



Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales
ICADE

**THE ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY: HOW GENERATION Z WOMEN PERCEIVE
FASHION INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM AND ITS IMPACT ON BRAND
ENGAGEMENT**

TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

Autor: Svea Marie Kloker
Director: Carmen Valor Martínez

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Abstract

The rise of influencer marketing on Instagram has transformed the fashion industry, while simultaneously increasing scepticism among Generation Z toward sponsored content. Although authenticity is widely considered a key success factor, little is known about how young female consumers subjectively interpret it. This thesis explores how Generation Z female fashion consumers perceive the authenticity of social media influencers and how these perceptions influence their cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with promoted brands applying the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Based on eight semi-structured qualitative interviews, the findings reveal that authenticity is a multidimensional construct triggered by visual, content-related, and value-based cues. Highly curated and visually perfect content is often decoded as commercial intent, triggering immediate cognitive defence mechanisms. In contrast, authenticity is associated with approachability, consistency, imperfections, and transparency, such as unfiltered situations or the open discussion of product flaws. These cues reduce psychological distance, allowing social media influencers to be perceived less as advertising channels and more as trusted advisors, fostering strong parasocial relationships. While authenticity reduces cognitive and emotional barriers towards social media influencers, the study highlights that social media influencers primarily act as “door openers” for behavioural engagement. Actual engagement with the promoted brand is often delayed as independent brand verification regarding price, quality, and values remain essential for this cohort. The study provides important managerial implications: to build sustainable brand relationships, fashion brands and influencers should move away from idealised perfection, integrate products into everyday contexts, and prioritise honest, transparent communication that goes beyond mere aesthetics.

Keywords: Engagement; Authenticity; Fashion; Generation Z; Influencer Marketing

Resumen

El auge del marketing de influencers en Instagram ha transformado la industria de la moda, aumentando simultáneamente el escepticismo de la Generación Z hacia el contenido promocional. Aunque la autenticidad se considera ampliamente un factor clave de éxito, se sabe poco sobre cómo las jóvenes consumidoras la perciben. Esta tesis explora cómo las consumidoras de moda de la Generación Z perciben la autenticidad de los influencers en redes sociales y cómo estas percepciones influyen en su compromiso cognitivo, afectivo y conductual con las marcas promocionadas, aplicando el modelo Estímulo-Organismo-Respuesta (S-O-R). Basándose en ocho entrevistas cualitativas semiestructuradas, los resultados revelan que la autenticidad es un constructo multidimensional activado por señales visuales, de contenido y basadas en valores. El contenido altamente curado y visualmente perfecto suele decodificarse como intención comercial, activando mecanismos de defensa cognitivos inmediatos. Por el contrario, la autenticidad se asocia con la cercanía, la coherencia, las imperfecciones y la transparencia, como situaciones sin filtros o la discusión abierta sobre los defectos de los productos. Estas señales reducen la distancia psicológica, permitiendo que los influencers sean percibidos menos como canales publicitarios y más como asesores de confianza, fomentando sólidas relaciones parasociales. Si bien la autenticidad reduce las barreras cognitivas y emocionales hacia los influencers, el estudio destaca que estos actúan principalmente como facilitadores para el compromiso conductual. El compromiso real con la marca promocionada suele retrasarse, ya que la verificación independiente de la marca en cuanto a precio, calidad y valores sigue siendo esencial para este grupo. El estudio aporta importantes implicaciones de gestión: para construir relaciones de marca sostenibles, las marcas de moda y los influencers deben alejarse de la perfección idealizada, integrar los productos en contextos cotidianos y priorizar una comunicación honesta y transparente que vaya más allá de la mera estética.

Palabras clave: Compromiso; Autenticidad, Moda, Generación Z; Marketing de Influencers

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1 Introduction

The rise of social media, particularly Instagram, has fundamentally transformed advertising communication, establishing influencer marketing as an indispensable tool in the fashion industry (Vrontis et al., 2021). In this context, Generation Z has emerged as a highly influential cohort, characterized by its digital nativity and continuous consumption of visual content (Chetioui et al., 2020). However, as the digital environment becomes increasingly saturated with sponsored collaborations, these consumers have developed an acute scepticism towards marketing attempts (Vrontis et al., 2021). Previous studies have identified authenticity as a key determinant of success in influencer marketing for fashion brands (Audrezet et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). Understanding how this authenticity is constructed, experienced, and perceived represents a critical challenge for both academic research and marketing practice. Despite previous literature on the general impact of social media influencers on consumer behaviour, a significant research gap remains. Much of the previous research has focused on quantitative metrics or direct purchase intentions, often treating authenticity as a static trait of the sender. While the broader industry problem lies in the declining efficacy of influencer marketing in oversaturated markets, the specific problem this thesis addresses is the lack of an in-depth, qualitative understanding of how users actively decode and evaluate this concept of authenticity. This is especially important to guarantee that the strategies' effects are understood on a deeper level and applied efficiently without losing the customer's trust in the brand.

In response to this gap, the primary objective of this research is to explore how Generation Z women self-identify as fashion consumers, who engage with fashion social media influencers on Instagram, subjectively perceive and decode specific authenticity cues. The second objective is to examine perceptions of authenticity and analyse how these consumers navigate the tension between perceived realness and commercial intent. To understand how social media influencers function as a route to brand engagement, it is important to determine how the specific interpretation of a social media influencer's authenticity shapes the consumer's cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with the promoted brand. To finally bridge the gap between theory and practice, it is important to derive implications for fashion brands and social media influencers on how to effectively communicate authenticity to Generation Z to foster sustainable brand relationships. Therefore, the central research question of this thesis is: How do Generation Z women experience and interpret the authenticity of fashion social media influencer on Instagram, and how does this shape their engagement with the promoted brand. To achieve these objectives, a two-fold methodology was applied. First, the literature review

was conducted through a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed academic sources, primarily obtained via the scientific databases EBSCO and Google Scholar. This facilitated the construction of a solid theoretical foundation encompassing consumer psychology, parasocial relationships, and the multidimensional nature of authenticity. For the empirical phase of the study, a qualitative and exploratory research design was chosen. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with eight active Generation Z Instagram users. The sample comprises seven women, the primary target audience, and one male participant, who serves as a methodological contrast to examine whether the identified phenomena are gender-specific or representative of universal generational patterns. During the interviews, visual stimuli were employed by comparing two Instagram profiles with divergent presentation strategies to identify deeper reflections on aesthetic and moral perceptions. The empirical research process followed an iterative and circular approach, whereby the interview guideline was adjusted after each session to validate emerging insights. The transcribed data were then subjected to a structured qualitative thematic analysis, allowing for the systematic extraction of inductive categories. This methodological approach will be elaborated upon in detail in Chapter 3.

The present thesis is logically structured to answer the research question systematically. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 establishes the conceptual framework by critically reviewing the existing literature on influencer marketing, authenticity, and brand engagement in the context of fashion. Chapter 3 details the qualitative methodology and research design applied in the empirical study. Subsequently, Chapter 4 presents the results and an in-depth analysis of the interviews, structured according to the cognitive process from visual perception to behavioural intentions. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the main findings, their practical and theoretical implications, the limitations of the study, and potential opportunities for future research.

2 Conceptual Framework

This chapter establishes the conceptual framework of the study by synthesizing key theories from influencer marketing and consumer psychology. Building on these theories, the chapter highlights authenticity as a central construct that links influencer characteristics to consumer engagement and brand-related outcomes.

2.1 Engagement with Social Media Influencers

This section examines the emergence of influencer marketing as a dominant communication strategy and analyses the mechanisms through which social media influencers affect consumer engagement. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Social Comparison Theory, it explains how social media influencers build trust, emotional bonds, and perceived similarity with their audiences. The section concludes by identifying authenticity as a cross-cutting element that underpins these theoretical approaches.

2.1.1 The Rise and Relevance of Influencer Marketing

The exponential growth of social media influencers over the past few years has had a significant impact on their relevance to companies (Vrontis et al., 2021), particularly for brands operating in a business-to-consumer environment (Haenlein et al., 2020). Thus, many companies now integrate social media influencers into their strategies to achieve positive marketing outcomes, ranging from enhanced brand awareness and consumer trust to measurable increases in purchase intentions and social media engagement (Leung et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). Influencer marketing diverges from traditional interruptive marketing approaches, which typically disrupt consumer routines by presenting unsolicited products, by anchoring its effectiveness in social proof and persuasive psychology (Aw & Agnihotri, 2024). Although social media influencers operate across various social media platforms, previous research has revealed that Instagram is particularly relevant to the fashion industry due to the growing number of social media influencers (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

Alongside other sectors such as beauty, travel, food, and beverages, the fashion sector is also strongly influenced by the rapidly changing social media environment, and including social media influencers in marketing strategies has become indispensable (Haenlein et al., 2020). Feng and Xie (2025) state that around two-thirds of fashion enthusiasts follow social media influencers whose content can be associated with fashion and beauty.

Instagram is particularly popular among female users for discovering and purchasing fashion items (Latha et al., 2025). Generation Z avoids traditional advertising and prefers to rely on recommendations from social media influencers, allowing them to interact with real people rather than intrusive advertising (Feng et al., 2021). It has become the most important social media platform among young people after WhatsApp (Statista, 2023).

2.1.2 Psychological Mechanisms of Social Media Influencer Impact

A central theory explaining how social media consumers experience and interpret social media influencers is the Source Credibility Theory. The original Source Credibility Theory, developed by Hovland and Weiss (1951), found that individuals who perceive a source as credible are more likely to be persuaded by it. The theory posits that the perceived credibility of a social media influencer directly impacts the effectiveness of their recommendation (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Credibility is achieved through the combination of expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (Keller, 1998; Ohanian, 1990). Expertise is based on a social media influencer's knowledge and skills (Kant et al., 2025; Ohanian, 1990). Attractiveness refers to the visual appearance and charisma that creates social and psychological appeal (Kant et al., 2025). Trustworthiness depends on the perceived authenticity (Luarn et al., 2024). A social media influencer is perceived as authentic when audiences believe that their opinions are sincere and not primarily economically motivated (Cho et al., 2025; Low et al., 2025). Munnukka et al. (2016) additionally introduced similarity as a fourth factor that impacts credibility. This study also demonstrated the correlation between the four dimensions. To be perceived as credible, social media influencers need to convince audiences across all four dimensions. However, in the fashion context, the relative importance of each dimension differs.

In the fashion context, trustworthiness is considered the most salient dimension (Low et al., 2025); thus, it is crucial to develop a comprehensive understanding of this dimension. Expertise, the second most important component, can only be provided when a fashion social media influencer can demonstrate genuine knowledge of fashion trends and preferences (Low et al., 2025). This study further indicates that similarity is a highly relevant factor in the fashion segment because it creates favourable opinions and relatability with a fashion social media influencer. Finally, attractiveness is considered especially important in the fashion segment and experts debate the extent to which it outweighs other factors (Kant et al., 2025; Pradhan et al., 2023). The theory is very relevant for fashion brands regarding brand image and trust (Cho et al., 2025). It is therefore important for brands to understand their components thoroughly to utilize influencer marketing effectively and achieve brand loyalty among consumers (Cho et

al., 2025; Pan et al., 2025). Each component is integral to the theoretical framework and must therefore be understood in its entirety.

Another relevant theory in the social media environment, including virtual social media influencers, is Parasocial Interaction Theory. The concept was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the relationship between a media performer and an audience. Individuals experience the illusion of an intimate social relationship with the media performer. This illusion is provoked by the direct addressing and personal engagement with the audience. This phenomenon is defined as "intimacy at a distance," referring to a relationship that is psychologically intense yet inherently one-sided. In the social media context, the parasocial interaction phenomenon explains the close relationships between a social media influencer and their audience (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Labrecque (2014) finds that brands and social media influencers can utilize social media to foster parasocial interactions. This results in enhanced engagement with their social media profile and their content (Labrecque, 2014). Social media influencers thus gain the advantage of increasing the trustworthiness of the brand through parasocial interactions (Chung & Cho, 2017). To establish trustworthiness, a social media influencer must engage in self-disclosure (Ki & Kim, 2019; Park & Lin, 2020). Consequently, they must appear vulnerable and reveal their most personal side to be seen as authentic by the audience (Audrezet et al., 2020; Leite & Baptista, 2022). Penttinen (2025) defines 'vulnerability' in this context as the sharing of personal insecurities or everyday struggles. The resulting feeling of intimacy and deep connection is crucial to form parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017; Leung et al., 2022). Ultimately, the relationship fosters audience interest in the social media influencer's recommendations and endorsed brands (Blight et al., 2017). Parasocial interactions are intimate and not necessarily exclusively positive. Similar to real-life friendships, they may also involve criticism or doubts (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Concerning the fashion industry, the theory is especially relevant for Generation Z, a generation that tends to see social media influencers as advisors or even friends (Pate & Adams, 2013). This feeling of friendship is crucial for Parasocial Interaction Theory (Bond, 2016; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016).

The two theories discussed above elucidate different aspects of the relationships with social media influencers: the Source Credibility Theory explains why the audiences trust a social media influencer and according to Parasocial Interaction Theory they consider them their virtual friends. Social Comparison Theory provides an additional explanatory lens for understanding why Generation Z women follow fashion recommendations from social media influencers. The

theory is especially relevant in the social media context and one of the most applied theories when analysing influencer marketing strategies (Joshi et al., 2025; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Originally, this theory was introduced by Festinger (1954). He finds that individuals possess an innate drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others. Later, when social media was introduced, the reaction towards social comparison changed, especially towards upward comparison (Tian et al., 2023). While celebrities in traditional media were seen as untouchable, the social media environment creates a more personal and interactive environment where social media influencers are considered approachable and comparison became more intense (Joshi et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2022). Tian et al. (2023) analysed social media influencer-consumer relationships, through an online survey with respondents from Generation Z focusing on social comparison. Whereas perceived similarity fosters positive emotions such as optimism and admiration toward the social media influencer, negative comparison can lead to envy or depression. Positive emotions can activate consumers' self-improvement motives and, in turn enhance brand attitude, purchase intention, and overall engagement behaviours. Perceived similarity positively affects assimilative feelings and reduces contrastive feelings. These tenets are highly relevant for the Source Credibility Theory, as one of its four dimensions is perceived similarity (Munnukka et al., 2016) that plays an especially relevant role in the fashion industry (Low et al., 2025). Social media influencers who present themselves as flawless reduce their relatability (Haenlein et al., 2020). Cheng et al. (2025) highlight in their work that highly polished, flawless influencers can even threaten human identity by triggering feelings of inadequacy and self-defensive mechanisms through upward social comparison. Generation Z is particularly susceptible to “fake perfection” and upward social comparison (Low et al., 2025), and therefore seeks “realness” (Argyris et al., 2020). Consequently, the feeling of positive perceived similarity is fundamental to achieving credibility and ensuring a social media influencer’s success (Luarn et al., 2024). Thus, similarity can be important for a social media influencer to be acknowledged as authentic (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

2.1.3 The Role of Authenticity in Influencer-Follower Relationships

A common tenet across these three theories is that authenticity plays a central role in their core dimensions and is essential for their effective application (Joshi et al., 2025). Authenticity positively affects trustworthiness, which is one of the Source Credibility Theory’s dimensions (Keller, 1998; Luarn et al., 2024; Ohanian, 1990). In Parasocial Interaction Theory, a social media influencer’s authentic and vulnerable appearance is crucial for increasing the

trustworthiness of the brand through parasocial interactions (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chung & Cho, 2017; Labrecque, 2014). Finally, Social Comparison Theory states that perceived similarity significantly enhances a social media influencer's level of perceived authenticity (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2023). Given its central role, authenticity must be analysed further to be fully understood.

2.2 Authenticity

This section conceptualizes authenticity in the context of influencer marketing. It defines authenticity as a perceived construct, distinguishes between passionate and transparent authenticity, and examines how they contribute to cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with social media influencers.

2.2.1 The Concept of Authenticity

In the social media environment, individuals have become more sceptical of traditional interruptive marketing techniques that expose consumers to the brand without their consent (Aw & Agnihotri, 2024). As a result, they tend to trust social media influencers who appear more authentic. However, the use of social media influencers as a marketing strategy often creates doubts about whether a social media influencer is commercially motivated or intrinsically motivated (Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity is commonly defined as acting in alignment with one's true self (Moulard et al., 2015), encompassing qualities of being true, genuine, and real (Audrezet et al., 2020). According to the self-determination theory, authentic behaviour is driven by intrinsic motivations, and therefore requires, in the case of social media influencers, content creation for inherent satisfaction and personal passion (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Extrinsically motivated actions driven by commercial rewards or external pressures are generally considered inauthentic (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yet, a person's true self is a private entity that is difficult to observe through behaviour, as it does not necessarily manifest itself in observable actions (Vrontis et al., 2021). Accordingly, authenticity is conceptualized as a subjective perception that cannot be objectively observed but must be experienced and interpreted (McLeod, 1999; Molleda, 2010). Moulard et al. (2015) refer to attribution theory in their work, which analyses whether behaviour is intrinsically motivated or extrinsically motivated. The three factors that audiences use to attribute intrinsic motivation are its uniqueness to that person, its consistency across different situations, and its consistency across different entities. It is important to deeply understand how Generation Z users experience it and what that means for social media influencers.

2.2.2 Dimensions of Authenticity

Social media influencers can exhibit either passionate authenticity or transparent authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Passionate authenticity is rooted in intrinsic motivation, meaning it is driven by internal passions and desires rather than external factors (Moulard et al., 2014). Audrezet et al. (2020) find that passionate authenticity can be observed when the published content is entertaining and sharing the experience with their audience alone is intrinsically rewarding for the social media influencer. Thus, fashion social media influencers select brands based on their alignment with attributes of their true selves, including style, identity, and creative expression. When presenting the selected brand, they sincerely showcase their personal use of the product, demonstrating intrinsic enthusiasm for the product. More specifically, they not only demonstrate but explicitly express the alignment of their true selves with the promoted product or brand.

Audrezet et al. (2020) state that transparent authenticity refers to situations in which a social media influencer presents a product truthfully and exhaustively to respect their own integrity. Achieving this requires disclosing background information and personal opinions, including potential product failures. Social media influencers perceive themselves as trusted advisors who test and transparently recommend products they approve of. This strategy requires a social media influencer to potentially refuse rewards from partnerships to comply with set internal guidelines without succumbing to external pressure. Regarding consumer perception, Vrontis et al. (2021) note that although sponsorship disclosures, which are a legal obligation, can negatively affect credibility, transparency is likely appreciated in the long run. Transparency helps consumers recognize advertising, which is crucial because consumers strongly dislike the feeling of being misled regarding a social media influencer's commercial motivation. Furthermore, the visual presentation plays a crucial role in perceived transparent authenticity. Lv et al. (2023) conceptualize aesthetic imperfection, including flaws that deviate from aesthetic norms, such as minor facial blemishes or messy hair. According to Audrezet et al. (2020), social media influencers should display at least one of the two forms of authenticity, either passionate or transparent authenticity, when promoting products.

2.2.3 Authenticity and Engagement

A social media influencer's main goal is to achieve engagement (Tanwar et al., 2022; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Engagement can be defined as an active interaction between themselves and their communities (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). It is characterized as a motivational

state that causes the consumer to be involved in interactive activities (Harmeling et al., 2017). Brodie et al. (2011) developed a systematic conceptualization of engagement, dividing it into three dimensions of customer engagement: cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and behavioural engagement.

Cognitive engagement is characterized by absorption and continuous processing. It depends on the concentration and attention a customer devotes to an object (Brodie et al., 2011; Molina-Prados et al., 2022). Authenticity can promote perceived intrinsic motivation (Leung et al., 2022). This lowers cognitive defence mechanisms, rendering consumers more receptive to the communicated content (Pan et al., 2025). These mechanisms are mental coping strategies to identify, evaluate and resist marketing attempts (Woodroof et al., 2020). To be perceived as authentic and to increase engagement, social media influencers often utilize narrative techniques (Feng et al., 2021). Narrative understanding requires cognitive resources and therefore promotes processing the content intensively within one's own cognitive framework and reduces the generation of counter-arguments (Feng et al., 2021). Another cognitive process is the parasocial perception: The audience builds a one-sided cognitive relationship with a social media influencer as a result of their authentic appearance (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Thus, this cognitive relationship motivates the audience to actively process the provided content or, in fact, engage with it (Ki & Kim, 2019).

While cognitive engagement refers to the active processing of content by the audience (Argyris et al., 2020; Delbaere et al., 2021), affective engagement represents the emotional dimension of consumer engagement and describes the audience's level of emotional involvement with the content (Brodie et al., 2011). An authentic appearance is crucial for affective engagement because it reduces the distance between a social media influencer and their audience (Kim, 2022). The role of authenticity in fostering affective engagement mirrors its impact on cognitive engagement. Phenomena such as parasocial interaction that builds on emotional attachment (Horton & Wohl, 1956) are therefore crucial to promote affective engagement that is also based on emotions. Further, intrinsic motivations can also activate the emotional part of engagement when a social media influencer's own passion and enthusiasm are successfully transferred to their audiences (Audrezet et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2022). The literature indicates that an authentic appearance that creates trust also triggers emotional reactions and consequently emotional engagement.

Behavioural engagement is the highest level of consumer engagement because it requires an active visible action, such as sharing, liking, or commenting on the social media content. To

promote the willingness to execute such actions, it is crucial to be credible (Pradhan et al., 2023). Authenticity reduces psychological barriers such as scepticism or the activation of persuasion knowledge and promotes emotional relationships, which is important for the parasocial interaction (Feng et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2025). The behavioural engagement functions as a method to actively maintain the one-sided parasocial relationship (Delbaere et al., 2021).

