal relationships develop with the exchange of information, affect and mutual activities (Taylor, 1968). Influencers who share personal information are engaging in affective exchange, which is marked by greater spontaneity with self-disclosure, greater depth in reciprocity, and exchange of both positive and negative information (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Close friends engage in affective exchange with one another, suggesting that greater openness stimulates an interpersonal bond between individuals (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Hence, when SMIs engage in affective exchange through active visibility, it should engender an illusion of closeness similar to that experienced with real friends (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

While the *visibility* dimension invoked a favorable attitude towards the influencer, it fell short in influencing behavioral intentions. This may be because individuals differ on how they view certain communication practices on social media. For example, findings by Ledbetter and Mazer (2014) show that communicating through social media enhances tie strength only when users value online communication. Ledbetter and Redd

(2016) subsequently illustrated that one's attitude towards self-disclosure practices on social media significantly moderate the relationship between celebrity's posting frequency and perceptions of their credibility through parasocial interaction. Extending this line of inquiry, future research should examine whether consumers' self-disclosure attitude moderate the relationship between SMIs' self-disclosure tendencies on the effectiveness of their brand endorsements.

Another notable finding is the emergence of the fourth dimension, *expertise*. From the vantage point of the objectivist perspective, being talented validates SMIs' fame and identity (Moulard et al., 2015). And by demonstrating a natural ability in their field, their content comes as genuine and effortless rather than extrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Similar findings have been documented in research on authenticity of celebrities (Moulard et al., 2015) and brand communities (Leigh et al., 2006). Interestingly, expertise did not have a significant effect on any of the dependent variables. Similar to how *sincerity* and *visibility* have become part of the micro-celebrity culture, expertise is a fundamental characteristic of a social media influencer. Indeed, the mean score for the *expertise* dimension was the highest among the five dimensions in Study 2, at 5.44 (1 = Not at all descriptive, 7 = Exactly descriptive; *SD* = 1.40). This is noteworthy given that, in Study 2, participants were assigned a random SMI rather than asked to self-select an authentic influencer. This suggests that while *expertise* conceptually resonates with being authentic, it speaks to the influencer identity more generally rather than explicitly to authentic SMIs. In other words, there are countless numbers of influencers who are talented and therefore being an expert may not be considered a remarkable asset to impact consumers' assessment of an influencer and subsequent behavior. Although the effect of *expertise* was minimal in the current study, it still warrants attention. For

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example, Breves et al., (2019) demonstrated that influencers' expertise lead to more positive evaluation towards the brand they endorse. Future research should consider examining its role in brand evaluations and cognitive processes that undergo influencer marketing.

As the last dimension, findings related to *uniqueness* suggest that consumers perceive SMIs who are unique and one-of-a kind as authentic. In line with the objectivist perspective, authenticity refers to being real and "not to be a copy or an imitation" (Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 297). SMIs who are distinct from other influencers in terms of both personality and content are the source of one's own action and ideas, and therefore real. This coincides with perceived celebrity authenticity where uniqueness was part of the rarity construct in Moulard, Garrity and Rice's (2015) study.

Uniqueness significantly predicted consumers' intention to follow a social media influencer, while it did not have a significant influence on attitude nor purchase intention. It is interesting to note the discreteness between attitude and follow intention, as can be seen from the sole effect on follow intention, contradicting well-established behavioral theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This could suggest that consumers may have distinct motives for following a social media influencer regardless of their evaluation of the SMI. For example, a consumer may hate-follow a SMI due to envy or simply because the SMI is the center of gossip within the consumer's social network. In this particular case, consumers could follow unique influencers because they provide stimulating content and gratify novel sensory needs (Bandura, 1986).

