The authentic influential identity: *How do lifestyle influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram?*

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Abstract

Title	The authentic influential identity: *How do lifestyle influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram?*
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Keywords	identity construction, authenticity, social media influencers, Instagram, Belk, Goffman
Thesis purpose	The purpose of this thesis is thus to explore how Instagram influencers construct or shape their authentic identities online. By combining the previous research on identity creation and authenticity with knowledge about identity construction on social media, we create a framework with which we aim to question and refine the existing literature on the topic.
Theoretical perspective	The theoretical perspective is a framework that combines Belk's (1988) conceptualization of possessions and the extended self, Goffman's (1956) conceptualization of performance, and a definition of perceived authenticity constructed from philosophy, criticism, and contemporary sources.
Methodology	Using social constructionist and constructivist paradigms, we

conducted a qualitative netnography (digital ethnography) of twenty-three Swedish lifestyle influencers' Instagram accounts to explore their constructions of authentic identities.

Empirical data	Our empirical findings come from two weeks worth of posts, Stories, and Reels from the twenty-three influencers. We noted numerous trends and behavior patterns, including the concept of 'the real me', Q&A sessions, and the prominent consumption of Chanel.

Findings/conclusions	We identified three blueprint responses to the question of authentic identity construction: 1. classic influencer authenticity management strategies (including passion, transparency, and calibrated amateurism) as well as downward-idealized performances and legitimizing behaviors, 2. the two-faced self, in which influencers admit to inauthenticity and that their digital influencer identity is not an accurate representation of their true self, and 3. compelling inauthenticity, in which influencers do not attempt authenticity work and instead offer other compelling reasons to follow them.

Practical implications	Our findings may be relevant to brand managers, who could use them to make more informed choices about influencer collaborations. Professional influencers concerned with their perceived authenticity may also find our insights useful.

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We hope that you will enjoy the reading and find this study interesting!

Emma Craven-Matthews & Annie Jeppsson
Lund, 30 May 2021

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The average daily time spent on social media in 2020 was 145 minutes, with at least 30 of those minutes spent on Instagram, an increase of almost 5 minutes daily from the year before (Tankovska, 2021). The rapid growth of social media during the last decade has enabled new ways of communicating with and reaching consumers worldwide in just a matter of seconds. Social media has changed the marketing scene by making it possible for marketers to reach a bigger audience in a shorter time compared to older, classical marketing techniques (Patino, Pitta & Quinones, 2012).

The influencer business is one of the significant marketing opportunities that has originated from the fast spread of social media. It has quickly grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry and is predicted to reach $15 billion in revenue by 2022, compared to $8 billion in 2019. (Business Insider, 2021) Today's biggest platform for influencers is Instagram, with more than 1 billion monthly users (Instagram, n.d.a). Instagram started as a photo-sharing platform in 2010, but as social media became more rooted in people's lives, the platform began to take on more practical uses besides communication, such as shopping, which led to the convergence between e-commerce and social media and increased the opportunities for influencers to act as intermediates between brands and their consumers (Business Insider, 2021).

Statistics show that there are currently more than 500 000 active influencers on Instagram and over 70% of "shopping enthusiasts" turn to Instagram when searching for new products or places to go, and because of that turning Instagram into a huge marketing opportunity for businesses (Aslam, 2021). Influencers and influencer marketing have existed for decades, where companies utilized celebrities to promote their products and brand. However, influencer marketing on Instagram is a relatively new concept developed alongside the expansion of Instagram and other social media. For a long time, influencers or opinion leaders were limited to celebrities, sports stars, and a few dedicated bloggers. Today, the possibility to build a compelling identity online

has shifted beyond celebrities and, thanks to social media, given everyone an opportunity to influence others. By creating an influential Instagram identity and increasing the number of followers, individuals can turn their accounts into profitable businesses. Influencer marketing is best described as social media marketing based on endorsements where chosen influencers get paid to show and use certain products or brands. In each case, the chosen influencer is seen as someone with expertise in the products or services they are promoting (Chen, 2020).

Professional influencers on Instagram combine posts about their lives with sponsored content from brands, balancing paid marketing work with unpaid, more 'authentic' content that attracted their followers in the first place (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). This is called lifestyle influencing: influencing by showing and sharing the influencers' daily lives, including fashion, beauty, health, travel, food, and interior design. Lifestyle influencers are effective marketers because their followers see them as real people first and celebrities second, making them much more authentic and relatable for an everyday consumer (Schwab, 2016).

1.2 Research Problem

Because authenticity is so critical to their work, lifestyle influencers face a paradox of authenticity construction. Authenticity, by definition, should not be a deliberate construct but because it is so important for influencers to appear authentic to their followers—as opposed to money- or fame-seeking—they may need to consciously create the appearance of authenticity. Stern (1994) states that authenticity in advertising means creating an illusion of real-life events while linking it to a consumption situation. She calls this 'commercially created authenticity', which could directly refer to the work of influencers because influencers, particularly lifestyle influencers as described above, use their daily lives to, in an authentic way, sell products and promote brands.

Successful lifestyle influencers have succeeded in constructing influential identities online. An identity that is interesting and authentic enough for other Instagram users to follow and be influenced by. Digital identity is defined as the information about an individual that is available online (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013). This implies that an individual's digital identity does not necessarily have to align with their real-life identity and that it is possible to control what is

being part of the digital one and what is not. Although most successful influencers are successful because they are able to construct authentic digital identities that, in fact, align with their real-life identities, it will always be challenging to separate the authentic from the fake. With the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 continuing into 2021, social media usage has increased (Koeze & Popper, 2020), and in-person interactions have decreased. This implies that consumers' behavior will be increasingly influenced by what they see on social media. Furthermore, interactions will take place on social media more frequently, which suggests that influencers' role is more important than ever. Accordingly, it stands to reason that it is even more relevant than ever to research the credibility and authenticity of influencers' digital identities.

1.3 Research question and purpose of the thesis

The concept of identity creation has been studied for a long time, as well as the notion of authenticity. However, a combination of the two in the digital age is not as well examined. Thus, we find it important to reexamine the theoretical concepts of identity creation and authenticity in the context of social media such as Instagram. Since the relationship between identity creation and authenticity is fairly limited in the literature (Schlenker & Weigold, 1990; Doherty & Schlenker, 1990; Hart, Richardson, Breeden & Kinrade, 2020; Kuchmaner and Wiggins, 2021) we find it interesting and important to research further.

As previously explained, the development and growth of social media during the last decade has added new platforms for individuals to create and shape their identities. This has for some even led to new business opportunities in terms of influencing. Social media influencers represent an increasingly large marketing opportunity for brands; the influencer industry is today worth $10 billion (Patota & Myszkowski, 2020). Due to the fact that social media influencers are a relatively recent phenomenon, there is still a limited amount of literature on the subject. Additionally, since the influencer business has grown in popularity and monetary value and more communication and social interaction takes place online due to the digital development but also the corona pandemic, we find it highly relevant to try to understand how influencers can shape their digital identities while still being authentic. Furthermore, authenticity is important for followers of influencers; perceived authenticity of influencers leads to higher follower trust,

sense of community, and willingness to purchase sponsored products (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021).

The purpose of this thesis is thus to explore how Instagram influencers construct or shape their authentic identities online. By combining the previous research on identity creation and authenticity with knowledge about identity construction on social media we hope to question and refine the existing literature on the topic.

We, therefore, aim to examine the following question:

How do lifestyle influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram?

In answering this question, we aim to understand the growing business of influencers and influencer marketing, the role of authenticity in digital influencer identity, and the construction of lifestyle influencers' digital identities on Instagram. We plan to identify specific strategies influencers use to make their digital identities appear authentic to their audiences. Finally, we hope to contribute to the growing literature on social media influencer literature.

1.4 Limitations of the thesis

This thesis is limited to Swedish lifestyle influencers on Instagram. Narrowing the focus of this thesis to one platform, one industry, and one cultural context allows us to identify specific patterns, trends, and behaviors that are not caused by different norms, standards, and values. Different social media platforms have different styles of communication, self-presentation, and identity construction; we expect that a broader sampling base of influencers across multiple platforms would not produce coherent conclusions about authenticity and identity work. This thesis is limited to lifestyle influencers because different influencing industries have different expectations surrounding identity and authenticity; limiting the research to one influencing industry means the influencers are using the same definition of identity and authenticity. Similarly, the limitation to only Swedish influencers allows us to assume a baseline of shared

meanings and contexts of the content posted; there is no need to interpret the influencers' content through different cultural lenses.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

In this section, we present the outline of our thesis by describing the upcoming chapters. After this first introductory chapter, we move on to **Chapter 2** which includes a literature review of the theoretical concepts that are relevant for our study. This chapter will also provide the theoretical background that will be used throughout our discussion later on. **Chapter 3** discusses and explains the chosen methodology of the study, how we approached our research and how all the data was collected and analyzed. Finally, we conclude the chapter by reflecting upon the limitations and the critique of the study. In **Chapter 4** we present our empirical findings including how Swedish lifestyle influencers work on constructing authentic identities on Instagram. Further, we examine how authenticity on Instagram is perceived by others such as ourselves and influencers' followers. **Chapter 5** consists of a discussion where our empirical findings are analyzed, interpreted, and connected to the theoretical concepts outlined in chapter 2. Moreover, we refine the existing concepts of identity creation and authenticity and draw our own conclusions with the help of existing literature. Finally, we add value to the existing literature on identity and authenticity by adding the dimension of social media and more specifically Instagram. In the final **Chapter 6,** we present our main findings and theoretical contributions. We discuss the limitations of our study and further research possibilities on the topic as well as reflect upon the relevance of our findings.

2 Literature review

This chapter examines the most relevant literature for our research and analysis. The core of our theoretical framework is based on identity creation literature as well as theories and previous research on authenticity. We begin this chapter by describing identity construction from different classical perspectives, which we later develop to explore digital identity construction. Then, we outline previous literature relevant to authenticity. Finally, the chapter concludes with a combined theoretical framework that will be used throughout our analysis and discussion.

2.1 Identity construction

This thesis deals directly with the construction of identity. We begin with the seminal, pre-social-media concepts of performance and the extended self, developed by Goffman (1956) and Belk (1988), respectively. Both performance and the extended self are used in the theoretical framework discussed at the end of the chapter. We then move onto identity construction in the age of social media, which is a particularly relevant topic given our focus on Instagram influencers.

2.1.1 Identity construction through performance

Goffman (1956) theorizes that individuals try to influence others' perceptions and impressions of them through performance. He describes the two poles on the performativity spectrum: the first, in which the individual sincerely believes their performance is representative of their true identity, and the second, in which the individual performs knowingly and cynically, for their own benefit or the benefit of their audience. Because performance often involves the use of particular objects or settings, it can be viewed as an extension of identity work theories discussed in 2.1.2. The front, or impression seen by others, is essentially an outward-facing identity project.

Goffman also discusses idealization, in which the individual performs as an idealized version of themself, usually 'better' than they actually are in terms of socio-economic status, sophistication, professional success, et cetera. He illustrates this with the example of Scottish lairds who secretly lived frugal lives but would put on lavish feasts to impress English visitors and appear higher-

status (pp. 25). Conversely, the individual may instead downplay their good position and present a deceptively modest front (Goffman, 1956). He uses the example of a junk peddler whose business thrives precisely because he appears wretchedly poor and pitiable (pp. 25). In both cases, Goffman explains, the individual conceals their true circumstances to elicit a particular reaction from their audience.

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) use Goffman's framework to explore how individuals use self-presentation in the online world. They claim that online platforms provide users with the opportunity to present and perform several different identities; the online identity is not seen as a completely new one but rather a facet of the offline self. Goffman (1956) has earlier described how one's identity can resemble wearing a mask where the performer is expected to 'keep their face' by maintaining the initial impression they have given others. The self is then understood as merely choosing to wear a mask in particular situations. Similarly, online users can choose to wear a mask when interacting online leaving the audience unwittingly about the different selves that might lie beneath. Online platforms act as a stage for individuals to perform on and enable performance to a higher degree than social situations in real life.

2.1.2 Identity construction through possessions

Belk (1988) presents a definition of identity by describing what he calls the extended self. Drawing on prior literature, Belk theorizes that consumers view their possessions as extensions of their selfhood and thus parts of their identities. Certain possessions may help the consumer feel part of a group, or hold specific memories, or represent plans and aspirations for the future. Belk uses the term 'possessions' loosely; it refers to material objects but also includes people the consumer is close to (such as children or romantic partners), body parts, and money. Loss or contamination of or damage to extended selves can make consumers feel as if they themselves have been harmed. Additionally, he describes how our possessions are used to help others form impressions and opinions about us as well as function as memory markers. When influencers create identities on Instagram, they post pictures of their own body, their belongings, their living spaces, and their friends and family. Their possessions represent them and help them shape their identity in that space.

Belk (2013) revisited his concept of the extended self to develop it to fit into the digital world. He suggests five areas surrounding the extended self that have changed with digital development are dematerialization, re-embodiment, sharing, co-construction of self, and distributed memory. Dematerialization means that many of our possessions remain immaterial until we choose to call them forth, for example, our photos, information, communication, music, and videos which are all stored digitally (Belk, 2013). Similarly, he argues that individuals have also been immaterialized through re-embodiment and gone from humans to avatars that only exist online, where it is now possible to hide behind photoshopped pictures and made-up identities. Simultaneously we also share more about our life online and our social media friends now know more about us than our closest friends and family; Facebook, for example, is now seen as a key part of individuals' extended self (Belk, 2013). Not only is our sharing a significant part of our identity creation, it is also part of a collected self, where we, through communication, comments, interaction, and geotagging, co-construct our and others' selves (Belk, 2013). Furthermore, he suggests that the digital revolution has made us outsource our memory to hard drives; our memory and experiences are no longer kept to ourselves but stored digitally. Finally, in terms of the digital age, Belk (2013) suggests that the self has now extended into avatars, constructed identities that we more or less identify with, that can affect our offline behavior and our sense of self.

2.1.3 Identity construction and social media

Schau and Gilly (2003) develop the concept of self-expression and explain how that is used online to create multiple selves. Individuals use symbols, texts, and images online to express particular identities and the digital space acts as a platform for expressing and developing alternative identities that are closely related but more polished than their real-life identities (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Labrecque, Markos, and Milne (2011), studying Facebook users, found some congruence between digital and real-life identities but an increased cognizance of the increasing importance to present a branded self online. As social media usage has become even more widespread following the launch of platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, people have begun to specifically craft different identities on different platforms (Jain, Belk, Ambika, and Pathak-Shelat, 2021). While all social media users construct identities online, the

identities of social media influencers are of particular interest to researchers: these identities are attractive enough that tens of thousands of strangers choose to observe them. This thesis aims to continue in the tradition of the 'digital identity work' literature with a focus on influencers, the most compelling and powerful digital identities.

Influencers' self-presentations tend to strike a balance between being relatable and aspirational (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, & Zahid, 2018; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips, 2013). The fashion bloggers studied by McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) take style risks to demonstrate their good taste while practicing careful self-deprecation to feign similarity to their audience. Similarly, Duffy and Hund (2015) observed that fashion influencers invoked designer brand names and celebrity connections to appear glamorous to their followers while sharing selective personal details to maintain relatability. Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, and Zahid (2018) studied different variables that affect influencer persuasiveness on followers, finding that influencers' persuasiveness is connected to the influencers' relatability: that they are not necessarily experts, that they do not look like models, or that they may downplay their financial resources.

Influencers construct some elements of their identities deliberately while other identities are constructed subconsciously (Ezzat, 2020; Marcella-Hood, 2020). The identity construction may be pragmatically and shrewdly designed to appeal to the widest audience possible (Ezzat, 2020; García-Rapp, 2016; Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017)

2.2 Authenticity

Authenticity is a central concept to this thesis. In section 2.2, we explore varying perspectives, from the philosophical to the critical to the contemporary, on what authenticity means and constitutes. Later, we will develop our own definition based on the following literature.

