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■ ■ ■ **M A R K S T O N E S - A R B E I T S P A P I E R E** ■ ■ ■

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Identity-based Authenticity of SMIs – Conceptualization and Empirical Testing
of the Construct and its Antecedents

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SUMMARY

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Identity-based Authenticity of SMIs – Conceptualization and Empirical Testing of the Construct and its Antecedents

Arbeitspapier Nr. 74 / Working paper no. 74

Type of working paper:	Conceptualization of SMI authenticity and empirical verification of the construct.
Method:	Theoretically based conceptualization and empirical analysis using CFA and SEM
Objective:	- Theoretically based conceptualization of the construct of SMI authenticity. - Derivation of the antecedents of SMI authenticity. - The authenticity of SMIs should be derived from their identity. - Provision of a measuring scale in order to be able to validly and reliably measure the SMI authenticity. - Empirical review of the construct for its validity in influencer branding.
Main findings:	- SMI authenticity can be confirmed as a one-dimensional construct with the antecedents consistency, continuity and individuality. - Consistency and continuity are far more important than individuality in forming SMI authenticity.
Target group:	Practitioners, researchers, and students in the field of online marketing especially in influencer marketing.

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Abbreviations

e.g.   Exempli Gratia / for example

et al.   et alii, et alia, et alteri

i.e.   id est

ROI   Return on investment

SMI   Social Media Influencer

UGC   User-generated content

1. Relevance of SMI Authenticity in Influencer Branding

Influencer marketing has become an established advertising format for brands in recent years (Vrontis et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2022). The market size is expected to grow to US$21.1 billion in 2023 (Geyser 2023). Advertising on social media platforms in cooperation with social media influencers (SMI) now represents a main touch point between brands and consumers (Geyser 2023). Among social media platforms, the majority of brands (97% (Dopson 2022)) rate Instagram as most important (Dopson 2022). Consumers use Instagram intensively (63% use it at least daily, 42% even several times a day (Andre 2023)) and the platform is part of everyday life. Instagram is therefore explicitly suitable for brands to regularly coming into contact with consumers.

Authenticity is a term that is very often mentioned in connection with influencer marketing (Hoos 2022). Product advertising of SMIs should be particularly authentic (Lee and Eastin 2021). Authenticity can be described as a unique selling proposition of influencer marketing (Salim 2017). Therefore, the success of influencer marketing on Instagram is largely based on authenticity (Lee and Eastin 2021; van Driel & Dumitrica 2021). In particular, it is not the advertising format itself that is particularly authentic, but rather the authenticity relates to the person of the SMI who is responsible for the degree of authenticity (Salim 2017).

In particular, the story function on Instagram allows consumers to accompany SMIs through their everyday lives, which can create a particularly intimate and emotional closeness to the SMI. Through these deep insights into the everyday life of the SMI, SMIs appear particularly accessible and approachable. Consumers often follow favorite SMIs over a long period of time, which allows them to get to know them personally (Hoos 2022; Leung et al. 2022). In some cases, consumers even develop parasocial relationships with SMIs (Horton and Wohl 1956; Schramm and Wirth 2010) and perceive SMIs as parasocial friends (Ballantine 2005; Bond 2016; Swant 2016; Yuan and Lou 2020). This special relationship between SMIs and consumers can increase both the credibility of SMIs and trust in SMIs (Vrontis et al. 2020). If SMIs then make product recommendations and advertise brands on their profile, they can benefit from their credibility, the trust placed in them and the emotional closeness to their followers. Thus, brand-related user-generated content (UGC) through SMIs appears particularly authentic. Compared to other forms of advertising, younger generations in particular

seem to be receptive to this type of product recommendation and to buy the products advertised by SMIs. In a survey of 2,000 Instagram users, 72% said they had bought products they had previously seen on Instagram (Salpini 2017). But despite the advantages of influencer marketing there is still some need for optimization in order to increase the return on investment (ROI) of influencer-brand cooperations. The study by Leung et al. (2022) has shown that sometimes brands do not choose the best SMIs for collaborations or the content is not designed optimally.

Brands also know about the relevance of authenticity in influencer marketing and, when selecting suitable SMIs for cooperations, try to select particularly authentic SMIs (Lee and Eastin 2021).

Research has also taken up the relevance of authenticity. Several studies have examined what can lead to and the effects of authenticity of SMIs (Marwick 2013; Duffy 2017; McRae 2017; Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard 2018; Lee 2020; Batt et al. 2021; Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Ardley et al. 2022; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser 2023). Viewing the state of research shows that there is no uniform understanding of the term. Some researchers have looked at authenticity from a consumer perspective (McRae 2017; Lee 2020; Batt et al. 2021; Ardley et al. 2022; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser 2023), others from a researcher perspective (Marwick 2013), and still others from the SMI perspective (self-awareness) (Duffy 2017; Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard 2018; Balaban and Szambolics 2022). In addition, only the study by Lee (2020) operationalized the construct and developed a preliminary scale to measure SMI authenticity. Nevertheless, it should be noted that no theoretical-conceptual derivation for this scale was made and that items referring to the identity of the SMI were explicitly excluded in the scale development. However, social science research points out that identity is the most fundamental and inherent attribute that a person, and therefore an SMI, possesses. Identity describes a person's self-image and serves to distinguish them from others and provides lasting orientation for their own behavior. Ultimately, a person can only behave authentically and be perceived as authentic by others if they have a clear identity (Burmann et al. 2023). Identity can thus be described as the socio-psychological foundation of authenticity. Such an identity-based understanding of authenticity does not yet exist in the literature with regard to SMIs. Based on this research gap, the first research goal of this study is to carry out a theoretically and conceptually derivation of the construct and its antecedents. The starting point for

deriving the conceptualization is the brand authenticity understanding integrated in the identity-based brand management model by Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014). Following their approach, SMI authenticity is viewed from a socio-psychological perspective, with identity being the starting point of authenticity. Our theoretical concept is then tested empirically for its validity.

