

Course: SKOM12
Term: Spring 2019
Supervisor Henrik Merckelsen
Examiner

HOW TO BE AUTHENTIC: a visual social semiotic approach to travel photography on Instagram

TAYLOR MIOTTI

Lund University
Department of strategic communication
Master's thesis



Abstract

HOW TO BE AUTHENTIC: a visual social semiotic approach to travel photography on Instagram

Due to their high level of authenticity, travel bloggers started to be an important part of the influencer strategies adopted by corporations in the travel industry and are becoming increasingly popular among social media users, especially on Instagram. However, their practices under this commercial pressure, on a platform known to present an idealized version of reality and by expressing themselves through a medium (photographs) that has lost its status as a credible representation of reality, raise dilemmas as to how authenticity is created and maintained. Most existing research regards the notion of authenticity as ontologically stable and fixed and therefore fails to acknowledge it as a dynamic concept that can be created. By adopting a processual conceptualization of authenticity and through a detailed visual analysis of a travel influencer's profile, this study drew from the perspectives of Eco and Kress & van Leeuwen and investigated how different semiotic cues participate in the creation of authenticity in the staged circumstances that surround travel blogging. The results suggest that what is important for creating authenticity does not rely on the authenticity of the picture itself, but on the configuration of different cues, such as positioning of the participants, their actions, salience, colors, symbolic elements, angle, social distance, etc. that together form a consistent construction of an authentic experience. Thus, the research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by explaining how travel influencers' visual communication is used on social media to create authenticity for their audience.

Keyword: Authenticity, Instagram, Personal Branding, Travel Influencers, Visual Communication, Visual Social Semiotics.

Wordcount: 20028

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Henrik Merckelsen. His support, advice, and patience have been a great help during the entire process of writing this thesis.

A special thanks to all my friends that kept me optimistic and motivated during this demanding journey, especially during the coldest and darkest Swedish days.

Finally, I wish to thank my family for the continuous support throughout my studies and for making this achievement possible.

One simply cannot wish for better or more supportive people.

Thanks.

Lund, May 2019

Table of contents

- 1. Defining the research problem 1**
 - 1.1 Introduction 1
 - 1.2 Problem statement..... 2
 - 1.3 Aim and research question 4
 - 1.4 Relevance of the study to the field of Strategic Communication 4
 - 1.5 Terminological clarification 5
 - 1.6 Delimitations 6

- 2. Literature review..... 7**
 - 2.1 Influencer marketing and social media personal branding..... 7
 - 2.2 Authenticity in the travel industry 10
 - 2.3 Authenticity and photographs on Instagram 12
 - 2.4 Synthesis and research gap..... 14

- 3. Theory..... 15**
 - 3.1 Introduction to Semiotics 15
 - 3.1.1 The two traditions 16
 - 3.1.2 Hyperrealism..... 18
 - 3.2 Visual semiotics..... 19
 - 3.3 Visual social semiotics 21

- 4. Methodology 23**
 - 4.1 Epistemological approach 23
 - 4.2 Research design 24
 - 4.2.1 Case selection and sample 25
 - 4.3 Data collection 26
 - 4.3.1 Netnography and images collection 27
 - 4.4 Data analysis..... 29
 - 4.4.1 Representational metafunction..... 29
 - 4.4.2 Interactive metafunction..... 30
 - 4.4.3 Compositional metafunction..... 31
 - 4.5 Methodological reflections and limitations..... 32

- 5. Analysis..... 33**
 - 5.1 Plain landscape photography 33

5.1.1	Representational metafunction.....	34
5.1.2	Interactive metafunction.....	35
5.1.3	Compositional metafunction.....	36
5.2	Portrait photography	39
5.2.1	Representational metafunction.....	39
5.2.2	Interactive metafunction.....	41
5.2.3	Compositional metafunction.....	42
5.3	Photography in explicit commercial partnership.....	44
5.3.1	Representational metafunction.....	44
5.3.2	Interactive metafunction.....	46
5.3.3	Compositional metafunction.....	47
5.4	Summary of visual analysis.....	49
6.	Discussion	52
6.1	Relation to the previous knowledge.....	52
7.	Conclusion	55
7.1	Suggestions for further research	56
8.	References.....	58

1. Defining the research problem

1.1 Introduction

In today's society of media representation and mass-produced commodities, both consumers and producers see authenticity as a vital resource for creating meaning in their experiences. On one hand, consumers begin to desire and look for authenticity in their purchases, on the other, being authentic has become crucial for the success and credibility of a brand and needs to be expressed to the consumers. On this matter, Schell (2010) claims that the more people use mediated technologies and act in an online culture, the more they will search for authenticity, making it the reason whether or not to buy a product or a service. To face this situation, companies actively enact strategies that make them appear to be authentic. When facing the challenge of not being credible or trusted among consumers when selling products and services, companies opt for establishing commercial partnerships with social media influencers and bloggers. It is believed that this type of strategy adds the important "authentic human element" to what it is supposed to be a mere online marketing tool: experts found that authenticity is the most important part in influencer marketing and good collaborations (Zietek, 2016). Bloggers and influencers, indeed, are well informed and passionate about their subject, they talk with credibility and are believed to have a more authentic relationship with their followers (Hayes et al., 2008; Marwick, 2013). However, for bloggers this position between companies that buy authenticity from them and their relationship with the audience poses a dilemma as to how this authenticity is created and maintained.

Nowadays, people perceive and use visual communication more as a means to enhance these partnerships and their personal branding. In this respect, photographs are believed to possess features that allude to some kind of authenticity, since the picture is supposed to depict and truly capture reality. However, taking from visual semiotics traditions and the amount of times in history where pictures were used for propaganda and commercial manipulation (Barthes,

1957; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), photographs are discovered to no longer be a purely denotative manifestation of reality, making it hard to create and maintain the authentic feature.

Authenticity is nowhere more salient than in a travel destination marketing context and especially those places that represent nature as something undoubtedly authentic. For travel bloggers, travelling is a way to reconnect with nature and get rid of materialistic things to finally find themselves. They use photographs to capture, represent and show the authenticity of the experiences they have, seeking the off-the-beaten-path adventures, embracing a state in which one can actually be true to oneself (van Nuenen, 2016). There is the need to be authentic and transmit this authenticity by showing their outdoor experiences through photography, important for building relationships with their followers. For quite some time now authenticity has been linked to tourism destination and travel image formation and its definition has been widely debated, especially among tourism literature (Wang, 1999; Marine-Roig, 2015).

1.2 Problem statement

For strategic reasons, travel bloggers need to express authenticity and they seem to represent it through their visual communication, showing their desire to escape social conventions in favor of a more authentic experience in a natural environment. However, even if they do so, the context in which they are operating poses some limits for this authenticity creation. In fact, travel bloggers practices are becoming increasingly popular among social media users, especially on Instagram, an image sharing app that encourages people to show and promote their amateur or professional real-time photography without limits of time and space. Instagram is regarded as a professional tool for the construction of images and symbolic values, generally considered as an important investment to control and navigate the meaning-making, visual social environment of the platform in profitable ways (Gandini, 2015; Hearn, 2008). Yet, the platform is receiving growing attention among scholars since it is promoting a sort of competition for depicting a very idealized reality and presentation of the self in the interest of obtaining other users' attention and appreciation, cultural status or possible economical returns (Gandini, 2015; Hearn, 2008). People use it in their everyday life and they can combine it with strategies for the creation of a marketable online persona: they share their created photographs as unfolding subjective representations, based on a pure expression of a personal style (Zappavigna, 2016). Studies refer to this process of generating content while becoming a

promotional “object” or commodity signs to be gathered and consumed by the social marketplace of the platform as personal branding (Hearn, 2008; Gandini, 2015).

Moreover, the field within tourism and the practice of self-branding in relation to the concept of authenticity has captured the attention among researchers since travelling is becoming heavily commercialized and has raised the problem of authenticity related to the construction of destination images (van Nuenen, 2016; Marine-Roig, 2015). Thus, the promise of going off the beaten path while being enclosed in a “nature-driven” touristic context of advertising and personal branding raises dilemmas as to how authenticity is created and maintained under these conditions.

Additionally, considering that tourism and travel is uniquely visual (Fesenmaier & MacKay, 1996), travel bloggers and visual social media, like Instagram, become pretty attractive for the visual communication field, for which images act as the expression of authenticity for those who travel to the destination (Adams, 1984). However, the photograph itself is no longer seen as a proof of reality and able to represent a non-mediated reality, since the possibility of representational and manipulation techniques started to arise, according to the subjective intentions of the image creator (Barthes, 1957; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Advanced technologies, social networking platforms for communication and the accessibility to editing tools for visual manipulation practices represent some of the core problems for the authenticity of the digital image representation, forced to confront on a daily basis. On Instagram, since most of the potential arrangements and creative editing depends on the creators and uploaders of the photograph and their personal intentions, the idea of authenticity and true representation becomes more questionable.

Under the circumstances of being subject to commercial pressure, acting on a platform known to present an idealized version of reality and by expressing themselves through a medium (photographs) that has lost its status as a credible representation of reality, it is not clear how it is possible for these travel bloggers to be authentic.

1.3 Aim and research question

Following these premises, through the investigation of the visual choices that the influencer is employing in the visual communication online within commercial contexts, the study aims to provide a deeper knowledge on the authenticity aspect of the photography sharing, no longer considered as a proof of reality, on Instagram. More precisely, the author will draw upon existing work on visual and content analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the creation of authenticity in pictures that depict authentic situations (outdoor and adventure photography) in apparently staged representations.

In order to achieve this purpose, the author seeks to answer the following research question:

- RQ: How are visual signs used to express authenticity within influencers in the travel industry under the employment of personal branding techniques when presenting pictures on Instagram?

The aim of this study is to practically understand the creation of authenticity in staged contexts by taking a visual social semiotic approach. This thesis will answer the research question using visual social semiotics and its aim will be accomplished through the example of an influencer that shares authentic pictures, but clearly utilizes personal branding techniques. The case study will be based on a visual analysis of the Instagram account “wilderness_addict” that uses and needs authenticity for her visual communication. She is an influencer who operates in the travel niche.

1.4 Relevance of the study to the field of Strategic Communication

Due to its high level of authenticity, travel blogging began to be an important part of the influencer strategies adopted by corporations in the travel industry and, in this sense, it is becoming a crucial element for these corporations’ strategic communication. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as a way that helps organizations reach their objectives and mission. Because authenticity started to be seen as a scarce resource it is a valuable asset,

and thus travel bloggers have become an important aspect of the travel industry of strategic communication.

The analysis will shed light on the field of personal branding and visual communication and will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by investigating in detail the structures and features that influencers use in practice in the expression of authenticity through visual signs as well as how they create meaning through their visual communication. Therefore, the contribution of this study goes beyond the understating of the good/bad quality of authenticity or the mere definition of authentic – inauthentic, dichotomy that dominates and upon which the existing literature is based. By exploring the relationship between authenticity and visual features in constructed situations on Instagram, people and organizations, scholars and professionals, who study, plan and execute social media campaigns will be helped in recognizing that authenticity can be strategically created and communicated.

Additionally, authenticity within the tourism field (e.g. Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1976), influencer marketing and personal branding (e.g. Gandini, 2015; Hearn, 2008) as well as visual social semiotics (eg. Jewitt & Oyama, 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006;) have been researched on their own, but, to the best knowledge of the author, their combined effect has not been researched in a social and visual communicative context.

In conclusion, from a strategic communication perspective, this thesis will enhance this knowledge, since some aspects of authenticity related to the above-mentioned fields seem to be taken for granted. As a multidisciplinary discipline, strategic communication comprises visual communication, branding, influencer marketing and social media studies. Hence, a contribution to this knowledge is a contribution to strategic communication.

1.5 Terminological clarification

As evidenced in the above sections and as it will be clarified in the literature review, the terms influencers, bloggers and personal branders are used in a way that often overlaps. While the influencer is a person who counts on a significant following on social media and therefore is considered influential online, bloggers are identified as such for owning a blog (website) and

they can also be considered influencers depending, again, on the influence they have on their audience (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). When influencers and bloggers are involved in a process of curating their image and identity and presenting themselves as brands they can be defined also as “personal (or self) branders” (Hearn, 2008). The author chose to use “influencer” as an umbrella term for all these definitions. For this specific study, the three terms will be also used interchangeably.

1.6 Delimitations

Authenticity has been linked to the success of a marketing strategy, and it's used to enhance the communication credibility of a brand towards consumers. This study will focus on understanding how this authenticity is visually created in a paradox of authentic but staged situations. The research will not question the authenticity of the analyzed Instagram pictures or profile, since “there is no such thing as universal authenticity” (Marwick, 2011, p. 124), but rather through a visual analysis it will explore how this important aspect of experience is represented and created on this type of context and under these “staged” conditions. The study proposes that authenticity represents a significant presence on social media photographs, and outlines, using a visual social semiotic framework, the ways in which it is signaled in the images.

2. Literature review

The following literature review will present central theories and research that are relevant in order to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the concept of authenticity related to personal branding, travel and photography. Within each of the presented fields, the author identifies the key concepts, definitions and dilemmas concerning authenticity. In a final synthesis, a key problem which has not yet been sufficiently analyzed will be extracted.

2.1 Influencer marketing and social media personal branding

As previously stated, the search for authenticity in a society of media presentation and mass commodities has become a crucial factor for the creation of meaningful exchanges and experiences sought both by consumers and business entities. New technologies and digital techniques undermine the traditional marketing process, that started to face many challenges in a world where consumers demand authenticity and their need for real thing to be delivered by someone genuine (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). From a branding perspective, the contemporary competitive context presents authenticity as a powerful element in terms of uniqueness and differentiation needed to overcome the competitors' threats of imitation (Brown et al., 2003). Additionally, when selling products and services, businesses need to deliver and render authenticity, credibility and trust to their consumers, and thus they actively search for and enact strategies to appear authentic. In the process of creation of authenticity, not only marketers, but also audiences and social contexts actively play an important role (Beverland, 2005). Brown et al. (2003) and Enli (2005) point out that authenticity is the result of an interaction and meaning negotiations between the expectations of the audience about the elements that qualify the sense of real and the producers' ability to deliver content that reflects these expectations.

