Brand Authenticity on Instagram: Consumers' Perspective on Beauty Brands

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Abstract

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Capturing how consumers understand brand authenticity is a prominent quest by scholars. However, the concept is characterized by its multiplicity of meanings. Especially in the context of social media, the meaning of brand authenticity remains uncaptured. Focusing on beauty brands, this study aims to explore the consumers' process of understanding brand authenticity on Instagram by taking the sensemaking approach. The qualitative research design of this study, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, allows for an analysis of the detailed thought processes of the consumers. The findings indicate that consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram through a circular process with four phases labeled as *navigating in the brand environment*, *interacting with the online community*, *processing brand cues*, and *preserving meaning*. This indicates that brand authenticity on Instagram is a personally constructed phenomenon. For brand communication practitioners, this means to work with brand authenticity on Instagram should be focused on the consumers' unique context-specific interpretations, which requires a reflexive approach to online brand communication.

Keyword: brand authenticity, Instagram, beauty brands, brand communication, consumers

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Introduction

Consumers are confronted with an overwhelming amount of meaningless market offerings every day (Morhart et al., 2015). This means an ever-growing number of brands are offering similar products or services and stand in fierce competition for the consumers' attention (Schallehn et al., 2014). As consumers often rely on the consumption of brands to express themselves, they are looking for meaningful market offerings (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, consumers are looking for brands that they believe are true, original, and genuine – they look for authenticity in brands (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Fouladi et al., 2021; Morhart et al., 2015). Understanding how consumers interpret brand authenticity becomes a strategic imperative to developing strong brand communication measures. Organizations that ignore authenticity will be confronted with weak brand communication, which ultimately translates to the decreasing appeal of the brand (Fouladi et al., 2021). Consequently, this consumer-based brand authenticity study is relevant to the research field of strategic communication, which encompasses ". . . all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493).

Scholars are on a quest to capture how consumers understand brand authenticity (Nunes et al., 2021). Research fields such as branding, marketing, and consumer research have flourished with studies devoted to conceptualizing brand authenticity, its dimensions, and its possible effects. For example, Bruhn et al. (2012) develop a scale to measure perceived brand authenticity across industries, consisting of the dimensions of continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness. Other scholars conclude that a brand is perceived as authentic if the brand behavior is consistent, individual, and continuous (Schallehn et al., 2014). The non-consensual research stream generates a fragmented understanding of brand authenticity among scholars (Bruhn et al., 2012; Nunes et al., 2021; Morhart et al., 2015). As Beverland et al. (2008) suggest, the complexity and multiplicity of the construct indicate the need for more qualitative research. In line with this, I argue that instead of capturing generalizable conceptualizations, dimensions, and effects across industries, it is more essential to generate a detailed understanding of the consumers' perspective on brand authenticity, as it is a concept characterized by a multiplicity of meanings.

The quest to understand brand authenticity from the consumers' perspective is not only an academic concern. Brand authenticity is essential for contemporary marketing and communication activities (Bruhn et al., 2012; Eigenraam et al., 2021; Fouladi et al., 2021;

Nunes et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). However, how brand communication practitioners in organizations ideally communicate, so brands are seen as authentic by consumers remains a challenge (Beverland et al., 2008). As a brand communication intern working for a global beauty care organization, I experienced this challenge in practice. I was advised to run the Instagram brand account in a way that is simply *more authentic*. However, how this translates into actions concerning brand communication content on Instagram remained unclear. The meaning of brand authenticity from the consumers' perspective and connected to the social media platform could not be captured. According to Fouladi et al. (2021), it is not defined how consumers interpret brand authenticity in the context of social media, which poses challenges for communication practitioners.

While it is stated that brand communication practitioners should adapt the online brand language to the preferred mode of the consumers, which is *authentic* content (Yang et al., 2021), brand authenticity is still underdeveloped in the context of social media (Fouladi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). This is surprising, as the interactivity of the platforms provides an interesting context for studying brand authenticity. In fact, online interactions form the center of social discourse and communication among consumers (Hu et al., 2020). These interactions are important to consider, as consumers rely on them to form an understanding of brand authenticity (Fouadi et al., 2021). Therefore, I argue it is relevant to investigate how consumers understand brand authenticity on Instagram, which offers a platform for direct interaction among consumers and brands. Understanding this becomes a matter of strategic communication, as Zerfass et al. (2018) describe that strategically significant conversations can happen in multiple arenas between employees (e.g., brand communication practitioners), consumers, or a combination of these players. In addition, Zerfass et al. (2018) argue that technological advances in a changing communicative landscape must be considered in the field of strategic communication. This thesis regards this by focusing on one social media channel, Instagram, to understand consumers. This platform is chosen as the context for this thesis, as brand content might be perceived differently depending on the platform (Pittman, Oeldorf-Hirsch & Brannan, 2021) and the type of organization (Yang et al., 2021).

To focus on a type of organization or a product category in brand authenticity research is debated by scholars. Bruhn et al. (2012) put forth that such a focus enhances the fragmentation of brand authenticity as a concept. However, Yang et al. (2021) argue that the focus will strengthen the understanding of the concept, as brand authenticity corresponds to a multitude of attributes that cannot be captured across industries and product categories. In line with this, I argue that in attempts to introduce a generalizable conceptualization of brand

authenticity across sectors and product categories, scholars fall into a guessing game of cause-and-effect relationships concerning brand authenticity, as the following quote illustrates: "This implies that brand authenticity *can be* regarded as one specific brand association of consumers, and thus a highly authentic brand *could be assumed to* have a positive effect on the overall image of a brand" (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 568). By uncovering the fine nuances concerning the understanding of brand authenticity among brands of the same industry, rather than comparing the authenticity of car brands with clothing brands, more rich conclusions about the consumers' understanding can be drawn.

The beauty care industry forms an ideal context for this thesis, as my experience as a brand communication practitioner suggests. But more so, the beauty care industry is a thriving market; it is experiencing a generational consumer shift and places significant emphasis on social media communication (Stokinger & Ozuem, 2018). The same holds true for Germany, the largest beauty market in Europe (*Germany beauty and personal care products*, 2021). The beauty market is driven by young consumers (Generation Z), who are willing to invest more money in their hair, skin, and face routines (*Germany beauty and personal care products*, 2021). While the cut-off points for generations are not scientifically determined, individuals born from 1997 onward are usually considered part of Generation Z (Dimock, 2022). Thus, consumers that are members of Generation Z are referred to as young consumers in this thesis. They monitor trends and product launches and engage with brands on social media (Szalaty & Derda, 2020).

Especially Instagram has been proven to be a successful social media platform for beauty businesses to connect with their digital audiences and create a strong brand presence (Szalaty & Derda, 2020). Beauty businesses can be parts of different industry segments, such as fragrances, skincare, haircare, personal care, and decorative cosmetics (Marchessou & Spagnuolo, 2021). Decorative cosmetic brands (make-up) are the focus of this thesis – hereinafter referred to as beauty brands – as they form an interesting context due to their potential on Instagram. For example, the most-followed beauty brand account on Instagram in 2021 was Kylie Cosmetics, with a following of > 25,000,000 individuals (*Leading beauty brands*, 2022). As a result, beauty brands such as *benefit cosmetics*, *NYX Professional Make-Up,* and *L'Oréal Paris* are part of this research project. Based on what is stated above, I argue it bears great potential to discover how consumers understand the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram – academically and practically.

Aim & Research Question

This study aims to explore the consumers' process of understanding brand authenticity on Instagram by taking the sensemaking approach. By understanding the consumers' thought processes, brand communication practitioners can create relevant communication measures on Instagram. Thus, it is necessary to first listen to the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity. The sensemaking approach is valuable in this context, as sensemaking is concerned with subjective interpretations and meaning-making instead of discovering the ultimate truth or right or wrong assumptions (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). To achieve the aim, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: What constitutes the process of understanding the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram among young German consumers?

The findings of this thesis form a rich understanding of the consumers' perspective on brand authenticity on Instagram, resulting in the knowledge that brand communication practitioners in the beauty industry can make use of. Organizations have limited resources, face direct competition in the market, and are confronted with complexity and uncertainty (Zerfass et al., 2018). Consequently, this project's insights are strategic for the communication on Instagram for brand communication practitioners in the beauty industry.

Disposition

The thesis is structured in the following way. Firstly, a literature review on brand authenticity on social media synthesizes current academic findings relevant to the topic. Secondly, the sensemaking theory is discussed, which forms the backbone for analyzing how consumers understand the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram. After motivating my methodological choices informed by the interpretative tradition, I present the analysis of the qualitative in-depth interviews by structuring the consumers' process of understanding brand authenticity in four sequences of one circular process. I conclude by addressing that the understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram should be seen as a complex process of individual interpretations by the consumers. The thesis ends with the theoretical contributions and implications for brand communication practitioners.

Literature review

To explore the consumers' process of understanding brand authenticity on Instagram, an overview of key studies concerning *the concept of brand authenticity* and *brand authenticity on social media* is needed. More specifically, the first part of this literature review presents the multiplicity of brand authenticity and the three research perspectives to study the concept: the objectivist perspective, the constructivist perspective, and the existentialist perspective. The second part of this literature review discusses the relevance of brand authenticity on social media. To conclude this literature review, the synthesis section presents the conclusions drawn about brand authenticity on social media based on this literature review and the implications for this thesis.

The concept of brand authenticity

The multiplicity of brand authenticity

In a consumption context, authenticity has found increasing relevance for a wide range of objects, services, and activities that create meaning for consumers (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015; Nunes et al., 2021). Beverland and Farrelly (2010) offer an interesting explanation for why this is the case. Consumers are searching for authenticity in consumption due to the loss of traditional sources of meaning caused by characteristics of the postmodern market. For example, the global market exposes consumers to a bandwidth of consumption opportunities they have never faced before. While this means consumers have access to products and services worldwide, they also need to navigate through confusing quantities of offerings. At the same time, the quest for authenticity in consumption is also described to be the consequence of the homogenization of the postmodern market, meaning that product offerings become increasingly similar (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Consequently, consumers become active in appropriating authenticity in consumption to create meaning in their lives.

However, despite the agreement on (1) the importance of authenticity for consumers and (2) that associations such as genuine, real, and honest convey the meaning of authenticity for consumers, the academic literature on authenticity is fragmented (cf. Nunes et al., 2021). This is surprising as research projects on authenticity have flourished to establish one commonly accepted conceptualization of authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015). In line with Morhart et al. (2015), I argue these circumstances hold true for the branding context, in which

multiple attempts have been made to establish a commonly accepted definition for *brand authenticity* from the consumers' perspective. One attempt to define the concept is put forth by Nunes et al. (2021): "We define authenticity as it pertains to consumption as follows: a holistic consumer assessment determined by six-component judgments, whereby the role of each component can change according to the consumption context" (p. 2). Inspired by this conceptualization of authenticity in consumption, this thesis defines brand authenticity as the subjective evaluation by consumers of multiple components that jointly determine whether a brand is perceived as authentic.

Perspectives to study brand authenticity

In the following sections of this literature review, I introduce the objectivist perspective, the constructivist perspective, and the existentialist perspective. Each perspective bears certain assumptions about authenticity relevant to the branding context (Morhart et al., 2015). All perspectives are necessary to understand, group, and review the fragmented academic literature on brand authenticity.

Objectivist perspective. In the objectivistic perspective, authenticity is seen as a measurable quality that an object possesses (or not) and can be evaluated (Morhart et al., 2015). In the branding context, this describes the notion that consumers perceive brand authenticity based on assessing information about the brand. For example, the brand's performance, the brand's logo, or the product ingredients the brand uses are essential for the consumers to find the brand authentic. The information about the brand used to assess brand authenticity by the consumers is labeled as *indexical cues* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The cues provide evidence for the brands' claims and function as a way of verifying for the consumers whether brand promises are delivered. While this notion does not necessarily state that brands can control how consumers perceive brand authenticity, brand communication professionals certainly possess significant agency over the brand information communicated to the consumers.

For example, Schallehn et al. (2014) concluded that *consistency, continuity,* and *individuality* are the antecedents of brand authenticity and positively impact brand authenticity according to their quantitative survey with *N*=510 participants. The scholars conclude a causal relationship: "Brand attributes should be reflected in its individual, consistent, and continuous brand behavior. In such case, a consumer assumes that the brand promise stems from the brand's internal nucleus and is likely to perceive that brand as

authentic" (p. 194). From this, I conclude that some scholars who do brand authenticity research to develop scales to measure perceived brand authenticity based on indexical cues claim that they focus on the consumers' perspective, while in practice, the scale is measuring brand attributes rather than brand authenticity. While I agree with the general notion that the brand cues which consumers perceive as stemming from the brand's internal nucleus are probably helpful for forming brand authenticity perceptions, I disagree that brand authenticity is a construct that is objectively measurable across cultures and contexts based on these three antecedents, even though Schallehn et al. (2014) are frequently cited within brand authenticity research.

In my opinion, indexical cues alone do not acknowledge the agency that consumers possess in the consumption context. For example, Napoli et al. (2014) aim to develop an objective, robust measure for the consumers' perspective of brand authenticity using quantitative methods. The scholars conclude that quality commitment, heritage, and sincerity are the factors driving brand authenticity from both the consumers' and the organizational perspectives. While the scholars come up with a multitude of items to measure perceived brand authenticity objectively (e.g., "The brand manufactures to stringent quality standards"), they also argue that brand authenticity is socially constructed and highly subjective: "Brand authenticity is defined as a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers" (Napoli et al., 2014, p.1091). While it seems like this approach to studying brand authenticity is somewhat contradictory, it underlines that it is necessary to acknowledge subjective interpretations by consumers, as the constructivist perspective in the next section shows.

