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Got to be real: An investigation into the co-fabrication of authenticity by fashion companies and digital influencers

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# Got to be real: An investigation into the co-fabrication of authenticity by fashion companies and digital influencers

## Introduction

In recent years, authenticity has become a keyword in the influencer industry. With the emblematic title, “‘It’s genuine, you know?’”: why the online influencer industry is going “authentic”” (Elmhirst, 2019), *The Guardian* reported that over the last decade, influencer marketing has become a well-established practice, generating a business model where brand names pay ‘authentic’ social media influencers to advertise their products.

This emphasis on authenticity takes place within a context of consumer overstimulation where the target’s senses are subjected to an increasing volume of engaging, seductive and multi-sensory marketing communications. Brands and influencers have intercepted this demand for genuine content and authenticity ‘sought in the uncommon and in opposition to the mainstream’ (McQuarrie et al. 2013: 152). Traditional company-centric brand communication has lost some of its effectiveness as the internet has led to the explosion of user-generated content. Relatedly, there has been a considerable power shift in brand strategies towards the apparently genuine, personal recommendations of credible<sup>1</sup> digital personalities who help to identify and set trends in many markets. These personalities are called digital influencers (hereafter DIs): a self-congratulatory label that is increasingly used, both in the marketing environment and common speech, to refer to bloggers, Instagrammers, YouTubers and TikTokers with large audiences. Research indicates that consumers trust independent (or at least perceived as such) third parties more than they trust corporations (e.g., Appel et al., 2020). As a result, companies embrace more consumer-centric tools in order to build meaningful relationships with the public. Nowhere is this change more evident than in the field of fashion, as DIs are deeply reshaping the structure of relationships among brands, consumers and professional gatekeepers (Pedroni, 2015). In view of the high returns that influencer marketing can create for businesses (Backaler, 2018), the majority of fashion companies are eager to build relationships with social media influencers who have a strong, personal connection with their global audiences.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Authentic’ identifies what is real, faithful, genuine, referred to a first origin. The term is often used to emphasize the personal touch of the creator in contrast to commercial imperatives. ‘Credible’, differently, refers to how ‘valid’ a (media) message is perceived. The aim of influencer marketing may be summarised as an attempt to transfer the authenticity of the authenticator (the DI) into credible messages, a process that makes it clear the key mediating function of DIs.

While most researchers and industry experts believe that DIs play an increasingly important role in a sound brand communication strategy (e.g., Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip, 2014), digital personalities can be a double-edged sword for companies. They can endanger a firm's control over the message, perhaps by spreading misinformation about a product or a brand, or attracting negative comments and unfair attacks. In particular, consumer responses to a company may be negative if they perceive the influencer's messages as inauthentic and controlled by the brand owner. Furthermore, integrating ordinary individuals, both DIs and audiences (consumers), into the brand-building process remains a difficult challenge for many companies (Gomez et al., 2019).

Academic research has mainly focused on the perspective of the influencers (e.g., Findlay, 2017) and consumers (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2014). However, the perspective of the company brand owner in the company/DI relationship process has remained almost untouched (for an exception, see Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip, 2014). With DIs serving as representatives of the company for a wider audience, brand managers are challenged on two fronts: one, including and controlling them within the brand communication activity and two, maintaining their credibility with the general public despite the increasing commodification of their work (Abidin, 2016).

The aim of this essay, then, is to embrace the overlooked perspective of the company. We specifically explore the process through which fashion companies face the challenge of authenticity while collaborating with a new group of key cultural intermediaries, the DIs.

For the purpose of this article, we define authenticity as an ideal underlying the practices and strategies of DIs and the companies they work with (Rocamora, 2018). Authenticity is an issue of increasing interest for at least three reasons. First, authenticity works as an object of desire, an output, a product in high demand that is both requested by consumers and manufactured by companies, as testified by the increasing debates 'about who and what should be called "real" versus "fake."' (Lehmann et al., 2019: 1). Second, it is used as a rhetorical strategy (Jacobs, 2012) by both companies and DIs to justify their practices. Finally, an increasing number of academic works are focusing on the concept of authenticity (e.g., Guignon, 2004; Lehmann et al., 2019; Marwick, 2013).

## **Background: the digital influencers and the authenticity work**

### *The politics of authenticity*

The commercial construction and commodification of authenticity is a well-known issue in cultural sociology (Peterson, 1979; Rocamora, 2018) and in consumer research (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Scholars have taken an interest in its capacity to delineate an anti-mainstream posture while functioning as a marketing narrative (e.g., Guignon, 2004). In this view, authenticity becomes a true business imperative and companies strive to offer ‘realness-driven’ messages to their consumers (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

An uncritically enthusiastic vision of authenticity, such as the one found in business and influencer marketing manuals (e.g., Backaler, 2018), is of little help for a critical understanding of authenticity as a social construct. According to Marwick (2013), authenticity works as an organizing principle in fashion bloggers’ practices, which are oriented towards self-expression, ‘honest engagement’ with companies, and intimacy with audiences, in opposition to the ideas of artificiality, mask and theatrical play. Notably, Peterson’s study on country music illuminated the notion of ‘fabricated authenticity’, showing that ‘authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct’ (1979: 5). The politics of authenticity, as Peterson highlighted, require a repertoire of characters, images, practices, and metaphors centered on a semantic world built around genuineness, spontaneity, originality and an anti-establishment attitude. The same appears to be true for the fashion market, where the realness of ‘next-door’ influencers is designed to remedy a lack of trust in companies.

However, Peterson’s perspective saw authenticity as solely a product of the fabricator, in this case the company, and intended to achieve obvious commercial goals. In contrast, we posit in this study the idea of a ‘co-fabricated’ authenticity where both fashion companies and DIs share responsibility in the cultural construction of this ideal. In particular, we propose that co-fabricated authenticity is the result of the work of those actors who are engaged in managing the authenticity or processes of authentication of marketable goods. Audiences ultimately serve as the source of this symbolic power, but both companies and influencers legitimize the use of authenticity.