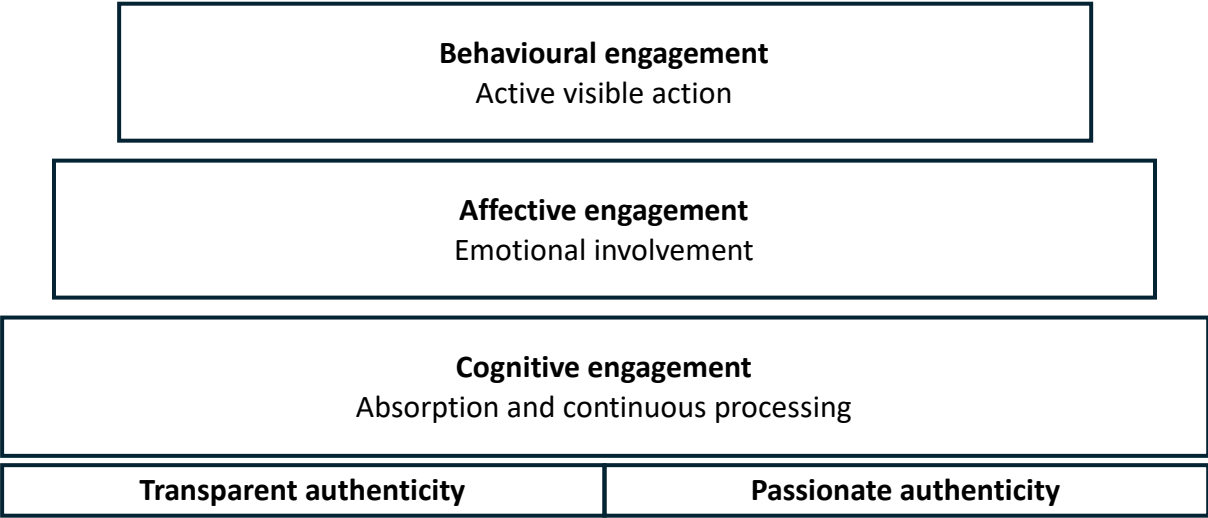


Figure 1: Dimensions of authenticity and dimensions of engagement

2.3 Brand Engagement

Building on the influencer-follower relationship, this chapter explores how perceived authenticity facilitates the transfer of positive meanings and engagement from a social media influencer to the promoted brand. It outlines the cognitive, affective, and behavioural routes through which brand engagement is formed and concludes by identifying a research gap concerning Generation Z women’s subjective interpretation of these processes.

2.3.1 The Role of Authenticity in Shaping Brand Perception

The meaning transfer model, created by McCracken (1989), explains the role of the celebrity’s personality. The audience might transfer certain personality traits of a social media influencer to the promoted brand. Therefore, it is recommended that brands collaborate with social media influencers who align with the brand culture (Pookulangara et al., 2024); in the fashion context it is especially relevant that the brand fits a social media influencer’s regular style (Audrezet et al., 2020).

To shape brand perception, a social media influencer needs to find a way to transfer their credibility to the brand (Argyris et al., 2020). Authenticity leads to trustworthiness, a dimension of credibility, and is therefore crucial for the meaning transfer model. Without authenticity, a social media influencer cannot be perceived as credible, and the brand message might fail to resonate. A trusted social media influencer has the power to positively promote a brand and transfer the positive perception to the brand (Leung et al., 2022). A brand with a strong brand image, however, also has the power to recall and evoke established strong cultural associations when being promoted by a trusted social media influencer (Seno & Lukas, 2007). Authenticity, as a dimension of trustworthiness, is important for improving the receptivity of the brand message and relationship quality (Labrecque et al., 2011). Thus, a social media influencer does not function as a traditional advertisement but rather as a trusted advisor (Aw & Agnihotri, 2024; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). When social media influencers display passionate authenticity in fashion, demonstrating intrinsic motivation, this positive affect is transferred to the brand, because the audience believes that passionate social media influencers know more about trends and style (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). The key is the brand's alignment with a social media influencer's style and creative freedom to ensure a creation process that is intrinsically motivated (Audrezet et al., 2020). Consequently, the audience does not perceive the brand as purely commercial but as a brand that represents passion and lifestyle values (Pan et al., 2025). Conversely, transparent authenticity shapes brand perception by the honest disclosure of partnerships and candid opinions about products, including the discussion of product flaws (Audrezet et al., 2020). Although sponsorship disclosure can promote scepticism, this kind of transparency is appreciated in the long run (Vrontis et al., 2021). Thus, a brand promoted by a passionately or transparently authentic social media influencer is perceived as honest and confident, because the personality trait is likely to be transferred to the brand perception (Leung et al., 2022). The visual perfection of an influencer also directly impacts the perception of the brand: An influencer who appears flawless and too perfect can actually diminish consumer attitudes toward the endorsed brand because the influencer's perfection poses a status threat (Cheng et al., 2025).

2.3.2 Influencer Marketing as a Route to Brand Engagement

Social media influencers act as a route to brand engagement when successfully established through cognitive transfer, affective transfer, and behavioural transfer (Delbaere et al., 2021). Authenticity lowers the audience's cognitive defence mechanisms, making them more open to the communicated content (Pan et al., 2025). The parasocial perception, utilized

to promote cognitive engagement with a social media influencer, motivates the audience to actively process the content (Ki & Kim, 2019). A social media influencer's content about brands triggers brand thoughts, thus, the audience actively consumes and engages with the brand content (Delbaere et al., 2021). To transfer affective engagement, it is important to reach a high degree of emotional engagement triggered by trustworthiness (Brodie et al., 2011; Vrontis et al., 2021). Affective engagement causes an emotional connection with the brand and therefore fosters emotional attachment to the brand (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). The "intimacy at a distance" that is generated through the personal bond and one-sided relationship online (Hudders & Lou, 2022), creates an emotional environment where a social media influencer's endorsement acts as a friend's advice, increasing positive brand attitude (Pan et al., 2025). Finally, the high level of active engagement with a social media influencer, also including parasocial relationships, causes an internalization of a social media influencer's affinity toward the brand which promotes the audience's engagement with the brand (Argyris et al., 2020; Kim, 2022; Leite & Baptista, 2022). Therefore, social media influencers are advised to strategically craft images and facilitate interactions with their followers to support engagement with the brand (Argyris et al., 2020).

2.3.3 Research Gap

While the extant literature provides a robust framework for understanding influencer marketing through the lenses of Source Credibility (e.g., Ohanian, 1990; Munnukka et al., 2016) and Parasocial Interaction (e.g., Labrecque, 2014; Bond, 2016), a specific gap remains regarding the qualitative interpretation of authenticity strategies by Generation Z in the fashion sector. Recent analyses and reviews (Pan et al., 2025; Vrontis et al., 2021; Aw & Agnihotri, 2024) confirm the general effectiveness of social media influencers on consumer outcomes. However, most of this research relies on quantitative methodologies which measure the magnitude of outcomes (e.g., purchase intention) rather than the underlying processes of interpretation and brand engagement on social media. Furthermore, while recent research mentions highly relevant aspects such as aesthetic imperfection (Lv et al., 2023), and the threat to human identity caused by flawless perfection (Cheng et al., 2025), these studies primarily focus on virtual influencers. Although Audrezet et al. (2020) provided a crucial theoretical distinction between passionate and transparent authenticity, there is limited insight into how these specific dimensions are subjectively experienced and constructed by young female consumers on social media platforms like Instagram. Existing research on Generation Z (e.g., Tian et al., 2023; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) highlights their scepticism towards traditional

advertising and their desire for "realness". Yet, there is a need to unpack how this group navigates the specific tension between a social media influencer's commercial necessity and their authentic self-presentation, and to discover the underlying interpretative processes that characterize their engagement with the promoted brand. Therefore, a critical question remains unanswered: How do Generation Z women experience and interpret the authenticity of fashion social media influencers on Instagram and how does that shape their engagement with the promoted brand? The underlying emotional process by which consumers reconcile these conflicting cues to form brand engagement intentions remains largely opaque and requires further investigation. This thesis aims to bridge this gap by exploring the subjective experience of authenticity strategies among Generation Z women, shifting the research focus from the downstream effects of authenticity to how it is interpreted.

3 Methodology

To explore the subjective experience of authenticity strategies among Generation Z women, a qualitative and exploratory research design was applied. Given that previous literature has primarily focused on quantitative metrics, this study focuses on a qualitative approach that aims to gain a deeper understanding of how such authenticity is experienced and interpreted by the target audience. A comprehensive literature review conducted through academic databases such as EBSCO and Google Scholar served as the theoretical foundation.

The chosen technique consists of semi-structured interviews with eight respondents born between 1999 and 2007. The sample was recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Participants were initially identified within the researcher's academic and social network to ensure a high level of accessibility and trust during the interviews. To guarantee the quality and relevance of the data, two pre-screening filter questions were applied: First, candidates were asked about their active interest in fashion, and second, whether they regularly use Instagram to seek fashion inspiration from influencers. To enhance diversity, the selection aimed for a European cross-border representation, including respondents from Austria, England, Germany, Greece, Romania, and Spain. While the primary focus remains on Generation Z women, the inclusion of a male respondent (Respondent 8) serves as a strategic polar case to test the boundaries of the phenomenon. This contrast is essential to determine whether the identified expectations of authenticity are gender-specific or whether they are a fundamental, cross-gender characteristic of the Generation Z cohort. After seven interviews, theoretical saturation was reached, as no significantly new insights were expected

to emerge. To finalize the study and test the boundaries of the findings, a polar case was subsequently interviewed, completing the research sample.

<i>ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Interview Duration</i>	<i>Place of Interview</i>
R1	Female	23	English	28 minutes	Physically
R2	Female	21	Greek	27 minutes	Online
R3	Female	21	Rumanian	29 minutes	Online
R4	Female	25	Austrian	30 minutes	Physically
R5	Female	20	German	26 minutes	Physically
R6	Female	26	German	27 minutes	Physically
R7	Female	19	Spanish	30 minutes	Online
R8	Male	23	German	19 minutes	Physically

Table 1: Description of the sample

The semi-structured format ensures that the theoretical framework is systematically addressed while providing sufficient flexibility to capture individual perspectives and nuanced experiences. The semi-structured guide was designed to systematically explore the participants' perceptions. It was structured into four thematic blocks. Phase 1, the introductory part, assessed the respondents' engagement with Instagram and fashion influencers to understand their daily usage patterns. In phase 2 respondents were asked to define authenticity in their own words and identify aspects of inauthenticity and purely commercial content. Phase 3 involved showing two contrasting Instagram profiles. Profile 1 displayed a highly curated, aesthetic feed with professional lighting and flawless perfection. Profile 2 showcased a mix of spontaneous, unfiltered everyday moments, including human imperfections. This comparative approach was used to trigger immediate reactions and identify specific visual authenticity cues. Finally, phase 4 explored how these perceptions translate into trust and specific actions towards promoted brands.



Figure 2: Visual cues - profile 1 (left); profile 2 (right)

Reflecting the iterative nature of the study, the guide was refined during the process: Question 8 was expanded to include a sub-question about the importance of consistency after interview 2, and question 11 was expanded after interview 3, to explore emerging themes more deeply.

Methodologically, the study is embedded in an iterative and circular research inspired by the Grounded Theory approach, specifically the Constant Comparative Method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach was chosen to allow the theory to emerge directly from the data through simultaneous collection and analysis. After each interview, recurring themes and anomalies were identified. These findings were then compared with previous interviews to identify patterns in how authenticity is perceived. The formal analysis followed a systematic process, beginning with open coding, where the transcripts were broken down into discrete parts to identify initial concepts. These concepts were then integrated into the axial coding phase, where the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm served as the central coding framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). This framework was chosen because it accounts for the subjective internal processing of the consumer. To evoke deeper reflections on the initial perception (the ‘Stimulus’), visual stimuli were integrated into the interview process, showing different Instagram profiles of female fashion influencers who share a similar aesthetic but utilize different presentation strategies. This comparative approach allows for a precise analysis of how different visual cues shape the interpretation of authenticity. In this context, the ‘Organism’ represents the internal, psychological evaluation of the respondents. It explores how these visual stimuli trigger cognitive and affective states, such as trust, scepticism, or a sense of relatability. Finally, the ‘Response’ captures the resulting behavioural outcomes. This

includes not only the engagement with the influencer but also the subsequent brand engagement, such as the willingness to search for the promoted products or actively engage with the brand on Instagram.

In the final stage of selective coding, all categories were integrated to identify the core phenomenon of the study. By using the S-O-R model as a structured lens within the Grounded Theory process, the study could trace the entire journey from the first visual impression to the final consumer action.

4 Results

This chapter presents the qualitative findings structured along the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm. First, the general perception of the relevant concepts is examined and linked to social media influencers through participants’ prior experiences and the visual cues presented during the interviews. Second, emotional reactions to these visual cues are identified and analysed. Third, behavioural responses are examined, focusing on actions on Instagram and the resulting level of engagement with the brand.

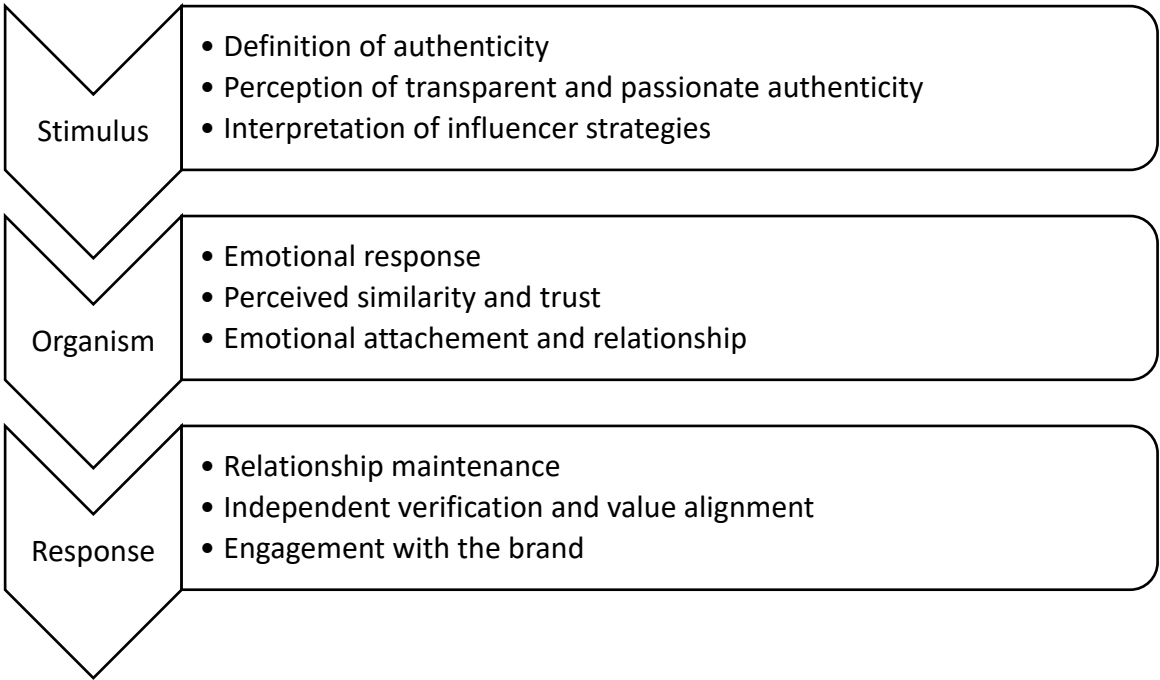


Figure 3: Findings along the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm

4.1 The Baseline: Generation Z’s Relationship with Fashion Influencers

To understand how fashion is integrated in the users’ use of Instagram, respondents were asked about their general use of the app. All users report using Instagram daily, with usage time

ranging from approximately 30 minutes to two hours per day divided in short periods throughout the day. The primary use is to stay in contact with friends and to find inspiration in different fields such as lifestyle, fashion, and comedy. In order to do that, they mainly consume stories and posts. Among the different areas, fashion plays a significant role and all respondents stated that they follow social media influencers on Instagram for fashion inspiration. It was significant that they had been following at least one or two social media influencers for a long time. When being asked what it is that makes them stay most respondents mention factors like personality, charisma, similar style and following someone journey since the beginning. Respondent 6 states that what keeps her is not “fashion specifically, but rather their personality”. Respondent 7 has a similar opinion explaining that the relationship feels personal and that it does not feel like “they’re just trying to sell [her] something”. She also mentions that the social media influencers she follows have a “beautiful style” and offer the “right mix of content”. The factors that cause the respondents to unfollow a social media influencer are usually the loss of relevancy, unrealistic perfectionism, and too much advertising. The loss of relevancy mainly refers to the loss of relatability due to the respondents “grew out of the target group” (Respondent 4). Perfectionism is detected when a social media influencer “never feels stressed about anything or struggles with anything” (Respondent 5). Too much advertising is not appreciated. In fact, it leads to a feeling that “it is only about the money” (Respondent 6).

4.2 The Stimulus: Decoding Authenticity Cues

This chapter examines the stimulus phase of the S-O-R model by analysing how Generation Z interprets specific indicators of authenticity. It explores how respondents subjectively define authenticity, investigates how passionate and transparent authenticity strategies are experienced, and evaluates how divergent visual presentations, from curated perfection to spontaneous realness, impact consumer perception.

4.2.1 Defining Authenticity: The Intersection of Realism and Relatability

To gain a deeper understanding of the experience and interpretation of authenticity, it is necessary to first clarify how authenticity is defined. Respondents define authenticity as the correspondence between communicated statements and actual behaviour. When discussing fashion, several respondents emphasize that clothing items should not be presented only once. Respondents expect the promoted items to appear in different contexts, including situations where they are not actively advertised. This is considered particularly important when social media influencers receive financial compensation. Respondents frequently used terms such as

“realistic”, “normal”, and “value alignment” when describing authenticity. Respondent 4 explains that fashion should be presented in a way that appears normal to a typical Instagram user and avoids exaggerated or inappropriate portrayals. She particularly criticizes staged or exaggerated scenarios, such as “celebrating a birthday in a wedding dress”. Respondent 2 expresses a similar view and emphasizes the importance of relatability. If the content is too distant from her own reality, she finds it difficult to relate to it and therefore questions the social media influencer’s authenticity. While this understanding aligns with the foundational concept of authenticity as being true to one’s ‘true self’ (Audrezet et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2015), the findings add a distinct layer of meaning specifically relevant to Generation Z. For the respondents, authenticity is not merely an internal consistency of the influencer but is heavily dependent on relatability and perceived normalcy. By criticizing staged scenarios, respondents signal that they interpret authenticity as a negotiation between the influencer’s portrayal and the consumer’s own lived reality. Thus, the findings expand existing definitions by suggesting that for young consumers, ‘being real’ is inextricably linked to ‘being relatable’.

4.2.2 Passionate and Transparent Authenticity: Navigating Commercial Intent

Authenticity can be divided into two types: passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Passionate authenticity is rooted in the perceived intrinsic motivation of the influencer, suggesting that their engagement with fashion is driven by genuine enthusiasm rather than commercial gain (Audrezet et al., 2020). Respondents state that even though it is sometimes difficult to detect whether a fashion influencer is truly passionate, most of them experience it through consistency. They intend to regard how the social media influencers speak about the brand over time and whether they stay passionate about the clothes they once promoted with joy. Respondents expect to see the fashion items repeatedly, including in situations outside of promotions or collaborations. Furthermore, they prefer that the product is mentioned or shown before a paid promotion. This highlights the importance of perceived intrinsic motivation. An ideal scenario would therefore involve social media influencers developing a genuine interest in the fashion before receiving extrinsic rewards.

Transparent authenticity, on the other hand, refers to the influencer’s willingness to disclose the commercial content, including sponsorships and product flaws (Audrezet et al., 2020). It differs from passionate authenticity by focusing on communicative honesty regarding extrinsic rewards rather than the internal drive of the creator. Sponsorship disclosure is often a legal requirement. Social media influencer can disclose paid and unpaid partnerships as well as promoting products not linked to a commercial agreement. Users appear to be aware that social

media influencers earn money through partnerships and therefore engage in advertising. Still, the amount of advertising plays an important role and should not be underestimated. Respondent 6 referred to a situation where the large number of advertisements and the resulting inconsistency caused her to unfollow the social media influencer. Almost all respondents express at least some scepticism when sponsorships are disclosed. Nevertheless, a transparent disclosure of commercial intent can also be appreciated and considered honest. Respondent 7 explains that since “everyone knows influencers earn money with this [she] tend[s] to have a higher opinion of the person”. Besides extrinsic rewards, transparency also relates to how products are presented. Respondents were asked whether mentioning products flaws or being honest about having bad days affect their opinion. All respondents agree that this kind of honesty is highly appreciated. Providing an honest opinion about products that also includes mentioning flaws or problems, strengthens trust, and increases credibility. Respondent 1 states that “it saves people from [...] making mistakes and buying certain things”. Beyond mere product evaluations, the appreciation for sharing bad days highlights that Generation Z expects transparent authenticity to go hand in hand with vulnerability. As Penttinen (2025) conceptualizes, the deliberate disclosure of personal problems, everyday struggles, and negative life experiences acts as a crucial relational tool. By blending transparent product reviews with personal vulnerability, social media influencers not only secure trust in positive recommendations but also cultivate deeper, authentic connections with their audience.

<p align="center">Passionate authenticity Intrinsic motivation and genuine passion</p>	<p align="center">Transparent authenticity Honest opinions and disclosure</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent opinion and style • Repeated appearance of the product • Genuine interest before promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclosing sponsorships • Honest reviews on products • Mentioning problems
<p align="center">Intrinsic motivation driven by passion</p>	<p align="center">Extrinsic motivation mentioned honestly</p>

Figure 4: Identified cues of passionate and transparent authenticity

4.2.3 Visual Cues: Curated Perfection vs. Spontaneous Realness

Authenticity is a perceived construct that requires interpretation (Moulard et al., 2014). To better understand which factors, make a social media influencer appear authentic, respondents were shown visual stimuli. The visual cues identified in the comparison between

Profile 1 and Profile 2 serve as the empirical evidence through which respondents decode the previously defined dimensions of passionate and transparent authenticity. The comparison contrasts a profile that appears perfect with one that openly shows situations as they really are. Profile 1 presents fashion exclusively in a favourable light, with carefully selected backgrounds and poses that present the clothing to its best advantage. Profile 2, on the other hand, does not present fashion in a staged manner but integrates it into lifestyle content. Here, fashion is shown in various everyday situations, with backgrounds such as a messy room or an untidy street. The images capture how the moment naturally unfolded, and the clothing is not presented in a staged manner. The comparison clearly reveals how Generation Z interprets and evaluates visual stimuli.

Respondents react rather sceptically to profile 1, primarily stating that the visual perfection appears inauthentic, and the purely commercial intent is interpreted as extrinsic motivation. Respondent 2, for example, criticizes a commercial post in which the social media influencer is shown cooking while wearing only underwear. “A normal person would not look like that cooking in underwear” (R2). The lack of relatability is decoded as a lack of transparent authenticity, as the situation is perceived as a setup rather than an honest depiction of life. A boundary of perceived authenticity can be observed, where actions that audiences cannot relate to are interpreted as inauthentic. Respondent 5, on the other hand, describes the pictures as outdated and explains that Generation Z aims to “catch the moment” rather than “pose for it to be perfect”. This suggests that the respondents see pure perfection as a performance rather than a genuine, passionate connection to the displayed fashion. It becomes clear that the majority is not interested in pure perfection but instead develops a defensive attitude when viewing such images. Nevertheless, not all respondents share that opinion. Respondent 3 feels inspired by the perfect images and does not experience strong pressure or negative feelings. Respondent 6 states that she is self-confident enough not to compare herself with the profile and instead reacts with indifference.