For these reasons, companies opt for establishing commercial partnerships with people that are believed to have more authentic and genuine relationships with their audience, and that are well

informed and passionate about their subject and talk with credibility: influencers and bloggers (Hayes et al., 2008; Marwick, 2013; Zietek, 2016). This late modern phenomenon has been widely studied in the social media context and it is referred to as influencer marketing. It is believed that this type of strategy adds the important “authentic human element” to what it is supposed to be a mere online marketing tool: according to Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018), Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) and Hayes et al., (2008), influencers are real individuals with a significant following and reputation on a social media platform with whom brands can collaborate to reach their marketing objectives. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) further point out that brands are now recognizing influencers as a social relationship asset that can affect others because of their knowledge and authority, as well as for their authentic connection with their audience. In Hearn and Schoenhoff study (2016), influencers cultivate an environment based on attention seeking and employ authentic personal branding techniques via social networks.

Personal branding indirectly has been studied from a branding perspective that uses influencers for marketing purposes and refers to the practice which sees people curating their identity and presenting themselves as brands. It incorporates all the activities of marketization of the self, which aim for the “empowerment and professional success of the individual” (Gandini, 2015, p. 124). For Hearn (2008), self-branders participate in a process of self-exploitation and promotion for material gain or cultural status where they try to create their own rhetorical meanings and packaging, as well as persuasive versions of themselves.

For many professionals, the use of digital platforms for personal branding represents an almost exclusive and definitely widely employed activity (Gandini, 2015). On this matter, Gandini (2015) further states that a branded persona is a set of social activities through which a public and social self is produced and exhibited on social networks. These activities represent the visible demonstration of the combination between professional skills and personal preferences, where the identity self-packaging is at focus: authenticity, here, doesn't rely on personal skills, motivations and interests, but on how effectively it is expressed and branded (Fisher-Roffer, 2000; Gandini, 2015; Lair et al., 2005; Peters, 1999; van Nuenen, 2016). From a general perspective, social media is now needed both for the curation of a personal and professional image and for the direction of performative practices in a social context (Gandini, 2015) where

images creation becomes a significant investment as important as a company's equipment (Harvey, 1990, as cited in Hearn, 2008).

As a result, social media users are dedicating time and effort in arranging and designing their public profiles, image and information sharing in order to have a more trustworthy, authentic connection with other people, involved in the same process (Hearn, 2008). Recent research confirms that bloggers use social media with a certain amount of creativity and self-expression in order to establish their authentic self-brands (Liu & Suh, 2017). On Instagram, however, the profiles created are limited by the structural properties of the application, making it interesting to study the meaning-making development within a constrained environment (Zappavigna, 2016). To this, Hearn (2008) adds that while personal branders generate content about their social lives, they also become a promotional object composed by a combination of the creator's actual content, the signs used to recognize him/her, and the given symbolic appeal to improve the advantages obtainable from this interplay (Wernick, 1991; Hearn, 2008). From her perspective, this type of platform creates "inventories of branded selves" (p. 211) and they incite users "to see themselves and others as commodity-signs to be collected and consumed in the social marketplace" (Hearn, 2008, p. 211).

According to Liu and Suh (2017) the notion of self-branding on social media is strictly contradictory since it supports both authenticity and business-targeted self-promotion (Lowenthal et al., 2016), meaning that people have to live up to the preferences and needs of the market. Authenticity is still very unclear when it comes to self-branding: some scholars support the idea that it is hard to construct an authentic branded persona due to its market-oriented characteristics (Marwick, 2013). Others argue that both concepts co-exist in a complex way: on social media, authenticity and realness have a significant presence (Marwick, 2011). According to Marwick (2011), the ongoing frontstage performance uses a balance between the desire to follow the audience's tastes and maintain positive impressions with the demand to appear authentic and real to others.

Authors further point out a specific kind of personal branding built around sharing travel experiences, which will be explained in the next section.

2.2 Authenticity in the travel industry

Van Nuenen (2016) explored the concept of authenticity in the travel niche, and more specifically for people who chose traveling as way of living – like travel bloggers and influencers, and he regarded the notion both as a determinant to the process of personal branding and an effort to create new pathways and solutions for achieving a better self-understanding (p. 195). In fact, his study shows that in this context people reject the normal life and social requirements and move in the direction of self-ownership, where authenticity in the main driver and crucial element to strategically organize and commoditize one's self development (van Nuenen, 2016, p. 200). The type of authenticity that bloggers and influencers seem to appeal to, in van Nuenen's view (2016), is a more existentialist form of the term: the main motive that drives bloggers to travel and explore is about reaching a certain type of freedom, breaking the everyday practices, embracing the nature of one's existence and identity (Heidegger, 1996) while having the duty to efficiently produce a certain lifestyle (van Nuenen, 2016).

An interesting consideration brought up by researchers is that tourism and travel advertising have incorporated and started to use nature as a symbol of escape from everyday life and to enhance the human relationship to itself and to nature (Fesenmaier et al., 1996; MacCannell, 1976). As a consequence, tourists in search for authenticity and real experience travel to a destination to view this nature and they do it also in a way to verify the authenticity of the experience to the image (Fesenmaier et al., 1996). This authenticity is also enhanced by providing real information based on personal experiences and by relying on a trustworthy relationship with their audience. Additionally, through the use of social media, they enact a two-way communication as a way to improve the value co-creation and credibility building. Thus, the promise of the off the beaten path experience while acting in a “nature-driven” touristic context using personal branding and commercial partnerships poses dilemmas as to how authenticity is created and maintained under these conditions.

Several studies within the field of tourism have already explored the notion of authenticity from different theoretical and practical perspectives, which revealed a more complex, both essentialist and materialist delineation of the term. MacCannell (1973) was one of the first who introduced the concept of authenticity, arguing that the motive behind modern tourism is the

search and desire for authentic experiences, to be away from everyday life. He refers to authenticity as something absolute, original and real, and therefore he is considered as objectivistic in his perspective. MacCannell (1973) argues that people look for natural experiences in the untouched world and lived in reality. From this objectivist point of view, authenticity is seen as a property or a quality used to distinguish genuine or fake representation of the reality related to the place and the tourist object (MacCannell, 1973; Marine-Roig, 2015). This approach suggests that it is possible to assume that certain phenomena are authentic or not, and it is possible to clearly identify the dichotomy authentic – unauthentic, intrinsic of places and objects (Wang, 1999). An alternative perspective to understanding the concept is given by the constructivist approach used in the studies conducted by Cohen (1988). Constructive authenticity introduces the concept that there is no such thing as real authenticity independent from the human perception, but it is socially constructed instead of given and measured (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). The reality is seen as the result of interpretation and constructions, where the object or the experience appears as authentic because of how it is perceived by the subject, and not because it is actually authentic or not. According to Wang (1999), authenticity is subjective and related to the own definition of the tourist, based on experiences and interpretation. Additionally, research on sociology and tourism explains that it is not a tangible element, but rather a contextual changing concept (Littrell et al., 1993), created by a process socially constructed and negotiated depending on perceptions, beliefs and contexts (Chhabra, 2005; Cohen, 1988; Marine-Roig, 2015; Wang, 1999). The third conceptualization of authenticity that is particularly interesting for the travel and tourism field refers to the existential aspect of the term. It regards the subjective experience and feelings, where authenticity is pursued as an existential state of being in which the person feels happy and feels the connection with one's own authentic self (Lamont, 2014; Wang, 1999). Authenticity is an existential state that can be found in engaging in tourist activities, away from the everyday life, meaningless existence and conformation, in relation to one's sense of self, and can include self-realization and sense of belongingness with the place (Lamont, 2014; van Nuenen, 2016; Wang, 1999). Additionally, according to Marine-Roig (2015) the existential authenticity evoked by these feelings and values can be communicated through images.

Underneath these considerations, the paradox for influencers of a search and creation of authenticity for both becoming and selling one's own self nature has emerged. It is in this

contemporary travel context that existential authenticity and self-branding have converged, which creates a need for a deeper practical understanding.

2.3 Authenticity and photographs on Instagram

Since tourism and travel destination are uniquely visual, according to Fesenmaier et al. (1996), people use photographs as a way to successfully represent and communicate the image of a place. Plus, the fact that sharing a picture on Instagram which allows people to express their inner self and desired visual messages seems to create the perfect arena for the construction of a genuine and authentic visual communication for the travel field. The stream of pictures is used as an unfolding personal identification where the object or phenomena captured is a pure expression of a personal style (Zappavigna, 2016). In this perspective, as Knaller (2012) points out, the photographer sees and captures reality and her own pictures as she faces her own perception. According to Susanka (2012), nowadays the relationship between photography and authenticity is the result of the communicative strategies that the photographer employs and the result of his/her subjectivity.

According to Straub (2012), representing authenticity means reproducing something that should be original since it is un-mediated (p. 21). Previously, photography was conceived as a method that allowed to replicate and represent nature, in terms of capturing and reproducing reality (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). Due to the perceived reliability of vision and sight in Western societies, it was common to believe in the “photographic truth” and the true captures of the world. This belief persisted until the end of the 19th and the beginning of 20th century (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). Later on, it was recognized that photography wasn’t able to represent a non-mediated reality, since the possibility of representational and manipulation techniques started to arise, according to the subjective intentions of the image creator. On this aspect, as confirmed by Zappavigna (2016), Instagram creates a “constrained environment” (p. 275) with a set of visual limitations on the uploaded content and encourages users to apply to their images post-processing, selecting representation and manipulation techniques, like filters, frames, cropping, etc. (Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Thelander & Cassinger, 2017; Zappavigna, 2016) before being shared.

On this matter, considering that photography is a subjective construction, many argue that people on social media platforms try to work on and adjust their visual representation according to their desires of representing a certain image of themselves and the reality they are witnessing. Lobinger and Branter (2015) call the attention to the fact that individuals use certain aesthetic and behavioral elements, mentioning facial expressions, frames, postures, status symbols, etc., to enhance and create their (online) “performance”.

MacCannell (1973) discusses the performance based on the creation of a “staged authenticity”, applied in the search for authenticity in the tourism experiences. The general idea behind this staged authenticity proposed by MacCannell (1973) and elaborated further by Lobinger and Branter (2015) follows Goffman’s impression management framework and theatre metaphor of front and back stage (1956). According to this theory, when presenting a picture online, people are acting according to a social role in a front stage performance (Lobinger & Branter, 2015), defined as an activity that serves to influence other participants (Goffman, 1956, p. 8). According to Goffman (1956) and reconfirmed by Lobinger and Branter (2015) it will be the audience that will feel if an impression is true and genuine, or if it is not. However, Goffman’s approach has been strongly criticized, as it assumes that a back-stage behavior is more authentic than the front stage, implying that individuals would automatically act less sincere and less honest. On this matter, Lobinger and Branter (2015) point out that online representations are strongly connected to the ones in the “real world” (p. 7) and therefore the separation between online and offline environments would not be much relevant. To support this argument, Meier (2009) argues that online photographs serve to manifest a certain personality that acts in authentic offline settings, stressing the fact that authenticity plays an important role on social networking sites.

In the tourism and travel field, images serve also as index of authenticity for the people who are traveling to the destination (Adams, 1984) and have been used in tourism advertising to convey certain expectations of a travel destination and/or attraction (Fesenmaier et al., 1996). Whether this authenticity and expectations are fulfilled lies within the capacity of the creator of the image to reproduce and satisfy these requirements and to the subjective experience of the audience.

2.4 Synthesis and research gap

As presented in this literature review, authenticity is needed by companies when marketing a product/service and thus influencers, thanks to their relationship with their audience that is believed to be real and authentic, represent an important asset for their brand. Influencers employ personal branding techniques, that include all the activities which see people curating their identity and presenting themselves as brands. Personal branding relies on people being authentic, but it also faces the paradox of being applied in commercial settings. This paradox is even more evident in the travel and outdoor niche, as a type of self-branding that relies on authenticity when it comes to sharing experiences on social media through the use of nature-based, but staged photographs. Travel influencers, who regard authenticity as a way to achieve a better personal self-understanding in the search of a certain type of freedom and distance from the everyday conventions, adjust their visual communication in the desire of successfully representing a specific type of image of themselves and of the reality they are living.

The study will analyze how influencers operating in the travel niche are able to create and convey authenticity through social media photography in staged contexts. The ways that existential authenticity and self-branding are expressed visually in the contemporary travel context still need a deeper practical understanding. Moreover, research so far regards authenticity as a stable and universal presence and few studies have focused on a more processual approach, failing to acknowledge that it is something that is created and maintained. Considering that there is a sort of taken for granted belief in the authenticity realm related to personal branding, social media and photography, by using a social semiotic perspective the researcher will explore this phenomenon investigating the processes of construction of reality.

3. Theory

In the following sections, there will be an introduction to semiotics and its related theories that will be used as a frame for this research. The thesis mainly draws on the perspectives developed by Kress and van Leeuwen on visual social semiotics and considers theories based on the understanding of authenticity and reality developed by Umberto Eco. Therefore, the following sections will introduce semiotics, then its traditions and branches will be explained and finally it will be presented the visual social semiotic framework used for the thesis.