Using this approach, the study provides (1) a relevant contribution to previous influencer marketing theory by theoretically conceptualizing and testing a new construct and (2) a relevant contribution for practice, because both brands and SMIs can use our results to increase their effectiveness. Our theoretical contribution is particularly relevant for researchers. With the identity-based approach, we ensure that the construct of authenticity is firmly rooted in theory. Through the empirical validation of SMI authenticity and its antecedents we also provide a scale with which SMI authenticity can be measured. The practical contribution provides important insights for both brands and SMIs. Our study provides brands with guidelines to select suitable SMIs for cooperations. By rating SMIs based on the antecedents we have identified, brands can compare different SMIs in terms of their degree of authenticity. In this way, brands can identify particularly authentic SMIs. SMIs also benefit from our results, because they receive guidelines on how to increase their own authenticity. As a result, SMIs can increase their value for brands, become more interesting for them and differentiate themselves from other SMIs.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Authenticity Concept

Various streams of research have developed to analyse the concept of authenticity. In addition to different reference objects of authenticity (object, subject), authenticity can be evaluated from different perspectives. The perspectives most commonly used in the literature are presented below.

2.1.1 The objectivist perspective

For example, physical objects can represent the reference of authenticity. From an objectivist perspective, authenticity in this context represents an inherent property of the object that can be unequivocally demonstrated (Trilling 1972; Smelser and Baltes 2001). Authenticity is defined as the "original" and the opposite of a copy (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Peterson 2005). Following this understanding of the term, for example, original works by famous artists can be described as authentic (Newman and Smith 2016).

2.1.2 The constructivist perspective

In order to assess the authenticity of objects, however, it is not only necessary to refer to the object's inherent properties (Cohen 1988). From a constructivist perspective, the subjective perception of subjects is included in the assessment of authenticity (Lu and Fine 1995). In contrast to objectivist authenticity, clearly verifiable facts are not the criterion for authenticity, but the correspondence of an object of observation with the subjective image of the original perceived by subjects (Beverland and Farrelly 2009). Thus, things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic, but because they are socially or personally constructed as authentic (e.g., in terms of beliefs, expectations, point of views) (Wang 1999; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006).

2.1.3 The existentialist perspective

Another way of assessing authenticity is the existentialist perspective, which examines authenticity in relation to one's identity (Steiner and Reisinger 2006). In this context Morhart et al. (2015, p 202) refer to authenticity as "being true to one's self". In summary, it can be concluded from the literature that the objectivist, constructivist and

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existentialist perspectives are often used together to conceptualize authenticity (i.e. Morhart et al. 2015; Lee 2020; Lee and Eastin 2021).

2.1.4   *The socio-psychologial perspective*

In addition to the authenticity of objects, the term can also refer to subjects. From a socio-psychological perspective, authenticity is conceptualized as self-fulfillment (Fine 2003; Guignon, 2004). A person who is perceived as authentic orients their behavior primarily towards their personal identity (Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley 2014). The individual perception of "self" can be traced back to various self-defining attributes (Erikson 1975). Since people are a part of a social society and are always exposed to external influences and social norms, their personal identity is also influenced by external effects. Against this background, the degree of authenticity can be measured by the extent to which a person manages to remain true to him- or herself and his or her identity while following external influences (Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley 2014). This type of authenticity, i.e. the extent to which one fits into society as a member and is well-adapted, is referred to as in-authenticity (Hartmann 2002). Thus, the degree of authenticity can be measured by how strongly individual actions are determined by external influences (0 per cent of authenticity) or whether all actions do not follow any external requirements (100 per cent of authenticity) (Ferrara 1998). Following this understanding, Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014) defined "authenticity as the degree to which personal identity is causally linked to individual behavior". Following this definition, identity can be seen as the starting point of authenticity and is therefore crucial in the assessment of authenticity.

2.2   *State of Research on SMI Authenticity*

There are some studies that have examined the concept of SMI authenticity. Marwick (2013) was one of the first to emphasize the importance of SMI authenticity. From a researcher's perspective she examined what is expected of SMIs in order to be perceived as authentic. For example, the audience expects high levels of visibility from SMIs, i.e. deep personal insights (a high level of self-disclosure). Marwick has used social constructivist theories. However, there was no theoretically-based derivation of the construct or a systematic processing of the dimensions.

Duffy (2017) examined authenticity in 50 interviews with young women (SMIs,

Youtubers, bloggers) from a content creator perspective. Duffy derives the dimensions of authenticity from the interviews without prior theoretical foundation. According to her results, the active showing of realness, visibility and uniqueness contribute to SMI authenticity of micro-celebrities.

McRae (2017) identified inauthentic practices of SMIs from a consumer perspective. She analyzed conversations among participants in an anti-fan forum of travel influencers as well as blogging of an anti-fan community of lifestyle bloggers. She identified inauthentic practices of SMIs: using topics that are insincere or unrelated, authenticity and monetization cannot co-exist, lack of brand/SMI fit and ordinary and unoriginal content just to post something. All of these practices negatively affect authenticity. Dimensions of the SMI authenticity are not examined at all in this study and there is no theoretical foundation.

Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard (2018) analyzed authenticity from an SMI perspective. They performed a content analysis of 36 social media posts of fashion- and lifestyle SMIs and did qualitative interviews with 27 SMIs. They identified two ways how SMIs can generate authenticity. First, passionate authenticity, which they derived from self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000). SMIs are so personally convinced of a product/brand that they would advertise them even without an external incentive. On the other hand, transparent authenticity that they base on self-projection and personal branding techniques (Schau and Gilly 2003). SMIs disclose their paid partnership and communicate fact-based information about the products. However, the researchers are restricting their results themselves, since a generalization of the qualitative results is only possible to a very limited extent.

Lee (2020) also examined SMI authenticity from a consumer perspective: First, she developed a measurement scale. According to her results, SMI authenticity consists of the five dimensions sincerity, transparent endorsements (in the paper, this dimension is referred to as truthful endorsements (Lee and Eastin 2021), visibility, expertise and uniqueness. However, the derivation of the dimensions is theoretically not well-founded, because it is only said that scales from the branding literature were viewed (Lee 2020, p. 24) and these items were supplemented with the items generated from the survey. Overall, the theoretical foundation and the transfer of research results from other scientific areas are not explained in detail. She then examined the relationship between the five dimensions and the attitude towards SMI, the follow intention

and the purchase intention.

Batt et al. (2021) conducted an online experiment with 296 Instagram users in Germany from a consumer perspective. According to their experiment, two-sided messages in Instagram posts do not affect perceived SMI authenticity if the SMI has a verified badge. However, two-sided messages affect the perceived SMI authenticity if the SMI does not have a verified badge. The perceived SMI authenticity fully mediates the relationship between the two antecedents and advertising effectiveness (measured via attitude towards the brand, attitude towards the post and purchase intention). Authenticity is only examined as a dependent variable and is not examined as a theoretical construct itself. The dimensions are taken from existing authenticity research on brands and particularly human brands.

Balaban and Szambolics (2022) examined SMI authenticity from an SMI (self-perception of SMIs) perspective. To do this, they conducted 20 semi-structured guideline interviews with SMIs from Europe and developed a theoretical construct on self-perceived SMI authenticity. They have identified three levels of authenticity. Authenticity of source, authenticity of message and authenticity of interaction. These dimensions were identified in the interviews and only then theoretically explained. In addition, it is a purely qualitative study without a supplementary quantitative follow-up study.

Ardley et al. (2022) qualitatively examined the factors that determine SMI authenticity when SMIs advertise products from a consumer perspective. They use Ohanian's source credibility scale (1990) as a theoretical foundation. For the empirical investigation of the dimensions of authenticity, Ardley et al. conducted two focus group discussions. According to their work trustworthiness, transparency, relatability, and expertise lead to more authentic perceptions of SMIs.

Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser (2023) examined SMI authenticity from a consumer perspective using an experimental approach. They use attribution theory (Asch 1946) and the "Entity-Referent Correspondence' (ERC) framework of authenticity" (Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser 2023, p. 9) as a conceptual framework (Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2021). They use existing scales from celebrity and brand research (Moulard, Garrity, and Rice 2015; Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2016) to measure SMI authenticity. In particular, uniqueness and consistency increase the authenticity of SMIs. In addition, they have demonstrated a strong connection between

SMI authenticity and purchase intention.

The state of research shows that SMI authenticity was examined from different perspectives. In addition, the researchers used different approaches and methods to study the construct. Furthermore, only one study (Lee 2020) has so far developed a scale with which SMI authenticity can be measured. However, no study to date has used the SMI identity as a basis for conceptualizing SMI authenticity. Following the socio-psychological origin of the concept of authenticity, there is a large gap in previous research. Lee (2020) categorically excluded identity items when developing the measurement scale. As justification, Lee states that these items are "too specific and ungeneralizable" (2020, p. 26). However, the omission of these items is detrimental to the assessment of authenticity. The roots of personal identity are anchored in the biography of an SMI (Krappmann 1988). Only if the SMI has a clear idea of its own identity – i.e. has a clear self-image – can (s)he behave in accordance with his/her identity. In addition, identity creates clear expectations on the external side. Consumers develop expectations of SMIs that can be met by behavior that conforms to their identity (Burmann et al. 2023). In the consumer's perception, such behavior can be described as authentic. It is precisely the unique identity of an SMI that ensures that authenticity can arise at all. Accordingly, the identity of SMIs should not be excluded when conceptualizing authenticity, but rather defined as its starting point.

Table 1: Overview of the state of research.

Study	Identity-based	Ante-cedents	Conse-quences	Perspective	Operationali-zation/Measuring Scale
Marwick (2013)	N	Y	Y	Researcher	N
Duffy (2017)	N	Y	N	Contentcreator/ SMI	N
McRae (2017)	N	Y	N	Consumer	N
Audrezet, De Kerviler und Moulard (2018)	N	Y	N	SMI	N
Lee (2020), Lee and Eastin (2021)	N	Y	Y	Consumer	Y
Batt et al. (2021)	N	Y	Y	Consumer	N
Balaban and Szambolics (2022)	N	Y	N	SMI (self-awareness)	N
Ardley et al. (2022)	N	Y	N	Consumer	N
Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser (2023)	N	Y	Y	Consumer	N

Notes: Y = Yes, N = No.