As a co-fabricated output, authenticity requires authenticity workers—a role performed by DIs—who can convey a feeling of authenticity through their vitality and character, as well as by setting the tone of the collaboration in order to prevent an excess of commercialism. But this work cannot be imagined outside of the cultural and material frame provided by companies.

As stated by Jones et al. (2005: 283), ‘all work of culture industries, in some way or the other is preoccupied with claims to authenticity’. Fashion, a cultural and creative industry by definition, is no exception. DIs, and fashion bloggers before them, ‘have been able to tap into

the ideal of authenticity’ (Rocamora, 2018: 70) by monetizing their blogs and social channels. In so doing, they are participating in the commodification of authenticity—a process that dates back to the 1960s when, according to Chiapello and Boltanski (1999), this issue was a critique of consumerism before being incorporated into a capitalistic narrative.

The promise of the authentic or real is today a consolidated narrative terrain. Scholars have variously commented on this crafted authenticity. It has seen, for example, as constitutive of the immaterial and promotional labour typical of social media practitioners (Rocamora, 2018). Several authors have used oxymorons to highlight the tension between realness and the promotional logic of influencer practice, among them ‘staged authenticity’ (Pooley, 2010) and ‘contrived authenticity’ (Abidin, 2016). As explained, fashion bloggers use authenticity as ‘a content strategy carried out to gain readers and differentiate oneself both from one’s peers and from mainstream fashion magazines’ (Marwick, 2013: 248). Authenticity has become a powerful legitimisation device in the juxtaposition between glossy fashion magazines with their photo layouts of model, non-ordinary bodies, and influencers who build their *persona* as ‘real’ and normal individuals speaking to other ‘real’ individuals.

A related matter is whether authenticity as a legitimisation device works for all segments of the fashion industry, as it does in the popular music studied by Peterson (see also Regev, 2013), or only for commercial fashion. The fashion field is in fact characterised by discrepancies between high fashion, commercial fashion and streetwear (Mears, 2011) that reflect a wider debate on fashion as art vs. fashion as commerce (Pedroni and Volonté, 2014). The use of DIs by high fashion brands is now widely accepted. Dolce&Gabbana was one of the first companies to host DIs to sit front row when they invited two famous bloggers, Brianboy and Tommy Ton, to view their 2009 Milan show. More than a decade later, Brianboy was still collaborating with brands such as Louis Vuitton and Chanel in his TikTok videos. Although the content produced by professional DIs for these brands is more sophisticated than the mere product placement campaigns made for lower-end brands, underlining authenticity remains the aim of the narrative and aesthetic strategies to drive follower statistics (e.g., Chiara Ferragni’s tale of pregnancy and motherhood on Instagram).

### *Influencers as cultural intermediaries*

Through ‘authenticity work’, we can understand how fashion DIs serve as brokers or intermediaries of authenticity as a cultural commodity. Bloggers and influencers have been analysed with reference to a range of categories, including those of content creators/prosumers

(Pihl and Sandström, 2013), cultural capitalists (McQuarrie et al., 2013), or celebrities (Pedroni, 2016). Furthermore, they have been studied through several disciplinary lenses, like sociology (e.g., Titton, 2015), communication (e.g., Freberg et al., 2011), branding (e.g., Delisle and Parmentier, 2016), technology (e.g., Liu et al., 2015) and media studies (e.g., Meyers, 2012). The main research topics include firms' competition for influencers (Katona, 2013), identification and selection of influencers (Booth and Matic, 2011), social media influencer capital (Freberg et al., 2011), influencers and trust (Liu et al., 2015), person-brand building and career of influencers (Delisle and Parmentier, 2016), and brand communication through DIs (Uzunoglu and Misci Kip, 2014).

However, most of this research takes the perspective of either the influencer (e.g., Findlay, 2017) or the consumer (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2014). In other words, only a few scholars have examined the phenomenon of DIs through the viewpoint of brands and companies, and specifically how the latter identify, select and compete for influencers (Booth and Matic, 2011; Katona, 2013; Liu et al., 2015).

What makes DIs crucial in any communication campaign in the fashion industry, and beyond, is their remarkable capacity to connect companies and consumers. This feature qualifies them as a new, powerful group of cultural intermediaries (Pedroni, 2014), conceived as 'the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today's marketplace [who work] at the intersection of culture and economy [and] perform critical operations in the production and promotion of consumption, constructing legitimacy and adding value through the qualification of goods' (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014: 1). While the sociological literature has already examined the central role of cultural intermediaries in the field of fashion (e.g., Crane and Bovone, 2006), a few scholars have recently started considering DIs as real cultural intermediaries (Delisle and Parmentier, 2016; McQuarrie et al., 2013).

According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediaries work in strategic areas of communication and research, grappling with the immaterial and symbolic significance of consumer goods and cultural processes. In so doing, they embody the dual role of 'perfect consumers' and consumption amplifiers before a wider audience. They are, in short, manufacturers of symbols who are engaged in at least two tasks (Pedroni, 2014): first, materialising the immaterial (i.e., translating intangible ideas into something real and commodifiable); and second, creating cultural content by denying or overshadowing the commercial dimension of their work.