Dimensions	Authenticity Perspectives	Effects on consumer behavior
Sincerity	Constructivist	Attitude towards SMI
Transparent endorsements	Existentialist	Attitude towards SMI Follow intention Purchase intention
Visibility	Constructivist	Attitude towards SMI
Uniqueness	Objectivist	Follow intention
Expertise	Objectivist	None

Note: constructivist perspective: authenticity is subjective and personally defined;
existentialist perspective: authenticity is the state of being true to oneself;
objectivist perspective: authenticity is inherent and an objective quality

Table 18:   Summary of findings.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature on SMI authenticity in several ways. First, a theoretical contribution of this research lies in revealing that SMI authenticity is an amalgamation of subjective, objective, and observational cues (Table 19), thereby confirming the multidimensionality of authenticity (e.g., Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The *sincerity* and *visibility* dimensions are categorized under the constructivist perspective as they emerge from consumers' subjective assessment of influencers' personality (e.g., "seems kind and good hearted", "comes off as very genuine") and behavior (e.g., "reveals a lot of their personal life to the public"). The *transparent endorsements* dimension pertains to the existentialist perspective as it more clearly exhibits consistency between the influencer's intrinsic motives and behavior (e.g., "promote products they would actually use", "the products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality"). The *uniqueness* and *expertise* dimensions are grouped under the objectivist perspective as they are inherent qualities of the influencer (e.g., "is skilled in their field," "is unique").

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More importantly, the current study extends previous research on SMI authenticity by shedding light on the effects of the identified dimensions of authenticity on consumer behavior. Observational authenticity (i.e., existentialist perspective) - when the observer is able to witness the target's behavior coinciding with their true thoughts, beliefs and values - is the most powerful form of authenticity in inducing both positive affect and behavioral change from consumers. More research is needed to better understand why the constructivist and objective forms of authenticity were less effective in predicting some of the variables of interest.

Another theoretical contribution lies in substantiating our understanding of how social media influencers differ from traditional celebrity endorsers (Jin et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Dimensions such as *transparent endorsements*, *visibility*, and *sincerity* are unique to SMI authenticity and do not pertain to celebrity authenticity based on Moulard and colleagues' (2014) findings. The emergence of these dimensions suggests that a key difference between traditional celebrities and SMIs is that SMIs are regarded as fellow consumers while traditional celebrities are not. Consequently, consumers expect SMIs to live a similar lifestyle and be identifiable. Being attainable by showcasing a friendly personality (i.e., *sincerity*) and demonstrating that they go through similar life issues (i.e., *visibility*) allow consumers to draw connections with an influencer. This ultimately frames a SMI as an ordinary consumer, which fits with how consumers visualize an authentic influencer. Similarly, a key reason why influencer marketing is subject to criticisms and creates reactance from consumers is because sponsorships are something that diverts from being an ordinary consumer. So, when influencers provide honest reviews and recommend brands they actually use in real life, this reinforces their consumer-status or ordinariness making them real and authentic. On the contrary, because

traditional celebrities are not perceived as fellow consumers, there is less reactance when they are featured in advertisements.

Another contribution of this work beyond existing literature is that while previous research on SMI authenticity has focused on how SMIs manage an authentic persona (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018; Savignac et al., 2012), in the current study, emphasis was placed on the consumer side. This becomes important as there exists a gap between how SMIs speculate their followers evaluate their content and what followers actually think of their content (Lynch, 2018). For example, while there are a growing number of consumers who perceive influencers' sponsored posts as dishonest, more than 80% of influencers think there is minimal difference in the way consumers view regular content versus a brand-sponsored content (Lynch, 2018). Moreover, given that judgements of authenticity are highly dependent on the observer (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009), decoding how consumers construct authenticity perceptions of SMIs is valuable for both practitioners and academics to gain a better understanding of social media influencer marketing. And by using a mixed-method approach, this study provides empirical evidence while substantiating previous research that were heavily qualitative in nature (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018; Savignac et al., 2012). In this study, more than fifty participants provided open-ended responses in the item generation phase generating a comprehensive list of authenticity cues that served as a foundation for a statistics-driven scale development process.

Lastly, this study demonstrates the relevance of the traditional opinion leadership framework for understanding digital opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2018). Technological advancements have introduced a new breed of opinion leaders and altered the way information is disseminated. However, despite the many changes brought by

social media, the nuts and bolts of digital opinion leadership is consistent with traditional opinion leadership. While digital opinion leaders operate at a much larger scale in a unique environment, they are constantly striving to foster a sense of closeness or an illusion of interpersonal relationship. This is because word-of-mouth is most powerful when it is disseminated casually within small groups as suggested by the two-step flow of communication hypothesis (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) and diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 1983). The concept of authenticity has garnered attention due to its ability to create such atmosphere.