2.2.1 Authenticity in philosophy and criticism

The concept of authenticity has developed and adapted to match changing societal values and technological advances. Early definitions and explorations focused on the individual's internal

sense of personal authenticity rather than external perceptions thereof. Kierkegaard's (1835) quest for authenticity was a call to action, a conscious choice to seek out an anchoring meaning in one's life. Authentic living, Kierkegaard (1846) argues, is driven by passion, not reason (Golomb, 1995). Sartre's (1946) view on authenticity involves lucid consciousness of one's situation and understanding of the responsibilities of the situation (pp. 90); authenticity is not introspective self-exploration; rather, it is developed in relation to other people and external forces. Nietzsche (1874) also opposes authenticity-via-introspection, instead advocating for self-discovery by looking up to and emulating chosen admired educators, but, like Kierkegaard, acknowledges the importance of discovering and then living by one's core values. He (1889) and Camus (1942), from their respective nihilist and absurdist perspectives, both oppose the idea of prescriptive moral frameworks of authenticity: Nietzsche argues for skepticism towards all prescriptive frameworks for life (such as religion), while Camus views human existence as inherently absurd and meaningless; to live authentically is to accept this (Golomb, 1995). Although existentialist views on authenticity vary, there is a consensus that the pursuit of authenticity is a conscious choice by the individual and that it is an ongoing process (Golomb, 1995). While these perspectives address individual inner authenticity, they are relevant to this thesis because they inform external perceptions of authenticity.

From a critical perspective, Benjamin (1935), in his essay on mechanical reproductions of artwork, suggests authenticity is the element of a work that is not reproducible. He posits authenticity as something that, although it incorporates the circumstances of an object's creation, is not inherent to an object but as something that develops over the course of its existence. Though the authenticity-gaining processes are very different for art and humans (art passively becomes authentic; humans must continuously and actively pursue authenticity), Benjamin's argument has some congruence with those of the existentialists: authenticity is not an inherent quality and it must be earned or developed over time.

Other critics, including Trilling (1972) and Firat and Venkatesh (1995), suggest that the drive for authenticity is merely a reaction to the fear of becoming inauthentic in a postmodern society. Inauthenticity refers to the sense of superficiality, a meaningless and performative reality. Further, it is implied that only the ones that dare to be vulnerable and primitive are seen as real,

which then concludes that only the ones who stay true to themselves are defined as truly authentic. Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, and Grohmann (2015), on the other hand, argue that authenticity is subjective to the receiver or viewers' perception and the perceived authenticity is based on contextual indicators. This means that whether something or someone is authentic depends on the receiver's subjective perception, making authenticity fairly difficult to measure and distinguish. An influencer may believe she is presenting her authentic self online but her followers may disagree, which may result in her needing to construct authenticity.

2.2.2 Authenticity in social media influencing

Contemporary researchers have addressed the ways in which social media influencers practice authenticity and are perceived to be authentic. Authenticity in the context of social media influencers generally means influencers are seen to be presenting their genuine selves to their followers and are not themselves overly influenced by external forces like money or fame (Maares, Banjac & Hanusch, 2020; McRae, 2017). This view of authenticity, while informed by the existential and critical perspectives discussed in 2.2.1, is of greatest interest and relevance to this thesis. It is also seen to be at odds with paid social media influencing work. Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) found that influencers struggle to balance paid commercial content with the unpaid, more 'authentic' content that they had built their platforms on. Two authenticity management strategies emerged: *passion*, in which influencers are intrinsically motivated, collaborate only with brands they are excited about, and exercise creative control over their sponsored content and *transparency*, in which influencers fully disclose ads and are honest in their discussion of sponsored products (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020). Transparency has been proven to be a successful strategy; Weismueller, Harrigan, Wang, and Soutar (2020) found that ad disclosure does not negatively affect follower perception of influencer trustworthiness. Though trustworthiness is not the same as authenticity, the two concepts are closely related (Enli, 2015). Another tactic researchers have observed is the purposeful sharing of curated personal details, which helps influencers seem more 'real' to their followers (Duffy and Hund, 2015; García-Rapp, 2016; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). McRae

(2017) has also noted the monetization-authenticity dichotomy and shown another authenticity management strategy: the influencers are cognizant of 'inauthentic' behavior in their industry and draw attention to it, thereby positioning themselves as authentic actors. The emergence of these strategies shows

The authenticity management strategies have both internal and external effects: influencers feel better about themselves and followers find them more trustworthy (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). This thesis is primarily interested in external perceptions of authenticity but it is important to note that influencer authenticity management is not solely for the benefit of followers. van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) also observed a dilemma for influencers as they professionalize their accounts: the influencers want to build a sense of community with their followers but to attract advertisers, they need to post content that is standardized and curated. van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) comment on intrinsic motivations as well; the semi-professional travel influencers in their study report increased stress and decreased intrinsic motivations as their platforms grew. Their research found that for influencers, as account size and professional opportunities increase, so does the need to appear authentic. The correlation between professional success and the struggle to appear authentic is why this thesis focuses on influencers with larger followings. Influencers with smaller followings tend to have fewer extrinsic rewards (gifted products, sponsorships) and thus have an easier time appearing intrinsically motivated, or authentic.

These authenticity management strategies fall under the umbrella of *authenticity labour*, which is the work put into creating a persona that is seen as authentic by their followers (McRae, 2017; Maares, Banjac & Hanusch, 2020). Influencers perform authenticity labour, or authenticity work (our preferred term) in part to mitigate criticism, sometimes preemptively; Abidin (2017) coins the phrase "calibrated amateurism...contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice" (pp.7); essentially, influencers may post content that does not reflect their professional skill levels, such as poorly composed or blurry photographs, to appear less professionalized and thus more authentic to followers. Calibrated amateurism is a critical concept that will be incorporated into the analysis later in this thesis. Even if an influencer is genuinely a talented photographer and skilled at

constructing Instagram posts that receive high engagement, she may use Abidin's (2017) calibrated amateurism to *appear* more authentic, thereby *being* less authentic. Instagram influencers' perceived trustworthiness and authenticity are negatively affected when they post pictures that appear overly staged (Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, and Zahid, 2018; Reade, 2020). For social media influencers, perceived authenticity means not appearing overly professionalized or like they are 'trying too hard'. Smith, Vandellen, and Ton (2021), studying beauty influencers, found a negative relationship between perceived authenticity and the use of make-up as a self-enhancement tool; when beauty influencers framed make-up use as self-*expression*, they were seen as more authentic; these findings support the connection between authenticity, 'being yourself', passion, and amateurism.

Dutton (2003) adds the definition of authenticity in visual presentation as *expressive authenticity*, which refers to the connection between an individual's identity and their visual representation of it. Nguyen and Barbour (2017) apply this theorization of expressive authenticity in the context of social media by studying selfies as visual representations. They found that individuals on social media are seen as authentic when they successfully portray their identity through visual representation where things stay true to their nature. Additionally, they found that using social media as a platform for expressing identities could help individuals reach a more authentic self, due to the possibility to explore one's identity. However, they also found that the expressive authenticity is subjective to the observer and can be affected by how well the observer knows the subject. For instance, if you know that someone always edits their photos the perceived degree of authenticity will probably decrease and vice versa.

2.2.3 Authenticity and identity creation

Authenticity is widely considered to be the degree to which one's behavior aligns with their true self (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019), a definition descended from Kierkegaard and the existentialists' quests for meaning and core values. Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) and Baumeister (2019) deconstruct the concept of the true self, arguing that it is nebulous, complex, and multifaceted and there is no singular 'true self': living authentically may take on many different, possibly contradictory forms, depending on present circumstances and which facet of the true self is the driving force. This subtly contradicts a prevalent idea in the influencer

literature that long-term consistency in content is evidence of an influencer's authenticity (McRae, 2017): it is important to bear in mind that apparent changes and inconsistencies in influencers' identities and self-expression are not necessarily indicative of inauthenticity. Consistency, we argue, might be another form of authenticity work: while an influencer may have a contradictory, complex, and multifaceted identity, she may limit herself to expressing only one facet to her followers in order to appear more authentic.

Within social groups, there exists a dichotomy between *being* and *doing*; *being* describes authenticity, genuine membership in that group while *doing* refers to practicing specific group behaviors without belonging in that group (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2006; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1990). Although these researchers focused on authentic identities in particular subcultures (i.e., punks, skaters) and some of their observations are not relevant to this thesis, the idea that an authentic identity is more than a series of behaviors is broadly applicable. However, for some people, *being* authentic is not enough and they may feel it necessary to manipulate their behavior out of a desire to be seen as authentic (Doherty & Schlenker, 1990; Hart et al, 2020; Schlenker & Weigold, 1990). This relates to the authenticity work discussed by Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch (2020) and McRae (2017). Performance of authentic identities is linked to higher levels of self-consciousness (self-awareness); performing authenticity does not preclude one from having an authentic identity (Doherty & Schlenker, 1990; Hart et al, 2020; Schlenker & Weigold, 1990). This is a critical point to consider throughout this thesis: that an influencer performs authenticity work does not mean that she is not intrinsically motivated and expresses her genuine self. The observation of authenticity work is not a negative judgment on one who performs it. Related to this point, Kuchmaner and Wiggins (2021) conceptualized a two-part model of authentic identity creation: authenticity is constructed internally through the consumption of relevant and communicative products and externally through validation from both in-groups and out-groups. Authentic identities are communicated and validated through the consumption of specific products and feedback from peers.

Kimmons (2014), on the other hand, argues that individuals use social networks to express their authentic identities and makes the assumption that everyone active on or in social networks has an offline authentic identity that then can be expressed online. However, he also states that

online networks have their own norms and cultures that the users are expected to follow, which might interfere with the authenticity of one's identity. Because when the norms and cultures are being followed the users' social prominence is improved which might lead to users adjusting their presence and identity to rather gain social status than staying authentic. He thereby means that the used social network for constructing and communicating chosen identity might affect the degree of authenticity related to the identity.

2.3 Theoretical framework

2.3.1 Goffman's performance: influencing perceptions

Goffman's concept of performance is relevant to a study on Instagram influencers' identities because the influencer's page is essentially a stage for digital performance. Influencers have a high degree of control over their images; because their followers only see what they choose to post, their accounts can be viewed as purposefully crafted performances. All they share and the ways in which they share it affect how their audiences perceive them.

We are interested in exploring the myriad ways in which influencers influence their followers' perceptions of them. Consequently, we will use Goffman's ideas about performance as a foundation for our analysis of influencers' content online. By looking at the content influencers post as a performance of their identities we can more critically analyze it and come to conclusions that will add value to the existing knowledge of influencer marketing.

2.3.2 Possessions and the extended self: we are what we own

Belk's possessions and the extended self can be used in our analysis as a framework for exploring how influencers present digital identities through the assembly and invocation of objects, people, and other meaningful 'possessions'. How does the content of influencers' posts express who they think they are? What are influencers expressing about themselves when they

post pictures of their children, or their Chanel handbags, or sponsored products from brands? How are these used to communicate authenticity and identity?

The idea of the extended self is helpful when trying to understand how different brands and possessions promote the influencers' identities. By understanding how influencers use their possessions to shape their influential identity we can also interpret whether the identity and content are authentic or not.

2.3.3 Authenticity in a digital world

When we use *authenticity* in reference to Instagram influencers, we are using a definition developed from the philosophical, critical, and contemporary perspectives covered in this literature review. We approach authenticity from primarily an external perspective because while 'being authentic' may be something that influencers value, the *perception* of authenticity is critical to maintaining an audience. Authenticity in this context, then, means the influencer is and appears to be intrinsically driven by her passion, not extrinsically motivated. Her ongoing identity does not (appear to be) constructed for her followers but rather a genuine and honest expression of who she is. Authenticity is more than a series of behaviors; it is an identity. Finally, authenticity is a continuous process, as opposed to something that can be achieved once and for all.

2.3.4 Combined theoretical framework

By combining Belk's (1988) idea of possessions and the extended self and Goffman's (1956) notion of performance, we are able to approach the question of authentic identity construction through the perspective of performed identity. The extended self primarily involves consumers' internal identity work, while performance involves outward projections of identity. Together, these theories create a holistic framework of identity creation and identity projection.

Using Belk's (1988) extended self, we will note and analyze the specific possessions influencers use in their digital identity work. The includes not only material goods but also loved ones

(children, romantic partners, friends, and family members), pets, places (both personal places, such as homes or offices, as well as public places, such as locales or monuments in the influencer's home city), body parts (hair, nails, skin), and money (which is indirectly invoked through expensive purchases and discussions of work).

The possessions as extended self also function as props in influencers' performances. The 'stage' is another important aspect of performance: where and how is the performance happening? In the context of Instagram influencers in this thesis, the stage not only includes the specific locale of each picture (bedroom, backyard, coffee shop) but the nature of the picture (such as selfie, portrait, flat lay, or text post), if filters or editing technology were used. The analysis of influencers performances also extends to verbal and written communication: the language the influencers use (Swedish, English, a combination of the two), their tone (such as professional, enthusiastic, or tongue-in-cheek), and the reason for the post (such as an advertisement for a product, a personal announcement, or showing off an outfit).

A particular aspect of performance we are interested in analyzing is idealization, both upward and downward. Upward idealization may take the form of an influencer drawing attention to glamorous aspects of her life, such as expensive purchases, celebrity friends, and high-profile collaborations, without acknowledging the less glamorous struggles she might have Downward idealization may take the form of the influencer downplaying her resources (audience, money, career opportunities) to present herself as a peer to her followers.

For the purposes of this study, we define authenticity under 2.3.3 but, as noted by Doherty and Schlenker (1991), Hart et al (2020), and Schlenker and Weigold (1990), it is something that can be performed and expressed. This framework enables us to explore how influencers work to develop and project an authentic identity on Instagram through the imagery of objects, people, themselves, and other 'possessions', since creating an authentic yet influential identity is critical to succeed as an influencer. The construction of authenticity will also serve as a theoretical underpinning of the analysis: what strategies, if any, do influencers use to make their digital selves seem more authentic?

Our framework essentially functions thusly: identity is built through possessions and communicated through performance. In this thesis, we use this framework to explore the different strategies and tools influencers use to craft what are perceived to be authentic identities. We study how influencers use possessions and perform to communicate their identity and authenticity to followers.

The specific ways in which the theoretical framework will be applied to our analysis of the influencers' content is elaborated on in 3.4.

3 Methodology

In the methodology chapter, we will begin by describing our chosen research approach and its context and background. Further, we will outline our data collection process and data analysis. We conclude the chapter by discussing the limitations of our research as well as the reflexivity and ethical principles the research has followed.

3.1 Philosophical grounding

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of two complex phenomena: identity creation online and authenticity online. Both identity and authenticity are highly subjective to the receiver's perception and predetermined opinions. Since the conception of one's identity and authenticity is not fixed it rather changes depending on the receiver as well as the identity and authenticity can change depending on the context (Goffman 1956, Jongman-Sereno and Leary 2019, Baumeister 2019). Thus, in order to be able to understand these complex phenomena separately as well as together and to fulfill the purpose of this study we found that an interpretive approach was best suited. An interpretive approach in research means using the human interpretation as a foundation when developing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2018). The interpretive approach is divided into five traditions and one of those is symbolic interactionism, SI; the tradition of SI is based on the role of the self in the construction of reality (Prasad, 2018). Further, it is assumed within SI that all social phenomena are symbolic, which means that objects, events, and actions always have meaning for individuals (Prasad, 2018). This approach was helpful in our research when trying to understand what meaning certain objects and actions had for the influencers and what they were trying to communicate with or through them. Another assumption within SI is the multiple self-images and that they, the selves, are connected to different roles taken on by individuals (Prasad, 2018). Where it is stated that humans take on different roles in life depending on the social context (Prasad, 2018). An online platform like Instagram could be seen as a social context where one could take on a special role depending on the setting and topic, and we were trying to find out whether the influencers were using a created online identity or were in fact portraying their authentic selves online.

3.1.1 Hermeneutics

In addition to the interpretative approach and more particularly SI, our research has also been influenced by another interpretive tradition called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the theory of text interpretation and is used in research for text analysis (Prasad, 2018). Since Instagram posts consist of both text and images, text and picture analysis and interpretation are an important part of our study which is why we choose to apply the theory of hermeneutics to picture interpretation as well. The hermeneutic research process is based on the hermeneutic circle which refers to the interpretation of text as a development in a circular movement between the individual's comprehension, experiences, and idea (Prasad, 2018). The theory revolves around individuals' pre-understanding and preconceptions of things, which affect their interpretation of a text. (Prasad, 2018) In our work, we used the hermeneutic circle by going back and forth between the text and image included in the post and our own ideas of what it could mean as well as our subconscious experiences of similar posts and former posts by the same influencer. By going back and forth between our previous knowledge, experiences, and the Instagram activity we were able to dig deeper into the interpretation and achieve a better understanding of the nature of the post, Reel, or Story.