3.1 Introduction to Semiotics

The term “semiotics” refers to the study of signs and symbols and how they are used for interpretation in a social and cultural setting. Semiotics can be applied to a wide range of studies and it is extended to anything that is used to produce meaning or “everything that can be taken as a sign” (Eco, 1976, p. 7). From a contemporary semiotic perspective, words, images, and objects can be considered signs and they are part of a system which investigates how reality and meanings can be created and interpreted (Chandler, 2007). Signs are an important part in human life since they allow structures and patterns to be unveiled; they serve as plans and guides for actions and can explain phenomena (Sebeok, 2001), or can simply communicate messages. However, these signs and their meanings follow a sign system (what Saussure would call ‘langue’) actively created by human beings according to interplaying codes and conventions (Chandler, 2007). This rule-based aspect of communication is not something that people generally are conscious about when using signs as a vehicle for communication (what Saussure terms ‘parole’) (Saussure, 1983). By unveiling these codes, semiotics can help investigate and understand how reality is constructed and maintained in particular social situations, allowing a fair distribution of control of the world of meaning we are all living in (Chandler, 2007).

“Semiotics is not about the 'real' world at all, but about complementary or alternative actual models of it and - as Leibniz thought - about an infinite number of anthropologically conceivable possible worlds. Thus, semiotics never reveals what the world is, but circumscribes what we can know about it; in other words, what a semiotic model depicts is not 'reality' as such, but nature as unveiled by our method of questioning”.

(Sebeok, 2001, p. 26)

In the next sections, the author explains the main features that are part of the “science of semiotics” that will be useful for the reader to understand the concepts that will be outlined in the analysis. The theory of signs has been mainly developed by two contemporary traditions: the European, pursued by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American, by the philosopher Charles S. Peirce.

3.1.1 The two traditions

In the previous section, the word “sign” was used to define the term semiotics without providing a proper explanation of its use or what it refers to. As stated before, we are constantly surrounded by signs and we have no possibility of understanding the reality we are living in, except through these signs and their organization into codes (Chandler, 2007). Signs, again, can take the form of words, images, or anything that surrounds us, things that become signs only when people give them meaning as such. If these were taken into consideration alone and extracted from the context they are in, they would have no intrinsic meaning. Put into the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s words, “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (1931-58, p. 2.172), and people manage to do so by “unconsciously relating them to familiar systems of [social and cultural] conventions” (Chandler, 2007, p. 13).

Depending on the semiotic tradition, there are different conceptions of the sign. While Saussure’s (1983) definition of it is based on a dyadic model, which describes it as composed by *signifier* (sound pattern) and *signified* (the mental concept), Peirce’s contribution goes beyond the language and offers a different representation of the sign, constituted by representamen (the *form* that the signs take, a sign vehicle), the interpretant (the meaning or the sense made of the sign) and the object (to which the sign refers), (Chandler, 2007; Peirce, 1931-

58). Peirce suggested another alternative to Saussure's dyadic model, since this third term – the *object* (or referent) – includes referentiality (which is not dealt with by Saussure). The inclusion of this third element is crucial for distinguishing the two traditions since it introduces referentiality (referring to a specific object outside the sign itself) as an independent element, something that lies outside the human sphere, whilst in the European tradition, reality is simply a perception in people's mind.

Furthermore, Saussure defines a sign as purely conventional and the relation between signifier and signified as arbitrary (Chandler, 2007; Saussure, 1983). According to the Saussurean tradition, the sign meaning is the result of a general agreement and created by the human imagination or mind-activity conveyed through language codes, according to a specific purpose and intentional meaning, that people involved in the communication process understand. In contrast with Saussure's perspective, for Peirce everything can be a sign and can be interpreted as such, and not only something that is purposely conveyed. Based on the relationship between object, interpretant, and representamen, Peirce developed three main "modes of relationship" (Hawkes, 1977, p. 105) into which signs can be further distinguished: symbol, icon and index.

In the symbolic mode, symbols present no resemblance between the object and the association created, and they represent their relationship in an arbitrary or conventional way, established by social conventions (Chandler, 2007; Sebeok, 2001). Symbols are identical to the Saussurean sign system and they can represent, for example, language in general – alphabetical letters, words, etc. (Saussure, 1983; Chandler, 2007) or numbers. They all must be culturally learned.

The iconic is the mode in which there is a similarity or analogy between the representamen and the object, expressing a concrete simulacrum representation of the reality. A portrait or a metaphor, for example, show the object in some of its qualities (Chandler, 2007).

The last mode is the index, which offers an evidence of the object without describing it (Peirce, 1931-58). The object is not conventional but is linked somehow to the representamen – smoke is, usually, an index of fire, or cough is an index of a cold, and so on (Sebeok, 2001).

The author listed the three different modes in order of conventionality: symbols are the most conventional signs, followed by icons and indexes, more attached to the referential object. The more the object is distant from its representamen, the more the sign needs to be learned and agreed based on social and cultural conventions (Chandler, 2007).

3.1.2 *Hyperrealism*

Although it is not possible to connect these two traditions completely, one of the leading semioticians that serves as a bridge between the two is the Italian author Umberto Eco. What is central for Eco was the limits of interpretations, where he expresses his concerns on the process of interpretation rather than the object of interpretation and explores the phenomenon of hyperreality (Eco, 1986). One of his theories, associated with American culture, focuses on describing the way that contemporary society challenges the notion of authenticity by recreating realistic simulations of reality. In the contemporary digital and mass-produced culture, it is hard to identify and recognize the real and original product. This inability of consciousness to distinguish the copy from the original version, especially in digitally and technologically advanced society, is called hyperrealism (Eco, 1986). It is particularly relevant for the thesis due to its strict connection with the concept of authenticity, the conditions through which it is created and its relationship between society, reality and symbols.

In hyperreality, the line that separates real and fake is blurred: the lack of a neat distinction between reality and its simulation represents the condition that Eco defines as “authentic fake”. According to Eco, in this context, authenticity is far from being associated to originality or history, but rather the concept represents genuine fakes. In his essay, Eco (1986) describes a world artificially created, perceived by some as more real and better than the original. In a world of “absolute fake” (p. 8), these imitations do not only recreate reality, but they are an attempt to improve it and represent something that is better than real. Whereas everything looks real, even if the object is fake or not even exists, the fact that it seems real and it is perceived as such makes it real. In other words, what is actually real is the process of interpretation of the fake object, and not the object itself. Eco’s interest in this interpretation raises important considerations in understanding authenticity, for which the focus is not on determining if the object is fake or real, but how good it is staged. Indeed, according to Eco (1986), people are satisfied with simulations of reality, which can be perceived anyway as authentic: what matters

is how convincing fakes are, strictly dependent on personal perceptions and way that technology is used for the simulation. Taking from Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis, Eco (1986) recognizes that there is a number of interpretations of this staged reality that might not have an end but has a starting point, the sign, that will be the determinant for the creation and interpretation of other signs. The Peircian's object itself, the reality to which the sign (or representamen) refers to, poses some obstacles and limits to the interpretation, meaning that the objects cannot be interpreted endlessly. To have a clearer understanding of the concepts, using Eco's example, suppose that on the wall it is possible to see a door (Eco, 2013). It is painted, but as a sign, it will represent a door to the same extent as a real door – one cannot see any difference. However, it will not open. The object to which it is referred ultimately does not have the features of a door. Thus, empirical reality sets some limits for our interpretation.

3.2 Visual semiotics

Although Saussure used linguistics as a starting point for his studies, it is possible to apply his concepts of signifier and signified also to other sub-disciplines of semiotics, such as to the visual semiotics. In fact, even though in his works he did not explain or define a visual sign, by extension the signifier can be intended as the “visual image” (picture or viewable image) and the signified as the “conceptual image” (or “mental image”) – evoked similarly by a verbal signifier in language (Danesi, 2017). Later on, the definitions given by Peirce on iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism considerably contributed to explore and understand the field of visual semiotics since they “are all modalities that visual images evoke, which lead to their coded interpretation” (Danesi, 2017, p. 6).

Today, visual semiotics, a branch of Applied Semiotics which focuses on certain contexts of sign use (Nöth, 2012), is an important tool for the analysis of multimodal online representational practices (Danesi, 2017) that aims to analyze how visual images communicate a specific message.

Roland Barthes (1964) used the idea of semiotics, first associated to language, to unfold the meaning(s) and messages that images contain. In particular, he was the first to talk about a “rhetoric of the image” (Nöth, 2012) and he applied the Saussurean notions of signifier and

signified on the analysis of the advertising image and photography (1964). The semiotic relevance of his study and the motives behind the choice of this type of images is given by their signification: according to Barthes in advertising the meaning behind images is “undoubtedly intentional” (p. 152), it’s formed in advanced based on the characteristics of the product and it has to be shared in a very clear way (Barthes, 1964, p. 152). Furthermore, he points out that all visual images are “polysemous” and therefore have multiple and different meanings that the reader can chose to embrace or ignore (p. 156). He makes an important distinction in terms of signification: he calls “denoted” the meaning that comes from the immediate visual impact and “connoted” the socio-cultural meaning attached to the sign (Barthes, 1957; Chandler, 2007). In John Fiske’s terms, ‘denotation is *what* is photographed, connotation is *how* it is photographed’ (Fiske, 1982, p. 91). Connotation and denotation can also be identified in terms of levels of meanings or in different orders of signification (Barthes 1957; Hjelmslev, 1961). Denotation belongs to the first order, where the sign is composed by signifier and signified, whilst connotation is part of the second order, which identifies the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and adds to it a further signified (Chandler, 2007, p. 140). In this way, different connotations can be created by simply changing the form of the signifier while maintaining the same signified (Chandler, 2007, p. 140), for example, when changing the type of focus or the angle of a photograph. To this, it is important to notice that Barthes also added a higher order of signification represented by the myth, the dominant ideology of our time and a reflection of cultural concept that support certain ideas of the world (Chandler, 2007, p. 144), through which more abstract meanings can be attached to the sign.

However, connotations are determined by “codes” (or conventions) accessible to the interpreter, thus they are not purely personal meanings (Chandler, 2007, p. 139). Semioticians also refer to codes when it comes to denotation and connotation: when looking at the message of a photograph, Barthes called the initial denotative reading “non-coded” and the connotative one as “coded” (Danesi, 2017, p. 4; Barthes, 1964). This depends on the capacity of the reader to decode a message contained in a picture: in the case of a “literal” denotation, there is no deeper meaning attached to it, the object in the photograph can be easily recognized, independently from social and cultural codes. On the contrary, the coded message represents the story and the meaning that the image portrays: the readers need to apply their socio-cultural knowledge to encode what the picture expresses. The more the reader is familiar with the codes used, the easier it is to understand what the photograph stands for.

3.3 Visual social semiotics

In the previous section, it has been explained that codes are the results of cultural histories and social resources used to generate meanings and to interpret messages. In particular, when semiotics can explain and describe how these codes (or resources) are used to provide meanings in specific social and cultural settings, it takes the name of social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt & Oyama, 2011; Chandler, 2007). The traditional social semiotic approach broadened the borders of the semiotic studies, which focused on how languages evolve or influence what people can do with language in a specific social context (Halliday, 1978). In particular, Michael Halliday's systemic functional theory (Halliday, 1978) stresses the importance of social interaction as a base for meaning making. However, the growing importance of visual communication makes it relevant for social semiotics to extend this framework based on the linguistic tradition and to provide new knowledge for other semiotic modes. Particular attention has been given to images in contemporary communication. To this aim, visual social semiotics was introduced. This branch of semiotics involves the description of semiotic codes, and investigates what people do and say with visual communication and its interpretation (Jewitt & Oyama, 2011, p. 136). In other words, this relatively new field of study, first presented in the 1990s, recognizes the social ideology and its application in visual images (Harrison, 2003).

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen provided a new "grammar" for the visual communication based on Halliday's linguistic framework. The theorists see this grammar as socially formed, through which people (sign-makers) use motivated signs to communicate to, for, and with others in a specific moment and specific social context to represent (in concrete or in abstract terms) some aspects of the world through cultural, social and psychological experiences of the sign-maker (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For them, all the meanings expressed by the sign makers, who use the most suitable forms to express their signs, are social meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Their visual grammar is seen as a set of "resources" for meaning making, which also follow the theory of semiotic metafunctions (ideational, the interpersonal and the textual) identified by Halliday (1978), extended to visual social semiotic resources. They used the metafunctions as tools to interpret visual language, since the visual, like all semiotic modes, "in order to function as a full system of communication has to serve several representational and communicational requirements" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 41). The ideational

metafunction refers to the different ways in which objects can be represented and the way that experience is encoded visually (Stoian, 2015). Visual sign making also accounts on the interpersonal metafunction, which involves the form of relations and interactions between the sign maker and the sign receiver. More in particular, visual communication has to represent a certain social relation between these participants (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The last metafunction, compositional, refers to the meaning of the composition: the ways that positional visual arrangements allow the realization of different meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). All three metafunctions offer diverse choices for the representation of the object, its representation in terms of interpersonal relations and in terms of positional arrangements for the visual sign making.

Visual semiotics, in particular in the form of the photographic image as demonstrated by Barthes, exhibits almost pure denotation and thus alludes to an unproblematic authenticity. Yet, as Barthes reminds us, the chains of signification through connotations are unlimited (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2007). This unlimited semiosis has no beginning and no end. It is simply a chain of representations that refers to other representations. It is not limited by referentiality in its potential to become even better than the reality allegedly referred to. Through its self-referentiality it can create its own reality as hyper-reality. This would be a reality that is better and more appealing, and most importantly, not less plausible than the real reality.

4. Methodology

The following section represents a detailed description of how the study was conducted and the methods used for the analysis of the material. Thus, the chapter will include: epistemological perspective, data collection, data analysis and methodological reflections.

4.1 Epistemological approach

According to Rose (2001), images are never innocent, and they are constructed through practices, technologies and knowledge. They always carry a message and can have one or multiple meanings, whose understanding can be acquired through analysis and interpretation (Dake, 2005). In a picture, the construction of meanings is a process that results in a combination of different visual features (lines, shapes, colors, lights, angles, and so on) with the personal intentions of the creator and the perception that the viewer has of the image itself. Indeed, as Dake (2005) points out, the aim of the visual maker is to create a meaningful connection between the visible form and the intended hoped message (p. 6), where the physical and concrete nature of the image helps participants to communicate. It is important to notice that pictures can convey meanings through signs that are different than the ones that the creator intended: they can change depending on time, viewers, context, texts and images associations (Van House, 2011, p. 132).