Constructivist perspective. The constructivist perspective on brand authenticity stems from the notion that authenticity is a personally constructed phenomenon (Morhart et al., 2015). This perspective highlights the importance of individuals' own beliefs and interpretations about authenticity. Taking this perspective, brand authenticity might emerge from consumers processing abstract impressions about the brand, such as the brand's essence (Brown et al., 2003; Morhart et al., 2015). This means that brand authenticity perceptions emerge from the consumers' individual evaluations based on cues communicated by the brand. These brand cues are labeled iconic cues (Morhart et al., 2015). Scholars that are associated with studying brand authenticity from the constructivist perspective deploy different methodological approaches, such as netnographic analysis (e.g., Brown et al., 2003), in-depth interviews (e.g., Beverland et al., 2008; Bruhn et al., 2012; Leigh et al., 2006) or document reviews (Leigh et

al., 2006). These methodological approaches stand in direct contrast to studies with their background in the objectivist perspective, which primarily use quantitative methods. The reason to use in-depth interviews, document reviews, or netnographic approaches is that the complexity of brand authenticity and fragmented research results suggest the need for more qualitative research (Nunes et al., 2021). Therefore, I argue that a meaning-based approach is necessary to draw fruitful conclusions.

For example, Beverland et al. (2008) conduct 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews to identify how consumers assess authenticity in advertising claims within beer brands. In their study, they identified three types of authenticity: pure/literal authenticity (commitment to tradition), approximate authenticity (abstract impressions), and moral authenticity (status of the brand). The scholars detect that the types of authenticity that consumers describe are based on iconic cues and indexical cues. The iconic cues provide consumers with feelings, while the indexical cues provide factual information about the brand. Interestingly, they conclude that consumers sometimes ascribe meaning to indexical cues, transforming them into iconic cues due to the consumers' personal interpretation.

Brown et al. (2003) conclude: "Consumers demonstrate that they are sophisticated interpreters of marketing cues about brand authenticity" (p. 24). This conclusion is drawn based on a netnographic analysis of the brands Volkswagen and Star Wars. While they also underline the importance of symbolic stories of the brand, the brand essence, and the brand's community meaning, it must be kept in mind that this study was performed in the context of retro brands. This means significant attention was paid to the brand's tradition. However, some useful conclusions can be drawn from their research project: The scholars underline that consumers have unique perspectives on brand authenticity, which is primarily informed by going into dialogue with other consumers about the brand. Furthermore, the scholars conclude that brand management faces complex challenges. The meanings created are consumer-mediated rather than imposed by managerial dictate, indicating how brand authenticity needs to be approached from the consumers' perspective. This means that analyzing brand authenticity in a specific context of one communication channel and one industry is highly relevant.

In a different brand context (cars), Leigh et al. (2006) draw similar conclusions about brand authenticity by conducting an ethnographic research study, including document reviews and in-depth interviews. The scholars postulate that brand authenticity is an understanding by consumers that is not only created through an individual's personal experience but has a multiplicity of meanings for consumers that allows for diverse interpretations. This underlines

how brand authenticity is subjective, negotiable, and context-specific. Their study reveals that brand authenticity perceptions are based on an interplay of indexical, iconic, and existential cues, and brand authenticity is gained for consumers by identity construction. While the constructivist perspective is evident in their research project, I argue that their focus on the identity benefits of consumers might even point out a focus on an existential approach to brand authenticity, as it aids consumers in uncovering their true selves via consumption (Morhart et al., 2015). This perspective is discussed in the next section.

Existential perspective. In the context of consumption, existential authenticity describes if consumers uncover their true selves by means of consumption (Morhart et al., 2015). This means consumers feel true to themselves by consuming the brands' products. As a result, the brand serves as the resource that helps consumers have these feelings. This is an interesting angle to study brand authenticity, as it is highly related to the consumer's identity. It means a brand is perceived as authentic if it fulfills the purpose of being an identity-related resource for the consumer (Morhart et al., 2015). The object assists consumers in finding their true self – thus providing *existential brand cues* to the consumer. There is no research project on brand authenticity that is deeply rooted in the existential perspective, to my best knowledge.

While it is important to be aware of the perspective to understand different types of brand cues and dimensions of the concept of brand authenticity, it is most likely the least popular perspective compared to the other two. A reason for this might be that it is rooted in philosophical existentialism (Morhart et al., 2015) rather than focusing on inherent brand traits (objectivistic perspective) or on consumer impressions (constructivist) to understand brand authenticity. However, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) might be worth mentioning in the existential perspective. Their study is rooted in the belief that consumers view brands as authentic that reinforce their desired reality. While they do not explicitly mention the perspective in their research, they conclude that brand authenticity is driven by the consumers' desire to draw identity benefits from the consumption to reach personal goals.

Taking stock of the perspectives. While all perspectives are needed to understand the academic literature on perceived brand authenticity, this thesis is based on the *constructivist perspective*. It is the perspective taken in this thesis, as well as for other frequently cited qualitative brand authenticity studies, that focus on the consumers' understanding of the concept in specific product or service contexts (e.g., Beverland et al. (2008) research beer brands; Brown et al. (2003) research retro brands, Leigh et al. (2006) research car brands).

However, it must be noted that the perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Indexical, existential, and iconic cues co-exist and influence brand authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Fouladi et al., 2021; Leigh et al., 2006; Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, brand authenticity may be inspired by all three perspectives.

For example, Morhart et al. (2015) come up with four dimensions of perceived brand authenticity inspired by all three perspectives: continuity (brand transcend trends over time), credibility (delivery on brand promises), integrity (values brand communicates), and symbolism (values constructing who consumers are). Looking at the dimension of *continuity* more closely reveals how the scholars' approach is rooted in all three perspectives of authenticity: Continuity is composed of the brand date (objectivistic lens), the impression formed by consumers (constructivist lens), and the connection the consumer has to childhood (existential lens). While I describe my thesis as rooted in the assumptions of the constructivist perspective, it is essential to note that there is room to detect indexical or existential cues when analyzing how consumers understand brand authenticity on Instagram. The following section discusses the current state of academic literature concerning brand authenticity on social media channels.

Brand authenticity on social media

Relevance of communication channels

The relationship between brands and consumers has been drastically changed by the context of social media. Due to the popularity of social media, brands have no choice but to adopt them as platforms for promoting and communicating (Fouladi et al., 2021). At the same time, consumers use the platforms as an effective way to receive independent information about brands and to articulate their opinions to a broad audience (Schallehn et al., 2014). The fast-paced interactivity on the platforms poses a challenge for brand communication professionals (Fouladi et al., 2021). It becomes clear then that simply using the platforms is no guarantee for generating value. Brands need to adapt their communication efforts on the internet, as they can no longer afford to make delusive promises to active consumers (Eggers et al., 2013). Consequently, multiple brands are trying to adapt their communication efforts on the platforms to the preferred mode of the consumers, which is "authentic" content (Yang et al., 2021).

Even though brand authenticity has been acknowledged as an essential buzzword for social media, only very few scattered studies have been devoted to studying the concept in the digital context (Fouladi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Generally, the academic literature on

brand authenticity does not seem to agree on the extent to which the communication channel itself plays a role in or is connected to the understanding of brand authenticity by the consumers. The frequently cited study on brand authenticity conducted by Bruhn et al. (2012) postulates that companies should ideally strive for a unified brand representation across all internal and external communication media and tools to enhance brand authenticity. In line with this, Pittman et al. (2021) and Yang et al. (2021) conclude that it is essential for brand authenticity to be consistent in online and offline interactions.

Eigenraam et al. (2021) conclude that different social media platforms might impact the brand authenticity of engagement initiatives because other platforms bear different user experiences. More specifically, the scholars investigate what type of engaging initiatives on online platforms (e.g., Instagram and Facebook) are seen as authentic for different kinds of brands. They conclude that engaging initiatives work best for "warm" brands (i.e., brands that are perceived as generally meaning well), while informative initiatives work for all types of brands. Thus, brand authenticity is enhanced when the digital engagement initiative fits the consumers' understanding of the brand (Eigenraam et al., 2021). They encourage scholars to consider the experiences consumers can make on different social media platforms to draw fruitful conclusions about the consumer's understanding of authenticity. In line with this, Pittman et al. (2021) argue that every digital channel is different, and the same content, in their case advertisements, can be perceived differently by the consumers. The scholars investigate advertising and how this is perceived in various digital contexts. Their findings show that brand quality is the main appeal to consumers on a website, while on Instagram and Facebook, brand authenticity is deemed the primary persuasive mechanism. They claim that brands should strive to communicate information about their brand, and the products, to be perceived as authentic (Pittman et al., 2021).

Based on this, I argue that the channels and their characteristics need to be considered when studying how consumers understand brand authenticity. The content that is understood as authentic on a website might not be perceived as authentic on Instagram.

Brand cues on social media

Fouladi et al. (2021) aim to define what factors affect brand authenticity of startups on social media according to consumers by using semi-structured in-depth interviews. They describe multiple factors that influence brand authenticity on social media and categorize them as indexical cues (connection to heritage, having credible support), iconic cues (innovative brand founder, commitment toward customers), and existential cues (having self-

confidence, self-satisfaction, intimacy with the brand). Looking at the factors in detail reveals interesting insights into how social media characteristics play a role in shaping the perceived brand authenticity of consumers. For example, the iconic cue of *brand intellectuality* resembles that consumers believe brands need to welcome critics, such as critical consumer comments, on social media to be perceived as authentic (Fouladi et al., 2021). This factor could not have been concluded if the communication channel had not been considered.

Besides their conclusions about what factors affect brand authenticity on social media, their study stands in an interesting relation to how indexical cues, iconic cues, and existential cues interact. Beverland et al. (2008) and Beverland and Farrelly (2010) argue that brand authenticity is informed by consumers assessing brands based on their normative standards (iconic cues) and transforming these iconic cues into indexical cues (objective observations) under the projection of their opinion. Thus, consumers define indexical cues themselves or do not draw the border between them, while both are important for the consumers' perceived brand authenticity. It should be noted that this study is conducted in the offline environment but offers interesting conclusions about the interaction of brand cues that can be compared to the online environment. In the online environment, Fouladi et al. (2021) conclude that consumers rely more on existential cues (than iconic and indexical) to evaluate brand authenticity on social media. Even though this stands in contrast with other scholars, it seems evident in the context of this study, as indexical cues are often formed based on the brands' history – which is what start-ups lack. Thus, consumers rely less on indexical cues to form brand authenticity perceptions and more on existential cues for start-ups on social media (Fouldi et al., 2021). They argue, "It is vital to determine how the factors in different categories are related to each other and how the process of authenticity is formed through these factors and their corresponding categories" (Fouldi et al., 2021, p. 408). This is interesting as it underlines how 1) the context of brands – whether it is the type of organization or the type of industry – matters to the analysis of brand authenticity and 2) the communication channels matter for how consumers understand brand authenticity, as different factors are taken into consideration by the consumers.

Synthesis

After conducting the literature review, the following conclusions are drawn that are relevant to place my study in the context of the existing research stream on brand authenticity from the consumers' perspective. First, brand authenticity is a subjective and socially constructed concept not based on inherent brand attributes but rather on individual

evaluations. These individual evaluations of brand authenticity might encompass a multitude of associations and attributes, which explains why there is no widely agreed-upon definition of the concept found in the academic literature (cf. Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Bruhn et al., 2012; Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Leigh et al., 2006; Napoli et al., 2014). Second, in the process of consumers evaluating brand authenticity, brand communication activities play an important role, as the content might entail different brand cues that consumers process (Morhart et al., 2015). The same holds for brand communication activities on social media, for which authenticity is crucial (cf. Fouladi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). However, in the context of social media, it must be noted that brand communication content that is perceived as authentic on one channel does not mean it will be automatically perceived as authentic on another digital channel (Pittman et al., 2021), which underlines the relevance of this study for the research field of strategic communication by taking into account the changing communicative landscape.

Based on these conclusions, I argue that it is relevant to investigate how consumers form an understanding of the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram. The beauty industry is a proper context for researching brand authenticity on Instagram as it is a thriving market that emphasizes social media communication (Stokinger & Ozuem, 2018). This thesis will add to the research field, as the context of brand authenticity lacks studies that narrow their scope and focus on specific components of brand marketing communication, such as the channels (Yang et al., 2021). More specifically, to my best knowledge, only a limited amount of brand authenticity research is connected to social media (Fouladi et al., 2021). No academic studies are devoted to understanding the consumers' thought processes regarding beauty brands' brand authenticity on Instagram. The findings of this thesis will fill this gap and aid brand communication practitioners in understanding the individual interpretations of consumers, which might allow them to develop strategic communication measures that are more likely to be understood as authentic on Instagram. To address this, a meaning-based approach is needed to analyze consumers' interpretations. Consequently, the sensemaking theory is introduced in the next section, which is used along with iconic cues, indexical cues, and existential cues in the analysis.

Theory

In the following section, the sensemaking theory is introduced as the theoretical backbone of this thesis. The sensemaking approach is valuable for analyzing how consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram. This is because the social constructionist ontology of sensemaking entails the worldview that reality is socially constructed by individuals (Weick et al., 2005). This worldview goes hand in hand with the constructivist perspective taken to study perceived brand authenticity, introduced under *perspectives to study brand authenticity* in the literature review. The constructivist perspective puts forth how brand authenticity is constructed based on the consumers' beliefs and impressions rather than being objectively measurable (Morhart et al., 2015). This means that brand authenticity results from the consumers' processing of abstract impressions to construct their own reality. Therefore, I argue that the sensemaking approach serves well to understand how consumers understand brand authenticity. Different *sensemaking properties* are discussed besides *introducing the sensemaking theory* and outlining its *applicability to the consumer context*.

Introduction to sensemaking

This thesis primarily draws on Karl Weick's contributions to the sensemaking theory, as he can be described as the founding father of sensemaking (Johnson & Kruse, 2019). Generally, sensemaking can be described as a process of organizing in which individuals form an understanding of circumstances (Weick et al., 2005). More specifically, it is a process by which individuals assign meaning to situations due to an interplay of interpretation and action (Weick et al., 2005). Individuals engage with their social context, extract cues from their environment, and consequently assign and construct meaning to specific situations or circumstances. The sensemaking process is described to have several fundamental properties. For example, it is ongoing and subtle, meaning that there is no clear beginning and end to the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). However the process should not be underestimated: "To work with the idea of sensemaking is to appreciate that smallness does not equate with insignificance. Small structures and short moments can have large consequences" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410).