Further, within hermeneutics, it is central to delayer the text which means uncovering the text's different layers and its subtext. (Prasad, 2018) By using this theory and process we aimed at finding the bottom line of what identity the influencers were communicating through their posts. Moreover, it enabled us to in a more nuanced way analyze and interpret the authenticity of the influencers' identities. Finally, the hermeneutic process relies on the researchers' imagination and ability to creatively decipher text. We found it very helpful being two researchers who could discuss our own personal interpretations with one another and in that way develop more creative thoughts and ideas that contributed to a deeper understanding and analysis.

3.2 Research approach

Our aim with this study is to gain a deeper understanding of influencers' identity construction on Instagram; furthermore, we want to be able to draw conclusions regarding the influencers'

authenticity on Instagram, to what extent the authentic identity is created, and how. With that said, our aim is to answer our research question; *How do lifestyle influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram?* In order to answer our question and be able to construct a nuanced analysis, we have chosen to conduct a netnography which will be described further later on.

Moreover, induction, deduction, and abduction are three different ways to approach business research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, and Jaspersen, 2018). An inductive approach is used to find theoretical concepts through analyzing empirical findings whilst deduction on the other hand intends to confirm already existing theoretical concepts with support from empirical findings. Abduction is often seen as a combination of the two former approaches where the researchers move back and forth between the theoretical concepts and new empirical findings, trying to rather refine existing theories than confirm them or draw completely new conclusions (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Our research will take a primarily inductive, partially abductive approach. Although we are applying a theoretical lens to our analysis, we do not aim to confirm the validity of these existing theories but rather to build on them and, more importantly, use them to develop new theories about authenticity and identity construction in digital spaces.

3.2.1 Research context/design

Since our research aim is to gain a better understanding of two phenomena, identity and authenticity, rather than to test theories we have chosen to perform qualitative research that is based on non-numerical data (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). The data was gathered through online observations to help us understand our research problem, authentic identity creation online, and draw deeper conclusions that would not be achievable to the same extent with a quantitative research approach due to the different types of data.

Because we are conducting a netnography and our results are subject to different possible interpretations, our research design is one of social constructionism rather than positivism (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). The social constructionist approach used here is detached, as opposed to engaged: we are independent observers of the influencers and will not be interacting with them in the field or actively co-creating meanings with them (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Our ontological perspective is relativism (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018): we acknowledge the

validity of different perspectives, that there are many ways to view and construct authenticity, that there are many ways to view and construct identity, and that different influencers, even within our sample of mid-tier Swedish lifestyle influencers, may have different aims and priorities for their work on Instagram.

3.3 Data collection

The following section describes the data collection process. This qualitative research was accomplished with netnography as the main data collection method. Empirical data can be seen as the raw material the research and its conclusions are based upon. Since data collection might be influenced by subjective beliefs and interpretation it is of importance to thoroughly and clearly describe the collection process.

Our data collection comes from a live archive of Instagram content that is being created and built upon as we observe it. While most of our data will exist as a publicly available archive at the time of publication, some of it inevitably will not, as influencers may delete posts and most Stories vanish after twenty-four hours, if the influencer does not choose to save it as a highlight in their bio. Whenever possible, we will archive and store the data we collect for our own use.

3.3.1 Sample

The purpose of sampling for research is to be able to make statements about a larger group that the sample is being drawn from. A sample might, for example, be a number of employees that work in an organization or a few chosen companies operating in a specifically chosen market. To be able to make a correct sample for the study the researchers must make decisions about what the sampling unit is in their case (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). For this thesis, a purposive sample method has been used. A purposive sampling method is preferred when the researchers have a clear idea of what kind of sample is needed to fulfill the purpose of the study. The sampling process is conducted by approaching potential respondents and checking whether they meet the criteria for the study (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Although we do not expect this study to have cross-cultural, cross-industry generalizability, we hope a reasonably large sample size with some

diversity will allow some generalizability to other lifestyle influencers in Sweden and possibly other Scandinavian countries, as well as regional influencers in other, related industries (such fashion, family, beauty, or design).

The influencers were purposively selected according to the following criteria: a) they are Swedish and currently live and work in Sweden, b) they are mid-tier influencers, with followings between 50 000 and 500 000[1], c) they are lifestyle influencers, d) they are influencers, as opposed to, for example, musicians or athletes with mid-tier Instagram platforms, and e) they are professional influencers, which we define as having posted sponsored content. Although gender was not a criterion, all the influencers in the study are female; we were unable to identify male influencers who met the other criteria. Age was also not a criterion; the influencers' ages ranged from twenty-one to thirty-six (shortly before the publication of this thesis, we independently confirmed their ages to ensure none of them were under eighteen).

Regarding platform size, there is no clear consensus on what number of followers constitutes a mid-tier platform, with some sources saying 75 000 - 400 000 (VandeMerwe, 2020) and others saying 50 000 - 300 000 (Espinosa, 2020). However, several sources (IZEA, 2020; mediakix, n.d.; tapinfluence, 2021), repeated the 50 000 - 500 000 figure so we have elected to use that.

When choosing the influencers for this study, we relied on prior knowledge of the industry corroborated with lists of top Swedish Instagram accounts, client lists from Scandinavian influencer agencies, and analyses of each potential influencer's Instagram account to ensure that they met our criteria. This resulted in a sample of twenty-three influencers. That we chose to look at twenty-three influencers depends mainly on that they were the ones matching our criteria but also the fact that we wanted to research quite a large amount to be able to see any commonalities and differences. At the same time, we did not want to have a too large sample which would be difficult to handle and risk the analysis becoming shallow due to a large amount of data.

Influencer	Name	Number of followers, in 1000s (23/04/2021)
biancagonzalez	Bianca G.	85.9 (Gonzalez, 2021)
danipavlica	Dani P.	84.5 (Pavliva, 2021)
elinskoglund	Elin S.	54.2 (Skoglund, 2021)
elinwarn	Elin W.	80.9 (Warnqvist, 2021)
elsaekman	Elsa E.	77.8 (Ekman, 2021)
hannafriberg	Hanna F.	214 (Friberg, 2021)
hannamodig	Hanna M.	77.4 (Modig, 2021)
isabellajedler	Isabella M.	158 (Meisner, 2021)
isabellalowengrip	Isabella L.	426 (Löwengrip, 2021)
josefinecf	Josefine C.	111 (Caarle, 2021)
josephineqvist	Josephine Q.	256 (Qvist, 2021)
lojsanwallin	Lovisa W.	146 (Wallin, 2021)
lovisabarkman	Lovisa B.	264 (Barkman, 2021)
michaelaforni	Michaela F.	100 (Forni, 2021)
mollyrustas	Molly R.	220 (Rustas, 2021)
pennyparnevik	Penny P.	281 (Parnevik, 2021)
petratungarden	Petra T.	164 (Tungården, 2021)
sannajornvik	Sanna J.	159 (Jörnvik, 2021)

sannealexandra	Sanne J.	210 (Josefson, 2021)
tanbyklara	Klara E.	127 (Elvgren, 2021)
tovewaldemar	Tove W.	85.1 (Waldemar, 2021)
vanessa.lindblad	Vanessa L.	92.7 (Lindblad, 2021)
yayanaomi	Johanna L.	220 (Ljungqvist, 2021)

3.3.2 Netnography

To be able to explore and answer our research question the research takes a netnographic approach where we study chosen influencers' Instagram feed and their activity during a period of two weeks (23 April 2021- 7 May 2021). Netnography refers to digital ethnography, which means that a study is conducted by only collecting data from online platforms, networks, or forums (Kozinets, 2002).

Kozinets (2002) explains how netnography is a good research method when researchers have a limited amount of time since all of the research is conducted online without the need for personal interactions. Furthermore, he argues that a lot of communication and interaction is taking place online in these digital times and it also allows researchers to observe naturally occurring behavior online without having to create an unnatural situation.

Data is therefore collected only by studying the respondents' activities on Instagram. The netnography involves an in-depth analysis of recent Instagram posts and other activities on Instagram. The decision to do a netnography was determined by the fact that we are examining authentic identity creation on Instagram, an online platform, as well as the flexibility of a netnography where you can collect a huge amount of data during a limited amount of time. Finally, all of the data we needed was available to us online on Instagram and there was no need to use any other data collection methods.

The data used in this study is all Instagram content by the influencers shared over a two-week period, including posts (both pictures and videos, along with their accompanying captions and tags), Stories, and any IGTV or Reels posted during this period. We both followed the chosen influencers during the two-week period and documented the posts, their Stories, IGTV, Reels, and other activities during the period. We chose to study the influencers' accounts for two weeks because we wanted to be able to follow their Stories and analyze that content as well. Instagram Stories is a function that allows users to post pictures and videos that are only visible for 24 hours. Including Stories, IGTV, Reels, and other possible activities on Instagram allowed us to gain a better understanding of the influencers' identities and authenticity in their posts. Further, it gave us more material to work with and contributed to a more nuanced analysis of authenticity on Instagram.

Since netnography is based on the researchers' interpretation of a phenomenon, which in this case was visual secondary data portrayed by Instagram activities and posts, it is hard not to be biased in the data collection process. To avoid the material being subjective to our preferences and feelings we made sure that we both followed and analyzed all of the content used in the study. Another issue with netnographic research, especially in this case, is the fact that the influencers were not given the opportunity to explain the process behind their content which means that we as researchers could only imagine what they wanted or intended to express with their posts or activity.

Definitions of the Instagram terminology used above can be found in Appendix 1.

3.3.3 Quality

Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Easterby-Smith et al (2018) outline different paradigms in research qualities, including validity, reliability, methodology. Our approach is through social constructionism (the term used by Easterby-Smith et al) and constructivism (the term used by Guba and Lincoln); though those terms do not have precisely the same meaning, they are similar enough for the purposes of this thesis (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). We take a social constructionist approach to the validity of our research, meaning that we prioritize the inclusion

of many perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Although only one perspective has an actual voice in this thesis (ours), our sample size of 23 ensures that no single informant dominates our empirical findings and conclusions. Regarding reliability, we take a strong constructionist approach. Though our analysis may appear subjective in places and we cannot guarantee that other researchers would reach identical conclusions, we at least aim to be fully transparent about our methodology and data interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). We take a social constructionist view towards methodology, which involves the use of hermeneutical techniques (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) through which we attempt to interpret the influencers' visual and textual content through the lens of their socio-cultural context (Sweden, 2021, 'professional influencer culture') and by acknowledging that our interpretations are not necessarily the only interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Our use of hermeneutics is further discussed in 3.1.1. Our epistemological paradigm is constructivist, as we assume the conclusions of this thesis are not an objective truth we have uncovered but a production of knowledge unique to us and our informants (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The inquiry aim of this thesis is constructivist as well, as our end goal is an understanding of a particular phenomenon rather than an explanation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Finally, we take a constructivist view towards the nature of our knowledge; with a relatively large sample size, we are looking for patterns, trends, and consensuses, as opposed to a positivist aim to prove or disprove a hypothesis (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.4 Data analysis

A difficulty presented by a two-week netnographic observation of 23 influencers is the large volume of data produced. Not all of it is relevant to the theme of authenticity and identity construction, and not all of the relevant data can be included in a thesis of this size. It is therefore important that we find or develop a system that allows us to manage and analyze this data. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2017) outline a three-part plan for analyzing qualitative data, such as the content produced in netnographies: first by sorting and re-sorting the data in different ways to find trends and patterns, then reducing the data to what is most relevant and interesting, and finally using the remaining data to form an argument. This strategy is used to condense large amounts of data into a cohesive analysis; we will be applying it to our data collection. Our data will be sorted in several different ways: by influencer, by type of content (image post, carousel

image post, video post, still image story, video Story, or Reel), as well as by the qualities delineated in 2.3.4, which are further described below. The theoretical framework will be used to create different sorting systems but the actual categories within each system will be determined ad hoc based on the data collected. From there, we will reduce the data by highlighting the most illustrative cases and noteworthy observations; this will include both exceptional and remarkable instances as well as recurring patterns of behavior among multiple influencers. We will then use those to develop our conclusions about how influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram.

3.4.1 Specific qualities studied in the analysis

Quality	Brief description with examples	Theoretical derivation
Editing	Has the picture been noticeably edited (image posts?) or have filters/effects been applied to the video (video content)? Filters, Photoshop, special effects...	Although Goffman's (1956) concept of performance came decades before the emergence of Instagram filters and sophisticated photo-editing technology, editing can certainly be viewed as part of a performance: influencers edit, filter, and otherwise alter their content in order to (both literally and figuratively) affect how they are perceived by others.
Tone	What tone is the tone of the caption (image posts) or the influencer's voice (video content)? Professional, enthusiastic, playful, conversational...	Goffman's (1956) discussion of the "personal front" (pp.14), or the fixed and unfixed characteristics of the individual include "speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures" (pp.14): essentially how the individual communicates. Here, 'tone' describes the overall sum of these.
Language	What language is the influencer using? Swedish, English, Swenglish, only emojis...	This is another performance element related to the manner in which the individual communicates.
Type of picture/video	What type of picture/video is used? Selfie, portrait, flat lay, still life...	This is another performance element; what kind of picture has been taken affects, literally

		and figuratively, how the audience sees the performer.
Purpose	What is the purpose (if any, implied or explicitly stated) behind the post? Professional announcement, #OOTD, personal news...	Purpose functions as a metaphorical setting (Goffman, 1956) for the performance: it sets the stage for and explains why the performance is happening, which contextualizes the performance.
Topic	What is the content of the caption (image posts) or the video conversation (video content)? Life during coronavirus, a joke, a personal story...	*What* the influencer talks about in her posts is another way of communicating a particular identity/front to her followers (Goffman, 1956). Unlike many interactions in non-digital settings, the influencer has complete control over what she shares with followers; her choices of post topic are therefore relevant to her performance and how her followers perceive her.
Idealization	One of the more subjective qualities. Does the influencer appear to be idealizing her image, either upward or downward?	Idealization, as described by Goffman (1956), is a particular type of performance in which the performer adjusts their performance to meet a particular audience expectation: they either want to be perceived as 'better' than they really are (upward) or 'worse' (downward)
Setting	Where does the post take place? Living room, backyard, restaurant, office...	Goffman (1956) explains that settings are used to ground and enhance performances. Belk (1988) also discusses how places, such as homes or city landmarks can be included in one's extended self/identity.
Brands	Has the influencer invoked any brands? This includes both actively tagging brands and featuring clearly branded products	An influencer may invoke particular brands as part of her performance; Goffman (1956) explains how status symbols (like luxury branded objects), for example, are used to perform a high social class. Brands are also

		part of the extended self (Belk, 1988): an influencer may purposefully associate herself with possessions from particular brands to associate herself with those brands' meanings.
Content	Who/what exactly is depicted in the post? A manicure, a child, a meal, a city street...	Belk (1988) delineates the ways in which individuals use 'possessions' (objects, people, places, money, body parts…) to form their identities. Influencers share pictures/videos with particular possessions to communicate something about their identity. This is also related to Goffman's performance (1956): the people and things depicted in influencers' posts are props for their performances.
Authenticity work	Another possibly subjective quality: does the influencer appear to have performed any authenticity work? Calibrated amateurism (Abadin, 2017), invocations of passion, honesty, intrinsic motivations...	This encapsulates different manifestations of authenticity work as discussed in 2.2.2: how influencers communicate that they are authentic.
Consistency	Not a quality of individual posts; rather a judgment of each influencer's oeuvre over the two-week period. Does the influencer maintain a consistent aesthetic, tone, content…?	McRae (2017) suggests that an influencer maintaining consistency throughout her posts is seen as authentic. Although we view this as a form of authenticity work, we have separated it because it is an overall judgment of the influencers' content over the two-week period, not a quality of individual posts.
Sponsorship	Is the post sponsored? Includes paid promotions and gifted products; must be explicitly stated	This does not necessarily have a theoretical derivation but it is related to authenticity: if a post is sponsored, then authenticity work is particularly interesting and relevant, as the commercial nature of the post compromises perceived authenticity.
Candidness	Another possibly subjective quality: does the picture or video appear to be more	This is related to performance (Goffman, 1956) and attempts to influence followers'

	staged/carefully composed or more candid?	perceptions. Content that appears to be more staged and composed may indicate that the influencer has put a lot of thought into that particular performance, while candid-looking content might be an attempt to appear more authentic through calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017).
Type of content	Is the post a single image, a carousel image post, a filmed story, a Reel...	This does not necessarily have a theoretical derivation but it is related to performance; we believe the medium of each post is relevant and may be another way influencers try to affect their followers' perceptions of them (for example, Stories are temporary so 'off-brand' content may be confined there).