People have access to all the semiotic resources that are available in a society and produced within a culture; they also have learned and acknowledged that the conventions and norms are socially constructed, and they dictate the way that people create meanings and signs. This meaning and signs creation is guided by interests, socio-cultural inheritance and awareness of present and contemporary events, always as modification of semiotic materials that already exist and thus it is continuously evolving. Visual structures rather than reproduce “reality” produce images of reality related to the interests of the social contexts they are in. They are

indeed ideological and never merely formal: they include a significant semantic dimension (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

As ideological constructions, they are nevertheless subject to some restrictions. As shown in the discussion about hyperrealism, there are limits to our interpretation. In line with Peirce's empirical pragmatism, Eco argues that ultimately the chain of signs refers to an external object that can be subject to empirical inspection and when one sees that the object contradicts one's own understanding of it, this understanding must be rejected. Umberto Eco calls this epistemological position minimal realism (Eco, 2013). This study adopts this epistemology in the sense that even though a visual analysis may never meet positivist criteria of reliability (replicability) the soundness of the analysis can be evaluated in negative terms: some inferences are simply wrong, but the closer the analysis stays to its empirical object the more the risk of this is minimized.

From this perspective, semiotics can provide conceptual framework and structures to understand this "reality". The research fundamentally makes use of a visual social semiotic framework, a branch of semiotics that involves the understanding of reality through semiotic codes, and investigates what people do and say with visual communication and its interpretation (Jewitt & Oyama, 2011, p. 136). This entails interpreting reality depending on the social context through the use of several visual systems of communication. In order for it to work as a proper way of communication, the visual has to follow representational and communicational requirements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006); therefore, this thesis follows a semiotic perspective based on Kress and van Leeuwen's contributions (2006) that focuses on the relationship between sign, understanding and socio-reality. This will help to unveil and explore the structures and features that influencers practically use for expressing authenticity through signs in their pictures as well as how they create meaning through their visual communication.

4.2 Research design

This research will employ the use of a qualitative method in exploring the phenomenon of authenticity creation through visual features in the apparently staged and constructed context of personal branding. This will focus on understanding how meaning can be created and is

communicated in this specific paradoxical situation. The use of a qualitative approach will help the researcher in creating knowledge by allowing different interpretative possibilities and it gives the possibility to the researcher's construction of the explored phenomenon of authenticity to be more visible (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). For the phenomenon selected, this approach is useful because it refuses the superficial interest in the way that reality works, while providing the possibility to produce basis for the creation of knowledge that aims at understanding rather than searching for an absolute and generalized "truth".

Through a qualitative research, the study will aim at an empirical analysis adopting a reflective approach which bases on careful interpretation and reflection (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The first refers to the fact that the entire research will be a result of interpretation, rejecting the idea that the data collected and the research results are a simple mirroring of the reality and representation of the truth (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The determinants for this interpretation come from pre-understanding and theoretical knowledge of the researcher. At the same time, the reflection can provide the interpretation with a better quality that can enhance the value of the research: the attention will point at all the elements that are part of the research context as well as at a critical investigation of the researcher's personal interpretations of the observed material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 24). The researcher will be part of this and draw reflection on the reality presented by the collected data. Again, the material and results provided by this thesis should not be considered as a universal truth, but as an exploration of a reality that is constructed and interpreted according to the empirical material collected and selected by the author.

4.2.1 Case selection and sample

For the selection of the case to study, a purposeful sampling will be employed based on an information-oriented selection strategy in order to achieve a significant amount of information related to the research problem (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In order to do so, a critical case, according to the definition of "having strategic importance in relation to the general problem" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 30), will be selected for the sample of this research. This type of sampling criteria was chosen based on the belief that the selected case can provide the most information and has a significant impact on the knowledge construction (Patton, 1990). The researcher opted for the selection of one single case that could be studied in depth for the amount of information that it

contains. It refers to the selection of an influencer who operates in the travel – outdoor experience niche and who employs personal branding techniques through visual communication on Instagram for marketing purposes.

Therefore, the identification of the critical case is based on the following criteria:

- It has to be a private individual with an active account on Instagram;
- The Instagram user has to be an influencer who actively uses photographs to communicate;
- The influencer has to operate in the travel destination niche; therefore he/she has to post pictures that represents nature and/or outdoor experiences;
- The influencer has a history in using pictures to commercialize herself/himself and/or other brands (explicit partnerships are being searched).

According to these criteria, the case chosen is the account named “wilderness_addict” (https://www.instagram.com/wilderness_addict/) run by Caroline Foster. The account meets the requirements for the study and encapsulates the form of authenticity that is needed to express travel and outdoor experiences in pictures. Moreover, more than once in the shared content, she was part of commercial partnerships with brands that are related to her niche. Her profile is an example of a travel influencer and can provide important insights in order to understand how the researched phenomenon is formed and managed. Since the aim of the study is to investigate the way that authenticity can be created through the use of visual features when implying personal branding techniques, the author believes that this profile can represent a critical example in the context of interest.

4.3 Data collection

The objective of the research is to explore how authenticity creation is practiced on a social media platform, therefore the data collected derives from the analysis of visual materials and their specific visual features that contribute to the explanation of the phenomenon.

At the time of the study, the profile analyzed was composed by more than 500 pictures, 3 of which were selected for the visual analysis, with the aim of unveiling how the meaning creation

takes place, or more specifically, how the influencer translates authenticity into visual information.

4.3.1 Netnography and images collection

This thesis has adopted a content analysis approach based on visual material on an Instagram account of a travel influencer. For this reason, in this study the researcher used a specific approach to qualitative research, that specifically aims at cultural analysis of social media and online community data, called netnography (Kozinets et al., 2014). This technique shares many of the features of ethnography, in which the researcher gets a more inclusive understanding of the social phenomenon by becoming a participant and observer of the culture and social setting studied (Kozinets, 2010; Mkono, 2013). This type of data collection, based on a naturalistic orientation, is relevant for the study since it gives access to important insights to explain socio-cultural phenomena by exploring naturally occurring behaviors (Kozinets et al., 2014), such as the interactions and co-creation processes among participants.

In using netnography, the researcher can be a mere observer of the studied phenomenon, collecting empirical material without taking part in the online interactions, or, on the contrary, the researcher can become an active member in the virtual social context studied. In order to conduct the research and have access to the entire amount of information available about the influencer profile, the writer of this thesis became, to a certain extent, a member of the social setting since she had to possess an Instagram account and follow “wilderness_addict” profile was needed. In this way, the researcher was ensured to gain the same information and in the same way as the other users (Kozinets et al., 2014). However, it is worth mentioning that other than the above-mentioned actions and even though the researcher was virtually present, there was no participation or involvement in the interaction practices of the case or in the creation of content. The observations and analysis took place with very discreet and non-obtrusive methods. In fact, through an online cultural study, the researcher can get a significant amount of information in a less invasive way than traditional ethnography, obscuring their presence to the other members (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2014).

It is important to mention that this content analysis on Instagram was conducted exclusively in the form of photographs publicly shared by the user of the case study. Although the texts that accompany the pictures were read carefully and were only used for a more thorough selection of the empirical material (for example, to understand and identify the explicit partnership), it was the images that determined the entire analysis and results. Furthermore, texts could be interpreted and used as a social media strategy that was not relevant for the study.

For the data collection, the author applied Bryman's thematic image selection (2016) to find relevant themes for the examined material. The case presented a large amount of data; therefore it was important to use a sampling procedure, in order to select some pictures and to ensure that they were representative and significant (Rose, 2001). Firstly, due to the frequency of the influencer's posting activity and the similarities of the images' outlook of the entire profile, it was chosen a relatively short timeframe of 12 months from which it was possible to extract the images. The time frame started from March 3rd, 2018 until February 27th, 2019 and included 121 photos. In this way, it was possible to gather the most recent pictures and, at the same time, get a pretty accurate representative sample of the different image types.

After identifying the possible pictures for the analysis, the researcher examined the 121 images and developed themed categories based on their visual characteristic in the selection, relevant for the study. The aim of the research is to get a deeper understanding of the visual feature of a picture in terms of authenticity when the creator is known for the strategical employment of personal branding techniques. For its achievement, the data was carefully scrutinized more than once to get an overall view of its relation to the aim and research question. Furthermore, bearing in mind that the categorization is a way of making sense (Bryman, 2016) and of identifying common characteristics, the process continued by labeling these categories, which should be exhaustive, exclusive and enlightening (Rose, 2001). That means that they should represent the image, they should not overlap, and should be analytically interesting and coherent (Rose, 2001). After defining the categories according to the themes discovered (3), all the 121 pictures selected were divided into these categories.

Lastly, after inspecting the photographs and related categories some more times, as the visual communication was repetitive, the author reduced the number of pictures for the deep analysis

and randomly chose 1 picture for each category for the analysis, considered a well representative sample.

The following delineates the list of themes encountered, related to the study, and the number of pictures included:

- Plain landscape photography; no. of images: 37
- Portrait photography; no. of images: 32
- Photography in explicit commercial partnership; no. of images: 52

4.4 Data analysis

In order to analyze the collected material, the researcher applied the theory of metafunctions, further extended to visual social semiotics resources by the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and initially founded by Halliday (1978) regarding the linguistic realm. According to the authors, “the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several communicational (and representational) requirements, in order to function as a full system of communication” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 41). Therefore, the three dimensions to consider for the analysis renamed by Kress and van Leeuwen’s adaptation (2006) are: representational, interactive and compositional. The concept of modality was also important for the analysis, since it refers to the reliability of the message: Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) do not include it in any of the metafunctions, therefore the author placed it in the compositional metafunction, following Jewitt and Oyama’s work (2011).

4.4.1 Representational metafunction

Through this metafunction, the study will explore the choices that are used in the picture for the visual sign-making of the process of representation, and more specifically, the ways in which objects can be expressed and represented (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The objects and elements that appear in the image (people, places and everything else that is included in the representation), following Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework (2006), will be referred to as “participants”. The most salient participants that can be identified according to a more functional semiotic theory (Halliday, 1978 cited in Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 49) are

called “actors”. They are considered relevant participants through specific visual features like the size, placement, contrast, color saturation, focus and ‘psychological salience’ (for example, the human figure), attention that the actor draws of the viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63). These actors are also the ones who emanate and form the vector, a (usually) oblique line, that indicates directionality and the type of action taken by the actors (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The use of a vector suggests that the visual encoding is carried by a narrative structure that serves to depict unfolding actions or events (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Stoian, 2015). When there is no action and the pictures do not include any vector, they are called conceptual images and aim to present to the viewer the concept of the depicted elements (Jewitt & Oyama, 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

4.4.2 *Interactive metafunction*

The interactive metafunction refers to the patterns of interactions that are grasped between the producer and the viewer of the picture (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) point out two types of participants that can have different relationships and interactions between each other through images: represented (depicted) and interactive (real) participant (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Stoian, 2015). This metafunction has three dimensions, namely image act, social distance and point of view. The first refers to the way that the represented participants address the viewer: directly (demand) or indirectly (offer).

The second dimension, social distance, concerns the size of the frame and the type of shot (close-up, medium or long) and can be applied not only to human-represented participants, but also to the representation of objects and landscapes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). It is important to understand the visual choices employed by the creator of the picture in depicting the participants close to or far away from the viewer; these lead, again, to different (imaginary) relations among participants (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

This takes the analysis to the last dimension of the interactive function, which is about the point of view or perspective. The selection of an angle for the shot, or perspective, determines the expression of possible subjective attitudes towards the participants, encoded as they are perceived to be individual and unique (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

4.4.3 *Compositional metafunction*

The last dimension refers to the way that the previous dimensions (representational and interactive) relate and are integrated to each other into a meaningful whole (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 176). The choices of placement of certain elements are important in order to communicate specific information. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) meaning is created through: information value, salience and framing.

The information value is connected to the visual areas of left and right; top and bottom; and center and margin (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Stoian, 2015). Left and right refers to the visual positions that the elements of the picture were given along the horizontal axis, where left stands for the “given” and known information – chosen as “starting point” for the message – and the right serves to provide new information about something new or that needs particular attention (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Stoian, 2015). Top and bottom elements, on the contrary, follow the vertical axis, where the top implies information that is essential or ideal, and the bottom is the representation of the real and practical information (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Stoian, 2015).

Salience concerns the ability in capturing the viewer’s attention and refers to the size, focus, colors, foreground, and all the elements that contribute to the visual communication of the picture.

Framing, on the other hand, makes the viewer perceive the participants as connected to the whole picture or separate from it, having a major importance or another particular role in the photograph.

Modality

Another important aspect included in the model of visual design presented by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) is the concept of modality (reality value), motivated signs useful to understand the reliability of the message of the picture. The determination of the realness or not of things is based on their appearance and how close they are to “what people can normally see as an

object” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 158). Modality represents the level in which the picture is experienced as “real” or “hyper-real” and refers to the interplay of actual visual features (signs) that are given to the picture and through which the creator can express meanings of truth or falsehood, credibility and unreliability (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 154). These features (or markers) are: color saturation, differentiation or modulation; contextualization; representation; depth; illumination and brightness (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 160-163) and they generally follow a spectrum of possibilities.

These visual semiotic tools for visual analysis were applied to all the 3 images selected for the object of the study. It is believed that through the use of this theoretical framework, the author was able to first understand the “reality” created by the influencer and, second, to unveil the practical ways through which she could construct and create authenticity, even though the picture was strategically built for commercial and partnership purposes.

