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The art of falsifying

A grounded theory of communication advisors' use of
social media to create perceived authenticity of top
politicians

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Acknowledgements

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- Umberto Eco, 1977

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Abstract

The art of falsifying

Top politicians are increasingly using social media to create perceptions of authenticity but social media challenges taken-for-granted notions of authenticity, as people cannot see who is the creator of the perceived authenticity. Applying a grounded theory approach, this study conducted in-depth interviews with communication advisors assigned to Danish top politicians and developed a theory of how communication advisors can use social media to create perceived authenticity of top politicians. Most existing studies on the concept of authenticity agree that it is a socially constructed concept but they have difficulties detaching themselves from an essentialism value system, assuming that authenticity is ontologically present. To avoid being caught in such essentialism thinking, this study drew on theoretical perspectives by Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco.

The results suggest that in order to create perceived authenticity, communication advisors have to understand and be able to connect with the code of the audience in a convincing way because authenticity is not a matter of who creates it but how well it meets the audience's expectations. It is also suggested that communication advisors may even be better at creating perceived authenticity of politicians than politicians themselves. This thesis thus contributes to the current body of knowledge and public relations practice with an explanation of the concept of authenticity that transcends the dominating essentialism assumptions and the typical dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity.

Keyword: Authenticity, social media, public relations, framing, advisor, political communication, Baudrillard, Eco, hyperreality, grounded theory

Content

- 1. Definition of research problem 1**
- 1.1. Introduction..... 1
- 1.2. Research problem 2
- 1.3. Research questions 4
- 1.4. Research aim..... 4
- 1.5. Focus and limitations 5

Word count: 1,284

- 2. Literature review..... 6**
- 2.1. Aim of chapter..... 6
- 2.2. PR research 6
- 2.3. Tourism research 9
- 2.4. Marketing research..... 10
- 2.5. Political communication research 13
- 2.6. Social media research..... 15
- 2.7. Concluding summary 16
- 2.8. This study’s contribution..... 17

Word count: 3,500

- 3. Research design and methods..... 18**
- 3.1. Aim of chapter..... 18
- 3.2. Outline of research strategy 18
 - 3.2.1. Grounded theory approach..... 18
- 3.3. Theoretical perspectives 20
 - 3.3.1. Hyperreality 21
 - 3.3.2. Simulacra and simulation..... 23
 - 3.3.3. Precession of simulation 23
 - 3.3.4. Technology in hyperreality 24
- 3.4. Data collection..... 25
 - 3.4.1. Sampling strategy 25
 - 3.4.2. Interviews 27

3.5. Relationship between researcher and participants.....	28
3.6. Considerations about qualitative research.....	30
3.7. Quality of research	31
3.8. Bibliography of participants	32

Word count: 4,354

4. Analysis	34
4.1. Aim of chapter.....	34
4.2. Essentialist traits of authenticity	34
4.2.1. Human character	34
4.2.2. Coherence between identity and behaviour.....	36
4.3. Authenticity depends on interpretation.....	37
4.4. Authenticity on social media	38
4.4.1. Olesen & Messerschmidt.....	41
4.5. Invisible simulators	43
4.6. Interpretation depends on codes.....	44
4.7. Fakes perform better	47
4.8. Quality of authenticity	49

Word count: 4,934

5. Discussion and concluding remarks.....	51
5.1. Aim of chapter.....	51
5.2. Comparison with existing literature	51
5.3. Contribution to the existing body of knowledge.....	54
5.4. Concluding remarks and future research	56

Word count: 1,648

Bibliography.....	57
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Word count in total: 15,720

1. Definition of research problem

1.1. Introduction

Authenticity. There is a demand for authenticity and people seek to appear authentic. People are judged on their ability to appear authentic and they are criticised if they appear inauthentic. Authenticity is thus seen as a normative ideal people pursue. But can it really be that simple?

Most scholars today agree that authenticity is a socially constructed concept but even when they do so they still think of it in normative, essentialism terms. Authenticity is seen as a desired object that can be achieved or obtained. Consequently, there are also certain notions of what is authentic and what is inauthentic.

This quest for authenticity is particularly evident in the field of politics. Among scholars, journalists, commentators and politicians, it is often argued that authenticity plays an important role for politicians' ability to build and maintain relations with the public and for the outcome of political campaigns (Louden & McCauliff, 2004; Brewer, Hoffman, Harrington, Jones & Lambe, 2014). Within politics there are also certain notions of what is authentic or what is inauthentic, and people do not hesitate using these notions to pinpoint if politicians are authentic, or, especially, if politicians are inauthentic. Among the characteristics that typically are used to describe and define authentic politicians include being spontaneous rather than staged and having a human character (Montgomery, 2001; Lilleker, 2006). That is why politicians often present themselves as being emotional and allow their private life to be publicised (Lilleker, 2006). They try to be perceived authentic.

This use of – and *hype* about – the concept of authenticity is particularly interesting in the context of social media because social media is often seen as something that enables politicians to appear authentic and to create authentic relationships with the public (Gilpin, Palazzolo & Brody, 2010). Social media provides great opportunities for politicians to demonstrate the traits that are associated with authenticity, such as showing the person behind their public persona and politicians are increasingly using social media for this purpose (Gilpin et al., 2010).

However, some scholars have pointed out that the technological development has made it difficult to distinguish between real and fake because technologies have made it possible for copies to be exact clones of the original (Molleda, 2010). Also, it is difficult to tell whether the person portrayed really is the creator of the content (Boyd, 2008). This means that social media can create perceptions of authenticity but people cannot see if the person portrayed really is the creator behind. There is thus actually no need for the real person to be involved in the creation and management of his/her social media profiles, since people cannot see whether he/she is involved or substituted by another person.

1.2. Research problem

Authenticity has become an ideal in contemporary society and the current pursuit of this ideal reflects a quest and desire for the real and genuine. This is particularly the case within politics. This quest for the authentic has been stimulated by technological developments, such as the Internet and social media, because it gives people a feeling of close interaction and intimacy (Gilpin et al., 2010). While the Internet gives people a feeling of closeness it, simultaneously, keeps people distant from each other (Hjarvard, 2008). With social media, boundaries are blurred and there is no clear distinction between real and fake. This challenges conventional notions of authenticity.

The concept of authenticity may therefore not be as simple as it seems at first. Particularly, when it comes to the increasing use of technologies, such as social media, an interesting paradox emerges. The advent and spread of social media, embraced by both politicians and the public, challenges fundamental taken-for-granted notions of authenticity. Although social media provides users, such as politicians, opportunities to appear authentic, it is not the real politician that appears but rather a simulated image of the politician. Actually, the politician himself/herself does not need to be involved in the creation of this image at all, as people cannot see who is the creator.

Today, most top politicians in Denmark have communication advisors assigned (Winther, 2012). These communication advisors typically aid in planning and carrying out strategic communication together with, and on behalf of, the politician. This means that when politicians appear authentic, this authentic appearance may be constructed and/or carried out by someone else than the real politician, i.e. the communication advisors. On social media it is not clear whether politicians are involved in the management of their social media profiles, although these may be perceived authentic. These blurred boundaries and paradoxes suggest that the concept of authenticity is more multifaceted than it seemed at first.

The current body of knowledge demonstrates that the concept of authenticity is restrained in essentialism assumptions and in a dichotomy, where authenticity is viewed as in opposition to inauthenticity, and authenticity is always better than inauthenticity. However, this interpretation and application of the concept may be too simple in a mediatized society, where people rarely, if ever, meet the real phenomenon (Hjarvard, 2013). Therefore, a nuanced explanation of the concept of authenticity is needed in order to understand the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept in the context of public relations (PR).

1.3. Research questions

Based on the research problem, the central research question is:

- How can communication advisors use social media to create perceived authenticity of top politicians?

To answer this central research question, it is first necessary to investigate what characterises perceived authenticity of top politicians on social media. Thereafter, it is necessary to understand how strategic communication can be used to influence these perceptions of authenticity of top politicians on social media. In order to answer the central research question, the thesis will therefore be guided by the following sub-questions:

1. What characterise perceptions of authenticity of top politicians on social media?
2. How can strategic communication be used to influence the perceptions of authenticity of top politicians on social media?

When answers to these sub-questions are accumulated and integrated, it will thus be possible to answer the central research question.

1.4. Research aim

The research aim of this thesis is to develop a theory that explains how communication advisors can use social media to create perceived authenticity of top politicians. This theory will be grounded in empirical data and it will be applicable to PR scholarship and practice.

Authenticity is regarded particularly important in the field of politics, where the public demand authenticity, politicians seek to appear authentic and communication advisors aid politicians in appearing authentic.

Therefore, the theory developed in this thesis focuses on political communication/political PR but it may be relevant for the discipline of PR in general, i.e. for individuals and organisations, seeking to be perceived authentic by their stakeholders.

1.5. Focus and limitations

This thesis focuses on the concept of authenticity and investigates this phenomenon in the context of political communication/political PR. This will be studied from the perspective of communication advisors assigned to top politicians.¹

The study is limited to communication advisors that are assigned to Danish top politicians in order to keep the research scope narrow. For this study, the term 'top politicians' refers to members of the Danish Parliament and members of European Parliament.² The reason why only these politicians are chosen is that many of them have communication advisors assigned and because they attract significant attention from the public daily, including when it comes to their presence on social media. All considerations regarding sampling are explained in Chapter 3.