Traditionally, sensemaking processes are researched within the organizational context, for example, among communicative processes of employees. It is described as filling

important gaps in organizational theory (Weick et al., 2005). As Press and Arnould (2011) summarize, sensemaking is about creating meaning by developing a framework for understanding the organizational environment. For example, scholars prominently investigate how employees make sense of corporate change communication (e.g., Bartunek et al., 2006; Lockett et al., 2014; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008;), crisis communication (see Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016) or organizational learning (see Calvard 2016; Thomas et al., 2001).

However, in this thesis, sensemaking is applied to the consumer context. As Weick (1995) states, there is no shortage of ideas about where sensemaking is applicable and when the sensemaking process might start. Generally, it can be said that once the complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity of information increases that individuals need to process, they engage in steps to manage the information, thus in sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Consequently, it is relevant to apply sensemaking to the consumer context, as the meaning-making of individuals about brand authenticity on Instagram is characterized by complexity and ambiguity due to an information overload of brand communication activities by organizations. According to Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking is relevant in contexts in which individual interpretations and the organizational context overlap. Thus, I argue it is pertinent to use the sensemaking approach to analyze the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram.

Sensemaking & consumers

As described before, sensemaking is also applicable outside formal organizations where meanings materialize (Weick et al., 2005). Individuals make an effort to organize information and search for meaning once the input of information is too much or too equivocal (Weick et al., 2005). This means explicit efforts at sensemaking are triggered in everyday situations in which too many (or too few) meanings are presented. When the impressions are fleeting, sensemaking is instigated among the actors (Weick et al., 2005). Onkila et al. (2018) conclude that to order information, consumers typically engage in sensemaking to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty of the content they have perceived. I argue that the same holds true for consumers who are exposed to a stream of brand communication content on social media daily. This claim is supported by Milfeld and Haley (2021), who argue that sensemaking emerges in complex environments such as the media environment.

To my best knowledge, the sensemaking theory has not been applied to study the concept of brand authenticity. However, it found applicability in multiple other studies in the consumer context that use the theory introduced by Karl Weick. For example, in a recent

study, Wolter et al. (2021) conclude that consumers engage in sensemaking when ascribing meaning to the company's identity, which also affects the meaning of consuming the product. Ponathil et al. (2020) investigate the sensemaking process of consumers regarding online information cues on review portals. They use the sensemaking approach, as they understand it as the response to situations in which individuals develop meanings, arrange events, and question understandings. Generally, sensemaking is described as opening new ways of understanding consumers and their demands in a real-world setting (Hoyer et al., 2010; Ponathil et al., 2020).

Based on this, I argue that sense-making applies to the organizational context and other situations in which meaning is socially constructed and interpreted. Forming an understanding of brand authenticity involves the active negotiation of individuals (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Thus, the concept only comes into being if consumers extract cues and interpret them (Nunes et al., 2021). Therefore, the constructivist approach to brand authenticity, paired with sensemaking, forms a well-aligned perspective to explore how consumers understand brand authenticity on Instagram. As Weick et al. (2005) phrase it: "The operative image of the organization is one in which organization emerges through sensemaking, not in which organization precedes sensemaking" (p. 410). I argue that brand authenticity emerges through sensemaking, not that brand authenticity precedes sensemaking. Thus, it is a concept that does not exist without the consumers as sense makers.

Sensemaking properties

Sensemaking has several fundamental properties that distinguish it from other explanatory processes (Woodside, 2001). Among others, it is linked to identity construction. Furthermore, it is retrospective and social, and the goal is never to establish accuracy but rather to create plausibility in this ongoing process of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). These properties need further explanation and are outlined in this section. It is essential to understand the properties of sensemaking in detail to analyze how consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram.

To begin with, sensemaking happens in a chaotic state (Weick et al., 2005). This means that individuals need to navigate through an undifferentiated flux of impressions, which they do by producing connections (Chia, 2000). Woodside (2001) explains that individuals extract cues from the ongoing flux of impressions to make assumptions and build these connections. This means that organizing different impressions does not occur in a process that is separate from what the individual is experiencing or has experienced but

happens ongoing and in retrospect. This is interesting concerning the consumer context, as the constant state of chaos describes their daily experiences. More specifically, consumers need to navigate through a brand-dominated hyperreality and an information overload (Napoli et al., 2014). This hyperreality means that consumers are exposed to a complex media landscape, as they are confronted with many brand messages across media formats every day. Among this stream of information, consumers may or may not extract cues for closer attention.

Extracting cues for closer attention can be described as noticing, bracketing, and labeling in the sensemaking process (Weick et al., 2005). Bracketing is defined as guided by existing mental models of individuals that help process what they noticed. The phenomenon is taken out of the flux of experiences by the sense maker and is conceptually labeled (Chia, 2000). It is necessary for the sense maker to label and categorizes the experiences to ensure that the content can be used for functional deployment (Weick et al., 2005). By imposing labels on the experiences, the sense maker ensures that they can communicate about the circumstances or situations, which is not possible without conceptual labels.

Interestingly, the categories and labels have a so-called high degree of plasticity. Weick et al. (2005) describe plasticity as a feature of the labels, meaning that they are socially defined and adapted to local circumstances. This means the labels are not permanently fixed – if the extracted cues are changing, the labels change too. Thus, the extracted cues are not more than seeds from which individuals develop their understanding, and what this cue might become depends on the context (Weick, 1995).

It becomes clear that individuals use cues to connect the abstract with the concrete and make presumptions about their current experiences (Weick et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the labels and categories formed based on the cues are not set in stone and might change in the process if the circumstances change too. This underlines that the goal of sensemaking is never accuracy but rather plausibility (Woodside, 2001). It means sensemaking is not about uncovering an ultimate truth but can be described as a story that emerges along the way to become more comprehensive and resilient to criticism (Weick et al., 2005). In the consumer context, this might mean that consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram that might get more resilient over time.

The way individuals interpret the circumstances to make it a comprehensive story is different for individuals. According to Weick et al. (2005), the identity we believe we have influences how we act and interpret. How we act shapes what other individuals think about who we are and determines how we get treated. As a result, our identity is destabilized or stabilized by how others treat us. It becomes clear that maintaining an identity is central to

sensemaking processes (Woodside, 2001). This is interesting concerning the existential authenticity perspective. This perspective entails the view that consumers uncover their true selves by consuming certain brands or products (Morhart et al., 2015). Consequently, identity is not only a concern in organizational sensemaking but also finds applicability in sensemaking processes among consumers who are informed by existential cues that aid identity maintaining or identity construction via consumption.

On the one hand, the focus on one's own identity points out individual thought processes. On the other hand, it becomes clear that these thought processes are contingent on the interaction with other individuals. It points out that sensemaking is never solitary because what happens internally in an individual is contingent on others (Weick, 1995). The thought processes are influenced by multiple social factors, meaning that the conduct of individuals depends on the conduct of others (Woodside, 2001). Even one-way communication assumes an audience, describing the social influence on the individuals' processes. This is interesting concerning sensemaking on social media, which offers platforms for constant interaction among brands and consumers.

It becomes clear that communication is regarded as a central component of the social process of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). The communicative element of sensemaking is found throughout the process. Mainly, communication is part of sensemaking in the form of interactive talks. In these talks, individuals form an understanding by talking about their experiences, which become more real. At the same time, they form a basis for action to deal with the situation. In the sensemaking process, action and talk co-occur rather than describing a linear sequence of happenings (Weick et al., 2005). This means the interactive talks might happen at any point in the process: sensemaking never starts and stops; it is ongoing (Weick et al., 2005). Jablin and Putnam (2001) explain that action-taking generates opportunities for dialogue and persuasion to enrich the sense of what is going on.

Weick et al. (2005) describe the process of sensemaking as consisting of interdependent interactions which are built by retrospective interpretations. The scholars present the relationship between enactment, organizing, and sensemaking, as shown in Figure 1. The authors propose that individuals engage in sensemaking to organize ambiguous input. The relationships among the parts are explained below to understand this conceptual framework fully. Generally, the framework is described as ". . . reciprocal exchanges between actors (enactment) and their environment (ecological change) that are made meaningful (selection) and preserved (retention)" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 414). If the generated content is doubted or believed, the exchanges will continue.

Figure 1

The relationship among enactment, organizing, and sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005)
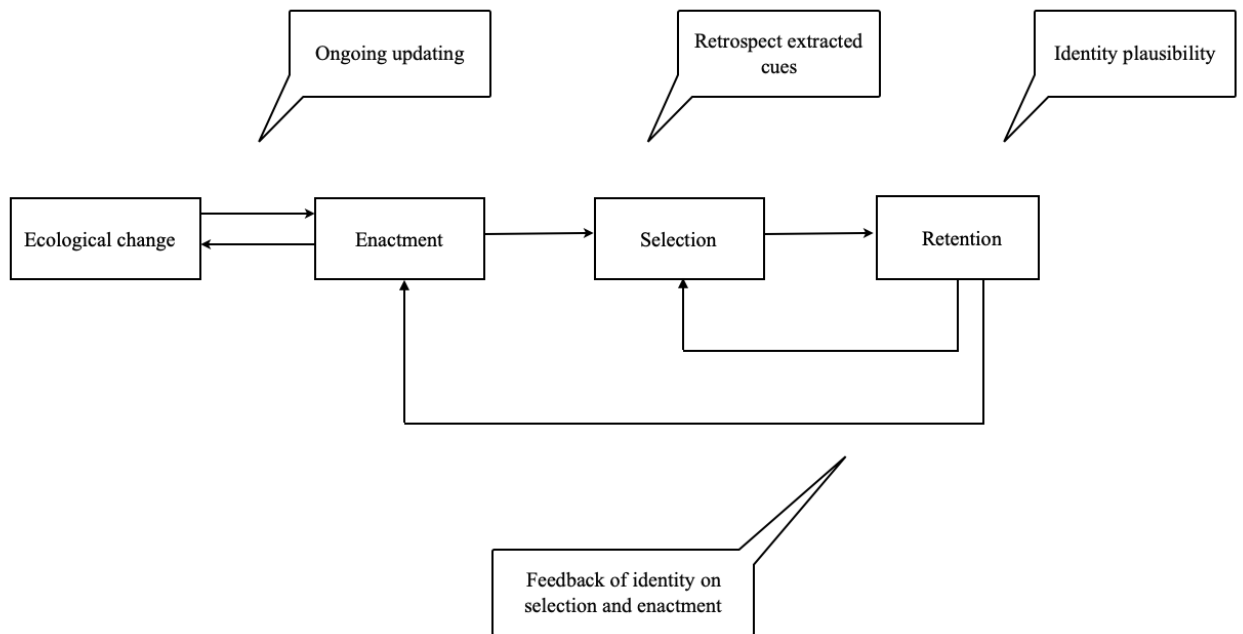
It must be noted that the relationship between ecological change and enactment is reciprocal (Weick et al., 2005). This means that individuals are confronted with several fleeting impressions and are shaped by these external circumstances. At the enactment stage, more sensemaking properties apply, such as noticing and bracketing, to organize the constant flux of fleeting impressions (Weick et al., 2005). While the impressions are more organized at this stage, they can still consist of multiple meanings. The selection stage reduces the number of meanings and thus drives the process of organizing the chaos further. In the selection phase, the retrospective characteristic of sensemaking applies, as individuals devote attention to reducing the narratives to create a plausible story (Weick et al., 2005). What is selected at this stage gains solidity in the stage of retention. Once the content is retained, it is organized and more substantial.

Reflections

This chapter has introduced the sensemaking theory and its properties and has demonstrated its applicability to the consumer context. With the indexical cues, iconic cues,

and existential cues that contribute to the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity (cf Morhart et al., 2015), sensemaking will be used in the analysis of this thesis. This is done by detecting sensemaking properties in consumers' interpretations of brand authenticity on Instagram and forming a process framework that contextualizes consumers' interpretations. Furthermore, the social constructionist ontology of the sensemaking approach informs the methodological choices of this thesis, which are outlined in the following chapter.

Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to explore the consumers' process of understanding brand authenticity on Instagram by taking the sensemaking approach. By understanding the consumers' thought processes, brand communication practitioners can create relevant communication measures on Instagram. The qualitative research design of this project allows me to achieve this aim. In the following section, the interpretative tradition is introduced. This perspective informs the methodological choices of this study. Furthermore, significant emphasis is placed on the description of the research procedure to gather the empirical material used for the analysis: semi-structured in-depth interviews with consumers. This section includes the sampling procedure, description of participants, the data collection process, and the analysis process. Lastly, trustworthiness is addressed.

Interpretative tradition

In this thesis, I take the sensemaking approach, which suggests that reality is constructed in social processes (Weick et al., 2005), to analyze how consumers understand brand authenticity. Taking a social constructionism orientation means understanding reality not as naturally given but as socially constructed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This is in line with the constructivist perspective of studying brand authenticity, which suggests that brand authenticity is a personally and socially constructed phenomenon based on subjective interpretations of the world (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Thus, this thesis is rooted in the interpretive tradition that suggests that the human capacity to interpret the world is the starting point for developing knowledge (Prasad, 2017). Subjective meaning is taken seriously in this tradition, as the aim is to understand how subjective realities are constructed (Prasad, 2017). As Weick (1995) states, the tradition is concerned with interaction, interpretation, and meaning, which are essential to sensemaking too. The tradition is designed to bring a multiplicity of meanings to light, which is needed to study the concept of brand authenticity, characterized as highly fragmented in academic research (Bruhn et al., 2012; Nunes et al., 2021; Morhart et al., 2015). The intention is not to locate one objective truth but to examine how consumers construct meaning about brand authenticity through the digital channel Instagram. Consequently, the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this tradition are beneficial to gaining an intimate understanding of how consumers understand brand authenticity on Instagram.