The second profile, on the other hand, is generally perceived positively and embodies both passionate and transparent authenticity through its “spontaneous realness”. The images evoke primarily positive feelings among respondents. One recurring detail highlighted by almost all respondents is the image of a broken shoe heel, which triggers a strong sense of relatability and functions as a powerful cue for transparent authenticity, as it shows the influencer’s willingness to reveal human flaws. Respondents state that they have experienced similar situations and appreciate that such fashion moments are also shown. Such deliberate breaks with typical

Instagram aesthetics signal authenticity and make the social media influencer appear more approachable. Respondent 5 adds that the clothing is well suited to the situations shown, which makes the outfits appear more credible. This integration into daily situations serves as evidence of passionate authenticity, proving that the influencer wears and enjoys the items in real life out of intrinsic motivation. These imperfect visual stimulus breaks down barriers. Respondent 4 states that the images create the feeling of interacting on equal terms. Respondent 7 confirms that she does not compare herself negatively to the social media influencer and that she feels “significantly more comfortable” when viewing the images of the second profile. She reports feelings of joy and describes the experience as identification rather than negative comparison.

The analysis of the responses demonstrates that visual perfection in today’s fashion industry is often interpreted as a sign of extrinsic motivation. Generation Z seeks visual cues of ‘real life’. Spontaneity, disorder in the background, and visible problems or mistakes are no longer perceived as flaws but function as essential cues of transparent and passionate authenticity. They signal approachability and transform the commercial messages into a relatable experience (Kim, 2022). It is therefore important for brands to choose influencer collaborations carefully, as the way the products are presented can easily backfire on the brand (Haenlein et al., 2020). According to the respondents, overly perfect presentations are not appreciated, and it must be assumed that this can negatively affect the perception of the brand.

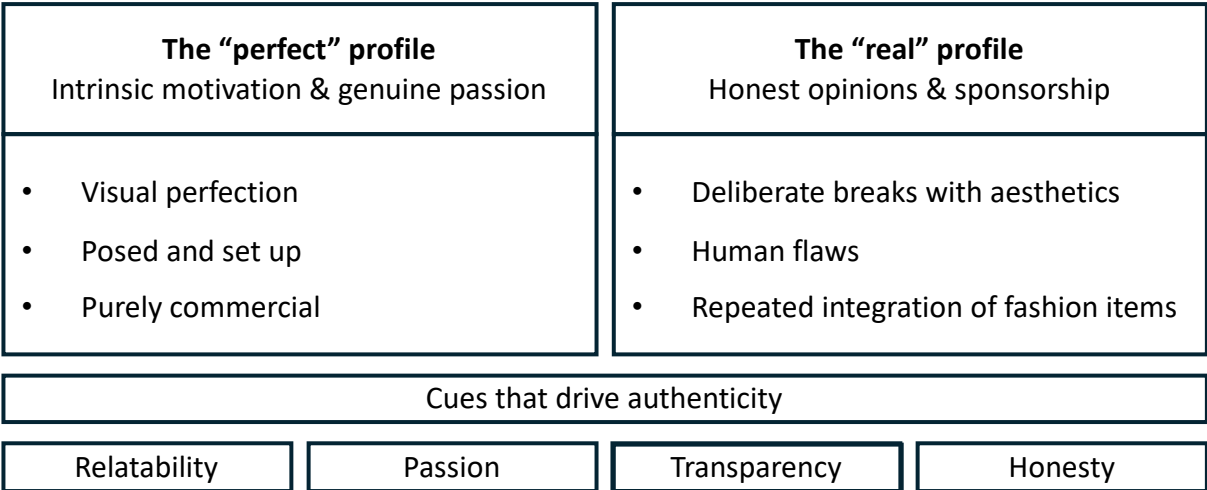


Figure 5: Perception of visual cues

4.3 The Organism: Cognitive and Affective Appraisal of Authenticity

This section examines the organism stage of the S-O-R framework, exploring how Generation Z women cognitively and affectively internalize authenticity cues. It analyses the

internal psychological mechanisms, ranging from social comparison and trust formation to the development of parasocial relationships. These mechanisms bridge the gap between initial visual perception and the final behavioural response.

4.3.1 The Psychology of the Feed: Defensive Attitudes versus Assimilative Inspiration

Social Comparison Theory provides a central psychological framework for explaining how visual stimuli are cognitively and affectively processed by respondents. The analysis of the responses demonstrates how different visual strategies lead either to upward social comparison or to assimilative, inspiring feelings. The theory suggests that perceived flawlessness on Instagram triggers upward social comparison, which can evoke negative emotions among consumers (Tian et al., 2023). The analysis of the responses largely supports this theoretical assumption. The highly polished images in Profile 1 trigger negative, contrastive emotions among several respondents. This cognitive protective mechanism aligns with recent findings that flawless, idealized social media influencers can induce a “threat to human identity” (Cheng et al., 2025). To reduce the psychological tension and identity threat triggered by upward social comparison, consumers consciously distance themselves and adopt a defensive attitude, categorizing the account as purely commercial (Cheng et al., 2025). Respondent 4 states that she “compares herself a lot” with the social media influencer, who appears to live in a perfect world. She further explains that she cannot identify with the social media influencer due to her portrayal as an idealized figure, characterized by extremely high standards and perfection. Instead of admiration, she develops a defensive attitude. Respondents dismiss the portrayal as a “fake” commercial construct that negatively impacts their own self-esteem. Interestingly, the qualitative analysis also reveals a cognitive protective mechanism: in order to reduce the pressure of upward comparison and the resulting psychological tension, some Generation Z consumers consciously distance themselves. Respondent 2, Respondent 5, and Respondent 6 state that they do not compare themselves with Profile 1. Their identification with the depicted social media influencer is so low that they perceive no meaningful basis for comparison. They do not denigrate the person, but rather categorize the account as purely commercial rather than a human being. Respondent 6 represents the strongest contrast, stating that this type of portrayal even makes her “almost feel more positive about [her]self”, as she finds it sad that people feel the need to present themselves in such a way. Respondent 3 represented a slight exception and was still able to derive fashion inspiration from the perfect images without experiencing strong pressure.

In contrast, Profile 2 is cognitively processed very differently. The theory suggests that perceived similarity promotes positive emotions such as optimism and admiration and triggers assimilative feelings, while reducing contrastive responses (Tian et al., 2023). Since Generation Z is particularly sensitive to artificial perfection and actively seeks “realness,” imperfection functions as the primary signal for authenticity and acts as a bridge to the target audience. The reactions to Profile 2 are consistently positive and support the concept of assimilative social comparison. Respondent 4 compares herself positively with the social media influencer and perceives images of messy hair or everyday outfits as reassuring. Respondent 2 experiences no pressure to look exactly like the social media influencer and identifies with the situations portrayed. Respondent 5 expresses a similar perception. She clearly states that, for her, the comparison does not occur at the level of clothing. When imagining herself wearing the same outfits, she does not aim to look identical but rather to experience the same emotions: “I compare myself with how I would perhaps feel in the situation and not explicitly related to the clothes.” Instead of a defensive reaction, inspiration emerges, and the focus shifts from purely visual aspects to an emotional level. All respondents perceive Profile 2 as authentic precisely because of its showcased imperfections, whereas opinions regarding Profile 1 are divided. The analysis demonstrates that self-presentation, which embraces human flaws, reduces the respondents’ cognitive defence mechanisms. When social media influencers reveal their flaws and imperfect everyday lives, harmful upward social comparison, which otherwise generates psychological pressure, and a sense of inadequacy is transformed into healthy assimilative feelings. This reduction of cognitive barriers constitutes the fundamental prerequisite for building deeper trust.

4.3.2 Building Consumer Trust: The Interplay of Similarity and Source Credibility

The Source Credibility Model provides an explanation for why consumers follow recommendations made by social media influencers (Lin et al., 2021). In the fashion context, trustworthiness and similarity are particularly crucial for the acceptance of recommendations (Low et al., 2025). The responses conducted in this study aim to explain how visual authenticity and honest communication address these dimensions of credibility. Respondents were asked which of the two profiles they would be more likely to accept recommendations from. Most respondents chose the second profile. Respondent 2 explains her choice by stating that she can better identify with the everyday situations portrayed in Profile 2, “so her advice fits [her] situations better.” Displaying vulnerability is an essential tool for building deep-seated trust, validating the assertion that disclosing personal challenges fosters empowerment and intimacy

between the influencer and the audience (Penttinen, 2025). Respondent 4 also chooses Profile 2 because she feels that this social media influencer better understands the type of advice she needs in real life, as their values and relaxed attitudes toward imperfect situations overlap. These statements support the assumption of Low et al. (2025) that perceived similarity creates a foundation for trust in the fashion segment. Thus, many social media influencers try to be more accessible and to reduce a feeling of inferiority among the audience. In addition to similarity, trustworthiness represents another key dimension for establishing credibility in the fashion context. According to Audrezet et al. (2020), trust is primarily fostered through transparent authenticity, meaning situations in which social media influencers evaluate products honestly and disclose flaws or imperfections. “Perfect imperfection” and the display of vulnerability are essential tools for building deep-seated trust in influencer communication (Penttinen, 2025). Research suggests that a flawless appearance can actually diminish brand attitudes because it reduces the perceived power and relatability of the consumer, whereas aesthetic imperfection in endorsers can lead to higher brand authenticity (Lv et al., 2023). The interview material strongly confirms this theory-driven assumption. Respondent 1 states that pointing out product flaws “saves people from making mistakes,” which significantly increases her trust in future recommendations made by the social media influencer. This illustrates how a functional flaw can be perceived as more appreciated than perfection (Lv et al., 2023). Respondent 7 argues that transparently acknowledging the commercial nature of the relationship and refusing to hide behind a façade gives her the feeling of being valued as a follower rather than being treated merely to an end. Respondent 4 also confirms that such honesty strengthens her implicit trust in the product’s quality. These results correspond with the finding cited in the conceptual framework by Vrontis et al. (2021): although the disclosure of advertising partnerships may initially trigger scepticism, this transparency is highly valued by Generation Z in the long run and is ultimately rewarded with trust.

4.3.3 Emotional Attachment: Personality-Driven Loyalty and Parasocial Interaction

To gain a deeper understanding of the affective processing of visual stimuli, Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) provides a useful framework. The analysis examines whether respondents develop a psychologically intense, one-sided relationship with social media influencers and which factors contribute to this phenomenon. The findings suggest that, for Generation Z, the emotional component is a key driver of long-term follower loyalty and affective engagement. While visual stimuli may initially trigger a user to follow the social media influencer, long-term loyalty is sustained by the social media influencer’s personality.

Respondent 5 states that “visual attracts, the character somehow keeps you there.” Similarly, Respondent 6 reports that she does not primarily follow fashion influencers because of the clothing itself, but rather because of their “personality”. The social media influencers she tends to follow present their lifestyle in a humorous, for example by joking about their past fashion choices. Furthermore, the respondent suggests that social media influencers should not “take life too seriously”, which aligns with the personality of the influencers she follows. Respondent 4 illustrates the intensity of this one-sided relationship by describing how she has essentially grown up alongside social media influencers she has followed for many years. She explains that these social media influencers have provided her with valuable insights into life, so she has remained as a follower. When asked directly whether they feel deeply connected to certain social media influencers and may even experience a sense of friendship, the majority confirm this perception. Respondent 4 states that she feels personally connected to social media influencers and has the impression that she could reach out to them at any time. Respondent 2 likewise reports feeling curious about social media influencers’ lives and capable of developing a personal bond with them. Although most respondents form parasocial relationships, the qualitative analysis also reveals important exceptions. Respondent 3 strongly denies experiencing any personal connection or sense of friendship with social media influencers. For her, fashion influencers function solely as a visual catalogue model for inspiration. If she likes a look, she saves it, the social media influencer’s personality or any emotional connection is irrelevant to her. This case demonstrates that cognitive engagement can exist without strong affective engagement when users approach Instagram in a purely pragmatic manner. In summary, the analysis based on Parasocial Interaction Theory suggests that Generation Z associate authenticity with humanity and approachability. Sharing imperfect aspects of everyday life fosters a deep emotional bond. As a result, the social media influencer transforms from a distant public figure into a virtual friend whose advice is valued and trusted by audiences.

4.4 The Response: Brand Perception and Brand Engagement Dynamics

This chapter concludes the analysis by focusing on the response phase of the S-O-R model. It evaluates how perceived authenticity transforms Generation Z from passive observers into active supporters through specific behavioural patterns. Furthermore, it analyses the mechanism of meaning transfer from the influencer to the promoted brand and concludes by outlining strategic imperatives for building sustainable, trust-based relationships in a saturated digital market.

4.4.1 Behavioural Engagement and Relationship Maintenance

Behavioural engagement represents the highest level of interaction among the three engagement dimensions proposed by Brodie et al. (2011), as it requires visible actions such as liking, sharing, or commenting. The analysis of responses reveals a clear behavioural pattern among Generation Z: engagement occurs almost exclusively through “likes,” “saves,” and following. Actively commenting on posts is largely avoided by nearly all respondents. The results reveal a strong interconnection between the three engagement dimensions. Affective engagement, manifested through parasocial relationships, appears to be the direct driver of behavioural engagement. The theory suggests that parasocial relationships can increase engagement and stimulate the motivation to maintain the one-sided relationship (Delbaere et al., 2021; Labrecque, 2014). The interview data provide empirical support for this assumption. For many consumers, a “like” is not merely an evaluation of the outfit but rather a social gesture that functions as a form of relationship maintenance. Respondent 6 describes liking stories as a form of support and as a signal directed toward the social media influencer: “I think what you are doing right now is cool.” Similarly, Respondent 5 states that she likes posts by authentic social media influencers “to support her in what she does,” even if the post itself is not particularly interesting. Respondent 1 even actively shares and reposts authentic content because she wants others to discover this honest and helpful social media influencer. In contrast, Respondent 3 reports saving posts exclusively for fashion inspiration. To examine how perceived inauthenticity affects defensive mechanisms and engagement behaviour, respondents were asked how they react when they perceive content as inauthentic. Initially, respondents tend to react with indifference. If content appears staged or purely commercial, the post is usually skipped. Respondents 6 and 8 state that they initially scroll past individual inauthentic posts. Respondent 5 is often willing to give social media influencers a “second chance” if they appear to have only temporarily changed their content and are likely to return to their previous content. However, when inauthenticity becomes a recurring pattern, users eventually unfollow the social media influencer. The main triggers for this behaviour include a mismatch of values, commercial overload, and a lack of added value. The analysis demonstrates that behavioural engagement does not simply occur spontaneously. Rather, it is the direct result of preceding psychological processing stages. As stated by Brodie et al. (2011), emotional trust determines the willingness to act. Authenticity transforms users from passive observers into active supporters, expressed through liking, saving, and following. In contrast, inauthentic behaviour activates cognitive barriers and ultimately leads to the termination of the relationship, manifested in unfollowing the social media influencer.

4.4.2 The Social Media Influencer as a Door Opener: Meaning Transfer and Independent Brand Verification

Building on the psychological trust and emotional bond with the social media influencer established through transparent and passionate authenticity, it is important to understand how this can be transferred to the promoted brand and foster brand engagement. According to the Meaning Transfer Model, the personality traits and credibility of a celebrity can be transferred to the promoted brand (McCracken, 1989). The interview findings confirm this mechanism. Unknown brands promoted by a social media influencer perceived as authentic benefit from an initially higher level of trust. Respondent 1 states that a social media influencer she perceives as authentic would only promote brands that she assumes to be of good quality. Respondent 4 supports this perspective: she immediately perceives the brand positively and approaches it with certain expectations because she has already developed a parasocial bond with the social media influencer. Respondent 5 likewise states that she is more inclined to click on a link and explore a brand in greater detail when she has previously had positive experiences with the social media influencer and understands what the influencer typically endorses. These findings suggest that without authenticity a social media influencer is less likely to be perceived as credible, and the brand message therefore loses impact. Authenticity reduces followers' cognitive defence mechanisms and makes them more receptive to the brand message.

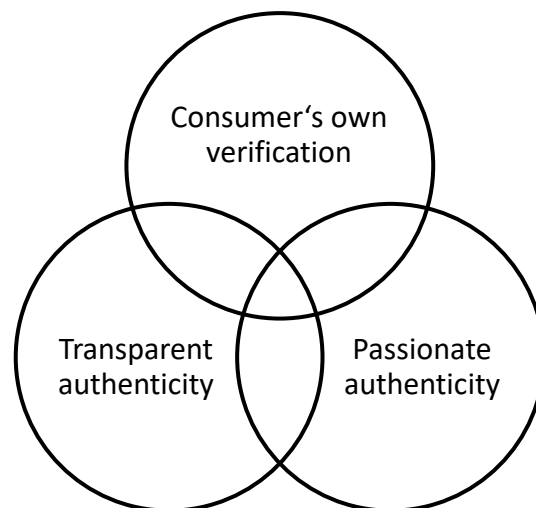


Figure 6: Identified dimensions of brand engagement

Although the perceived image of the brand can be transferred to the brand, the qualitative analysis reveals an important nuance: Generation Z consumers do not trust brands blindly. The social media influencer functions as a door opener, but the brand must subsequently convince the audience on its own. For example, Respondent 7 states that although the social media

influencer draws her attention to the brand, she still verifies the brand herself to ensure that it matches her own values and is trustworthy. Furthermore, objective factors such as price play a substantial role. Respondents 3 and 6 emphasise that although they may initially check out the brand, the price segment and product quality ultimately determine whether a purchase will occur. The meaning transfer therefore reaches its limits when the product does not align with consumers' financial resources or quality expectations. Nevertheless, it becomes evident that perceived authenticity increases consumers' willingness to actively process brand information. Empirically, this is reflected among nearly all respondents in the form of intensive information-seeking behaviour. Respondent 2 immediately visits the profile of the unfamiliar brand and even examines which other social media influencers the company collaborates with. Respondent 3 also actively engages with the brand even if she does not immediately find a product she likes, "the brand would still remain in [her] memory." Trust in the social media influencer thus creates an emotional connection with the brand. Respondent 4 expresses this through a previously established positive expectation, which arises largely from the recommendation of a valued social media influencer. Consequently, the promoted brand is no longer perceived as purely commercial but rather as a representation of passion and lifestyle values. This process ultimately leads to engagement with the brand. Yet, this engagement does not regularly manifest in posting or commenting, so this cue of behavioural engagement cannot be expected. Several respondents report saving brand posts or sharing them with friends. Respondent 1 additionally indicates that she will directly follow the brand's account if she appreciates its aesthetic presentation. For Respondent 3, however, almost no meaning transfer occurs. She explicitly states that she does not purchase clothing because it is worn by a specific social media influencer. Instead, she evaluates the visual appearance and price independently. If she likes the styling, she may search for similar items from other brands, potentially at lower prices. This indicates that when the emotional bond with the social media influencer is absent, the social media influencer functions merely as a visual showcase, while the transfer of trust to the promoted brand fails to take place. Authenticity therefore represents the fundamental prerequisite for Generation Z consumers to even consider an unfamiliar brand. The positive attributes of the social media influencer act as a quality signal that generates trust and positive expectations. When combined with an appropriate price-performance ratio, this transfer ultimately results in measurable behaviours such as saving, sharing, and following the brand, so forms of behavioural engagement.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Synthesis of Findings and Evaluation of The Polar Case

The present study examined, within the Stimulus-Organism-Response Model framework, how young consumers decode authenticity on Instagram and how this perception shapes their engagement with fashion brands. Aligning with recent studies discussed in the theoretical framework, the findings empirically confirm that Generation Z increasingly rejects social media influencer strategies that focus primarily on flawless aesthetic perfection. While the concepts of aesthetic imperfection and vulnerability are already gaining relevance in academic discourse, the qualitative analysis of this thesis demonstrates how Generation Z actively decodes these cues on Instagram. The data illustrates that highly curated visual perfection is largely interpreted by the target group as a commercial stimulus that activates immediate cognitive defence mechanisms. Echoing established theories, the findings validate that only the deliberate display of imperfection, approachability, and authentic everyday situations effectively reduces these barriers and enables the development of trust. The qualitative results show that authenticity is primarily interpreted as an interplay between the influencers' self-presentation and the interpreted relatability. To examine whether these perceptual mechanisms are gender-specific or represent a universal pattern within Generation Z, a male polar case (Respondent 8, 23 years old) was included in the study. The analysis of this contrasting case supports the generalization of the findings. The male respondent also perceives flawless visual perfection as exhausting and reports experiencing pressure due to upward comparisons. If he considers a profile "fake" or "staged" he does not "really use these profiles for fashion advice because it's not realistic just annoying". He expresses the same preferences for uncompromising honesty and transparency, such as openly addressing product shortcomings, which he considers essential in order to perceive a social media influencer not only as a promoter. Instead, it gives him the feeling of "getting a tip from a friend who has a similar life to [his]". Furthermore, his behavioural engagement mirrors that of the female respondents, for example by saving posts or sharing them. The integration of the polar case therefore suggests that the rejection of "fake perfection" and the strong desire for transparency represent central characteristics of Generation Z, rather than being dependent on gender-specific preferences.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Implications

While previous literature on influencer marketing has predominantly relied on quantitative methods to demonstrate that authenticity positively affects purchasing behaviour, this study makes a significant qualitative contribution by exploring how young consumers cognitively and affectively experience authenticity.