Managerial Implications

As consumers demand more authentic brand recommendations, this research substantiates prior knowledge on how consumers conceptualize authenticity in the context of social media influencers. It also provides evidence that authenticity does in fact have a positive impact on important return on investment (ROI) variables such as purchase intention. The current scale allows marketers to measure SMI authenticity and could be useful in the influencer selection process. With the current scale, marketers can compare the authenticity levels of several different influencers using a sample of real followers. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges brand marketers face in influencer marketing is selecting the right influencer who can help achieve the desired ROI (Suciu, 2020).

Of noteworthy insight was that the *transparent endorsements* dimension is the only one that positively predicted purchase intention. In support of this finding, established brands that wish to drive sales from influencer marketing should partner up with influencers who are known to be truthful in their brand endorsements and are

consistent with the brand's image (Lee & Eastin, 2020). Brand managers should also allow influencers to be creative with brand endorsements so that partnerships can see natural rather than forced (Audrezet et al., 2018). The dimension also positively influenced attitude towards the SMI and intention to follow the SMI suggesting that influencers should also be mindful when it comes to brand partnerships. Even when it is a brand that fits their personality, they should be careful in increasing the number of brand sponsorships to prevent followers from questioning the motivation of the SMI's brand endorsements more generally. To strive for authenticity, SMIs might want to only consider brands that they use in real life and can speak for genuinely.

The findings of this study also provide strategic insight into relationships management strategies for influencers. Influencers who wish to grow their audience or attract new followers should focus on differentiating themselves from other influencers, as suggested by the positive impact the *uniqueness* dimension had on follow intention. For influencers who wish to focus on maintaining ongoing relationships with current followers, constantly displaying a sincere personality as well as engaging in frequent self-disclosure should induce positive impressions and aid in maintaining healthy parasocial relationships.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the current study took an important step in examining perceived SMI authenticity, it is not without limitations. First, behavioral intention was measured instead of actual behavior due to the shortcomings of self-report surveys. To overcome this limitation, future research should combine actual behavioral data taken from real influencer campaigns with followers' assessment of an influencer's authenticity using the

scale developed in the current study. Additionally, to provide a more robust understanding of the effects of SMI authenticity in influencer marketing, a comprehensive list of outcome variables should be examined including engagement (e.g., "likes", comments, and shares) and key performance indicators (e.g., click through rate, website traffic leads).

Second, to better delineate the individual effects of the five dimensions on important outcome variables, additional steps should be taken to uncover the mechanisms underlying the relationships. For example, Kowalcyzk and Pounders (2016) identified emotional attachment as an important mediator linking celebrity authenticity on purchase consumer intentions. Future research can similarly investigate different mechanisms through which the different dimensions of authenticity influence consumer behavior. Alternatively, the moderating effects of user motives and the five authenticity dimensions should be explored given that there are diverse gratifications consumers seek from following influencers (Morning Consult, 2020).

Despite the fact that Study 2 assigned participants with relatively well-known influencers as indicated by the high familiarity scores ($M = 4.25$, SD = 2.41), those who did not have an ongoing relationship with the assigned influencer might have had insufficient information to thoroughly assess authenticity. Thus, future research should replicate the findings using actual followers who have an ongoing relationship with an influencer and are knowledgeable about the influencer. Additional research could also investigate whether authenticity perceptions are dependent on length of the SMI-consumer relationship. For example, McRae (2017) demonstrates that when followers start recognizing inconsistency in an influencer's personal life stories (e.g., romantic

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relationships), followers start questioning the authenticity of their self-disclosure practices. Meaning, authenticity perceptions fluctuate throughout time.