Qualitative interviews

In line with the interpretative tradition in which understandings are generated based on intimate standpoints of individuals (Prasad, 2017), qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with consumers were the source of data for this thesis. As Beverland and Farrelly (2010) describe, the complexity of brand authenticity and the conflicting research results demand more exploratory qualitative research on the topic. As brand authenticity is highly subjective and personal, a meaning-based approach is necessary to draw fruitful conclusions about the concept (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). As qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews are well equipped to understand the micro world of consumers (Prasad, 2017), they provide meaningful data for understanding sensemaking processes. Based on this, I argue that semi-structured in-depth interviews were an ideal method to address the aim of this study, as it allows me to understand the multiplicity of meanings that brand authenticity can have for consumers.

Participant recruitment

Participants of this research project were chosen purposefully. The purposive sampling approach allows researchers to recruit participants representing pre-determined criteria (O'Reilly, 2012). In doing so, the researcher has the chance to recruit information-rich cases that are interesting to analyze, considering the central concepts and the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To generate detailed insights about how consumers form an understanding of the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram, the following criteria qualified consumers to participate as interviewees: living in *Germany*, being part of *Generation Z*, being *interested in beauty brands*, and being *active Instagram users*. The reasons for these criteria are explained below.

Living in Germany is chosen as a criterion because consumers have been exposed to similar (local) market offerings regarding beauty brands. This means, in this study, beauty brands that have a presence in the German market are considered. This led to interesting insights as some consumers mentioned the same brands. In addition, it is beneficial to focus on the context of one country to study how consumers understand brand authenticity; as Bruhn et al. (2012) indicate, it can be assumed that cultural background leads individuals to evaluate authenticity differently. It must be noted that consumers did not need to have consumed specific brands of the German market to participate in this project. Brand authenticity does not depend on the consumption of a brand but is a subjective evaluation that

can also be described detached from the consumption of a brand (Bruhn et al., 2012). This means that brand authenticity can be interpreted – whether interviewees are or are not consumers of certain brands. Nevertheless, German consumers should be interested in beauty brands on Instagram or ideally follow one beauty brand account to participate in this study.

Furthermore, the focus of this study laid on consumers that are part of Generation Z, as they pose a key consumption group for organizations in the beauty industry (*Germany beauty and personal care products*, 2021). Following the example of Dimock (2022), individuals born from 1997 onward are considered part of Generation Z in this thesis. I decided that consumers being interviewed should be >18 years old. This is because, by German law, only consumers that are >18 years old are legally eligible for purchases without restrictions (Geschäftsfähigkeit, 2019). Members of this generation are not only in the formative phases of their lives but will also influence global economic outcomes (Francis & Hoefel, 2020). Collecting and cross-referencing many sources of information online and offline, this generation searches for "true" brands – for authentic brands (Francis & Hoefel, 2020).

Lastly, participants needed to be active Instagram users. This means they should have their own Instagram account and use the platform more than three times a week. The interviewees should be familiar with the functions and technicalities of the platform, as the brands' use of these functions might play a role in the consumers' interpretations of brand authenticity. Instagram is chosen as the communication channel under investigation as it offers unique opportunities for beauty brands to connect with their digital audiences while creating a strong brand presence (Szalaty & Derda, 2020).

To recruit participants that fulfilled the sampling criteria, while considering this project's time and resource constraints, I formulated an Instagram post that I posted via the story and highlight feature on my private account. The post was shared by three other Instagram accounts on my network, meaning that approximately 1,500 Instagram users saw the post. Furthermore, I tried to contact potential male interviewees by sending direct messages to male followers of beauty brand accounts on Instagram. However, these efforts did not result in the recruitment of participants. A possible reason for this is that the Instagram users might not have received my messages due to their privacy settings. With this recruitment process, 13 participants were chosen. Using the snowballing sampling approach, I recruited two other participants over the course of the data collection, which is a useful procedure for qualitative research, if more participants are needed that have the potential to

provide information-rich answers (Patton, 2001). Consequently, the sample consisted of 15 participants with diverse educational and professional backgrounds, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Information about research participants

Initials	Year of birth	Gender	Nationality	Educational background	Profession
AS	1997	Female	German	Postgraduate	Data scientist
AW	2000	Female	German	Highschool graduate	Graduate student media management
BS	2000	Female	German	Highschool graduate	Graduate student psychology
CF	1999	Female	German	Graduate	PR manager
DB	1997	Female	German/ American	Graduate	Postgraduate student language studies
JK	1997	Female	German	Graduate	HR manager
LO	1999	Female	German	High school graduate	Physiotherapist
MP	1998	Female	German	High school graduate	Graduate student law
NG	1997	Female	German	High school graduate	Restaurant manager
OC	1999	Female	German	Graduate	Consultant
ST	1998	Female	German	Graduate	Postgraduate student e-commerce
SW	1997	Female	German	Graduate	Performance marketing manager
TM	1997	Female	German	Graduate	Pre-school teacher
VH	1997	Female	German/ French	Graduate	Postgraduate student business psychology
YB	1997	Female	German/ Italian	Postgraduate	Sustainability manager

Interview procedures

The data was collected via the conferencing tool *Zoom* within three weeks in March 2022 and held in German. In total, 15 interviews were conducted, which lasted between 40-65 minutes. The approach to conducting the interviews online was advantageous as the geographical location of the participants is irrelevant in online interviews. Furthermore, it was beneficial as facial expressions and gestures are captured via the video recording of *Zoom*, even though it is not possible to observe the body language of the interviewee, which is a downside of this approach (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). However, it might well be that the online setting enabled them to talk freely about their experiences on Instagram as it balanced out the power distance of the typical interviewer and interviewee relationship that is usually present in interviews, according to Brinkman and Kvale (2014). Therefore, I argue that conducting the interviews online did not inhibit the collection of intimate data.

The interviews in this thesis were meaning-centered and in-depth, as the interpretative tradition suggests (Prasad, 2017). The semi-structured interviews were characterized by a mix of open and more structured questions used flexibly to gather data from respondents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). An interview guide (see Appendix 1) ensured semi-structured interviews. This interview format allowed the respondents to speak freely about their unique understandings. It gave me, as the researcher, the chance to guide the interview without intervening too much with the respondents' chosen direction of the interview. Thus, not all questions of the interview guide were asked in all interviews, but a flexible approach ensured following the participants' leads. This resulted in data that I could not expect in any form but was highly relevant to fulfill the purpose of this study, which is often the case according to Brinkman and Kvale (2014).

The interviews were complemented with visual material of beauty brands on Instagram. Once the participants mentioned specific beauty brands as examples, they were provided with log-in details for an Instagram account created for this thesis. Interviewees logged into the account and activated the *Zoom* function *screen sharing*, so they could show me the examples they had talked about. The Instagram accounts mentioned by the participants were used as prompts to generate an even more in-depth understanding of their thought processes. Thus, the participants' answers were facilitated by the content of the account, including its posts, stories, captions, or other aspects of the account. This method might be compared to the photo-elicitation method used in qualitative research, which enriches answers based on the additional stimulus (cf. Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) but puts it in the digital

context. According to Thunberg and Arnell (2021), collecting qualitative data with new technologies opens multiple possibilities to enrich data collection. The procedure allowed me to observe the participant's way of looking at beauty brands on Instagram. At the same time, the content was used as prompts to enrich the interviewees' answers.

Data preparation and analysis

The interviews were transcribed with the support of the transcription software *Trint*, as verbatim transcription forms the best basis for the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Learning from the data while collecting the data is strongly recommended by O'Reilly (2012) to ensure the collection of information-rich data. The analysis process was inspired by the grounded theory approach first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Their comparative method aligns well with the concept-building orientation of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As inspired by Beverland et al. (2008) and Fouladi et al. (2021), who analyzed qualitative in-depth interview data to understand the concept of brand authenticity, this process was enabled by open and axial coding procedures to gain a better understanding of the data. Furthermore, this approach has been chosen as simply selecting themes from other theories hinders generating new categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

First, in an open coding process, initial codes were generated close to the data, which helped break down and examine the data, according to Brinkman and Kvale (2014). After this, reflection notes were taken on each transcript to capture my impressions and contradictions compared to other interviewees. This process resulted in approximately 750 open codes. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) describe these codes as in vivo codes, as they are found directly in the material. Second, another coding process involved the interpretation of meaning, which according to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), can be described as axial coding. This process resulted in 30 axial codes after several rounds of revising. These codes were interpreted from the data and can also be labeled in vitro codes (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Again, reflective notes were taken after this coding process. By synthesizing some codes according to their meanings, four abstracted themes emerged responsive to the research question. Moving from the initial reading of the text to creating core themes over time is a typical process informed by inductive analysis procedures (Thomas, 2006). While this procedure has been criticized as being inefficient due to the time a complex coding process needs, it is also seen as a way of capturing sophisticated social realities (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Beverland & Farrelly (2010) state that brand authenticity is a complex concept that demands more exploratory qualitative research. Therefore, I have chosen not to establish themes as a first step in the analysis but to let them emerge through my collected data. The approach is inductive, as themes are formed based on precise units of data, meaning that themes emerge from the raw data (Thomas, 2006). However, as the analysis proceeds and codes are revised, the mode of the analysis is not entirely inductive but instead describes a back-and-forth process between codes and themes. Brinkmann & Kvale (2014) describe this as an interactive and comparative way of analyzing that cannot be standardized. In addition, I argue that my analysis cannot be described as entirely inductive since I was already informed of different brand authenticity perspectives by writing the theoretical background of this thesis and the interview guide, which might have influenced the coding process. Thus, I argue that even though the data analysis was systematic and inspired by the grounded theory approach, it cannot fully be categorized as inductive.

Translations

The interviews were conducted in German, which was the mother tongue of all participants and the researcher. Interviewing in a setting where the researcher and interviewees are talking in their native language is beneficial to gathering in-depth data, as one's social reality is experienced uniquely in one's language (van Nes et al., 2010). Therefore, I argue that gathering data in the native language of the participants capture rich explanations of a complex social world. This is in line with the constructivist approach to brand authenticity in this thesis. The construct is socially and personally constructed based on subjective interpretations of a complex world (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, capturing these interpretations in the native language seems logical as it requires mature reflections by the interviewees while keeping the natural flow of the conversation.

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness in qualitative research, the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity are widely accepted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) – as established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility describes if the data collected is congruent with reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To establish credibility in this thesis, different measures were taken. First, rapport was built with the participants to encourage them to speak freely. In addition, the photo-elicitation method helps to build rapport (Meo, 2010). In this digital context, what the interviewee described verbally could be

related to content examples on Instagram, which helped gather data congruent with reality. Second, when I was unsure of my interpretation of the participants' responses, I contacted them to clarify the matter. This method is referred to as member checks to establish credibility. Lastly, it is important that the meaning the participants conveyed in German is not altered when presenting it in English. Therefore, the quotes have been checked with a bilingual German-English speaker to assess the quality of the translations.

Dependability is established if findings are consistent with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To show dependability, peers were asked to review the empirical material, the way codes were established, and the subsequent findings in terms of consistency. Transferability describes whether the results can be used in other contexts, based on thick descriptions provided by the researcher, also in the form of documentation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, detailed descriptions of all methodological choices and processes in the data collection and the analysis are provided. Confirmability was established by engaging in debriefing sessions with my supervisor to confirm themes that emerged in the data.

In addition, the integrity of qualitative researchers is essential as they collect, document, and analyze the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Reflecting on one's identity in the qualitative research process is key to making informed decisions (O'Reilly, 2012). I acknowledge that my position as an interpretative researcher cannot separate me from the academic knowledge I have about brand authenticity and the practical experience I had when working as a brand communication practitioner. Therefore, it was vital for me to listen actively to the consumers' responses and let them determine the focus of the interviews without asking leading questions that might support my assumptions about how consumers interpret brand authenticity on Instagram. Furthermore, the integrity involved maintaining the anonymity of the participants and informing them about the procedure by providing them with an ethical consent form (see Appendix 2). According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2014), an informed consent form is described as a best practice approach in qualitative studies that serve both the researcher and the participants as a source of protection if any conflicting situation arises. After transcribing the data, the recordings were destroyed, and the anonymity was preserved by giving the participants pseudonyms. As inspired by Lemon (2019), Table 2 illustrates how trustworthiness was established in this thesis.

Table 2

Trustworthiness in this thesis

Trustworthiness	Methods in this thesis
Credibility	- Encouraging participants to speak freely of any brand as I am an independent researcher (rapport) - Using digital content as prompts (rapport) - Asking participants if I interpreted their answers correctly (member checks) - Checking quotes with a bilingual English-German speaker to assess the translation of the quotes
Transferability	- Detailed description/documentation of research procedures and findings
Dependability	- Peer review session - Establishing themes across transcripts
Confirmability	- Debriefing sessions with supervisor
Integrity	- Writing a reflexivity statement - Reflecting before and after each interview - Maintaining anonymity of participants - Informed consent form

The methodological choices made in this study, including the measures taken to establish trustworthiness, led to rich data provided by 15 interviewees. This data formed the basis for the analysis inspired by the grounded theory approach, as presented in the next section.

Analysis and Discussion

What follows is the analysis of what constitutes the process of forming an understanding of the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram among young German consumers. The analysis has been divided into four themes. The first theme is *navigating in the brand environment*, which describes how consumers make sense of the brands' context – online and offline. The second theme is labeled *interacting with the online community*, which discusses the focus on other actors in the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity in the online context. The third theme is labeled *processing brand cues* and analyzes facts, feelings, and identity benefits that consumers process. Lastly, the fourth theme, *preserving meaning*, discusses how stable the consumers' impression of brand authenticity is. Together, the themes emerged as the process of how consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram. However, it should be noted that the process is not linear or consecutive. As Weick et al. (2005) explain, sensemaking, including action and talk, occurs in cycles rather than linear sequences.

Navigating in the brand environment

The following section discusses the sub-sections *the brands' online-offline congruence* and *the brands' context on Instagram*. Both perspectives are needed to understand how consumers form an understanding of the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram.

The brands' online-offline congruence

This section analyzes the connection between the consumers' impressions of beauty brands in the offline environment and their impression on Instagram. After being asked why she believes the brand is authentic, one consumer stated the following.