3.5 Ethical principles and reflexivity

3.5.1 Ethical principles

Bertilsson (2021) and Kozinets (2002) agree that best practices for netnographic research are generally to disclose one's presence as a researcher to the online community. However, our netnography includes only content shared by influencers with their 50 000+ followers on, at the time of publication, non-private accounts. All the data we collected was free and accessible to any Instagram user; this thesis contains no sensitive information about any influencer. For this reason, we did not feel it was necessary to disclose our presence as researchers.

We incorporate screenshots of the influencers' content to illustrate our empirical findings in Chapter 4; however, for ethical reasons, we do not include content featuring any person we have reason to believe is under eighteen years old. The primary consequence is that we will not be able to use any content that includes the influencers' children; though many of the influencers

are clearly comfortable sharing pictures and videos of their children, we prefer to protect the children's privacy as much as possible.

3.5.2 Reflexivity

It is crucial to take a reflexive approach to research and consider the ways in which we as researchers might have an effect on our research (Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson, 2021; Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Through reflexivity, we acknowledge our own fallibility and subjectivity and, where it is possible, use that to improve our work. Because we are conducting an observational netnography, it is possible that our own biases and perspectives will affect our observations; i.e., we will incorrectly ascribe particular motivations to influencers. We aim to minimize the possibility of misinterpretation by restricting our sample to Swedish influencers: one of us is Swedish and the other is an American who has lived in Sweden for three years so we believe our cultural perspectives and lenses are the same as or at least very similar to those of the influencers. However, the subjectivity of our observations should be kept in mind by all our readers. We do not aim to construct universal objective truths, only to present subjective findings and observations.

That being said, while an observational netnography presents a highly possible problem of bias, it has a related benefit: because we are not interacting with the influencers, we know that they are not performing or otherwise altering their behavior for our benefit. Alvesson (2003, 2021) and Easterby-Smith et al (2018) claim that informants are likely to alter their behavior based on their perceptions of or even the presence of the researcher(s). While we assume that the influencers are performing for their audiences in various ways (and have incorporated that assumption into this thesis through the use of Goffman in the theoretical framework), their performances are unaffected by our presence as researchers. Though we must be cognizant of the possibility of bias in our interpretation of the data, there is no observer bias in the influencers' behavior.

3.6 Limitations and critique of the methodology

There are several important limitations to this thesis. Firstly, our research is purely observational and therefore susceptible to our own biases, as discussed in 3.5. Because we are not interviewing, surveying, or otherwise giving voice to the influencers, our interpretations of their content may not accurately reflect the intentions of the influencers. To avoid and minimize the risk of subjective data collection we both evaluated all of the chosen posts and activities, likewise, we made sure to discuss our personal interpretation of each activity and post for the data to be as objective and correct as possible. The decision to study the chosen influencers' activities on Instagram during a period of two weeks allowed us to form an opinion about their identity and authenticity in a way that a much shorter period would not; Bertilsson (2021) emphasizes the need for high quantities of data in netnographic research. However, it is still a very short amount of time to be able to get to know the influencers and try to read their identities that might have been shaped during years. If the influencers, for example, were to use internal language or jokes, it would be hard for us to know since we would not have been following them long enough to recognize such behavior.

Another limitation is our method of sampling. Although we used multiple sources to determine our pool of informants, we had no singular definitive list of influencers who met our criteria. Because one of our sampling sources was our own prior knowledge of the industry, there may be familiarity bias reflected in the sample. It is very possible that some influencers were excluded from the sample simply due to our oversight. This may have some effect on the results. Moreover, we chose to study only Swedish lifestyle influencers residing in Sweden which narrows the result to only cover the Swedish influencer business. The results may have some generalizability to similar industries (such as fashion or design influencing) in Sweden or lifestyle influencing in culturally similar places (such as the other Scandinavian countries) but we are reluctant to suggest generalizability beyond that. Additionally, this thesis is a snapshot of a particular group of influencers at one moment in time. A thesis that used different sampling criteria and was conducted during a different time period or over a longer period of time might have yielded different observations and conclusions. The outcome and resulting commentary, therefore, are likely to have limited generalizability.

Our prior knowledge of the influencers might affect our perceptions of them. However, since we are not analyzing whether or not they are authentic but rather how they work to build a perceived authentic identity, this will likely have little to no effect on our results.

4 Empirical Findings

In the following chapter, we will present our empirical findings. The findings have been divided into different themes based on our data collection, analysis, and our theoretical framework. This part will only include our empirical findings and observations and the analysis will later be conducted in the next chapter.

4.1 Empirical findings

In this chapter, we describe relevant patterns, trends, and behaviors observed during the two-week netnography. These findings are not necessarily comprehensive; some of the following phenomena were so popular that to note and describe each instance of them would be redundant. Instead, we describe several varying instances of each observed phenomenon and, when appropriate, offer visualizations to aid reader understanding.

Some influencers, such as Hanna F. and Isabella M., may appear to be overrepresented in these findings. That is in part due to differing frequencies of posting: some influencers post multiple pictures per day as well as lengthy Stories while others went days at a time without posting new content and shared Stories that were only two or three slides long. Another reason some influencers are discussed multiple times in this chapter is the diversity of content: the more varied an influencer's content in tone and topic, the better we are able to comment on her authenticity and identity work.

The following observations include content from posts, Stories, and Reels. None of the influencers produced any IGTV content during the period of observation.

All figures are screenshots of Instagram posts; links to the original posts can be found in Appendix 2. However, Figure 8 is a screenshot from a Story that is no longer publicly available but has been stored in our digital archive.

4.1.1 Behind the Scenes

The first trend we observed was the influencers sharing behind-the-scenes imagery from their paid promotional work. During the two-week observation period, Hanna F. and Lovisa W. released a sunglasses collection with Corlin Eyewear. Hanna F. shared a carousel post with five images (24 April, the day before the release of the collection) and a Reel (25 April, the day of the release of the collection) of images and videos from the making of the official promotional content (Friberg, 2021). These depict the studio where they filmed 'snowy' scenes and 'beach' scenes, as well as Hanna F. and Lovisa W. getting made up, dancing, and laughing on set. Lovisa W. shared some of this in her (25 April; Wallin, 2021) Stories as well. Isabella L. also shared pictures of the photo studio used for her eponymous hair/skincare collection in her feed and Stories on (28 April; Löwengrip, 2021). Hanna M. shared behind-the-scenes footage in her Stories for her paid promotion for Casall (sportswear), including her early call time and her makeup artist (26 April; Modig, 2021).

4.1.2 The Real Me

Several influencers attempted to express authenticity identities by drawing a dichotomy between their influencer persona and the 'real me'. This sometimes took the form of the influencer juxtaposing an upward-idealized image of herself with a downwards-idealized image of herself. Hanna F. used this theme on 29 April with a two-picture carousel post, with the caption "What you think I look like in sweats vs what I actually look like..."(Friberg, 2021). The first image shows her posing for a mirror selfie in sweatpants and a cropped top, with her hair, makeup, and nails all styled (Figure 1), while the second image (a portrait) depicts her clad in a loose sweatshirt, loose knee-length shorts, and house slippers, with a simple ponytail and no makeup (Figure 2).

Figure 1 (26 April; Friberg, 2021)

Figure 2 (26 April; Friberg, 2021)

Lovisa W.'s post on 26 April uses a similar script: "How I wish my Monday outfit looked like and how it actually looks" (Wallin, 2021). The first image in the carousel, a portrait of her and Hanna F., shows her outside on a Stockholm street, dressed in a chic and professional all-black outfit that includes a blazer, a Chanel bag, and Bottega Veneta high-heeled sandals. The second, a mirror selfie, shows her at home in a matching sweatshirt/shorts set. Lovisa W. tagged NA-KD in that image. NA-KD is a Swedish fast-fashion brand; although it is popular among our informants—several of them posted NA-KD-sponsored content—it is not an inaccessible and aspirational brand like Chanel and Bottega Veneta.

Isabella M. touched on a similar theme in a Friday night Reel (23 April). In the video, she and two female friends, wearing hoodies, sweatpants, and sunglasses, dance to a rap song (Sean Paul's "Temperature"); the performance is well-choreographed and they have clearly put a lot of

work into it. Isabella M. lip-syncs to the track using a whisk as a microphone. The Reel is captioned, "Friday night with the girls xxx when all the guys think you are drinking champagne and eating chocolate with strawberries in nice silk clothes" (Meisner, 2021).

4.1.3 My family is my identity

A common theme among the influencers' posts is including their family and especially their children. At least twelve of the studied influencers have children, who are frequently a theme in their posts and Stories. Isabella L. is the only one of the influencers we studied that has chosen not to show her children's faces in her pictures and Stories. However, she still includes them in her posts; she covers their faces with emojis or only shows their backs

Lovisa W., on the other hand, was very open and often shared content of her children but almost solely in her Stories that disappeared after 24 hours. During the two-week observation period, she never posted a picture in her feed of her children, while they frequently appeared in her Stories. However, on Friday (30 April), she posted a humorous reel including her children. In the Reel, she is dressed up in a mini dress and knee-high boots, carrying her daughter while her son is clinging to her leg, as she lip-syncs to the song "Leave the Door Open" (by Bruno Mars, Anderson, .Paak, and Silk Sonic) and pretends to call her babysitter with the caption "Friday plans cancelled". The text on-screen reads "When you call your babysitter and she already has plans" (Wallin, 2021).

Family also includes partners, which in this case included boyfriends and husbands. Many of the influencers posted pictures and Stories about their partners as well as wrote and talked about them. Vanessa L. posted on 3 May about her and her husband's wedding anniversary with the caption "...We are good at having an amazing marriage. Today we celebrate 4 years as married. We are still as obsessed with each other today as when we met. I LOVE HIM LIMITLESSLY. Congratulations to us" (Lindblad, 2021, Figure 3). Likewise, Penny P. posted a picture of her and her husband on 3 May with the caption "The Luke to my Lorelai" referring to an iconic couple from the television series Gilmore Girls (Parnevik, 2021). The post is interpreted as her marriage

is the perfect love and that she is both really happy and in love but also that she wants to show off her fantastic marriage to the entire world (Figure 4).

Figure 3 (3 May; Lindblad, 2021)

Figure 4 (3 May; Parnevik, 2021)

Then there are some of them that never show their partner, children, or family and merely keep their Instagram about themselves. Molly R. for example, mentioned the existence of a partner but never showed pictures of him; she also visited her parents for a weekend at the beginning of the netnography but did not post any content of them, only their house (Rustas, 2021). Michaela F. frequently posted about her son but never about her partner (Forni, 2021). Lovisa B. also keeps her content strictly about her and her lifestyle including fashion, food, beauty, and health but she never posts about her partner although they live together (Barkman, 2021). This makes it clear that they have different strategies regarding what is being shown and what is not in their respective feeds. Nevertheless, it might also seem like they do not show everything about their

life, instead the content is selected to only be about certain topics and not all of their everyday life which might lower the degree of perceived authenticity for the influencer in question.

4.1.4 Who needs a life coach?

Many of the influencers posted content of inspirational and supportive nature. For example, we found that Monday posts were a common theme where posts posted on a Monday often contained some inspirational or motivational words for their followers. Dani P. posted a photo of herself on 26 April (a Monday) with the caption "let's kick start this monday with a big cup of coffee" (Pavlica, 2021; translated from Swedish). Likewise, Molly R. made a post on 3 May (another Monday) saying how excited she felt for the coming week and hoping that her followers had a beautiful Monday (Rustas, 2021). Hanna F. also made a post on 3 May with the caption "Love Mondays and I have such an exciting week ahead of me" (Friberg, 2021; translated from Swedish; Figure 5). Klara E. also posted a motivational post on 5 May with a video of herself out on a balcony enjoying her morning coffee whilst listening to birds chirping, with the caption "Please turn on the sound, listen to the birds and enjoy your morning cup of coffee. Just wanted to wish you all a really GOOD morning" (Elvgren, 2021; translated from Swedish; Figure 6).

Figure 5 (3 May; Friberg, 2021)

Figure 6 (5 May; Elvgren, 2021)

Isabella M. made a motivational post on 2 May while posting a picture of a picture frame with an image from her wedding saying "Please love yourself instead of loving the idea of other people loving you <3" (Meisner, 2021; Figure 7). Hanna F. offered career guidance in her post on (27

Figure 7 (2 May; Meisner, 2021)

April; Friberg, 2021) where she asked her followers four questions and gave them advice to reflect upon; the post touched upon goals in life and career-wise, happiness, money, and the importance of living in the now. Penny P. posted a picture in her feed on 30 April saying "Less scrolling… more living" (Parnevik, 2021) with the caption basically saying that she will take a few days off from social media to be with her family--yet another post indicating the importance of spending time with loved ones and living in the present.

Sanne J. posted an ad for her own clothing brand to her on 29 April featuring a video of herself talking about confidence and body positivity. She talked mainly about the importance of women not criticising their bodies and

that more people need to learn how to feel good from the inside and out. The caption to the video says " We need to stop focusing on the outside. Focus on the health not the weight [sic]" (Josefson, 2021). Sanne J. also shared body positivity content in her Stories on 26 April as well as other health-adjacent advice on several other occasions, which are discussed below (Josefson, 2021).

4.1.5 The tutorial

In addition to informal life-coaching, influencers also offer informative content within their various areas of expertise. Along with her advice on body positivity, Sanne J. shared a post about the physical and emotional effects of being in nature on 30 April, commentary on the positive effect self-care had on one's children in her Stories on 5 May, and a variety of holistic life and health advice to her followers in a Story on 29 April(Josefson, 2021). She concluded the 29

April advice-giving session with text that read, "...So happy that many of you actually feel that you can get help or some Good (sic) info from me...Receive so many dm's [sic] everyday about health, hormones, life questions etc. I try to answer as much as I can but its [sic] hard for me to catch up…." (Josefson, 2021).

Johanna L.'s content tended to be somewhat different from the other influencers studied; while she discussed motherhood and collaborated with fashion brands like the others, she primarily posted about cooking and gardening. On 26 April she shared how to make salmon packets in her Stories (Ljungqvist, 2021). In her 3 May Stories, she shared videos of a gardener advising how to tend to dahlias; although she was not the one giving the advice, she added text comments that translated, explained, and supported the gardener's advice (Ljungqvist, 2021; Figure 8).

Figure 8 (3 May; Ljungqvist, 2021)

Several influencers acted as authorities for products they were paid to promote. On 26 April, Isabella M. posted an ad in her Stories for the website Protein.se, which sells protein powders, vitamins, pills, and various dietary supplements with woman-oriented branding (followers could use the code ISABELLA25 to receive a 25% discount on their next purchase). Isabella M. explained the benefits of Vitamin D and tanning pills in a professional, informative tone of voice (Meisner, 2021).

Petra T., also in Stories and on 26 April, demonstrated how to use a self-tanning product on her brother; in a series of videos, Petra T. walked her audience through the self-tanning process. Though she laughed and joked with her brother, she too spoke with authority on the product's use. She devoted much more space to the tutorial than the ad information (Tungården, 2021). The post was sponsored by Tanrevel, which sells at-home spray-tanning kits (followers could use the code PETRA20 to receive 20% purchases within the next forty-eight hours).

4.1.6 It looks like I have it figured out...but I do fucking not

Though the influencers' content was generally upbeat and the most common tones of their posts were professional, enthusiastic, and excited, there was a pattern of confessional and downbeat posts as well. On 26 April, Hanna F. discussed her anxiety in the caption of a picture and posed some rhetorical questions: "Will you ever feel like you've got it all figured out? And why do I keep living my life as if hard work is the key to happiness even tho [sic] I know it's not...Gosh this anxiety shit is a never ending story. But at least my outfit is cute!" (Friberg, 2021). The next day, she elaborated on her anxiety in Stories, discussing how frustrated and tired she was, how she did not have any dreams, how it might look like she had it all figured out in life "but I do fucking not" (Friberg, 2021). Hanna F.'s discussion of her mental health came up again in her Stories on 4 May with a series of text-only images. She said, "everyone are [sic] fighting battles you may know nothing about" and went on to talk about the pressure placed on influencers to be "fkn perfect role models" (Friberg, 2021; translated from Swedish), her struggles with body image and comparing herself to others, and her worry that she is almost twenty-seven years old and had not met anyone (romantically) and did not know what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

Isabella M. brought up mental health as well in the caption of her 30 April post: "I will be honest, today is the first day in a long time that I have felt genuinely happy. Without thinking about the horrors around the world or worrying if life will be as I want or without worrying if the people I love are doing well or if I should do more" (Meisner, 2021; translated from Swedish).