Table 1 shows that there is currently no study that is based on identity theory, examines antecedents together with consequences and provides a valid scale to reliably measure authenticity. Our aim is to dress this research gap. For this purpose, the identity-based SMI authenticity construct is first derived theoretically and conceptually. It is based on the work of Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley (2014), as this is the only study that has used brand identity as a basis for the conceptualization of brand authenticity.

3. Conceptualization of Identity-based SMI Authenticity (Conceptual Framework)

3.1 Antecedents of authenticity

Since identity as a latent construct is not externally measurable, attribution theory is used to determine the degree of authenticity by analyzing its antecedents.

Antecedents of authenticity are indicators that outsiders can use to gauge the degree to which a person's actions are dominated by their identity. Attribution theory can be used to derive such antecedents. Heider (1958) was one of the first to apply attribution theory to the concept of personal authenticity. According to Heider (1958), people actively perceive actions and try to attribute these observable events to unobservable internal or external causes. Internal causation in this context means that the cause of a person's observable behavior lies within their identity. In contrast, external causation means that the cause of a person's action lies in the situational context. If there is an attribution to intrinsic causation, the term can be replaced by authenticity (Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley 2014).

Kelley (1973) further refined the attribution theory and introduced the co-variation model. Kelley (1973) introduced three main types of information that observers use to make attributions. The first type of information is consensus. Consensus means that an effect can be generalized across many different people and thus occurs in many people. The second type of information is distinctiveness. Here it is evaluated whether there is a covariance of effect and stimulus. The third type describes the consistency of information and thus the covariation over time. If an effect has a low consensus (i.e. high individuality of behavior), low distinctiveness (i.e. high consistency of the current behavior) and high consistency (i.e. high continuity of behavior over time) it can be assumed that the action was caused internally and the outcome can be attributed to the person. This can also be referred to as authenticity.

It can be established that the degree of authenticity of SMIs results from the extent to which their behavior is individual, present-related consistent and past-related continuous. If an action of an SMI is characterized by high values of individuality, consistency and continuity, it will lead to the attribution of the cause of the action to the SMI, thereby generating SMI authenticity.

3.2 The concept of SMI authenticity

After conceptualizing the antecedents of SMI authenticity, the question now arises of how to conceptualize the construct of SMI authenticity itself. Following the socio-psychological definition of authenticity presented earlier, authenticity describes the self-fulfilment of individuals. A low SMI authenticity would thus mean that SMIs let their behavior be strongly guided by external forces. In the context of social media (e.g. Instagram), SMIs would then follow any trends and orient their behavior to the needs and expectations of followers. With this market orientation, SMIs run the risk of conveying an image that is desired by external target groups but does not reflect their actual identity (Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley 2014). In order to behave authentically as an SMI and consequently to do justice to self-fulfillment, SMIs should not orient their behavior towards external forces, but exclusively towards their own personal beliefs – i.e. towards their identity. If SMIs always follow their own personal beliefs and act inside out according to their identity, so SMIs can be perceived as authentic by external target groups (e.g. followers) (Zniva, Weitzl, and Lindmoser 2023). As already mentioned, identity is not visible and therefore it is not possible to measure how followers get the impression that SMIs are authentic. However, it has already been worked out that according to Kelley's attribution theory, the perceived SMI authenticity depends on its antecedents, i.e. on individuality, consistency and continuity. The attributes of SMIs should be reflected in an individual, consistent and continuous behavior. If this is the case, followers can assume that SMIs follow their personal beliefs and thus act authentically (Gaden & Dumitrica 2014; Hou 2018).
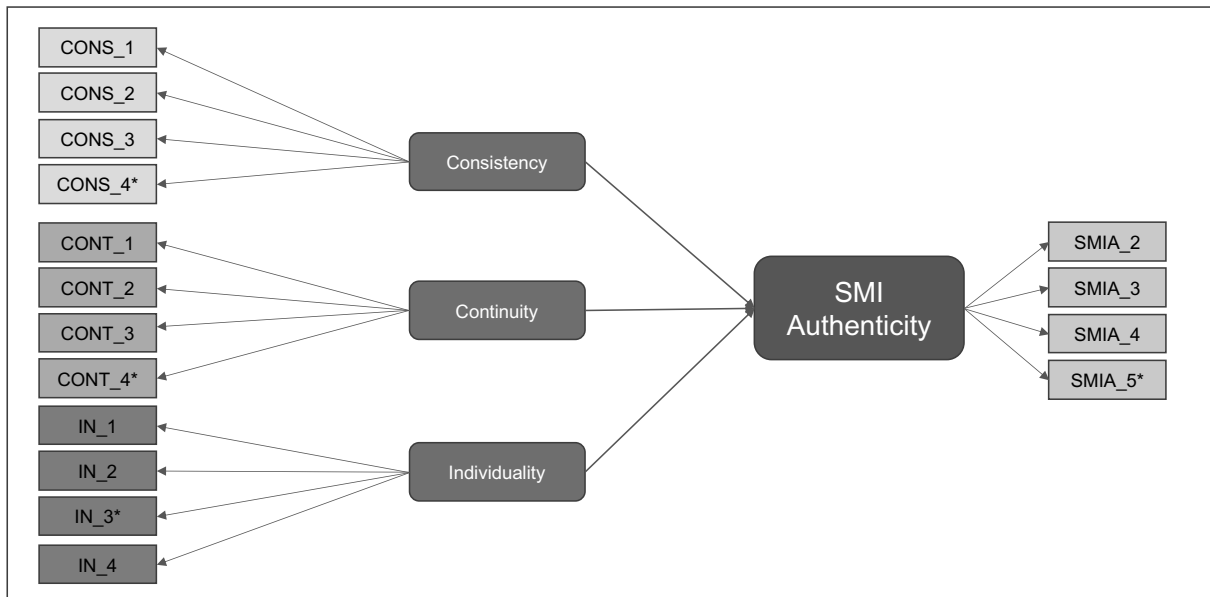
3.3 Causal model of SMI authenticity

