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Maryam Amini[1]

Authenticity in the Realm of Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Review

Authenticity in influencer marketing is a multifaceted concept, playing a crucial role in shaping producer-influencer-consumer relationships. This study employs the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for the Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol to systematically review the existing literature on authenticity within the context of social media influencers. The methodology involves three stages: assembling, arranging, and assessing. Each stage includes sub-stages tailored to ensure thoroughness and accuracy in the literature review process. This analysis suggests that the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing include an emphasis on origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of inner integrity, individual interpretation and intrapersonal connection of the audience. This study equips influencers with a comprehensive understanding of authenticity and enables them to evaluate their content and help them strike a strategic balance between their claims of inner genuineness and external pressures. Additionally, researchers benefit from its contribution to synthesizing authenticity typologies from various fields and its innovative methodological approach.

Keywords: Authenticity, Influencer marketing, Systematic literature review, Social media influencers

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INTRODUCTION

This article describes the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing. Understanding what authenticity means requires examining the concept itself, which creates a circular relation between the concept and its definition (Knaller, 2012). Schulze (2017) finds a paradox in defining authenticity; once you want to label something as authentic, it loses its authenticity and genuineness.

During the last decade, many people on social media have become famous, attracting the attention of a large number of followers by creating interesting profiles and content (Hudders et al., 2021). They mostly share their thoughts, interests, and personal experience on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. These famous social media users, social media stars (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021), or micro-celebrities (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021) are also called influencers because they play a significant role in their followers' decision-making (Hudders et al., 2021). They

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leverage their expertise, personality, or niche focus to engage and influence their audience, often shaping opinions, behaviours, and purchasing decisions. Influencers are mostly seen as experts or personalities in certain areas, like fashion, fitness, or travel. Because so many people follow them, they can have a big impact on what others think or buy (Vrontis et al., 2021).

As a result, companies, organizations, and brands often approach them to promote their products by using their popularity on social media. This method of marketing is called Influencer Marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). Influencer marketing is a multi-layered relationship since it encompasses the relationship not only between social media influencers and their followers but also between influencers and brands (Kim & Kim, 2021). It has become increasingly popular in recent years due to the rise of social media platforms and the growing scepticism towards traditional advertising methods (Han et al., 2023, Joshi et al., 2023, Myers et al., 2024). They create a wide range of content formats, such as photos, videos, stories, and blog posts, providing brands and producers with diverse opportunities to collaborate and engage with audiences. The main reason why brands tend to approach influencers to promote their products instead of using traditional methods of marketing is that influencers offer brands the ability to create diverse and engaging content formats that resonate with their target audience. This flexibility allows brands to connect with consumers in more authentic and relatable ways compared to traditional advertisements (Gambhir & Ashfaq, 2021).

The paradox that Schulze (2017) refers to in the definition of authenticity is clearly visible in what happens in influencer marketing: while influencers claim to share their authentic experience, the main fact behind this endorsement is promoting a product for commercial gain. This fact, hence, raises questions about the authenticity of the influencer. The paradox that exists in their career makes influencers' job very challenging since on the one hand they aim to authentically connect to their followers and on the other hand, their role as a promoter for products and the financial aims behind their content challenge their authenticity.

OVERVIEW OF PAST RESEARCH

This study explores the key aspects of authenticity in influencer marketing using the SPAR-4-SLR protocol proposed by Paul et al. (2021). The study includes 88 peer-reviewed academic articles from the Scopus and Project Muse database. The study of the role of authenticity in influencer marketing is particularly useful because it addresses a subtle but significant contradiction inherent in the role of influencers. While influencers aim to share their authentic experiences with their followers, the primary goal behind many of their endorsements is to promote products for commercial gain. This paradox described above raises critical questions about the true authenticity of influencers. Furthermore, Funk (2015) believes that authenticity is a black box making this concept difficult to define. He suggests that to define authenticity, scholars should focus on firstly, the observable, tangible result of it and secondly, the tactics that build it instead of the concept itself.

In this study, thematic synthesis supplements the systematic literature review by uncovering key dimensions that contribute to our understanding of authenticity in this context. By thematic coding of the typologies of authenticity in the existing literature on influencer marketing, five key dimensions were identified. These five key dimensions include an emphasis on origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of the inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection of the audience.

Emphasis on the origin highlights the value of producing genuine and original content, while *alignment with societal expectations* reflects that influencers are often judged by the norms and values of the society. *Expressions of inner integrity* emphasizes the need for influencers to stay true to their own values and beliefs and avoid being manipulated by external desires. *Individual interpretation* highlights the subjective nature of authenticity, where each audience member's perception plays a critical role. Finally, the dimension of *intrapersonal connection* points to the personal resonance that authenticity can evoke in each person.

What Qualities Influencers Possess that Make them Appear Authentic?

In societies where digital communication plays a central role, there is a continuous conversation about the importance of authenticity. This discussion extends beyond just brands and professional communicators to include social media users as well. This conversation raises questions like whether authenticity is important in our today's communication, specifically, in the influencer marketing field. If yes, to what extent is it important? What is authenticity and who is an authentic person? What does it mean to be authentic? According to Balaban & Szambolics (2022), authenticity is about being a genuine, true, and real version of yourself. In the context of social media, authenticity refers to the perception that influencers are presenting themselves as the real and unfiltered version of them and not just showing off the best moments and achievements of your life.

What Does Authenticity Mean Based on the Existing Literature?

The simplest definition of authenticity is "being true to oneself" proposed by Wood et al. (2008, p. 386). The main objective of social media influencers is to grow the number of followers and be seen as authentic by their large community of followers. The more authentic they seem, the more potential they would have to influence their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Poyry et al. (2019) also emphasize the crucial role of authenticity in strengthening the bond between influencers and their followers. He claims that, like traditional celebrities, social media influencers also rely on being seen as authentic, credible, and trustworthy. There are divided opinions on whether authenticity is positively or negatively associated with influencer marketing activities. Some scholars believe that authenticity has a positive link to influencer marketing efforts particularly when they genuinely recommend products or services (Kim & Kim, 2021). Transparency and open disclosure of the fact that they have received compensation or other benefits for promoting a product can improve the relationship between the influencer and the followers, making their messages more effective (Johnson et al., 2019). Some scholars, however, suggest that social media influencers who regularly share content that has been paid for or financially supported by a sponsor may lose their authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Evolution of Authenticity

The concept of "authenticity" has gone through many changes over time. Dishek (2020, as cited in Schulze, 2017) emphasizes that authenticity has to be studied considering its specific historical discourse because it has developed as time passes. This approach involves tracing the historical development and interconnectedness of ideas, practices, and institutions, the concept of authenticity. The concept of authenticity gains significance and goes to marginality in certain periods (Schulze, 2017). Funk (2015) believes that when society undergoes significant transformations, people care more about what the real experiences are and how to perceive and represent them. In other words,

they start thinking more about being real, honest, and truthful. Today, authenticity has the highest value in society because we get informed of almost everything through media, which is obviously second-hand information. We take this information and form our own idea of authenticity (Mair & Becker, 2005).