¹ In this thesis, the term 'communication advisors' refers to PR professionals/practitioners but the term 'communication advisors' is chosen because it better reflects the job functions of the participants.

² In the following, 'top politicians' will just be referred to as 'politicians'.

2. Literature review

2.1. Aim of chapter

The aim of the literature review is to identify the current body of knowledge by critically evaluating central theories and conceptual frameworks relevant to the concept of authenticity as well as discussing where the existing knowledge is incomplete. I will draw definitions and key concepts from a variety of disciplines because research on the concept of authenticity within PR is limited and because interdisciplinary knowledge is needed in order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon studied. I will review literature from the disciplines of PR, tourism, marketing, political communication and social media and finally explain how this thesis contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

2.2. PR research

The application of the concept of authenticity to PR scholarship is limited. This is surprising because the concept seems relevant to PR. Cook (2007) explained future trends and issues facing PR professionals:

We're at the start of an era where people want authentic stories about authentic people. PR professionals are the storytellers. It's our job to help find the authenticity at the core of our companies and clients, and to tell those stories to the world in words that will truly be heard. (p.33)

This idea of placing authenticity at the core of PR was embraced by Juan-Carlos Molleda, who is one of the few scholars that has applied the concept of authenticity to PR scholarship. In his research paper *Authenticity and the construct's dimensions in public relations and*

communication research, Molleda (2010) elaborated on Cook's (2007) statement by arguing:

It is not only that practitioners should be responsible for the persuasive public relations and communication efforts and techniques they carry out, but also to keep their organisations and clients faithful to their true self and the core values embedded in the corporate identities, offerings, and promises they make to targeted stakeholders. (p.224)

From this perspective, a crucial part of PR is thus to identify and tell stories that are true to one self and one's core values. At the same time these stories must be compelling for the audience, and for key publics in particular. Molleda (2010) further argues that the concept of authenticity should be central to PR scholarship and practice because "perceived authenticity could determine the quality of organisation-public relationships" (p.225). Specifically, Molleda (2010) explains the use of authenticity in PR.

Organisations progressively build their corporate personalities by highlighting and putting certain authentic features out to the scrutiny of their stakeholders who, at the same time, make selective interpretations and consequently judge these organisations' reputations. (p.225)

In this way, authenticity is created by organisations and interpreted by the public/stakeholders. Organisations are used as an example and could be replaced with e.g. products, events or individuals (Molleda, 2010), such as CEOs or politicians. As it appears, Molleda (2010), as well as Cook (2007), argue that PR professionals can use certain techniques to create authenticity. Molleda (2010) also proposes an 'authenticity index' to measure the effectiveness of PR efforts and techniques and the perceived authenticity of organisations, including its actions, products, services and spokespeople, in the mind of stakeholders. With his focus on the creation and interpretation of messages as well as ethical practice, Molleda (2010)

can be said to belong to the rhetorical perspective of PR (Hallahan, 1999). Later, Molleda & Jain (2013) tested the index on a tourism setting.

From a relational perspective, Jain (2014) also studied how PR is used to communicate authentic experiences that cultivate long-term relationships with tourists. Jain's (2014) study revealed that a destination's image positively influences the perceived authenticity. Consequently, this makes PR central for the creation of authenticity, which is similar to the view by Molleda (2010) and Cook (2007). However, some studies have different explanations of the concept of authenticity and its application to PR.

Among them are Rawlins & Stoker (2010) and Bowen (2010), who discuss normative ethics of PR and suggest that authenticity is crucial in that regard. According to Bowen (2010), authenticity is essentially about "being the same on the inside as one appears to be outside an organization, or even personally" (pp.578-579). Along the same lines, Rawlins & Stoker (2010) explain that authenticity in PR is about being true to the individual's or organisation's own beliefs and values. This view is similar to that of Molleda (2010), who also stressed the idea of keeping organisations faithful to their core values and true self. However, according to Rawlins & Stoker (2010) and Bowen (2010), individuals or organisations that strategically manage perceptions and images are inauthentic. This contrasts with the view that authenticity is something that can be created, held by Molleda (2010) and like-minded (e.g. Cook, 2007; Jain, 2014). There are thus both differences and similarities in the PR studies applying the concept of authenticity. However, it is common for all that authenticity is seen as something positive and something organisations and individuals seek.

While the concept of authenticity is underresearched in PR scholarship, it has been extensively examined by other disciplines. Within the discipline of tourism, a quite varied picture of the concept of authenticity has

emerged and therefore explanations and definitions from a tourism perspective will be discussed in the following.

2.3. Tourism research

Since studies within the discipline of tourism have approached the concept of authenticity from several theoretical perspectives, a quite comprehensive picture of the concept has emerged. The first studies appear rather objectivistic, while the later typically take a constructivist approach.

MacCannell (1973; 1976) was one of the first to apply the concept of authenticity to the field of tourism, and he argues that the primary motivation behind tourism is a desire for authentic experiences. From this point of view, authenticity refers to originality or the 'real'. Authenticity is viewed as something absolute, and MacCannell (1973; 1976) can therefore be considered rather objectivistic in his approach. MacCannell (1973) investigated tourism using Goffman's (1959) ideas of 'back stage' and 'front stage' and found that tourists try to enter 'back regions' of the destinations they visit because they are regarded authentic. However, in fact tourist settings are staged to give the impression that a back region has been entered although that is not the case (MacCannell, 1973). Thus, tourists may believe they are having authentic experiences but it is often difficult to tell whether experiences in fact are authentic. The ontology of these early studies is based on essentialist objectivism, assuming that certain phenomena are in their essence authentic or inauthentic, and that it is therefore epistemologically possible to make a clear distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity.

In contrast to this objectivism approach, studies taking a constructivist approach view authenticity as something that is projected onto toured objects by tourists or tourism producers (e.g. Cohen, 1988). From this point of view, objects or situations appear authentic not because they are

inherently authentic but because they are constructed and perceived as such. The ontological belief here is thereby that multiple realities and truths exist and the epistemology is that authenticity is individually interpreted. This is very similar to the most studies of the concept from the field of PR discussed above.

Interestingly, some studies have combined objectivist and constructivist ideas in their investigation of the concept of authenticity. One of them is Grayson & Martinec (2004), who argue that, “authenticity can be both a social construction and a source of evidence” (p.310). Grayson & Martinec (2004) found that people evaluate objects both according to absolute, objective criteria and to criteria based on certain expectations. One of the examples they give is about the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The original version from 1776 has faded significantly because it was poorly preserved for many years. Since an engraving from 1823 is much better preserved, this version is most commonly reproduced in books and therefore thought to be a better representation of how the original Declaration looked in 1776. Thus, the original object is perceived authentic as source of evidence while the reproduction is perceived authentic because of socially constructed expectations. In that way, authenticity refer to different things and it may be graded rather than binary, in terms of authentic and inauthentic, it is argued. The study by Grayson & Martinec (2004) was carried out in tourism settings but focuses on market offerings. Interestingly, the concept of authenticity is regarded central to marketing and a number of relevant studies on the concept therefore exist.

2.4. Marketing research

The concept of authenticity is often seen as central to the practices of marketing and branding. According to Gilmore & Pine (2007), people demand authenticity because they want “something real from someone genuine” (p.1). Brown, Kozinets & Sherry (2003) have a similar view, arguing that authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary

marketing because uniqueness and differentiation are important aspects of branding. From this perspective, authenticity makes a powerful source for differentiation because it per definition refers to originality and thus is difficult for competitors to imitate or copy.

Michael B. Beverland has conducted several studies exploring the concept of authenticity from a marketing perspective. Beverland (2005) argues that authenticity is about “projecting an image that is partly true and partly rhetorical” (p.1008) and defines authenticity as:

A story that balances industrial (production, distribution and marketing) and rhetorical attributes to project sincerity through the avowal of commitments to traditions (including production methods, product styling, firm values, and/or location), passion for craft and production excellence, *and* the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations. (p.1008, original emphasis)

Authenticity is, in other words, created when real and stylised attributes are combined. Like Cook (2007) and Molleda (2010), Beverland (2005) views storytelling as a central dimension of authenticity. The key role of telling sincere stories was also demonstrated by Beverland & Luxton’s (2005) study. Furthermore, Beverland (2005), Cook (2007) and Molleda (2010) share the view that authenticity is a feature that can deliberately be added to products, events, organisations or people. However, both Molleda (2010) and Beverland (2005) stress that this process of creating authenticity lies not only in the hands of marketers and PR professionals but audiences as well as institutional and social contexts play a key role. According to Molleda (2010):

The power to create and consolidate authenticity claims of media products does not only reside in encoders or creators, but also in decoders or interpreters. These claims are product of an ongoing negotiation of meanings within experiential realities. The encoders use relevant symbols crafted as features of the portrayed identity, which must reflect experiences and

expectations of the target segment of society – the targeted audience. (p.228)

Thus, the creation of authenticity is a complex and interactive process of meaning construction, consisting of not only creators of authenticity but also interpreters. Along the same lines, Peterson (1997) also points out that there may be multiple voices, meanings and interests at play. Peterson (1997) studied the country music industry and found that authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but instead socially constructed when country music artists, producers, marketers, promoters and radio programmers engage with fans, buyers, and potential buyers of country music (Peterson, 1997). Collectively, they create a shared meaning of what authenticity is at a particular moment. Authenticity is thus a dynamic concept, created in an ongoing negotiation of meanings when actors interact with each other. Brown et al. (2003) also point out that the creation of authentic brands is a complex process because branding management in “a world of consumer-mediated meanings” is not imposed by marketers but co-created with stakeholders. In that way, authenticity is something marketers can deliberately create and add to brands but this process is always dependent on meaning negotiation with stakeholders.