First, this study extends the understanding of passionate and transparent authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2020) mainly related the terms to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This study further identified that for Generation Z, authenticity is especially associated with relatability. Respondents repeatedly highlight the importance of “being real” and find aspects that can be related to themselves. While established theories highlight the importance of vulnerability and aesthetic imperfection, this study contributes by uncovering the internal psychological mechanisms of how these cues are processed. While perceived perfectionism triggers negative feelings like upward social comparison, the deliberate inclusion of imperfection serves as a psychological catalyst that transforms harmful upward comparisons into more positive and assimilative feelings. Deliberated imperfection and transparency lower cognitive defence mechanisms. It allows the audience to process information about a brand naturally rather than rejecting it as a mere commercial attend and therefore enables cognitive engagement with the brand. Second, the study provides an extension of the Source Credibility Model. While recent literature, such as Pradhan et al. (2023), discusses attractiveness as an especially important factor in the context of fashion, it is debated to what extent it outweighs other dimensions of the model. This study found that attractiveness does not seem to outweigh the other dimensions for Generation Z. In fact, the dimensions of trustworthiness and similarity emerge as the decisive determinants of credibility. Consumers are no longer seeking perfection and unrealistic beauty standards but rather trusted advisors who communicate on an equal level with their audience. Aligning with recent studies that call for ‘perfect imperfection’, this shift implies that affective barriers towards brands are reduced through the influencer’s vulnerability and imperfection rather than flawlessness. This relatability fosters a deep parasocial bond, which is essential to generate affective engagement and emotional trust before any brand message can be successfully delivered. Third, the study offers deeper insights into the Meaning Transfer Model. The transfer of positive attributes from the social media influencer to the promoted brand does not occur automatically. Rather, the parasocial bond and the perceived authenticity primarily function as a “door opener” that initiates cognitive and affective engagement with the brand. However, for behavioural engagement to ultimately occur, the brand must be

independently verified by the consumer. Brand values must align with the consumers' own values and objective factors such as price and product quality must also meet consumers' expectations. Therefore, the influencer is a necessary but only conditional route to behavioural brand engagement.

Building on these theoretical insights, several managerial implications emerge for fashion brands targeting Generation Z. First, brands must rethink their influencer selection by prioritizing spontaneous realness and vulnerability over highly curated perfection. Thus, collaborating with overly flawless influencers should be avoided, as this triggers status threats and cognitive defence mechanisms. Second, marketing managers must adjust their engagement expectations. Behavioural engagement among Generation Z manifests subtly through "likes" for parasocial relationship maintenance and "saves" for inspiration, rather than direct comments. Furthermore, since influencers primarily act as a "door opener", immediate purchases or trust in the brand are rare. Instead, brands must ensure their own Instagram profiles provide the objective information necessary to support the delayed, independent brand verification. Finally, brands should grant influencers the creative freedom to integrate products into unpolished, everyday contexts.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing valuable exploratory insights, the study is subject to several methodological limitations. First, the qualitative sample of eight interviews is appropriate for an insight-generating investigation. However, the results cannot be statistically generalised to the entire Generation Z population, especially concerning the polar case. The constructs identified qualitatively in this study should be tested in large-scale quantitative studies, for example through experimental testing of Instagram posts. This approach would make it possible to measure the effects of imperfect self-presentation on conversion rates and measurable brand engagement metrics. Second, the research focuses exclusively on Instagram and fashion. As the target group is increasingly active on algorithm-driven platforms such as TikTok, perception mechanisms may differ in more dynamic short-form video environments. Cross-platform studies offer significant potential for further investigation. A direct comparison of how authenticity cues are decoded on Instagram versus TikTok could provide valuable insights for the strategic development of influencer marketing. Third, findings are limited to how fashion influencers are perceived. Fashion is often driven by enjoyment and self-expression, whereas utilitarian products serve primarily functional purposes. Future research should examine whether authenticity cues identified in this study are equally important in both contexts.

Fourth, as outlined in the theoretical framework, authenticity represents a purely subjective construct. Consequently, the analysis relies on consumers' self-reports, which may be subject to social desirability biases.

6 Declaración de Uso de Herramientas de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa en Trabajos Fin de Grado

ADVERTENCIA: Desde la Universidad consideramos que ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares son herramientas muy útiles en la vida académica, aunque su uso queda siempre bajo la responsabilidad del alumno, puesto que las respuestas que proporciona pueden no ser veraces. En este sentido, NO está permitido su uso en la elaboración del Trabajo fin de Grado para generar código porque estas herramientas no son fiables en esa tarea. Aunque el código funcione, no hay garantías de que metodológicamente sea correcto, y es altamente probable que no lo sea.

THE ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY: HOW GENERATION Z WOMEN PERCEIVE FASHION INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM AND ITS IMPACT ON BRAND ENGAGEMENT

Por la presente, yo, Svea Kloker, estudiante de Administración y Dirección de las Empresas (E4) de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas al presentar mi Trabajo Fin de Grado titulado "The Role of Authenticity: How Generation Z Women Perceive Fashion Influencers on Instagram and Its Impact on Brand Engagement", declaro que he utilizado la herramienta de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa ChatGPT u otras similares de IAG de código sólo en el contexto de las actividades descritas a continuación:

1. **Brainstorming de ideas de investigación:** Utilizado para idear y esbozar posibles áreas de investigación.
2. **Metodólogo:** Identificación de enfoques metodológicos potenciales, seguido por una evaluación propia para seleccionar la metodología más adecuada.
3. **Corrector de estilo literario y de lenguaje:** Para mejorar la calidad lingüística y estilística del texto.
4. **Sintetizador y divulgador de libros complicados:** Para resumir y comparar literatura compleja.
5. **Revisor:** Para recibir sugerencias sobre cómo mejorar y perfeccionar el trabajo con diferentes niveles de exigencia.
6. **Inspiración para encuesta:** Para recibir sugerencias sobre la estructura inicial de la guía de entrevistas y, posteriormente, desarrollo y profundización de las preguntas de manera propia.

Afirmo que toda la información y contenido presentados en este trabajo son producto de mi investigación y esfuerzo individual, excepto donde se ha indicado lo contrario y se han dado los créditos correspondientes (he incluido las referencias adecuadas en el TFG y he explicitado para que se ha usado ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares). Soy consciente de las implicaciones académicas y éticas de presentar un trabajo no original y acepto las consecuencias de cualquier violación a esta declaración.

Fecha: 25.03.2026

Firma:

S. Moker

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8 Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Introduction: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed.

Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Could you quickly tell me your age, gender and where you are from?

Question 1: So to start off, could you briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend there, and what kind of content do you mostly consume?

Question 2: What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time? At least 3-4 names

→ Yes: What is it about them that makes you stay? How do you feel about them?

→ Have you followed someone for a long time and then one day decided to stop following them, why?

Question 3: In the world of Instagram, we often hear the word 'authentic.' What does that word mean to you personally when you look at a fashion influencer?

Question 4: Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought: 'This is fake' or 'They are just doing this for money'? What gave it away?

Question 5: How important is it to you that an influencer seems genuinely excited about the clothes they show? Can you tell the difference between real passion and 'scripted' passion?

→ How can you tell? Is it their voice, their body language, or how they style it?

Question 6: Now I will show you pictures from two different profiles. Let's start with the first one.

What do you think about her style and how she presents fashion?

How do these pictures make you feel?

Do you catch yourself comparing this influencer to yourself?

Is there an item that you would buy yourself? And if so, does it make you want to look the same, when wearing the item?

→ Does seeing these perfect images rather inspire you, or does it trigger a feeling of comparison or pressure or maybe trigger a defensive attitude?

→ Does this influencer seem authentic to you?

I will now show you another profile.

Again, what do you think about her style and how she presents fashion?

How do these pictures make you feel?

Do you catch yourself comparing this influencer to yourself? Is there a difference compared to the first profile I showed you?

Is there an item that you would buy yourself? And if so, does it make you want to look the same, when wearing the item?

→ Does seeing this mix of images rather inspire you, or does it trigger a feeling of comparison or pressure or what do you think?

→ Does this influencer seem authentic to you?

Who are you more likely to take advice from?

Question 7: Some influencers openly talk about product flaws, bad days, or clearly label their ads. How does that affect your opinion of them?

→ Does admitting a flaw make you trust their positive recommendation more?

Question 8: How do you navigate the tension when you know they are getting paid? Does the '#ad' label change how you view their opinion?

→ How important is consistency for you? What role does it have when an influencer promotes different fashion brands? (Added after interview 2)

Question 9: When you feel an influencer is being truly authentic, how do you react? Do you like, comment, or share?

→ Why exactly do you do this? Do you feel a personal connection or 'friendship' with them?

Question 10: Conversely, if you sense they are being inauthentic, do you just scroll past, or do you actively unfollow?

Question 11: Let's talk about the brands they wear. Imagine an influencer you find very authentic promotes a brand you've never heard of. How does their recommendation affect you? Are you curious enough to click on the brand's profile or google them? Are there other acts you do?

→ Does the type of brand play a role? For example, the price range of the products or the information provided about the promoted brand. (Added after interview 3)

Question 12: If you could give fashion influencers one piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be?

→ And considering their fashion content, what can they do to convince their community of the brands they use and show?

Closing: Is there anything else regarding the topic that you want to add because we haven't discussed it? Thank you for your time and the valuable information you have provided. Your perspective really helped me gain a deeper understanding of these topics, thank you.

Appendix 2: Interviews

Interview 1

Interviewer: Hello and thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation, perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel real or fake to us. And then in the next step I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I'm looking for personal opinions and honest experiences, so please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving reasons. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your gender and age will be mentioned to ensure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed. Do you agree to be recorded?

Respondent 1: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you quickly tell me your age, gender and where you are from?

Respondent 1: I'm 23, I'm female and England.

Interviewer: So to start off, could you briefly describe how you typically use Instagram, how much time you spend there, and what kind of content you mostly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 1: I typically consume food reels, fashion content and funny videos. Usually I am on there for maybe 1 or 2 hours a day.

Interviewer: What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time? (Question 2)

Respondent 1: Not for a long time. So there are some fashion brands that I have been following. For example, there is one lady from Nigeria with her own brand or also there is another Nigerian influencer that I like to watch because she has a similar body type and it makes sense for me to watch her fashion content.

Interviewer: So yeah, my next question was going to be, what is it about them that makes you stay and how do you feel about them? But I think that was already answered quite well, thank you. In the world of Instagram, we often hear the word authentic. What does that word mean to you personally when you look at fashion influencers? (Question 3)

Respondent 1: I feel like authentic is something that seems realistic or is realistic and that some people can relate with. If something's authentic, it's most likely something that I can relate to or something that I can wear or something that makes sense in this world.

Interviewer: That makes sense. Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought this is fake or they're just doing this for money and what gave it away? (Question 4)

Respondent 1: So there is this brand and they are selling underwear, like bras. They are advertising as big breast friendly but they are using models only with the smaller sizes and not really catering specifically to bigger sizes. So they would use models who didn't fit the criteria and when you search on the website or search their size guide, they never really catered for a bigger size. They just said bigger sizes to attract more people to check their website.

Interviewer: OK, so you think. This was like only like a message to attract people and not really their purpose.

Respondent 1: Clickbait, yeah.

Interviewer: And how important is it to you that an influencer seems genuinely excited about the clothes they show? Can you tell the difference between real enthusiasm and scripted excitement? And if so, how can you tell the difference? Is it their body language, or how they style an item? (Question 5)

Respondent 1: You can't always tell because sometimes people have been like this for a very long time, and they are really good at it. So sometimes they would have a sponsorship and they would tell you 'Oh my god, I have been having this piece for weeks'. But you never see them wearing it only when they promote it and are getting paid.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. And how would you then describe real enthusiasm? How does someone look who is truly excited about what they do?

Respondent 1: Only someone who's doing this for real normally speaks about the brand before they're even sponsored. And even if they're sponsored, it tends to be something that they talk about all the time and you can tell it when someone doesn't speak about it with like their mind on it. They speak about it freely. Sometimes they just mentioned it so they would say something, they're not thinking too much about it and that's how you know that it's something that they genuinely like. When someone is really emphasizing on a product, you can tell the difference.

Interviewer: OK, perfect, thank you. Now I will show you pictures from two different profiles and I will just start with the first one. I will show the pictures to you now. You can take your time and have a look at them and then can you please tell me what do you think about her style and how she presents fashion? (Question 6)

Respondent 1: Her style is very classic and very cute, her style quite suits her body. But it's also only shows specific sizes. It's quite nice though

Interviewer: OK. How do these pictures make you feel? Do you catch yourself comparing this influencer to yourself? And is there maybe an item that you would buy yourself?

Respondent 1: Yes, I would like to buy the red dress, the short dress, but I would I be scared too because of like the bra size. Yeah, there are many things that are really nice here, but I don't know whether they would cater to other sizes.

Interviewer: Does it make you want to look the same when wearing the item?

Respondent 1: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you say that seeing these perfect images rather inspire you? Or does it trigger a feeling of comparison or pressure?

Respondent 1: A mix of both. I really like the fact that she is able to confidentially wear her clothes. But at the same time I was thinking if I was to get what she got, would it look the same on me or fit the same way? So I guess you compare but at the same time feel inspired.

Interviewer: Does this influencer seem authentic to you?

Respondent 1: I don't know. Her pictures seemed too perfect.

Interviewer: Why would you say that? Is it only because of her body size or are there factors that makes it seem too perfect?

Respondent 1: Not about her body. It's about like how everything is situated in each post. Each post is made too perfect and there's nothing out of place. There is always a nice background, but it just seems like a setup.

Interviewer: I will now show you the second profile. You can also take a moment to look at the pictures and then again tell me what you think about her style and how she presents fashion and how these pictures make you feel.

Respondent 1: Her account is more laid back and seems more realistic and authentic. She is no too perfect in each picture, and she's also showing some struggles.

Interviewer: OK, what struggles?

Respondent 1: She showed a picture of her shoe, like her heel. It got spoiled and we can relate because it happens to other people. And she took a picture of it and was kind of making fun of it. And there is a picture, she looks really good in it but it's really laid back. There are things in the background and it seems a bit messy and not too perfect.

Interviewer: OK, perfect. Do you catch yourself comparing this influencer to yourself? Is there a difference compared to the first profile I showed you?

Respondent 1: Yeah, the first profile is very perfected. It just seems more like aesthetic, but the second profile seems more real and she has fun moments, pretty moments and also just very laid back moments. It is more relatable.

Interviewer: OK. Is there a again, is there an item that you would buy yourself, and if so, does it make you want to look the same when wearing the item?

Respondent 1: There is one outfit with a white top and lounge pants. I would probably buy the pants. But it doesn't make me want to specifically the same. I don't specifically want to look exactly like her, I just feel like it looks comfortable.

Interviewer: OK, perfect. Does seeing this mix of images rather inspire you or does it trigger a feeling of comparison or pressure or what do you think?

Respondent 1: It's inspiring that she seems to be having fun, and I also want to have fun, but at the same time it makes me feel, in a positive way, like she also has hard days. That makes it relatable.

Interviewer: So you would say that wearing those items you would probably more feel like being in her situation and not being her.

Respondent 1: Yes.

Interviewer: Does this influence her seem authentic to you?

Respondent 1: Yeah, she seems more authentic to me.

Interviewer: Why exactly would you say that?

Respondent 1: She shows things not many typical people show. And pictures people tend to like have clean backgrounds, perfect pictures, hair clean and perfect, outfit perfectly arranged. But she has things mismatched in her in her background which shows authenticity. Like everybody sometimes has a messy background, not everything is perfect. All her pictures, like she has goofy pictures and pictures where she's having fun like a normal person.

Interviewer: Some influencers openly talk about product flaws, bad days or clearly label their ads. We've already like mentioned this a little bit, but how does that affect your opinion of them?

Does admitting a flaw make you trust their positive recommendation more? (Question 7)

Respondent 1: Yes.

Interviewer: So what does it make you feel when you see people showing these kind of things like product flaws and having a bad day? And also the ad label.

Respondent 1: I like the fact that show when products have flaws. It saves people from like making mistakes and buying certain things. And if they still want to buy it, they still have it in mind that this could possibly happen. They also talk about different people. So that for some people it may work for you, but may not work for you. So you have the choice too. But if

someone just advertises and doesn't say anything, you're kind of forced to buy it and see what it's like for yourself.

Interviewer: That's very true. How do you navigate the tension when you know they're getting paid? Does the hashtag ad label change how you view their opinion? (Question 8)

Respondent 1: Not really because they're being honest.

Interviewer: OK, in every situation? Is there like specific situations where you think it's good? And in other situations you think it has a bad impact on your opinion?

Respondent 1: Sometimes when they show ads, like sometimes there's a little word, that confirms that they're getting paid so it might not be their exact opinion. And sometimes through other people, through their other videos of ad you can tell whether they genuinely like a product or not. But also it has two sides. It can positively impact you and also not because if you tell someone it's an ad, people will know that you're getting paid for it and also they're like, OK, well, you're being honest. At the same time, it also makes you sceptical about the product.

Interviewer: When you feel an influencer is being truly authentic, how do you react? Do you like, comment or share? (Question 9)

Respondent 1: Like, share, repost.

Interviewer: Why exactly do you do this? Do you feel a personal connection or friendship with them, or is it for others to see it?

Respondent 1: A mix of both. If someone's being authentic, you tend to like their things more and you like other people to see that this person is being truthful that they could find it helpful too.

Interviewer: Would you say you feel a personal connection to them or maybe even a friendship?

Respondent 1: Yes. It is very relatable if someone is enthusiastic and honest speaking their mind.

Interviewer: Conversely, if you sense they are being inauthentic. Do you just scroll past or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 1: I don't unfollow, sometimes I watch till the end to see if there's anything I could take away and if I think it wouldn't help me I just I scroll away.

Interviewer: Let's talk about the brands they wear. Imagine an influencer you find very authentic promotes a brand you've never heard of. How does their recommendation affect you? Are you curious enough to click on the brand's profile or google them? Are there other acts you do? (Question 11)

Respondent 1:

I tend to google their profile. Sometimes if I can't check right now then I would save the video. I'd redo my research on the brand, especially if it's someone who is very authentic and mentions a brand, then it's most likely a very good brand. So I tend to check it out anyway. Interviewer: Do you also engage with them on Instagram?

Respondent 1: Yeah. If I see their things, I'm like, OK, I would like to go back and reference it later to see I would like their posts or I would follow them.

Interviewer: Ok. And you'll probably also go through their posts and maybe like something or also even save posts?

Respondent 1: Yeah

Interviewer: To be a bit more specific. So if you see an influencer, an authentic influencer, making an ad about a brands, apart from buying, what other actions does an authentic post trigger for you? Do you ever start following a brand's account, save the post for later inspiration, or even send it to a friend?

Respondent 1: Oh yes, I would share it, save it, probably even follow the brand too. And check the website.

Interviewer: And also send it to other people?

Respondent 1: Yes.

Interviewer: Last question. If you could give fashion influencers one piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be? (Question 12)

Respondent 1: I would just say that they should be honest. And also, just because a brand is paying you doesn't mean you can't give the brand themselves feedback. Because at the end of the day, you're promoting their business. And if you're not promoting something good they won't receive good reviews. Just be honest about their product and tell them what's good about it, what's not good about it, while also promoting it for other people. That would be great.

Interviewer: And considering their fashion content, what can they do to convince their community of the brands they use and show, to promote engagement with the brand?

Respondent 1: Some brands do this already when they show they're behind the scenes. Maybe unscripted parts to show the work that goes into it. Sometimes people promote brands that are very expensive and then they forget that so much work goes into it. So when other influencers show the behind the scenes other people can like relate and see how much effort goes into it.

Interviewer:

Is there anything else regarding the topic that you want to add because we haven't discussed it.

Respondent 1: No it was all good, everything has been said, thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time and the valuable information you have provided.

Your perspective really helped me gain a deeper understanding of these topics, so thank you very much.

Respondent 1: No problem. Thank you for choosing me.

Interview

2:

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start.

I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand.

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Respondent 2: Yes, I agree.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you briefly tell me your age, your gender, and where you are from?

Respondent 2: Yeah, I am 21 years old, I am female, and I am from Greece and I live in Germany.

Interviewer: Could you start by describing how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend there and what kind of content do you mainly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 2: Well, I use Instagram daily, I would say, over several hours. I'd say definitely about 2 hours a day. And I use Instagram for different things, for example for food inspiration or style inspiration. I like to see what my friends are doing, where they are. So mainly for inspiration and to stay in touch with friends.

Interviewer: What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time, and if so, what makes you stay with a profile? (Question 2)

Respondent 2: I would say fashion plays a big role in my feed. I'd say about 50% of my feed is fashion inspiration, different styles, and what is currently trending. For example, I follow an influencer called Caro (*@adorablecaro*). I actually like her quite a lot because I like her style and her vibe, and I find her very authentic. I've been following her for several years now and I like how she has developed. Then, for example, an influencer from England, Molly Mae (*@mollymae*). I've been following her for quite a while too; she has her own fashion brand and advertises other well-known fashion brands like Adidas. I think she is great and she has a very nice style. Then I follow this influencer from Greece, her name is Garifalia (*@garifalia.kalifoni*). She has a nice style that I love to get inspiration from. Then there are also influencers who do fitness and lifestyle who also advertise sports clothes, like Nikoleta (*@nicol.mavridi*), for example. Exactly, I think she is great too because she is very authentic, wears nice outfits, and is simply very likable.

Interviewer: Okay, is there anyone you followed for a while and then eventually unfollowed? Can you think of anyone spontaneously? And what was the reason?

Respondent 2: Yes, that happens too. I don't know if you know her, her name is Fabia Bengs. She is also a lifestyle and fashion influencer. I followed her because I thought she was quite cool at the beginning, but at some point, she did too much advertising and I didn't consider her that authentic anymore. But I recently came across her account again and now I follow her again because I simply still find her style cool. Let's see how long I will follow her.

Interviewer: Okay. The word "authentic" has come up frequently now, and in the world of Instagram, you generally hear it quite often. What would you say that word means to you personally when you think of fashion influencers? How would you define it? (Question 3)

Respondent 2: Authentic means to me when an influencer doesn't just promote things, but I really believe that the person actively uses them. And also, essentially, if she didn't get money for it, she would probably still use and test it. Exactly, so basically that I can simply trust the person that the advertising isn't just done for money. Of course, that plays a role, but yes, you just know that if you were to buy it, you would probably be satisfied with it too.

Interviewer: Yes. And how would you say you recognize that someone isn't just doing it for money right now?

Respondent 2: When influencers occasionally review and look at things critically, so that not every story is an ad from some other company. But rather when I know, okay, they have been cooperating with this company for years. Or if, for example, I've seen them post a story saying, "Hey, I tried this guys, I have to say, no recommendation, I didn't like it, so don't buy it." So

when not everything is always only positive and perfect in the influencers' lives, because that's simply not how it is.

Interviewer: Okay, yes. Now the opposite. Can you remember a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought, "This is fake and she's only doing it for the money"? How would you say you recognized that? (Question 4)

Respondent 2: That is also a bit difficult, but I think sometimes you just notice it from the way people, as I said, only review things positively and have a new company every week. Or for example, so many influencers show juice diets or things like that, and if you know that they did it with one company last week and basically the same thing next week but with another company, then I find that somehow a bit problematic because nobody would do it so soon again and even change the brand. How would you know the first one worked if you do it again with a new brand only the week later.