Further, future research could also examine how the current authenticity dimensions differentiates from Ohanian's (1990) source credibility dimensions by conducting additional confirmatory factor analyses to look at the discriminant validity. Lastly, the sample across the two studies were also heavily based in the United Sates, with majority of the respondents identifying as Caucasian. Prior literature on celebrity endorsements show that the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements varies across cultures due to differences in conceptualizing celebrity figures (Winterich, Gangwar, & Grewal, 2018). Future research should explore the influencer phenomenon across different cultures and examine whether authenticity is construed similarly and valued the same way.

Conclusion

This research not only develops a scale for measuring perceived authenticity of social media influencers, it reveals five distinct authenticity cues that uniquely hinge on the existential, constructivist and objectivist perspectives. By doing so, it supports prior literature that postulate authenticity judgements are influenced by both subjective and objective cues. Lastly, important managerial insights are provided from testing the effects of authenticity on important consumer variables. Engaging in transparent branding practices emerged as one of the most important dimensions of authenticity, predicting all three dependent variables of interest. Authentic branding practices in the age of social media deserves more attention.

Appendix A: Open-Ended Response Survey

This assignment is only for people who **follow at least one social media influencer on Instagram.** If this does not pertain to you, let the instructor know and I'll provide you a different assignment.

To receive full credit, carefully read the instructions and answer all the questions in detail.

> *Social Media Influencers are those who have built a reputation for being knowledgeable on a particular topic; they become famous through their social media accounts - which makes them different from traditional celebrities such as Hollywood singers, actors, entertainers, and/or reality TV show stars; and often range from industry experts, bloggers, to ordinary users.*

1. Think of a social media influencer on **Instagram** who you think is **<u>AUTHENTIC</u>**. *You can browse through your Instagram feed to refresh your memory.*

    A. What is the @username of their account profile?

    B. What makes this influencer **AUTHENTIC**? List and thoroughly describe <u>AS MANY REASONS</u> to why you identify this influencer as **AUTHENTIC**.

2. Now, think of a social media influencer on **Instagram** who you think is **<u>INAUTHENTIC</u>**. *You can browse through your Instagram feed to refresh your memory.*

    A. What is the @username of their account profile?

    B. What makes this influencer **INAUTHENTIC**? List and thoroughly describe <u>AS MANY REASONS</u> to why you identify this influencer as **INAUTHENTIC**.

Below are a series of personal questions to make your qualitative responses meaningful.

1. How do you identify your gender?
   - ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Other

2. What is your age?

3. What is your ethnicity?
   - ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
   - ☐ Asian
   - ☐ Black or African American
   - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - ☐ White or Caucasian
   - ☐ Multiracial

   Clearly provide your name and UTeid to receive extra credit.
4. Your name:

5. Your UTeid:

Appendix B: Original items for scale development

Phase 1: Item generation through literature review and open-ended responses

Original items from open-ended survey
1. Their real life (i.e., off screen) personality and personality displayed on social media are different
2. Their social media activities are largely for the fame and sponsorship rather than because of true passion
3. They started out as being relatable and honest to 'in it for the money'
4. Their actions seem to be dominated by the growth of their follower base
5. S/he celebrates her/his cultural or sexual identity
6. S/he is very open about his/her cultural or sexual struggles and experiences
7. They use social media to spread awareness for issues in the world
8. S/he frequently posts messages advocating a cause
9. Exemplifies how to support and help a cause s/he is passionate about
10. Has stayed the same over the years
11. Hasn't changed much
12. They have too many followers
13. They don't have a lot of followers
14. Their follower count is close to their following account
15. S/he has her own business that s/he has built from the ground up
16. S/he is naturally talented in many different ways and expresses those talents openly and freely
17. S/he shares information on where to get the products they use
18. S/he provides discount codes to make products more affordable for the followers
19. Their content is full of life hacks and everyday informational content
20. S/he just post what they want
21. S/he is not afraid to be who they are
22. S/he is not afraid to speak their mind on social media
23. They are undeniably themselves
24. S/he does not join the hype train to fit in with today's trend of posting things to look good
25. S/he posts very vulnerable content
26. S/he's not afraid to act silly and ridiculous
27. S/he does what s/he feels compelled to do
28. They tell you things straight up and does not beat around the bush
29. S/he is honest with followers
30. Is true to themselves
31. Is upfront
32. S/he's different from the traditional image of an influencer
33. Their style is original and not a copy of somebody else's