As it appears, marketing and tourism research provide a quite comprehensive and diverse picture of the concept of authenticity. As it was also the case in PR studies, the concept of authenticity is typically seen as something that is socially constructed rather than inherent in object or situations. At the same time, it is also seen as a positive and normative ideal. This is also the case in research on political communication, where it is described how politicians strive to be perceived authentic.

2.5. Political communication research

Most research on the concept of authenticity within the field of political communication views authenticity as an ideal and there are certain characteristics that typically define authenticity, i.e. there are features that state whether politicians are authentic or inauthentic.

According to Louden & McCauliff (2004), perceived authenticity is crucial for the outcome of political campaigns, and they describe how some politicians have lost elections because they were not perceived authentic. Along the same lines, Brewer et al. (2014) argue that authenticity is “a key trait by which citizens judge political candidates”(p.743), and it is therefore important to know what people perceive authentic and what they perceive inauthentic. Brewer et al. (2014) studied citizens’ perceptions of authenticity regarding messages by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in the 2012 US presidential campaign, and they explain that authentic politicians are those who have traits such as sincerity, trustworthiness and honesty. Similarly, Montgomery (2001) examined features of authenticity adopted in a Party Election broadcast from the UK Conservative Party and argues that the performance of politicians is judged by their ability to appear accountable, honest, sincere and authentic. There are thus certain traits of authenticity, and personality is key for politicians to be perceived authentic. As a result, politicians are increasingly trying to demonstrate the person behind the public persona (Louden & McCauliff, 2004).

Along the same lines, Lilleker (2006) explains that politics traditionally was associated with rationality but today politicians must express emotions because people demand human and emotional interactions with politicians. Politicians therefore often present themselves as being emotional and allow their private lives to be publicised in attempts to create an authentic image. This is e.g. seen when politicians appear in non-political contexts, such as TV shows, where focus is on personality and

popular topics rather than on politics. In that way, strategic communication is used to accentuate politicians' humanity and emotions in order to make politics and politicians more desirable for the public. This focus on personality and emotions is a part of the professionalization of political communication that characterises the current postmodern era (Lilleker, 2006).

People's demand for authentic politicians can thus be seen as a driver for the professionalization of political communication, but, interestingly, it can at the same time be seen as a response to the professionalization of political communication, often negatively framed as spin. Montgomery (2001), among others, points out that authentic appearance of politicians is the opposite of being staged and prepared – authenticity is when scripts and rehearsals of performances are avoided and replaced with informality and spontaneity. In addition, Montgomery (2001) explains that 'authentic talk' essentially is when the audience "have an implicit guarantee that it is the speaker's own experience and reactions that are at stake rather than anyone else's" (p.460). This view of authenticity is somewhat similar to that of Rawlins & Stoker (2010) and Bowen (2010) discussed earlier.

As it appears, the concept of authenticity in political communication is, similarly to the other disciplines reviewed, seen as a normative ideal people are striving for, and there are certain characteristics of what authenticity is. Some scholars argue that strategically planned appearance is inauthentic while others acknowledge that strategic communication is used to create authenticity. Since the concept of authenticity can be seen as a response to the professionalization of political communication, an interesting paradox emerges: Communication professionals and politicians use techniques of professional communication to conceal or erase traces of professional communication techniques. Recently, social media has become an embraced technique for professional political

communication, and the following will therefore examine literature on authenticity in social media research.

2.6. Social media research

Only few studies within social media research focus on the concept of authenticity but several have mentioned authenticity as an aspect associated with social media.

Gilpin et al. (2010) argue that social media is designed to bring people together and the matter of perceived authenticity is therefore particularly relevant. Focusing on public institutions, Gilpin et al. (2010) further stress that: “authenticity is a fundamental requirement for public affairs communication” (p.274). In other words, for communication between public institutions and constituents to be effective, it is important to develop authentic relationships, and social media is seen as a key tool in this regard. According to Gilpin et al. (2010), social media both enables interpersonal dialogue between users and it creates a perception of close interaction and intimacy. Gilpin et al. (2010) also point out that ‘ordinary people’ in general are perceived as representing greater authenticity than ‘elite actors’ or ‘faceless institutions’. In that way, social media allows users, such as politicians, to create a perception of authentic relationships because it enables them to demonstrate the traits that are associated with authenticity.

Along the same lines, Henderson & Bowley (2010) explain that people today seek ‘the real’, which is “associated with the need for more person-to-person, or authentic, interactions” (p.242), and social media provide opportunities for such personal interactions. Kaplan & Haenlein (2011), who are often referred to in PR research on social media, also stress that social media enables user to create relations that are intimate and immediate. Although the ultimate form of social relations still is offline face-to-face interactions, social media enables users to appear more real

than other types of media does (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Here the concept of authenticity is also viewed rather normative with certain ideas of what is authentic and what is inauthentic.

Molleda (2010) also touches upon digital communication technologies and puts forward two interesting points. Firstly, Molleda (2010) explains that what was perceived authentic before the advent of digital communication technologies may be different from what is perceived authentic today. Consequently, the technological development has changed – and is changing – perceptions of authenticity. Secondly, Molleda (2010) argues that people’s perception of authenticity is challenged because the technological development has made it possible for copies to be exact clones of the original and thus made it difficult for people to tell the difference between real and fake. Boyd (2008) also points out that people cannot distinguish the original from the fake on social media and it is difficult to tell whether the person portrayed really is the creator behind.

2.7. Concluding summary

As this literature review suggests, the authenticity is a multifaceted and complex concept that is viewed differently depending on field of research as well as epistemology and ontology of the studies. While some early studies approached the concept of authenticity as an inherent essence of an object, most studies today agree that authenticity is instead socially constructed. However, what all studies have in common is that authenticity is viewed as a normative ideal and that there are certain characteristics that determine what is authentic and what is inauthentic. Thus, studies taking a constructivist approach may successfully deconstruct the essentialism in the concept of authenticity but appear to have difficulties detaching themselves from the underlying value system imposed by this essentialism, assuming that authenticity is ontologically present and authentic phenomena are better than inauthentic. In other words, despite the fact that studies take a constructivist approach to the

concept of authenticity they are restrained in a normative, essentialism thinking, which normally is associated with objectivism studies.

In that way, most studies view the concept of authenticity quite similar, despite their philosophical stance. Whether the concept of authenticity is viewed from an objectivist or constructivist perspective, the concept is accepted in a certain shape. By its very nature, authenticity is something positive and something people seek and strive for. Although constructivism studies view authenticity as dynamic and negotiated, it is rooted in the concept that authenticity is an ideal. It is thus difficult for constructivists to avoid taking over an essentialism value system when it comes to the concept of authenticity. This points towards an ontological problem and the need for developing research that is more sophisticated than the existing.

2.8. This study's contribution

Since existing theories on the concept of authenticity are restrained in essentialism assumptions, they do not manage to explain the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept. This thesis' contribution to the current body of knowledge is a theory grounded in empirical data that goes beyond the essentialism assumptions and the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity, which dominate existing literature on the concept of authenticity. This theory will help PR scholars and professionals to understanding when authenticity is of good quality and when it is of poor quality, which is more practically relevant than just pinpointing whether something or someone is authentic or inauthentic.

This thesis will thus contribute to PR scholarship, in which the concept of authenticity is understudied even though there are various reasons for approaching the concept from a PR perspective. Since focus in this thesis is on political communication and social media, it will at the same time contribute to political communication and social media scholarship.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Aim of chapter

This aim of this chapter is to explain the research design and methods that were chosen to study the research problem. This will include a description of theoretical perspectives that were drawn on in the analysis and a brief description of the participants.

3.2. Outline of research strategy

This study has taken a qualitative approach using qualitative research methods because focus is on exploring in depth how actors behave and make sense in certain situations, from the point of view of those actors. Specifically, a grounded theory approach was applied.

3.2.1. Grounded theory approach

There are several ways researchers can use theory in qualitative studies. According to Creswell (2014), studies can either use theory as broad explanations of behaviour and attitudes, as an overall theoretical lens or theory can be proposed as an end point (Creswell, 2014). This thesis has proposed theory as an end point, by developing a theory that is grounded in information from participants. This grounded theory approach is inductively in nature. Creswell (2014) explains the process as follows.

The researcher begins by gathering detailed information from participants and then forms this information into categories or themes. These themes are developed into broad patterns, theories, or generalizations that are then compared with personal experiences or with existing literature on the topic. (p.65)

This grounded theory approach was chosen because it is appropriate when little is known about the phenomenon that is studied (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). As the literature review demonstrates, research on the concept from a PR perspective is limited and research within both PR and related disciplines is restrained in essentialism assumptions, which means that the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept is not fully explored. Furthermore, grounded theory is particularly useful in studies that seek to discover theories used by those involved in the creation and interpretation of communication (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). As mentioned above, this thesis focused on exploring how actors behave and make sense in relation to the phenomenon studied and grounded theory was therefore suitable.