Following the theoretical derivation, it is assumed that the three antecedents have a positive correlation with SMI authenticity. Adapted from Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley (2014), "consistency" measures those attributes that are expressed by a repetitive current behavior of the SMIs. Thus, high consistency means that SMIs consistently embody their personal beliefs and can be perceived by consumers in every contact with them. "Continuity" refers to SMI attributes that are stable over a long period of time. If the current beliefs of SMIs also reflect past behavior, a high degree of continuity can be assumed. "Individuality" expresses the extent to which SMIs implement their personal beliefs in a unique way. This study therefore hypothesizes (see Figure 1):

H₁: Perceived SMI consistency is positively related to perceived SMI authenticity.

H₂: Perceived SMI continuity is positively related to perceived SMI authenticity.

H₃: Perceived SMI individuality is positively related to perceived SMI authenticity.

Figure 1: Research model of SMI authenticity.
Notes: *Revers coded

3.4 Methodology and Measures for Analyzing SMI Authenticity and its Antecedents

The first research goal of this study is to conceptualize SMI authenticity and to develop a scale with which SMI authenticity can be reliably and validly measured. The theoretical conceptualization has already taken place. The next step is to test the model empirically. As already mentioned, this study is based on the work of Schallehn, Burmann and Riley (2014). Therefore, when measuring the antecedents and the SMI authenticity, the operationalizations they used are also used in this study. The items are only slightly modified and adapted to the SMI context. The three antecedents consistency, continuity and individuality are each measured using four items (see Appendix Tables A3-A5). SMI authenticity is measured across six items (see Appendix Table A2).

The data was collected in an online survey. The selection criteria for the relevant target group were based on the main users of Instagram (Statista 2022b). Therefore,

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female and male Instagram users (female = 64.1%, male = 35.7%, divers = 0.2%), aged 16 to 35, from Germany who use Instagram at least several times a week and follow at least one SMI on Instagram were surveyed. In order to ensure the greatest possible practical relevance when evaluating the SMI authenticity from the consumer perspective, the subjects were asked to name one SMI that they follow on Instagram and whose content they regularly consume. The evaluation of a self-remembered SMI has the advantage that the subjects have usually followed the SMI for a certain amount of time (82.3 percent of the subjects follow the remembered SMI for more than a year) and thus have a certain knowledge of the SMI and his/her behavior and identity. According to the theoretical derivation, this is essential in order to be able to assess how authentic an SMI is perceived. If an SMI were specified, such an evaluation of the SMI authenticity would not be possible. For these reasons, the memory performance method was chosen.

In order to ensure high data quality, a further screening step was carried out in which the subjects had to validate their memory performance. For this purpose, the subjects had to rate their memory performance in terms of ease of retrieval (two items) and confidence in answer (two items) on a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 = "very easy/very sure" to 7 = "very difficult/not sure at all") (Aarts and Dijksterhuis 1999; Kelley and Lindsay 1993). Only if the subjects could reliably remember (cut-off values for both constructs: answering at least one item with less than/equal to 2 and the other item with at least less than/equal to 3) were they included in the study. The restrictive screening led to very high memory performance (ease of retrieval mean [M] = 1.36; confidence in answer M = 1.17). Therefore, a high data quality can be assumed. In addition to this subjective validation by the subjects, the data was objectively validated by the authors by checking the SMIs mentioned 100 percent (key question: are they really SMIs?). The final data set includes n = 462 valid cases.

The subjects had to rate the SMI they remembered based on the antecedents and the SMI authenticity each on a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"). Following Anderson and Gerbing (1988) the data were evaluated in two steps. First, the validity of the measurement models of the individual constructs were checked using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and then the causal relationships were evaluated. Therefore, a structural equation model (SEM) was calculated to check the causal relationships between the antecendts and the SMI authenticity. We

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used the partial least squares (PLS) procedure (variance analysis approach) (Wold 1975, 1980) and analyzed with the SmartPLS software.

3.5   Results regarding SMI Authenticity and its Antecedents

All measurement models used were specified reflectively. To check the convergence validity, the loading of the indicators (> 0.7), the t-value (≥ 1.96) and the average variance extracted (AVE) (≥ 0.5) were determined. Internal consistency reliability was checked using composite reliability ρ_c (≥ 0.7) and Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.7). Discriminant validity was tested using cross loadings and the Fornell-Lacker criterion (Hair et al. 2017).