The term authentic comes from the Greek word "authentikos" which has various meanings related to truth, reality, and genuineness (Kakisch, 2000, as cited in Schulze, 2017). In Latin, the word "authenticus" mostly meant the document that was taught to be written by authorities, in other words, in Greek, it was about being complete, whereas in Latin it was about not being fake. It is difficult to define authenticity because it occupies the space between subjective and objective validation (Knaller, 2012). Funk (2015) believes that this paradox makes describing this concept impossible. His practical solution to address this issue is to focus on firstly, the tangible, concrete, and observable results of authenticity rather than trying to define authenticity itself and secondly, the strategies creating it. Funk (2015) introduces a solution to strike a balance between being fake and real at the same time. He calls this solution "reconstruction". He believes reconstruction helps to solve the tricky problems of authenticity by combining different ideas and perspectives. This process involves both the artist and the audience. They use various strategies like making references to the real world, crafting intense emotional experiences in the content, etc., to make the performance feel authentic. Even though authenticity is a bit of a paradox, the process of reconstruction can bring together different perspectives and make them work. The reconstruction process proposed by Funk (2015) can apply to the influencer marketing since the influencer here is the artist playing a role and has some followers who are their audience. For example, a beauty influencer promoting a new makeup brand might use different strategies, such as sharing before and after photos, providing honest reviews of the product, creating engaging content that tells a story, or sharing a personal experience to resonate with their followers and make the makeup seem effective and authentic.

Existing literature on authenticity in influencer marketing highlights the urgent need to explore authenticity and its key dimensions in this field to better understand the existing paradox. As a result, this study tries to answer the following research question: What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of social media influencers?

METHODOLOGY

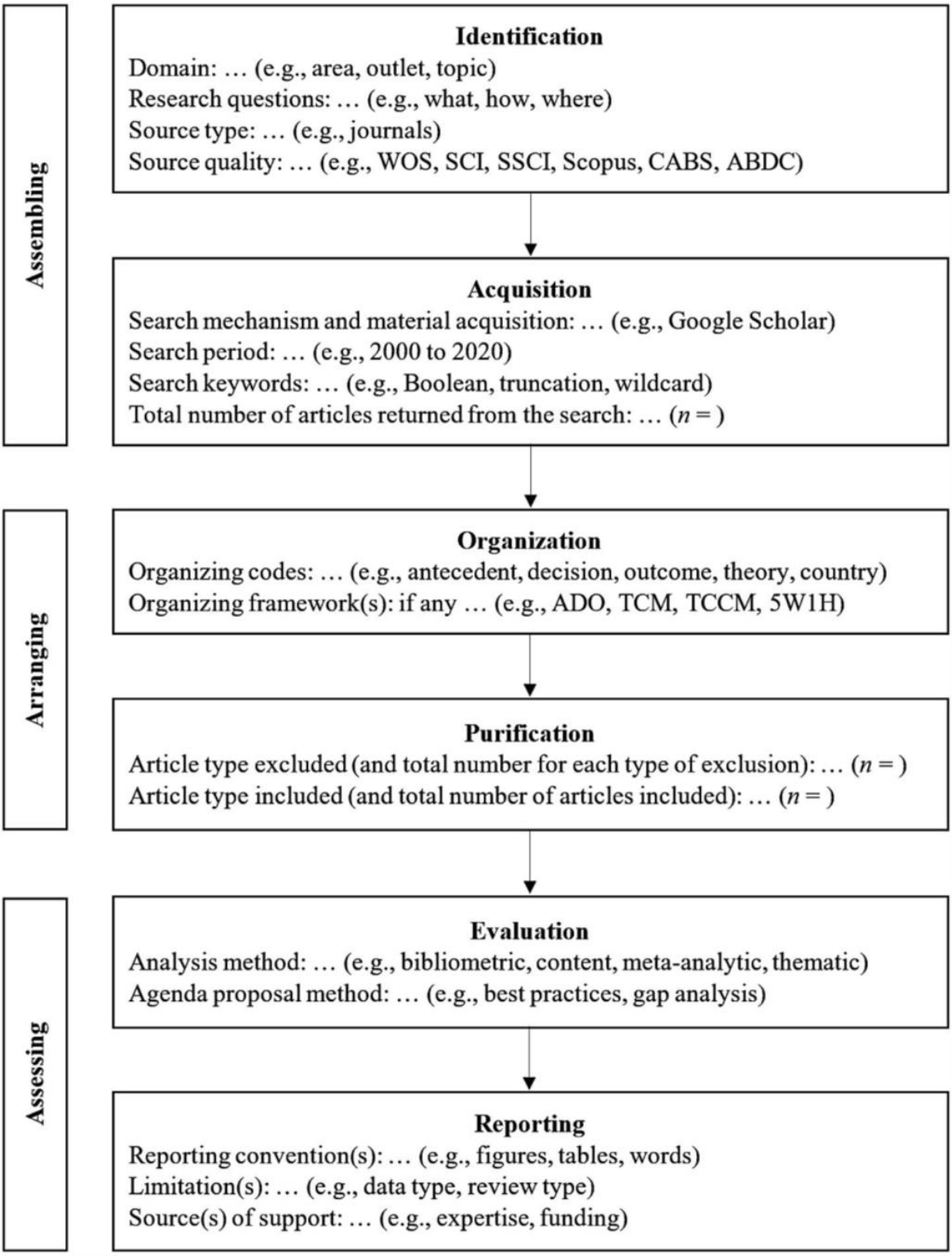
This study uses a systematic literature review for several reasons. Firstly, a systematic literature review approach contributes to an unbiased and a comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature. It ensures that the analysis covers a wide range of relevant studies and help uncover the existing gaps in the literature (Paul & Criado, 2020). In this way, a systematic literature review can be seen as a platform for knowledge advancement (Palmatier et al., 2018). Secondly, the transparent process that it follows facilitates the validity and reliability of the review (Paul & Barari., 2022). Finally, it is a well-suited approach for synthesizing perspectives and theories extracted from a variety of disciplines (Paul et al., 2021).