> LO: […] The brand has the same effect on me on Instagram as the experience I have had with the brand through its appearance in the drugstore. Plus, the things I have just bought, tested, tried, or whatever. That this impression fits together, it's not *(pauses)* far apart. That's why I think it just fits what they do on Instagram. I believe them somehow. But if *Essence (a drugstore beauty brand)* claims in a post that they have the strongest pigmented eyeshadow when I know for a fact that it is not the case, I would be quite put off. It would annoy me.

Different layers need to be addressed when analyzing the connection between the online and offline environment. First, the consumer explains that she believes the brand because the appearance in the drug store is on par with the experience the consumer has when looking at the brand's Instagram account. This means the brand's impressions in the offline environment align well with the brand's impression on Instagram. It must be noted that these impressions do not have to be the same. However, a general fit between the online and offline environment must be established, as highlighted by the consumer when stating the impressions are "not far apart". The consumer believes the brand is authentic because the impressions are not far apart.

Second, it must be noted that *not* managing to establish a sound connection between the online and offline environment can have negative consequences – the consumer would be "annoyed". While, in this specific case, the consumer speaks hypothetically, it is interesting that being negatively impressed is because the brand's claim on Instagram (i.e., "having the strongest pigmented eyeshadow") would not be congruent with the experience of the consumer. Weick et al. (2005) argue that small moments or experiences can significantly impact sensemaking processes. This holds true for consumers that form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram, as underlined by the consumer when speaking about the negative consequences one claim can have. This also shows that the consumers' thought processes are not linear but may jump to different sequences, as the consumer seems to draw a conclusion about brand authenticity based on these initial impressions. While this is a specific example, it underlines that the process of sensemaking can be ongoing and circular instead of linear. In line with Eggers et al. (2013), I argue that brands cannot afford to make delusive claims on internet channels to active consumers. Thus, it becomes the brand communication practitioners' responsibility to ensure that brand claims are congruent with the consumers' interpretation of the brands' standing in the offline environment. Furthermore, the impression of the offline environment can also be connected to expectations of the brands' use of Instagram functions and content formats, as the following quote shows.

> ST: So, I think not every brand has to use *Reels*. It needs to fit somehow. So, I don't know, an older, classy, more traditional brand like Dior on Instagram doesn't have to upload tens of thousands of *Reels* to some trendy tunes, do they? It does not fit the brand as I know it from the store.

This means, for example, *benefit* is a brand that consumers describe as young and edgy, which they often first experience by visiting the pink brand store with cheerful employees (see Figure 2). They expected the brand's Instagram account to use innovative

content formats on Instagram, such as *Reels* (i.e., short videos that are often used for entertaining content). In contrast, consumers would find *Reels* inappropriate for *Dior* because they experienced the brand as luxurious and classy in the offline environment. It becomes clear that consumers have specific expectations for the brands' Instagram accounts based on their experiences with the brands in a physical setting.

Figure 2

An image of a Dior brand store (left) and a benefit brand store (right), as discussed by the consumer.

As Weick et al. (2005) state, explicit sensemaking efforts are triggered if individuals do not experience the current world the same way they expect it. This means that once the reality is different from their expectations about the reality, individuals try to form an understanding of the situation. Thus, explicit sensemaking efforts are triggered if consumers visit a brand account on Instagram that looks different from what they expect the brand account to look like. This means sensemaking is triggered once the consumers question the online-offline congruence of the brands. However, in the same way, sensemaking can be triggered if individuals are presented with too many or too few meanings without facing the discrepancy between the real and the expected world (Weick et al., 2005). In the consumer context, sensemaking still happens even though the online-offline congruency might be established. Especially in an online environment like Instagram, consumers are surrounded by a fleeting information overload they need to digest. Thus, consumers manage the information overload by engaging in sensemaking to reduce the uncertainty or ambiguity of the content they are presented with, as underlined by Onkila, Mäkelä and Järvenpää (2018). This shows

that the consumers' online and offline impressions need to be congruent and cannot be systematically separated. While the consumers interpret whether the brands' online-offline congruence is established, it is the brand communication practitioners' responsibility to communicate brand claims and use Instagram functions that align well with the brands standing in the offline environment.

The brands' context on Instagram

In addition to the brands' own Instagram accounts, the brands' cooperation partners on Instagram play an essential role for the consumers. The following answer was given when asking consumers what comes to mind when thinking about the brand on Instagram.

> AS: No influencer I know of has promoted the brand. And especially, none of these typical huge influencers *(pauses)*, which I actually find pretty good, because all these macro-influencers are not authentic. Um yeah. So, I think the influencer is quite crucial for brand authenticity. I wouldn't believe *Madára (the brand she is talking about)* if it cooperated with some influencer who somehow pushes like 100,000 different cosmetics brands.

As the quote highlights, consumers reflect on the influencers that promote a brand to locate a brand's context on Instagram. In this regard, they focus on several aspects connected to the influencers. First, it is essential to the consumers *how many* influencers they can recall promoting a brand. For example, being able to recall multiple influencers that collaborate with the brand is a negative sign of brand authenticity, as the quote shows. If consumers could recall numerous influencers promoting the brand, the brand was described as trying to "aggressively sell" to consumers. This also means that remembering no influencers or only very few influencers collaborating with the brand is a positive sign for brand authenticity. Second, in addition to the number of influencers, it matters *which* influencers promote the brand. For example, "typical huge influencers" represent influencers with a large following (e.g., > 1,000,000 followers) that are known for frequently promoting different beauty brands. According to the consumers, cooperating with these types of influencers was described as another "cheap sales strategy" by the brand.

Thus, the consumers' understanding of the influencers that promote the brand on Instagram is important. I argue that consumers look for brands that show individual (instead of "typical") brand behavior on Instagram. According to Schallehn et al. (2014), individuality is, among others, an important antecedent for perceiving brand authenticity. Even though I do not believe in a causal relationship between individuality and brand authenticity that can be

quantitatively measured (as postulated by some scholars), I do agree with the scholars' explanation that brands need to be seen as somewhat individual in the eyes of the consumers to be understood as authentic. This notion is supported by Bruhn et al. (2012) and Moulard et al. (2016), as the findings of both studies show the importance of individuality for brand authenticity, even though the phenomenon is named *originality* or *uniqueness* in the context of their studies. Being promoted by multiple influencers is seen as a mainstream sales strategy rather than helping to underline brands' individual traits. Most interestingly, consumers have developed a concept name for mainstream brands that fall into this category. They describe the brands as "Insta-brands".

> *YB: Pomelo,* for example, that's such a typical *Insta-brand* […] it is just advertised by all influencers, even though you've never heard the brand before. So, you don't find them at Sephora or Douglas or anywhere in the store. And you are already skeptical, in a way.

Being described as an "Insta-brand" seems to be an obstacle to classifying the brand as authentic. By labeling the brands as "Insta-brands", the consumers connect their impressions about the brands and give them a consolidated name. Having multiple impressions is similar to what Weick et al. (2005) describe as the chaotic state in which sensemaking occurs. However, it must be noted that this does not mean that the sensemaking process begins from zero. It happens along a stream of potential antecedents and consequences (Weick et al., 2005).

In the sensemaking process of consumers, potential antecedents, such as the influencers' individuality, help them categorize the fleeting impressions they have about brands. Individuals produce connections to organize these fleeting impressions (Chia, 2000). They can communicate about their experience and make it more concrete by doing this. Connecting the abstract with the concrete is part of the sensemaking process and is also described as making presumptions (Weick et al. 2005). In the context of Instagram, influencer cooperations aid the consumers' need to make presumptions about the brand. The consumer may conclude that the brand is an "Insta-brand" and can hardly be authentic. Thus, influencers help the consumer navigate the vast number of impressions about the brand. This means that the brand account itself *and* influencers play a role in establishing an understanding of brand authenticity in the context of Instagram. While brand communication practitioners can only partly steer the content that influencers produce on Instagram (via

content briefings), it seems essential to reflect on the influencers' *individuality* and the implications for the brand to be associated with the specific persons.

Interacting with the online community

The following section analyzes how consumers interact with the online community of a brand on Instagram. The analysis of this section is clustered in a more passive mode of interaction with the online community (labeled *other consumers on Instagram*) and a more active way of interaction with the online community (labeled *the brand teams on Instagram*).

Other consumers on Instagram

Consumers observe how other consumers interact with beauty brands on Instagram. The following quote captures what consumers generally expressed when describing what they look at.

> ST: I look at the posts' comments, so to speak, to see what other people think about the brand. I feel like that is actually how it should be, that there is some reaction to what the brand says there *(on Instagram)*. Suppose no one has to say something *(pauses)* that is weird. Sometimes it is even a bit like looking at reviews on Amazon or so; that's just what I often want to find in the comments. Do others like it? Is the brand telling the truth? […]

The consumers look at the comments section to understand what other individuals think about the brand. An Instagram account of beauty brands can have multiple comments sections, as it is possible to leave comments under several content formats, such as posts, reels, or videos. "If no one has to say something" to the brands' communication, skepticism is induced in the consumers about whether the brands' claims can be believed. Consequently, consumers expressed their concerns if they see comments sections that are not alive, as Instagram forms a platform that thrives on online interactions according to their understanding of the platform. Weick et al. (2005) describe how other individuals play a crucial role when processing different impressions. In the context of Instagram, it seems like consumers also rely on their social context – other consumers on Instagram – to construct their understanding of brand authenticity.

However, observing other consumers describes an interesting paradox of interacting with the online community. On the one hand, it underlines that online interactions are an important resource for consumers, which is also suggested by other scholars (e.g., Fouladi et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2020). On the other hand, it becomes clear that the consumers do *not*

prefer to articulate their opinions themselves but rather observe others. Thus, while observing other consumers is a form of interaction with the online community, it is somewhat passive. Nevertheless, it points out that individuals rely on other consumers to some extent. In line with this, Weick et al. (2005) state that how individuals make sense of something is contingent on others' beliefs and actions. I argue that the same holds true for consumers on Instagram who seek to form an understanding of brands.

By looking at the comments sections, consumers observe other individuals to trace their beliefs about a brand. They aid their need to see how different individuals interpret the brand, which informs their understanding. In this regard, Weick et al. (2005) describe how social factors such as active discussions aid the sensemaking process. However, my findings show that even relatively passive forms of social interaction, such as simply observing others, also aids individuals in the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity. This passive mode of interaction can affect how the consumers interpret the brand. Hence, brand communication practitioners should encourage consumers to express their opinions online freely. Weick et al. (2005) state that sensemaking is often falsely portrayed as passive. This does not directly stand in contrast to my findings; however, forming an understanding of brand authenticity does not necessarily entail immediate action or talk but can also involve passive activities such as looking at comments of other consumers.

The brand teams on Instagram

In addition to simply observing other consumers, the interactive exchange among consumers and the brand teams on Instagram are crucial.

> BS: […] It was a comment under a post that their product does not work, or the product is stupid because it does not work. And then, the brand has written a huge text on why the product might not work and what she can do differently if she tries to use it again. And if it doesn't work, she can contact their support and get the money back. So, it was a massive comment. And I thought you are not going through this trouble unless you care about your consumers. In the way they answer, you can really see the mindset behind all of what the brand claims to be. And that's authentic for me because they no longer use Instagram as a website but fulfill the function of Instagram to share and communicate. At least that's how I interpret the platform, that it is not just a collection of websites and advertising pages, but also about being able to exchange ideas, to write about them […]

As the quote above underlines, the reaction of the brand team in the comments section is important to the consumers. Based on the response, the consumer interprets that she can

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judge the brand's mindset. In doing so, she describes the brand as authentic. Morhart et al. (2015) explain that the key component of brand authenticity is whether consumers believe the brands' managers are intrinsically motivated. By describing the brand's mindset as positive, the consumer seems to be content with the brand's motivation. However, the brand's mindset does not necessarily need to be linked to the intrinsic motivation of brand managers; it could also simply be an abstract impression. Whether it is classified as the brand's intrinsic motivation, an abstract impression, or simply a feeling, the brand's reaction to the comment triggered a stream of interpretation about the brand and provided reason to classify the brand as authentic. In addition to replying to the comments, the consumers explained that the brand needs to use different Instagram functions to interact with them.

> OC: […] What is, of course, always cool is something interactive. For example, when they ask what your favorite cream is, you need to let them know in the stories. For example, a small Q&A where you can simply click what you like the most of a few choices or so. I find it quite remarkable if there is something interactive on their account because then I feel like they *(the brand)* want to know my opinion and include me as a consumer. Even if it's minor, I somehow contribute to the brand.

The interactions provide value to the consumer when engaging with the brands' Instagram accounts instead of simply looking up the brands' websites. Using different interactive functions, such as the Q&A function, makes the consumer feel heard on Instagram. In line with this, Fouladi et al. (2021) postulate the importance of interactions on social media for consumers to form an understanding of brand authenticity. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the study's context includes a different social media platform (Linkedin) and other types of organizations (start-ups). In contrast to this, Leigh et al. (2006) argue that through having interactions with brands, consumers perceive *themselves* as authentic. This indicates that the interactions do not serve to form an understanding of brand authenticity but rather serve as a resource for consumers to feel connected to themselves. However, based on the above findings, I argue that consumers are eager to interact with brands on Instagram to understand the brands mindset, which is an essential indicator for them to find the brand and its conduct genuine or not.

As Weick et al. (2005) state, a significant component of the sensemaking process is communication in interactive talks and the reciprocal exchanges between actors. In the context of Instagram, I argue that through the interactions with the brand team, consumers can experience the brand. The brand teams might take the opportunity to persuade the consumers

with their forms of interaction and communication on Instagram to enrich the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity. Situations in which interactive talks take place are what Jablin & Putnam (2001) describe as opportunities for persuasion. It must be noted that it is not one encounter with the brand on Instagram that leads the consumers to believe in the brands' authenticity. As Weick et al. (2005) suggest, in the process of forming an understanding, many possible meanings are synthesized, and multiple experiences are taken into consideration. Thus, this section has shown that various interactions with the brand team add to the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram.

Processing brand cues

The following section discusses what types of brand cues consumers process to form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram. The brand cues are communicated by the brands on Instagram and interpreted by the consumers. Three types of brand cues are discussed in the following: *facts, feelings*, and *identity benefits*.