Central to grounded theory is that the researcher is open-minded and makes no assumptions before the research begins (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The grounded theory approach therefore suggests that theoretical perspectives or frameworks should not be adopted before the data is collected and analysed. The concern is that doing so will guide the study in a particular direction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, literature and key concepts should not be entirely ignored before and during the research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The literature review in the previous section was used to identify the current body of knowledge of the concept of authenticity and to demonstrate where this study is positioned in relation to that existing body of knowledge. Furthermore, existing literature also plays a key role during the research process. A central research technique in grounded theory is that collected data and ideas developing during the study are constantly compared with existing literature (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). During this process, theories and theoretical ideas are continually developed and modified, and grounded theory is developed as a result of this process of constant comparison. Finally, in the end of the research process, findings are, as already mentioned, compared with existing literature (Daymon & Holloway,

2011). In that way, literature plays a significant role throughout the entire research process.

Theory produced in grounded theory studies is either substantive or formal theory. Substantive theory emerges from a specific setting and is therefore relatively limited to that context (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Formal theory is developed from substantive theory but it is also generated from a variety of settings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, formal theory is regarded to have a higher generality than substantive theory but substantive theory may also have some general implications. Since this thesis has studied a phenomenon in a relatively specific setting, i.e. communication advisors assigned to politicians, the theory developed is substantive theory. Although the grounded theory of this study is substantive, it also may be relevant for other areas than political communication, i.e. for individuals and organisations seeking to be perceived authentic by their stakeholders.

Since it is important in grounded theory studies to be open-minded and to make no assumptions prior to the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it was necessary for this study to draw on theoretical perspectives that could counter-ontologise the essentialism assumptions like those found in existing literature.

3.3. Theoretical perspectives

This study drew on perspectives developed by Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco. Particularly the theory of hyperreality, explored by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986), and the theory of simulacra and simulation, proposed by Baudrillard (1981), were relevant for this thesis. These theories were appropriate because they are concerned with the concept of authenticity through their sophisticated examination of the relationship between society, reality and symbols.

Baudrillard and Eco have some views in common and they have views that significantly differ from each other. While Baudrillard is considered a postmodernist philosopher, strongly influenced by ideas of semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure (Poster, 1988), Eco considers himself a negative realist philosopher with the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce as a key influencer (Eco, 2013). Thus, Baudrillard and Eco are concerned with some of the same issues but they have different views due to their philosophical backgrounds. In the following, the concepts of Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) used in this study are explained, and differences as well as similarities between them are evaluated.

3.3.1. Hyperreality

Both Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) explore the phenomenon of hyperreality, which is a condition in which real and fake is seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between them. These blurred boundaries mean that the real may turn into fake and vice versa. Consequently, the concept of authenticity is challenged.

For Eco (1986), hyperreality describes the way contemporary culture is full of realistic fabrications and it is especially associated with American culture. In his book *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), Eco describes his travels in USA, where he experienced that boundaries between sign and reality, or between copy and original, are blurred. This is the concept of hyperreality – a world where real and fake is mixed so it becomes difficult for observers deciphering them apart from each other. Eco (1986) explains that “American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (p.8) to be consumed as real. Eco (1986) also refers to the ‘absolute fake’ as an “authentic copy” (p.20). On his travels, Eco (1986) observed that some tourists perceived reproductions of objects as being more real and better than the original. Consequently, the tourists had no desire to experience the original object.

In other words, people demand the real but they prefer fakes because they perform better.

According to Eco (1986) authenticity is thus not about originality or history but rather about genuine fakes. This acceptance of copies, imitation and the contrived also means that inauthenticity is not considered a problem. After visiting a museum on his travels, Eco (1986) explained:

The authenticity the Ripley's Museums advertise is not historical, but visual. Everything looks real, and therefore it is real; in any case that fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed. (p.16)

For Eco (1986), it is not the object that seems real that is real, but it is the fact that the object seems real that is real. In fact, the object is a fake. It is thus the process of interpretation that is real, not the object that is interpreted. Since Eco (1986) is concerned with the process of interpretation and not the object of interpretation, what matters it not if an objects is real or fake but how well it performs. From this perspective, authenticity is not seen as a normative ideal but what matters is the quality of authenticity.

Eco (1986) does not question the existence of reality because interpretations, according to him, must be related to some facts. This view is inspired by Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis, which suggests that there may not be an end to interpretations but there must be a starting point - there must be something to interpret (Eco, 1986; 2013; Brier, 2006). More radically, Baudrillard (1981) argues that there is no reality at all but only interpretations, Thus, it is mainly the limits of interpretation that distinguish Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) in their exploration of hyperreality. Baudrillard's (1986) more radical view of hyperreality is explained in his concept of simulacra and simulation.

3.3.2. Simulacra and simulation

According to Baudrillard (1981), all reality and meaning in today's society is replaced with symbols and signs, and people experience a simulation of reality mediated through simulacra. The concept of simulacra and simulation is therefore fundamental to hyperreality. Baudrillard (1981) explains that simulation is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (p.1). Simulation is thus about absence of originality, or absence of references to originality. Baudrillard (1981) illustrates that idea of simulation by quoting Littré: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (p.3). Simulacra refer to the images of simulation, and simulacra are thus fakes, copies and imitations with no original or history. Images in hyperreality, according to Baudrillard (1981), "have no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum" (p.6). In hyperreality, images are thus not just representations or reproductions of something. Images are simulated; they are simulacra.

3.3.3. Precession of simulation

In today's society, which is dominated by media and communication technologies, there are only simulations of reality and they are neither more nor less real than the reality they simulate (Baudrillard, 1981). Baudrillard (1981) explains that in this era, it is "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (p.2). In this condition, simulacra have even come to precede the real. This is referred to as the 'precession of simulation'. Simulacra are not copies of the real but truth in their own right. Since people think that what they experience in the media is more real than their actual lives, these simulacra, the images they consume through media, precede their lives (Baudrillard, 1981). Like Eco (1986) observed that people demand the real but prefer perfectly created fakes, Baudrillard (1981) explains that people are satisfied through simulation of

reality rather than through interaction with real reality. In hyperreality, technology thus plays a key role.

3.3.4. Technology in hyperreality

Both Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) point out the importance of technology in today's hyperreal society. Technology enables the production of fakes that are not just perfect but actually better than the real (Eco, 1986). Using Disneyland as example, Eco (1986) explains:

A real crocodile can be found in the zoo, and as a rule it is dozing or hiding, but Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands... Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can. (p.44)

In that way, people demand the real but they actually prefer fakes because they perform better. In addition, Baudrillard (1981) explains that people are so reliant on models that they have lost contact with the real world that preceded the models, and reality itself has simultaneously begun to imitate the models, which now precede the real world. Consequently, people are satisfied through simulation of reality rather than through interaction with real reality. In that way, technology is significantly influencing perceptions of real and fake - and thus perceptions of authenticity.

According to both Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986), what matters for authenticity in hyperreality is how convincing fakes are. Something is authentic if people are convinced that it is authentic. If a person perceives something as authentic, then it is authentic to that person. Authenticity thus depends on perceptions and they differ and change constantly.

The theories of Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) show that it is possible to approach the concept of authenticity in a non-essentialist way. When

transcending the typical dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity it becomes possible to explore and evaluate the quality of authenticity. In other words, it becomes possible to make a distinction between good and bad authenticity instead of viewing authenticity as good and inauthenticity as bad.

3.4. Data collection

It is central to grounded theory that the analysis begins when the first data is collected, and the findings of this analysis then guides the following data collection (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this way, the research becomes more focused as the research process progresses. Data collection continues until the end of the research process, i.e. until a proper theory has been developed. This point of time, referred to as 'theoretical saturation', is when it is assumed that additional work cannot change the proposed theory significantly (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Collection of primary data was carried out in form of six interviews with five communication advisors that either are assigned to top politicians currently or have previously been assigned to top politicians. Secondary data was deliberately excluded, because the aim is to explore in-depth the views of the involved actors, i.e. the participants interviewed. The sampling strategy and interviews as research methods are explained in the following.

3.4.1. Sampling strategy

In grounded theory, theoretical sampling is used as sampling strategy. Theoretical sampling is an unique research technique because it is not planned beforehand but develops during the research process. In theoretical sampling, the researcher makes sampling decisions in the initial phase and then the findings guide sampling decisions in the following phases (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), as explained above.

For this thesis, the sampling decision in the initial phase was to sample communication advisors assigned to top politicians and only communication advisors assigned to members of the Danish parliament and members of European Parliament were included in the sample. The main reasons for these criteria was that many of these top politicians have communication advisors assigned and attract attention from the media and the public daily (Winther, 2012). This includes attention on social media, which is the focus of this thesis. This relatively homogenous sample was chosen because I wanted to study the views of this particular group of people.

Based on the sampling criteria, I identified potential participants using desk research and sent them a request for participating. This resulted in interviews with three participants. After each interview I asked participants to help finding other informants with interest in and knowledge about the topic studied. In that way, I used existing participants to get in contact with potential participants relevant to the study, similar to the snowball, or chain referral, sampling technique (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). The snowball sampling technique is particularly useful when informants are not easily accessible (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), which is to some degree the case with the topic of this study. This method helped me finding two more participants. As the research process turned out, I found it relevant to interview one of the participants twice because some ideas emerged during the research process. Thus, a part of theoretical sampling for this study involved decisions to request people, which I had not thought of in the initial phase, to participate and to interview one participant twice. In total, requests were sent to 23 communication advisors. Of these, three replied that they could not participate because they were too busy and two replied that they were not allowed to participate. The remaining 13 never replied my request.