Paul et al. (2021) developed an innovative protocol to allow researchers to "predict issues, minimize subjectivity, and ensure consistency in their research" in the systematic literature review (p. 6). They call their protocol "Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews protocol, or in short, the SPAR- 4-SLR" (P. 6) protocol. Figure 1 shows the three stages and six substages of this protocol. This

protocol introduces three stages including assembling, arranging, and assessing, and six sub-stages which will be explained below. Paul et al. (2021, p. 6):

> 1. *assembling*, which involves (1a) *identification* and (1b) *acquisition* of literature that have not been synthesized, 2. *arranging*, which involves (2a) *organization* and (2b) *purification* of literature that are in the process of being synthesized, and 3. *assessing*, which involves (3a) *evaluation* and (3b) *reporting* of literature that have been synthesized.

Figure 1: The SPAR-4-SLR Protocol (Pauel et al., 2021, p. 6)



SPAR- 4-SLR protocol helps define a research question and narrow down the scope of the review to the most relevant studies by setting inclusion and exclusion criteria. Secondly, developing a detailed search strategy using relevant keywords minimizes the risk of missing important studies. Thirdly, this protocol has a systematic selection process that ensures unbiased and reproducible selection of existing literature. Finally, the detailed and transparent stages and substages of this protocol contribute to the possibility of

reproducing this review. All in all, this structured approach can pave the way for answering the research question.

A. IDENTIFICATION

The initial phase of conducting a systematic literature review involves identification. This requires defining the research domain, formulating research questions, determining the types of articles to include or exclude, and establishing criteria for assessing source quality.

(1) Research Domain

According to Paul et al. (2021), research domain refers to the main topic, outlet or area which is the central focus of the research. This definition of research domain serves as a guiding framework that aligns this research efforts with the research question. In terms of identification, the research domain focuses on theories of authenticity, extracted from the field of social media influencers' marketing.

(2) Research Question

The second sub-stage of identification is research question, the purpose of which is to uncover existing knowledge about a particular concept by asking "What do we know about...?" (Paul et al., 2021, p. 7). This systematic review aims to answer the following question: What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of social media influencers?

(3) Source Type

The third sub-stage of identification is to state the source type, the validating of which requires a description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the sources. For this review, only conceptual and empirical articles from academic journals were included. I gathered the dataset using the keywords listed in the Table 1 and 2 below.

(4) Source Quality

Here the requirement is to "define the quality of sources of published material" (Paul et al, 2021, p. 7). In this research, two reputable databases were used to extract articles, including Scopus for its scientific focus and Project Muse for its rich collection of journals and books in humanities.

B. ACQUISITION

(1) Search Mechanism

The first step with respect to acquisition is to define the strategies scholars have employed to acquire their material (Paul et al., 2021). For the acquisition of the sources, this study utilized Scopus and Project Muse as described above.

(2) Search Period

The second step is to identify and justify "the start and end date for the search" (Paul et al., 2021, p. 9). The concept of authenticity has evolved over the course of time. Schulz (2020) believes that this concept has gone through many changes, capturing attention, and going to marginality in some periods. Therefore, I did not limit the scope of

the research to any specific start date although the first article in the databases came from 2015. The end date for the literature, is April 25, 2024, the date of this study's retrieval.

(3) Keyword for Search

Based on the research question, "What are the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of social media influencers?", two key words were chosen; "Authenticity" and "Social media influencers" to limit the scope of the research. To capture a broader range of relevant literature I used some synonyms for "social media influencers", including "social media celebrities", "online celebrities", "Internet celebrities", "Youtubers" and "vloggers". However, for the term authenticity, I did not introduce any synonym because this term is the central concept in the research. I employed this strategy to identify instances where discussions on authenticity intersect with the realm of social media influencers. It provides valuable insights into the potential overlaps in these two domains.

Table 1. Articles Extracted from Scopus

	Queries	**Number**
#1	"authenticity"	14067
#2	"Social media influencers" OR "social media celebrities" OR "online celebrities" OR "Internet celebrities" OR "Youtubers" OR "vloggers"	919
#1 AND #2	"authenticity" AND "social media influencers" OR "social media celebrities" OR "online celebrities" OR "Internet celebrities" OR "Youtubers" OR "vloggers"	82

Table 1 shows the number of articles I obtained in the database of Scopus. First, for the keyword "authenticity", I retrieved 14,067 articles. Then, for the keywords related to "Social media influencers", I found 919 articles. Finally, I combined both sets of keywords, "authenticity" and those related to influencers, which gave me 82 articles.

Table 2. Articles Extracted from Project Muse

	Queries	**Number**
#1	"authenticity"	964
#2	"Social media influencers" OR "social media celebrities" OR "online celebrities" OR "Internet celebrities" OR "Youtubers" OR "vloggers"	408
#1 AND #2	"authenticity" AND "social media influencers" OR "social media celebrities" OR "online celebrities" OR "Internet celebrities" OR "Youtubers" OR "vloggers"	13

Table 2 shows that the number of articles retrieved with the keyword "authenticity" and the keywords related to social media influencers are respectively 964 and 408 in the Project Muse database within the specified timeframe (2015 to May 2024). After combining both sets of keywords, I obtained 13 articles.