4.5 Methodological reflections and limitations

The study is conducted on a public Instagram account, which means that the needed information is available to everyone and to the purpose of the research. Additionally, it existed already and therefore it cannot be influenced by the presence of the researcher or by the study conducted. However, since the content can be modified by the user, it is possible that during or after the analysis, some of the posted content might change. This could represent a limitation in terms of accessibility of information. In any case, the methodology and the platform used are the most suitable for the study, since they give access to a form of visual communication tailored also for strategic purposes.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the research is confined to western cultures. The consequence of this is that one should be cautious with generalizing results beyond this culture.

5. Analysis

In this chapter, the selected images will be analyzed by applying Kress and van Leeuwen's visual social semiotics framework (2006) based on Halliday's metafunctions (1978). The analysis will focus on identifying the denotative and connotative elements (what is seen and the related meanings) using the representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions. Therefore, it will follow the identified themes: plain landscape photography, portrait photography and photography in explicit commercial partnership.

5.1 Plain landscape photography

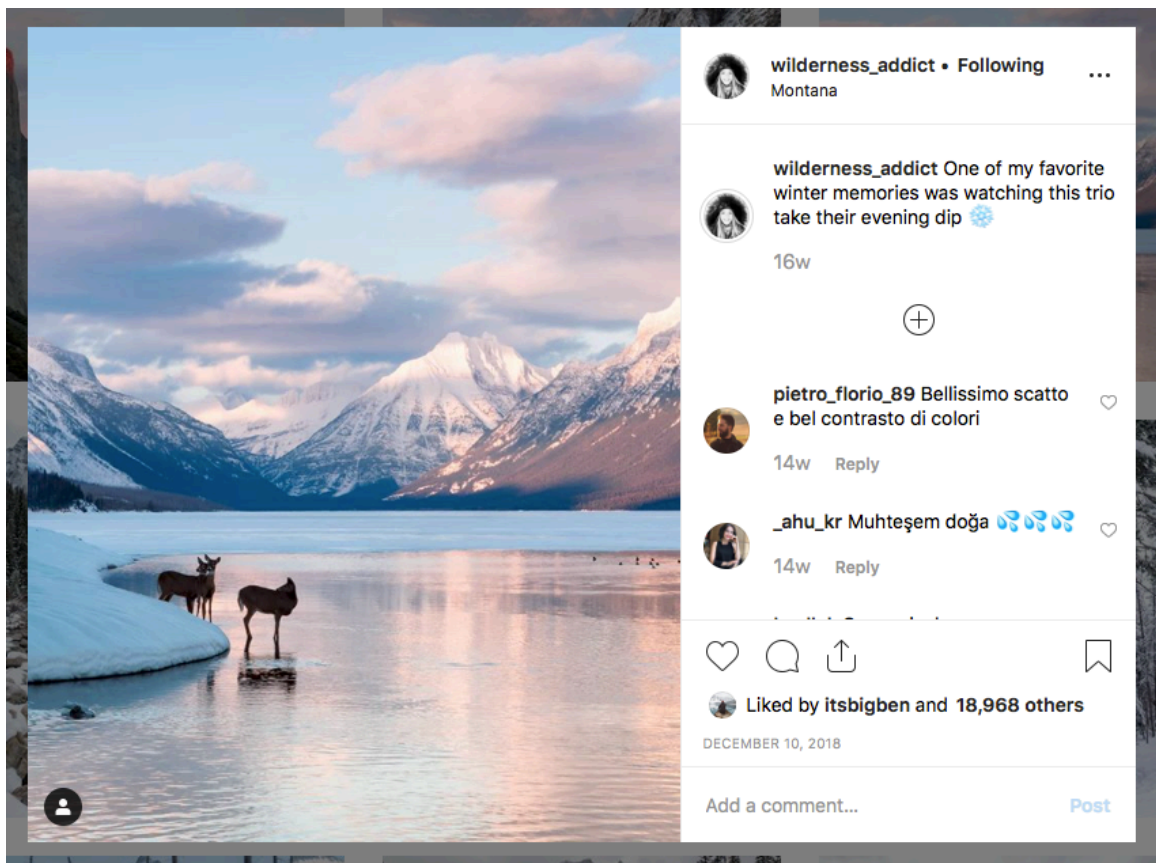


Figure 1 Screenshot of a picture representing a natural environment composed by a lake, animals and mountains in the background. Image caption and few comments on the side (wilderness_addict, 2018).

5.1.1 *Representational metafunction*

In the picture, *Figure 1*, the researcher identified two types of participants: the first one is represented by the three animals (which seem to be elks or deer) and the second is the natural landscape (composed by the mountains and the lake). The simple identification of these two participants is given by the fact that it is not a very detailed naturalistic image, which made the process of identification easier and worth to be mentioned. The animals, in this specific case, are the most salient participants and therefore they are the so-called actors of the representation. Even though they are not very big in size, they particularly manage to stand out for their very dark figures and sharpness in contrast against the light color of the background.

In the photograph, the bodies of the three animals form a diagonal vector and the natural context helps in understanding the kind of action that this vector represents. Their figures form an oblique vector that makes it easier to understand the narrative: their positions suggest that they were drinking from the lake, before being interrupted by something unknown to the viewer. In the shot, the animals seem to simply stare at the left side of the picture, in an apparent non-transactional process. This means that the action is represented by their glance, but it seems to have no aim nor is directed to anyone or anything, at least from what can be seen from the picture. As a consequence, it is up to the viewer's imagination to complete the scene.

As a narrative image (since an action is present), the depicted mountains and the lake represent a secondary participant, named setting, and they are connected to the actors not through vectors but through some other ways. Although these participants could be left out, since they do not participate directly to the action of the main actor, omitting them would make the representation lose a consistent amount of information and its original meaning. The presented setting is important for the expression of the visual modality and in this case, it is used to make a more detailed and credible representation of reality (the setting against which the animals appear). Furthermore, it is also part of a conceptual structure, since it can be seen as a symbolic process that is included within the action process. Normally, mountains and lake are found in nature and represent, usually, uncontaminated environments. Thus, they are symbolic of the wilderness of the presented context, the proof that the photographer was actually immerse in nature, expression of a sense of freedom and belonging to something greater and more complex than the human presence. A sort of idealization is indeed perceived: the warm colors of the

clouds, the soft reflection on the lake and the warm feeling radiated despite the frozen situation show that the influencer wanted to find an ideal space that people dream of (it reminds of an imaginary, peaceful and thoughtless place), but that could actually be lived in reality.

5.1.2 *Interactive metafunction*

In the picture, the look of the deer points to the left side of the picture, allowing no kind of relationships to be created among participants. There is no visual contact between the represented participant (the animals) and the interactive participant (the viewer) and for this reason the analyzed image can be called “offer”, since it delivers the depicted participant as an item of information or object to be observed, impersonally. The animals are not engaging with the viewer, almost implying that they don’t want to be disturbed and that they don’t need anything from the viewer. Indeed, the photograph allude to a lucky moment in which the photographer managed to capture these animals, that did not notice her presence. The lack of preparation and posing of the animals show a modality typical of wildlife photography, attributing to the analyzed picture a touch of a more authentic and real representation.

Moreover, the photograph presents the size frame of a long shot, since the figures of the animals are shown completely with some space that surrounds them and are placed in a long distance from the viewer. The creator decided this type of size-frame which seems to lead to a so called “far personal distance” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124) reserved to a more formal and impersonal interaction among participants. The size of the frame for the landscape in general suggests that the viewer is imaginarily located somewhere within the landscape, not very far away from the actors, but not too close neither. Being too close for the photographer, indeed, would have resulted in scaring the creatures and would have ruined the beauty and spontaneity of the entire scene. Additionally, for the viewer, a photographic close spatial distance stands for (imaginary) intimacy and affinity, which does not represent in reality the type of relationship that humans have with wild animals, and would have therefore failed to fulfill the purpose of the picture. This choice of spaces gives the impression that the viewer is placed in a strategic spot that can allow a more detailed overview of the environment, but always without disturbing its wilderness nature.

The analyzed picture is a naturalistic image, since what is observed can also be seen in reality. Furthermore, it is clearly a subjective image, as the viewer can assist to the scene only partly and from a particular point of view, dictated by the creator of the photograph. A slightly vertical angle is employed by the photographer, which allows the interactive participant (the human viewer) to be in a position of a “symbolic” power over the represented participants (animals), that look to be almost within reach of the viewer. The visual angle used suggests that the animals should not be intimidated by the presence of the human, while it reinforces the status of the person observing the scene. In this way, the person is not actively part of their world and is not involved in their actions, as it should normally be, even if the viewer is still present, controlling and recording the situation.

The size-frame, the perspective and the angle used by the influencer for the image is a way to make the viewer (passively) participating in the natural environment to a certain extent, as if the viewer was actually there, but maintaining some barrier, in order not to contaminate the surrounding nature. It is not an ordinary and everyday situation the one represented by the photographer and therefore the viewer has just to observe quietly in order not to ruin the almost “magical” but real moment.

5.1.3 Compositional metafunction

The picture is created following the left/right and top/bottom scheme of the information value system and it is the result of a combination of a horizontal and vertical structure. The animals (representing a wild life) are placed on the left side as given/known information and are a significant part of the nature, whereas the landscape is represented as the new information that needs particular attention. The animals are placed on the left side to leave more space for the whole natural landscape/surrounding, in order for it to be at focus and to express its picturesque importance and value in the composition, ready to be “discovered”. Additionally, the encounter between the foot of the mountains, the end of the lake and the frozen surface divides the picture in two, in a way that seems to follow and accompany the deer’s gaze in an equilibrate natural system. The animals placed on the left bottom side represent the certain and real thing, in contrast to the broad, unknown and open information of the nature (mountains and sky) on the top of the picture. The deer are shown as the real information given (existing and undisturbed animals) that is needed as a starting point to express the idea of the photographer: the

surrounding nature is the new idea offered to users – the ideal of an infinite, positive, natural and authentic landscape. A place where people can find nothing but a natural and untouched system (the animals) and the beauty of an unexplored and pure nature (setting).

Saliency has been briefly discussed in the previous sections and explains the presented elements (the animals in *Figure 1*) for their sharpness, color and contrast as more relevant and attractive than the others. Even though their size is modest, the animals capture the viewer's attention for their sharp figures and dark colors, popping out of a bright and warm-colored setting and emphasizing the rarity of the moment captured. The viewer is almost compelled to focus first on the animals and imaging their actions, and just in a second moment will shift the attention to grasp the background's details. The photographer intentionally worked on the tonal contrast between the deer and the soft-colored landscape to almost remind the viewer that these are real animals and they are there; the scene really happened and it's not an artificial construction or a lie. The lack of details together with the definition of the figure's outline help in recognize the creatures and give them a more stable, valuable and not at all idealistic presence.

Lastly, the image contains no specific lines of frame since there is no separate unit of information that needs to be stressed or differentiated out of a group. Both animals and the landscape are part of a significant whole needed to express the influencer's intentions of a wild and real nature.

Modality

In the photograph, high modality (or closeness to truth or reality) of the analyzed picture is given, according to the western culture, by a median color saturation, differentiation and modulation. Indeed, although the picture presents a limited diversification of colors, the predominant ones vary significantly from ranges of pink and light blue in an apparently neutral or non-exaggerated saturation. The presence of an apparently non-altered color makes it appear as a very close to reality representation. Indeed, the warm palette chosen for the analyzed picture and the color saturation (surely enhanced and edited by the influencer) seem to accompany the gaze of the viewer, starting from the animal moving to the lake and then the mountains, in a calm and gentle process that makes the viewer appreciate the entire

representation. Through the soft colors used for the winter context, the viewer can recognize that the sun is setting behind the mountains and its warm colors are reflecting on the landscape in a way that is commonly seen in the everyday life. The influencer managed to choose the right balance between excessive and inexistent saturation, avoiding the risk of resulting more colored than real or pale and “ghostly”. Illumination and brightness play also an important role, since their interplay makes it easier for the viewer to define the main actors (represented with a dark color and in the shadow) in contrast with the main landscape (bright pinks and light blues in an apparently sunlight illumination). These colors and light remind of a heavenly ideal place, made of fluffy, pinky clouds and white mountains, brought to the real world by the presence of elements (the dark, “grounded” animals, and the small ripples of the water) that keep the viewer close to the realness of the image.

Moreover, the modality of the image is increased by its quality, a naturally-defined background and a plain, but non-artificially articulated and detailed setting. The light and the sharpness used by the influencer for the background enhances the details along the surface of the mountains and the lake, giving it a more realistic and authentic aspect, without making them appear fake or exaggerated.