34. Their content is uncreative and repetitive
35. S/he copies other influencers
36. What she promotes is relevant to my life
37. S/he lives a life congruent with my own personal goals
38. S/he is relatable
39. S/he proves she is just a normal person
40. S/he goes through a lot of the same problems that I do
41. S/he responds to and interacts with followers.
42. I can see an incredible amount of follower engagement on their profile as can be seen with the number of likes, comments, and replies back to their fans
43. S/he cares about their followers and keeps them engaged
44. Doesn't seem to have a genuine connection with followers
45. S/he does not communicate with followers
46. The comedic and personal way s/he addresses the followers allows me to feel as if I'm in on the joke and have a spot in the fanbase
47. S/he actively posts new content in a timely manner
48. S/he posts too much on social media
49. S/he writes long captions, portraying that s/he wants to interact with her/his followers
50. Honest or relatable captions make them seem more down to earth and real
51. S/he uses a lot of hashtags, making me think that all they care about is spreading their post
52. S/he uses very clickbait captions at times
53. S/he often includes questions in their captions bc its just a way to ask your followers to comment on your posts
54. Everything s/he posts is according to the planned schedule rather than spontaneously
55. They show lots of videos throughout the day that are very funny
56. The content s/he posts is comedic
57. S/he doesn't post unnecessary content just for likes and follows
58. S/he gives the idea that their content is not for the money but because they enjoy it
59. Their feed features more than just pictures of themselves
60. The type of content s/he creates is also very personal as it is usually everyday lifestyle type vlogs and posts
61. S/he shows a more behind the scenes style side to media so it gives his content a more genuine feel
62. Lots of fun and entertaining content
63. Their content is consistent with their personality
64. The way they present themselves in the posts seem very shallow
65. Topics of some of their posts don't seem they are of much value of substance
66. Their content is ultimately based around wellbeing
67. S/he posts lost of wholesome content on positive self-image

68. Always optimistic and looks at things on the bright side
69. Often times, their post focuses on uplifting people to become a better version of ourselves
70. Although they post ads, they actually give meaningful insights into the products
71. They don't post a lot of sponsored content
72. They use a diverse choice of brands
73. They give very honest reviews on brands
74. They promote products that s/he actually would use
75. S/he often promotes brands that are not "big brands"
76. The products/companies s/he endorses are those of her/his choice
77. Promotes similar brands now as s/he did before s/he was getting paid to do
78. Will feature any product no matter how much it doesn't fit with her/his audience
79. S/he sponsors too many different brands, making it seem like s/he does it just for the money
80. Does many sponsored posts that seem rushed into rather than genuine
81. The products the influencer endorses do not seem to vibe well with their personality
82. S/he posts ads in an insincere way that makes me not want to purchase the products
83. S/he seems to be a very family-oriented person
84. There is never any pictures of their family
85. They come off as very genuine, kind, and good-hearted
86. S/he has a very bubbly personality
87. Doesn't take him/herself too seriously
88. Mocks him/herself jokingly
89. S/he has a very outgoing personality
90. Is down to earth
91. S/he is adventurous
92. Has a good sense of humor that brings her down to earth and makes her less preachy
93. Does not seem like a very nice person
94. Is sincere
95. There are a very few pictures of them smiling
96. S/he is very narcissistic and self centered it appears
97. Is entitled and attention seeking
98. S/he frequently posts real time content that doesn't seem too posed or polished
99. Pictures of the influencer do not appear overly edited
100. Their profile isn't nearly as pretty as other influencers who closely stick to color themes to keep their feed looking 'aesthetic'
101. S/he does not filter anything out
102. S/he doesn't try to be perfect on Instagram
103. Their posts seem to be staged and too good to be true
104. Their pictures seem very structured and lack variety and natural movement
105. The feed is not very aesthetically appealing