(4) Total Number of Articles Returned from the Search

In total, 88 articles were included in this study. The number of articles extracted in the initial retrieval was 95 encompassing 13 articles from Project Muse and 82 articles from Scopus. However, after consideration of their content, I decided not to include 7 articles in this study that will be discussed more in Purification where I explain the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

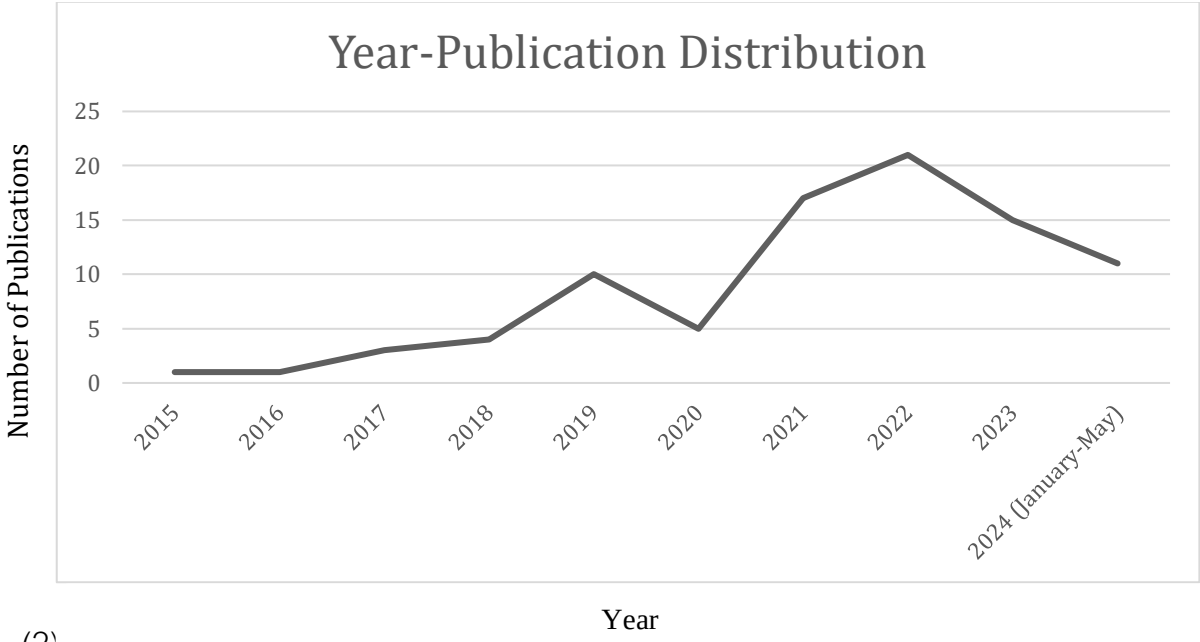
C. ORGANISATION

Organization "refers to the code book that researchers rely upon to code and record each article returned from the search" (Paul et al., 2021, p. 9). The first step of organization is to analyse the existing literature based on the year of publication and the number of citations. The next step of organization is to provide a systematic literature review of the concept of authenticity in the connection of social media influencers. Among the articles extracted for this study, 82 articles out of 88 articles (93%) were obtained from the Scopus database and 6 articles out of 88 articles (7%) were retrieved from Project Muse.

(1) Distribution of the Year of the Publications

Figure 2 presents the distribution of the year of the 88 publications existing in this study. As it shows the popularity of the concept of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing has gradually increased over the last decade. In 2015 and 2016, only 2 articles (2%) were published in this field. In 2017 and 2018, the number of publications saw a significant increase, with 6 articles (7%) contributing to the discourse. Subsequently, in 2019 and 2020, there was a notable boost in the interest of scholars, with 15 articles (17%) focusing on authenticity in influencer marketing. In 2021 and 2022, it reached its peak with 38 articles (43%) highlighting the importance of authenticity in this field. In 2023 and the initial half of 2024, the number of published articles was 27 (31%).

Figure 2. Year-Publication Distribution



(2) Distribution of the Journals of the Publications

Table 3 presents a list of academic journals related to communication and media studies that have published a minimum of two articles discussing authenticity within the domain of social media influencers. The "Number of Occurrences" column indicates how

many times each journal is mentioned in the dataset, while the "Percentage of Total" column shows the proportion of occurrences relative to the total number of journals listed. This table helps to identify which journals are most frequently referenced in the dataset and provides insights into the distribution of scholarly publications in the field of communication and media studies. Table 3 also reveals that these articles are mostly published in journals with a focus on Media and Cultural Studies, Advertising/Marketing and Technology Studies, showing that journals with these subfields have stronger interests in exploring topics related to authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing.

Table 3. Journal-Publication Distribution

Journal Title	Number of Occurrences	Percentage
Social Media and Society	4	4.5%
New Media and Society	4	4.5%
Celebrity Studies	4	4.5%
Convergence	4	4.5%
International Journal of Advertising	3	3.4%
International Journal of Strategic Communication	3	3.4%
Feminist Media Studies	2	2.2%
Media, Culture, and Society	2	2.2%
Journal of Advertising	2	2.2%
Public Relations Inquiry	2	2.2%
Advertising & Society Quarterly	2	2.2%

(3) Most Cited Publications

This study checks the most cited articles in the existing literature on authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing. Table 4 displays the most cited articles that received more than 80 citations (based on the information retrieved from Scopus). This shows that these articles have been the most influential ones in this field.

Table 4. Citation-Publication

Article Title	Authors	Year	Citations
In the time of the microcelebrity: Celebrification and the YouTuber Zoella	Jerslev A.	2016	158
Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm	Bishop S.	2018	141
Social media celebrity and the institutionalization of YouTube	Hou M.	2019	116
"This Is What the News Won't Show You": YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity	Lewis R.	2020	101
A Call for Authenticity: Audience Responses to Social Media Influencer Endorsements in Strategic Communication	Poyry E.; Pelkonen M.; Naumanen E.; Laaksonen S.-M.	2019	97

Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content	Wellman M.L.; Stoldt R.; Tully M.; Ekdale B.	2020	97
"Charlie Is So Cool Like": Authenticity, Popularity and Inclusive Masculinity on YouTube	Morris M.; Anderson E.	2015	86
Why are consumers following social media influencers on Instagram? Exploration of consumers' motives for following influencers and the role of materialism	Lee J.A.; Sudarshan S.; Sussman K.L.; Bright L.F.; Eastin M.S.	2022	80

Jerslev (2016) with 158 citations is the most cited article. This article explores how celebrity culture has changed over time with the popularity of using social media and video-sharing platforms in our daily lives. Bishop (2018) was cited 141 times. The article again discusses the strategies social media influencers employ to strike a balance between being authentic and implying the algorithms of YouTube. Hou (2019) obtained 116 citations and is in the third place of citation. It emphasizes the role of social media in making ordinary people famous. It highlights the fact that social media let anyone become a celebrity without being in the mass media industry. It is also more like a business because being a social media celebrity is tied to making money through ads, partnerships, and other business deals. This article suggests that authenticity is not just about claims of being real and genuine with your audience, it is also about being smart in how you present yourself online. The fourth most cited article is the article written by Lewis (2020) with 101 citations. This article discusses the manipulation of authenticity. It highlights the cases when political influencers strategically employ tactics to present themselves as authentic to elicit a specific political reaction from their audience. All of these articles have a recurring pattern and insight about the strategies influencers use to affect their audience. It seems that this was the main reason for the highest number of citations they have received.