Facts

This section discusses how consumers look at the factual information of brands' Instagram accounts and what consumers interpret. This is focused on the information consumers can observe when looking at the starting page of the brands' Instagram accounts. The following quote is stated by a consumer while looking at such a starting page, as shown in Figure 3.

> DB: […] I mean the number of followers is super high, like what, around 10,000,000. That somehow already speaks for itself; the brand is, of course, very well-known and probably very good. I think many people still believe in *Tarte (the beauty brand)* and in their products; otherwise, they would not have so many followers. So that's already a good sign that they are authentic. And what's also such a good sign is that the brand does not follow so many accounts. That's also a criterion for me because if you somehow follow 2,000 people but only have 1,000 followers yourself as a brand – that would be a rather ominous sign. And also the amount of content they do. So, you notice, okay, over 11,000 posts. There is probably really a team behind this brand that cares to provide relevant content. That means they have resources and many content ideas, too; I think that's authentic.

Figure 3

The starting page of the Instagram brand account of Tarte Cosmetics, as discussed by the consumer in the quote above.
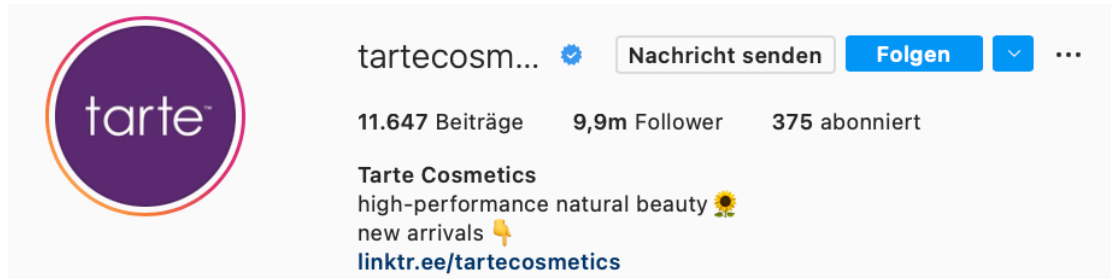
Some consumers expressed that the basic statistics that one can see when looking at the brands' Instagram accounts describe important information to them. Having 10,000,000 followers and over 11,000 posts is interpreted as positive. As communicated by the brand on its account, this information serves as evidence for the consumer to believe the brand. These forms of evidence are labeled as indexical brand cues in the branding context (Morhart et al., 2015). Indexical cues describe how consumers understand brand authenticity through processing factual information about the brand, which consumers interpret as evidence for the brands' claims. Thus, looking at the factual aspects the brand communicates on Instagram, such as the number of followers, serves as evidence to believe the brand. These factual aspects seem to function as a form of verification for the consumers to assess if brand promises are delivered. This indicates that brand communication practitioners have significant agency over the information communicated and interpreted by the consumers on Instagram.

However, looking at the line of interpretation in detail, it does not seem to be the actual number of followers that the consumer interprets as being authentic. Having 10,000,000 followers is not authentic in itself – it is a sign for the consumer that other consumers believe in the brand and the consistent quality of the products. Likewise, it is not the 11,000 posts that make the brand authentic – but the following interpretation by the consumer. She describes the brand must have a motivated team with many resources that flourish with ideas for content. Thus, the factual information (the indexical cues) on the brands' accounts is essential to form an understanding of brand authenticity. However, it must be noted that they only form a starting point for a line of interpretation about the brand by the consumers, which eventually leads them to believe in the brands' authenticity. This means

that only when the factual information is interpreted does it provide meaning to the consumers.

This is interesting in relation to the findings of Beverland and Farrelly (2010), who draw somewhat contradictory conclusions in comparison to this thesis. Based on their reasoning, consumers assess the brand based on their own beliefs and transform these feelings into indexical cues under the projection of their own opinion. Thus, they argue that feelings about the brand are transformed into facts when consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity. In contrast, my findings underline how indexical cues are only meaningful to the process when the consumers interpret them. This contradiction might be explained by the differences in the context that the brands are experienced. Beverland and Farrelly (2010) do not focus on specific types of brands and conducted their study before Instagram existed. A key difference is that the communication channel Instagram forms a unique context for consumers to understand brand authenticity. It might well be that the dense information overload on Instagram leads consumers to search for factual information first, such as having 10,000,000 followers, to take this as a point of departure for their interpretation of the brand. However, the analysis has shown that the factual information is only meaningful once the consumers interpret them.

Feelings

This section focuses on feelings that consumers process to understand brand authenticity on Instagram. When asking consumers about their experiences on Instagram with beauty brands, consumers mainly referred to impressions they had by experiencing content (images and videos), as the quote below represents.

> AW: […] You can tell the quality of the content is super good if you look at all the details *(see Figure 4)*. Of all the images and videos, the amount of detail you can see through the camera is fantastic. I find it very beautiful and aesthetic; it is high-end content production. You can tell this is a brand in the industry that has access to resources. Resources like a lot of money and employees, you know, to produce the best content and products. So, I find it authentic that it looks professional.

Figure 4

An image of a YSL Beauty post as described by the consumer in the quote above
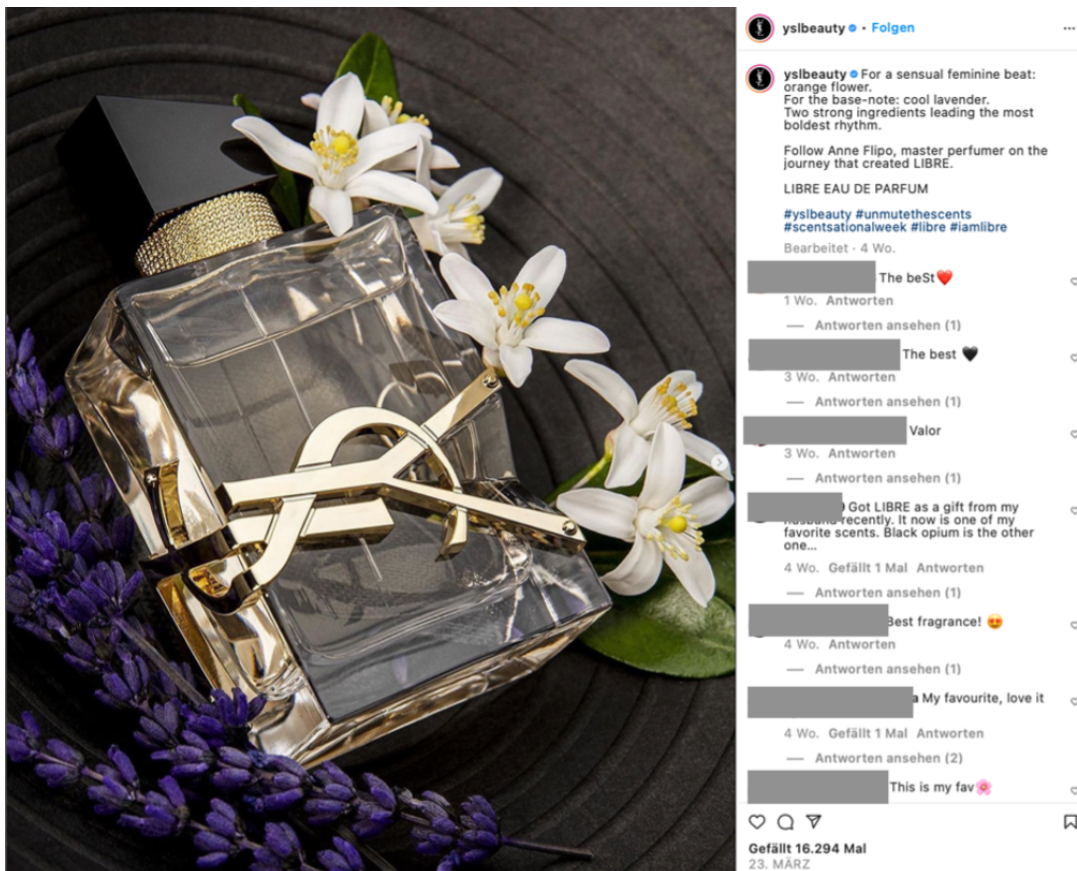
Consumers expressed their need for detail in the content the brand releases on Instagram when experiencing the brand. This means, for example, being able to see content that shows the ingredients of the perfume, such as the flowers next to the flacon (see Figure 4). It is interesting to understand why details are essential for consumers. It is details that convince the consumers of the quality of the brands' content – even possibly its products. The high quality resembles a feeling of professionalism of the brand for the consumer. The feeling that the brands are professional is then seen as a cue for brand authenticity. As suggested by Morhart et al. (2015), brand authenticity emerges if consumers process abstract impressions and feelings about the brand. In this case, the brand's professionalism is a cue for the consumer to believe in the brand's authenticity.

Interestingly, this line of interpretation seems to convince the consumer that YSL Beauty is not an "Insta-Brand", underlining the circular relationship between the different sequences. According to Morhart et al. (2015), these types of brand cues are labeled as iconic cues, highlighting the importance of the consumers' own beliefs and interpretations in

understanding brand authenticity. According to the consumers, in direct connection to experiencing the brand as professional is to experience an Instagram account as "going with the time".

> AW: It just has to look contemporary, what they do on their account. If it still looks like in the old days when Instagram first appeared, and everyone was trying things, it does not work. Do you remember the default backgrounds that were often used? If I see them now, I have seen enough. That would be super unprofessional. There are so many different possibilities to create your content these days that it's not even a big deal.

As this shows, consumers do not want to be confronted with content they understand as unprofessional. This includes the content of images and videos and the use of specific technical features on Instagram. For example, seeing brands use outdated features such as default backgrounds from years ago is interpreted as unprofessional by the consumers. Thus, evaluating a brand as professional is context-specific to the communication channel the brand uses. This means that not only the content itself but also how brand communication practitioners use the technicalities on Instagram to communicate with consumers influences how the content is interpreted and if this might lead to understanding the brand as authentic. This finding is interesting in relation to the study of Fouladi et al. (2021). They conclude that the characteristics of LinkedIn are connected to whether individuals understand a brand as authentic or not. Hence, the communication channels play an active role in the process of interpreting iconic brand cues, such as the feeling about the brands' professionalism. However, it must be noted that not one cue alone constitutes the understanding of brand authenticity. According to Leigh et al. (2006), consumers process a multiplicity of meanings, which entails detailed interpretation by the consumers of the cues communicated by the brand. This means that consumers process feelings about the brands' accounts to form an understanding of brand authenticity.

Identity benefits

This section focuses on the identity benefits consumers might experience when consuming content of Instagram beauty brand accounts. When asked what makes the Instagram brand account special for the consumers, one interviewee explained what is stated in the following quote while looking at the post of a specific lipstick called *PILLOW TALK* (see Figure 5).

CF: Charlotte Tilbury is not a drugstore brand that everyone uses every day. I think they want to maintain the exclusive vibe, which is what they do so well with their content. It's not that it is too perfect, but still quite exclusive. That makes the brand authentic for me because not everyone uses the brand. It is a bit silly, but I don't like it when everyone else has what I have. I like to identify with what they are doing because it is special and suits me well. Yes, probably hundreds of others have the *PILLOW TALK* too, but I feel special, even if it might be stupid.

Figure 5

A post about the lipsticks called PILLOW TALK by the brand Charlotte Tilbury as mentioned by the consumer in the quote above
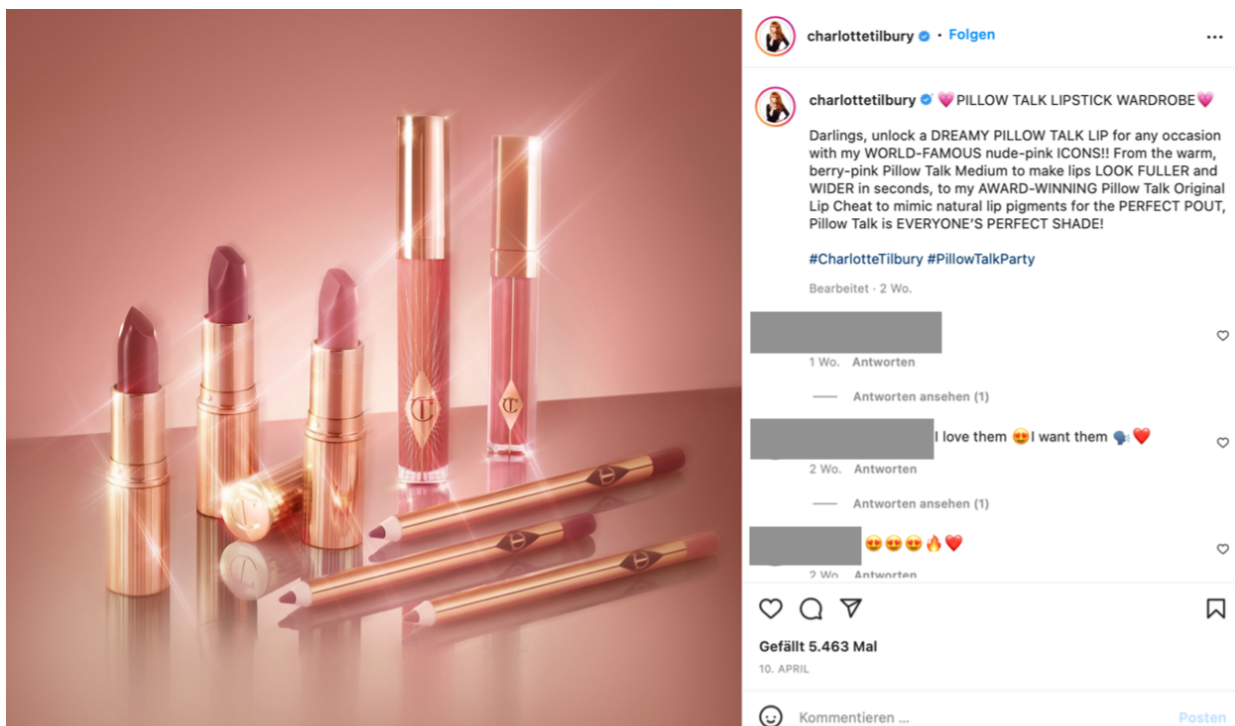
Consumers expressed different benefits they want to experience by consuming the brands' products and content on Instagram. For example, by looking at the post of the lipstick *PILLOW TALK*, the consumer described that she feels special because not everyone consumes the brand, which makes the brand exclusive. This might seem like an impression or feeling about the brand's account, which the consumer interprets. Thus, this could be described as another iconic brand cue communicated by the brand, in line with the feeling of professionalism, as discussed in the previous section. However, looking beneath the surface, the key message is the benefit the interviewee draws from experiencing the exclusivity: the consumer identifies with the brand due to feeling special and exclusive and projects these

feelings on herself as the consumer. By identifying with the brand, the consumer believes in the brand being authentic.