A key task of fashion DIs is to nurture a faith in brands, consumers and themselves, and in the fact that what they do has a value. This necessitates cultivating the authenticity narrative and thereby the preservation of the *illusio* of their field, that is, not only believing in its rules, but also spreading this principle of ‘belief’ through their practices and discourses (Bourdieu, 1998; Lonergan et al., 2018), for example, through an aesthetic of authenticity (amateur-quality pictures, naturalness, lack of post-production, etc.) and self-presentation as ‘the girl next door’. Like traditional cultural intermediaries— e.g., magazine journalists (Negus, 2002), marketing and PR practitioners (Nixon and Gay, 2002)—DIs have started to lead trends and influence consumption thanks to the network power they have achieved with new digital technologies. Successful DIs gain their audiences by creating content on social media and garnering higher follower statistics. They act as a relational keystone between producers and consumers by performing a work of mediation. In the scholarly literature from Peterson onwards, authenticity is presented as a process initiated artfully on the production side (i.e., companies and the cultural industry in general), without adequately considering the role of gatekeepers and their concrete relationships with companies (i.e., to help fulfil the brands’ communication goals). We aim to fill this gap by devoting our analysis to the DIs-companies dyad and in particular, by exploring the perspective of the latter entity.

### **Aim and methods**

Our general goal can be reformulated as a research question: How do companies partake in the process of fabricating authenticity while collaborating with DIs within the fashion industry?

To answer this question, we performed an exploratory empirical investigation, adopting a qualitative inductive approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in order to examine the company-DI relationship at 21 Italian fashion companies. In our research, brand managers’ accounts form the core empirical material for understanding the company-DI relationship process.

We focused on Italian fashion companies since Italy represents a mature market where companies are well established and regularly collaborate with DIs. Furthermore, Italy hosts the highest number of fashion and luxury companies in the world (Reuters, 2019) and is pivotal in the fashion geography (Godart, 2014). Moreover, a recent report by Launchmetrics and WGSN (2019) recognised Milan as Europe’s leading market for influencers and the Italian Chiara Ferragni as one of the top five influencers who garnered the most buzz around the major fashion weeks.



### *Data collection*

Companies represent the unit of analysis in our research. Following a purposeful sampling method, we selected companies (and brands) from various sectors and segments of the fashion market. We checked each brand's official Instagram page to make sure that the selected companies were using DIs in their official posts and/or were tagged by DIs. We then identified key informants in each company, mainly among brand managers and digital communication managers.

We contacted them via phone or mail, and invited 58 of them to participate in our research. We finally interviewed 21 informants who belonged to as many companies from various sectors and market segments: 12 clothing companies, 3 sportswear companies, 2 shoes companies, 2 lingerie companies, 1 knitwear brand, and 1 accessories brand; 5 of these companies serve the luxury market, 11 serve the medium-end segment, and 5 serve the low-end segment.

The data for this study came from semi-structured interviews, which present open-ended questions. The interviews took place between 2017 and 2018, over a period of eight months, mostly in the informants' workplace to ensure their comfort and maximum expressiveness, and were conducted in their native language (Italian). The interview ranged from 40 to 80 minutes.