According to Jerslev (2016) and Bishop (2018), one of the strategies that influencers use to affect their audience is to use a unique greeting. Their distinctive and personal greeting help them build friendly rapports with their followers. For example, Jerslev (206), focuses on a case study who is a famous UK YouTuber called Zoella. Jerslev (2016) states that first strategy is her special way of greeting at the beginning of each video. She uses phatic expressions like "Hellooo everybodyyy!" (p. 5241). The second strategy that influencers use to share their personal life that includes bloopers. Bishop (2018) believes that one of the strategies that Zoella uses in her video production is to include a "blooper reel" (p. 80) in her videos. A blooper reel shows unscripted moments or mistakes in the process of video production aiming to add more authenticity to it. For example, in one of her videos, her dogs' barking prevents her from talking in the video.

Finally, Lewis (2020) emphasizes on strategic presentation that is the manipulation of authenticity. It highlights the cases when political influencers strategically employ tactics to present themselves as authentic in order to elicit a specific political reaction from their audience. They try to cultivate trust and credibility which are powerful tools to shape public opinions. Therefore, this article draws attention to the fact that authenticity may not always reflect genuineness, it is sometimes a target tactic to achieve desired political outcomes.

(4) Frequently Used Keywords

Term Frequency (TF) in text mining refers to the number of times a term appears in a text. It is a fundamental component in text mining. The most important purpose of the investigation of term frequency is to identify the important keywords within a document. The keywords with higher frequencies are often considered more important in the document (Stansfield et al., 2017). In this study, I investigate what keywords are the most central and frequently used. To find keywords, I used the online tool *Wordcounter.net*.

I pasted the material, including the abstracts of 88 articles, into the tool and wordcounter.net generated a detailed analysis of the most commonly used keywords to identify key themes and concepts within the text. I used this technique to find common phrases made of 1, 2, or 3 words, Tables 5, 6, and 7 respectively, demonstrate the key terms. Table 5 shows the nine commonly used keywords in the dataset. *Wordcounter* does not provide any specific feature to remove stop words (common words such as "the", "is", "in", "and", "how", etc.) from the text. As a result, one stop word "how" can be found in the Single Keyword Analysis. The stop word "how" is not meaningful in this analysis, so it has been removed from the keywords table. Then, the 11th most commonly used word "Study" was added to the table.

Table 5: Single Word Keyword Analysis

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Media	240	Influencer	114
Social	205	Content	73
Authenticity	137	YouTube	58
Influencers	126	Self	52
Celebrity	114	Study	49

Table 6: Two-Word Keyword Analysis

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Social Media	173	Purchase Intentions	17
Media Influencers	44	Beauty Vloggers	14
Influencer Marketing	24	Media Influencer	14
Digital Media	20	Influencers Reputation	14
Influencer Industry	20	Media Platform	11

Table 7: Three-Word Keyword Analysis

Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Social Media Influencers	44	Influencer Industry Ethics	11
Social Media Influencer	14	(Social) Media Influencers Strategies	8
Social Media Platform	11	Using Social Media	8
Micro Celebrity Practices	11	How Social Media	8
Social Media Influencer's	11	Media Influencers Reputation	8

Analysing the keywords from the text provides valuable insights into the main topics, themes, and areas of focus within the content. This indicates that the text heavily focuses on themes related to media, social dynamics, authenticity in online personas, influencers, and celebrities.

D. PURIFICATION

According to Paul et al. (2021), researchers have to define the inclusion and exclusion criteria of their literature review. In terms of the exclusion criteria, the main one was to be peer-reviewed. The second exclusion criterion was the language. I excluded studies published in languages other than English to ensure the consistency. While doing a comparative analysis, using one language makes it easier to analyse and organize data the same way throughout the research. Finally, I excluded the articles whose keywords did not include this search terms even if the title or abstract did. While they touch on various aspects of marketing, including the importance of trust, ethics, and authenticity, they do not specifically focus on authenticity in influencer marketing as its primary topic. Instead, their conversations seem to address broader themes related to marketing strategies, the role of the chief marketing officer, biases in technology, and key insights of marketing.

E. EVALUATION

In this substage, researchers have to define the method of analysis they adapt to review the articles of their dataset (Paul et al., 2021). In this article, I used two methods for data analysis. The first method of analysis was bibliometric analysis. According to Donthu et al. (2021), bibliometric analysis is a method employed to evaluate and quantify various aspects of published academic literature within a specific field of topic. Bibliometric analysis typically involves citation analysis (Donthu et al., 2021), journal analysis, publication time patterns analysis (Yang & Wang, 2024), keyword analysis (Pesta et al., 2018), etc.

The second method of analysis is thematic synthesis. Thematic synthesis was used to answer the main research question. Thematic synthesis is defined as a systematic, repeatable method for reducing extensive words of text into fewer content categories by following certain rules of coding (Berelson, 1952, as cited in Stemler, 2001). Thematic synthesis is helpful in finding trends and patterns in textual documents (Stemler, 2001). I explain thematic synthesis steps in the following section.

F. REPORT

According to Paul et al., (2021), in this stage of systematic literature review, researchers have to report their findings with words, figures and/or tables. The result of bibliometric analysis has already been presented in Figure 2 and Table 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 and thoroughly discussed.