Several influencers talked about the difficulties they experienced as mothers. On 27 April, Michaela F. shared a story in which she talked about how difficult it was for her to drop her son off at preschool (Forni, 2021). Penny P., on 25 April, shared in her Stories about how exhausted she and her husband were after traveling with two young children (Parnevik, 2021). Later, on 30 April, she announced a weekend-long social media break so she could spend more time with her kids because "life has been a bit heavy" (Parnevik, 2021).

4.1.7 Self-awareness

Influencers occasionally poked fun at themselves and their industry or drew attention to the presence of Instagram as a medium. On 27 April, Penny P. posted pictures of herself and her two children all dressed in pink, with the caption. "I know it's Tuesday but I wanted the caption to be 'On Wednesdays we wear pink'" (Parnevik, 2021), referencing the movie *Mean Girls*. On 4 May, she posted a picture of herself holding one of her children, 'You shouldn't post pictures of your kids' gosh i totallyyyyy [sic] agree...Pebble give me some space it's almost as if you are attached to me all day" (Parnevik, 2021). Klara E., on holiday in Spain, posted a carousel series of three portraits of herself on 3 May sitting outside in bright sunlight, dressed in sunglasses, high-heeled sandals, and sleeveless top, captioned "A completely normal Monday outfit" (Elvgren, 2021; translated from Swedish; Figure 9). Finally, Isabella M. made several playful, self-aware remarks in the captions of her Reels: "How smooth I wish my mornings were (minus the glitch but maybe some 10 year old girl can come and teach me how to reel properly)" (25 April; Meisner, 2021) and "When you want to be a funny family but safety goes first" (24 April; Meisner, 2021), which refers to an internet trend of filming oneself in a moving vehicle (Isabella M. and her family filmed themselves in a parked car). She also commented, in a 3 May Story in response to a follower inquiring after her marriage, "he doesn't like that I am taking pictures at [sic] him" (Meisner, 2021).

Figure 9 (3 May; Elvgren, 2021)

4.1.8 Ask and you shall receive

An activity that appeared frequently in the influencers' Stories is the question and answer session, of Q&A, in which the followers got to

ask questions they had and then the influencer would answer them in their story. The main purpose of doing a Q&A is to have the opportunity to answer questions about outfits, makeup, beauty products, and other goods that they likely receive frequently. It may also be an opportunity for the influencer to share more about themselves and their lives and in that way get more connected to their followers. Furthermore, it is a way for the influencer to seem more real and authentic by answering questions about themselves and elaborate on what they think, like and dislike about certain things. However, as a follower, you do not know if all the questions asked get answered or if the influencer chooses the ones she wants to answer and just skips others.

Isabella M. did a Q&A on her story on 26 April where she asked her followers to "ask her anything" (Meisner, 2021). She then got questions regarding her baby and his routines, about her relationship and marriage to her husband, her pregnancy, what she eats, and if she is on a special diet. She answered all of these questions, with some answers more detailed than others. Her answering questions regarding her child, pregnancy, marriage, and diet combined with the fact that she elaborated on and delivered rather extensive answers could have made her more relatable for her followers.

Lovisa B., on the other hand, did a reversed Q&A on her story on 26 April where she posted pictures of her outfits and asked her followers to choose which one they liked better, which made it more of a "this or that" activity (Barkman, 2021). This is a way for her to understand and get to know her followers better rather than the followers getting to know her and it appears that she is genuinely interested in what her followers think and like more versus less. It might seem to be an act of genuineness to her followers but it may also be done out of self-interest: knowing what her followers like and dislike allows her to adapt her content, almost like market research.

Lovisa W. also did a Q&A on her story on 4 May; she told her followers to ask questions and then she would answer ten of them (Wallin, 2021). Here, her followers already know beforehand that she will most likely not answer all of the questions she is asked, rather she will choose the ones she feels like answering. In one way, this strategy is more honest and upfront but at the same time her authenticity could be questioned since she can choose to only answer more

superficial questions. The questions she got and answered were about kids and her plans to have more, her routines such as when she wakes up and goes to bed and where she gets her energy from, also some more shallow questions about her age and travel tips for Stockholm. Overall she answered mostly easier questions with short answers.

In her 26 April Story, Elsa E.prompted her followers to ask about her possessions with a question submission box labeled "Hi Elsa, please show us ___" (Ekman, 2021; translated from Swedish). Her followers asked to see things like her earring collection and particular items from her wardrobe but were also interested in pictures of her she particularly liked and content from the period when she knew she was pregnant but had not announced it yet. Like the other influencers who did Q&As, she did not reveal any personal information; the questions she answered were limited to the fun, lighthearted, and superficial.

4.1.9 The Chanel Bag

Chanel was one of the most popular brands among the influencers in our netnography. Consumption of Chanel usually took the form of a bag featured in portraits; although the influencers often tagged the brands they wore (both high-end and low-end, sponsored or not), they rarely tagged the official Chanel Instagram account, instead allowing the recognizable logo to speak for itself. Seven influencers featured Chanel in at least one post. None of these posts were sponsored or affiliated with Chanel, although on 27 April, Isabella M. hosted a giveaway through another retailer with a prize that included some Chanel beauty products (Meisner, 2021). In most cases, the influencers did not specifically draw attention to their Chanel products, although the logos were consistently visible (Figure 10); however, on 28 April, Molly R. posted a close-up of her Chanel logo necklace and on 1 May, she posted a cropped version of a previous post that made her Chanel bag the focal point (Rustas, 2021; Figure 11).

Figure 10 (27 April; Jörnvik,2021)   *Figure 11 (28 April; Rustas, 2021)*

4.1.10 The life of luxury

While Chanel was the most popular luxury brand the influencers consumed, it was certainly not the only one. Most influencers wore and tagged multiple designer brands over the course of the observation period, including (but not limited to) Chanel, Prada, Celine, Miu Miu, Bottega Veneta, Gucci, and Acne Studios. None of these products appeared to be gifted or sponsored by the brands or any retailers; the only purposes of the tagging appeared to be to let followers know where the products could be purchased or to signify that they consumed luxury fashion products.

Luxury experiences were also a common topic. Michaela F. and Hanna F. both geotagged pictures (24 April; Forni, 2021; and 2 May; Friberg, 2021, respectively) from the restaurant at Hotel Diplomat, a well-known luxury hotel in Stockholm. On 27 April, Josephine Q. posted about her experiences at a Swedish yacht club in her Stories and as regular posts; Champagne

Figure 12 (27 April; Qvist, 2021)

was heavily featured and the pictures were even captioned with a Champagne emoji (Qvist, 2021; Figure 12). Beginning 1 May, Klara E. went on a trip to Marbella, Spain during the observation period and she shared many pictures and videos of her large, luxurious accommodations (Elvgren, 2021).

4.1.11 Authenticity, what is that?

Several influencers did not appear to be interested in performing authenticity work or trying to appear relatable to their followers. Molly R. is perhaps the best example of this. Her captions were short and revealed very little personal information: sometimes the caption was only an emoji (a heart emoji on 23 April) (Rustas, 2021), a short phrase like "this lipstick" (27 April; Rustas, 2021), or at most, a couple of friendly but impersonal sentences like, "I'm feeling so excited for this week <3 I hope you all are having a beautiful monday!!" (3 May; Rustas, 2021). She would often share the same content multiple times: on 27 April, for example, she posted some flowers she had purchased, then posted another picture of those flowers on 3 May, and on 23 April, 28 April, and 3 May, she made separate posts for pictures of herself in the same outfit from different angles (Rustas, 2021). In posts, Stories, and Reels, she posed and moved like a fashion model. At no point during the netnography did she share information about her personal life, her struggles, or any unflattering content. Molly R. had one of the most cohesive, consistent aesthetics out of the twenty-three influencers; for the duration of our observation, her posts were consistently white, gold, and pink, with some green accents (Figure 13). A few other influencers, including Bianca G. and Tove W., cultivated specific and consistent grid aesthetics as well.

Lovisa B. was another influencer who did not seem to try to make herself appear more relatable. She consistently featured conspicuously branded luxury products and would tag those brands' Instagram accounts for products that were not visibly branded. In her 24 April Story, she tagged/prominently featured, over the course of about 10 pictures and videos: Diptyque, Soft Goat, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Jo Malone, Åhléns, Polene Paris, Mason Pearson, Loro Pianao, 12 storeez, Hermès, and Dr. Ceuracle, all of which are luxury or upmarket brands in the fashion, beauty, and fragrance industries (Barkman, 2021). While parts of the Story were sponsored by Swedish department store Åhléns and online skincare retailer Skin City, most of the featured brands were not promotional products but Lovisa's possessions she wanted to show to her followers.
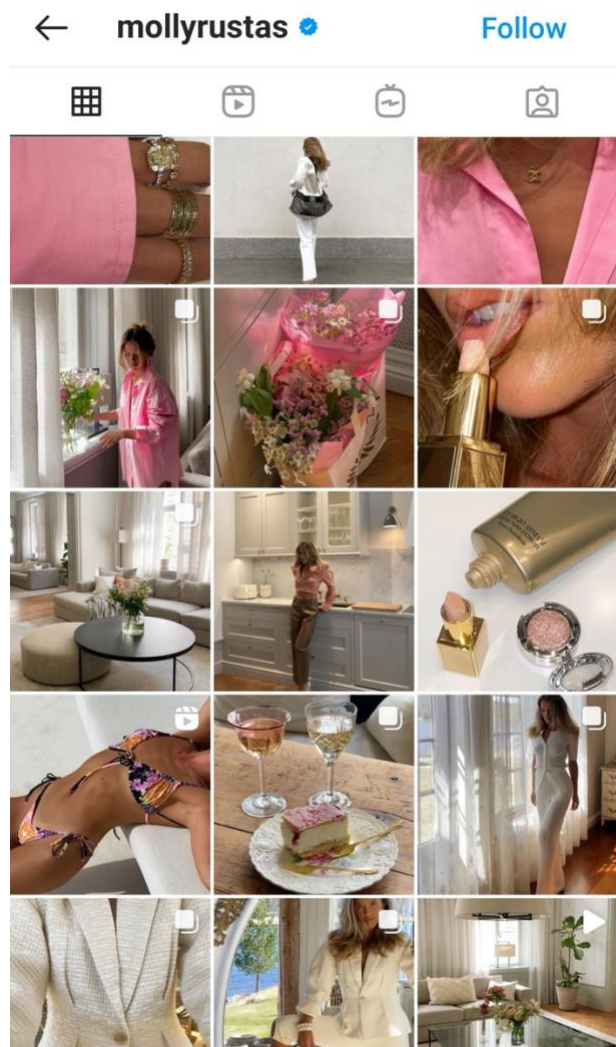
Figure 13 (Rustas, 2021)

4.1.12 Self-deprecation

Although the influencers often took on the roles of educator or authority (as with how-tos and life-coaching), they sometimes made self-deprecating comments. Isabella M., as discussed in 4.1.7, drew attention to an error in the Reel she made by saying "minus the glitch maybe some 10 year old girl can come and teach me how to reel properly" (25 April; Meisner, 2021). Sanne J. made several self-deprecating remarks over the two-week study. During a 24 April Story in which she shared her makeup routine, she admitted, "Im (sic) so bad at makeup" (Josefson, 2021). In her 26 April Story, she shared a picture of herself and her daughter, captioned "hope

someone has a better hair day than her mom" (later on in the Story, she discussed the importance of not criticizing one's body) (Josefson, 2021).

4.1.13 I see what you did there (miscellaneous)

During the two-week period where we continually studied the influencers' content, we noticed some more observable commonalities that we viewed as interesting. For instance, we found that the majority of the posts were edited in some way. Most of them only had some light editing to fix the light or enhance the colors while some of them used rather heavy editing with blurring or airbrushing effects to improve their appearance. Another common editing style was turning the pictures into black and whites which could be done either for aesthetic/dramatic purposes or to hide things they did not want to show, for example, the lack of a tan or makeup. The editing of photos is most likely done to enhance the look of their posts, which in turn enhances the look of their entire grid.

However, we also found that the influencers in most cases posted unfiltered and unedited photos and videos in their Stories. The Instagram story function also enabled more openness and real content where the influencers in most cases could talk about deeper thoughts and express themselves more naturally than in their photos. This makes the Story function an opportunity for authenticity work, due to the more unfiltered "in the moment" and transient posting. There were some exceptions to this; notably, Penny P. shared several pictures of herself (23 April and twice on 3 May) on her grid that might be considered "unflattering" by some (because she looked somewhat tired, likely because of her two young children, no makeup, and/or her stomach was not completely flat — ie. she showed a completely normal female body). This means that she was one of few that dared to show her reality instead of just the polished side of her life.

Another interesting observation is that the influencers mixed low-end and high-end brands in posts of their outfits. Lovisa W., for example, posted a Reel on 4 May showing different outfits, where she mixed clothes and accessories from NA-KD with Nathalie Schuterman, a high-end fashion brand. She also made a post on 29 April where she again showed her outfit and tagged both Twist & Tango and Chanel in the photo, the former a mid-range brand and the other a luxury brand (Figure 14). Vanessa L. followed the same theme when she posted a photo of

herself on 1 May showing off her Saturday outfit, which included clothing from inexpensive brands like Zara and Levis, as well as accessories from high-end and luxury brands including Acne Studios, Prada, and Chanel (Figure 15). Lovisa B. also posted an outfit on 26 April in which she tagged Arket, a relatively inexpensive local brand as well as two luxury brands (Gucci and Bottega Veneta).

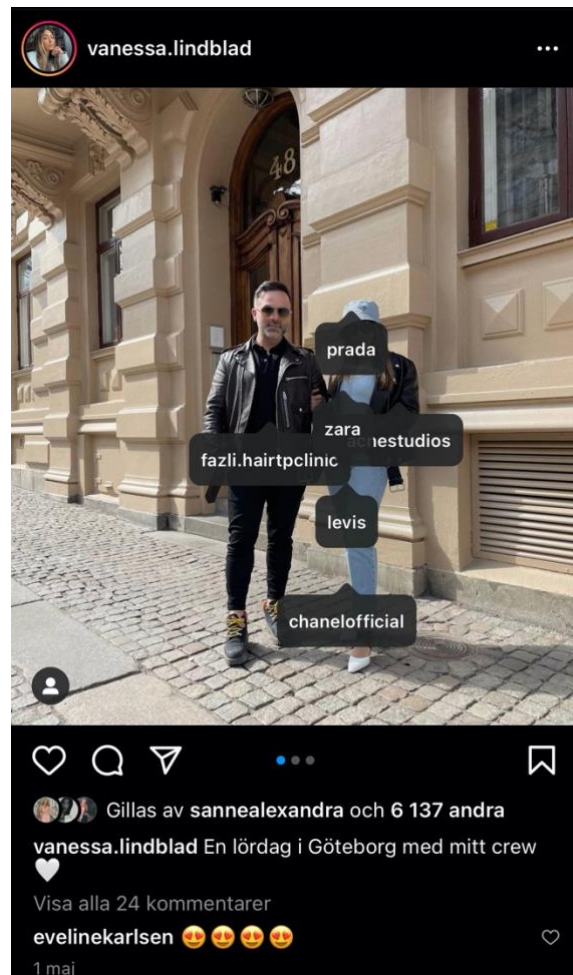*Figure 14 (29 April; Wallin, 2021)*

Figure 15 (1 May; Lindblad, 2021)

The prevalence of mirror selfies (in which the influencer takes a picture of her reflection in a mirror with her phone) is worth noting. Mirror selfies may appear less polished and professional than portraits, as the equipment (phone) is visible. All the influencers in our study appeared to

Figure 16 (29 April; Waldemar, 2021)

have the photography equipment and/or human help to have portraits taken of them; however, Bianca G., Elin S., Elin W., Hanna F., Josefine. C, Lovisa W., Penny P., and Tove W. (Figure 16) all shared at least one mirror selfie during the netnography.

Finally, we noticed a high number of ad disclosures both on top of posts (Figure 17) and in captions (Figure 18). At no point were we under the impression that any influencer had been paid to promote a product and was not disclosing that information.