The sample of this thesis thus ended up consisting of five participants. The relatively small sampling size was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, a key advantage with such a small sample is that it allows an in-depth and careful exploration of the phenomenon – both from the point of view of the participants taken together and of the individual participants. Secondly, sample sizes do not have to be very large in studies, where the sample is relatively homogenous (Bryman, 2008). In addition, the sample size was also a result of saturation in the research process. In other words, the collection of data ended when it was considered unlikely that additional data would change the proposed theory significantly.

3.4.2. Interviews

Collection of data was carried out as in-depth, one-to-one interviews. As research method, such interviews enable researchers to collaboratively explore meanings, perceptions, ideas, values and feelings of participants (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Interviews were thus chosen as they enable an understanding of the participants', i.e. communication advisors', worldview to be developed.

Interviews allow participants to answer spontaneously and also to spend time reflecting on their answers (Kvale, 2007). Furthermore, interviews enable researchers to 'go with the flow' if something interesting and unexpected should appear during the interviews (Kvale, 2007). In this way, it is the responses of the participants that determine how the interviews develop. Thus, responses and knowledge guide the researcher to concentrate on certain areas, which means that interviews differ from each other, in terms of both structure and wording of the questions (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). This is suitable for the dynamic nature of grounded theory studies. To ensure the interviews were as flexible as possible, while still being directed by the overall research questions, the interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews.

For semi-structured interviews I prepared interview guides covering themes to be explored and questions to guide the process of exploring these themes. These interview guides ensured that similar types of data were collected from all participants, although specific questions were adapted to the situations and to the responses given by the participants (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). During the interviews, both broad questions and more specific questions were asked. Moreover, follow up questions were asked when responses provided insights that were interesting to further explore. With the participant that was interviewed twice, the second interview was conducted via telephone, as this was easiest for the participant. All interviews were conducted in Danish for the convenience of the participants, as that is their mother language and the language they mainly use in their daily work. This means that quotes used in the analysis have been translated from Danish to English.³

The interviews were audio-recorded but participants were asked for permission before recording. There are two main reasons for audio-recording the interviews. Firstly, such recording ensures that all words of the interview are captured. Secondly, it enables the researcher to pay attention to what the participant says and to maintain eye contact with the participant during the interview, without having to focus on taking notes.

3.5. Relationship between researcher and participants

As in every other relationship, dialogue and transparency is important in order to keep a trustful atmosphere. It is important to stress that welfare of participants has been crucial throughout the entire process and that I have communicated openly with the participants about the study's purpose and research methods. I have thus followed the suggestion put forward by

³ Transcriptions of the interviews can be translated and provided upon request.

Fontana & Frey (2005) that it is important to exercise responsibility, first to the participants, then to the study and finally to oneself. All participants were offered the opportunity to request anonymity, and one participant made use of this option. After the interviews were conducted, I also offered participants the opportunity to be kept updated with relevant information about the thesis, if they wished. The participants were moreover offered the chance to read a final version of the thesis to check if there were any misinterpretation of their answers. They all just wished to read how I had quoted them and translated these quotes. One participant suggested that some words in his quotes to be translated differently. I agreed to that and adjusted his quotes accordingly.

It has to be mentioned that all participants knew the topic of the study before they were interviewed. This may have influenced the interviews, and thus the data collected, as it gave the participants time to reflect on it and prepare for answers. However, what the participants knew about the topic differed slightly. Due to the grounded theory approach, the topic was relatively broad in the beginning but it became narrower throughout the research process. One participant required receiving a document with the research question and the interview guide before the interview. In that way, he knew in advance the research question, as it was formulated at that time, as well as the questions for the interview, although some of them changed during the interview, some were not asked and some were added. This means that he had more time to think about it and to prepare answers and it may have made the interview less spontaneous than it would else be. The other participants were only able to prepare very little as they did not know what questions that would be asked. As a result, this gave some variance in the data collection.

3.6. Considerations about qualitative research

Although qualitative methods were the most appropriate to use in this thesis, there were some important aspects to consider.

A limitation using semi-structured and flexible methods is that it may be more difficult to compare answers when the questions are adapted to each interview situation. However, this is at the same time the advantage of qualitative research, including grounded theory, as it makes it possible for new and spontaneous ideas to suddenly emerge. It just requires a creative and open-minded researcher, which I have strived to be.

In addition, it is a concern that findings from qualitative research may not be either generalizable or transferable because they are developed in a specific setting and involve a small sample (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). It is not possible to say whether other communication advisors would have given similar answers because others' experiences, opinions and interpretations may be different than those of the participants in this study. However, as the concept of theory-based generalization suggests, it is the theories and claims generated in the research, rather than the answers from participants, that may be possible to transfer to other settings and cases (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that participants can have framed their answers in favour of themselves and/or the politician they are assigned to. The participants could, in other words, have a hidden agenda with their answers. Additionally, participants can have given wrong answers by mistake. These concerns are, however, not limited to qualitative research but to research in general (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). However, I have no reasons to believe that any participants have not said the truth; it just has to be mentioned as a possibility that exists in research in general and therefore also in this thesis.

3.7. Quality of research

The ensuring of quality is already implicitly explained but it will be elaborated here. Ensuring the quality of interpretative research like this thesis can be done in several different ways. Inspired by Lincoln & Guba (1985), Daymon & Holloway (2011) suggest that the quality of research should be judged by the criteria 'authenticity' and 'trustworthiness'.

Authenticity means is in this regard - and *only* in this regard - that reported findings truly demonstrate the participants' ideas, when the study is fair to the participants and when it helps them understand their practice. The key word here is 'fairness', which means ensuring that the voices of all participants have had the chance to be represented and treated with balance (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). As the analysis shows, every participant in this study has contributed with relevant knowledge and every participant is referred to and quoted several times.

Trustworthiness is in this regard evaluated by the sub-criteria of credibility and transferability (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). According to Lincoln & Guba (2005), a study is credible when participants recognise the meaning the research has for them, and this is ensured in this study through member checking, as explained earlier. Transferability is close to the concept of theory-based generalization suggests, which suggests that it is the theories and claims generated in the research rather than the answers from participants that may be possible to transfer to other settings and cases. As already explained, the theory developed in this thesis is substantive, and thus limited to a specific context. However, the theory still has general implications that go beyond this specific setting and beyond the discipline of PR. It is, in other words, not the findings of the study but the theoretical ideas and the grounded theory that are applicable to a wider context.

3.8. Bibliography of participants

The participants and the politicians they are/have been assigned to are briefly described below.⁴

Kristian Wederkinck Olesen, interviewed on March 19 and April 28

Olesen is Political Advisor to Morten Messerschmidt, Leader of Danish People's Party (DPP) in the European Parliament. Messerschmidt is active on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Thomas Nystrøm, interviewed on March 24

Nystrøm is Special Advisor to Pia Olsen Dyhr, Party Leader of Socialist People's Party (SPP) in the Danish Parliament. Olsen Dyhr is active on Facebook and Twitter.

Anonymous participant, interviewed March 31

Former Accredited Assistant to a Member of European Parliament. For the convenience of the readers, the participant has been given the fictive name 'Jensen' and the politician he has been assigned to has been given the fictive name 'Hansen'. Hansen is active on Facebook and Twitter.

Karl Kjær Bang, interviewed April 17

Karl Kjær Bang is former Political Advisor and Chief of Staff for Dan Jørgensen when he was leader of the Danish delegation of Social Democrats in the European Parliament. Jørgensen is active on Facebook, on Twitter and on Instagram.

⁴ As it appears, the participants have different job titles. In the following, 'communication advisors' will be used as umbrella term for all the participants.

Mark Thorsen, interviewed April 20

Mark Thorsen is Political Advisor to Inger Støjberg, Political Affairs Spokeswoman of Venstre, Denmark's Liberal Party, in the Danish Parliament. Støjberg is active on Facebook.

4. Analysis

4.1. Aim of chapter

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the collected data. The analysis presented here reflects that data has been constantly compared with existing literature and that theoretical perspectives by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) have been drawn on.

4.2. Essentialist traits of authenticity

Communication advisors and politicians have certain ideas of what authenticity is, and they do not hesitate using the concept of authenticity to evaluate other politicians by pinpointing whether they are authentic or inauthentic. The most central notions among communication advisors and politicians are that politicians are authentic when they have a human character and when there is coherence between his/her identity and behaviour.

4.2.1. *Human character*

According to the participants in this study, authenticity is closely associated with the personal aspect, and presenting the person behind the politician is important. E.g. Karl Bang said:

You can enhance the feeling of authenticity if you add more private life to the politician's profile [on Facebook]. Authenticity is also enhanced when the politician discusses comments. Such things basically give a feeling of the person behind.

The common notion is thus that politicians appear authentic when people have a feeling that they are 'humans of flesh and blood' so people can

relate to and identify with them. Both Bang and Thomas Nystrøm used the expression “to feel” the politician. Along the same lines, Jensen said that, “it means a lot to show what kind of person it is”. According to the participants, typical methods politicians use to demonstrate the person behind the politician include publicising their private life, showing emotions and appearing in non-political contexts. The participants pointed out that these characteristics describe authenticity both in general and on social media but the significant difference is that politicians have better opportunities to demonstrate authenticity on social media than in other types of media.