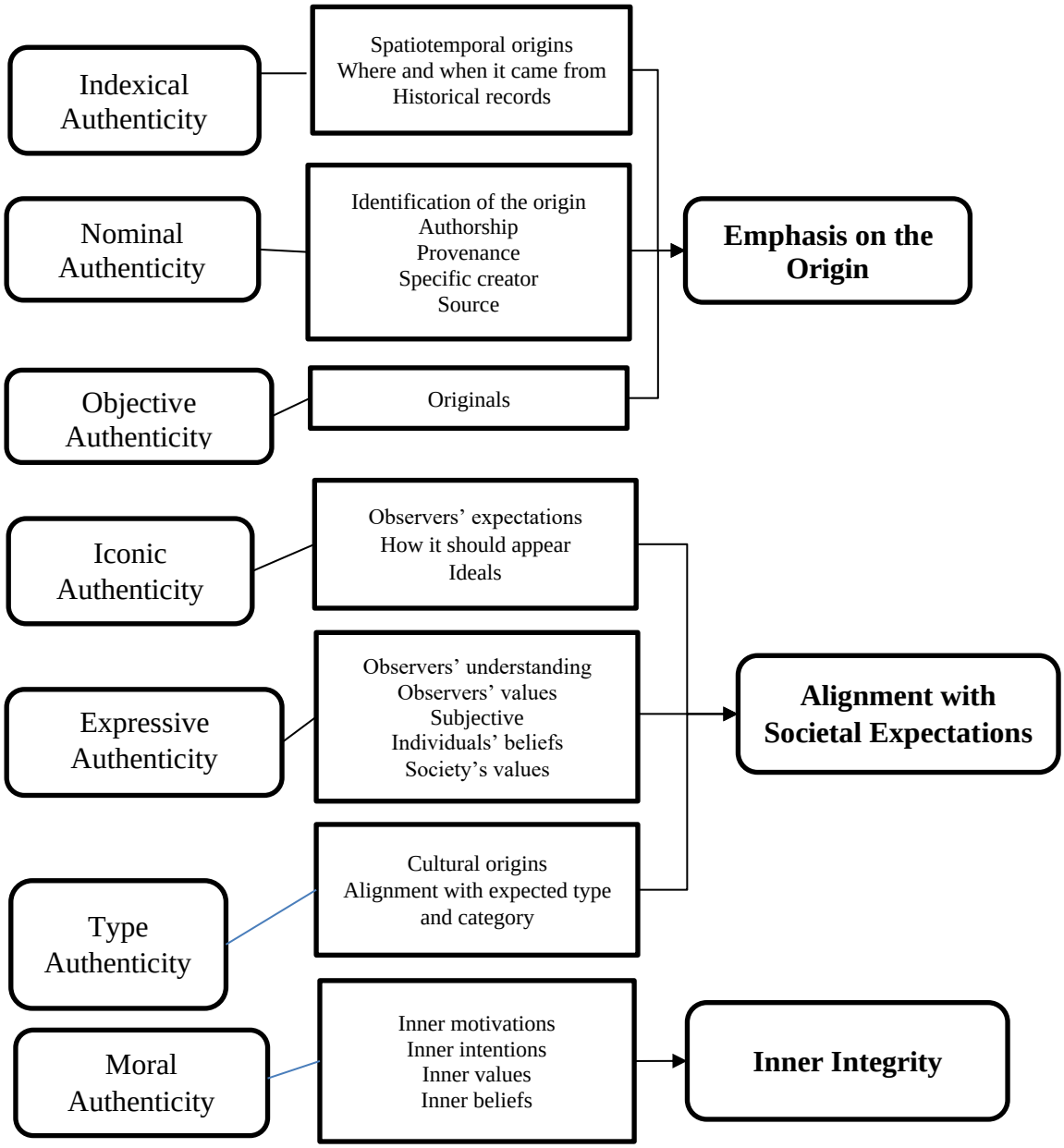
Thematic Synthesis Report

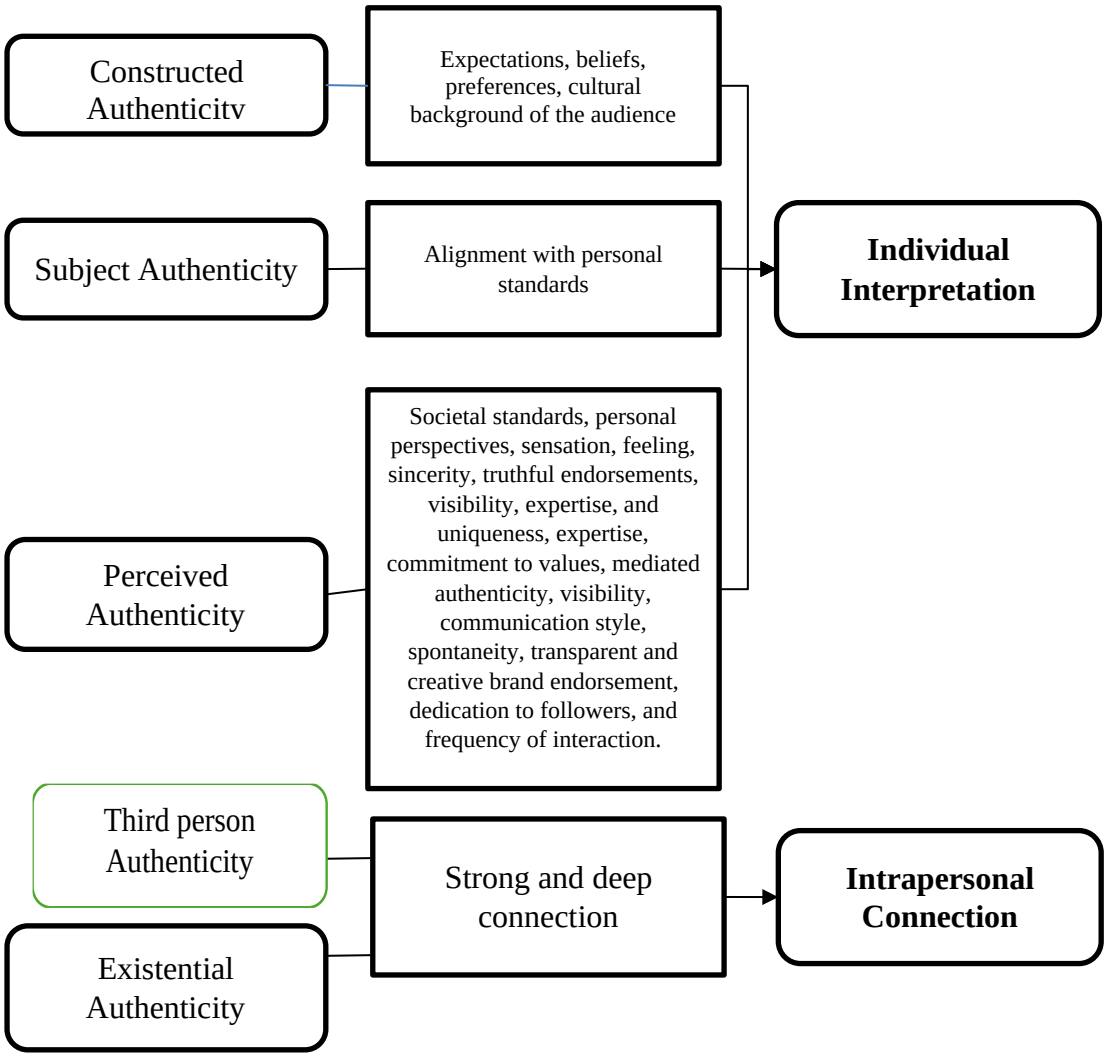
Thematic synthesis was used in this study to answer the research question asking about the key dimensions of authenticity in the context of influencer marketing. Thematic synthesis was done to extract the articles in which scholars had discussed different types of authenticity referring to other scholars and/or presenting a taxonomy for authenticity. Among the 88 articles in the literature, 9 articles had explained different types of authenticity which are in connection with the field of influencer marketing.