Interviewer: How important is it to you that an influencer is genuinely enthusiastic about the clothes they present? Would you say you can tell the difference between real enthusiasm and rather pretended or scripted enthusiasm? (Question 5)

Respondent 2: Well, if I've been following the influencer for a while, then I think you can notice the difference in how they act and when they are really enthusiastic. Yes, I would say so. You just have to trust your judge of character to some extent.

Interviewer: Okay, I'm going to briefly show you pictures from two different profiles, starting with the first one. You can take a moment to look at them and then maybe briefly say what you think of the style or her way of presenting fashion. (Question 6)

Respondent 2: Well, I have to say, I know her and I used to follow her, but I don't follow her anymore because I didn't find her authentic anymore at some point. As I said, I followed her in the past. I think she has a likable appearance and also a nice style, but it seems a bit unauthentic to me. For example, the third picture... no, actually almost all pictures, but especially the fourth picture where she is baking or cooking in underwear, it's just unrealistic.

Interviewer: Okay, so what exactly would be the factors here that make you say you don't like how fashion is presented?

Respondent 2: I don't know, I just don't think it's a nice way to present fashion. She just thinks of a perfect background and then wears the items she is promoting. A normal person would not look like that cooking in underwear. You simply can't relate to the moment.

Interviewer: Does that mean you say they wouldn't wear the outfit like that while cooking?

Respondent 2: Maybe, but they would probably not photograph themselves in that moment and pose for the camera like that, exactly. My point is, that it looks staged and if you are trying to

show a typical everyday situation wearing the item, it would be better to take a natural picture and not make an ordinary moment seem so perfect, with the perfect pose and smile and completely staged.

Interviewer: How do you feel when you see these pictures? Would you say you catch yourself comparing yourself to her?

Respondent 2: Well, it could be that one might think more about perfectionism because you think, okay, she takes perfect photos and stands perfectly in the sun. Or for example the last photo, this Christmas photo with all these gifts. But yes, maybe a little bit.

Interviewer: Okay, is there a piece of clothing that you would buy yourself, and if so, would you then strive to look exactly like her in it?

Respondent 2: I have to say, of all the things, I like the pajamas best because I just find that they are most realistic. I have to say I find the others are a bit... some things are advertised in a very obvious way. But I would say, for example, the pajamas, I would be most likely to buy because it is simply the most authentic.

Interviewer: Overall, would you say that these perfect pictures rather inspire you or rather trigger a feeling of comparison or pressure in you, or nothing at all? Can you simply not identify with it at all?

Respondent 2: I would say rather not at all. I don't compare myself to her because all the pictures are very far away from how I would wear these outfits. Pajamas are supposed to be comfortable and it's something you would not be able to see in the picture. When I look at the picture I have no idea whether they are comfortable. She looks nice but that's not everything. I would say it's more like I think, "I'll unfollow you."

Interviewer: Okay. So you really cannot relate to her at all?

Respondent 2: Exactly, it bores me because they are all photos in the same style; you wear different clothes, but it's simply the same photo. So I don't know, I find them very unexpressive.

Interviewer: Okay, so you would say the influencer appears rather unauthentic to you?

Respondent 2: Exactly.

Interviewer: Okay, I'll show you a second profile now. And I have the same question first: What do you think of the overall style, the way of presenting fashion, how she does it?

Respondent 2: Well, that is Laura Abla, I told you at the beginning that I follow her. For example, I find her very authentic and also very likable because she shows not only perfect moments but also simply everyday situations, like struggling with her heels, but then again great moments and great clothes and so on. But I just find her much more authentic and much more likable and simply much more creative in how she shows her fashion or her style.

Interviewer: Okay, what exactly do the pictures trigger in you, what feelings?

Respondent 2: Connection or simply more willingness to follow, to look, to engage.

Interviewer: Okay. Any feelings of comparison, positive or negative? What is the difference compared to the first one?

Respondent 2: Yes, I would probably compare myself more here, because you can identify with it, for example, if you have a fail or something, or simply everyday situations... yes, or also regarding style because she has so many different styles that I like. I dress like that on a bad day and on a good day I would also wear another of her styles to feel good. And then there are the very fancy ones that feel achievable. I know where she comes from and she gives me the feeling that everything is possible. Because she never expected to one day become a model but she now is.

Interviewer: So compared to the first profile, you would actually establish a comparison here. Is there a piece of clothing that you would buy yourself, and would you then strive to look like her or feel like her?

Respondent 2: Maybe, for example, the second which is all the black, with the blazer and so on... maybe yes.

Interviewer: What would you say then, how do you imagine it when you wear the outfit? Do you really want to look just like her or do you identify more generally with the vibe the picture gives off?

Respondent 2: I would say rather the vibe, yes. When I look at the pictures I don't feel any pressure that I need to look exactly like her. I compare myself with the situation she is in and not with her. I want to feel like her and have a similar energy when wearing this, but she always makes someone feel like anyone can feel this way without actually looking like her.

Interviewer: Would you say that the pictures overall still trigger a negative comparison? Like, that you say you feel pressured by the pictures or how fashion is simply portrayed?

Respondent 2: Actually not.

Interviewer: Why not?

Respondent 2: Because it is simply much more realistic, due to the fact that she also simply shows situations where she looks exhausted or tired, for example. When I get home at night and I put my pajamas on that is how I look. And not like the girl from the first profile. She makes me feel like that's okay because tomorrow we can get up, put on a cute outfit and feel much better.

Interviewer: Does this influencer appear authentic to you?

Respondent 2: Yes, definitely.

Interviewer: Okay, from which of the two would you be more likely to accept advice?

Respondent 2: Clearly the second one.

Interviewer: Can you maybe name 3 or 4 factors or reasons why?

Respondent 2: I can relate to her better, so her advice fits my situations better. She shows her everyday situations and many of them look like my own life. Her life isn't portrayed perfectly in every photo. And also because she isn't extremely dressed up in every photo and she takes much more varied photos which makes it more fun to look at them. You never know what to expect when she makes a new post. She doesn't take a photo just to show the clothes, but she also shows: 'Hey, I'm outside, I'm with my friends, I'm just out and about.'

Interviewer: Okay, that means she doesn't put the focus on the outfit, but rather on the situation and then shows what she is wearing during it.

Respondent 2: Exactly, sure, sometimes she puts the outfit in the focus too, but then she shows that clearly, but that isn't the main part of her profile.

Interviewer: Some influencers, you mentioned this earlier, also speak openly about product defects, bad days, or criticize clothing, and clearly label their advertising. How does that affect your opinion of this person? (Question 7)

Respondent 2: It has a positive impact. Because then simply... as I said, it is simply much more authentic.

Interviewer: Also, regarding the labeling of advertising, you mentioned it once as something negative. Would you generalize that the labeling of advertising has a negative effect on your opinion? (Question 8)

Respondent 2: Yes, well occasionally yes, because I think, "Ah okay, they just want to tell something," and then I see, "Ah okay, it's an ad." And especially when I see in every story that it is marked as advertising.

Interviewer: Okay. But does the amount of advertising matter more to you, or would you say generally whenever you see that it's an ad, you immediately become more skeptical?

Respondent 2: Yes, well not generally. I would say, well not always... sure, you somehow have a negative connection with advertising, but I would say it's not always, but really mainly the quantity.

Interviewer: Okay. But what exactly would you say, when you see advertising, what do you think? What is your first thought?

Respondent 2: "Oh, advertisement again." Okay. That was my first thought, I think. So yes mainly it's the amount. I know some influencers have a cooperation with a fashion brand. That's different because the consistency makes it more trustful. I know they are wearing the clothes

for a long time and then I think they really like it. They are getting paid, yes, but sometimes I recognize an item they had advertised and now they still wear it even after the cooperation.

Interviewer: When you feel that an influencer is truly authentic, how do you react to that? In what way would you say you interact with the influencer? This includes things like liking, commenting, reposting, saving. (Question 9)

Respondent 2: If they are authentic?

Interviewer: Yes. Does that lead to you engaging with them?

Respondent 2: Okay, what exactly do I do then? I rather go to the profile, look at their stories, look at their posts partially. If I follow them newly, I also go to old posts and look like, okay, what have they done... you are simply much more interested.

Interviewer: Okay, that means you would also say that it leads to a more personal connection, maybe even a feeling of friendship.

Respondent 2: Yes. There is a lot of trust and I definitely get curious about them and feel personally connected to them.

Interviewer: And conversely, if you feel someone is not authentic at all, do you just scroll past or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 2: Well, mostly at the beginning I naturally just scroll past, but at some point, when I notice it doesn't bring me anything, so I have no added value, then I unfollow.

Interviewer: Perfect. If we think actively about the brands that are always advertised, or maybe not... it's not only about being actively advertised, because sometimes a brand is promoted rather passively, people just ask about the product and it gets mentioned. Imagine an influencer you find very authentic promotes a brand or wears a brand you have never heard of? How does the recommendation affect you? Are you curious and curious enough to click on the brand's profile or google them? (Question 11)

Respondent 2: Yes, if it's new and I don't know it and I think... regarding the ad I think, "Ah, okay, that could be something cool," then I do go to the profile and check it out, like "Hey, what is this anyway?"

Interviewer: What exactly are factors for you where you say: Yes, I am interested in this brand now too. So what does the influencer have to do? Being authentic is basically a given, but what exactly is the trigger moment for you?

Respondent 2: Simply maybe just telling about the product. Giving more information than just "Here, by the way, this is this and that and it's quite good." So you would need a bit more.

Interviewer: What exactly do you do then? Do you go to the brand's profile first, or is it really just about buying, or are you also personally interested in the brand?

Respondent 2: It is then rather about buying the product.

Interviewer: That means, apart from the purchase, there are rather no further actions that such an authentic post triggers for you, right?

Respondent 2: I think I look then perhaps, when I go to the company's profile, which other influencers they work with. To see who else is advertising for them.

Interviewer: But you at least check out the profile. Do you ever follow [brands]?

Respondent 2: Yes, I do. I can't name a concrete brand now, but I do follow them sometimes.

Interviewer: Okay, so it has happened before. And if you could give fashion influencers a piece of advice in 2026 to build a loyal community, what would it be? What would you say is the most important thing nowadays to gain trust? (Question 12)

Respondent 2: Be honest and real and don't just show the perfect sides, but also show fails sometimes or everyday situations where people can simply identify. And also if you are a fashion influencer, for example, but not only designer brands, because 90% of your community probably won't buy only expensive brands... or if you always have expensive things, then somehow show alternatives and don't only advertise for your advertising partners. But also generally simply give recommendations.

Interviewer: Do you also have concrete advice, if we think specifically about fashion again, how can influencers best manage to convince their community of the brand?

Respondent 2: By simply wearing cool styles with the clothes, by simply posting different types of photos... and if you simply promote the brand over a long period of time and not only for short periods.

Interviewer: Is there anything else on the topic that you want to add otherwise, where you think we haven't discussed it in enough detail yet?

Respondent 2: No, actually not.

Interviewer: Then thank you very much for your time and the valuable information you have given me. Your perspective really helped me a lot to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Thank you very much.

Respondent 2: You are very welcome.

Interview 3:

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive

fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Respondent 3: Yes.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you briefly tell me your age, your gender, and where you are from?

Respondent 3: I am 21 years old, I am female, and I am from Rumania.

Interviewer: Great, thank you. Could you first briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend there and what kind of content do you mainly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 3: I use Instagram every day, for at least half an hour, sometimes one or maybe two. And I mostly use it to get inspiration, be it how to combine fashion items, cooking videos, or just funny content.

Interviewer: Okay, perfect. What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time? If so, what moves you to stay with them and follow them for a longer time? (Question 2)

Respondent 3: I really love Alexia Eram (@alexiaeram). Her content is about fashion, lifestyle and travel and I enjoy everything about it. She is funny and I like her style a lot. Her personality is really inspiring, and I have followed her for so long, simply because I don't see a reason to unfollow her. I also follow a girl called Georgiana (@oanadima__). She is a rather small creator, but I really like her style and the content she posts in general about her life. Another small creator I follow is Alexia Dragos (@alexia_dragos). I just love her style and vibe. Her appearance is so positive, and everything seems so chill and classy. With her it is not necessarily something personal, but pure inspiration.

Interviewer: Would you say they have certain character traits or a way of presenting themselves that makes you stay? So, why would you say you have been following them for a longer time now?

Respondent 3: I think simply because they never made a bad impression, meaning they were likable or had a positive attitude, and because the videos also served a lot as inspiration. They simply give off a positive vibe and for me the fact that I don't sense anything negative or questionable is enough to keep following them.

Interviewer: On the contrary, have you maybe followed someone for a long time and then one day decided not to follow that person anymore? What was the reason for that?

Respondent 3: Yes, actually, I have. The reason was simply that I noticed the content had changed and it didn't fit anymore with what I follow.

Interviewer: Would you say those were rather visual reasons, or the way things were presented, or the person's attitude?

Respondent 3: I wasn't really about the person. She just used to do fashion content and now focuses on other areas that I'm not interested in. Her style changed too so I am not really inspired by her anymore.

Interviewer: Okay. In the context of Instagram, we often hear the word authentic. What would you say that word means to you personally when you think of fashion influencers? (Question 3)

Respondent 3: I think that they simply stay true to themselves, meaning that even if something is trendy and they want to show that clearly too, but that they also stand by it when they don't find something nice, or somehow stand out from the broad masses by doing things differently after all.

Interviewer: Okay, are you speaking specifically about the style now, or about certain brands they always wear, or what exactly?

Respondent 3: That too, and also simply honesty. If you don't like a brand, you shouldn't mislead people into buying it. Some influencers just promote every trend even if it doesn't have anything to do with their regular style. They don't even try to give it their own touch or find their own way to style it. I don't like that because I maybe followed them for their style and now the style changes every month and I can't keep up with that.

Interviewer: Okay. Which influencer comes to your mind first when it comes to an authentic appearance?

Respondent 3: I can't think of a person right now to be honest.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought, "That's fake," or "They are only doing it for money," and how did you recognize that? What was the decisive reason for you in that moment that made you sure the person doesn't mean it the way they say or show it? (Question 4)

Respondent 3: Yes, one example comes to mind immediately: when people promote or link things like Temu or Shein, meaning clothing items from there, but they have explicitly said at some point that they are against child labor or against fast fashion, or market stores like New Yorker or brands from New Yorker even though they once positioned themselves against it.

Interviewer: Okay, that means for you it is particularly important that the values the person conveys also match the values of the brands they wear.

Respondent 3: Exactly.

Interviewer: How important is it to you that an influencer is genuinely passionate about the clothes they present? Would you say you can recognize the difference between real passion and rather pretended passion? (Question 5)

Respondent 3: I don't necessarily think that I can recognize that. There is a reason why they are influencers, I'd say. It is basically their job to influence and convince people and some are really good at it. I try to see their reaction to products and then I trust my first reaction whether I believe them or not.

Interviewer: That means you mainly just trust your judge of character?

Respondent 3: Exactly.

Interviewer: I'm going to briefly show you pictures from two different profiles. Two influencers. You can take a moment and look at it. And then tell me what do you think of her style and the way fashion is presented here, and how do you feel when looking at these pictures? (Question 6)

Respondent 3: Well, I think she has a very diverse style. She also promotes a lot of nightwear, I would say. I think she also provides inspiration on how to combine clothing items, and not all her posts are actually promoted, some are just for inspiration.

Interviewer: What do you think about the way she presents the clothes?

Respondent 3: Diverse, I would say.

Interviewer: Okay. What makes it diverse?

Respondent 3: So apart from the few selfies in front of the mirror, there are also some in the landscape, so outside in the nature or in front of a special background, I'd say, like the one with the hot air balloon.

Interviewer: How do you feel when looking at these pictures? Do you catch yourself comparing yourself with the influencer?

Respondent 3: Yes, I would say so. I mean, I am aware she probably doesn't dress like that every day, but neither do I, and when you see such a glitter outfit, you think to yourself, "Hmm, I would also like to wear that sometime, or do that more often."

Interviewer: But if we assume that these are generally the pictures she posts, how do you determine that she doesn't always look like that or doesn't always walk around like that?

Respondent 3: So everyone doesn't always look perfect and I simply assume that she probably won't dress like that every day and go out styled like that.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there a piece of clothing that you would buy yourself, and if so, would you then strive to look exactly like her when you wear it?

Respondent 3: Yes, I like the last outfit quite a lot with the gray pants and the burgundy red top. But I don't strive to look like her, rather I think... well, one always adds one's personal touch to things. So I see all the Instagram posts more as inspiration and not as "it should look exactly the same on me."

Interviewer: Okay, perfect. So her pictures look quite perfect. Would you say that is something that rather inspires you or rather triggers a feeling of comparison and pressure in you?

Respondent 3: It depends. If it's only perfect pictures in nightwear or perfect outfits that you wouldn't otherwise wear in everyday life, would it put me under pressure somehow? Okay. But especially through the last top or also the outfit in the snow with the scarf and so on, that would rather serve as inspiration for me.

Interviewer: Would you say overall that this influencer appears authentic to you?

Respondent 3: Yes.

Interviewer: I'll show you a second profile now, you can just take a brief look at it too. What do you think of her style and the way fashion is presented here?

Respondent 3: Well, she is already quite authentic, also through the pictures that show that she definitely doesn't always look perfect. But she also looks very fashion-conscious, meaning she dresses very elegantly and... also partly comfortably in this tracksuit, but she appears more authentic than the person before.

Interviewer: Is it important for you that an influencer is fashion-conscious? How would you determine now that someone is fashion-conscious?

Respondent 3: I think somehow everyone is fashion-conscious, but everyone has their own taste. So, I find her fashion-conscious because I like her taste, meaning her clothing style, how she dresses. But her clothing style is also very diverse.

Interviewer: How do you feel when looking at these pictures? Do you catch yourself comparing yourself to her? Is there a difference to the first profile I showed?

Respondent 3: Nope, there is no difference.

Interviewer: Okay, that means how would you briefly describe how you feel now when you simply look at these pictures, what does it trigger in you?

Respondent 3: Inspiration as well. So, clearly, when you wear something more elegant and everything, you do feel put under pressure. But I actually find it very inspiring, especially through this one picture with jeans and a white top... it's actually quite basic, but how she combined it with the bag, it serves more as inspiration than being intimidated. I like the mix of picture because they show all kinds of situations. Me too, I sometimes dress up elegantly and on other days I want to wear something comfortable. She shows that all situations can be accompanied by a nice outfit.

Interviewer: Okay, that means overall you would say the mix of pictures inspires you and triggers no feeling of comparison or pressure in you.

Respondent 3: Exactly.

Interviewer: Is there a piece of clothing you would buy, and if so, would you then strive to look like her when she wears the clothing item?

Respondent 3: I would choose this blazer dress. I find the first picture very cool. But I wouldn't look like that in it and I don't strive to either. Also because we simply have completely different body proportions.

Interviewer: Is something like that a problem for you then, or would you simply say: "No, it's enough now that it looks good to you in that moment or on this picture and then you would buy it?" So it doesn't pose a problem.

Respondent 3: I mean, I only buy things that I know I would wear and can wear. For example, I know that long skirts don't suit me, that's why... I find things nice on others, but I wouldn't buy them. I would always only buy things, or buy as inspiration, where I really know I would wear that too.

Interviewer: Does this influencer appear authentic to you?

Respondent 3: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. From whom of the two would you be more likely to accept fashion advice?

Respondent 3: I think from the last one.

Interviewer: Okay, can you maybe briefly justify why?

Respondent 3: Yes, because I like the clothing style better. It is simply more diverse than the first person.

Interviewer: So it is rather about what they present and not how they present it?

Respondent 3: Yeah I only care about the outfits and how pieces are combined.

Interviewer: Some influencers speak openly about product defects, bad days, or label their advertising clearly. How does that affect your opinion of them? (Question 7)

Respondent 3: I think when advertising is labeled, sure, most don't enter a cooperation if they aren't convinced by it. So it depends entirely on the influencer, but I tend to rate the things lower then, I'd say, or most likely not buy them.

Interviewer: Okay. What would you say advertising triggers in you? So why or how do you determine whether a person is serious about it anyway or not? (Question 8)

Respondent 3: I think for that you have to follow the person for a longer time to simply see what they promote. If they label everything as advertising, I'd say, then for me that isn't a person who actually stands behind the products they promote.

Interviewer: Okay, that means the amount of advertising definitely plays a role for you. And how important is consistency to you? Would you say it is a problem for you if different brands are advertised?

Respondent 3: Not necessarily. If the brands are actually good, then no, or if they don't always promote the same thing... or rather different brands that basically maintain the same style.

Interviewer: When you feel that an influencer is truly authentic, meaning you have already made the decision that the person seems authentic to you, how do you react then? What actions would you say you take then? Something like liking, commenting, sharing, saving, following? (Question 9)

Respondent 3: Well, I generally follow the person. If I like the things, then I will save the things too, but I don't share things at all or comment at all. Maybe like a post.

Interviewer: Okay, why not? Do you just generally not do that?

Respondent 3: I generally don't do that.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you still say that you have a personal connection to the influencers, even if you don't actively interact or try to interact with them, or does it even feel like a friendship partly?

Respondent 3: No.

Interviewer: Okay. That means here it is really only about pure inspiration and about the look, meaning the visual style.

Respondent 3: If I see a person through other formats who is likable to me in a different way, then I tend to follow them more, but it mostly serves only as inspiration for me.

Interviewer: Okay, if you think about a person where it is perhaps on a more personal level for you, would you then be more likely to accept advice or trust the style or trust the advertising than from another person from whom you really only get inspiration?

Respondent 3: Yes.

Interviewer: Conversely, if you feel someone is not authentic at all, do you just scroll past or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 3: I unfollow.

Interviewer: Okay, can you spontaneously think of an influencer where that happened?

Respondent 3: Yes, namely... she isn't specifically a fashion influencer now, at least earlier I think she was more of a beauty fashion influencer, but Jana's Diary.

Interviewer: Okay, what was the reason, why did you decide that she isn't authentic for you anymore?

Respondent 3: It wasn't because she wasn't authentic, but simply she changed her content suddenly and went from a fashion influencer to a somewhat different kind of influencer that I wasn't interested in.

Interviewer: Okay. But did you ever have the situation where you say you followed someone for a longer time but then decided that the person isn't authentic for you anymore because something happened or so?