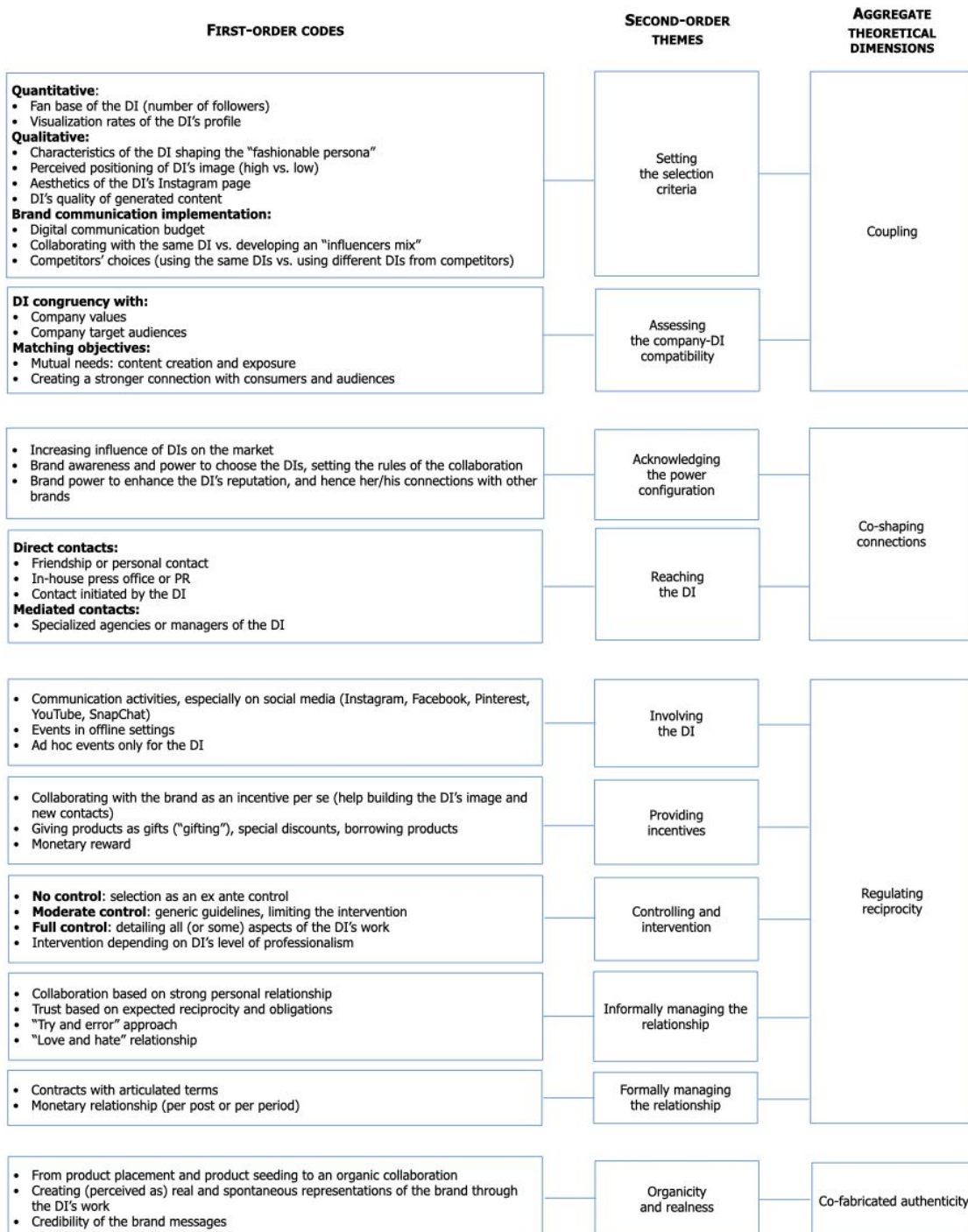
### *Analysis*

In analysing our data, we followed a qualitative inductive approach where we allowed key findings to emerge from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We then followed a three-step coding process whereby we developed first-order codes, second-order themes and aggregate theoretical dimensions within a process of constant iteration between data and theory (Gioia et al., 2013). All interviews were recorded, then transcribed and analysed via Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

All stages of data interpretation involved an iterative process: we went back and forth between the data, literature and emerging categories until we reached theoretical saturation. The two authors, assisted by a knowledgeable researcher, independently coded the interview transcripts using *in vivo* codes in order to generate first-order codes (see first column in Figure 1). We then scoured the relationships between first-order codes and grouped them into categories with a higher level of abstraction (i.e., second-order themes) (see second column in Figure 1). After further distilling the second-order themes into aggregate theoretical dimensions, we devised our data structure (Gioia et al., 2013). We met and discussed our codes at each stage of the coding and reconciled disagreements through discussion. In sum, we found ten second-order themes

that clustered into the following four aggregate theoretical dimensions: coupling, co-shaping connections, regulating reciprocity and co-fabricated authenticity (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Data structure

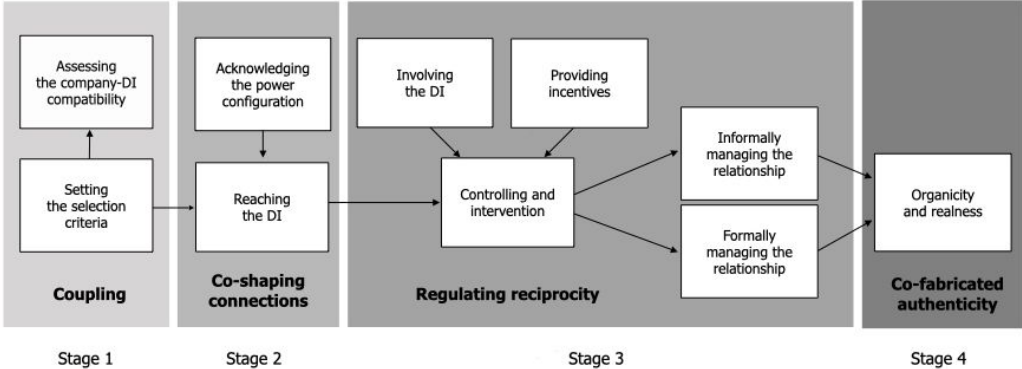


Finally, we focused on the interrelations among theoretical dimensions in order to build a model explaining how fashion companies and DIs perform a joint authenticity work.

**Findings**

The data structure in Figure 1 displays the key concepts (10 second-order themes) that emerged from our study. On the basis of the analysis, we outlined a process model, depicted in Figure 2, in which we show the interrelationship among these concepts. Our analysis suggests that companies are able to manage this process through four sequential stages; co-fabricated authenticity is both the last stage and the output of the whole process. Accordingly, the next sub-sections present the findings, organized by our aggregate theoretical dimensions. For each of them, we will display the evidence as organized through the second-order themes.

*Fig. 2: The process model*



Note: Clear boxes represent second-order themes; shaded rectangles represent theoretical dimensions of Figure 1.

*First stage: Coupling*

*Setting the quantitative and qualitative selection criteria for DIs.* Before developing a relationship with a DI, brand managers set the criteria for the selection, as a careful selection reduces the likelihood of having to perform a subsequent intervention and control her/his work. Managers listed a series of quantitative and qualitative criteria used in this selection. Unless more sophisticated indicators of success are available, such as ‘engagement rate’, dry and simple parameters—like the DIs’ ‘fan base’ (i.e., number of followers) and their visualization

rates—are crucial at the very beginning. As an informant clearly put it: ‘today the selection criteria have changed from having covers on magazines to having followers on Instagram’.

Managers claimed 100,000 Instagram followers as a minimum amount. This is despite the fact that the influencer marketing industry has taken new interest in micro- and nano-influencers, whose audience can be even smaller than 10,000 followers, but exhibit higher engagement and loyalty. The reason behind such a choice is the expectation that the DI’s profile will be able to generate at least the same number of ‘likes’ as a brand’s Instagram posts: as noted, ‘otherwise we are giving visibility to them [influencers] and not the other way around’.

Managers were also increasingly turning their attention to qualitative indicators, like personal and idiosyncratic characteristics of each DI—communication skills, attitude, lifestyle, and personal style—as well as the DI’s values (such as a socially or environmentally responsible behaviour) or a recognised expertise in a professional field. Especially for companies operating in the higher-end market segments, informants emphasised the importance of the DI’s image over the number of followers: ‘There are influencers who have millions of followers, but who do not adequately reflect the image we are looking for’, and ‘it is a question of authority, let’s say, and the credibility of the ambassador/influencer like in the case of a mountaineer with only 50,000 who, when he says “This suit will keep you warm!” makes you think “Good grief, he was in the Himalayas so what he says must be true”’. Managers also attended to the aesthetics of DIs’ Instagram page and/or any other social channel, as well as the quality of the content.