In this approach, first different types of authenticity that have been presented by scholars in these 9 articles was discussed. After that, thematic coding was done to categorize and organize the data that presented different types of authenticity. The

dataset is not very large, so the most effective way of coding was to process manual coding, an inductive form is done "through a grounded-theory approach of open coding, in which the researchers essentially enter into a dialogue with the data, a back-and-forth comparative process of reading and re-reading a subset of the corpus to look for patterns" (Lauer et al., 2018, p. 391). The criterion used for coding is the usage of keywords in each definition. Themes, which represent the key dimensions of authenticity, are extracted from these keywords. Figure 3 presents the keywords on the left as well as themes on the right.

Figure 3: Key Dimensions of Authenticity Extracted from Definitions Using Keywords





Thematic Coding

The left column of the Figure 3 shows different types of authenticity discussed in the literature. In other words, they derive from the 9 articles mentioned above which are talking about the types of authenticity engaging in the field of influencer marketing. The middle column shows the key sentences and words of the definitions of each authenticity type. Basically, those sentences can define the focus of each type of authenticity. From the middle column we can see that some authenticity types have similar themes and key words, therefore we can put them together and derive one general theme from them. In general, five different themes emerged from this thematic synthesis of different types of authenticity mentioned in an influencer marketing literature.

Thematic synthesis discussion

1. Emphasis on the Origin

One of the key dimensions acquired from this comparative analysis is the focus on the origin. Indexical, nominal, and objective authenticity all merge on this aspect and emphasize the importance of where things come from or who made them. They are interested in verifying the origin or history of an item.

Indexical Authenticity

This concept has already been used several times in different studies over time (Beverland et al., 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014; Newman & Smith, 2016; de Kerviler et al., 2021). Indexical authenticity focuses on verifying the spatiotemporal origins of an item. It is about where and when something came from that is often done through historical records, documentation, or physical evidence.

Nominal Authenticity

Nominal authenticity refers to "the correct identification of the origin, authorship or provenance of an object" (Dutton, 2003, p. 259). It involves confirming whether an object is genuinely attributed to a specific creator or source, such as determining if a painting was truly created by Picasso.

Objective Authenticity

Wang (1999, as cited in Newman & Smith, 2016) identifies this type of authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to the authenticity of originals. For example, a Native American headdress should be worn by a famous chief to have objective authenticity.

2. Alignment with Societal Expectations

The second dimension is alignment with societal expectations. Iconic, expressive, and type authenticity merge in this aspect, despite their apparent distinctions. Iconic authenticity assesses whether an item meets observers' expectations of its appearance or behaviour which are rooted in cultural or societal perceptions. Expressive authenticity focuses on the genuine expression of individual or societal values and beliefs. Similarly, type authenticity evaluates whether something aligns well with its expected type and category. These dimensions collectively highlight the importance of authenticity strongly rooted in alignment with societal expectations.

Expressive Authenticity

Expressive authenticity is very subjective and relies heavily on the observers' understanding and values. Dutton (2003) defines expressive authenticity as "true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs" (p. 259).

Iconic Authenticity

Iconic authenticity is concerned with whether an item meets observers' expectations of how it should appear or behave. It is about meeting the ideals of authenticity. This dimension is more subjective and relies on cultural or societal perceptions (Dutton, 2003).

Type Authenticity

Carroll (2015) introduces this kind of authenticity. The first one is Type authenticity that refers to whether something represents its cultural origins and aligns well with its expected type and category.

3. Expressions of Inner Integrity

The third key dimension of authenticity is the expressions of the inner integrity. Inner integrity refers to the alignment of decisions and actions with personal values and beliefs. This dimension which has been derived from the definition of moral authenticity, emphasizes the importance of sincerity and integrity in the influencers' choices, which display an inner authenticity that is independent of external factors such as brand partnerships, sponsorships, audience expectations, and financial desires.

Moral Authenticity

Moral authenticity helps to the inner motivations and intentions behind the actions. It focuses on whether the decision aligns with its values and beliefs rather than

following societal norms and expectations. Carroll (2015) introduces this kind of authenticity as well.

4. Individual Interpretation

Another key dimension of authenticity is individual interpretation. Definitions proposed for constructed authenticity, subject authenticity, and perceived authenticity all share an important insight which is the critical role of individual interpretation in attributing authenticity to someone or something which are shaped by personal experiences and perspectives. This key dimension acknowledges the diversity of perspectives and the subjective nature of authenticity assessment.

Constructed Authenticity

Another type identified by Wang (1999, as cited in Newman & Smith, 2016) is constructed authenticity, and this type can be built by complying with the expectations, beliefs, preferences, and cultural background of the audience. To elucidate, this is individuals who decide to assign or attribute authenticity to objects or people.

Subject Authenticity

Knaller (2012) identifies this type of authenticity based on who confirms its genuineness. Subject authenticity refers to the type of authenticity where an individual decides about one's authenticity according to their personal standards.

Perceived Authenticity

Lee & Eastin (2020) define perceived authenticity as "Public perceptions of the authenticity of social media influencers" (p. 822). They confirm that perceived authenticity is described as a multifaceted and subjective concept that is influenced by various cues. They acknowledge that authenticity is subjectively determined and influenced by societal standards and personal perspectives, rather than being determined by predetermined standards. Some scholars highlight the subjective aspect of authenticity, suggesting that it is perceived as a sensation or feeling (Schlegel et al., 2011, as cited in Lee & Easting, 2020). After examining existing literature on the topic, Lee & Easting (2020) have identified five specific aspects that contribute to the understanding of perceived authenticity in social media influencers. These aspects include sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. Lee et al. (2022) also state that perceived authenticity has a direct relationship with perceived trust. Finally, Balaban and Szambolics (2021) propose a model for the components involved in perceived authenticity. These components include sincerity, expertise, uniqueness, commitment to values, mediated authenticity, visibility, communication style, spontaneity, transparent and creative brand endorsement, dedication to followers, and frequency of interaction.