Respondent 3: Yes, probably, I did, but I don't have a concrete example right now.

Interviewer: Okay. If we think about the brands now that are promoted by the influencers or maybe just worn. It happens sometimes that outfits are simply shown that aren't shown for advertising. Imagine an influencer who seems very authentic to you and promotes a brand or just wears the brand. And you have never heard of the brand. How does the recommendation affect you? Are you curious enough to click on the brand's profile or google it, or are there other things you do regarding the brand? (Question 11)

Respondent 3: I think yes, I would check it out. If I hadn't heard of the brand yet, I would check what the brand is, and depending, if I like the products, I would probably buy something from it if something convinces me. And if not, then the brand would still remain in my memory.

Interviewer: Okay. And what would you say are the exact factors that lead to your interest in the brand? So what exactly does the influencer have to do, or does it simply have to appeal to you visually, or would you also say it really depends on the influencer whether you then click on the brand's profile?

Respondent 3: It has to appeal to me visually.

Interviewer: Okay. And what role does the type of brand play in this, for example the price segment the brand is in, or sustainability or other factors?

Respondent 3: I think the price plays a big role. Is it something that is more cost-intensive? I wouldn't buy it just because I saw it on an influencer; for that, the quality and the look would really have to convince me 100%.

Interviewer: Okay. That means when choosing influencers, do you also pay attention to what price segment the clothes are in?

Respondent 3: No. Okay. To be honest, I take a lot of inspiration and I also find things look relatively similar. That means if I see that an outfit is combined nicely by an influencer I like, then you can combine that with other clothing items differently... or rather exactly the same way.

Interviewer: Okay, that means for you it is really only purely about the look and not about the brand that is being promoted or shown, but really simply just finding the clothing item similar.

Respondent 3: Exactly.

Interviewer: Okay. Apart from buying, what further actions does an authentic post trigger in you? Regarding interaction with the brand.

Respondent 3: Probably simply that the brand remains in my memory and I probably won't recommend it to others, or I will talk about it.

Interviewer: Okay. If you could give a fashion influencer a piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be?

Respondent 3: I think my advice would actually be not to always promote everything and not always promote everything as something "you absolutely have to buy", meaning as vital for life, because I think many let themselves be influenced by that... either in the positive or in the negative direction.

Interviewer: Okay. And what can they do in the fashion area to convince their community of the fashion brands they use and show? Perhaps especially for you now, because you said it's enough for you to see a T-shirt visually and find a similar one. Is there any possibility what they could also do so that you engage more with the brand or take exactly the promoted brand? (Question 12)

Respondent 3: Maybe they could convince me of what is behind the brand. So often I actually prefer brands that also have a story behind them.

Interviewer: Okay. How would you wish for this presentation then? So how should that be portrayed in your opinion?

Respondent 3: Maybe simply by briefly explaining what the brand is, what it offers anyway, what quality, and how they ensure that. It would be nice to see exactly how they work together and that the influencer has a personal interest in the brand that they can trigger in me, too. Very often, you only see the clothes and that's it so I don't see a need to buy this exact brand, it's not different than any other brand.

Interviewer: Okay, perfect. Is there anything else on the topic generally that you would like to add because we haven't discussed it yet?

Respondent 3: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Okay. So, thank you very much for your time and the valuable information you have given me. Your perspective helped me a lot to gain a deeper understanding of this topic. Thank you very much.

Respondent 3: You're welcome.

Interview 4:

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Respondent 4: Yes.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you briefly tell me your age, your gender, and where you are from?

Respondent 4: 25, female, Austria.

Interviewer: Great. Could you first briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend there and what kind of content do you mainly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 4: I would say I use it one hour a day. Basically content from friends, family, and regarding influencers, a lot about lifestyle and sport.

Interviewer: What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time? (Question 2)

Respondent 4: Yes, for example Lisa-Marie Schiffner (@lisamarie_schiffner) or Emilia (@emilia). I have been following them for a long time, I think definitely for about 6 years.

Interviewer: What is it that makes you stay with these influencers? So, what keeps you on these accounts?

Respondent 4: I grow with them. So, I grew up with them and basically followed the trends along with them. And what kept me with them was mostly that they could give me something useful for my life. So I could relate with them and apply it to my own life.

Interviewer: Have you ever followed someone for a while and then one day decided not to follow them anymore? What was the reason?

Respondent 4: Yes, that happened quite often, but then it was because of opinions that diverged, or often I simply grew out of the target group, when I had the feeling the people were producing content for a younger target group, or as I said, that it didn't fit my life anymore, so it didn't seem authentic anymore.

Interviewer: Okay, good keyword. In the context of Instagram, we often hear the word authentic. What would you say this word means to you personally when you think of fashion influencers? (Question 3)

Respondent 4: For me, it means that they really live what they show, that I have the feeling their everyday life matches how they dress for example. If someone goes to the supermarket and is always dressed super elegant for example... yes, that simply isn't everyday life for us and that wouldn't be authentic for me either, because I think no one does that in the real world."

Interviewer: Okay, that means you would take yourself as comparison to measure their authenticity? So that you say, if you can relate to them, then it seems authentic to you?

Respondent 4: I think that's well summarized. I think I only surround myself with people who behave a certain way and I would expect that from an influencer too. So in my environment it is common to wear something comfortable at home, dress up for a party, wear something chic to the office and so on. So simply that I could imagine—as silly as it might sound—that is my life. I do it like that person and it is normal and understandable for me, and not that the person simply has to be approachable.

Interviewer: Okay, which influencer comes to mind first when it comes to an authentic appearance?

Respondent 4: Emilia. Because she loves what she does and she always makes me feel understood and motivated for the things she loves herself.

Interviewer: Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought, "That is fake" or "She is only doing that for the money"? And what would you say, how did you recognize that? (Question 4)

Respondent 4: Yes, I think you encounter that quite often on social media and I recognized it because it was portrayed in an exaggerated way, I'd say. For example, I once saw a video where a girl celebrated her birthday in a wedding dress. And then I thought: Okay, that is super weird, that is totally exaggerated. And then there were ten videos of it, where I again thought, "Okay, the person is really just doing this right now to shoot this video and not because that is really what she wants to experience on her birthday right now."

Interviewer: Okay, you would just say that how situations are portrayed, are completely different from how you would usually experience them.

Respondent 4: Exactly.

Interviewer: Okay, how important is it to you that an influencer is genuinely enthusiastic about the clothes they present? Can you tell the difference between real passion and pretended passion, and if so, how? (Question 5)

Respondent 4: Yes, I would say so. For example, what came to my mind immediately is when we think of advertising. There are many brands, I'd say, that sponsor influencers. If someone stays true to their line and also rejects fashion brands that don't fit their natural style, then I would describe that as authentic. Or simply that the person also wears it in everyday life not only when promoting it. And if a person deviates from that or if you simply notice, also through paparazzi pictures when one is not in front of the camera and looks different, dresses differently, then I would say that is not real.

Interviewer: Okay, that makes sense. I will show you two different profiles now. We will start with the first one. You can take a moment to look at it in peace and then briefly describe what you think of the style and also the way fashion is presented here. (Question 6)

Respondent 4: Well, what I notice immediately is that the person actually always looks the same and poses the same way. So it doesn't seem like the picture was taken in the moment, but really, she uses her big camera and takes a picture of herself. Top styled, hair always done, the red lipstick always sits perfectly, everything perfectly planned. And she looks super similar in every picture. So she also always has the same facial expression. I would think the person really actively got ready to take this picture and show her outfit.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you feel when looking at these pictures? Would you say you catch yourself comparing yourself to this influencer?

Respondent 4: Yes. It seems very, very perfect and you see for example no pimples, you see a great shape, you see perfect clothing, a perfectly tidied background in every single picture and just chosen super accurately; especially in front of a hot air balloon or a Ferris wheel, it's just a photo spot, that we don't experience like that in everyday life otherwise. And the clothing is

also very special. So yes, I couldn't identify with her now, but I compare myself a lot, because it simply seems as if she lives in a perfect world.

Interviewer: Okay. Does that mean there is a piece of clothing that you would buy yourself? And if so, would you really want to look exactly like her?

Respondent 4: Yes, well I would definitely buy it with the intention that I think it looks that good on me too. But would I buy something from her? Probably not. So I think I would have the intention to look the same in general, but nothing really caught my eye now.

Interviewer: Okay, because of the outfits or because you simply don't like her style now, or is it rather due to how she presents it?

Respondent 4: I think it is due to how she presents it. You go into something like a defensive attitude yourself, I'd say, because maybe it is also that you know deep down you won't look like that. Then I don't identify it with me at all, so I couldn't transfer it to myself, because it looks too perfect and I just know it won't look like that on me.

Interviewer: Okay, does that mean that the pictures can serve as inspiration?

Respondent 4: They can, but I think for me personally not, because that is simply an inspiration that goes rather in the other direction, I'd say. And awakens something in me like "Okay, why don't I look like that?" Rather like envy/resentment, is that the word? Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Overall, would you say the influencer appears authentic to you?

Respondent 4: No.

Interviewer: Okay. I will show you a second profile now. You can just look at it briefly. Okay, here again now, what do you think overall of her style and here again, how is fashion presented?

Respondent 4: Here it is presented much more diverse, like in different life situations. You see that you don't have to be perfectly styled all the time. She shows herself without makeup, she shows messy hair. You think you are experiencing the moment with her because you have been there too. It seems completely different compared to the first profile, much freer, you feel more comfortable.

Interviewer: Okay, how do you feel when looking at these pictures? Would you say that you catch yourself comparing yourself? And what difference is there also to the first profile that was shown?

Respondent 4: Well, with that person, seeing the pictures like this, I would like to be friends, because you have the feeling she shows a lot of herself. And I feel that way too, that I think I could talk to the person normally and be on the same level as her. And I would say you compare yourself anyway. Sure, you still see a great body, cool clothes. But also positively, because when I stand there in pajamas and my hair isn't done I don't feel bad because she shows that too. And

there you can say, okay, everyone looks good sometimes, everyone has these and those clothes that just fit the everyday situation too.

Interviewer: Would you say then you compare yourself more with her as a person or more with the situation she also shows?

Respondent 4: That is a good question. I think it is both, because I have the feeling, the person basically deals with the situation in a certain way. So even when I see the broken heel or something, I think to myself, the person just took a picture of it in the situation and was like, "Yeah, that happens and that can happen to me too."

Interviewer: That means it is a lot about simply the vibe of the person, that you would then want to radiate the same thing.

Respondent 4: Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: Does this influencer appear authentic to you?

Respondent 4: Yes, very.

Interviewer: From whom would you rather accept advice?

Respondent 4: From the second one.

Interviewer: Okay. Why exactly? Is it more about the personal aspect or really about the presentation?

Respondent 4: I have the feeling that the person could understand better what advice I need. And simply deals with the situation more relaxedly, because yes, she shows that not everything goes perfectly, that you don't always have to look perfect. And those are just values that I also represent. And I think if that overlaps, then I would rather accept advice from her and also be happy about advice.

Interviewer: Some influencers speak openly about product defects or bad days, as you already said, label advertising clearly. How would you say that affects your opinion? Does this kind of honesty strengthen your trust in the positive recommendation? (Question 7)

Respondent 4: Yes, definitely. So I would say if a person, for example now like the second profile you showed, posts something, then I would think the quality is good. You put more trust in it, especially if you order something from abroad or something where you might get scammed. Then I assume that it will arrive. You feel closer to the product too.

Interviewer: Okay. And how do you deal with the tension when you know someone is being paid to promote the product? So, does the labeling of advertising change your opinion? (Question 8)

Respondent 4: I tend to skip it more than if a person basically buys something on their own or gives me their honest opinion. But I find you still notice whether a person burns for the advertising or not. So, I have the feeling I could still differentiate there.

Interviewer: What would be factors?

Respondent 4: Factors would be, for example, if a person has used the product for a longer time, so basically a pair of pants for example, and she had pants from the brand before and is now just supported by them and gets things sent from them. Then I would say, yes, that fits, or it is tested longer.

Interviewer: That means an important word here would also be consistency. Would you say then it is a problem for you if different brands are promoted?

Respondent 4: I wouldn't say so, because I believe there are many good products, many innovative, good quality and also from different manufacturing countries. And that's why I would say it is still good to offer a range, because we also react to different things.

Interviewer: And now if we think of fashion, what does consistency mean to you there? So where would you say someone is consistent even though they wear different brands?

Respondent 4: Well, consistency for me is not that the person has to wear the same things for ten years or something, but consistency for me is, one represents—for example in fashion—the values, where it is produced, that it was produced well, and but also the style, the clothing. So they don't start to promote a brand that doesn't fit the values they had mentioned before. Sure, you can wear something else sometimes, but I am for example more this casual type, relaxed clothes. And if I follow someone who normally wears this style and suddenly from one day to the next dresses completely polished and chic, then for me that is not consistent. Well at least if they keep doing it very often.

Interviewer: Okay, now if you have the feeling that an influencer is truly authentic, how do you react then? Do you like, do you comment, do you share? (Question 9)

Respondent 4: I only like.

Interviewer: Okay. Generally? So because you generally only like?

Respondent 4: Yeah, I never comment or share. I like and then follow the person too, and with others I often press "not interested" so that they don't appear in my feed at all.

Interviewer: Would you say you feel a personal connection to an authentic influencer, maybe even something like a virtual friendship?

Respondent 4: It does feel like that, especially when you have something in mind like broadcast channels, where people then post daily and simply post short things sometimes, or also via

WhatsApp Channel. And there I do have the feeling that the person... yes, that I could just write to her directly, even if she doesn't answer me, I mean some even do.

Interviewer: Okay. And conversely, if you have the feeling that someone is not authentic, do you simply scroll past or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 4: I actively unfollow.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you spontaneously think of an influencer whom you find inauthentic and whom you maybe unfollowed then?

Respondent 4: Yes, Julesboringlife. Does that ring a bell?

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent 4: There, for example, I noticed that things or also the fashion style—that was the example I mentioned at the beginning—simply didn't seem authentic to me, and there I actually unfollowed then.

Interviewer: Okay. Did that have a lot to do with what you mentioned earlier? Like with her style or more with the way fashion was presented or maybe too little consistency?

Respondent 4: Exactly. She started supporting brands, like for example SHEIN, which is simply not justifiable for me. And then I differentiated myself from that.

Interviewer: That means you then also transferred the values of the brand to her and those were values you didn't agree with.

Respondent 4: Exactly.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's talk about the brands that are worn or promoted by influencers. Imagine an influencer who you find very authentic wears a brand or promotes a brand. You have never heard of the brand. How does the recommendation affect you? Are you curious enough to click on the brand's profile or google it? (Question 11)

Respondent 4: Yes, I would definitely do that. So I would check what is there, if I like the clothing item or something else. As I said, I would also perceive the brand positively at first, because I have the feeling I established the bond with the person, especially if I see stories daily or so. And I would watch the brand positively at first and also go in with a certain expectation, I think.

Interviewer: If we stay on Instagram now, would you somehow follow such a brand then, like... commenting you said you don't do anyway. Share with friends?

Respondent 4: Yes, I think I would share it. Following... I tend not to do that either. So I follow very few fashion brands, I'd say. But I would click on the profile and definitely look through what they have, and also save things if I like them.

Interviewer: Okay. What role does the type of brand play in this? So for example now the price segment the brand is in or also the information you get about the brand from the influencers now.

Respondent 4: Well, if I go onto the profile and see for example that it is totally out of my price range, then I do look through. But then I know, okay that is nothing for me, but it is still cool. So you keep the brand in the back of your mind anyway. But if it is then for example a brand that is in my price segment and is then promoted by the person, then I also assume good quality.

Interviewer: You would also say you really stick with the brands you see there... or for example, it is only about the clothing items and not about the brand at all, so that one sees inspiration more in how to combine and not necessarily which brands are shown there.

Respondent 4: Yes, that too, but I think for me it is actually rather the brand, so there is this Spanish brand for example, Scuffers, I stayed with the brand after I had seen a long-sleeve shirt on someone once and she then commented that it is from there. And that is a brand where I say, I like the style, I stick with it.

Interviewer: Okay, that means then influencers serve rather to show how the brand can be combined. But the brand is definitely important too?

Respondent 4: For me, yes.

Interviewer: Okay. If you could give fashion influencers a piece of advice on how they can build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be? (Question 12)

Respondent 4: I would perhaps say, yes simply show different facets of yourselves, show clothing facets of yourselves, show everyday life, but also show fancier occasions like birthdays or special celebrations and stand by your brands. But what I also find nice is to support small brands, because influencers especially have the possibility to live out their style in fashion and then really convey what defines them, what defines their character, and that they show us that not everyone has to walk around the same, wear the same thing, but that one can be fully oneself and doesn't always have to follow the trend.

Interviewer: Okay, would you also have a specific tip again on how to really convince someone of a fashion brand? So, how can one really convince one's community of a certain brand, which they are convinced of themselves?

Respondent 4: Yes, I would just say, test things for a long time and also give an update again, when I have worn it two, three times already, whether I still like it. But also say things for example about how the sizes fit and really show the reality there. And this testing, before starting to promote it, I also think is positive, because otherwise it can fall back on the influencer if one says it was promoted but is actually different now.

Interviewer: Yes, okay. Is there anything else on the topic that you would like to add because we haven't discussed it yet?

Respondent 4: No, thank you.

Interviewer: Okay, then thank you very much for your time and the valuable information you have given me. Your perspective helped me a lot to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Thank you very much!

Respondent 4: Thank you!

Interview 5:

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed.

Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Respondent 5: Yes.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you briefly tell me your age, your gender, and where you are from?

Respondent 5: I am 20 years old, and I am from Germany.

Interviewer: Great. Could you first briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend there and what kind of content do you mainly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 5: I am on Instagram for about one hour a day. I mainly look at what my friends post, but also a few influencers that I have chosen over the years, who post about their lifestyle, from different backgrounds.

Interviewer: What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there certain fashion influencers you have been following for a long time? And if so, what makes you stay on these accounts? (Question 2)

Respondent 5: I follow Millane (@millane), for example, because I can relate to her very well and I find her style very beautiful. And that I can see myself reflected in her, because we perhaps have a similar body shape, similar hair color, skin color and so on, so I think that the things would also fit me.

Interviewer: Does she also have certain character traits where you would say you can relate to her, or is it really only the purely visual aspect when it comes to fashion?

Respondent 5: I would say that, as they say, the visual attracts, the character somehow keeps you there. You see a post, you go to the account, and then you follow the person or not. And if you then also see, their lifestyle and so on, her behavior fits with what you yourself want to present right now, I tend to stay on the account.

Interviewer: Okay, great. Have you ever followed someone for a long time and then one day decided not to follow them anymore? What was the reason?

Respondent 5: When people set unrealistic standards in their lives, where you just thought, that is unrealistic. For example, Sarah Harrison because her lifestyle was not realistic for me, especially how she portrayed her life as a mother or in general, she was never stressed about anything or struggled with anything.

Interviewer: In the context of Instagram, we often hear the word authentic. What does that word mean to you personally when you think of fashion influencers? (Question 3)

Respondent 5: That what they say reflects the values they want to stand for, that they also post things out of conviction and not only for purely financial reasons. And you notice that, I think, in how they do advertising. Whether they simply post it permanently in the same slogan or actually share their experiences with the product or the clothes, and also say what they like, but also what could perhaps be improved. They need to be honest about how good the products are and transparent about what we can expect from them. And they also need to give tips for example, what size they chose or how it can be styled in more than one way.

Interviewer: Does an influencer directly come to your mind when you hear the word authentic?

Respondent 5: No, not immediately.

Interviewer: Okay, that's no problem. Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought, "This is fake" or "She is only doing this for money," and what would you say, how did you recognize that? (Question 4)

Respondent 5: For me it's the people who really just present a product. They are not trying to include the piece in an everyday situation but only promote the product itself. Personally, I would believe that they are not even wearing those clothes when the camera is turned off.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely, that they just want to portray it purely and not try to integrate it into their normal content.

Respondent 5: Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: How important is it to you that an influencer is genuinely passionate about the clothes they present? So, would you say you can tell the difference between real passion and pretended passion, and if so, how? (Question 5)

Respondent 5: I think it is difficult to recognize that nowadays, especially when it takes place in the context of Instagram. But when posts or stories take place with a voiceover, I find it more authentic than if you just hold it into the camera to a song or something like that. So combining the presentation of the clothes with a personal opinion seems important to me.

Interviewer: Okay, makes sense. I will show you pictures from two different profiles now and you can have a look at them first and then tell what you think about their style and also about the way fashion is presented here. Here is the first one. (Question 6)

Respondent 5: Well, I think it looks very staged, because she often also assumes a similar position, because she always takes the angle where she somehow thinks she looks best—which makes sense, but which also somehow doesn't seem quite authentic, or as if this were a candid shot or something, but really very conscious use of light and posture.

Interviewer: How do you feel when looking at the pictures? Do you catch yourself comparing yourself with the person?

Respondent 5: No, I don't actually have the feeling that I compare myself with the person. I find it looks very posed and also not appropriate for my target group. So this style of posting is outdated. I think my generation always tries to catch the moment and not pose for it to be perfect. The reason I don't compare myself is that I can't relate to her because everything seems so staged and not relatable.

Interviewer: Okay. So it's basically what you mentioned before about the explicit portrayal of fashion that makes you be skeptical.

Respondent 5: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you say there is also a piece of clothing that you would buy yourself, and if so, would you strive to look exactly like her in it?

Respondent 5: If I chose something, then I would definitely hope that it looks as good on me as it does on her. But here again the temptation that these are unrealistic standards one chases, I'd

say. She does have beautiful clothes and if I bought something, I would definitely hope that it looks like that.

Interviewer: Would you say these perfect pictures rather inspire you or do they trigger a feeling of comparison, pressure, perhaps even a defensive attitude?

Respondent 5: Defensive attitude actually hits the mark quite well. Everything seems so perfect and it makes me feel annoyed because I just know it's not really like that. It is hard to be inspired when what they show can never be my reality.

Interviewer: Would you say this influencer appears authentic to you? In general.

Respondent 5: No not really.

Interviewer: I will show you another profile now. You can look at it again and then also tell what you think of her style and also here of the way fashion is presented.

Respondent 5: Well, her pictures are completely different to the other person you showed before. You see her in different emotions, different positions, and also not necessarily her outfits are in the center all the time, but that she includes them very well into her environment and also dresses suitably for the situation. I also think it is very cool with the broken heel. It seems very realistic, like if you were doing a city trip, looking at the pictures and relate to them quite well. And her clothing is very integrated into what she is currently doing. Yes, and it is also very diverse in what she wears and not always staying with the same style somehow.