Obviously, the company’s digital communication budget largely affected the DI selection, but also choosing whether to create an ‘influencer mix’: as a manager defined it, working with heterogeneous influencers to reach different segments of the target audience. By contrast, a few managers stressed the importance of collaborating with the same DI over time in order to create a sense of continuity in the eyes of the target audience. Moreover, they seemed quite reluctant to work with a DI who had already endorsed competitor companies.

*Assessing the company-DI compatibility.* Confronted with the need to both reach a sufficiently wide audience and find the desired DI social media profile, managers articulated an ex ante decision of only choosing DIs who are compatible with the brand’s values and target(s). Managers particularly assessed the degree of ‘fit’ between the DI and the brand: ‘When you work with these influencers, they present their own interpretation of your brand! Therefore, I believe that the influencer must ultimately be close to the values of your brand’.

As one manager explained, even if a DI has millions of followers, what matters is the amount of them who are aligned with the brand's target audience (i.e., a high-end vs. mass audience): 'The criterion of choice is the achievement of the best possible overlap with our strategy, our positioning, our brand, and our target'.

Content generation is crucial in this regard: on the one hand, the company needs the DI to show its products and generate content associated with its brand name (i.e., a 'storytelling'). On the other hand, a DI needs the brand and its products in order to gain legitimacy and 'to have something to talk about' on their social channels. In short, the brand becomes a content provider. Relatedly, building stronger connections with consumers and audiences was a common objective for both the company and the DI.

### *Second stage: Co-shaping connections*

*Acknowledging the power configuration.* Managers also assessed the profile of their target-DIs on the basis of their 'power', that is, the DIs' reputation with and influence over fashion audiences: 'Their power has grown in that they are now a 'must have', everyone needs to use them because they are fundamental to the creation of a marketing and complete communication strategy, so they have power in the sense that we cannot do without them.'

Yet, according to our interviewees, well-known brands still hold an unquestionable awareness and power in the market. As one informant pointed out: 'They need us to keep working in the future!' In fact, collaborating with companies increases the DIs' legitimacy and reputation. Informants did not seem to believe that their brands can benefit, in terms of reputation, from the association with a DI. Yet, some interviewees acknowledged that DIs help to legitimise the brand with specific audiences, especially on social media and particularly on Instagram.

Managers still had the privilege of selecting the DIs, although sometimes those relationships required compromise in terms of involvement, payment, or compliance with requests. On some occasions, such as when working with top influencers, DIs may be selective about the companies they work with and very demanding throughout the collaboration.

### *Reaching the DIs: direct vs. mediated contacts*

The company's relative level of power determined whether it pursued a DI without intermediaries (such as through influencer marketing agencies), which in turn influenced the level of control and intervention exerted over the relationship.

Managers often maintained direct contact with the DIs: 'It is just my cell phone and hers, nothing more in between'. In many cases, the manager initiates the contact, buoyed by the reputation of the brand, as well as her/his own network of personal contacts.

The DI's own initiative can lead to a direct contact, as in the case of celebrities who like to show branded products on their Instagram pages or for public events. Indeed, a manager recalled a very spontaneous experience she had with a famous top model who loved the brand so much that she took a photo with the coat that the manager was wearing when they met at the airport. This photo received more than 60,000 likes on the model's Instagram profile. More often, DIs with lower reputation and metrics try to increase their portfolio of collaborations by contacting companies.

The use of intermediaries, like the DIs' managers and specialized agencies, seemed to be preferable when the collaboration involves a specific and narrow goal (e.g., a short-term collaboration, the launch of a 'capsule' collection), or when the DI is reachable only through agencies (i.e., influencers with an international audience).

Informants agreed that indirect contact is generally less efficient: they reported a loss of spontaneity in the DI's work when the contact is mediated by an agency: 'There are unfortunately too many intermediaries, and this means that the influencer doesn't really get to know the product well, and maybe, why not, fall in love with it and become a real endorser for the brand'.

### *Third stage: Regulating reciprocity*

*Involving the DI in the collaboration with the company.* Our informants strongly believed that involving the DIs in a series of initiatives was crucial to supporting the collaboration. Granted, managers claimed to be reluctant to involve the DIs in the brand's full range of marketing activities, preferring to limit their role to social media marketing. They were also concerned about excessive reliance on the DIs.

Managers also involved DIs in offline settings, such as invitations to shop openings, fashion weeks and shows, press presentations, red carpets and festivals; these were regarded as a preferable means of increasing the DI's affection towards and engagement with the brand, as well as controlling the content by directly providing the setting for DIs' posts. Some events were created ad-hoc, like invitations to visit the showroom for a preview of the collection, or to choose the clothes, or guided visits to the factory or company. As one manager summarises, 'We try to base everything on an experience made-to-measure for the particular influencer or blogger'.

Another manager promoted a customised collaboration with some DIs by taking them to a special destination like Dubai to shoot photos and create content for the brand's social media. The brand got fresh content and led the whole process, and the DI benefited from becoming closely associated with the brand while also enjoying a unique vacation.

*Providing incentives for the collaboration.* In order to engage DIs and guarantee a satisfactory result from the collaboration, managers needed to provide incentives. They had no precise 'rules' on what incentives to use, when to give them, and to whom. In rare situations, the DIs endorsed the brand with nothing in return, just because of a personal attachment to the brand or manager, or of the expected advantage to associating oneself with an important brand (namely, to help the DI's positioning).

Managers typically lent the products to DIs, especially when the clothes are expensive or *couture* pieces. They occasionally gave discounts or gifted the products. The practice of 'gifting' was more common with a few strategic DIs who were highly engaged with the brand or had a long-term relationship. Informants mentioned several negative experiences, where the DI did not tag the brand after receiving the gift. Mass brands tended to gift products more often than luxury brands, as the investment is lower.