The participants emphasised the great opportunities social media provides for politicians to appear authentic. This is because interactions on social media usually are personal, informal and spontaneous. Put differently, the characteristics that are attached to the concept of authenticity, such as having a human character and showing emotions, are possible to communicate on social media. It may even be expected that politicians appear in this way on social media. The participants also explained that personal updates on social media profiles are often more popular than updates that are politically focused. Nystrøm e.g. said that people on social media in general, “demand the thing with the politician as a whole person – and that is where Facebook particularly is effective.” In that way, the feeling of interpersonal and intimate relations are central for perceptions of authenticity and social media provides great opportunities for politicians to create such perceptions.

The interpretations of the participants thus correspond with existing literature on political communication that stresses the human character of politicians and links it to features such as being informal, spontaneous and emotional (Montgomery, 2001; Louden & McCauliff, 2004; Lilleker, 2006) and with literature on social media that highlights the opportunities for politicians to demonstrate such features (Gilpin et al., 2010; Henderson &

Bowley, 2010). As explained earlier, these are objectivist rather than constructivist assumptions due to their normative approach and essentialism thinking. However, at the same time, it can be argued that these normative ideas also reflect a postmodern thinking because of the emphasis on emotions rather than facts and the appearance of politicians in non-political contexts in order to promote political ideas (Lilleker, 2006). Such ideas and trends constantly change and, as Molleda (2010) pointed out, what was considered authentic only a decade ago may be considered inauthentic today and vice versa.

4.2.2. Coherence between identity and behaviour

The participants also emphasised that politicians are not automatically perceived authentic just because they demonstrate that they have a human character, e.g. by publicising their private life and showing emotions. A politician's behaviour must be in accordance with his/her core values and beliefs. To put it simply, politicians must be the same on the inside as on the outside. Although demonstrating a human character is regarded central for the authenticity of politicians, it must align with the person so that there is coherence between identity and behaviour. Nystrøm pointed out that something is not authentic, when "it is too far from the person and it is too intended". This is somewhat similar to Montgomery's (2001) argument that politicians' behaviour must reflect who they really are and not what they may pretend to be. In that way, it is not enough just to present the person behind the politician but it must be the 'right' person that is presented and it must not look staged. Rather, it must seem natural and harmonious.

Mark Thorsen explained it this way:

There is nothing more ridiculous than politicians trying to be ordinary, if they actually are not ordinary. It is fair enough not being ordinary. My good friend Søren Pind [MP for Venstre],

he is definitely not ordinary. But he does not pretend to be ordinary, he allows himself to be extraordinary.

What matters is thus whether people are themselves or pretending to be someone else. This was also highlighted in existing literature on authenticity, most clearly in PR studies, where scholars stressed the importance of keeping individuals and organisations faithful to their core values and true self (Rawlins & Stoker, 2010; Bowen, 2010; Molleda, 2010). When participants believe that politicians have certain core values and beliefs and a 'true' identity that can be expressed, it underlines that the participants also are caught in an essentialism value system.

As it appears, these two central notions of authenticity are closely related to each other, and both of them correspond to existing literature on the concept. There seems to be assumptions in both existing literature and among participants that there are certain traits characterising what is authentic and what is inauthentic. In literature, it was, at the same time, acknowledged that authenticity always depends on individual interpretations, and this is also the case among the participants, as the following will show.

4.3. Authenticity depends on interpretation

As demonstrated above, communication advisors and politicians have certain rather fixed ideas of what authenticity is, and politicians follow these by presenting themselves in certain ways. At the same time, the participants also acknowledge that authenticity implies interpretation, and that perceptions of authenticity will therefore always depend on the eye of the beholder. Bang e.g. said:

Dan's [Jørgensen] opinions are the same and he fights for the same, but of course the particular choice of message depends on the context. It is important to appear authentic no matter where you are, but there are different techniques [one can use], and

different expectations from the audience to what is being said or to how one behaves.

In that way, aligning the politician with the audiences is a key part of the communication advisors' job, and understanding interpretations and expectations of the audience is crucial in order to do so. Bang further elaborated:

You make a judgement of which message should be central in a given situation... You are aware that things will be received in a certain way and therefore you also decide what you want to focus on.

This shows that the participants acknowledge the importance of individual interpretation, and that perceptions of authenticity vary between people and are context-dependent. What is considered authentic for one person may be different for another, and it may change over time and be different from context to context. However, the participants are at the same time also restrained in an essentialist value system when describing their interpretation and application of the concept of authenticity. Authenticity is understood as something with ontological presence, which can be revealed or highlighted, and the participants only acknowledge that authenticity depends on individuals' interpretations to the extent that people judge things as being either authentic or inauthentic. In that way, the participants are, like existing research literature, caught in the normative and dichotomous thinking. This is also evident in their interpretation and approach to authenticity on social media.

4.4. Authenticity on social media

The participants agreed that social media provides great opportunities for politicians to appear authentic because it allows them to demonstrate the traits that, in their view, characterise authenticity, such as being emotional and showing the politician as a whole person. Additionally, the

participants also emphasised that through social media they can communicate directly with people – at least those actively following the politician – bypassing journalists and other gatekeeping functions.

Thus, social media allows politicians to give their own unedited version of what they think and do. In the participants' view, this gives people a more nuanced and coherent picture of what politicians prioritise in their work and in their private life than the picture produced through or by conventional media. Kristian Olesen e.g. said:

When you manage what information should be communicated, then people will most likely get a truer picture. If you communicate through [conventional] media, the story is edited and influenced by the journalists' perspective. On Facebook, you get Morten [Messerschmidt] – you get him as the person he is.

Along the same lines, Bang explained:

You won't get a story through [conventional media] if it is just positive. It is very rare that positive news is taken [by conventional media]. They don't think that is interesting... Facebook has another role... You have the opportunity to express positive values about how you want society to develop.

In that way, politicians and communication advisors can influence how people will perceive the politician – especially those that actively follow the politician on social media – more directly on social media than in other types of more conventional media.

At the same time, the participants also agreed that being authentic on social media requires that the politician himself/herself is involved and committed to it. The participants explained that they are not able to be authentic on behalf of another person, i.e. the politician they are assigned to, because it has to be the real person. About acting on behalf of Dan Jørgensen on social media, Bang e.g. said:

He is who he is. You can see it when he comments, then he sometimes does so with indignation or humour because he is a human and he is a politician who is committed and fights for the things he believes in... If I should act as though I was Dan on social media, and be indignant on his behalf, it would not be authentic.

In that way, Bang believes that only Jørgensen can be Jørgensen on social media and anything else would be inauthentic. The notion that authenticity refers to a true essence is thus clearly evident, as both communication advisors and politicians believe that authenticity must come from the politician. Bang further said that it would “obviously” not be authentic and it would be “easy to find out” if another person than Jørgensen was handling his social media profiles. Similarly, Nystrøm explained about Pia Olsen Dyhr’s social media profiles:

She manages it herself, because she is actually pretty good at it. And it gives some genuineness. You notice those politician profiles where others probably have written it and those where you can feel the person.

Nystrøm thus also stresses that it is easy for people to tell if politicians are handling social media profiles themselves or if others are doing it on their behalf. Jensen also reflected on the possibility of acting authentically on behalf of Hansen. Jensen said that, “One cannot just get someone to do it. I mean then you really have to be ‘of a piece’”. For him, it is thus also important for authenticity on social media that it is the politician himself/herself. This view is almost similar to that of Bang and Nystrøm but Jensen acknowledges that it may be possible, if the politician has assigned a communication advisor that can act exactly like the politician on social media.

All things considered, participants agreed that for politicians to seem authentic on social media, the profiles must be managed by the real

person or by a person that knows the politician so well that he/she can act exactly like the politician. The advisor-politician relationship of Olesen and Morten Messerschmidt is a particularly interesting case in this regard and will be examined in the next.

4.4.1. Olesen & Messerschmidt

Olesen and Messerschmidt believe that Olesen can manage social media profiles in an authentic way because he knows Messerschmidt so well that he is able to act exactly like him on social media.

Typically, Messerschmidt and Olesen manage the social media profiles together by discussing what should be done, how it should be done and when it should be done. However, Olesen often acts on behalf of Messerschmidt on social media without Messerschmidt being involved because they believe – and have decided – that Olesen can act on behalf of Messerschmidt on social media in an authentic way. According to Olesen, this is possible because the relationship between him and Messerschmidt is unique. In that way, Olesen and Messerschmidt are ‘of a piece’. Olesen explained it this way:

Well, Morten and I are childhood friends so we have known each other for many years. That means that I know the spontaneity Morten has as a private person. So I can write on behalf of him and know exactly how he feels. Our relationship is a little unique in the way that we know each other extremely well.

In that way, Olesen and Messerschmidt are closely cooperating, and Olesen knows exactly how to behave so it seems real because he knows Messerschmidt extremely well. Olesen further explained:

Actually, I think I have authority to everything. That’s because we know each other so well. I know when I have to ask for permission, I know when things are dangerous to upload, and in those cases we’ll discuss it on text messages.