5.2 Portrait photography

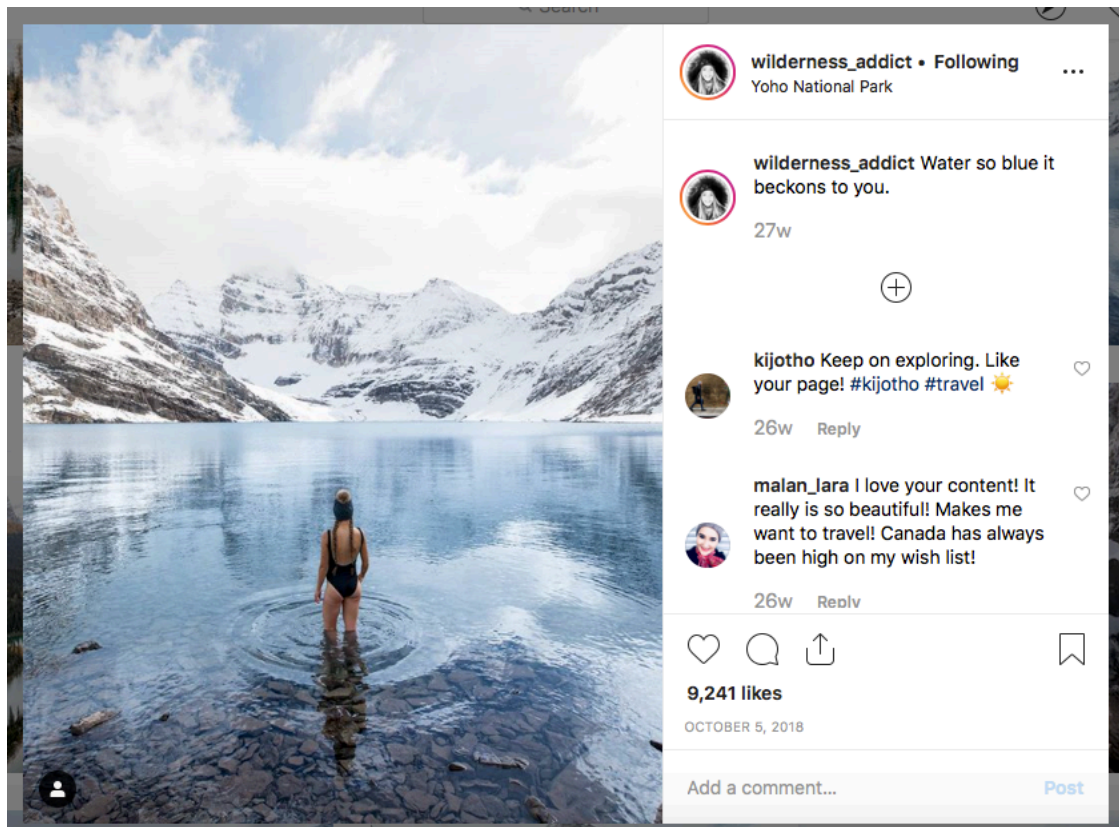


Figure 2 Screenshot of a picture representing the influencer entering a lake in the mountains. Image caption and few comments on the side (wilderness_addict, 2018).

5.2.1 Representational metafunction

The analyzed picture, *Figure 2*, is composed by two major participants: a human presence, represented by a girl, and a natural landscape, identified by a lake and a “barrier” of mountains on the background. The participant that captures at first the attention of the viewer is clearly the person standing in the center of the picture, partly immersed in the water. The representation of a human presence gives more realness and credibility to the picture and helps humanize it, connecting the viewer to the story within it. In this case, the girl in front of this landscape represents a desire and an attempt to be closer to and to explore this nature. Given her huge audience, the viewer must be considered someone who most likely doesn’t know or never met personally the influencer, however through the pictures shared on her profile, and with the help of the profile picture, it is quite certain that the depicted person is the influencer herself. Even though she is not in the foreground, she is still at focus for her contrasting colors (her skin tons

and her swimsuit) against the light blue color of the lake. The position of her legs and her body together with her reflection on the lake suggest a very steep diagonal vector that helps in recognizing the action that the influencer took and is going to take. At a first look, it seems that she just entered the lake and that she is admiring the view while taking the courage to dip into the water. Looking with more attention, the small vector created at the level of her knees and the ripples that are expanding across the water because of the movements of the girl provide a feeling of action that gives the picture a naturally dynamic feel, rather than a static one. The back view of the shot and the capture of these little movements give the impression that the girl didn't know that she was being photographed. However, given the details, the viewer can understand the narrative by thinking that the influencer did not just enter the lake. The ripples of the water are spreading circularly outwards incrementally from the center, where the girl stands, typical of the moment in which an object dropped into the water. This might show that the influencer was actually trying to get the best shot, by arranging her position in that exact spot. Furthermore, she wears an apparently woolen hat (item that is not used to swim), which makes the viewer think that it is cold and that she actually does not intend to jump into the water, at least not completely.

The other participants form an important part of the picture and help to explain (to a certain extent) the outfit of the influencer, in an almost ironical attempt to make the picture more credible. Indeed, on the background, the viewer can see the mountains covered in snow alluding to the low temperature of a winter day. Despite this, the influencer is shown to be about to have a swim in the lake. This situation seems almost unreal: she wears a swimsuit (symbol of summer, or at least, it arises warm feelings) in a snowy and apparently cold environment. What is interesting is that she also wears a woolen-winter hat, a (symbolic) "protection" against the low temperature, almost to prove that she didn't just photoshopped the snow on the mountains or herself on the lake, but to show that she was actually there and that the climate conditions were exactly how they look like in the picture.

The influencer is famous on the platform for her wilderness experiences, and this picture, once again, gives a taste of what her wild-life looks like. Indeed, the fact that she is just wearing a swimsuit and a hat and her willingness to take a dip into the lake despite the temperature seem to show that she wants to get a deeper connection with the nature, distant from the artificial

things of the everyday life. An apparently spontaneous moment is captured, that appears to be unprepared and full of truth.

5.2.2 *Interactive metafunction*

As already pointed out in the previous section, in the photograph the influencer, which in this case does not coincide with the photographer, is facing (and probably admiring) the landscape. The viewer, in this way, not only will contemplate the nature, but will mostly observe the person, who became the (almost) exclusive object of observation, reducing the engagement between herself and the viewer. The presence of the same influencer gives, to a certain extent, to the depicted situation a sense of attachment to reality, since it shows that she was there and that she is real; the action and the image serve as a proof that the influencer is who she claims to be and does what she claims to do. The lack of eye contact among participants, as in almost all of her picture, seems to stand for a more authentic and credible representation of the situation: the influencer looks like she got captured in the moment, ignoring that she was being photographed, making the image less staged and more realistic. The position of the girl gives the impression that she didn't intend to take a picture, because that's just how she is in real life, or that is how she lives her life, in the search for a deeper connection with the nature, off the beaten path. She purposely decided to not engage with the viewer, firstly so that she can show that she didn't prepare the picture – “it just happened” –, and secondly, it could mean that she didn't want to actively invite people to share the moment, since it could ruin the atmosphere and the feeling of being alone with nature. The viewer just needs to observe and understand that it's something that not all people can do, but just the ones who embrace the wilderness and freedom of being part of the nature.

In the image, the photographer chose to leave the influencer at a significant distance from the viewer, to create a strong sense of uniqueness and spontaneity of the moment. In this way, the viewer can still participate in the scene, but only to admire the depicted girl. It also shows a new way to capture the image, giving the impression that the girl is actually alone and no one else is there with her. Once again, she does not invite the viewer to participate or to identify with her and her relationship with the nature. She invites the viewer to contemplate the scene detachedly, to make the viewer implicitly aware that just “some” can have this unique type of relationship with nature, and not everybody, not the viewers themselves. In this case, she and

her peculiar experience are the phenomenon to observe. This is also reinforced by the oblique angle used by the photographer who did not align with the subject: this further reminds the viewers that this is not part of their world, but just hers. Additionally, the use of a back view implies a measure of trust, despite the willingness to be alone. In fact, exposing one's back to someone also makes oneself vulnerable to the other. In this way, the influencer was able both to generate a sense of detachment and uniqueness, but also a feeling of trust in sharing her moments with the public.

5.2.3 *Compositional metafunction*

The photograph uses two types of information value systems. In fact, within *Figure 2* the influencer is depicted almost at the center of the entire picture. She represents the nucleus of information, to which all the other elements and parts of the picture are to a certain extent subservient. In a certain sense, the influencer in this picture wanted to capture the attention and show that she is surrounded by nature and that she manages to be part of it, even if for a limited time. The picture is also clearly divided into two different parts: the encounter between the lake and the mountains separates what is real (bottom section) and known from what is, instead, more ideational (top section). Following this identification, the influencer and the lake shore stand for the true information, something to be sure about: the person is as real as the stones that can be seen at the bottom of the lake, which give a more specific and recognizable information of the place. The details and the colors bring the viewer to an earthy-grounded environment, contributing to a sense of authenticity and stability. The mountains, that represent the ideal information, are placed in the background and give a more general idea of the entire situation, allowing the viewer to free the thoughts and let them fly towards something unknown and outside his/her power.

The salience of the main actor is determined firstly by the importance of the appearance of the human figure, which determines the object of focus for the human mind. Secondly, although the size of the figure is small compared to the entire image and it is not perfectly centered, it captures the attention for the actual object represented and for its chosen visual features and editing. In fact, the girl stands with her black swimming suit and dark woolen hat in a spot where the water starts to be brighter and in a lighter cold color. The soft-reddish skin color of the influencer contrasts the light-blue saturation of the lake, making the girl pop at the viewer's

sight. However, even though she has a great importance in the representation, the photograph wouldn't reach its purpose if the setting wasn't present. Both participants (the human object and the landscape) complement each other and their functions, in order to give more reliability to the picture. The girl and her outfit wouldn't transmit the same message if she was depicted somewhere else, on a regular beach for example.

Modality

Despite the fact that the picture may have very low modality if the viewer focuses on certain details, the message that the influencer wants to communicate still holds great validity and reliability for the viewer. Even though real objects are represented, they seem pretty odd when depicted in a particular context: the hat of the influencer is in a cultural contrast with the swimming suit that she is wearing. In the representation of the moment in which she is (apparently) about to dip into the water, the hat might seem “abstract”, uncommon and constructed. However, when considered the entire picture, the hat confirms and helps in understanding the weather condition and temperature in which the influencer is acting. The same can be said about the swimming suit: pretty uncommon when considering just the mountains and not the context and the purpose of the picture. This demonstrates that all the objects depicted are used to validate all the visual choices giving a sense of realness to the entire representation.

The picture was edited maintaining the cold colors that the reality suggests, using a limited differentiation of hues: they range from blues, greys to grey-brownish effects. These colors remind of a winter landscape, water, ice and snow; their saturation level (a little less than full) allows the viewer to understand and recognize the details and the different parts of the lake and the mountains. Furthermore, the colors are approximately as saturated as those in the standard photographic editing technology, and therefore they do not appear exaggerated or dull. This makes the picture look like it was not subject to editing (since viewers are more or less used to these standards), giving an even more authentic appearance and closeness to reality. The picture appears with a strong message that is reinforced by the cool colors that dominate the representation: they help in feeling relaxed and calm (perfect for representing nature, a place where people can relax and feel free) in a receding effect, which makes the viewers feeling like abandoning themselves in an endless blue lake and sky.

Although there seems to be no sunlight, the photograph, also helped by the use of different shades of colors, is pretty bright, especially in the top part, where lighter hues are used to reflect a more natural light. This increases the perception of a more naturalistic and genuine representation.

5.3 Photography in explicit commercial partnership

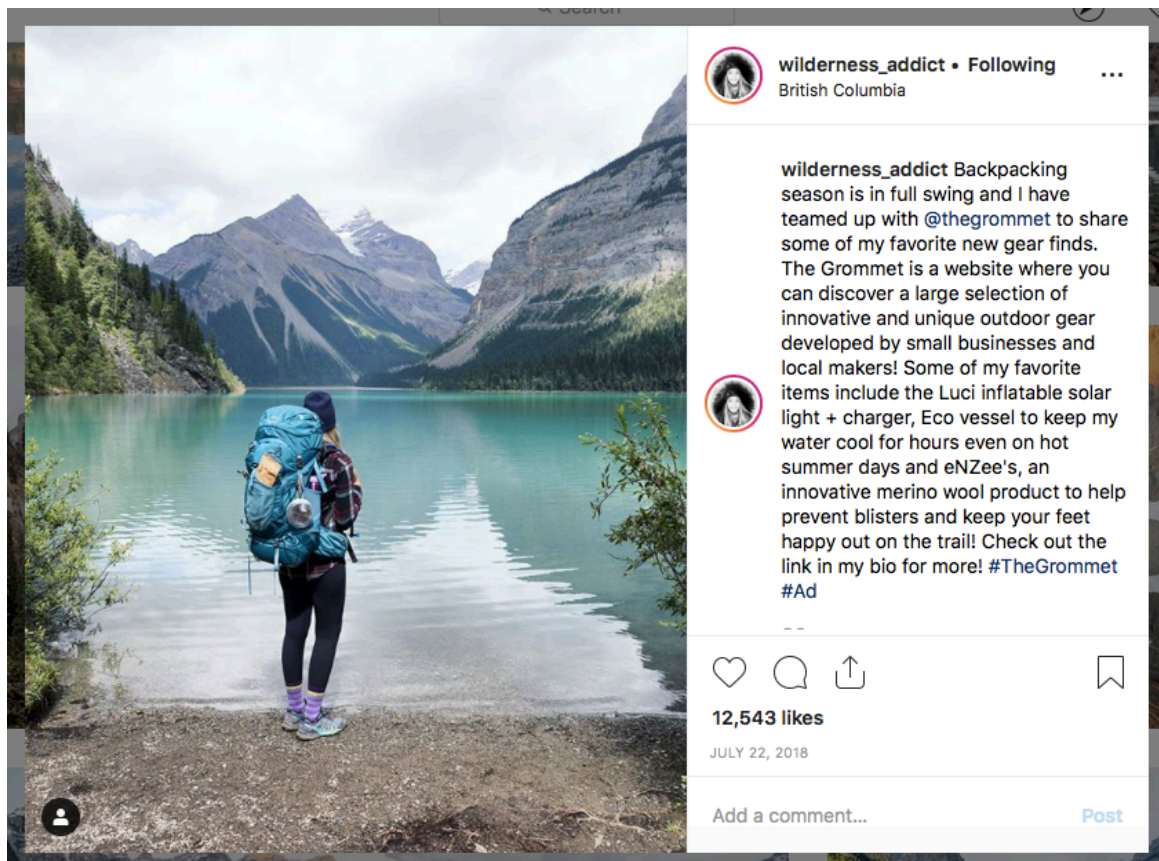


Figure 3 Screenshot of a picture representing the influencer staring at a lake in the mountains. Image caption and few comments on the side (wilderness_addict, 2018).