106. It seems s/he cares more about the effect of the pictures than the content
107. Tries to keep their private life private
108. S/he reveals a lot of their lives to the public
109. S/he talks about real life issues going on in her/his life
110. Doesn't share 'real' or raw posts about their day to day struggles, general life, or insight into who they really are.
111. Not only posts about the good in their life but also posts about hardships
112. Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed of showing them to the public
113. Does not try to present some kind of perfect life
114. Is open about their struggles
115. S/he is very knowledgeable in their field
116. Looks the same every time I see her
117. Changes their morals and values frequently
118. Has moral principles (Mohart et al., 2015)
119. Is true to a set of moral values (Mohart et al., 2015)
120. They are consistent over time (Bruhn et al., 2012)
121. S/he makes me believe that s/he is very passionate about their work (Moulard et al., 2014)
122. It is obvious they are excited about their Instagram account (Moulard et al., 2014)
123. Has a true passion for Instagram (Moulard et al., 2014)
124. Shows a strong dedication to their Instagram account (Moulard et al., 2014)
125. Is skilled at his/her craft (Moulard et al., 2015)
126. Demonstrates a natural ability in his/her field (Moulard et al., 2015)
127. Has something about him/her that makes him/her stand out (Moulard et al., 2015)
128. Has distinctive characteristics (Moulard et al., 2015)
129. Is unique (Moulard et al., 2015)
130. Whenever it is a brand promotion, s/he clearly informs the audience that it is an ad (Audrezet et al., 2018)

Initial reduction of items
1. They use social media to spread awareness for issues in the world
2. S/he frequently posts messages advocating a cause
3. Exemplifies how to support and help a cause s/he is passionate about
4. Changes his/her morals and values frequently
5. Has moral principles (Mohard et al, 2015)
6. Is true to a set of moral values (Mohard et al, 2015)
7. Is true to themselves
8. Their content is consistent with their personality
9. Has stayed the same over the years
10. They are consistent over time (Bruhn et al., 2012)
11. Looks the same every time I see him/her
12. What she promotes is relevant to my life
13. Lives a life congruent with my own personal goals
14. S/he is relatable
15. S/he proves she is just a normal person
16. S/he goes through a lot of the same problems that I do
17. S/he reveals a lot of their lives to the public
18. Tries to keep his/her private life private
19. S/he talks about real life issues going on in her/his life
20. Not only posts about the good in their life but also posts about hardships
21. Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed of showing them to the public
22. Often posts content of their partner, family, and friends
23. S/he seems to be a very family-oriented person
24. They come off as very genuine, kind, and good-hearted
25. Is sincere
26. Has a good sense of humor that makes them down-to-earth
27. Doesn't take him/herself too seriously
28. S/he has a very bubbly personality
29. Is entitled
30. Is narcissistic and self-centered
31. Is attention seeking
32. S/he frequently posts real time content that doesn't seem too posed or polished
33. Pictures seem very staged and lack natural movement
34. S/he doesn't try to be perfect on Instagram
35. There a very few pictures of them smiling
36. Whenever it is a brand promotion, s/he clearly informs the audience that it is an ad (Audrezet et al., 2018)

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37. S/he is honest with followers
38. Is known for being straight forward
39. Is upfront
40. S/he makes me believe that s/he is very passionate about their work (Moulard et al., 2014)
41. S/he is very knowledgeable in their field
42. Is skilled at his/her craft (Moulard et al., 2015)
43. Demonstrates a natural ability in his/her field (Moulard et al., 2015)
44. Just posts what she wants
45. Is not afraid to be who they are
46. S/he's not afraid to act silly and ridiculous
47. S/he's different from the traditional image of an influencer
48. Their style is original and not a copy of somebody else's
49. Has something about him/her that makes him/her stand out (Moulard et al., 2015)
50. Has distinctive characteristics (Moulard et al., 2015)
51. Is unique (Moulard et al., 2015)
52. S/he doesn't post unnecessary content just for likes and follows
53. Topics of some of their posts don't seem they are of much value or substance
54. The way they present themselves in the posts seem very shallow
55. Shares information on where to get the products they use
56. S/he provides discount codes to make products more affordable for the followers
57. Their content is full of life hacks and everyday informational content
58. S/he responds to and interacts with followers
59. S/he cares about their followers and keeps them engaged
60. Doesn't seem to have a genuine connection with followers
61. S/he actively posts new content in a timely manner
62. Posts too much on social media
63. Uses a lot of hashtags so their posts reach a larger audience
64. Uses a lot of clickbait captions at times
65. Started out as being relatable and honest to seeing to be 'in it for the money'
66. They don't post a lot of sponsored content
67. Although they post ads, they actually give meaningful insights into the products
68. They give very honest reviews on brands
69. They promote products that s/he actually would use
70. The products the influencer endorses do not seem to vibe well with their personality
71. S/he often promotes brands that are not "big brands"