The consistency measurement model showed too little loading for the CONS_4 indicator (0.436 < 0.7). The continuity measurement model showed too little loading for the CONT_4 indicator (0.472 < 0.7). The individuality measurement model showed too little loading for the IN_3 indicator (0.413 < 0.7) and the SMI authenticity measurement model showed too little loading for the indicators SMIA_1, SMIA_5 and SMIA_6 (0.621 < 0.7; 0.285 < 0. 7; 0.295 < 0.7). The corresponding indicators were eliminated and the calculations were carried out again. Subsequent testing of the measurement models showed that all requirements were met (see Appendix tables A6-A9 and see figure 2 for the adapted final SMI authenticity construct). The measurement of all constructs can thus be confirmed as valid and reliable.
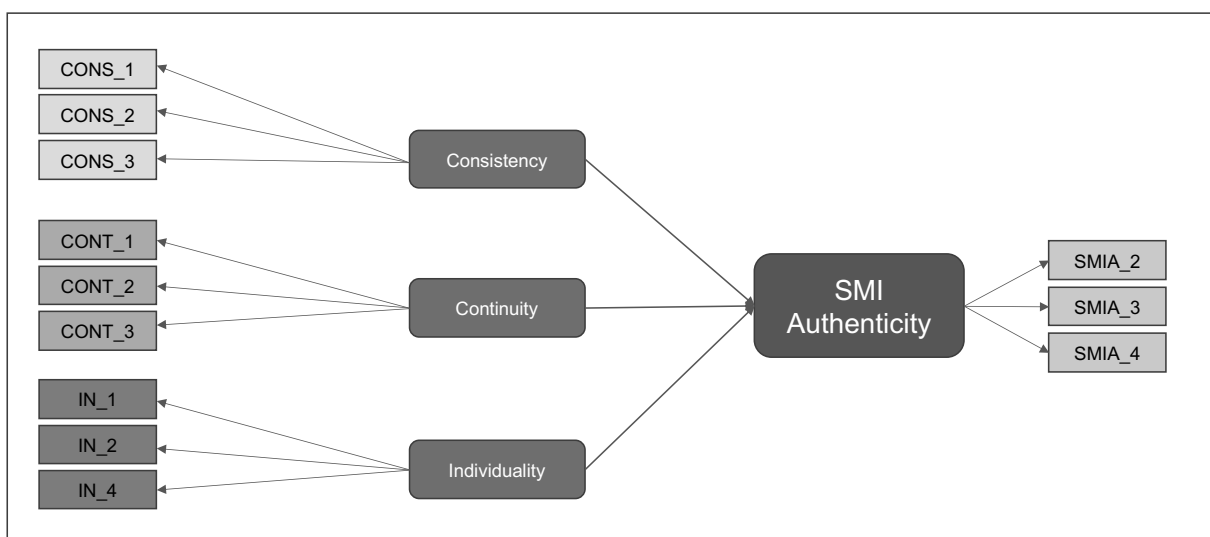
Figure 2: Final SMI authenticity construct

The coefficient of determination R^2 for SMI authenticity is 0.602. Thus, 60.2% of the

variance in SMI authenticity is explained by the exogenous constructs (i.e. the three antecedents). According to Hair et al. (2017), R^2 values from 0.2 can already be classified as high. The structural model also confirms the previously developed theoretical-conceptual SMI authenticity construct. All path coefficients are highly significant (consistency → SMI authenticity 0.399, f^2 = 0.129; continuity → SMI authenticity 0.288, f^2 = 0.068; individuality → SMI authenticity 0.180, f^2 = 0.053; $p < 0.001$ for all three paths) and thus there is a direct positive causal relationship between the antecedents and the SMI authenticity. Hypotheses H_1, H_2 and H_3 can therefore be confirmed.

4. Discussion regarding SMI Authenticity and its Antecedents

The results of the study confirm the positive relationship between consistency, continuity and individuality as antecedents and SMI authenticity. Therefore, authenticity of SMIs seems to actively build when SMIs consistently, continuously, and individually embody their personal beliefs, i.e. act in accordance with their identity. Among the three antecedents, individuality is the least important for building authenticity. Consistency and continuity are far more important in forming SMI authenticity. A possible explanation for these results may be that it is not necessarily most relevant for followers' assessment of authenticity that SMIs embody their personal beliefs in a particularly unique way. Even a less unique embodiment of personal beliefs can be perceived as authentic. For followers, it seems far more important that SMIs remain true to their identity in both the past (continuous) and the present (consistent). If SMIs base their behavior on these findings, they will probably be perceived as very authentic by their followers.

These results are also highly relevant for brands. In particular, as the results show, SMIs should occur consistently and continuously in accordance with personal beliefs. If brands now specify SMIs for brand cooperations in briefings, for example how they have to design a certain story, this may conflict with the usual behavior of the SMIs. The brand-related post would thus lead to cognitive dissonance among followers of the SMI. The theory of cognitive dissonance, which is considered part of the consistency theories (Festinger 1957), provides a theoretical explanation for the follower behavior that may result from this. Basically, people strive for freedom from contradiction. Cognitive dissonance arises whenever a person feels a contradiction between two perceived cognitions. In order to restore consistency, people then try to eliminate the perceived cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). With regard to the predetermined behavior of SMIs in brand cooperations, this would mean that such a dissonance in behavior triggers the motivation for followers to eliminate it. It is therefore conceivable that not only does the perceived SMI authenticity suffer, but that followers no longer consume the content of the SMI or even completely unfollow the SMI. With that in mind, brands should not be overly strict with SMIs about brand collaboration posts on Instagram. In this way, the SMI can create authentic content, which ultimately also benefits brands.