5. Intrapersonal Connection of the Audience

Another key dimension of authenticity in the realm of influencer marketing is the intrapersonal connection that the audience establishes with themselves. Based on the definition of existential and third person authenticity, I suggest that this aspect highlights the deep inner harmony and bond that followers and fans cultivate with themselves.

Existential Authenticity

Another type identified by Wang (1999, as cited in Newman & Smith, 2016) is activity related or existential authenticity. This authenticity focuses on achieving a certain personal feeling or being connected to oneself. For example, when someone watches a movie or listens to music and feels connected with themselves, even if that piece of art does not comply with societal pressure and standards.

Third Person Authenticity

Moore (2002) identifies a new type of authenticity called third person authenticity. This type of authenticity refers to a scenario when the audience feels a strong and deep connection with what they witness. While Moore's concept of third person authenticity was primarily applicable to analysing musical performances, it can be also relevant to the field of influencer marketing. This is because this concept is not inherent in the music, but it is defined by the audience. In the case of the influencer marketing, the audience is followers. This concept of third person authenticity emphasizes the fact that the authenticity of an influencer's content is determined by how their audience perceives it.

Thematic Analysis Results

Based on the discussion, it can be suggested that authenticity is a crucial component for influencer marketers and other individuals in influential roles. However, authenticity is not just being oneself. It is a vast concept with many definitions. This complication makes the performance of authenticity difficult. Social media influencers in the marketing field must effectively perform authenticity. When doing so, they should take into account a number of dimensions such as: focus on originality, alignment with societal expectations, expression of inner integrity, individual interpretation and intrapersonal connection of the audience. Ignoring these dimensions can cause the loss of followers' trust.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides influencers with a comprehensive understanding of the concept of authenticity in the realm of influencers marketing. Relying on the findings of this study, they can evaluate their content and try to employ strategies to strike a balance between being real and fake simultaneously. Insights from this study can guide influencers in making strategic decisions about content creation, partnerships, and audience engagement. Understanding the importance of origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of the inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection can help influencers tailor their approach to better resonate with their audience.

Apart from the influencers, researchers can also benefit from this study. It contributes to the academic literature by synthesizing existing typologies of authenticity in influencers' marketing and using them to extract the key dimensions of authenticity. This study can also offer innovative methodological approaches in the study of authenticity by using a new protocol in a systematic literature review. The article identifies five key dimensions of authenticity: origin, alignment with societal expectations, expressions of inner integrity, individual interpretation, and intrapersonal connection. These dimensions offer a framework for scholars to understand the various facets of authenticity in influencer marketing. Future researchers can also use the model of authenticity as a starting point to explore how these dimensions influence consumer behaviour, trust, or engagement in different contexts, or across various platforms and demographics. In terms of the paradox of authenticity, scholars can learn that paradox inherently exists in the job of influencers so they can investigate what strategies are used to handle it and/or to what extent they are helpful in trust building.

Finally, apart from influencers and scholars that directly benefit from this study, ordinary people in whatever position they are can also rely on the findings of it and use them in their daily lives in several ways. By being aware of the dimensions of authenticity

and having an understanding of it, they can foster genuine relationships with others. They would be also able to inspire and motivate others once they embrace authenticity in their daily lives.

Regarding the limitations of this study, the first one is the limitation that both Scopus and Project Muse have determined for the first article retrieved. The first article had been published in 2015. It can limit the scope of the data in the review. Another important limitation was the language of the articles since I only retrieved English articles. Articles in other languages may somehow change the result of this study. Finally, I also limited the retrieval to the academic published articles. Book chapters and other types of publications, such as conference proceedings, theses, and non-peer-reviewed articles, were excluded. This restriction may have led to the omission of valuable insights and findings available in those sources such as practitioners' insights published as non-peer-reviewed articles. They provide valuable insights of the practical insights and real-world applications. I also excluded theses and dissertations that often deeply focus on case studies and present detailed and extensive datasets.

CONCLUSION

With the popularity of social media, traditional marketing methods have been replaced by innovative influencer marketing strategies. The concept of authenticity plays a pivotal role in shaping the relationships between producers/brands, influencers, and customers. This study aims to fill the gap existing in the literature that stems from the new nuances of social media. Applying Scientific Procedures and Rationales for the Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol revealed that the first key dimension is the importance of origin, according to the definitions proposed for indexical, nominal, and objective authenticity.

The most recent article published in the article Authenticity of Social Media Influencers: A Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis by Yang and Wang (2024) introduces authenticity as a crucial factor influencing celebrity endorsements. However, their article fails to define what authenticity truly and practically means. This research adds value to the existing literature on authenticity by proposing a detailed explanation of its dimensions.

Additionally, the convergence existing between iconic, expressive, and type authenticity revealed that there is a focus on alignment with societal expectations. Another significant dimension of authenticity is expressions of the inner integrity, derived from moral authenticity' definition. It focuses on the deeply rooted wishes and inner values, not external influences especially financial incentives.

Furthermore, the analysis highlighted the role of individual interpretation in attributing authenticity, as seen in constructed, subject, and perceived authenticity. Finally, the exploration uncovered the intrapersonal connection of the audience with themselves. These dimensions collectively demonstrate the fact that authenticity within influencer marketing has a complex nature.

The result of this study can contribute to the influencers' understanding of the concept of authenticity in the field of marketing. They can rely on the findings and balance the existing paradox in their job which is being fake and real simultaneously. This paradox makes their job very challenging since they always have to present themselves authentic while they pursue their external financial desires. These insights can guide them make wiser decisions in content creation, partnerships, and engaging with their audience. Obviously, understanding authenticity can help influencers connect better with their

followers because striking a strategic balance between being authentic and fake at the same time is the key to their success.

This study can also help scholars identify the key dimensions of authenticity in the realm of influencers marketing. In addition, this study is highly valuable methodologically because it employs an innovative protocol in the systematic literature review, synthesizing the theories derived from it.

Conflict of Interest Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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