Thus, the simplicity or complexity of cases is an important parameter. Olesen explained that he upload things, “if it’s something ridiculously simple, where I know it just has to be uploaded” but “when lambasting a political person or the media, or if it’s something that is a bit technical, then we have to agree about it”. Another important parameter is the different platforms. Olesen explained:

In general, we never put something on Twitter if we don’t agree that it should be put on Twitter. Then we are text messaging – from him to me – should we put this on Twitter? And then I write “yes”. Then he’ll upload it if he’s near the profile, or I’ll upload it. But we have an interaction about it.

When it comes to Facebook, it is different. Olesen said:

I have greater authority there... Sometimes he uploads something himself but then we have briefly talked about it before. But my impression is that Facebook is a bit softer in the way that we don’t have to agree entirely.

In that way, Olesen plays a key role in the management of Messerschmidt’s social media profiles, and they are both confident with this because of their close relationship.

This demonstrates that participants think that for social media profiles of politicians to seem authentic, politicians either have to manage it themselves or they have to assign a person who knows them inside out to manage it. Authenticity is thus associated with the ‘real’ – whether it is the politician himself/herself or a person that is able to act so it seems like the real person. This underlines that the participants, and the politicians they are assigned to, are influenced by essentialism thinking, when interpreting and applying the concept of authenticity, as they assume that authenticity is something with ontological presence, which can be revealed or highlighted.

4.5. Invisible simulators

The participants' interpretation and application of the concept of authenticity is particularly interesting because on social media it is difficult to tell whether the person portrayed really is the person behind (Boyd, 2008).

Social media dissolves the distinction between real and fake and it is therefore difficult for people to decipher them a part from each other. In fact, social media profiles are just images of politicians simulated on a screen of an electronic device. This means that when people interact with politicians through social media, they are not interacting with the politician but with a simulated image of the politician. People are interacting with simulacra, to use Baudrillard's (1981) term, and it is not possible for people to see who the simulators behind them are.

Although people cannot see who is behind social media profiles, the participants clearly agreed that the real person must be involved in managing the social media profiles - or alternatively, the communication advisors doing it for them must act exactly like the real person - because it must reflect the 'real'. This implies that authenticity actually is ontologically present. However, from a constructivist perspective, authenticity is not a property of people or an essence that exists somewhere but rather a socially constructed concept realised in human interpretations. Therefore, it could be argued that there is actually no need for the real person to be involved as long as it looks like this person is involved.

According to Baudrillard (1981), there is no reality at all but only interpretations. From this view, social media profiles of politicians are digital representations that are simulated and thus have no reference to any reality at all. Therefore, social media profiles managed by the politician are no more 'real', or authentic, than if they are managed by

another person. In other words, politicians' social media profiles are authentic, if someone interprets them as authentic. What matters is therefore not who is managing the social media profiles but if they meet the expectations people have of them. Clearly, this view transcends the typical essentialism thinking.

Since no one can see who the simulator behind social media images is, it could be argued that politicians do not have to be involved at any time as long as it looks like he/she is involved. However, it requires for the person managing the social media profiles on behalf of the politician, i.e. the assigned communication advisor, to know what people expect from the politician on social media. This implies that the communication advisors are able to understand and align with the expectations of the audience.

4.6. Interpretation depends on codes

As explained above, the participants agreed that for social media profiles of politicians to seem authentic, the real person, or someone who knows the real person extremely well, must manage it. From a constructivist perspective, it could be argued that anyone could in principle manage social media profiles of politicians, as long as they meet the expectations of the audience.

For Eco (1986) it is not important if an object, in this case social media profiles, reflects reality but rather that the object meets the audience's expectations of how reality looks. This means that authenticity is about matching the audience's expectations of what is authentic. What matters is thus not if it is the politician or a communication advisor that has simulated the image on social media. What matters is instead how well the image matches the expectations the audience holds regarding the

politician, and therefore understanding the codes that determine the interpretations is crucial.⁵

Eco (1986) is concerned with the process of interpretation rather than the object of interpretation and explains that the battle for communication professionals “is not to be won where communication originates, but where it arrives” (p.142) because audiences in a communication process can attribute a variety of meanings depending on the code they already hold. In other words, for a perception of authenticity to be established, communication advisors and politicians must understand the code of the audience and align with it in a convincing way because the code determines the audience’s expectations and thus how authenticity should be created. Eco (1986) also pointed out that in hyperreality, the winner is the most skilful ‘falsifier’, which means the one that has the most effective techniques for creating fakes that meet the expectations of the audience.

Based on this, it can be said that creating perceived authenticity thus is about connecting with codes in a convincing way. This is closely related to framing, which essentially involves connecting with the underlying psychological processes people use to evaluate information and make sense of their social world (Hallahan, 1999). In that way, the technique of framing is used to connect with codes and it requires that the politician and the communication advisor understand the code of the audience, i.e. what the audience expects from the politician, and know how to act in accordance to that.

The participants emphasised the aspect of aligning with the expectations of the audience as a crucial part of their job. Bang e.g. said:

⁵ Here the term ‘code’ refers to a concept within semiotics. Eco (1986) defines a code as “an established system of probabilities” (p.138). More simply, it can alternatively be defined as a social convention between individuals, which they use to understand the world around them (Brier, 2006).

Knowing your audience is essential to all communication and also basically what makes some politicians successful and others less so. The successful ones have a strong sense of who they are as person but they also have a feeling of what turns ordinary people on and what turns them off.

It thus appears that decisions of framing are key for communication advisors. According to Hallahan (1999), framing decisions are fundamental to PR practice and PR professionals operate as 'frame strategists'. In that way, communication advisors' job is to strategically frame communication so it connects with the code of the audience.

While Eco (1986) focuses on the process of interpretation rather than the object of interpretation, the participants focused on the object and how to align it with expectations of the audience. Bang e.g. said:

You have the politician. Politicians have strong opinions. What you have to decide is how to communicate the opinions most effectively to a particular target group in a particular context.

Along the same lines, Olesen explained:

Communication, it is very target group-oriented... We know 100 % where Morten is and how Morten is... Therefore, we are 100 % sure about the sender. But the target group differs between Facebook and Twitter.

Thus, the participants agreed that aligning with the expectations of the audience is crucial for politicians to be perceived authentic but they focus on the politician – the 'true' nature of the politician – as point of departure. This underlines that participants believe that the social media profiles must reflect 'truth', or 'reality', in order to be perceived authentic. Based on this, it can be said that the concept of authenticity from the view of the participants belongs to the 'domain of the truth', rather than to the 'domain of the code' as a constructivist perspective suggests.

While the participants stressed that for social media profiles to be authentic, the real person or someone who knows the real person very well has to manage them, a constructivist perspective inspired by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) would argue that anyone could in principle manage social media profiles as long as they are able to understand the codes of the audience and act in accordance to them. The case of Olesen and Messerschmidt demonstrated the assumption that Olesen is able to act on social media as if he was Messerschmidt in a convincing way, due to the intimacy of their relationship and Olesen's ability to imitate Messerschmidt. A constructivist perspective would rather argue that Olesen is able to act so it seems like it is Messerschmidt because of Olesen's knowledge of the codes of the audience and because of this experience with framing.

4.7. Fakes perform better

It thus appears that connecting with codes of the audience is a fundamental part of communication advisors' job. Combined with social media's great opportunities for communicating directly with people, it may be possible to create perfect social media profiles of politicians.

According to Eco (1986), 'fakes' often perform better than the real because they simply are better at meeting the expectations of the audience. With regards to this analysis, the term 'fakes' means social media profiles, as they are not the real politician but a simulated image of the politician. Eco (1986) also pointed out that technology enables the creation of 'fakes' that are not just perfect but actually better than the 'real', and perfect 'fakes' are in this regard social media profiles that are better at meeting the expectations of the audience than the real politicians are.

As explained earlier, the participants emphasised that social media allows politicians to communicate their own unedited version directly to the people following them, bypassing journalists and other gatekeeping

functions. This means that social media profiles can present politicians exactly how the politicians want to be presented and, if skilfully created, they can at the same time meet the expectations people have of the politician. In that way, social media provides politicians and communication advisors great opportunities for constructing a certain 'reality', which people following the profiles will experience. This could e.g. be communicating positive stories, which conventional media would not take due to their newsworthiness criteria, as Bang pointed out.

With social media, politicians and communication advisors can thus create 'perfect' images of the politician on social media, if they understand the codes of the audience and are able to connect with them. Eco (1986) pointed out that people demand the real but prefer fakes because they perform better and Baudrillard (1981) argued that people are satisfied through simulation of reality rather than through interaction with real reality. Since people rarely, if ever, meet the real politicians, they may be satisfied with experiencing the politicians on social media if what they experience corresponds to their expectations. From the perspective of Baudrillard (1981), the presentation of politicians on social media are simulated and has therefore no reference to reality but people will think it reflects the real politician's 'real' life, if it is presented in a convincing way.

This means that it may be more important knowing what the audience expects from the politician and being able to manage social media profiles in accordance to that than to know the politician extremely well, as the participants stressed. In relation to this, Thorsen pointed out an interesting aspect, when explaining the role of communication advisors. Thorsen said:

I think advisors can play a role when they have worked together with a politician for a while because then you learn – as you see things from the outside – to say “that is a suitable format”, or “that worked well for you when you did it that way or said it in that way”. Maybe the politician, since she is in the

spotlight, is not able to pay attention to it, or is too busy to pay attention to it.