5.3.1 Representational metafunction

In the picture (Figure 3) the use of the natural landscape and the presence of the influencer standing still as main participants encourages the viewer to think and perceive traveling and backpacking in the abstract and in a deeper way. This refers to the forms through which the viewer can reach freedom and be in connection with nature, exploring new places and achieve a better self-understanding. In this case, no vectors can be recognized, since there is no

particular action that involves the participants, thus it is the case of a conceptual picture, as it seems to explain the “concept” of what the influencer and the nature represent. The influencer is standing in front of the lake, probably in the middle of a hike, admiring the landscape in front of her, in a position that clearly gives the impression that she is posing to purposely show that she is carrying a packed backpack on her back.

More details can be seen in this third photograph, which enact a system of symbolic processes: more objects are displayed that seem to tell a story that unfolds the message that the influencer wanted to communicate. The backpack, for example, is one of the first things that the viewer observes, and it usually symbolizes wilderness and travel. In fact, backpacking is the outdoor activity that involves a form of independent travel, based on carrying gears on the back while hiking and travelling for short/long periods. The known backpack’s function is to carry all the persons’ life essentials on their own backs while exploring places, but in a different way than the common tourist. Backpackers are known for (if even for a short time) rejecting their normal life and adopting a form of a more down-to-earth and authentic way of living, while getting into a deeper connection with nature and the self. They search for freedom, moving away from conventions and everyday practices, embracing all the possibilities and things that nature can provide. The fact that the influencer is combining her admiration for the landscape, while showing her tools demonstrates once again that she is a backpacker who embraced this type of life and she is proud of being recognized as such.

On the surface of her backpack, the girl is displaying some objects that are both useful for her journey and are part (probably) of the strategy she is using. Indeed, these small objects and the way that they are showcased make the viewer think, even if not so visually explicit, that she orchestrated the picture according to some commercial agreements (as confirmed by the caption she wrote beside the picture). Although the viewer is sure that the image is staged, he/she still grasps the hints given by the influencer to recognize her authentic and genuine experience. The girl could have shown the objects also in other positions, but the effect and the message of being “off the beaten path” in a connection with nature is reinforced by the use of these symbols that make the viewer overcoming the reality that the picture is strategically constructed. The fact that in the picture it appears the vastness of a lake with mountains on the background only helps her in reaching her goal, demonstrating that she is backpacking and this is the way she is doing it. Her ways and gears have led her to amazing and almost magical places that she is not lying

about and that she wants to share. The character feels comfortable in the unique landscape, showing respect for nature and inspiring people to escape the city life in favor of a more wild and authentic life using the nature's own resources.

5.3.2 *Interactive metafunction*

Like in almost all the pictures shared on her Instagram profile, the influencer, when present, is not looking at the viewer and is facing at the lake and mountains in the background. Also, in this case she is represented from a back shot and does not make any demand or request to the public. Therefore, the picture presents the characteristics of a visual social semiotic “offer”, where the girl and her backpack are the object of observation and interpretation. It is interesting to understand the reasons why the producer decided to make herself the object of study and not, for example, just the landscape. In fact, it is not only herself that she chose to expose, but also her lifestyle, to a certain extent, and her travel choices. More specifically, the author already explained in the previous section what the backpack means symbolically, which, together with the objects displayed, serves to attract the viewer to this type of life and maybe persuade her/him to buy the same products and follow the influencer with her life decisions. Viewers do not participate actively to the picture, and it looks like that the depicted elements are shown specifically for them, almost in an attempt to give them advice about the experience. By being there, the influencer, once again, demonstrates that she takes care of her audience and wants them to be part of her adventure, sharing her “secrets” and guidance. She gives her testimony and shares her experience on being in connection with nature, revealing a more authentic and genuine way of experiencing it. And because of that, the viewer tends to believe and trust her, because she shows that she knows, and she successfully uses the tools that she is presenting, which have helped her to reach her goal of being there as an expert on the field, and they are a part of who she is.

The long distance used for presenting the subject creates a sort of invisible barrier between the viewer and the influencer. She is there, with her backpack, only for the viewer's contemplation, as if the objects were on display on a shop window or exhibition. This signifies that the viewers cannot be at her level and experience things that she is doing unless they follow her suggestions and use the tools she is using. This gives the impression that the picture was strategically constructed for this purpose. Additionally, seeing the influencer and sharing the same location

with her can make the viewer identify with her and want to explore places with her. Indeed, the feeling of being part of a unique experience, but just out of reach of the ones who share the same values of the influencer is reinforced by the imaginary location of the viewer. The viewer seems to stand in a privileged spot, within the landscape, but stopping for a little moment to admire what's ahead. Moreover, the picture's elements (the outdoor equipment, the intrepid girl and the nature) address people who enjoy these activities and can/are willing to identify with the influencer. The subjectivity expressed by showing her obliquely, between two bushes and taking the photograph from an eye-level, strengthens the viewer's identification with the girl, indicating equality and possibility of participation.

5.3.3 *Compositional metafunction*

In the picture, two types of informational value systems are recognizable: the influencer is standing, once again, on the center – left side of the photograph and the different types of natural landscapes almost seem to divide it into three parts, ground – lake – mountains and sky. Through the first type, the influencer and her backpack represent the main information and her position a little on the left stands for the expression of the known and given information, that is the girl waiting to explore with her equipment. The obliquity of the body of the influencer, instead, points at the right side of the photograph, which represents the new information, that she will discover the vastness of nature, a significant aspect of the backpacking way of traveling. Furthermore, the separation into three sections creates an ideal/real system. The ideal of the endless, almost imaginary, and unreachable mountains and cloudy sky is visualized in the photograph above the girl and the lake, which represent the real information. The part on which the girl is standing on the ground represents the attachment to the earth, indicating security and realness, in contraposition with the landscape in front of her that suggests freedom, emotions and imagination.

The human figure already captures the viewer attention and contributes in giving the girl and the backpack great salience. The strongly saturated colors of the backpack and the dark colors of the influencer's clothes were improved to create a light contrast with the soft color of the lake in order to highlight the importance of the human presence. The details that emerge both from the figure and the landscape leave no space for insecurity, uncertainty or falsehood. Every element of the picture helps in giving it an increased sense of real and referentiality.

Although there is no explicit framework, the importance of the main actor is enhanced by the natural green framework that is created around her. This is composed by the two bushes on both sides of the picture, almost in the foreground, and the trees in the horizon line that form its corners. This framework, though, is “open” creating an effect of both importance but also inclusion with the natural landscape in order for the photograph to focus both on the influencer but also on the background.

Modality

As for the previous images, the analysis of this picture shows that even though the message might be intended as promotional, it holds great modality. Although the natural participant might be unfamiliar to the viewer, the general setting can still be perceived as realistic: all the presented elements are known, to a certain extent, by the viewer and can easily be recognized and found in a natural environment. Everything participates in giving to the message of the image great reliability, validity and realness. By showing the girl with her equipment and the beauty of the landscape with a variety of elements and its vibrant colors, the creator managed to create positive feelings and associations, which make the viewer believe in the portrayed “story,” trust and identify with the influencer. The picture presents a limited range of colors; mainly greenish, grayish and turquoise tones, that actually remind of the typical landscape of mountains and forests and contribute in giving to the picture a more natural look. Furthermore, they manage to enhance the feeling of being immersed in the nature. The green color and its different shades have been used to transmit energy, balance and inspiration, feelings that are pursued by the people who want to embrace nature and its resources. Again, the cold colors and the sense of openness make the viewer feel relaxed and closer to the actual landscape that the picture depicts. Their less-than-full saturation level suggests a more vibrant but natural scene, while the luminance and the brightness of the colors help creating a more positive and “open” atmosphere. The non-perfect white-grayish clouds in the sky represent and suggest a near climate change, which gives more credibility and realness to the picture. The receding effect of the cool colors contributes in creating a feeling of calm, freedom, but also loneliness and solitude needed to explore the wilderness of the nature and capture its finest and most authentic elements.

In general, the picture appears bright, especially at the level of the influencer, at a point that the details are enhanced and appear as they are in reality. Indeed, at a closer look, the natural light of the scene forms the shadow of the girl on the lake, which increases the perception of realness and truth.

5.4 Summary of visual analysis

The photograph's aesthetics and visual features are important elements for the communication of a message and can generate different associations and interpretations. Certain signs can be recognized and can determine the type of reality that the influencer wants to create and communicate. In the previous sections, the author pointed out that authenticity was constructed through specific qualities that the influencer specifically decided to use or enhance.

One way of constructing authenticity was the use a diversity of techniques to emphasize the different participants: thought their positions and their actions, they had different representations and interpretations, and they all had different approaches in the creation of authenticity. All these participants validated and complemented each other to create a more genuine and credible representation of the reality captured by the photographer. Their positions in the photograph suggests the known, certain and real information, for example by being represented either on the left side (the animals) or close to the center (the girl), both on the lower section. On the right side the constant presence of the surrounding landscape contributes to a sense of the ideal, unknown and wild, synonymous with nature. Their actions further created a feeling of spontaneity that helped in the creation of an authentic and realistic picture. In the first image, indeed, the animals are not engaging with the viewer, they are just staring towards the left, outside the picture, leaving the viewer to imagine the rest of the scene. They did not notice the photographer's presence; alluding to the rarity of the moment makes the viewer realize that the picture is an example of wildlife photograph.

Another factor that contributed to the creation of authenticity concerns the "symbolic" meaning of the depicted participants. The human presence, for instance, even though she is depicted in an environment to which she does not belong to in reality, gives the picture more realness and credibility. It humanizes the photograph and helps in creating a stronger bond with the viewer,

connecting him/her to the story within it. By being in the picture, the influencer demonstrates that she wants to share with her audience her personal life, her “secrets” and guidance, and reveals a more authentic and genuine way of experiencing nature. The fact that all the participants are standing on the ground shows a certain attachment to the earth, indicating security and realness, needed to present the contrasting landscape in front of or surrounding them that recalls freedom, emotions and imagination.

Furthermore, in the expression of authenticity, other symbolic processes take place in all three pictures. The animals, the swimsuit with the woolen hat and the backpack within their contexts are all symbols of embracing a wildlife and an “off the beaten path” experience, typical of people who enjoy exploring nature and being in a pure connection with it. These help in reinforcing the authentic perception that the viewer has of the pictures, which allows the viewer to overcome the idea that they are the result of collaborations and therefore strategically staged and purposely constructed.

Through the use of vibrant colors approximately as saturated as those in the standard photographic editing technology, the influencer managed to replicate nature, generating positive associations and emotions, which make the viewer believe in the portrayed “story”, and trust and identify with the influencer. In fact, the range of hues, mainly pink and white, or green, gray and blue tones, and the presence of an apparently non-altered color actually remind of the typical landscape of mountains, forests or lakes at sunset and contribute in giving to the picture a more natural look. While the cool colors play an important role in creating a feeling of calm, freedom, but also loneliness and solitude needed to explore the wilderness of the nature and capture its finest and most authentic elements, the warm ones invite the viewer to participate in the scene, transmitting positive and idealistic feelings. Colors were also used to emphasize the realness and authenticity of the participants: the animals in the first picture, for example, are represented with strong dark colors, in contrast with the soft warm colors of the surrounding environment, to show the viewer their outstanding presence, by being real, standing on the ground and being attached to reality.

Lastly, authenticity is also created by the angle used by the photographer and the social distance produced between the participants and the viewer. Indeed, to create a strong sense of uniqueness, wilderness and spontaneity of the moment, the photographer chose to portray the

participants at an oblique angle and significant distance from the viewers in order to inspire them to explore the wild and identify with the lonely pictured character.

6. Discussion

6.1 Relation to the previous knowledge

This research studied and analyzed the processes of authenticity creation that are enacted through the visual communication of influencers online. More specifically, a detailed analysis has been conducted to understand how authenticity is created in pictures that depict authentic situations (outdoor and adventure photography) in apparently staged representations.

The body of literature presented at the beginning of the thesis shows that the concept of authenticity is a complex phenomenon, particularly important for the creation of meaningful exchanges and experiences sought both by consumers and business entities. Even though the term can be multifaced and assume different meanings depending on the perspective and field of research, studies today refer to it in a rather normative way (e.g. MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). By this, in their empirical applications these theories are limited to classifying their objects of study as either authentic or inauthentic. Most of the research takes for granted that authenticity is stable and present, and therefore fails to acknowledge that it is a concept that is created and maintained. In contrast, this study adopted a processual conceptualization of authenticity: by investigating how this visual representation is created through different semiotic cues the author was able to address how authenticity can be constructed in the staged circumstances that surround travel blogging. When conceptualizing authenticity as a dynamic construction as opposed to a static state of being, it was possible to identify the technical qualities that make visual representations appear as authentic.

In the literature review, studies based on a static notion of authenticity pointed out that personal branding relies on people being authentic, but it also faces the paradox of being used in commercial settings (Gandini, 2015; Hearn, 2008; Liu & Suh, 2017). The analysis demonstrated that self-branding social media actors are aware of the importance of the concept of authenticity and therefore they make certain use of available tools to express it in their visual

communication. What emerged from the analysis is that, despite the use of photographs for explicit commercial collaborations, these actors create a certain type of visual authenticity that relies on the representation of elements that are known to be authentic, like nature, and try to express the need of reaching a better self-understanding, away from artificial and every day conventions. Additionally, they adjust and construct their visual communication moved by the desire of successfully represent a specific type of image of themselves and of the reality they are living.

As shown in the literature review, tourism and travel destination are uniquely visual (Fesenmaier et al., 1996) and people use and share photographs as a way to successfully represent and communicate the image of a place. From a constructionist perspective, authors like Beverland (2005) argue that authenticity is a feature that can be added to products, services or anything but, since authenticity is socially constructed, the processes of creating it depend on a negotiation between the creator, the audience and the social context. The analysis showed that the proposed negotiation between creator and audience is carefully arranged by the creator of the photographs in a way that sets clear limits for the audience's interpretations. As such the 'negotiation' can be described more accurately as the creator making an offer to the audience to participate in an experience that is already constructed as authentic. The visual representations are of course open to some degree of interpretation and the audience can ultimately reject this offer. Yet, the assemblage of visual cues, including the position of the audience in the form of an absent spectator, that together constitute an authentic experience reduces the 'bargaining power' of the audience in the negotiation between the visual representation and the audience. In other words: the photograph has already established limits for how authenticity can be interpreted before the negotiations begin.