Thus, consumers draw identity benefits from consuming the content of the brands' Instagram accounts. This, in turn, is beneficial for the brand itself, as the consumers ascribe authenticity to the brand when experiencing identity benefits. This finding aligns with Morhart et al. (2015), who state that individuals feel true to themselves by consuming the brands' products. In doing so, the brand serves the consumers as a resource, for example, to feel special and exclusive themselves, not just interpreting the brand as special and exclusive. Experiencing this is labeled as *existential brand cues* in the brand authenticity literature (Morhart et al., 2015). I want to underline that this line of reasoning by consumers can be observed by drawing different identity benefits from other brands. Another interviewee expressed the following while looking at the post in Figure 6.

> LO: Um, so I experience make-up as an opportunity for everyone to express themselves and see their faces as a canvas. And I think it's a great pity when people say, for example, that men are not allowed to wear makeup. If that were the brand's approach, I would distance myself from it. I would not want to see their content and could not identify with it.

Figure 6

A post featuring a male model wearing make-up by the brand NYX Cosmetics as mentioned by the consumer
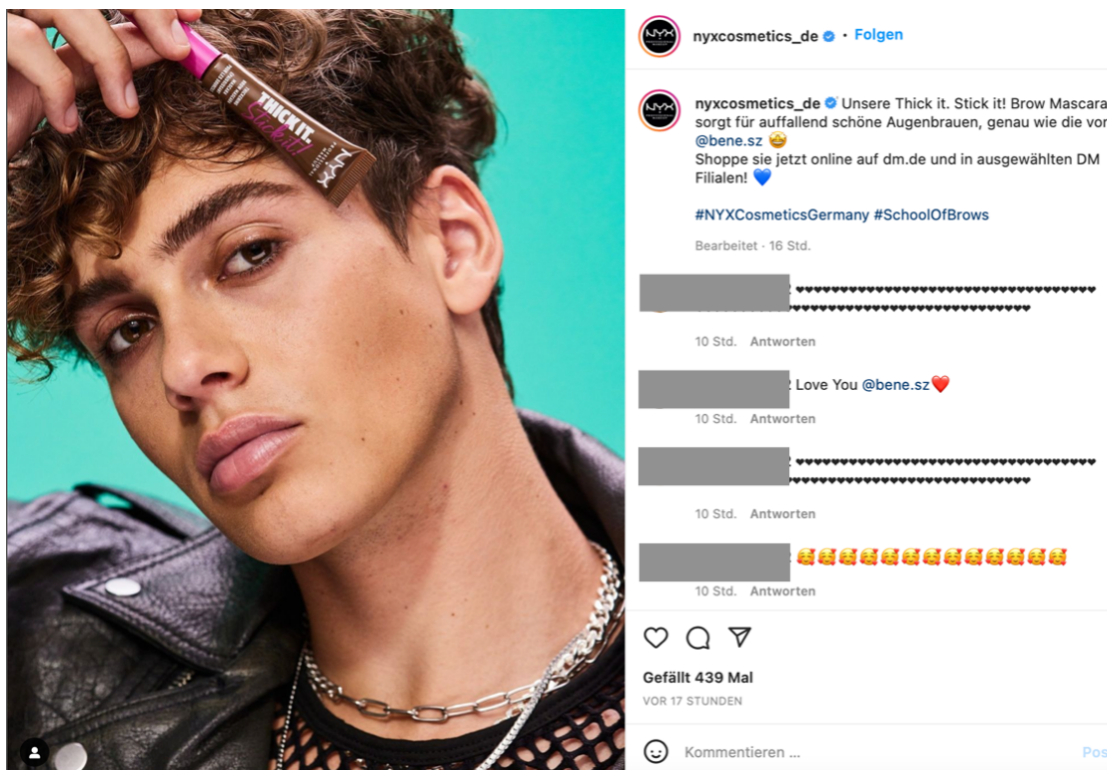
This shows, besides feeling the exclusivity of a brand as an identity benefit, it is possible to experience somewhat contradictory identity benefits. For example, by consuming content of beauty brands that feature diverse individuals instead of focusing on women only, the consumer experiences the brand as being inclusive and consequently feels inclusive herself. While both examples might be somewhat extreme, there are many more identity benefits that consumers might experience, which are interpreted as signs of authenticity by the consumers. These findings align with Weick et al. (2005), who state that identity plays a crucial role in sensemaking, as it influences the way we act and interpret. Furthermore, it underlines the need for a high degree of reflexivity among brand communication practitioners responsible for daily Instagram communication. This is needed to represent the brands' standpoints online clearly.

Interaction of brand cues

While there is a multitude of different brand cues consumers might experience, there also seem to be multiple ways how identity benefits (existential cues), facts (indexical cues), and feelings (iconic cues) interact in the process of forming an understanding about brand authenticity. According to my findings, facts (indexical cues) are only meaningful once they are interpreted and transformed into feelings about the brand (iconic cues). In addition, the findings indicate that identity benefits (existential cues) can be the result of processing the feelings about the brand (iconic cues). At first sight, this might indicate some form of hierarchy among facts, feelings, and identity benefits that consumers experience. In line with this, Fouladi et al. (2021) argue that existential cues are most important when forming an understanding of brand authenticity on social media. The scholars say that it is vital to determine how the different perspectives are related.

However, the findings underline that experiencing brands on Instagram is a unique process that cannot be categorized or hierarchically ordered. Multiple facts, feelings, and identity benefits are processed and might carry different weights for consumers' understanding of brand authenticity. While some consumers draw identity benefits from consuming the brands' Instagram content, others find the number of Instagram account followers most striking. It is an interplay of all of them that lead consumers to form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram. Thus, I argue that all types of brand cues aid the sensemaking process and cannot be hierarchically categorized.

Whether consumers find one or the other more critical might depend on the individual circumstances of the experience. Interpreting cues of the environment with close attention is what Weick et al. (2005) describe as noticing and labeling in the sensemaking process. By doing this, individuals can coordinate their experiences and give them labels. This holds true for consumers in the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity. Interpreting different aspects organizes their thoughts and makes it possible to communicate about them and reduce consumers' fleeting impressions. However, it is interesting to note that labels can be changed once the circumstances change (Weick et al., 2005). Even though the brand might be interpreted as somewhat authentic in connection to an identity benefit, this interpretation might change. For example, once the consumer does not experience the identity benefit of feeling inclusive, her impression about authenticity might change, as explained by the interviewee when stating she would distance herself from the brand if they would not communicate to be diverse. This underlines that the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity is non-linear and might jump to different sequences at any point in time. Furthermore, it emphasizes that all brand cues (facts, feelings, and identity benefits) are relevant to the process.

Preserving meaning

The following section discusses the preservation of the meaning of brand authenticity on Instagram and its relation to the offline environment. The consumers pointed out interesting answers. They were asked how stable their impression of the brands' Instagram accounts is.

> CF: […] I think once the brand conveys authenticity, you've got it. So, once you convinced me, that's good for the brand. I am always looking at the account (*talking about the Instagram account of the brand Charlotte Tilbury*) and searching for new things. And I am never disappointed. And I don't think I ever will be. This connection works, and maybe other people have it with cars, clothes, or something. But this connection stays with you, and once there is something new on Instagram, I think, hey, cool, let me take a look.

As the quote above shows, the consumer expressed that she is convinced of the brand's authenticity on Instagram. According to the consumers, there seems to be no reason to believe that this impression will change sooner or later. According to Weick et al. (2005), the goal of sensemaking is not accuracy but plausibility. This means the process's focus is not on uncovering the truth but can be more so compared to a story that becomes more resilient to criticism over time. For the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity, it is not the goal of the consumers to clearly define for themselves what brand authenticity means,

but the understanding instead emerges over time. The consumer states that she is "never disappointed" which underlines that sensemaking is not about accuracy but plausibility, as suggested by Weick et al. (2005). While the consumer does not have a specific expectation about what content or experience on Instagram is authentic, she evaluates whether the new experiences are plausible to her current beliefs. If those beliefs are not questioned, the impression of the brand's authenticity on Instagram gets more resilient over time. While this line of reasoning holds true for some consumers, others do not have such resilient impressions about the brands' authenticity on Instagram.

> JK: […] I find myself unfollowing quickly. Of course, I like the brand, and it is a genuine brand *(talking about the Instagram account of the brand benefit)*. But I would unfollow them quickly even if a single post annoys me. So, I'm very fast and consistent in saying goodbye. So far, that has not happened with *benefit*, so I still follow them. If it annoys me, I continue to be their customer, but not a follower.

This quote underlines two critical aspects of the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity. First, it emphasizes that developing an understanding never starts and never stops. While the consumers might like the brand's honesty and its account on Instagram, the content displayed, such as a new post, is constantly evaluated by the consumer. Should this not fit the consumer's beliefs, the understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram might be reevaluated. Weick et al. (2005) describe this as the *ongoing* characteristic of the process. Should the consumer rethink their understanding, it can result in losing the consumer as a follower of the brand's account, as the quote shows. While this does not seem like a dramatic consequence, I argue that once the consumer unfollows the brand account, the circular process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity might be inhibited, as the consumer is *not* confronted with the brand content anymore.

Second, it is interesting how the understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram interacts with the understanding of the brand in the offline environment. While the consumer underlines she would unfollow the brand on Instagram, she would remain a customer. While the understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram is reevaluated, she still presumes that the brand itself is somewhat authentic. This underlines the ongoing nature of transforming abstract impressions into concrete understandings, as described by Weick et al., (2005). Furthermore, it shows the connection between preserving the meaning of brand authenticity with the brand's online-offline congruence, indicating the circularity of the process. Thus, the meaning of brand authenticity on Instagram can be constantly reevaluated if the

circumstances change. This underlines the importance of the brand communication practitioners' reflexivity to produce relevant communication measures on Instagram. How all sections of the above analysis relate to each other is discussed in the following final section of the analysis.

The brand authenticity process

The four themes *navigating in the brand environment*, *interacting with the online community*, *processing brand cues*, and *preserving meaning* together constitute the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram among consumers, as illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7

The consumers' process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram
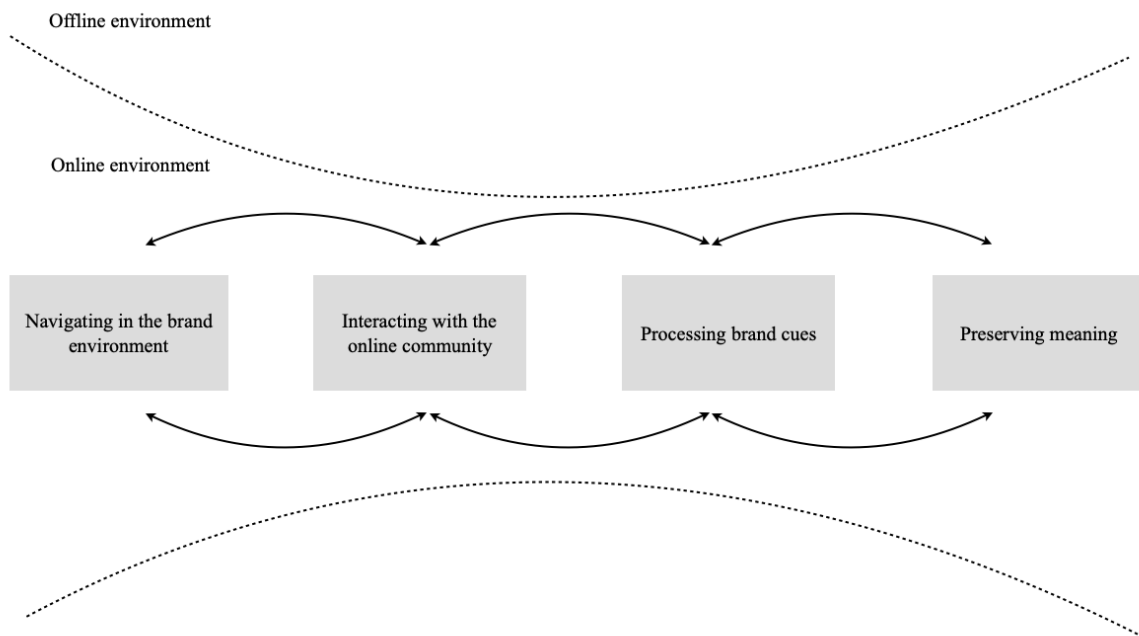
The process phases consist of various elements interacting with each other and interacting with the offline environment outside the Instagram context. The way consumers navigate in the brand environment has shown that the understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram cannot be systematically separated from the consumers' experiences with the brand in the offline environment. The way the brand presents itself on its Instagram account, in relation to how it is presented offline, matters to the consumers. In addition, the influencers that cooperate with the brand on Instagram must be a fit in the eyes of the consumers. Based

on these findings, it became clear that the online-offline impressions about the brand need to be in sync according to the consumers. Bruhn et al. (2012) describe this as a unified brand representation across channels – which brand communication practitioners should ideally strive for to enhance brand authenticity.

On Instagram, consumers look at comments of other consumers or interact with the brands themselves to experience the brand in the online setting. This indicates that sensemaking is social and systemic instead of a stand-alone individual process, as Weick et al. (2005) explain. Consumers interact with the online community to make sense of brand authenticity on Instagram. Thus, the process is contingent on other individuals. Brand communication practitioners should use these interactions as an opportunity to place strategically relevant messages in the online context. It must be noted that multiple experiences with the brand are necessary to establish an understanding of brand authenticity.