Monetary reward, usually accompanied by an agreement and in return for an established task, was the incentive that limited the uncertainty about the DI's behaviour. Managers used this incentive frequently when the DI was a top influencer or they wanted to exert more control over the DI's work in order to ensure a smooth outcome.

*Controlling and intervention.* The managers regarded a certain level of intervention as necessary in order to ensure that the brand message and image were properly delivered to the

final audience. Some managers wanted to maintain total control over the DIs' social media work, providing clear instructions about what clothes to wear, the context of the picture, the text of the post, the possibility of using another company's clothes or accessories, etc. Managers ultimately checked the aesthetic, visual and textual content of the posts before the DIs published them. As an informant puts it, 'The most popular influencers we have are under contract and [...] we want to have control over everything'.

Differently, other managers preferred a moderate level of control, only making simple requests such as tagging the brand or respecting the timing, as to encourage DIs to create their own content and thereby maintain their authentic character. In these cases, the manager provided only generic guidelines—as suggestions, not strict conditions—about the content and aesthetics of the posts: 'We don't give them complete freedom, but definitely guidelines, [...] because if they want to reach their targets, they must appear natural and spontaneous, if they become too artificial and seem too steered then they risk not giving the correct message to their audience.' A few managers left the DIs to wholly interpret their products in order to receive spontaneous and personal outputs. These managers invested time and resources into selecting the DIs who understand how to work properly and relate themselves with the brand.

Sometimes managers exerted control over the DIs' work in order to compensate for their lack of professionalism or inability to personify the brand image. Ultimately, the extent to which managers decided to intervene in the DIs' activity depended on their formal or informal approach to managing that relationship.

*Informally managing the relationship.* A more informal management of the relationship can not only sustain a sense of trust and reciprocity in the relationship, but also foster the credibility of the DI's work. An ongoing and repeated interaction among the parties cements the convergence of objectives, thereby lessening the need for control, intervention, and monetary rewards.

Managers supported having informal and personal relationships with DIs, characterized by a 'natural flow' of interactions that allowed the collaboration to be tacitly set, developed and renewed. An informant revealed that, over time, she had built strong personal relationships that evolved into real friendships with some of the DIs she works with.

Trust was generally based on the expectation that the efforts of one party would be reciprocated by the other party, which was derived from a sense of obligation or mutual indebtedness in the relationship. The collaborations were facilitated by a strong sense of reciprocity, as one



manager stressed: ‘For me the old saying applies: “clear agreements make long friendships”. Get the colour or size wrong, the place or the time, and the relationship ends, because there are a thousand other [influencers] in the wings’.

When the relationship was informally managed, managers got to know DIs rather well and commonly expressed having a ‘love and hate’ relationship. Interviewees had mixed feelings about these individuals: they judged many DIs as ‘unskilled’ and ‘untalented’ people, but nevertheless recognised that they were a crucial piece of the digital communication puzzle. This feeling may also be rooted in the fact that involving DIs is a relatively new practice, which requires a ‘trial and error’ approach.

*Formally managing the relationship.* Given a lack of rules or routinized practices—as noted, ‘We don’t have any [best practice]! If you have any ideas, please let us know!’—managers sometimes opted to govern the relationship with an agreement. This choice reflected a more formal, and sometimes indirect, connection with the DI. This situation reduces the uncertainty of the collaboration and ensures that the outcome meets detailed expectations, with the risk that it might be perceived as artificial or inorganic. Using contracts does not necessarily indicate distrust; most of the time, actually, formal management is simply a reflection of a DI’s professionalism. As an informant explained: ‘These days, gifting works just with less important influencers’, as the professionalisation of DIs—paid under contract— has created a category of non-amateur influencers who only work in exchange for a monetary reward.

Specifically, contracts were used to specify the scope of the collaboration and regulate the DIs’ behaviours as a safeguard mechanism. The company’s requests included the number of posts, their timing (e.g., specific hours of the day), the features of any picture (e.g., the type of pose: not too sexy, sitting at a table or standing, with a specific background, using or not using other brands, etc.), and the text. As one manager pointed out, ‘before the publication date they have to send me a preview of the shots so that I can choose those I like best and which ones are more in line with the brand image’.

Furthermore, a manager stressed that ‘if you do not pay them, then you cannot ask for anything!’ In this vein, contracts compensated for a lack of experience or professionalism, thereby reducing uncertainty about the DI’s work.

#### *Fourth stage (output): Co-fabricated authenticity*

*Organicity and realness.* Both styles of managing the relationship are ultimately functional for delivering narratives characterised by organicity and realness. On the one hand, companies have started labelling the collaborations with DIs as a means of (simple) product placement and/or ‘product seeding’, within a broader set of marketing and communication activities. On the other hand, the managers ultimately aimed to spread their commercial messages by exploiting the genuineness associated with the influencers’ grassroots voice. Medium- and low-end brands generally tended to seek seeding and product placement by DIs, and typically paid for the service, while high-end brands seemed less concerned with placing a product and more with spreading a compelling brand message or some brand values. DIs themselves were keen to keep their ‘freshness’ by underlining their anti-commercial posture, even while collaborating with a brand for payment or gifts, for example, by presenting their collaboration under the light of an ‘interpretation’ of the brand’s style. The final outcome of these complementary needs was a co-fabricated authenticity.