Phase 2: Remaining items after expert review

1. Seems kind and good hearted
2. Comes off as very genuine
3. Is sincere
4. Is down-to-earth
5. Seems real to me
6. Is true to themselves
7. Has a good sense of humor
8. Is relatable
9. Gives the impression of being natural
10. Seems like a very family-oriented person
11. Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products
12. The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality
13. Promotes products they would actually use
14. Gives very honest reviews on brands
15. Whenever it's a brand promotion, they clearly inform the audience that it is an advertisement
16. Talks about real-life issues going on in their life
17. Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships
18. Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public
19. Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.
20. Has distinctive characteristics
21. Is unique
22. Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's
23. Doesn't seem to care about what others think of them
24. Is different from the traditional image of an influencer
25. Is skilled in their field
26. Is very knowledgeable in their field.
27. Demonstrates a natural ability in their field
28. Has a very bubbly personality
29. Is not afraid to act silly and ridiculous
30. Doesn't take themselves too seriously
31. Posts don't seem too polished
32. Doesn't try to be perfect on Instagram
33. Often promotes brands that are not "big brands"
34. Goes through a lot of the same problems that I do
35. Keeps followers engaged
36. Responds to and interacts with followers

37. Frequently posts real time content
38. Rarely posts sponsored content
39. Seems to have a genuine connection with the audience
40. Has stayed the same over the years
41. Is consistent over time