Besides the interactions that inform the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity, the brand cues (facts, feelings, and identity benefits) that consumers extract from the communication measures on Instagram play a role in the sensemaking process. The brand cues can be described as seeds planted by the brand and interpreted by the consumers. This means the content on the brand account on Instagram includes these seeds. However, without the consumers' interpretation, the seeds are meaningless. For example, the number of followers on Instagram (i.e., fact / indexical cue) is only meaningful once the consumers interpret it as a sign of continuous brand success. Whether it is facts, feelings, or identity benefits that are more important in the sensemaking process for consumers cannot be concluded based on the analysis. However, different brand cues might carry extra weight for the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity.

This also means that the process of understanding brand authenticity is not about uncovering an ultimate truth but can be described as a story that becomes more resilient with time. While some consumers preserve the meaning of brand authenticity on Instagram, it can be constantly reevaluated by other consumers if the circumstances change. This indicates that the process is circular and ongoing – and never finished. Thus, I argue that brand authenticity is a complex construct that needs to be seen as a stream of individual interpretations, as the constructivist perspective suggests. The conclusions section discusses how these findings contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of brand authenticity in relation to strategic communication.

Conclusions

This thesis problematized different aspects of the current academic literature on brand authenticity. That is, the literature is too focused on establishing robust measures for the concept (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012), lacks focus on a product category/industry (e.g., Nunes et al., 2021), and disregards the context of social media (Fouladi et al., 2021). Consequently, understanding the consumers' thought processes in the context of a specific industry or communication channel is neglected. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the consumers' process of understanding brand authenticity on Instagram by taking the sensemaking approach. Taking the sensemaking approach to understanding consumers offered the worldview that reality is socially constructed (Weick et al., 2005). This perspective was well aligned with the constructivist perspective taken on the concept of brand authenticity, which outlines that the concept comes into being through the consumer's individual beliefs and impressions (Morhart et al., 2015). In total, 15 semi-structured interviews with young German consumers formed the basis for the analysis. Based on the analysis, I conclude that four themes constitute the process of how consumers understand the brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram: *navigating in the brand environment*, *interacting with the online community*, *processing brand cues*, and *preserving meaning*. Thus, the analysis underpins that brand authenticity is a complex construct that emerges along the stream of individual interpretations of consumers. Based on this, brand communication practitioners are informed by the unique lines of interpretations of the consumers about beauty brands. They can draw conclusions about their practices of establishing and analyzing brand authenticity on Instagram that are of strategic significance. In the following, the theoretical contributions of this study are addressed, which are also a springboard for future research suggestions. Furthermore, practical implications for brand communication professionals in the beauty industry are discussed before the thesis ends with concluding remarks.

Theoretical contributions and future research

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes several insights. This thesis contributes to the academic understanding of brand authenticity by investigating the concept in a unique digital context: beauty brands on Instagram. Doing so addresses the call for academic research on brand authenticity on social media, which is underdeveloped until now

(Fouladi et al., 2021). By focusing on one social media channel, it became clear that online interactions among consumers and brands are vital in the process of understanding brand authenticity. For example, observing crosstalk in the comments section can already make a difference for some consumers to label the brand as authentic or not. Thus, the channel used for communicating with consumers provides unique opportunities for online interactions among brands and consumers.

Some scholars argue that an important aspect of consumer interactions is behavioral consistency, through which authenticity is communicated (cf. Bruhn et al., 2012; Cinelli & LaBoeuf, 2019; Morhart et al., 2015). While my findings underline that a unified brand representation across channels is beneficial for brand authenticity, I am hesitant to conclude that it is behavioral consistency in all interactions that drives the understanding of brand authenticity. I argue that instead of behavioral consistency, it is rather behavioral *reflexivity* of the brands/brand communication practitioners that is needed for the interactions in the dynamic online environment with consumers. This means that as consumers challenge brands with different needs on social media, the brands' communicative measures need to be constantly adapted to the ever-evolving consumer needs. In line with this, Falkheimer & Heide (2018) state that the reflexivity of practitioners and researchers in the field of strategic communication is important, as nothing is ever carved in stone. Consequently, future research might investigate the ways brand communication practitioners practice *listening* to consumers on Instagram to draw conclusions about the brand communication practitioners' reflexivity skills necessary for enhancing brand authenticity in the online arena.

Only by treating the opportunities for online interactions on social media as important can the conversations among consumers and brand communication practitioners become strategically relevant conversations. This means that online interactions should not be treated as side effects of posting on Instagram but more so as the arena for conversations that inform the understanding of brand authenticity for consumers. This contributes to the field of strategic communication, as Zerfass et al. (2018) argue it is time to consider the changing communicative landscape for strategic conversations among employees and consumers. Consequently, it might be interesting for future research to investigate other social media channels than Instagram to understand what forms of online interactions among brands and consumers are vital to the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity. In line with Hoyer et al. and Ponathil et al. (2020), I argue that taking a sensemaking approach to understanding consumers' complex thought processes and demands opens up necessary ways of understanding them.

Using the sensemaking approach in this study contributes to the understanding of brand authenticity in the following way. While the constructivist perspective on brand authenticity postulates that brand authenticity involves the active negotiation of impressions among the consumers to create meaning about the concept (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), the perspective falls short in *contextualizing* the consumers' interpretations by regarding different phases of the process. Consequently, the brand authenticity literature often revolves around analyzing the consumers' interpretations of brand cues labeled as iconic cues, indexical cues, and existential cues (Bruhn et al., 2012) without contextualizing the interpretations. While my findings also highlight that consumers process brand cues such as facts, feelings, or identity benefits, these interpretations are seen as part of a holistic process by taking the sensemaking approach.

As Weick et al. (2005) explain, sensemaking is a never-ending cycle of meaning-making, which holds true for how consumers form an understanding of brand authenticity on Instagram. While the meaning of brand authenticity on Instagram might be preserved among some consumers, thus gets more resilient over time, other consumers constantly reevaluate their understanding of the concept. Acknowledging the dynamic nature of the process of understanding brand authenticity contributes to the field of strategic communication, as communication with consumers is crucial for the development of the field (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). According to Hallahan et al. (2007), studying issues from different perspectives instead of only focusing on the organizational side generates more holistic views on strategic communication processes, which is regarded in this study by focusing on the consumers' understanding of brand communication measures.

Implications for brand communication professionals

The findings of this thesis bring several implications for brand communication practitioners to light that aim to work with brand authenticity on Instagram. Practitioners need to be aware of their positioning and understanding of the brand in relation to other brand teams, marketing teams, and communication teams within their organization. This is because the findings underlined the importance of the brands' online-offline congruence for consumers. Thus, only by being aware of the holistic communication strategy for the brand, and the communication measures taken by other teams, can brand communication practitioners take the necessary steps to synchronize their undertakings on Instagram in ways that align with the offline environment. In addition, it is essential to choose influencer cooperation partners for Instagram wisely instead of relying on mass influencers that seem to

work for multiple other beauty brands. Hence, communicating in a congruent way on Instagram is important for brand authenticity and partly becomes a matter of *internal communication* for brand communication practitioners.

Furthermore, the community management on Instagram should be devoted significant resources by the practitioners. This means that while practitioners often wave aside comments on Instagram with empty phrases (e.g., "Thank you for sharing your opinion, we are sorry you are disappointed"), it became clear that this does not do the job when aiming to be a brand that is seen as authentic by the consumers. Practitioners should thoroughly deal with questions, concerns, or compliments and actively generate opportunities for interacting with consumers on Instagram via different functions the platform offers. At the same time, these interactions provide opportunities for practitioners to place strategically relevant messages in the online context.

Lastly, practitioners need to acknowledge that they can only aid the process of forming an understanding of brand authenticity to a certain degree – but do not have complete agency over establishing it. Thus, brand authenticity on Instagram cannot be treated as a project that is found and checked off, as it lies in the eyes of the consumers. However, acknowledging this does not mean practitioners should be inactive. For example, while the consumers interpret the professionalism of content on Instagram as a sign of brand authenticity, it is the practitioners' responsibility to produce content that might be interpreted as professional. It becomes clear that it takes detailed knowledge about the consumer groups and an advanced skill set as a practitioner to understand these dynamic consumer needs and continuously serve them in a beneficial way for the brand.

Concluding remarks

With this study, I wanted to show an alternative way of understanding brand authenticity by taking the sensemaking approach to put the consumers in the limelight. This research problem was inspired by the unreflective practices I have witnessed as a brand communication intern for an international beauty brand. The organization was eager to comprehend the consumers' understanding of brand authenticity by measuring and analyzing Instagram's key performance indicators, such as click rates. However, I demonstrated that the reality is more sophisticated than that – to work with the concept of brand authenticity on Instagram should be focused on the unique and context-specific interpretations of the consumers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide

1. Welcome & introduction
   a. Welcome to this interview, and thank you for your participation.
   b. I am conducting this project to qualify for the master's degree in Strategic Communication at Lund University in Sweden.
   c. This interview will allow me to analyze how consumers understand beauty brands on Instagram.
   d. Every opinion is valuable, and there are no correct or incorrect answers.
   e. I do not have expectations about your answers. Please mention anything that comes to your mind.
   f. I do not conduct this as part of any brand – I am an independent researcher.

2. Confidentiality & ethical consent
   a. Before beginning, I want to inform you that your participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any point in time.
   b. The data you provide is treated confidential and will be destroyed after it is analyzed. Only I will listen to the recordings.

3. Timeline
   a. The interview will last approximately one hour.
   b. Are there any questions before we begin with the interview?
   c. I will begin by asking some questions about your Instagram use in general, and then we will dive into today's topic: beauty brands on Instagram. An interactive part of the interview will be where we look at examples together via the screen share function.
   d. I will record this interview if you agree. This way, I can analyze your answers better after the interview.

4. Brand authenticity of beauty brands on Instagram

   a. Instagram
      i. When did you use Instagram the last time?
      ii. What did you do when you opened the app?
      iii. How would you describe the way you are using Instagram?
      iv. What do you appreciate most about Instagram?
      v. What accounts are you following on Instagram?

b. <u>Beauty brands on Instagram</u>

*The participants share their screens on **Zoom** and receive login data from an **Instagram account** I created for this study. They login to the account, and I ask them to navigate to a **beauty brand account they mentioned.** I ask them questions based on this example so consumers can explain their thoughts/feelings/experiences based on the examples. The moment when I ask them to do so depends entirely on the answers of the participants and the flow of the interview.*

    i.   Are there any beauty brand accounts you follow?
    ii.   Why do you follow these brands?
    iii.   What comes to your mind when thinking about this brand?
    iv.   Which content formats do you prefer to consume on Instagram?
    v.   What part of the Instagram brand accounts is essential for you?
    vi.   What are your experiences with this brand on Instagram?
    vii.   What do you like about the content of the brand?
    viii.   In what way do you use the content?
    ix.   What makes the Instagram account special for you?
    x.   What would be reasons to unfollow the accounts?
    xi.   Can you describe the last time/any time you interacted/saw a beauty brand on Instagram?
    xii.   Can you describe any experience you had with a beauty brand on Instagram?
    xiii.   What is your impression of this beauty brand account on Instagram?
    i.   How do you experience this beauty brand account?
    ii.   What do you find attractive about the account of this brand?
    iii.   What are your associations when you look at this account?
    iv.   In what way is this brand using Instagram, in your opinion?
    v.   What is the value for you in following this beauty brand?
    vi.   What challenges do you see with this beauty brand account?
    vii.   What are your expectations of this beauty brand account?
    viii.   What role does the interaction with others on Instagram play for you?
    ix.   Can you identify with the beauty brand on Instagram?
    x.   How does the brand seem genuine/honest/authentic to you?
    xi.   Is there something that seems ungenuine/dishonest/inauthentic to you?
    xii.   Is it essential that the brand is genuine/honest/authentic?
    xiii.   Why do you believe the brands' claims?
    xiv.   How stable do you think your impression of the brand on Instagram is?

2. Closing
   a. Can you summarize your main points for me?
   b. Are there any other topics/or is there anything else on your mind?

3. Debriefing & Goodbye
   a. If you are interested in the results of this project, I can inform you about it via E-Mail.
   b. Do you have other questions or concerns?
   c. Thank you for participating in this research project.

Appendix 2: Informed consent form

A qualitative study of beauty brands on Instagram
This consent form is part of the process required for the ethical treatment of research participants. It should give you a basic idea of what this thesis is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please do not hesitate to ask.

Invitation to Participate
This research is conducted as part of my Master's thesis in Strategic Communication at Lund University in Sweden.

Research Purpose
This study aims to understand better how consumers think about beauty brands on Instagram.

Research Method
If you decide to participate, I will invite you to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview. This means you will tell me about your opinions, feelings, experiences, or thoughts. For example, you will be asked questions: *Can you describe the last time you used Instagram?* Your answers will be reported together with data from other research participants.

Confidentiality - Anonymity - Security
If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study and any other personal information gathered about you during the study will be kept strictly confidential and never be made public.

All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all personal information data will be destroyed. The published results of the study will collect only data from which **no individual participant can be identified.**

Voluntary participation
You are being asked to decide whether or not to participate in this study. If any part of the information is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you decide not to participate or later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researchers or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be available. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time. All data collected up to that time due to your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What Your Signature Means
Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood the information regarding participation in this thesis and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. Your continued participation should be informed as to your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

If you agree to participate, please fill in the following information.

What is your year of birth? (e.g., 1998): _____

What is your gender? (e.g., female, male): _____

What is your educational background? Please fill in your highest degree + subject: (e.g., Abitur **or** Bachelor of Science Engineering **or** Master of Arts Media Studies…):

_____

What is your job/profession: (e.g., Graduate Student Environmental Studies, Junior Sustainability Manager,…):

_____

Good to know

The interview is conducted in the **language you feel most comfortable with, ideally in your mother tongue (German or English).**

For technical reasons, **please use a computer or laptop (video function, microphone, stable internet connection) for the interview duration** **(not a phone/tablet).**

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Print Name

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

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