In that way, the communication advisors can help the politician appearing authentic because they both know what ideas and opinions the politician wants to communicate and they know how to connect these with codes of the audience in convincing ways. Based on this, it could be argued that communication advisors may even be better at creating perceived authenticity than the politician himself/herself, as communication advisors “see things from the outside”.

Since communication advisors, operating as ‘frame strategists’ or ‘skilful falsifiers’, are competent in connecting with codes in convincing ways and because they “see things from the outside”, it can be argued that they are just as good as, or even better, at managing politicians’ social media profiles than politicians themselves. On social media, people cannot see who are the simulators of social media images, and therefore anyone could in principle simulate them, as long as it is done in a convincing way. As ‘skilful falsifiers’, to stay with Eco’s (1986) term, communication advisors could thus simulate perfect images of politicians on social media better than the politicians themselves.

4.8. Quality of authenticity

As it appears, communication advisors could create, or simulate, a perfect image of the politician on social media – an image that would perhaps even perform better than if constructed by the politician himself/herself.

From a constructivist perspective inspired by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986) it could be argued that authenticity does not have to come from politicians themselves, because authenticity is not ontologically present but rather socially constructed. Communication advisors can create authenticity on behalf of politicians as long as they know what the

audience expects from the politician and are able to act in accordance to that.

In other words, quality of authenticity has nothing to do with who creates the authenticity but how well it is created. What matters for the quality of authenticity is how convincing the simulated social media images are, because if something seems authentic to someone, then it is authentic to that person. Therefore, the quality of authenticity may be just as good or even better when it comes from communication advisors instead of politicians.

However, currently the participants seem to be restrained in an essentialism value system and a normative dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic, as it is also the case with existing literature. Since communication advisors and politicians interpret and apply the concept of authenticity as belonging to 'the domain of the truth' rather than 'the domain of the code', communication advisors may be hindered from creating perfect images of politicians. Transcending the essentialism assumptions and the typical dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic would thus have significant implications for the creation of perceived authenticity and for the role of communication advisors.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

5.1. Aim of chapter

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the analysis by comparing these findings with existing literature and, as a result thereof, demonstrate how this thesis contributes to the existing body of knowledge. In addition, concluding remarks are proposed and, finally, a direction for future research is suggested.

5.2. Comparison with existing literature

The review of existing literature demonstrated that the concept of authenticity is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that is viewed differently depending on field of research as well as epistemology and ontology of the studies. Although most studies today agree that authenticity is a socially constructed concept, they are restrained in an essentialism value system that understands and approaches the concept in a rather normative way where things are considered either authentic or inauthentic.

The analysis found that communication advisors have certain ideas of what the concept of authenticity means and these ideas influence what they think is authentic or inauthentic. The two most central notions are that politicians are authentic when they have a human character and when there is coherence between their identity and behaviour. These are similar to notions identified in research literature on political communication (Montgomery, 2001; Loudon & McCauliff, 2004; Lilleker, 2006), social media research literature (Gilpin et al., 2010; Henderson & Bowley, 2010) and in some research literature on PR (Rawlins & Stoker, 2010; Bowen,

2010; Molleda, 2010). This shows that participants think of authenticity as something that is ontologically present and can be revealed or highlighted, and the participants only acknowledge that authenticity depends on individuals' interpretations insofar that people judge things as being either authentic or inauthentic. In other words, it seems that participants are restrained in essentialism assumptions and the typical dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic similar to the existing literature.

The participants also agreed that social media provides great opportunities for politicians to appear authentic because it allows them to demonstrate the traits that, in their view, characterise authenticity. This is similarly to research literature on social media (Gilpin et al., 2010; Henderson & Bowley, 2010). In addition, participants stressed that social media allows politicians to give their own unedited version of what they prioritise, which gives politicians great opportunities for influencing people's perceptions. This point was not explicit in existing research on authenticity in relation to social media but it was a central aspect for the participants.

Although the participants interpret authenticity as a rather fixed concept and apply it in a normative and dichotomous way, they, simultaneously, point out that it is a dynamic concept that depends on interpretations. Similarly, Beverland (2005) and Molleda (2010) stressed that authenticity is a feature, which marketers and PR professionals deliberately can add to products, events, organisations or people but the process of creating authenticity depends on audiences as well as institutional and social contexts because authenticity is socially constructed. The participants agreed that interpretations of the audience are important, and they explain that it is their job to most effectively align the politician's values and beliefs with the expectations of audiences.

This view is somewhat similar to Molleda's (2010) explanation that "encoders use relevant symbols crafted as features of the portrayed identity, which must reflect experiences and expectations of the target segment of society - the targeted audience" (p.228) but it is different from Beverland's (2005) argument that creation of authenticity involves "projecting an image that is partly true and partly rhetorical" (p.1008). From the participants' view, authenticity rather involves projecting an image that is entirely true but rhetorically adapted to specific audiences and contexts. In that way, the point of departure for the participants when creating perceived authenticity is the 'true' nature of the politician rather than the receivers' interpretations.

To put it simply, the participants agreed that communication advisors and politicians must understand the code of the audience, as this is key for a perception of authenticity to be established, but they also believe that authenticity of politicians must come from the politician himself/herself as he/she is the real person, or alternatively from a person that knows the politician extremely well and therefore is able to act exactly like him/her. The participants believe it must be so despite the fact that people cannot see who is the person behind politicians' social media profiles.

To move beyond the dominating essentialism thinking and the typical dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic, the analysis drew on perspectives by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986). Inspired by these perspectives, it was suggested that communication advisors are able to create social media profiles of politicians that are perceived authentic because what matters for creating authentic social media profiles is not if the real person is involved but rather how well the profiles matches the expectations that the audience holds regarding the politician.

Furthermore, still inspired by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986), it was suggested that communication advisors may even better be able to create

authentic profiles because they “see things from outside” and because they know how to connect with the codes of the audience better than politicians themselves do. Within the ‘established system of probabilities’ social media profiles created by communication advisors may simply be more ‘probable’ than profiles created by politicians themselves. As ‘skilful falsifiers’, communication advisors could thus, in principle, create perfect social media profiles of politicians without the politicians being involved at any time.

In conclusion, it is suggested that social media profiles managed by communication advisors could be perceived just as or even more authentic than when politicians are involved because quality of authenticity has nothing to do with being the real person but about meeting the expectations the audience holds of the real person. This is particularly relevant on social media because people cannot see who is managing the profiles of politicians. There are obviously some ethical considerations to address in that regard, both from the perspective of the politicians, the communication advisors and the people interacting with the social media profiles, as it may not be considered ethically correct if politicians’ social media profiles are not managed by politicians themselves. However, first of all, it requires that politicians and communication advisors move from understanding and applying the concept of authenticity as belonging to ‘the domain of the truth’ to instead belonging to ‘the domain of the code’.

5.3. Contribution to the existing body of knowledge

This thesis contributes to the existing body of knowledge by explaining how communication advisors can use social media to create perceived authenticity of politicians. This explanation is empirically grounded and transcends the dominating essentialism assumptions and the typical dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic by drawing on theoretical perspectives developed by Baudrillard (1981) and Eco (1986).

Based on the analysis and the discussion of findings, the two sub-questions and the central research question can be answered, and this thesis' contribution to the body of knowledge can thus be demonstrated.

To answer the sub-question of what characterise perceptions of authenticity of top politicians on social media, it is argued that authenticity on social media profiles depends on individual interpretations and interpretations are determined by the code people use to examine those social media profiles. This is significantly different from existing literature that associates perceptions of authenticity with certain notions or features that can be revealed or highlighted. This thesis rather argues the concept of authenticity is a social construct realised in human interpretations rather than an ontologically present phenomenon. As a result, perceptions of authenticity are different from person to person, differ from context to context and may change over time. If one person perceives something as authentic, then it is authentic to that person.

To answer the sub-question of how perceptions of authenticity of top politicians on social media can be strategically influenced, it is argued that communication advisors have to understand and be able to connect with the code of the audience in a convincing way. This is because what matters for the perception of authenticity on politicians' social media profiles is how well they match the expectations that the audience holds regarding the politicians and these expectations are determined by the code, as pointed out above. Social media profiles are fakes, because they are digital copies of the politician, and the quality of perceived authenticity has therefore nothing to do with who the creator is but how well it is created – how well it is falsified. It is further argued that communication advisors may even be better at creating perceived authenticity on politicians' social media profiles than politicians themselves, simply because they, as 'skilful falsifiers', understand the codes better and better are able to act in accordance to them in convincing ways than the politicians.

This explanation of the concept of authenticity in relation to politicians' social media profiles will help those working theoretically and practically with studying, designing, planning and executing messages and campaigns, i.e. PR scholars and professionals, to realise that creating perceived authenticity of top politicians on social media is about understanding and connecting with the code of the audience in convincing ways. Creating perceived authenticity of politicians on social media is about mastering the art of falsifying.

5.4. Concluding remarks and future research

As it appears, communication advisors could in principle create perfect social media profiles of politicians but they are currently hindered by essentialist assumptions and the typical dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic.

Since the participants have difficulties detaching themselves from an essentialism value system similarly to existing literature, it seems that the current body of knowledge simply reflects the same ontological problem as practice does. This points towards encouraging that the concept of authenticity is studied from a detached analytical perspective. Since existing literature is what could be regarded 'applied communication research', future research should therefore examine the concept of authenticity in a way that does not focus on PR professionals' practice, as most existing studies and this thesis have done.

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