Managers, indeed, acknowledged ‘prized realness’ (Elmhirst, 2019) as the desired outcome of the brand-DI collaboration, since they believed that this contemporary ‘word-of-mouth’ only works when the public perceives the collaboration as organic (they spoke of ‘organic posts’ as opposed to ‘sponsored posts’). Real or realistic representations of the brand would reflect the credibility of the DI’s profile and the messages she/he delivers. Therefore, managers highly value and want to preserve this realness: ‘There’s also the matter of not wanting to reduce the spontaneity of these subjects, because the follower will understand whether or not the post was—let’s say— primed instead of being spontaneous.’ A manager stressed that ‘in order to obtain an authentic message, we use influencers,’ but also emphasized that their brand only gained credibility through the usage of credible DIs.

#### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the process of co-fabrication of authenticity between fashion companies and DIs. Our empirical analysis suggests that the intangible and ephemeral value of authenticity is made tangible and co-produced through the collaboration between brands and cultural intermediaries such as DIs. In particular, we identify the underlying

dynamics of achieving co-fabricated authenticity, unpacking the mechanisms through which companies select DIs, shape the connections and regulate the reciprocity with them.

A full understanding of our results comes from a close look at the third stage of our process model (where regulated reciprocity is emphasised). Here, the bond between the company and the DI can arise in the opposite forms of attachment and control. Yli-Renko and colleagues (2001) observed a similar process—referred to as the relational dimension of social capital—where the assets created and leveraged through personal relationships are developed through continuous interactions. Such relations are characterised by friendship, respect, and personal attachment (e.g., Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Our concept adopts a larger scope by considering both informal and formal relationships: in fact, it refers to both the trust and expectations of obligation and reciprocity (Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Yli-Renko et al., 2001) between the company and the DI. Trust is typically based on friendship and personal attachment, which lead to a higher willingness to engage in social exchange and cooperate. A higher degree of trust facilitates commitment between the parties (e.g., Luo, 2001), and ultimately engenders a longer relationship.

As any exchange (be it social or economic) brings with it expectations about future obligations (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), the company-DI relationship, as seen by the company angle, is largely based on reciprocity, but such a reciprocity appears to be regulated within a finite number of possible situations—this is the ultimate meaning of our third aggregate theoretical dimension. Especially when there is no formal means of managing the relationship, reciprocity can become a norm: if an agent in the relation perceives the other agent's action as valuable, their indebtedness to each other and desire to reciprocate will increase (Gouldner, 1960), especially in face-to-face, personal contexts (e.g., Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007).

Trust and reciprocity reduce the need for relational monitoring (Yli-Renko et al., 2001) and have been suggested as an alternative (or complement) to formal, arm's-length governance mechanisms (Dyer and Singh, 1998). Fittingly, our analysis found that the concept of control arises as an alternative expression of relationship management in the company-DI relationship. DIs are not organically connected to the company and they represent—at least at the beginning—outsiders to the fashion system. The two agents typically do not share a history of interactions or a system of norms, so there is a risk of not fulfilling the obligation to reciprocate. Using DIs in brand communication is still a new approach for managers, which entails a lack of norms to govern the relationship; thus, the company must accept a certain degree of uncertainty in both managing the relationship and assessing its outcome. In this sense, we advance the idea that forms of control can be used to compensate for a relationship that is not

fully developed; these mechanisms can range from formal means (such as contracts) to detailed requests and frequent contacts with the DI. The concept of regulated reciprocity therefore works as a force that renders companies and DIs able to act as one. This mechanism is ultimately the underlying condition for the authenticity work to take shape.

Our model, indeed, positions authenticity as the ultimate reason for engaging DIs within brand communication. Companies aim to create an organic, entangled relationship capable of delivering ‘realness’ to the target audience(s). Authenticity is based on transmitting credible and personal recommendations from trustable peers (DIs) to the public. However, the influence of these peers can grow so fast that companies cannot afford to forfeit all control. As the balance of power shifts between fashion companies and influencers, there must be a perpetual mediation between the company identity and DIs’ voice in order to build communication strategies that the public perceives as authentic.

Through ‘trial and error’, DIs and fashion companies are sharpening the borders around influencer marketing. The model presented in this article indicates that the fashion industry has initially codified a general process for establishing a relationship between companies and DIs, built around the idea of authenticity work. While tension between indeterminacy and structuration permeates the process, both companies and influencers appear to be engaged in professionalising their practices in order to make co-produced authenticity a feature of their relationship—and by extension, a feature of the advertised products, brands and experiences.

### **Concluding remarks, limitations and future research directions**

This study suggests that the emerging micro-dynamics of relationship building are positioning authenticity as the primary output for companies collaborating with DIs. In unpacking our findings, we make three main contributions to the literature.

First, we consider the company’s standpoint in the co-manufacturing of ‘authenticity’, which the management and sociology literatures have largely overlooked in favour of bloggers, influencers, and consumers (e.g., McQuarrie et al., 2013; Rocamora, 2018). Our analysis helps to deconstruct the air of mystique that often accompanies the conceptualisation of cultural intermediaries. It does so by demystifying the work of authentication performed by DIs, whose collaboration with fashion brands can be disaggregated into a series of practices and summarised in a process model. Our essay contributes to research on authenticity by looking at this construct from the angle of the ‘creators’ or suppliers of this much-needed authenticity.

This new direction will also help to enlarge our knowledge of the evolving phenomenon of digital influencers in the fashion field.

Second, this study illustrates that influencers cannot be analysed as an isolated force. The process model addresses our research question by showing how companies engage DIs and manage the process of an organic relationship, balancing the need for control with the goal of delivering an authentic collaboration. Our work adds to the growing research on DIs (Leaver et al., 2020; Pedroni, 2016; Rocamora, 2018) by showing how their practices are intertwined with those performed by companies. The company-Di relationship is informed by the dilemma of personal attachment vs. formal control, which ultimately determines the extent to which companies may *influence their influencers* without harming their main goal: the outcome of authenticity. In this vein, our findings also contribute to scholarly research about formal control and trust in governing interorganisational relationships (e.g., Gulati and Nickerson, 2008; Lumineau, 2017), as we shed new light on how contracts and personal attachment function as substitutes in safeguarding the company's ultimate goal.