Figure 17 (3 May; Parnevik, 2021)

Figure 18 (4 May; Modig, 2021)

4.2 Summary of Empirical Data

The thirteen themes discussed above represent the most interesting and relevant patterns we observed during the two-week netnography. Influencers offered interactive and informative content to their followers through Q&A sessions, tutorials, and life-coaching, they showed off things that mattered to them including family, luxury products and experiences, and specifically, their Chanel bags, they shared both emotional and physical behind-the-scenes content, and some of them did not try to seem relatable or authentic at all. In the following section, we will analyze these observations using our established theoretical framework and discuss the broader implications of our analysis.

5 Analysis

In the following chapter we will conduct a deeper analysis of our empirical findings with the help of our combined theoretical framework. The chapter is divided based on the different themes we identified while analyzing our collected data and begins with a deeper analysis of authenticity vis-à-vis identity construction through the extended self and performance, particularly idealization. The next section dives deeper into the established authenticity management strategies of transparency, passion, and calibrated amateurism, followed by a discussion of novel authenticity management strategies, including self-awareness, 'the real me', and legitimizing behaviors. Finally, we conclude the chapter with an analysis of our novel findings, two modes of identity construction that are not *centered on authenticity.*

5.1 The extended self and performance

5.1.1 My possessions define me

Belk (1988) describes how individuals create their identities by using their possessions which he calls their extended selves. The possessions include both material things as well as their body parts and family and friends. This is something that the influencers definitely use when shaping and building their influential identities. The influencer profession is heavily based around material items and they make money by promoting several different products such as clothing, makeup, interior, and beauty products but besides the products they are paid to promote, they also feature a lot of their personally-owned items and brands in their feed. One common denominator is Chanel which was repeatedly present in the influencers' posts and Stories. The Chanel brand was mostly featured through the influencers' bags which often was a part of their outfits or functioned as a prop in their photos. The Chanel bag was clearly used intentionally, considering that the logo was consistently visible in pictures. Chanel and Chanel possessions in this case may be used by the influencers to help build and show off their identities as successful influencers. Chanel, which is an iconic luxury brand, is often associated with (financial) success

and a luxurious lifestyle. Seven of the twenty-three researched influencers showcased a Chanel possession at least once during the two-week period, making it obvious that they want to be associated with what the Chanel brand stands for. Accordingly, it is safe to say that influencers use their possessions to shape and communicate their identity. However, it is important to note that the influencers' in this case can choose which possessions they use and show depending on the identity they want to create and or communicate. The identity they portray through social media is the only one their followers know and since that identity is entirely expressed online and mostly created content, it is easy for influencers to only show their followers what they want their followers to know. Sometimes it can be difficult to differentiate between possessions the influencer actually owns, those she has been paid to use, and those she simply borrowed from someone else. If an individual poses with certain possessions, for the purpose of communicating an image or identity, that actually is not even hers what does that mean for the identity she is showing. The Chanel bag which was featured most frequently among the influencers might then be seen as only an empty attempt to be someone they are actually not, a performed identity through the use of possessions.

Except for the famous and highly esteemed Chanel bag, we also observed that the many influencers often mixed high-end fashion brands with more low-end mass-produced fashion. For example, Lovisa W., in her 4 May outfit Reel, mixed cheaper brands with more expensive brands (Wallin, 2021). This was a common theme among many of the influencers mainly for outfits but also for interior and beauty products, where more expensive interiors such as Hermès were mixed with H&M and Zara Home. Through the extended self and performance framework, as mentioned earlier, the influencers use these products and brands to express a particular identity to their audience. High-end products, like Chanel bags or Gucci loafers, legitimize the influencers' status and success—they are 'proof' the influencers are successful enough that they can afford to consume luxury goods—while products from local Scandinavian brands like Acne Studios or Arket express the influencers' identities as Swedes, in the same way as the more low-end brands portrays the influencers as an average consumer who uses the same fast fashion brands as their followers probably do. While high-end foreign brands can 'prove' the influencers' success, lower-end and local brands can express the influencers' authenticity in different ways. Lower-end brands can indicate that influencers are not overly concerned with

presenting the best possible version of themselves but rather that they wear what they like and are not extrinsically motivated by admiration to wear only prestigious brands. Swedish brands (and even other Scandinavian brands) may be seen as expressions of the influencers' true selves: they are Swedish and they proudly express that through consumption of Swedish brands, even if Acne Studios does not have the cultural cachet of Chanel or Gucci.

Likewise, many of the influencers displayed their families in their content; according to Belk (1988) families are seen as possessions and a part of the extended self. A majority of the influencers showed their families in their content, including partners, children, and pets. Belk (1988) explains how people in our close environment such as family becomes a part of our extended self and thereby our identities and that we shape our identities with the help of the people around us. However, there were mixed strategies among the influencers in regards to posting about their families, where some of them shared content including their families while others did not show them at all. The ones who had children frequently included their children in their content, though to varying degrees: Lovisa W., for example, showed her children almost solely in her Stories, while Penny P, Dani P., and Petra T. often included their children in their feeds as well as their Stories (Parnveik, 2021; Pavlica, 2021; Tungården, 2021). Showing their children in their feed seems like the most natural thing since being a mother definitely is a part of their identity and especially being a successful working mother that balances work life with mom life.

Goffman (1956) theorizes performance and how individuals' identities resemble a performance that might or might not portray their real self. Further, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) extends Goffman's ideas but for online platforms and explains how the internet facilitates performance even more. It is of course much easier for influencers to portray themselves as both hard-working and good parents online while the truth might be that they are struggling to balance it all, something they might be reluctant to let their followers know, which yet again points to the influencers ability to choose what to post and what not to. The same goes for their partners--at least once during the observation period, Vanessa L., Isabella M., and Penny P. shared how great their relationships/marriages are, how much in love they are, and how well they and their partners complement each other (Lindblad, 2021; Meisner, 2021; Parnevik, 2021). Not one time

were there any mentions of relationship problems. Also here is social media, a tool to portray only the good parts of their relationship featuring loving quotes, cute pictures of the two or a declaration of love, and their identity except from "working mother" now also includes "loving partner". While some might see this as the influencers' being open and honest when sharing about their family, it can by others be interpreted as them putting up a polished facade, an ideal relationship, and parenthood that others only strive to achieve. On the other hand, some of the influencers, such as Lovisa B., Molly R., and Elin S., never or almost never posted about their partners or families (Barkman, 2021; Rustas, 2021; Skoglund, 2021). Their content was entirely about themselves, fashion, beauty, and interior design, nothing more personal. By going for a more open strategy, and share more of themselves, their personal life, and opening up about their kids and families, the perceived degree of authenticity increased as well as the feeling of knowing the influencer and getting a better understanding of their identity. At the same time as the ones being more impersonal seemed more far away, untouchable, and not that familiar or friendly they also seemed more professional and their Instagram accounts were merely treated as a business. Accordingly, using families in the content is a good way of becoming more human, relatable, and authentic even though the content mainly brings up the positive aspects which could appear fake, it can also remove some of the professionalism from the influencers' accounts which at the end of the day are, in fact, businesses. Because professionalization is often seen as inauthentic (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), influencers who appear more personal and less professional may seem more authentic to their followers.

5.1.2 Idealization

Goffman (1956) describes idealization as a type of performance that is calibrated to meet a particular audience's expectations. Idealization can be upward or downward—the performer may want to make themself appear 'better' than they really are or 'worse', respectively. As we coded and sorted our data, we looked for the presence of both upward idealization (in which influencers overemphasize their success and their exciting lives to appear more aspirational) and downward idealization (in which influencers downplay their success and exciting lives to appear more relatable). While this is a subjective quality and we cannot truly know influencers' intentions or circumstances, we did observe some, according to us, idealizing behavior.

5.1.2.1 Upward idealization

Influencers performing upward idealization may use their Instagram platform to convince their followers that they live luxurious, fashionable, and glamorous lives. While we do not know the true circumstances, financially, career-wise, or otherwise, of the influencers, we can observe instances in which influencers deliberately emphasize the lavish aspects of their lives, namely, the pronounced, highly visible consumption of luxury brands and luxury experiences. While influencers consumed and even collaborated with low-end and mid-range fashioned brands like NA-KD, Cubus (a Norwegian fast fashion brand), and Twist & Tango (a mid-range Swedish brand), international luxury and designer fashion brands were more common, even though we saw no evidence that they offered the influencers gifted or sponsored products. The emphasis on designer and luxury fashion brands can be considered idealization because of the connotations and implications of these brands; an influencer who carries a Chanel bag and wears Gucci shoes will likely be widely seen as wealthy, successful, and of high social status. Similarly, when influencers share their luxury experiences such as a vacation at an opulent Spanish villa or Champagne at a yacht club, they draw attention to the decadent, fun, and high-status aspects of their lives. It is important to note that it is not only the *consumption* of luxury products and experiences that is the upward idealization, it is the *emphasis* on the luxurious aspects (such as Champagne emojis or tagged brands) and the documentation that is upward idealization. Upward idealization through luxury consumption is a construction and performance of a particular identity but it is not done to persuade followers of authenticity; rather, we see this as *in*authenticity work. Inauthenticity work, which we will discuss later in this chapter, we define as defiance of expectations of authenticity and a lack of interest in authenticity work.

5.1.2.2 Downward idealization

Goffman (1956) suggests that downward idealization is less common than upward idealization but that there are still circumstances in which the performer may benefit from underplaying their present circumstances. For influencers, the benefit of appearing less successful is that they may then seem more similar to their followers and thus more relatable. We did not observe as much downward-idealized content, although 'the real me' can be viewed as an example, as it used to downplay certain attributes, such as their beauty and professional success. When Lovisa W.

juxtaposes the fashionable outfit she wishes she were wearing with the inexpensive loungewear she is actually wearing (Wallin, 2021), she reduces her own status and makes it closer to that of her followers. The message is that although she seems like a full-time influencer with an expensive wardrobe and exciting professional opportunities, she is also just a normal girl who hangs out at her apartment in sweats. Unlike upward idealization, we can consider downward idealization a form of authenticity work because the downward-idealized self may be intended to be seen as an honest representation of the 'real self'. The downward-idealized self is 'worse' than the upward- or unidealized self; therefore, we can assume that followers do not see it as a construction for others' approval but as an authentic expression of the influencer's true identity.

5.2 Authenticity work: established patterns

Authenticity work, as discussed in this thesis, is the work that goes into performing authenticity for an audience (McRae, 2017); in this thesis, we break that down into different strategies and techniques. In section 5.2, we analyze our empirical findings in the context of three authenticity work strategies established in the literature: transparency, passion, and calibrated amateurism.

5.2.1 Transparency

Transparency has been identified as an important part when trying to appear more authentic online (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020). Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard's (2020) research mainly discussed transparency in regard to sponsored content and "true to life" (pp. 563); however, we believe that transparency can be used to appear authentic in other content as well. We noticed several tools the influencers used to, in our opinion, be more transparent with their work and life in general. The first tool we discovered was the behind-the-scenes content many of the influencers shared. Hanna F., for example, shared a behind-the-scenes video of her and Lovisa W's. campaign shoot for their sunglass collection. The video gives the followers an image of how it works when creating campaigns like this and a better insight into behind-the-scenes the influencers' work (Friberg, 2021). It also appears as they have no problem in showing how much lighting, makeup, posing and props it takes to make pictures that look that good. For example, individuals with low self-esteem that only see the finished result might be affected by

how good everything looks but influencers sharing behind-the-scenes content and being transparent with what it takes to get those perfect pictures could help many relate and feel better about themselves. At the same time, it could also be a way for the influencers to show that they actually work hard and that it takes a lot of effort to shoot and create a campaign, that they do not only make money from just posting pictures of themselves. This means that the behind-the-scenes videos and photos could be a tool to justify that being an influencer is an actual profession that takes time and hard work and not at all a tool to be either more transparent or authentic. However, we still believe that, in line with former research on the topic, transparency is key for influencers to appear more authentic and the insight into their work and life it gives is important. Even if it is used intentionally as a justification of their hard work it still provides the followers with a different perspective and insight than they normally would get from other posts.

Another tool for being more transparent is the Q&A, which was popular among Instagram influencers in our study. Q&A sessions give followers the opportunity to ask more personal questions and get to know the influencer better but they also allow influencers to show more of themselves and open up about their inner thoughts and feelings. Previous research has shown that sharing personal details can help influencers seem more genuine and thereby also increase perceived authenticity (Duffy and Hund, 2015; García-Rapp, 2016; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Not all of the influencers who conducted Q&As chose to answer personal questions and open up about more private things. Both Lovisa W. and Isabella M. did Q&As during the observation period but they answered rather different questions. Isabella M. answered a lot of personal questions (Meisner, 2021) while Lovisa W. answered more superficial ones (Wallin, 2021). It was not only the questions that differed between them, it was also how they answered. Isabella M. provided long and thorough answers to every question but Lovisa W. offered rather short answers and seemed uninterested in elaborating and letting her followers know what she actually thought or felt. The Q&A is a good opportunity for influencers to work on their openness, transparency, and authenticity; however, it depends on how the Q&A sessions are being performed if they take the chance to answer personal questions and open up about their thoughts, feelings, and opinions it is a great way to get closer to their followers; on the other hand, if it only touches upon superficial and shallow topics it will not really increase neither the transparency nor the authenticity for the influencer. Doing a Q&A is, in our opinion, a good way

for the influencer to give her followers an opportunity to get to know her better by being able to ask questions. It is also a good way to open up and use the occasion to be more transparent and work on their authenticity. However, a Q&A could as well be seen as only a performance for the purpose of appearing more open and a way to gain more trust from her followers. This performance would be for both her own gain and her audience's, while the influencer is choosing exactly what questions to answer, or even makes them up herself, so that her identity stays intact her followers think that they get to know her even better. This means that a Q&A, besides being a way for the influencer to appear transparent, can be used to keep building on and performing the identity they already have.

Even though both of these things work as tools for increasing transparency and in turn authenticity, it is still important to mention that in both of these cases the influencer is still in charge of what is being shown, shared, and answered and what is not. This means that even in the authenticity work performed by influencers it is still entirely up to them on what lifestyle or identity they want to communicate to their followers. Accordingly, it is hard to identify authenticity and transparency work that is for real and not just a performance to seem more open and genuine.

Regarding Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard's (2020) discussion of transparency, we noted consistent disclosure of paid content as well as "true to life" (pp.563) content including 'the real me' and the occasional discussion of personal problems. Ad disclosures mitigate the apparent inauthenticity of paid content (paid content means the influencer has an extrinsic motivation; intrinsic motivation is a key part of perceived authenticity) because they show that the influencer is at least honest with her followers. However, because promotional content on Instagram is required to be identified as such in many places, including Sweden (Kempas, 2019), we do not necessarily view this as a strategy for influencers to appear more authentic but as influencers acting in their own best interest by adhering to laws and regulations, lest they be fined or otherwise punished. Transparency in sponsored content can also take the form of frank honesty and criticism towards sponsored/gifted products (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020) but we did not observe any instances of this. The influencers we studied may have felt their disclosures were transparent enough and they did not need to share unflattering opinions about sponsored

products. This may be in part because transparency through frank honesty could be a risky authenticity strategy: an influencer who is critical of the products she is paid to promote may inadvertently alienate the brand she is paid by, as well as other potential partner brands, who might prefer to work with influencers who are unequivocally positive about sponsored products. Finally, the "true to life" (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020, pp.563) content we observed took the form of the invocation 'the real me', unedited content, and discussions of personal problems. 'The real me' shows that the influencer in question does not always lead the glamorous, exciting life associated with successful influencers; instead, the influencer is honest and transparent about more mundane aspects of her life and thus appears more authentic: she does not lie about or conceal parts of herself to look better; rather, she is being her *whole* self. The same is true when an influencer posts unedited pictures of herself, like Penny P. frequently does (Parnevik, 2021): rather than digitally alter the way she looks to conform to others' expectations, she is honest about how she looks, which makes her seem more authentic. Discussions of personal problems allow influencers to be transparent about the fact their lives are not as rosy and perfect as they may seem. This can make them seem more authentic because it shows that they do not just present a curated version of their lives but their whole self, good *and* bad. Overall, transparency is a tool for influencers to communicate that they are not hiding information from their followers but rather being their genuine, authentic selves.