Interviewer: Do you catch yourself comparing yourself to her here too, and if so, are there differences compared to the first profile?

Respondent 5: When I compare myself to her, I look more at her emotions, I noticed. So rather how she is feeling or the situation she is in. I compare myself with how I would perhaps feel in the situation and not explicitly related to the clothes now.

Interviewer: Okay. That means here it is not really about the look, but rather like...

Respondent 5: It is on a deeper level, how she lives, how she interacts with her environment—so what the pictures make one think, how she interacts or how she acts, what she experiences.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there perhaps also a piece of clothing you would buy yourself? And if so, would you then strive to look like her in it too?

Respondent 5: Yes, I think I stick with the same statement as with the last person, that of course aspirations are there that it looks as good as on the persons who posted it.

Interviewer: Does the vibe play a role here too, that you say you would also like to radiate the same thing as her?

Respondent 5: Yes, I would definitely say that she also has a certain vibe that one would like to pick up.

Interviewer: Can you perhaps describe that briefly, so how would you describe her overall aura or vibe?

Respondent 5: More relaxed. You can tell she feels comfortable. So I find she seems very open-minded and realistic, approachable through the diversity of her posts and simply a bit cool and edgy too—so simply a bit her own opinion, she stands by it.

Interviewer: Does she appear authentic to you?

Respondent 5: Yes. Also fitting for our age group. I can only speak about myself, but those are exactly the pictures I take of myself or what I want them look like.

Interviewer: Okay, that means you would also say that is simply a portrayal that Gen Z practices a lot themselves.

Respondent 5: Yes, from the Gen Z people I know, I would agree. She could be like a girl from school from back then, whom you feel like you know now.

Interviewer: From which of the two would you rather accept some advice? Related to fashion, or also in general.

Respondent 5: I think from the second person, because she simply presents her clothing diversely, also in different situations, she can perhaps advise different body types better too and not only characterized on her type.

Interviewer: How do you think she would do that? I mean she only has her own body type to present the clothes. How do you think she would do that?

Respondent 5: That is exactly the point. She does not present her body, she presents moments and no matter what body type I may have, this could be my moment. And with the clothes I would feel as special as she does and have as much fun as she does.

Interviewer: Okay. Some influencers speak openly about product defects, bad days, or also label their advertising clearly. How does that affect your opinion? (Question 7)

Respondent 5: I think it should be a good mix. If it always says “advertisement”, it’s exhausting, because then I notice again, okay, they are really only doing it for the money. They could do it for any reason, but that's simply how it seems to me then. I think a mix of advertisement and then presenting it further in her content, without being asked to, is more important than if it is always clearly marked. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: Yes. Would you say this kind of honesty, so not only advertising, but also showing the reality of one's own life, showing product defects perhaps or rating outfits negatively, would you say this kind of honesty strengthens your trust in positive recommendations?

Respondent 5: Definitely. If they can simply offer a good reflection of the products and also show how they use it in everyday life, I consider that very important. That has a significant effect.

Interviewer: How important is consistency to you? Would you say it is also a problem for you if a person promotes very many different brands, so fashion brands? How do you navigate the tension when you they are getting paid? (Question 8)

Respondent 5: I think it has its pros and cons, because one then also sees with which other products and clothes one can combine it. But on the other hand, I do think that it lowers the authenticity a bit, because one then sees the professional aspect of them again and this active attempt to advertise, and I then have the feeling that they cannot stand behind everything the way they say. Or also statements like: "This is the best product" are then worth less because they promote many brands where they always say the same phrases or similar phrases. That doesn't seem realistic anymore then. And then when you say they are getting paid things get worse.

Interviewer: Would you say there are characteristics, however, that if they match between the different brands, that consistency is maintained?

Respondent 5: It clearly reflects consistency when one sees the similar values run through the products or also the style.

Interviewer: But something like that is important to you, that such a certain consistency...

Respondent 5: It reflects the character of the person somehow, and that's why I find it very important that it is simply coherent there and that one doesn't have to wonder, "Why is she advertising for this ad now?" If one knows, okay, she has advertised for this brand, and now a similar brand comes, then it is definitely coherent and also coherent in the concept she represents.

Interviewer: Okay. When you have the feeling that an influencer is truly authentic, how do you react? Do you like, do you comment, do you share, do you follow or anything else? (Question 9)

Respondent 5: If I have the impression that it is authentic and I like the post, then I definitely like. Maybe I share it with my girls or save the post so that I can fall back on it later again. I don't actually like commenting that much. And if I see a person appearing on my feed more often, where I notice, okay, I like the posts, I would also start to follow the person after a certain time.

Interviewer: Why would you say you do that? Do you have the feeling that you have a personal connection, perhaps even like a virtual friendship to the influencer and try to share that

somehow with others or like because of that, or save... or is it really purely for inspiration reasons for you?

Respondent 5: If I find the person authentic and can relate to her, I do want to support her in what she does and give her a like on her post, even if my contribution isn't that interesting or so, because I see her whole concept actually fits and I can relate to her. I find her likable and sympathy plays a big role for me, which then also keeps me on the account or with the person.

Interviewer: That means you would say, as soon as you have built up such a kind of more personal connection, it isn't important in detail anymore what is posted, but you give likes rather to support the person.

Respondent 5: Yes.

Interviewer: Conversely, if you have the feeling that someone is not authentic, do you simply scroll past or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 5: It depends on how much the person annoys me. Initially I do give them another chance, that they perhaps just have a phase where they want to address a different audience than me, but ultimately, if they are then inauthentic, I do unfollow them and I am not interested in their posts anymore either, because I consider it a waste of time.

Interviewer: Does an influencer spontaneously come to mind whom you found inauthentic and therefore unfollowed then?

Respondent 5: Only the one I have already mentioned: Sarah Harrison.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's talk about the brands that are worn or promoted. Imagine an influencer whom you find very authentic and she promotes a brand you have never heard of before. How does this recommendation affect you? Are you curious enough to click on the brand's profile? Do you google? Do you perhaps follow the brand? Are there other measures you take? (Question 11)

Respondent 5: That depends on how it is advertised. If they only tell me about it, I am rather reserved. If it is then persistent, that they report about it more and more, perhaps I would check what kind of brand that is. But otherwise ultimately, depending on if they post clothing that I would like to buy and they are wearing, then I probably do click on such a link that is included or so, to check what the price is and what kind of brand that is and if there are perhaps similar products that I find appealing.

Interviewer: Okay, so yes, that means you would say for you the brand plays a role in that moment too, or do you otherwise just look purely visually at the clothing item so to speak and then pick it out similarly for yourself?

Respondent 5: I do look for the identical clothing item that they posted, but that inspires me then to stay with the brand. So I don't just click on it if I don't like a clothing item or only heard about it because they advertised it, but if I see something I like, then I am maybe inclined to click on it... if it is a person with whom I already have several marketing experiences or can assess what she advertises for.

Interviewer: That means you trust the person that this brand is good then?

Respondent 5: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: If you could give fashion influencers a piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be? What would you say is important for Gen Z? (Question 12)

Respondent 5: Realistic, everyday-suitable clothing, which perhaps also differentiates itself a bit from previous styles. Also everyday situations, what always appeals to me, for example "my day in the library" or somehow like that, where one simply sees then, okay, that is a situation I am in too and she is wearing this and that and it looks cool, and then I am inspired by that to dress similarly in such situations. But for that the situation must correspond to my life or my phase of life, I'll say.

Interviewer: Yes, okay, makes sense. And what would you say can they do explicitly to convince their community of exactly the fashion brand they are advertising?

Respondent 5: That the products also appear persistently, so not only once during ad mentions, but that one sees them again and again, also hanging in the back of the wardrobe or over the hanger... or that one simply sees it again and again and not only once. So what I am trying to say, it is important that the clothes are not only shown in the moment of advertisement but also later, when it is clear that the partnership is over.

Interviewer: Okay, that one simply sees they didn't just do that for an advertising moment, but wear it privately. Is there anything else on the topic generally that you would like to add because we haven't discussed it yet?

Respondent 5: No.

Interviewer: Okay. Then thank you very much for your time and the valuable information you have given me. Your perspective helped me a lot to grant a deeper understanding of the topic. Thank you very much.

Respondent 5: Thank you, same to you.

Interview 6:

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Respondent 6: Yes.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you briefly tell me your age, your gender, and your origin?

Respondent 6: I am 26, German, and I am female.

Interviewer: Could you first briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend there and what kind of content do you mainly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 6: I would say that I mainly use Instagram for stories, to watch stories from friends or also from influencers, and occasionally check posts as well.

Interviewer: What topics are you mainly interested in?

Respondent 6: Well, I would say one topic is definitely fashion, but also just lifestyle.

Interviewer: If we talk about fashion, are there certain fashion influencers you have been following for a longer time? And if so, what would you say is it that makes you stay? (Question 2)

Respondent 6: I wouldn't even necessarily say that it is fashion specifically, but rather their personality. So, I follow for example Laura Abla (@lauraabla), Jada (@celinajadakerr), Feli (@feli), Laura Sophie (@laurasophie), simply because of their personality and yes, just as I said before, to follow their life basically. But it is just a nice component that you see there again and again.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever followed someone for a longer time and then one day decided not to follow the person anymore? If so, what was the reason?

Respondent 6: I would say it has definitely happened that I unfollowed people, but simply because the stories didn't interest me that much anymore. It was maybe not that exciting or I maybe didn't watch it anymore at all and then I just unfollowed.

Interviewer: Would you tend to say that had more to do with the content or also with the person?

Respondent 6: I would say tendentially rather with the content.

Interviewer: Okay, that areas were simply shown that didn't interest you.

Respondent 6: Exactly, so it didn't provide any added value for me to watch that.

Interviewer: Okay, in the context of Instagram we often hear the word authentic. What would you say this word means to you personally when you think of fashion influencers? (Question 3)

Respondent 6: That someone really stands behind their values and really only presents what they themselves stand behind and doesn't just show something because they are paid for it. And I would say regarding being authentic, also simply being real and showing themselves as the person is, and not getting ready first to then pose for some "I just woke up" video, but showing it more realistically.

Interviewer: What are the exact indicators for you, by which you determine that someone is showing themselves as real now?

Respondent 6: I would say you see it based on the stories since they are more personal and influencers actually talk into the camera. So like the example I just mentioned, if someone really gets out of bed with perfectly done hair and make-up, you see pretty quickly that that isn't quite real, everything seems very staged. I'd say you can tell when the person is only doing it for the money, because you have never seen the product before, for example.

Interviewer: Okay. That means you mean the product was never shown before, nor after?

Respondent 6: Exactly, but really only for the use case.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought, "This is fake" or "She is only doing this for the money"? (Question 4)

Respondent 6: Sure

Interviewer: What would you say, how exactly did you recognize that? So what was it for you that made you notice it was for money or fake?

Respondent 6: You just notice it often. So the stories seem super staged and as just mentioned, the product somehow never appeared before or after in the stories. I mean, of course this happens a lot because they also own lots of stuff. But if you're convinced of a brand you would wear it regularly. And inauthentic people appear as bad actors. You can just tell it's staged

Interviewer: That means you also simply rely on your common sense then? What would you say, how important is it to you that an influencer is genuinely passionate about the clothes they present? Would you say you can also tell the difference between real passion and pretended passion, if so, how? (Question 5)

Respondent 6: I would say sometimes it can be tricky, especially if the advertisement is perhaps also well integrated into the content. I mean, let's be real, influencers earn their money with this somewhere.

Interviewer: So you'd say that you can't always tell the difference?

Respondent 6: I think it's difficult sometimes. So you notice it with some cooperations you notice if it is really passion, precisely because the person maybe talked about it before without any partnership, but simply talked about it because they wanted to, then it is definitely very obvious that the person stands behind it and in the other cases it can be difficult.

Interviewer: Is it important to you that someone really does it passionately?

Respondent 6: Passionate is always better. So, the person could reach me more easily and if the person doesn't stand behind it, I find it difficult. But as I said, being realistic, it is something they earn money with, but to a certain level they should stand behind what they are currently promoting.

Interviewer: Now I will show you pictures from 2 different profiles. We start with the first one. You can look at it and then simply tell what you think of the style and the way fashion is presented here. (Question 6)

Respondent 6: Well, I would say it definitely seems super staged. You see it based on the poses, yes also based the light and how the picture was edited, especially on the first pictures. So, it doesn't seem natural now, I would say. She is really just trying to present herself in the perfect scenery, looking her best and wearing a perfect outfit. Well I wouldn't even say that because sometimes the outfit doesn't even match the situation. How would be cooking like that?

Interviewer: What would you say, how do you feel when you see the pictures? Would you say you catch yourself comparing yourself to the person?

Respondent 6: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Respondent 6: I am too confident for that.

Interviewer: That means you would say you have neither positive nor negative comparisons.

Respondent 6: I would say primarily not. If I really think about it now, I would rather say I would almost feel more positive about myself, because I really think, okay, it is actually sad that people portray themselves like that, and am then glad that I am not like that.

Interviewer: Okay. If we go into detail about the clothes she showed now, is there any piece that you would buy yourself and if so, would you strive to look like her in it?

Respondent 6: Well, I wouldn't say that this is necessarily really my style. There are definitely a few nice pieces included. But here for example, I would wear that exactly like that, but then I would wear it in my own way.

Interviewer: Okay. That means for you it is also important to simply bring in your own style and personality?

Respondent 6: Yes. I would not just copy it.

Interviewer: Would you generally say that these perfect pictures rather inspire you or do they rather trigger a feeling of negative comparison, pressure, or perhaps even a defensive attitude?

Respondent 6: No, well I would say that it doesn't influence me negatively. So as I said, I think I am simply too confident with my body and myself to compare myself with that now. Maybe my younger self, yes, would have compared herself with it, but now I really don't care.

Interviewer: So rather a feeling of indifference.

Respondent 6: Definitely, everyone should do what they want.

Interviewer: Okay, would you say this influencer appears authentic to you?

Respondent 6: Well the pictures do seem very staged. But I also have to say, I only see the feed posts here, and very often that appears more staged than stories for example.

Interviewer: Okay, I know, you find it difficult now based only on the pictures.

Respondent 6: I wouldn't judge completely about this person like that now, but if I really had to do it based on these pictures, it is quite staged.

Interviewer: Could you perhaps briefly name a few factors why you say, well in this case based on the pictures from her posts not stories, why she appears rather inauthentic and what you would perhaps otherwise expect from a person to appear authentic. What would be factors?

Respondent 6: One factor would be imperfection, I guess. Or also spontaneity, so that they show random moments instead of only the planned and staged ones. Just combine their content with a realistic lifestyle.

Interviewer: I will show you a second profile now. Here too you can a look at it and then say what you think of the style and the way fashion is presented here.

Respondent 6: Significantly less staged. I think especially on the first pictures you recognize quite well that the person takes a picture somewhere in the street, far from a perfect background. That would probably not be the first location one would choose if one really positions oneself like the person before and takes a photo. There are random details that make it more realistic.

So something like the broken shoe, which many simply don't show, but here you see, it can happen and it has happened to almost everyone.

Interviewer: Is that also something where you can connect your own everyday life more with it?

Respondent 6: Definitely, it is way more fun to look at these pictures, yes, because it really shows, okay, no one is perfect, so for that person not everything goes smoothly either. And then she adds her sense of humor by showing the most random things many people would not even think of.

Interviewer: How do you feel when looking at the pictures? Would you say here you catch yourself comparing yourself to the person? Is there a difference to the first profile?

Respondent 6: I would say comparing in a positive way. I would say I have rather a feeling of being understood. So, I feel rather drawn to it, but I compare myself in a positive way, I would say. I enjoy seeing things from her point of view and in a positive way I would also want to see things that way. She has a great taste of fashion, and she is good at it, but sometimes she still wears something that doesn't go together. It makes sense because you cannot be perfectly styled every day and I can really see myself in her. I love fashion but there are days when I don't.

Interviewer: Okay, would you say there is a piece of clothing here that you would buy yourself and if so, would you strive to look like her?

Respondent 6: It's hard to say. I think so yes. She has nice outfits. I can't name anything specifically right now but in general I like what I see.

Interviewer: Okay, would you say you still strive to look like her then?

Respondent 6: No. I would still try to add my own touch. I love fashion and that's why I never copy. I want to be my own person and she looks really pretty but in her own way.

Interviewer: Does this influencer appear authentic to you?

Respondent 6: Definitely, because you simply really see these real insights. It is just not everything staged. The person doesn't want to show everything from her life either, but she at least shows some insights that are happening in her life right now. So especially in the sports clothes, she is in the street and jumps into the air for fun, one wouldn't necessarily take that as a photo pose maybe... or how she stood there before without make-up, hungover, whatever, is not exactly common now.

Interviewer: From which of the two would you rather accept advice?

Respondent 6: The second person.

Interviewer: Some influencers speak openly about product defects, bad days, or label their advertising clearly. How does that affect your opinion of them? Would you say this kind of honesty strengthens your trust in the positive recommendation they make? (Question 7)

Respondent 6: I simply mean, labeling it as advertising has become mandatory, I feel.

Interviewer: Yes, it is mandatory actually. But sometimes things are promoted that aren't paid. That means the question is rather, if it is paid, what difference does it make to you? (Question 8)

Respondent 6: It does have an effect, I would say, that I look at it and think, is it really the case that the person only promotes it because she is paid for it, or is it perhaps also a product where you could really say, okay, that might fit the influencer too. So I think sometimes there are things you don't expect at all and then in other situations it seems very staged. So be it Shein for example... so just as a stupid example, if this person suddenly cooperated with Shein, I would worry more about that. But if it is really a brand that also fits other brands for which they had advertised before, I would just rather say, okay, I don't care.

Interviewer: Why would Shein trigger skepticism?

Respondent 6: It doesn't match my values and it might not fit everything else that is shown on the account concerning the values.

Interviewer: Okay. But would it be okay for you then if someone constantly represents values like the values of Shein, would you say it is authentic for you then if someone advertises Shein?

Respondent 6: I couldn't judge that, because I probably wouldn't follow the person then, because these values don't match my values.

Interviewer: What would you say, how important is consistency to you? Would you say it is a problem if, well you mentioned that promoting different brands is a problem. Would you say it is always a problem or is there for example also a factor for you that if there are matches between the brands, that it is no problem then?

Respondent 6: I think it doesn't necessarily have to be a problem. So, I think the authentic influencers, whom we are just talking about, there is a certain consistency, but I haven't thought about it that much.

Interviewer: Meaning, would you say it is important to you or rather doesn't matter?

Respondent 6: At this point I think I would say doesn't matter. Well I think in certain situations I would definitely notice. So like the example we just discussed, that will trigger skepticism, but if it falls roughly into the same area, I probably wouldn't worry too much about it. So the consistency should be between the brands.

Interviewer: When you have the feeling that an influencer is truly authentic, how do you react then? Would you say you like, you comment, you share, you follow or whatever? (Question 9)

Respondent 6: Well I usually follow the person. I don't follow that many actually, because I prefer to really watch the people where it is fun for me to see the content too. I would say I like a lot then too, so I watch a lot of stories, like them too, but am also rather inclined to really look into the feed posts, or rather you get them suggested more often then and look at them rather too, yes, but commenting not at all. But I don't do that generally.

Interviewer: If we say now, the things you do, what would you say, why do you do that? Is it rather for yourself or do you feel a personal connection to the person, want to support the person, perhaps even a feeling of friendship or virtual friendship?

Respondent 6: I would say, it is simply a small support and a sign of "I think what you are doing right now is cool." So especially this liking of stories is like, OK, I watch the stories, like you see based on the views. I watch them consistently, I seem to like it, but if I like something then, it is already a "hey, I found the story nice, thought it was cool."

Interviewer: Yes, OK, highlighting your action again. Conversely, if you have the feeling that the person is not authentic, would you say you simply scroll past or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 6: It depends a bit. So, if I have that feeling I would probably skip the post. If it keeps happening I would get annoyed and unfollow.

Interviewer: Does an influencer spontaneously come to mind whom you found inauthentic and therefore unfollowed?

Respondent 6: Twenty4tim.

Interviewer: What made the person inauthentic for you?

Respondent 6: It was simply too much advertising, where I really had to say, that it feels like it is only about the money right now. Like, there was something new every day and also he was very hysterical in everything he did and I would also say, his personality didn't appeal to me that much anymore. Yes, it simply became too much, where I was convinced that nobody can't stand behind so much, somehow.

Interviewer: Okay, that means you would also say several brands are okay, but for yourself you decide when there are too many.

Respondent 6: Yes.

Interviewer: Let's talk about the brands that are worn or promoted. Imagine an influencer whom you find very authentic promotes a brand or simply wears it, which you have never heard of.

How does the recommendation affect you? Are you curious enough to click on the brand's profile, google it, follow or other actions? (Question 11)

Respondent 6: I would say... so probably I wouldn't necessarily make this effort on my own and really actively google for it. But if it is perhaps linked in the story and I think it looks nice, I would click on it and look at the product too. Whether I end up ordering it is another matter, but also just out of interest, what is offered by the brand.

Interviewer: What is the decisive factor... the brand, so simply you see how the brand is presented, or is it your trust in the influencer or both?

Respondent 6: I would say both. So, I follow the person for a reason, precisely because I find them authentic. And somewhere there is a certain trust. In the end, however, they are still influencers and I like to form my own opinion then too.

Interviewer: What role does the type of brand play, for example the price segment the brand is in or also the information revealed about the brand. Would you say you also pay attention to which brand is being advertised or do you simply look at the picture, which outfit is being presented right now and look for it somewhere else then?

Respondent 6: I would say that things like prices and so on play a role too. So I do check what the brand actually is, before I order anything there or so.

Interviewer: But you would say you do engage with the brand... or if we simply have the example now, you see a cool T-shirt, you simply search for your T-shirt.

Respondent 6: I think then I simply search for the T-shirt.

Interviewer: So, it doesn't have to be from the brand then?

Respondent 6: I would say it is rather about the clothing item. So, if I find it cheaper somewhere else, I buy it from there.

Interviewer: If you could give fashion influencers a piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be? (Question 12)

Respondent 6: I would definitely say, show real insights into everyday life too. So don't fake everything, don't take life so seriously and perhaps especially in the topic of fashion, present the fashion as one wears it in everyday life. So whether they are sitting in the train or in an Uber or I don't know, it doesn't have to be somewhere in front of the most beautiful photo spot, but really show it like that too.