Finally, we propose the new construct of co-fabricated authenticity, which extends current knowledge on the commodification of authenticity (Lehmann et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2015; Michael, 2015; Peterson, 1979) by showing how its construction takes place at the crossroads between a company's commercial needs and influencer grassroots narratives and practices. In particular, the idea of co-fabrication is relevant to the management of authenticity as a valuable commodity, as well as to the processes of authentication of marketable goods performed by brands and DIs. While most companies want to relegate DIs to being merely a marketing channel, DIs' perceived authenticity—the source of their power and relevance—is increasingly pivotal to communication strategies. Criticisms towards DIs, in this light, do not seem to recognise they have become a structural component of a new entangled system of relations between fashion companies and fashion media. To work within an organic relation—or at least in a relation that appears organic—companies have to strike a balance between influencing their influencers while also maintaining the authentic feeling of the relationship.

Our research suffers from several limitations, including the size of our sample, the focus on a national industry, and the collection of the empirical material in a limited period with regard to a phenomenon that is rapidly changing. Further research could focus on cases in specific segments, for example, luxury brands vs. streetwear brands, in order to investigate whether the co-fabrication of authenticity works differently for the various segments of the fashion industry. This differentiation did not emerge as a topical issue in our current empirical research. In general, this article contains the weaknesses and strains of any qualitative research. The

exploratory analysis of a group of companies does not allow us to make general statements on how the observed process could be replicated for other companies in other industries. However, the findings may inspire new studies on both influencers and fashion companies in different cultural industries and other geographical contexts.

We believe that the initial state of the company-DI relationship is a mixture of curiosity, perplexity, and instrumental attitude, as keenly reflected by one brand manager: 'I don't love them, but I have to use them because I need them. And I exploit them too!'. That said, the relationship is rapidly evolving thanks to changes in both the technological infrastructure (e.g., new Instagram tools, new platforms like TikTok, and new rules, e.g., the hiding of 'likes' on Instagram) and the audiences themselves. A better understanding of this phenomenon will undoubtedly be of great importance for both companies and scholars.

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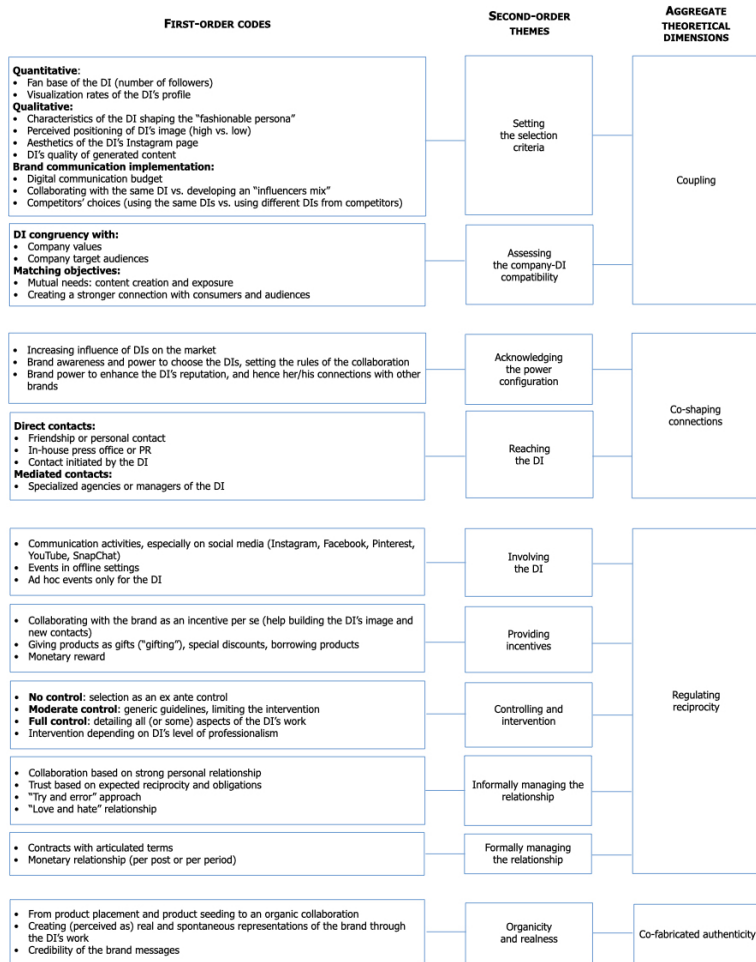
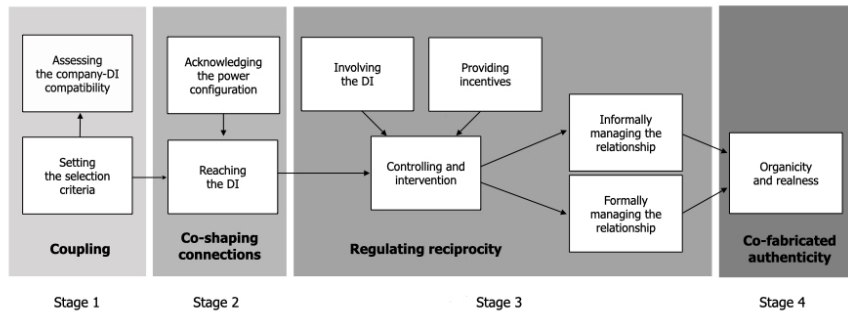


Fig. 1. Data structure

338x493mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Note: Clear boxes represent second-order themes; shaded rectangles represent theoretical dimensions of Figure 1.

Fig. 2. The process model

361x270mm (72 x 72 DPI)