5.2.2 Passion

Passion has been identified as another important strategy to appear more authentic. Research showed that influencers that appeared passionate about their work also were perceived as more authentic (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). Passion is shown through only collaborating with brands the influencer is truly passionate about. It can for example be expressed by a longer commitment to a certain brand or products that appear in an influencer's feed several times and not just a one-time occurrence. Another way of showing passion about the work or a brand is to feature products without it being a paid collaboration, maybe include it in a "my essentials" post or just in the background of a photo about something completely different. It can also be beneficial for the influencers to evaluate every collaboration and not take on every offer they get, as too many collaborations with different brands can easily seem like they are not authentically passionate about the particular brand or product but rather to do as many collaborations as

possible to earn money. Both Isabella M. and Josephine Q. are examples of influencers that did frequent collaborations; they tended to not seem particularly passionate about the companies or brands they were promoting (Meisner, 2021; Qvist, 2021). When they talked about the products or brands they did not sound particularly enthusiastic. Michaela F. and Hanna F., on the other hand, spoke passionately and enthusiastically about the products they promoted and they seemed genuinely committed to the products (Forni, 2021; Friberg, 2021). There was also a significant difference in how the collaboration was designed and communicated, some of them put more time and effort into making the ad look good and be interesting for the viewer by adding some props, getting dressed up, and preparing what to say about the products or service. Another example is Isabella L. who tended to sound like she was acting in her collaboration videos; she had a particular voice that appeared whenever she did collaborations that she did not normally have (Löwengrip, 2021). Sanne J., on the other hand, did always sound like she used to and spoke genuinely no matter what the content was about (Josefson, 2021). Additionally, she could be seen wearing or using products that she had promoted at other times than solely during the ad or collab, making her advertising seem more genuine and like she only chose to work with companies that she is truly passionate about.

However, passion is, of course, difficult to measure since what is perceived as passion depends on the viewer. It is possible that the influencers we perceived as more passionate were, in fact, merely skilled at acting and knowing exactly what to say to make us believe in their passion. This is something that we believe depends on the viewer or follower in this case, partly what they think is passion or to be passionate about something but also on the relationship the follower has to the influencer. Someone that has been following one influencer for years and knows exactly how that person does her collaborations, what brands and products she likes or dislikes, and how she acts might see her as passionate because she is emotionally invested in the influencer. On the other hand, a long 'relationship' with one influencer could also lead to the follower becoming more critical of the influencer and more easily recognizing when she is performing and then being harder to impress with passion. A long-term follower may develop an understanding of the influencer's taste and thus feel able to judge when the influencer is passionate about her sponsored products and when she is not. Though we definitely believe that being passionate about their profession is a tool to seem more genuine and authentic, we also

believe that it heavily depends both on the influencer and how well they are at expressing their passion without it seeming acted as well as it depends on the audience they are approaching, their followers, and how they receive the message. More perceived passion for their work and the products they promote also leads to a higher degree of perceived authenticity (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020) and in turn more trustworthiness from their followers that might lead to better results for them as businesses. Subsequently, to appear passionate or to show passion for their work is of great importance for influencers if they want to increase their perceived authenticity but they need to make their passion seem real.

5.2.3 Calibrated amateurism

Calibrated amateurism is a term coined by Abidin (2017) that refers to the way professional influencers may try to make their content appear less polished and professional and therefore more authentic-looking. Through our theoretical lens, we view this as a type of performance and downward-idealization (Goffman, 1956): influencers attempt to alter the way their audiences perceive them in a way that makes them look less accomplished, skilled, and professionalized. The mirror-selfie, which is often done to show off an outfit, is one example of this. Given what we have seen of their oeuvre, we know the professional influencers we studied all have access to the people and/or equipment necessary to take high-quality portraits. Posting mirror-selfies, however, allows them to present a raw, spontaneous, unstaged aesthetic. This makes their content appear less curated and planned and thus more authentic.

Self-deprecating comments are another form of calibrated amateurism we identified. When influencers admit to not being 'good' at something (especially a skill commonly associated with influencers, like making Reels or doing makeup), they deprofessionalize themselves. That they are 'bad' at basic influencer skills makes them appear more authentic in that they look less like professional influencers and more like flawed ordinary people who happen to be influential. Self-deprecation can also make influencers appear more authentic by making them appear more *honest*: she is not trying to present the best possible version of herself to her followers but is instead honest about who she is.

5.3 Authenticity work: original patterns

5.3 continues the discussion of authenticity work from 5.2 but here, we discuss and analyze new forms of authenticity work that we identified in our data: self-awareness, 'the real me', and legitimizing behaviors.

5.3.1 Self-awareness

Many of the influencers posted posts where they almost made fun of themselves and their profession, indicating that they are self-aware. This kind of behaviour—distancing themselves from them themselves and making fun of themselves and their profession—shows that they understand that the influencer profession often is staged and hard for other people to identify with at times, but also that they understand that they are one of those who contribute to the "unattainable" lifestyle that is being portrayed. By showing their self-awareness, the influencers appear a bit more human and "normal" and we believe that it is used as a way for them to seem more authentic. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) and Trilling (1972) argue that authenticity is driven by the fear of becoming inauthentic and that inauthenticity is having a meaningless and performative reality. Being an influencer is in many cases equivalent with a performative reality where everything that is shown displays a certain lifestyle. By choosing to post self-aware pictures and content, such as Klara E. did with her 3 May Monday outfit post (Elvgren, 2021), she makes fun of the perfectionism and performativity that often surrounds the influencer profession. The caption suggests that she has only dressed up for that one photo. Her ability to capture and turn her own profession into a humorous post could make her perceived authenticity increase thanks to her self-awareness. But at the same time as she is making fun of herself and her profession she has probably also put a lot of effort into creating that post, getting dressed up, doing her makeup and hair, probably taking pictures in different locations and poses, then editing the pictures. Thus, even though she expresses self-awareness, she is also living up to all of the expectations of the influencer industry, including the performed reality, the staged photo, and the catchy and funny caption. This means that maybe her self-awareness is not enough to increase the perceived authenticity but it might be one of many tools.

On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as only a performance of trying to seem more authentic through self-awareness. This kind of post is not really any different from others since the picture itself looks like the posts normally do, it is only the caption and more specifically the tone of the caption that differs and shows any sign of self-awareness or self-perspective. The question is if that is enough to increase the perceived authenticity or if the post merely feels like a performance and an attempt to convince the followers, and us, that she is authentic because she is self-aware. Perceived authenticity is found to depend on the receiver or viewer as well as performance is dependent on the context and what 'mask' the person has chosen to wear in the particular performance (Goffman, 1956). Goffman describes further how individuals can choose between different 'masks' to put on depending on the identity they want to perform. Being self-aware or rather using self-awareness to seem authentic could assimilate with wearing the "self-awareness mask' just for that occasion or post. We would therefore like to add that, while self-awareness absolutely could be interpreted as being real or authentic, it, aside from depending on the receiver, also depends on the other posts the influencer posts and the frequency of self-aware posts. If it is just a once or twice occurrence, it is more likely to be seen forgotten or dismissed rather than an attempt of performed authenticity.

5.3.2 The real me

A second authenticity management strategy closely related to self-awareness is the portrayal of 'the real me'. Hanna F. 's 'real me' post on 29 April is one example, where she showed herself in two separate pictures, one of them more aligned with industry standards of beauty and the other "what I actually look like" (Friberg, 2021). Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, and Zahid (2018) and Reade (2020) found that influencers' authenticity or trustworthiness were negatively affected when the posts and through the posts their lifestyle appeared to be staged. At the same time as we believe that showing 'the real me' is a perfect way for the influencer to let the followers in a bit more and share another side of herself. Hanna F.s post, in this case, could both positively and negatively affect her perceived authenticity. The fact that she is showing a not-at-all staged picture might, of course, positively affect her authenticity and strengthen the relationship with her followers since more of them might see her as relatable. On the other hand, it might also negatively affect how her followers view her, by giving her followers two pictures to compare

more of her followers might realize that the majority of her posts in fact are carefully staged and curated and that her reality and identity are performed and then perceive her as less authentic. Goffman (1956) describes two ends on the performativity spectrum: one where the individual believes that their performance is a representation of their true self, the other in which the individual performs knowingly for their own benefit or that of their audience. Both self-awareness and 'the real me' posts suggest that the majority of influencers' posts are performed; if their Instagram identities was a representation of their true self there would not be any point in posting pictures with captions along the lines of "what you think I look like vs what I actually look like" or remarks that make fun of industry behaviors. It is safe to assume that the influencers knowingly perform particular identities for their own benefit of gaining followers and making more money but also for the benefit of their followers, who apparently like what they see otherwise they would not continue following. However, it is of course not ruled out that the influencer believes that her performance is a representation of her true self. The staged (as perceived by us) photos could by the influencer be a way of showing her followers, what she believes, is her true self. This means that the performance of an authentic identity still exists but whether the performance is a representation of, according to the influencer, her true self or only for her own benefit or maybe a little bit of both is difficult to understand without knowing her true intentions.

5.3.3 Legitimizing behaviors

The final authenticity work trend we observed was the use of legitimizing behaviors to validate the influencers' influencer identities and their authenticity in those roles. The question of authenticity in a particular role has been raised by Beverland, Farrelly, and Quester (2006), who discuss how individuals in subcultures may perform authenticating behavior to legitimize their membership in that culture. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) suggest that 'being' a member [of a subculture] can only be achieved by having the 'right' grounds or reasons for performing category-bound activities or possessing category-based attributes" (pp.274); essentially, one's presence in a subculture or group must be justified. Like members of subcultures, influencers use different behaviors and consumption patterns such as special brands or products to legitimize their status. While we do not consider Swedish lifestyle influencers to be in a *sub*culture, they are

part of a culture with their own consumption habits, preferred brands, and behaviors that may be invoked and emphasized to prove legitimate lifestyle influencer status.

The Chanel bag, or, more broadly, the invocation of the Chanel brand, is one technique influencers used to lend legitimacy to their identities. Given its apparent popularity among Swedish lifestyle influencers, some influencers may purchase and display a Chanel in order to reinforce their identities as successful lifestyle influencers. This is an example of behavior manipulation in order to appear authentic to others, as discussed by Hart et al (2020): all twenty-three influencers in this study are, by some definition, successful professional influencers—in that they have over 50 000 followers and are paid for their work—but showing off a Chanel bag may further reinforce these statuses to their audiences. Because the consumption of Chanel is, at least for the duration of our netnography, restricted to conspicuously branded products—bags, jewelry, and beauty products, all featuring the logo or brand name—it is likely that the influencers are purposefully trying to associate themselves with the brand, as opposed to consuming it solely because they like it. This indicates to us that the popularity of Chanel is not a coincidence but rather due to influencers wanting to stress specific identities to their followers. Kuchmaner and Wiggins (2021) argue that authenticity may be constructed internally and communicated externally through specific products; the framework of internal identity construction → outward identity performance is also part of the theoretical basis for this thesis. Using that framework, Chanel bags (and other branded products) are used to construct and perform the identity of successful Swedish lifestyle influencers. An influencer may acquire a Chanel bag at least in part to self-signify and self-authenticate her influencer identity and then share pictures of it with her followers to outwardly communicate that she is an authentic lifestyle influencer who belongs with her peers.

Influencer Q&As, life-coaching, and tutorials allow influencers to legitimize their influencer identities. Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1990) discussion of *being* vs *doing* is relevant here; Q&As, life-coaching, and tutorials are all ways for influencers to prove that they have the right to their influencer status The Q&A Story format functions as a digital milieu in which the influencer is positioned as the dispenser of knowledge. Using Goffman's (1956) language, this is a setting or scenic aspect of a performance—albeit a digital one—that gives influencers a space

to perform their successful Swedish lifestyle influencer identities. However, the Q&A is not only a space for the performance of these identities but a reinforcement of it. Lovisa W.'s Q&A about herself, for example, positions her as an authority with information *and* as a subject of interest; the act of inviting her audience to ask questions about her life (4 May; Wallin, 2021) casts her and her life as topics her followers should (and do) care about. Life-coaching and tutorials are similar but they position the influencers as sources of knowledge on various subjects and show that the influencers do not just post pretty pictures on Instagram (*doing* lifestyle influencing) but have skills, knowledge, and lifestyles worth emulating (*being* lifestyle influencers). Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) argue that authenticity is a state of being, rather than a series of behaviors. Rather ironically, legitimizing behaviors (*doing*) are done to prove the influencers' inherent authentic *being*.

5.4 Novel findings: the inauthentic identity?

Up to this point, the analysis has centered themes and patterns already established in the literature. In section 5.5, we discuss two modes of the influential identity that we found through our study that surprised us and went in another direction than the literature. These findings are more of the inductive character since they propose new information regarding the influential authentic identity. They also synthesize and incorporate topics previously discussed in this analysis, including 'the real me', self-awareness, and upward idealization.

5.4.1 Who I am is *not* what I post (but I know that)

This was a radical and unexpected finding in that it countered our early assumption that the authentic influential digital identity was one that seemed to reflect the Instagram influencer's true self and that all authenticity work performed would be to persuade followers that 'what I post is who I am'. We made this assumption based on both our own preconceptions as well as prior literature on influencer authenticity; the authenticity management techniques of passion and transparency, for example, support this (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020). However, we noticed the emergence of a different construction of authentic identity: the purposeful detachment of the Instagram self from the true self.

Several of the observed patterns earlier in the chapter are separations of the Instagram self and true self. When influencers share 'the real me', they acknowledge that the often glamorous and polished image they present is not an accurate representation of who they are. Hanna F.'s "what you guys think I look like in sweats vs what I actually look like" (Friberg, 2021) is perhaps the strongest example of this. What Hanna F.'s followers think of her is almost entirely up to her: she constructs and performs a digital identity; that her followers might think she looks a certain way in sweats is because she has chosen to give them that impression. Lovisa W.'s "How I wish my monday outfit looked" (26 April; Wallin, 2021) is somewhat different from Hanna F.'s, as she is not directly addressing her performance for her followers. Her message, however, is similar: the juxtaposition of the wished-for Monday outfit and its implications with the actual Monday outfit and its implications shows that Lovisa W.'s influencer-persona is not her full-time identity.

Sharing of personal troubles is another form of separating identities; this is an emotional 'behind the scenes'. By discussing their struggles in areas like motherhood and mental health, influencers tell their audiences that there is more to them than what they post. Hanna F. repeating the adage, "everyone are [sic] fighting battles you may know nothing about" (4 May; Friberg, 2021) is a good example of this, as it acknowledges that the performed, public self is not the entirety of the self. Isabella M.'s confession that 30 April was the first day in a while that she had felt genuinely happy recognizes that her influencer identity is a performance (Meisner, 2021). Her posts, Stories, and Reels from previous days were light-hearted and playful in tone, with no indication that she had been feeling unhappy. Admitting to unhappiness, then, is an acknowledgment that her constructed Instagram identity is not an actual representation of herself.

The sharing of difficulties offers audiences a behind-the-scenes look at influencers' personal lives but influencers also share behind-the-scenes content regarding their work. By pulling the camera back and showing the work put into their content, influencers deconstruct their polished images and emphasize their identities as working professionals. This can be seen as a tacit acknowledgment that the influencers are cognizant of performing on Instagram: they show that being an influencer takes hard work and is not just 'being yourself'.

Performative self-awareness also separates the public persona from the true self. Influencers draw attention to the abnormal behaviors and norms of their industry, which indicates that they are cognizant of them; this is similar to McRae's (2017) observation that influencers might discuss and acknowledge the presence of inauthentic behavior within their industry to set themselves apart as 'authentic'. Klara E.'s tongue-in-cheek caption about her Monday outfit (3 May; Elvgren, 2021), for example, shows that she does not take herself and her work too seriously. By drawing attention to various aspects of the influencer industry or identifying the presence of Instagram, influencers indicate that, although they are successful in their industry, they do not buy into the influencer culture.

While other authenticity work is done to convince followers that the influencer identity is an expression of the true self, themes like 'the real me', personal struggles, behind-the-scenes, and self-awareness separate the two. These influencers disclose, implicitly or explicitly, the construction of a purposefully inauthentic identity. Instead of 'what I post is who I am', the message is 'what I post is *not* who I am—but I know that'. This can be seen as its own form of authenticity work: it is a justification for content that may not appear authentic. In not pretending that their Instagram identities are authentic representations of their true selves, influencers show their followers that they are authentic because their seemingly inauthentic self is a deliberate construction and performance. However, because this mode of identity creation does acknowledge that the influencer is sometimes inauthentic, we do not fully consider it to be authenticity work but rather simultaneously authenticity work and inauthenticity work.