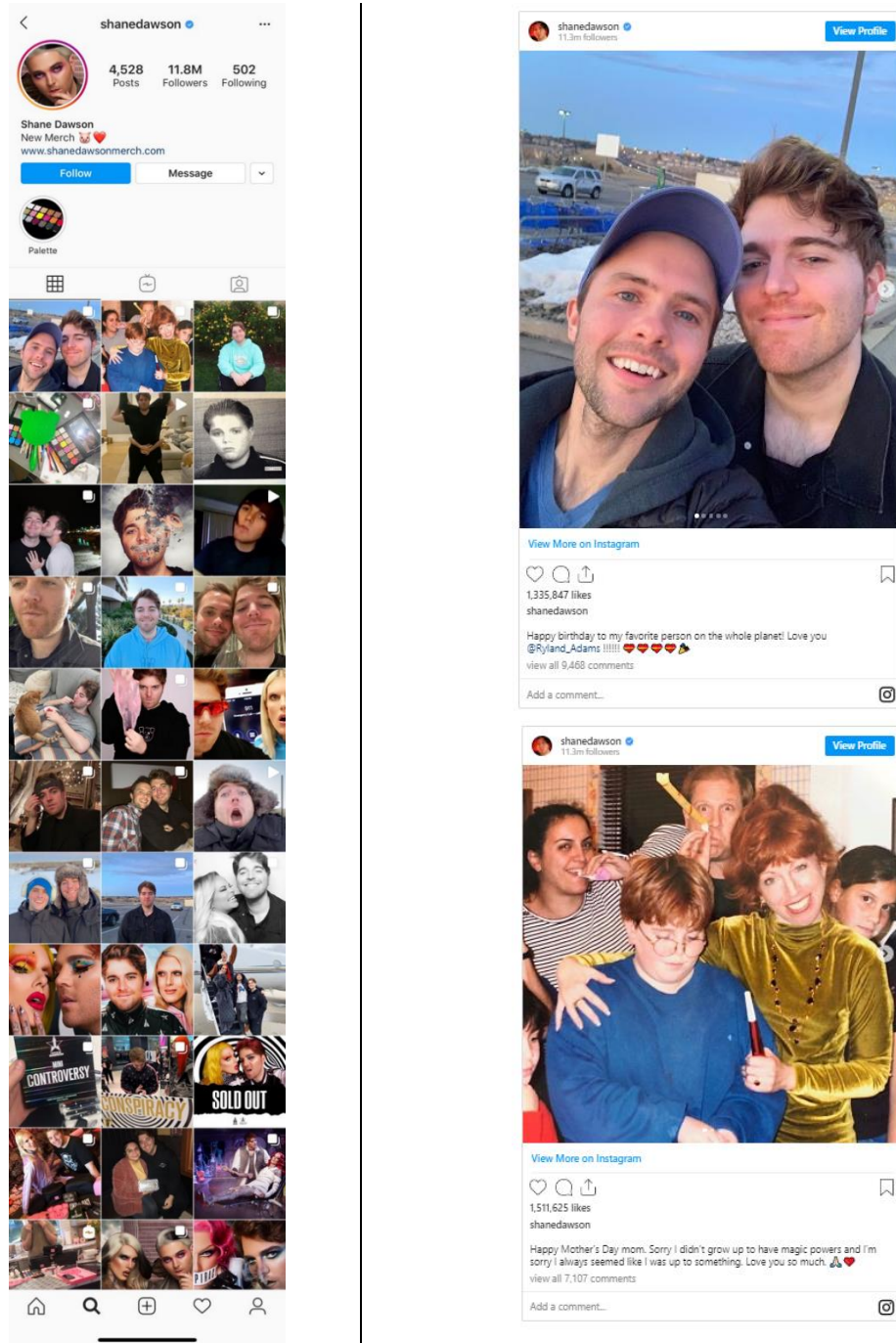# Appendix C: Stimulus for Study Two

Figure 4:   Overhead shot of profile and example Instagram posts

Appendix D: Survey Measures for Study Two

MNIPULATION CHECK

- "Please write down all the information you can recall about the influencer you just observed."

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE MEASURES

Perceived Authenticity of SMIs

Please indicate how much each of the items describe the influencer.

"The influencer I just observed _____."

1 = Not at all descriptive, 7 = Exactly descriptive

Sincerity

- Seems kind and good hearted
- Is sincere
- Comes off as very genuine
- Is down-to-earth

Transparent Endorsements

- Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products
- Gives very honest reviews on brands
- The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality
- Promotes products they would actually use

Visibility

- Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships
- Talks about real-life issues going on in their life
- Talks about their flaws and is not shamed for showing them to the public
- Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public

Expertise

- Is skilled in their field

- Is very knowledgeable in their field

- Demonstrates a natural ability in their field

Uniqueness

- Is unique

- Has distinctive characteristics

- Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's

DEPENDENT VARIABLES MEASURES

Attitude towards the SMI

How do you feel about this influencer?

- Uninteresting 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Interesting

- Unpleasant 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Pleasant

- Not likeable 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Likeable

- Bad 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Good

Intention to follow the SMI

How likely or unlikely are you to start (or continue) following this influencer?

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

- I would consider following (or continue following) this influencer in the near future.

- I intend to interact with this Instagram account in the near future.

- In would like to get updates on this influencer's content on Instagram.

Purchase Intention

How likely or unlikely is it that you'll purchase products or brands recommended by this influencer?

- Unlikely 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Likely

- Improbably 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Probable

- Uncertain $1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7$ Certain

- Definitely not $1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7$ Definitely

CONTROL VARIABLE MEASURES

Perceived Fit with Personal Interests

How much did this influencer's content fit with your personal interests?

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

- Content on this Instagram account are relevant to my values

- Content on this Instagram account are congruent with my interests

- Content on this Instagram account match my personality

Familiarity of the influencer

How familiar is this person to you?

- Unfamiliar $1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7$ Familiar

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