Compared to previous research on SMI authenticity, our study has some relevant advantages. We have conceptualized the construct in a theoretically sound manner. In this context, we have clearly defined the antecedents as well as the construct itself. In addition, we used identity as the starting point for SMI authenticity, which no other study before us has done. Thus, we define SMI authenticity as a personal characteristic of SMIs that is rooted in the person of the SMI. In comparison, the study by Lee (2020), for example, also shows authenticity dimensions that relate to the content design of the SMI and not to the person of the SMI (e.g. transparent endorsements). Thus, two different levels are mixed together here. On the one hand, the SMI is evaluated as a person with regard to its authenticity, and on the other hand, the brand-related UGC of the SMI is evaluated with regard to its authenticity. Both are related in a certain way, but the SMI as an authentic person with his/her identity and his personal beliefs always represents the starting point of authenticity.

5. Summary and Contribution

Our study (1) conceptually derived the construct of identity-based SMI authenticity and (2) empirically validated the antecedents and the construct itself. The study thus makes an important theoretical contribution to the existing influencer marketing literature. The current state of research reveals that the SMI authenticity has so far only been insufficiently examined. Either the studies lack theoretical foundation (e.g. Marwick 2013; Duffy 2017; McRae 2017) or the dimensions were not further investigated (e.g. Marwick 2013; Duffy 2017; Batt et al. 2021) or no scale was developed (Marwick 2013; Duffy 2017; McRae 2017; Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard 2018; Batt et al 2021; Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Ardley et al 2022; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser 2023).

Due to the high relevance of the SMI authenticity, which this study was able to confirm again, many researchers use the construct in their research models (e.g. as a target value, moderator or mediator) (i.a. Kim and Choo 2019; Wellman et al. 2020; Jun and Yi 2020; Pöyry et al. 2021; Kapitan et al. 2022). So far, however, there has been no valid and reliable scale and corresponding operationalization to measure the identity-based SMI authenticity uniformly across studies and thus make it comparable. Our study now makes this contribution to influencer marketing theory. The scale we developed and tested can be used by researchers in the future to measure identity-based SMI authenticity uniformly.

In addition, our study makes a relevant contribution to the theory of identity-based brand management. Based on the brand authenticity concept in the identity-based brand management model, the transfer to SMIs as human brands was successful. Our study was able to empirically confirm the concept of identity-based SMI authenticity. The model of identity-based brand management can therefore be expanded to include this concept.

5.1 Practical Implications

The results of the study provide relevant insights for both brands and SMIs. For SMIs to be perceived as authentic, they should behave consistently, continuously, and individually, always following their personal beliefs. SMIs should pay particular attention to following their personal beliefs both consistently (present-related) and continuously (past-related). This means that SMIs should not change their behavior regardless of

the type of content. Whether SMIs are reporting on their day-to-day life or posting a brand-related story, they should always stay true to their personal beliefs. As a result, followers can trace the behavior of the SMIs back to their identity, which ultimately leads to the emergence of authenticity. For this it is essential that SMIs are aware of their own identity, have a clear self-image and know what they want to stand for. SMIs can only align their behavior in an identity-based manner if these requirements are met. This also means that SMIs should not be guided by external influences, but act from intrinsic motivation. SMIs can position themselves clearly through such behavior and thus differentiate themselves from other SMIs. As a result, SMIs can actively bind their followers to them and not deter them with inauthentic behavior.

Both SMIs and brands can then benefit from these positive effects of high authenticity. The SMIs have loyal followers who like to follow them. For brands, these positive associations from consumers via SMIs mean that brand cooperations appear to be more effective. Brands therefore benefit from these spillover effects and should therefore explicitly use SMI authenticity as a segmentation criterion when selecting SMIs. Accordingly, when making a selection, brands should ensure that SMIs behave authentically. According to our findings, brands should refrain from working with mainstream SMIs. Mainstream SMIs usually do not act in an identity-oriented manner, but behave as expected of them and as other SMIs set an example. According to our conceptualization, such behavior is not authentic (Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser 2023). De Veirman et al. (2017) were able to show in this context that cooperation with average SMIs has negative effects on brand-related target values (reduction of brand uniqueness). Our developed conceptualization can be used to assess from a brand perspective whether an SMI behaves authentically. In this way, a systematic approach is possible that also delivers objectively comparable results.

In addition, SMIs should only promote products that are of good quality so that trust in them is not damaged by negative experiences consumers may have with inferior products purchased as a result of product promotions by the SMI. SMIs should therefore weigh up very critically what they advertise and not extrinsically motivated simply advertise everything. The damage is probably greater than the one-off incentive for product advertising. When choosing SMI, brands should also consider what other products the SMI advertises. As far as products/brands are concerned that may have a bad image with consumers, brands should refrain from cooperation. It is likely that past

negative experiences mean that consumers are critical of all future product advertisements and tend not to buy products advertised by the SMI.

5.2   Limitations and Further Research

Despite the greatest care, our study is not without limitations. Since the subjects could choose which SMI to name and in this respect only had the requirement to name an SMI that they follow on Instagram, SMIs with a higher number of followers tended to be remembered more often (34.2% = 50,000-500,000; 14.1 % = 500,000-1M; 34% > 1M followers). This distribution by number of followers does not correspond to reality, where significantly more micro and mid-tier SMIs are represented (Statista 2022a). A possible explanation is that the subjects were perhaps more certain that larger SMIs were actually SMIs. It is possible that larger SMIs were also remembered, since they are more present and better known than small ones. In order to check whether this data distribution has a relevant influence on the results of our study, the mean values of SMI authenticity depending on the number of followers were compared. It was found that the mean values of SMI authenticity did not differ significantly between the two groups (high number of followers: M = 5.92, SD = 0.06; low number of followers: M = 5.80, SD = 0.13). The independent-samples t-test yielded a p-value of $p = 0.444$, which is significantly greater than 0.05. The size of the SMI does not lead to any differences in the perceived SMI authenticity. The results therefore apply to both small and large SMIs.