5.4.2 Who I am is compelling (and that is enough)

In some cases, influencers did not seem to be concerned about constructing authentic identities. Rather, they focused on showing off particular possessions and posting beautiful pictures of themselves and their lives. This too was a surprising finding, as it ran counter to the fundamental assumption of this thesis that authenticity mattered. The apparent lack of concern for perceived authenticity we consider to be a form of inauthenticity work.

The upward-idealized performances—the purposeful consumption of Chanel, other luxury brands such Hermès, Celine, and Armani, and luxurious experiences, such as drinking Champagne at a yacht club or dining at a posh hotel—can be used to legitimize one's successful Swedish lifestyle influencer status (as discussed in 5.3.2) but this could also be to simply create a compelling identity that attracts an audience. Influencers who often invoke these brands in their posts may use them to construct and perform glamorous, aspirational identities that may not be *authentic*, in that they may be driven by the desire for recognition and admiration from audiences (thus not intrinsic motivation)—but are nevertheless appealing to some consumers. The same can be said of other seemingly inauthentic content: Molly R. may prioritize her Instagram grid's aesthetic over trying to convince her followers that she is authentic but if that aesthetic is appealing enough, authenticity work may not be necessary. Obviously edited pictures are another example: several of the influencers interviewed by Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) felt that editing pictures was inauthentic behavior but followers may not care about the inauthenticity of edited pictures if the pictures are beautiful or interesting enough.

Although the focus of this thesis is constructions of authenticity, we must also accept the premise that authenticity is not necessarily a quality all consumers care about. Instagram is a visual platform and many users may not care if the influencers they follow are authentic, only that their content is inspiring and visually pleasing. Users may find extreme consumption of designer brands and highly selective posting not relatable and/or authentic but they may find it aspirational, interesting, and enjoyable to look at. Given that Lovisa B. and Molly R. had some of the greatest numbers of followers among the influencers in our study (264 000 and 220 000, respectively, at the start of the observation period; Barkman, 2021; Rustas, 2021), it is clear that a compelling self-presentation may be enough to draw an audience.

5.5 Discussion

In analyzing our empirical findings, we first discussed how influencers might conduct authenticity work through identity creation and performance, using conceptualizations introduced by Belk (1988) and Goffman (1956). We moved on to examples of authenticity management strategies already described in the literature: transparency, passion, and calibrated amateurism, citing both established uses of these strategies and novel variations, such as the Q&A session as influencer transparency. The next chapter continues the analysis of authenticity work but includes three original strategies influencers may have used in order to appear more authentic: self-awareness, 'the real me', and legitimizing behaviors. Finally, we identified two new modes of authentic identity creation: the two-faced self and compelling inauthenticity.

Sections 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 all describe the ways in which influencers might try to communicate their authenticity to their followers. When we ask the question of how influencers might construct authentic identities, our most straightforward answer is "through myriad authenticity management strategies". Collectively, we identify this as **authenticity work.**

Section 5.4 includes modes of identity construction that destabilize the foundation of this thesis: that influencer authenticity matters. We began this thesis with the assumption that influencers would attempt to persuade their audiences that their digital selves were reflections of their true selves. This was supported in our literature: for example, Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard's (2020) described the authenticity work techniques of passion, in which influencers expressed passion and enthusiasm for their paid work, and transparency, in which influencers were honest and transparent about their paid work and their lives in general; both these strategies were used to prove that the influencers were not motivated or influenced by money. Furthermore, Schau and Gilly (2003) found that while personal website creators portrayed themselves as slightly 'better' online, their digital selves still bore close resemblances to their offline selves. Our findings contradicted this assumption; we saw that influencers admitted, obliquely and explicitly, that their Instagram identities were constructions that were not authentic representations of their true identities for example through 'the real me' posts. This particular mode we have identified as **the two-faced persona**.

We also assumed that influencers needed to, to some degree, be perceived as authentic to be successful, hence our research question. However, we instead identified a compelling form of inauthenticity: the idea that authenticity is not always necessary for professional influencers. Researchers such as van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) and Maares, Banjac & Hanusch (2020) have found that perceived authenticity is a concern for influencers of various platform sizes. We contend that if an influencer presents an obviously curated, extrinsically-motivated self that is attractive (compelling, interesting, beautiful, inspiring) enough, then the audience may not mind a lack of authenticity or that the self is so well structured that it seems authentic while being fabricated. We identify this mode as **compelling inauthenticity**.

These modes of identity construction with regards to authenticity can and do coexist in one influencer's content. Influencers may not behave consistently; they are subject to different moods, ideas, feedback, and circumstances that could affect how they post and how they construct their identities on Instagram. These are not rigidly defined, mutually exclusive blueprints but rather models of specific behavior patterns that may overlap and evolve over time.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

In this chapter, we will present and outline the conclusions we have drawn from our empirical findings and analysis. After that, we will discuss our theoretical contribution as well as limitations to our study and what opportunities we see for future research.

6.1 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to answer the question of how influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram. From a theoretical perspective that combined construction of the self and presentation of the self and a definition of what perceived authenticity looks like, we studied twenty-three Swedish lifestyle Instagram influencers for two weeks. We have presented a description of our empirical findings followed by theoretically-driven analyses of these findings that sought to answer our question.

How do lifestyle influencers construct authentic identities on Instagram? We propose three possible answers to this question, in descending order of how central authenticity is in each answer.

Authenticity management: This covers different strategies influencers might use to appear more authentic to their followers, including identity construction, invocations of passion, transparency, calibrated amateurism, downward idealization, self-awareness, and legitimizing behaviors, to appear more authentic. Passion, transparency, and calibrated amateurism were identified by prior researchers—passion and transparency by Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) and calibrated amateurism by Abidin (2017)—and we were able to confirm the presence of these and in some cases, suggest new iterations, such as the Q&A session as a form of transparency. Downward idealization, introduced by Goffman (1956) is not necessarily performed with authenticity in mind; however, we argue that influencers may use it to appear more authentic. Finally, drawing on Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1990) discussion of *being* vs *doing*, the legitimizing behaviors we observed may be done to assert that the influencers *are*

legitimate and genuine influencers rather than Instagram users who *do* influencer-like activities. These varied behaviors and strategies all fall under the umbrella of authenticity management: influencers may use them to appear more authentic.

The two-faced self: Influencers admitted that their digital Instagram identities were not actually representative of their true selves. Some influencers discussed or alluded to personal struggles behind the scenes, others shared actual behind-the-scenes content, and others used irony or sarcasm to show their awareness that they were performing. This contradicted our pre-research assumption in 2.3.3 that an authentic digital self would be an honest and genuine representation of the true self. We had expected to see influencers try to convince followers of this but instead we saw the opposite: influencers acknowledged that the digital self they presented was *not* who they really are. This does, however, still constitute authentic identity construction: it explains and justifies anything that may be construed as inauthentic.

Compelling inauthenticity: Constructing and performing authenticity were not priorities for some influencers. Instead, these influencers used luxury brands and strong visual aesthetics to give their audiences a different reason to pay attention to them. We used the term inauthenticity work to describe this defiance of expectations of authenticity.

6.1.1 Is there an authentic identity?

We have identified and discussed several blueprints for influencers' constructions of authentic identities but we do not have a singular definitive answer as to how the authentic identity is constructed. In fact, in two of the three blueprints, influencers did not actually try to construct authentic identities per se. We then must ask the question: does the authentic influential identity exist? Or, rather, does it matter?

We consider that appearing authentic is, in fact, important to some extent—if it were not, we would not see so much authenticity work. However, we believe, after conducting this research, that what matters even more is to portray a compelling lifestyle worth following. Without willing followers, there would be no influencers at all. The urge to start following strangers in the first place is more likely because of an interesting and desirable lifestyle rather than a genuine

authentic identity. We believe that an apparently authentic identity matters to a certain extent--and what that extent is depends on myriad other factors, such as the influencer's vision and goals for her platform, the resources at her disposal, her personal and professional networks, and, mostly, some amount of luck.

Regarding if the authentic influential identity exists, we believe that in order to become influential, influencers must, to some degree, be authentic or at least perceived as such. What we have yet to discuss is the question of what authenticity really is. Even though we have conducted thorough research into the subject, we still end up with the answer: it depends on the receiver's perception. This means that being authentic refers to different things depending on who you ask; if the degree of authenticity depends on the receiver the authentic identity also depends on the receiver's perception. If that is the case it would be impossible for an influencer to be perceived as authentic by everyone at the same time. Accordingly, we conclude that there most likely exists an influential authentic identity but that the influential authentic identity on Instagram merely is the ability to shape and maintain a lifestyle, and identity, that is being perceived as authentic enough for people to follow, listen to, and look up to. The tools and modes presented in this thesis are rather instruments to create this compelling influential identity that we then call the fabricated influential authentic identity.

6.2 Theoretical contribution

The theoretical contributions of this thesis are primarily to contemporary theory surrounding digital constructions of the self and authenticity. The findings in this thesis mainly build on Belk's (1988) possessions and the extended self and Goffman's (1956) performance. We add theory regarding performance online (perform an identity knowing that it does not represent their true self) as well as how influencers use possessions to express themselves as successful lifestyle influencers online (through the use of special products, brands, and their families). This means that we have taken these older concepts and put them in a modern context, the digital influencing one, to refine and add rather than renew them.

Our empirical findings also contribute to prior literature on digital authenticity. We have identified new iterations and broader definitions of previously established authenticity

management strategies, including passion and transparency, as discussed by Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard (2020), and the concept of calibrated amateurism, introduced by Abidin (2017). The findings of this thesis refine and build on this literature, as well as show how these authenticity management strategies may look in the cultural context of Swedish lifestyle influencers. We have identified several forms of authenticity work (self-awareness, 'the real me', and legitimizing behaviors, which build on the existing literature even further.

On the subject of legitimizing behaviors, our discussion builds on and modernizes prior theorizations on authenticity and identity, such as Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester (2006), Hart et al (2020), and Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990). These authors' findings either pre-date Instagram (and widespread social media usage in general) or were conducted in offline spaces; our findings thus show how signifiers and expressions of an authentic particular identity are executed on Instagram (or even other social media platforms).

Finally, we contribute with new findings of compelling inauthenticity to the already existing literature on Instagram influencing. We propose a new way of viewing influencers digital identity creation through the two-faced self or the compelling inauthentic identity as opposed to former conceptualizations about authenticity (Doherty & Schlenker, 1990; Hart et al, 2020; Maares, Banjac & Hanusch, 2020; McRae, 2017; Schlenker & Weigold, 1990).

6.3 Practical implications

This thesis offers practical implications to the influencer community, as well as management at brands that work or plan to work with influencers. A better understanding of how influencers shape their identities and how they express authenticity on Instagram can help companies make more informed decisions about which influencers to collaborate with: for example, an influencer who consistently work with brands she expresses a strong passion for might be an appealing partner for some brand managers, while a compellingly inauthentic influencer may be attractive to other brands managers, who want their products associated with luxury or beauty. Influencers work as spokespeople for the brands they are promoting, thus making it critical for the brands to

understand how the influencers operate to be able to gain as much as possible from collaborations.

Furthermore, this research and its findings could also be helpful for customers when turning to influencers in the search for new products or brands by also helping them make more informed decisions. With the findings in this thesis in mind, it is easier to understand what tools influencers use when trying to influence through their authentic influential identities. We also offer a better understanding of how to look at authenticity and identity creation in a digital context that might be of great use for both aspiring and professional influencers building online identities. Prior literature on the subject has established that influencers struggle to balance the professionalization of their accounts with their (perceived) authenticity; our findings and modes of (in)authentic identity creation may be of use to them.

The thesis also sheds light on the complex phenomenon of fabricated authenticity and how the perceived degree of authenticity, according to us, can be managed to some extent through the tools presented in our analysis and conclusion.

6.4 Limitations

There are several limitations that might have affected the outcome of this study. First of all, the fact that all the data was collected during a two-week period might have had a negative impact on the result and the conclusions. If we had studied the influencers' content for a longer time we might have found other themes and commonalities as well as differences between them that could have contributed to a deeper analysis and understanding of the authentic identity creation.

Secondly, the research is entirely based on our interpretation of the published content and activities on Instagram. Our choice to only conduct a netnography and not engage any of the influencers and their point of view has of course affected the results of the study. It is fully possible that we have understood or perceived things in one way which was not intended by the influencer or perceived in the same way by someone else.

Finally, we also did not involve the follower perspective. To be able to dive even deeper into this subject of authenticity online it could be helpful to hear it from the ones perceiving and experiencing the influencers' identities, their followers. By engaging the followers and getting their perspective, we could have gained an even better understanding of how the strategies the influencers use to increase their authenticity are perceived by their audiences.

6.5 Future research

Future researchers on the topics of authenticity and identity among influencers may wish to include both the influencer and/or follower perspectives through interviews and/or focus groups. Based on the literature, we assume authenticity *is*, in fact, a concern for influencers; it is likely they have strategies for creating authentic digital identities that we did not notice in this study. Followers of influencers may also offer some insight: do they believe the influencers they follow are authentic or not? Does apparent (in)authenticity affect their perceptions of influencers and if so, in what ways? Does authenticity matter to them?

An obvious next step in this research would be to expand the scope of the study. Our focus was on mid-tier Swedish lifestyle influencers on Instagram; future researchers could study influencers on different social platforms, such as YouTube or TikTok, they could study influencers in different industries, such as travel, fitness, or parenting, and they could study influencers in non-Swedish cultural contexts. Studying influencers with different platform sizes would presumably yield different constructions of authentic identities. Influencers who have not yet or are just beginning to professionalize their accounts will likely have very different priorities, behaviors, and tools at their disposal than the mid-tier influencers in our study, as would influencers with over 500 000 or even 1 million followers. Furthermore, the vast majority of/all of the twenty-three influencers we studied are white Swedish women, based in Stockholm, ranging in age from early twenties to mid-thirties. A more diverse study would offer fresh and new insights.

Our netnography was limited to two weeks but future researchers might benefit from a longer period of observation. A six-month or year-long study would allow researchers to immerse

themselves even more fully in the industry culture and gain a deeper understanding of the influencers and their behaviors.

Finally, our findings suggest that authenticity is not necessarily crucial to influencers' digital identities and that followers may be drawn to influencers who admit to being inauthentic and influencers who do not try to be authentic at all. Future researchers may wish to further explore these ideas and look into different ways influencers create identities that are compelling enough for authenticity not to matter.

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Appendix 1: Instagram terminology

Post: a picture, video, or series of pictures and/or videos (called a carousel post) shared to a user's profile. Unless deleted, posts can be viewed by others in perpetuity.

Carousel post: A post that includes two to ten images and/or videos. The first image/video is what is visible in the feed and grid; users can swipe to view additional image(s) and/or video(s).

Story: Stories are content that is visible for only twenty-four hours unless the user chooses to save them to her profile. They can include pictures, videos, content from other users, text

Caption: The text underneath a post. Captions can include, in addition to or in lieu of plain text, emojis, hashtags, tags to other users' accounts, or nothing at all.

Feed: An Instagram user's feed shows the recent posts and Reels from the users she follows. It is somewhat but not fully chronological. Feeds also include advertisements and suggested content (generated based on content the user has engaged with).

Grid: One user's posts viewed on her profile; the posts are shown as squares of the same size and separated by thin white lines (hence the term 'grid') and arranged chronologically. Some users are careful to create an overall aesthetic or mood with their grid (by using a particular color scheme, for example).

Tag: Users may take other accounts in their posts or Stories; this can be done to identify the brand of a particular item (by tagging the account for that brand) or a particular person (by tagging that person's account). Tags can be in the content itself or in the caption. The tagged user will be alerted to this (and content a user is tagged in can be viewed on their profile) and other users can see the tags.

Sponsored content: A user's (generally an influencer's) content that has been paid for in some way by a company. Users are required to disclose sponsored content by law. Sometimes the disclosure is officially done through Instagram and is visible on top of the post, sometimes the disclosure is in the caption, and sometimes, if the sponsored content is in a Story, the disclosure will be overlaid on the Story content.

Reel: Reels are a particular kind of video: they are fifteen seconds long, they are generally set to music (the song and artist information is available on-screen), and they often include special effects (Instagram, 2021). Reels are not shown in the grid; they are in a separate tab on profile pages.

IGTV: IGTV is long-form video; unlike ordinary videos, IGTV can be over one minute long (Instagram, n.d.b).

Appendix 2: List of figures

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