Lobinger and Branter (2015) argued that people use certain aesthetical and behavioral elements, mentioning facial expressions, frames, postures, status symbols, etc., to enhance and create their (online) "performance". They emphasize again the fact that people on social media try to work on and adjust their visual representation according to their desires of expose a certain image of themselves and the reality they are witnessing. However, this previous research has very little to offer in terms of explaining in detail *how* this construction of authenticity comes about. With the ambition to provide such as detailed explanation, this study showed that images can communicate specific messages and rhetoric through aesthetic qualities and features directed

to the audience. In fact, visuals are powerful communicative tools and their use contributes to meaning and rhetorical messages creation. In line with the aim of the thesis of investigating the processes of authenticity creation, the specific features identified in this study concern the use of positioning the participants, the way their actions are depicted, as well as the colors, the angles and social distance, to name a few.

Since it was not the ambition of the study to empirically test the authenticity of the photographs selected, in order to take distances from the predominant dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic the thesis adopted the approaches by Eco (1986) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Encouraged by these perspectives, the analysis demonstrated that influencers are able to construct a subjective reality and create authenticity in their photographs through the use of particular visual features (positions, colors, luminance, etc.). It emerged that what is important for creating authenticity does not rely in the authenticity of the picture itself, but the configuration of different cues in the photographs that together formed a consistent construction of an authentic experience.

7. Conclusion

The presented analysis and research demonstrate how influencers operating in the travel niche are able to create and convey authenticity despite their explicitly commercialized and staged photographs. Therefore, the research contributes to the existing body of research by explaining in detail how their visual communication is used on social media to create authenticity for their audience. Considering that there is a sort of taken for granted belief in the authenticity realm, as showed in the literature section, which regards the term as a stable and universal presence, by using a social semiotic perspective the researcher was able to explore this phenomenon investigating the processes of construction of reality. Through the understanding of visual signs and semiotic codes, that focuses on the relationship between sign, understanding and socio-reality, it was possible to interpret reality depending on the social context through the use of several visual systems of communication. Following the analysis and the previous discussion, it is possible to answer the research question, demonstrating in practice the thesis' contribution to the body of knowledge.

The answer to the question of how visual signs are used to express authenticity within influencers in the travel industry under the employment of personal branding techniques when presenting pictures on Instagram, relates to the fact that the visual has to follow representational and communicational requirements. Indeed, authenticity depends on the configuration of different cues in the photographs that together formed a consistent construction of an authentic experience. Additionally, since this thesis regards the notion of authenticity as a social construction and refuses the idea that is an ontologically stable and fixed phenomenon, authenticity can thus be created through positioning of the participants, their actions, salience, overall colors, symbolic elements, angle, social distance, etc. By employing, for example, the use of an oblique angle and a far social distanced shot and depicting the participants (both human and non-human) in action or posing the photographer was able to allude to a rarity and spontaneity of the depicted moment, attaching the photograph to a sense of wilderness, but also realness and credibility. The human presence is a sign used to humanize the photograph in order to create a stronger bond with the viewer and the depicted story. Signs were also categorized as

symbolic, which were emphasized and used for the expression and enhancement of authenticity: the animals or the backpack, for example, taken in their contexts stand for embracing a wildlife and “off the beaten path” experience. Signs can express themselves through colors: non-altered ones, for example, actually remind of the typical natural landscapes and contribute in giving to the picture a more natural and thus genuine look. They are able to generate positive associations and emotions, making the viewer believe in the portrayed “story”, trust and identify with the depicted participants. All the signs contributed to the visual communication of the creator of the pictures and were adjusted and arranged in order to express authenticity that inspires the viewer. Through the use of these visual qualities, it was possible to overcome the idea that the pictures are the result of collaborations and therefore strategically staged and purposely constructed. A photograph’s aesthetics are crucial for communicating a message and are important in the creation of different associations and interpretations. The analysis thus resulted in a detailed identification and explanation of the visual signs that participate to the creation of authenticity. They can be interpreted depending on the positions of the elements of the pictures, that can reveal a sense of real and existing information or ideal, unknown and wild, typical of nature.

In conclusion, the analysis and its results shed light on the field of personal branding and visual communication and helped to unveil and explore the structures and features that influencers use in practice in the expression of authenticity through visual signs as well as how they create meaning through their visual communication. Investigating the relationship between authenticity and visual features in staged situations on a social media platform will contribute in the work of people and organizations, scholars and professionals, who study, plan and execute social media campaigns in recognizing that authenticity can be strategically created and communicated. The authenticity of the personal branders’ photographs is about researching, managing and mastering the power of visual signs and meanings.

7.1 Suggestions for further research

As stated in the previous sections, the focus of the thesis was to explore and investigate how influencers construct their visual communications to create authenticity. Since the thesis focuses on the travel and tourism niche, it would be interesting to apply the same methods used

and to extend and/or compare the field of study to different types of contexts, settings, industries or fields.

It is also important to remember that the research is confined to western cultures. Therefore, to complement, contrast or to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon, it is suggested to include in the analysis sources deriving from other society models and cultures. This thesis can be used as a starting point to develop a model that assimilates and/or compares different visual communication methods in relation to distinct cultural backgrounds and social contexts.

8. References

Adams, K. (1984). Come to Tana Toraja, “land of the heavenly kings”. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 11(3), 469-485. doi:10.1016/0160-7383(84)90032-X

Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. Los Angeles; London: SAGE.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. New York: Hill & Wang.

Barthes, R. (1964). The rhetoric of the image. In R. Barthes (Ed. 1977). *Image – Music – Text* (pp. 32–51). London: Fontana.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image – Music – Text*. London: Fontana

Beverland, M. (2005). Crafting Brand Authenticity: The Case of Luxury Wines. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), 1003-1029.

Brown, S., Kozinets, R., & Sherry, J. (2003). Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning. *Journal of Marketing*, 67, 19-33.

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods*. (5th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge.

Chhabra, D. (2005). Defining authenticity and its determinants: Toward an authenticity flow model. *Journal of Travel Research*, 44(1), 64-10.

Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15, 371-86.

Dake, D. (2005). Aesthetics theory. In K. Smith, S. Moriarty, G. Barbatsis & K. Kenney (Eds.), *Handbook of visual communication* (pp. 3-22). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Danesi, M. (2017, May 24). Visual Rhetoric and Semiotic. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Retrieved from:
<https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-43>

Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Eco, U. (1986). *Faith in fakes: Travels in hyperreality*. London: Vintage.

Eco, U. (2013, August). *Some Remarks on New Realism*. Speech given at the 23rd World Congress of Philosophy in Athens, Greece.

Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated Authenticity. How the Media Constructs Reality*. New York: Peter Lang, ISBN: 9781433114854.

Fesenmaier, D., & MacKay, K. (1996). Deconstructing destination image construction. *The Tourist Review*, 51(2), 37-43.

Fisher-Roffer, R. (2000). *Make a Name for Yourself: Eight Steps Every Woman Needs to Create a Personal Brand Strategy for Success*. New York: Broadway Books.

Fiske, J. (1982). *Introduction to Communication Studies*. London: Routledge.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.

Gandini, A. (2016). Digital work: Self branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy. *Marketing Theory*, 16(1), 123-141.

Gilmore, J.H., & Pine II, J. (2007). *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Goffman, E. (1956). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., Van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International journal of strategic communication*, 1(1), 3-35.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harrison, C. (2003). Visual Social Semiotics: Understanding How Still Images Make Meaning. *Technical Communication*, 50(1), 46–60.

Harvey, D. (1990). *The Condition of Post-Modernity*. Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell.

Hawkes, T. (1977). *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Routledge.

Hayes, N., & Brown, D. (2008). *Influencer Marketing: Who Really Influences Your Customers?*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Hearn, A. (2008). “Meat, mask, burden”: Probing the contours of the branded ‘self’. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(2), 197-217.

Hearn, A., & Schoenhoff, S. (2016). From celebrity to influencer. In P. D. Marshall, & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 194-211). West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons/Blackwell.

Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Hjelmslev, L. (1961). *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (trans. Francis J. Whitfield). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Jewitt, C., & Oyama, R. (2011). Visual Meaning: A Social Semiotic Approach. In T. van Leeuwen, & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (pp. 134-156). London: Sage Publications.

Kádeková, Z., & Holienčinová, M. (2018). Influencer Marketing as a Modern Phenomenon Creating a New Frontier of Virtual Opportunities. *Communication Today*, 9(2), 90–105.

Knaller, S. (2012). The Ambiguousness of the Authentic: Authenticity between Reference, Fictionality and Fake in Modern and Contemporary Art. In J. Straub (Ed), *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies of a Critical Concept* (pp. 51-76). Bielefeld: Transcript.

Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V., Dolbec, P. Y., & Earley, A. (2014). Netnographic Analysis: Understanding Culture through Social Media Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (pp. 262-275). Sage: London.

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.

Lair, D.J., Sullivan, K. & Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the Recasting of the Professional Self: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Personal Branding. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 18(3), 307–43.

Lamont, M. (2014). Authentication in Sports Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 45, 1-17.

Linnaa Jensen, J. (2010). Online Tourism: Just like Being There?. In B.T. Knudsen, & A. Waade (Eds.), *Re-Investing Authenticity: Tourism, Place and Emotions*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.

Littrell, M., Anderson, L., & Brown, P. (1993). What Makes a Craft Souvenir Authentic?. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 20, 197-215.

Liu, R., & Suh, A. (2017). Self-branding on social media: An analysis of style bloggers on instagram. *Procedia Computer Science*, 124(6-8), 12-20.

Lobinger, K., & Brantner, C. (2015). In the eye of the beholder: Subjective views on the authenticity of selfies. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1848-1860.

Lobinger, K. & Brantner, C. (2015). Genuine or Phony? A Q-sort Study of the Perceived Authenticity of Self-Photographs and Selfies. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281278037_Genuine_or_Phony_A_Q-sort_Study_of_the_Perceived_Authenticity_of_Self-Photographs_and_Selfies

Lowenthal, P. R., Dunlap, J. C., & Stitson, P. (2016). Creating an intentional web presence: Strategies for every educational technology professional. *TechTrends*, 60(4), 320-329.

MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589-603.

Marine-Roig, E. (2015). Identity and Authenticity in Destination Image Construction. *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 26(4), 574-587.

Marwick, A. E. (2013). 'They're really profound women, they're entrepreneurs': Conceptions of authenticity in fashion blogging. Paper presented at *the Seventh International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, Cambridge, MA.

Marwick, A. E. (2013). Online Identity. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 355–364). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Have CT: Yale University Press.

Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New media & society*, 13(1), 114-133

Meier, S. (2009). 'Pimp your profile' – Fotografie als Mittel visueller Imagekonstruktion im Web 2.0. *IMAGE. Journal of Interdisciplinary Image Science/Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Bildwissenschaft*, 9.

Mumby, D. K. (2016). Organizing beyond organization/ Branding, discourse, and communicative capitalism. *Organization*, 23(6), 884-907.

Munar, A.M., & Jacobsen, J.K.S. (2013). Trust and Involvement in Tourism Social Media and Web-based Travel Information Sources. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 13(1), 1-19.

Munar, A.M., Gyimóthy, S., & Cai, L. (2013). Tourism Social Media: A New Research Agenda. In A. M. Munar, S. Gyimóthy, & L. Cai (Eds), *Tourism Social Media: Transformations in Identity, Community and Culture* (pp. 1-15). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing. Tourism Social Science Series, Vol.. 18.

Nöth, W. (2012). Visual semiotics: key features and an application to picture ads. In E. Margolis, & L. Pauwels (Eds), *The SAGE handbook of visual research methods* (pp. 298-316). London: SAGE Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.

Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vols. 1–8. In C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss (Eds.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Peters, T. (1999). *The Brand Called You*. New York: Random House.

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Material*. London: Sage.

Russmann, U., & Svensson, J. (2017). Introduction to visual communication in the age of social media: Conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges. *Media and Communication*, 5(4), 1-5. doi:10.17645/mac.v5i4.1263

Saussure, F. de (1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris). London: Duckworth.

Schell, J. (2010). DICE 2010. *Design Outside the Box Presentation*. Retrieved from: <http://www.g4tv.com/videos/44277/dice-2010-design-outside-the-box-presentation/>

Sebeok, T. (2001). *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Stoian, C. E. (2015). Analysing Images: A Social Semiotic Perspective. *Scientific Bulletin of The Politehnica University of Timisoara. Transactions on Modern Languages*, 14(1), 23-30.

Straub, J. (2012). *Paradoxes of authenticity: Studies on a critical concept*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript.

Susanka, T. (2012). The rhetorics of authenticity: Photographic representations of war. In J. Straub (Ed), *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies of a Critical Concept* (pp. 95–114). Bielefeld: Transcript.

Thelander, Å, & Cassinger, C. (2017). Brand new images? implications of Instagram photography for place branding. *Media and Communication*, 5(4), 6-14
doi:10.17645/mac.v5i4.1053

Van House, N. A. (2011). Personal photography, digital technologies and the uses of the Visual. *Visual Studies*, 26(2), 125–134.

Van Nuenen, T. (2016). Here I am- Authenticity and self-branding on travel blogs. *Tourist Studies*, 16(2), 192-212.

Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 349-370.

Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional Culture*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi: Sage.

Zappavigna, M. (2016). Social media photography: Construing subjectivity in Instagram images. *Visual Communication*, 15(3), 271-292. doi:10.1177/1470357216643220

Zietek, N. (2016). Influencer Marketing - the characteristics and components of fashion influencer marketing. (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Borås, Borås, Sweden.