Furthermore, our study has a platform focus. It is possible that these results cannot be transferred to other social media platforms. However, our study may offer a good starting point for other researchers. A replication with, for example, TikTok as a platform would be conceivable.

Today, SMIs are often active on multiple social media platforms. It would be interesting to investigate how SMI authenticity is perceived across platforms and whether SMIs might behave appropriately depending on the needs of the platform, which might lead to a degradation of their authenticity, because then their behavior would not be consistent and continuous.

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Appendix

Table A2: Measurement items of SMI authenticity scale (Schallehn 2012)

Indicator	Items
SMIA_1	[SMI Name] has his/her own philosophy, according to which he/she aligns his/her behavior.
SMIA_2	[SMI Name] knows exactly what he/she stands for and does not do anything that does not match his/her nature and character.
SMIA_3	[SMI Name] does not disguise his/her behavior, but is completely himself/herself.
SMIA_4	[SMI Name] does not curry favor with his/her followers with his/her behavior, but shows self-confidence.
SMIA_5*	[SMI Name] flexes his/her behavior to conform to current trends.
SMIA_6*	The saying "you trim your sails to every wind that blows" describes [SMI Name] adequately.

Notes: *Items are reverse coded.

Table A3: Measurement items of consistency (Schallehn 2012)

Indicator	Items
CONS_1	[SMI Name] embodies his/her personal beliefs without contradiction.
CONS_2	[SMI Name]'s current Instagram appearance is consistent with his/her personal beliefs.
CONS_3	[SMI Name]'s personal beliefs and his/her Instagram appearance today go well together.
CONS_4*	[SMI Name]'s personal beliefs regarding his/her current behavior are "more appearance than reality".

Notes: *Items are reverse coded.

Table A4: Measurement items of continuity (Schallehn 2012)

Indicator	Items
CONT_1	[SMI Name] has already fulfilled his/her personal convictions without contradiction in the past.
CONT_2	[SMI Name]'s previous Instagram appearance is consistent with his/her personal beliefs.
CONT_3	[SMI Name]'s personal beliefs and his/her Instagram presence over the past few months/years go well together.
CONT_4*	[SMI Name]'s personal beliefs regarding his/her past behavior are "more appearance than reality."

Notes: *Items are reverse coded.

Table A5: Measurement items of individuality (Schallehn 2012)

Indicator	Items
IN_1	The way [SMI Name] implements his/her personal beliefs sets him/her apart from other influencers.
IN_2	The manner in which [SMI Name] implements his/her personal beliefs is distinctive.
IN_3*	The way [SMI Name] implements his/her personal beliefs is a copy of other influencers.
IN_4	[SMI Name] implements his/her personal beliefs individually.

Notes: *Items are reverse coded.

Table A6: Evaluation of reflective measurement model

Construct	Indicator	Convergent validity			Internal-consistency validity		Discriminant validity
		Weight (> 0.7)	t-value (≥ 1.96)	AVE (≥ 0.5)	Composite-Reliability ρ_c (≥ 0.7)	Cronbach's α (≥ 0.7)	
SMI Authenticity	SMIA_2	0.877	58.483	0.758	0.904	0.840	• Cross-loadings: ✓ • Fornell-Lacker-criterion: ✓
	SMIA_3	0.876	45.461				
	SMIA_4	0.857	45.376				

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted; t-values for the indicators were checked and calculated using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples (Hair et al. 2017).

Table A7: Evaluation of reflective measurement model

Construct	Indicator	Convergent validity			Internal-consistency validity		Discriminant validity
		Weight (> 0.7)	t-value (≥ 1.96)	AVE (≥ 0.5)	Composite-Reliability ρ_c (≥ 0.7)	Cronbach's α (≥ 0.7)	
Consistency	CONS_1	0.879	54.454	0.807	0.926	0.880	• Cross-loadings: ✓ • Fornell-Lacker-criterion: ✓
	CONS_2	0.913	77.969				
	CONS_3	0.903	64.362				

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted; t-values for the indicators were checked and calculated using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples (Hair et al. 2017).

Table A8:Evaluation of reflective measurement model

Construct	Indicator	Convergent validity			Internal-consistency validity		Discriminant validity
		Weight (> 0.7)	t-value (≥ 1.96)	AVE (≥ 0.5)	Composite-Reliability ρc (≥ 0.7)	Cronbach's α (≥ 0.7)	
Continuity	CONT_1	0.849	39.897	0.782	0.915	0.861	• Cross-loadings: ✓ • Fornell-Lacker-criterion: ✓
	CONT_2	0.895	44.572				
	CONT_3	0.908	82.615				

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted; t-values for the indicators were checked and calculated using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples (Hair et al. 2017).

Table A9: Evaluation of reflective measurement model

Construct	Indicator	Convergent validity			Internal-consistency validity		Discriminant validity
		Weight (> 0.7)	t-value (≥ 1.96)	AVE (≥ 0.5)	Composite-Reliability ρc (≥ 0.7)	Cronbach's α (≥ 0.7)	
Individuality	IN_1	0.846	43.080	0.730	0.890	0.817	• Cross-loadings: ✓ • Fornell-Lacker-criterion: ✓
	IN_2	0.874	51.393				
	IN_4	0.842	41.762				

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted; t-values for the indicators were checked and calculated using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples (Hair et al. 2017).