Interviewer: And now also just again on the topic of fashion, because you said, for you the clothing item is more important and not necessarily the brand that is advertised. What would you say can they do to convince their community really of the fashion brands they use and show?

Respondent 6: I mean, what is often done already is things like discount codes, which are important, from which the influencer profits again perhaps, because discounts are often an incentive, even if it is not that much cheaper. But psychologically seen they tempt one more after all. And it is of course easier if the product is linked, to click directly on it, than to really go on the search now to find the product somewhere else again.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to add to the topic, because we haven't discussed it yet?

Respondent 6: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Then thank you very much for your time and the valuable information you have given me. Your perspective helped me a lot to gain a deeper understanding for these topics. Thank you very much.

Respondent 6: You're welcome.

Interview 7:

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Respondent 7: Yes.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you quickly tell me your age, gender, and where you are from?

Respondent 7: So, I'm 19, female, and I'm originally from Spain.

Interviewer: Great. Could you briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend on it and what kind of content do you mainly consume? (Question 1)

Respondent 7: Well, regarding time... I'm on Instagram multiple times a day. I'd say about half an hour in total, maybe an hour on weekends. As for content, I consume a lot of advice on sports, fashion, clothes, and everyday life. I mostly follow friends to stay in the loop, but also some more famous people to follow their lives a bit... yeah, things like that.

Interviewer: Okay, what role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time? And if so, what makes you stick with these accounts? (Question 2)

Respondent 7: Two come to mind immediately. One is Laia Castel (@laiascal) and the other one is Aina Simon (@aina.simon). I follow them specifically—and other fashion influencers that pop up in my feed—because I find their opinions credible. What they post just feels personal to me, not like they're just trying to sell me something. I think that creates a more personal connection, which makes you not just scroll past but actually consider: "Okay, do I actually like what this person is showing?" Or if they recommend something, you're more likely to believe, "Okay, that's actually good." Of course, the style has to match mine, too. I think those two have a beautiful style, that's why I follow them. And yeah, just the right mix of content—some humor, not taking themselves too seriously, so it just comes across as believable.

Interviewer: Okay perfect, thank you for the detailed description. Now, conversely, have you ever followed someone for a long time and then one day decided to unfollow them? What was the reason?

Respondent 7: Definitely. Generally, I have days where I declutter who I'm following. Especially with public figures I don't know personally, I try not to follow too many people who don't offer me much value. In the past, I've unfollowed people because... well, I just didn't perceive their recommendations or their vibe as authentic anymore, or I felt it didn't align with my interests. But with fashion specifically, it's primarily because I feel like what they are putting out there isn't truly authentic. Because I don't think my style or taste has changed that much, so it must be them.

Interviewer: Okay, very good. In the context of Instagram, we often hear the word "authentic." What would you say that word means to you personally when you think of fashion influencers? (Question 3)

Respondent 7: I think authentic simply means showing your real life, especially for influencers. Not just showing the fake stuff, but showing that, at the end of the day, they are still a human being, not just a tool used for advertising. That's what distinguishes influencers—they are people. Also, to be authentic, I think they should express critical opinions. Not just praising everything, but saying, "Okay, I really like this brand, but..." and pointing out things they don't

like. Or honestly admitting when they were sent something for free, that it's an ad, and communicating that clearly. I find that very important.

Interviewer: Yeah, that definitely makes sense. Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought, "This is fake" or "They are only doing this for the money"? What gave it away? (Question 4)

Respondent 7: I've definitely seen that, mostly just generally in my feed. You can usually tell when you see that their previous content doesn't align with what is being advertised now. For example, if someone says, "Okay, I care about sustainability, it's very important to me, I only wear high-quality materials with no ethical issues," and then you see them advertising a brand that simply doesn't match those values... then I'd say, okay, I don't trust that person anymore.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah, that makes sense. Would you say it's important to you that an influencer is honestly excited about the clothes they wear, like truly fashion-addicted? Would you say you can tell the difference between real passion and faked passion? If so, how? (Question 5)

Respondent 7: Well, I don't necessarily only follow influencers who are strictly fashion-focused. So, while I think it's cool and I trust them when they speak passionately about a brand, they don't have to be incredibly passionate about everything. But I would say that partly... actually, it's tricky. I think sometimes you can tell if a person is serious about how excited they are. But I think nowadays a lot of it is faked, or they say they stand behind it and think it's great, but money still plays a huge role. So yeah, I think you probably do get fooled every now and then, even though I hope not to be.

Interviewer: Okay, but would you say you often feel like you're being fooled?

Respondent 7: Every now and then, yes, definitely. I think when I was younger, I saw ads from influencers I liked and was a bit more naive, not really questioning "Does this make sense?", but just blindly trusting them because they spoke so enthusiastically about it.

Interviewer: Okay, okay, I think we'll come back to the topic of trust later. For now, I'm going to show you two different profiles. Let's start with the first one. Take your time looking at it and then just tell me what you think of the overall style and how fashion is presented here. (Question 6)

Respondent 7: So, with the first one... the fashion is presented in a very chic way. Wait, is this all her?

Interviewer: Yes, this is just the first profile so far.

Respondent 7: Sorry, no problem. So, I find all the pictures she posts—even if the clothes are very different, from winter stuff to lingerie or sleepwear—the background is always very chic

and stylishly furnished. The whole aesthetic is kept very neutral, the colors match. It's very pleasing to the eye, I'd say. And it's very cohesive somehow. Yeah, I'd say everything is a bit joyful; she always has a smile. It makes you feel good looking at it, but yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So you would say when you look at the pictures, you have a positive feeling? Or maybe you have negative associations? Would you say you catch yourself comparing yourself to the influencer? That can be positive or negative.

Respondent 7: I'd say I tend to feel positive because the pictures are simply positive. I think, especially where she wears tighter fitting things, you might compare yourself and wonder, "Okay, how would that piece look on me?" Because with fashion, you always have to check—it might look great on one person, but each body is different. But regarding the pictures themselves and the fashion, I'd say it's rather positive.

Interviewer: Okay. The pictures seem generally perfect. Would you say it serves as inspiration for you, or does it trigger negative thoughts? You theoretically said "no" to comparing, but maybe pressure, or even a defensive attitude?

Respondent 7: Yeah, partly, because the pictures are very... well, you described it well as "perfect." That brings us back to authenticity. I do find that the whole setting feels very staged. It has a positive vibe and doesn't necessarily make me feel negative but I would still say I am a bit skeptical about it. It's not a "I'll just snap a quick picture of my outfit" vibe, but everything is curated to fit perfectly. That's why I wouldn't say I find it 100% authentic, because it looks a lot like advertising and not like I'm seeing the influencer's everyday life where an ad just happens to pop up. The ad is the focus. I don't even know if they are all advertisements, but all her pictures look like a marketing campaign. And especially because the backgrounds are so stunning—at a festival, behind a hot air balloon—you get the feeling, "Wow, she has a very perfect life." Which triggers a certain type of feeling... I don't want to say envy, but something in that direction. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you say, in general, this influencer appears authentic to you?

Respondent 7: Partly yes, partly no. I do think she comes across as authentic in some things she does. But generally, I think she sometimes doesn't seem authentic because it's very posed and simply very staged advertising. And I think the background plays a big part—the setting. It makes it seem less authentic and a bit more like pure advertising.

Interviewer: Okay. I'm going to show you the other profile now. Take your time looking at it and describe what you think about the style and how fashion is presented here.

Respondent 7: Okay, here I would say there is a very strong contrast to the previous one because, firstly, the pictures vary a lot. They aren't all uniform, fitting into a perfect feed, but very

spontaneous, like snapshots. And partly not everything is perfect, for example, the picture with the shoe... you just see, okay, this is a real human. You still see the fashion, but it's somehow very real and not perfectly staged. I find that makes it very likeable.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you feel when looking at these pictures? Would you say here you catch yourself comparing yourself to the influencer? Is there a difference to the first profile?

Respondent 7: I don't think I would compare myself directly here. Maybe with individual pictures regarding mishaps or the spontaneous things shown. But less of that negative comparison where you think, "Ah, she has something I don't have." I'd say you feel significantly more comfortable looking at this and get more joy out of it because it's very real. And I prefer seeing that because you immediately notice how much healthier it is not to see the perfect life where you think "I need that," but to really see, "That's just a human." I find that's a very strong contrast to the pictures before. I would say I can identify with her more.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there a piece of clothing you would buy yourself? And if so, would you strive to look like her?

Respondent 7: Yes, I think so. I can imagine wearing the things she shows and maybe looking to combine them in that way.

Interviewer: Okay, but would you expect it to look the same on you as it does in the pictures?

Respondent 7: I don't think I'd have to look exactly like her. I feel like you can take a piece and style it your own way. So I wouldn't necessarily have to copy her whole outfit, even if the outfits are very cool, but I can imagine both. I feel like this is also what she wants. She wants to be funny and show you that all of this is okay. I feel seen and understood. It stands in contrast to what you usually see on Instagram.

Interviewer: Would you generally say this mix of pictures inspires you more, or does it trigger a feeling of comparison, pressure, or a defensive attitude?

Respondent 7: I would say this is significantly more inspiring, especially compared to the profile before. Because there isn't that pressure of "I'm putting on my clothes now and have to take perfect pictures," but more... well, it triggers a very nice feeling, more like joy. And I find, especially regarding fashion, it makes me want to buy it, rather than thinking "I have to portray it as perfectly as she does."

Interviewer: So, what I'm hearing is that you strive more for the feeling being presented, rather than the look itself?

Respondent 7: Yes, exactly. Of course, there are stylistic things that appeal to me. But I find if the overall vibe of the influencer appeals to me more, I tend to want to try it out because there

isn't that pressure behind it... the pressure that the clothes have to fit perfectly. It feels more positive. It feels like I can achieve the same feeling or vibe when wearing the clothes.

Interviewer: Okay, from whom would you rather accept advice?

Respondent 7: From the second one.

Interviewer: Some influencers speak openly about product flaws, bad days, or clearly label their ads. How does it affect your opinion when someone is that honest and addresses everything directly? (Question 7)

Respondent 7: I tend to have a higher opinion of the person when they address it directly. I think everyone knows influencers earn money with this. But if they transparently show what they earn or whether they are paid for the ad or not... I feel like that shows they value you as a follower and aren't just using you. I would say I tend to trust that person more.

Interviewer: Okay. That means you would also say this kind of honesty strengthens your trust in positive recommendations? How do you navigate the tension when you know the influencer is getting paid? (Question 8)

Respondent 7: Yes, I would say so. And like I said, I know they need to earn money. I'd say it's okay as long as it doesn't get too much.

Interviewer: How important is consistency to you? Would you say it's a problem for you if different brands are advertised? When would it not be a problem?

Respondent 7: I would say it doesn't bother me to see different brands, unless the brands—especially if they are well-known—don't fit with the rest. It doesn't have to be just one brand, but it shouldn't be, for example, very sustainable brands and then suddenly a fast-fashion brand. So there should be congruence or consistency.

Interviewer: Okay, so primarily consistency between the different brands that are advertised.

Respondent 7: Exactly, yes.

Interviewer: Okay, when you feel an influencer is truly authentic, how do you react? Do you like, comment, share, follow, save? (Question 9)

Respondent 7: Liking, definitely. I rarely comment. Saving too, if I find inspiration, especially if I find an outfit combination very exciting. Sharing, I'd say rather less.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you say you generally don't do that or...?

Respondent 7: Yes, I think with fashion specifically, I don't really share.

Interviewer: Okay. What content do you share then?

Respondent 7: More funny content or sports content, for example. But not stylistic stuff.

Interviewer: So fashion is something you look at for yourself, but you don't feel the need to share it. Conversely, if you feel they are not authentic, would you say you just scroll past and ignore it, or do you actively unfollow? (Question 10)

Respondent 7: I'd say I'd rather scroll past, but in moments where I really feel the need to clean up my Instagram a bit... I think I rely on my memory of what I find relevant. If I know I've looked at things from a person often, I keep following. If that's not the case, I unfollow. So I wouldn't unfollow immediately, but I think it definitely influences me sooner or later to unfollow because it's just not relevant anymore.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. If we talk about the brands that are worn, promoted, or just shown... Imagine an influencer you find very authentic promotes a brand, or just wears it, that you've never heard of. How does the recommendation affect you? Since you think highly of the influencer but don't know the brand. (Question 11)

Respondent 7: Yeah, if I find the piece of clothing really exciting or like what is being shown, I can imagine looking into it more. For example, I bought a piece of clothing once that I saw on an influencer, and I didn't know the brand before. But only after checking the brand myself. So, not if it looks a bit... sneaky or sketchy; I would verify it myself to make sure it's trustworthy.

Interviewer: That means you trust the influencer enough to look into the brand, but you still double-check the brand just to be safe?

Respondent 7: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay, fair. But you are at least curious enough to click on the brand's profile and really engage with it?

Respondent 7: Yes, exactly. I'd say an influencer can definitely introduce me to a new brand.

Interviewer: Okay. What role does the type of brand play? Maybe the price segment or the information shared about the brand. Where would you say your priorities lie? Or would you say the brand is really important to you? Because one could say, okay, an outfit is shown and you just look for clothes to recreate that style, but the brand itself doesn't play a role. How do you stand on that?

Respondent 7: I think the brand itself isn't the most important thing to me—like, the name of the brand. Partly, I think it does play a role, because well-known brands... well, if it's a known brand, it's usually received positively. But I'd say definitely how it is communicated matters—for example, if special features of the product are highlighted. Or definitely the price segment. Very, very expensive clothes or very, very cheap clothes, which are an indication of poor quality... I'd say that definitely influences my decision.

Interviewer: Okay. If you could give fashion influencers a piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be? (Question 12)

Respondent 7: I think it would primarily be real authenticity. Not showing such a perfect and staged life. I think they might think, "Okay, I have to present myself beautifully so it looks perfect and consistent," but I appreciate it much more—and trust people more—when I can identify with it and the person just comes across as more real.

Interviewer: Okay. And what can they do in the fashion area? Because you mentioned the brand plays a role, but not always. But assuming an influencer wants to convince their community of a fashion brand, how could they do that? When would you be convinced by the promoted brand?

Respondent 7: I think if the benefits are communicated directly. There are so many different fashion brands, and especially if I don't know a brand yet, I think I need to be convinced more about why this brand does something better than another brand. Yeah, I think that's important.

Interviewer: Okay, good. Is there anything else on this topic you want to add that we haven't discussed?

Respondent 7: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Good, then thank you very much for your time and the valuable information you have given me. Your perspective helped me a lot to gain a deeper understanding of these topics. Thank you.

Respondent 7: You're welcome, I enjoyed it too.

Interview 8 (polar case):

Interviewer: Hello, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. First, I want to give you some information about my project and the interview, that we are about to start. I am currently writing my bachelor thesis about influencer marketing and brand engagement on Instagram. I am specifically interested in how women of our generation perceive fashion influencers and what makes them feel 'real' or 'fake' to us. And then in a next step, I want to find out how this impacts the relationship and engagement with the promoted brand. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. I am looking for personal opinions and honest experiences. So please feel free to be critical and share positive and negative examples. Before we start, I need to cover a few formalities regarding data protection. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse a specific question without giving a reason. All data will be treated confidentially. It will be anonymous and only your age and gender will be mentioned to assure that you match the target group. To analyse

our conversation properly, I will record the audio of this meeting. The recording will be deleted once it is transcribed. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Respondent 8: Yes, I agree. That's fine.

Interviewer: Perfect. Could you quickly tell me your age, gender and where you are from?

Respondent 8: I am 23 years old, I'm male and I live in Germany.

Interviewer: So to start off, could you briefly describe how you typically use Instagram? How much time do you spend on the app and what kind of content do you mostly consume?

Respondent 8: I would say I'm on Instagram every day. It's probably around one to two hours a day, mostly in short bursts when I'm commuting or in the evening before I go to sleep. My feed is a mix of things. I follow a lot of sports stuff, especially football and gym content, but also check out fashion trends. I'm really into streetwear and sneakers, so I follow accounts that show new drops or vintage outfits. And of course, I see what my friends are doing.

Interviewer: What role does fashion play in your feed? Are there specific fashion influencers you have been following for a long time?

Respondent 8: I've been following Justin from Peso (@jstin) for years now, probably since he started. I also follow some international guys like Daniel Simmons (@imdanielsimmons) or smaller creators who just have a very specific aesthetic. I like following people where you can see a clear style. With Justin, for example, it's cool to see how his personal style influenced his own brand. I followed his journey and not just him as a person.

Interviewer: What is it about them that makes you stay? How do you feel about them?

Respondent 8: I stay because I feel like I can actually learn something or get an idea for my own outfits. It's a good feeling when you see someone wearing something and you think, "I could pull that off too." But I also like the consistency. If someone changes their style every week just to follow a trend, I usually lose interest because it's not my style anymore. I like it when they stay true to their vibe.

Interviewer: In the world of Instagram, we often hear the word "authentic." What does that word mean to you personally when you look at fashion influencers?

Respondent 8: Authenticity for me is when the person and the clothes actually match. It's hard to describe, but you can feel it. If a guy who usually wears oversized hoodies suddenly stands there in a tight designer suit just because he got paid for it, it feels off. For me, it means they would wear that stuff even if they weren't being filmed. Also, how they talk. If they sound like a salesman, they lose me. If they talk like they are just telling a friend about a cool new find, that's authentic to me.

Interviewer: Can you describe a situation where you saw a post and immediately thought: "This is fake" or "They are just doing this for money"?

Respondent 8: Oh, definitely. It happens all the time with videos that are clearly scripted. I remember one guy who usually does fitness content suddenly talking about this high-end watch brand. He was acting like he wears it every day, but in all his other videos, he wears an Apple Watch for his workouts.

Interviewer: And how important is it to you that an influencer seems genuinely excited about the clothes they show? Can you tell the difference?

Respondent 8: It's important I guess. How can I tell? I don't know... Maybe from the way they talk about clothes. Some are just presenting the pieces and others really show how much they love them. You can hear it in the voice – real excitement has a different energy.

Interviewer: I'm now going to describe two profiles to you. Profile 1 shows an influencer in an extremely perfect representation. He always shows himself from his best side and in top form to present fashion. The lighting is perfect, the background is clean, and every photo looks like it was taken for a high-end magazine. What do you think about this style and the way fashion is presented here?

Respondent 8: Honestly, I find that a bit exhausting to look at. I mean at the same time I don't really care because mainly I am interested in the clothes. But yes it feels distant and like I said if the attitude gets annoying I also don't feel inspired.

Interviewer: How do these pictures make you feel? Do you catch yourself comparing yourself to him?

Respondent 8: Sometimes, yeah. You see the perfect body and the perfect hair and you think, "Man, I should hit the gym more." But it's not a good feeling. It's more of a pressure thing. And then I realize it's mostly fake anyway, or at least highly staged. So I don't really use these profiles for fashion advice because it's not realistic just annoying.

Interviewer: Now, Profile 2 is different. He also shows unperfect sides. He presents fashion, but in a much more approachable way. Maybe the room is a bit messy in the background, or he shows himself in an everyday situation like waiting for the train or after a long day. He might even talk about an outfit that didn't work. How does this profile affect you?

Respondent 8: I like that much more. It feels like a real guy. It makes the fashion more "wearable." If he shows that a shirt gets wrinkled after an hour of wearing it, or if he jokes about a fail, it builds trust. It's more fun to watch. I appreciate honesty and especially in a funny way.

Interviewer: Would you say this influencer is more authentic? And would you be more likely to engage with a brand he promotes?

Respondent 8: Definitely more authentic. And yes, I'd be way more likely to check out a brand he mentions. Because I feel like his recommendation comes from a real place. It's like getting a tip from a friend who has a similar life to mine. I trust his judgment more because he's not trying to pretend his life is a 24/7 photoshoot.

Interviewer: Some influencers openly talk about product flaws or are very transparent about their partnerships. How does that affect your opinion?

Respondent 8: It's a huge plus. If someone says, "Look, I'm working with this brand, but honestly, this specific jacket is a bit too thin for winter," I trust them immediately. It shows they value their community more than the quick paycheck. I think that's the only way to stay relevant in the long run. If you only say positive things, people stop believing you after the third or fourth ad.

Interviewer: Does the ad or sponsored label change your view on their opinion?

Respondent 8: Not necessarily, as long as it fits their style. I know they need to make money. It only bothers me when it's hidden or when it's a brand that clearly doesn't fit them. But if a guy I follow for his street style does an ad for a cool sneaker brand, I don't mind the #ad at all. I might even be happy for him that he got the deal. It's all about the fit between the person and the product.

Interviewer: When you feel an influencer is being truly authentic, how do you react? Do you like, comment, or share?

Respondent 8: I mostly like the posts. I don't really comment in general. But if it's really good content or a very helpful review, I'll save it for later. I have a lot of saved posts for outfit ideas.

Interviewer: Conversely, if you sense they are being inauthentic, do you just scroll past, or do you actively unfollow?

Respondent 8: If it's just one post, I'll scroll past. But if it becomes a pattern, I unfollow. There are a few big influencers where every single story was a discount code for something else. I unfollowed them because it felt like they didn't have a personal opinion anymore.

Interviewer: Imagine an influencer you find very authentic promotes a brand you've never heard of. How does their recommendation affect you? Would you click on the profile or google them?

Respondent 8: Yeah, I would probably click on the tag to see the brand's Instagram profile first. If the vibe there is cool too, I might check the website. For me, the price range is important. If it's a small, affordable brand, I'm much more likely to look into it than if it's another luxury brand that I can't afford anyway. I also look for info about where they produce or if the quality is solid.

Interviewer: Apart from buying, what other actions does an authentic post trigger for you?

Respondent 8: Mostly saving and sharing. I also find myself sometimes following the brand directly if I like their overall aesthetic, even if I don't buy anything right away. It's like building a mental library of brands I like. Sometimes I just look at the posts to see how they style things, using it as a free styling guide.

Interviewer: If you could give fashion influencers one piece of advice on how to build a loyal community in 2026, what would it be?

Respondent 8: I would say: stop trying so hard to be perfect. We've seen enough perfect lives. Show us the process, show us the imperfections, show us how the clothes look after you've worn them for a whole day. And only work with brands you actually give a damn about. People are getting much better at spotting fakes, so honesty is the only way to survive.

Interviewer: Is there anything else regarding the topic that you want to add?

Respondent 8: No, I think we're good.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time and the valuable information. Your perspective really helped me.

Respondent 8: You're welcome.