

Co-fabricated authenticity. Trust and control in the relationship between fashion brands and digital influencers

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Abstract

This article investigates how fashion companies build their relationships with digital influencers (DIs), a new group of cultural intermediaries who are increasingly central to brand communication strategies. Scholars have mostly studied DIs' role in influencing the market, but largely neglected the process through which they build their work. Through a qualitative inductive research directed at 21 Italian fashion companies, we describe the process through which companies fabricate the authenticity work, while collaborating with DIs. By taking the overlooked perspective of the company brand owner, we identify the underlying dynamics of achieving co-fabricated authenticity, unpacking the mechanisms through which companies select DIs, shape the connections and regulate the reciprocity with them. 'Co-fabricated authenticity' ultimately emerges as the result of the work of those actors who are engaged in managing the authenticity or processes of authentication of marketable goods: the intangible and ephemeral value of authenticity is made tangible and co-produced through the collaboration between brands and cultural intermediaries such as DIs.

Background scientific research: The commercial construction and commodification of authenticity is a well-known issue in cultural sociology (Peterson, 1979; Rocamora, 2018) and in consumer research (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Scholars have taken an interest in its capacity to delineate an anti-mainstream posture while functioning as a marketing narrative (e.g., Guignon, 2004; Johnston and Baumann, 2010). Gilmore and Pine have argued that 'the authentic is what consumers really want' (2007: xii). In this view, authenticity becomes a true business imperative and companies strive to offer that to their consumers.

However, an uncritically enthusiastic vision of authenticity, such as the one found in business and marketing manuals or operational texts on influencer marketing (e.g., Backaler, 2018), is of little help for a critical understanding of authenticity as a social construct. According to Marwick's (2013) study of fashion bloggers,

authenticity works as an 'organizing principle' in DIs' practices, which are oriented (and described by practitioners; see e.g., Duffy, 2015; Rocamora, 2018) towards self-expression, 'honest engagement' with companies, and intimacy with audiences, in opposition to the ideas of artificiality, mask and theatrical play. Notably, Peterson's famous study on country music illuminated the notion of 'fabricated authenticity', showing that 'authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct' (1997: 5).

Research issue to be addressed: However, Peterson's perspective saw authenticity as solely a product of the fabricator, in this case the company, and intended to achieve obvious commercial goals. In contrast, we posit in this study the idea of a 'co-fabricated' authenticity where both fashion companies and DIs share responsibility in the cultural construction of this ideal. Our general goal can be formulated as follows: How do companies partake in the process of fabricating authenticity while collaborating with DIs within the fashion industry?

Methodology used: To answer this question, we performed an exploratory empirical investigation, adopting a qualitative inductive approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in order to holistically examine the company-DI relationship at 21 Italian fashion companies. We invited 58 informants to participate and finally interviewed 21 of them who belonged to as many companies. This sample encompasses the various sectors and market segments of the fashion system. The data for this study came from semi-structured interviews, which present open-ended questions in order to gather elaborate information and perspectives about our subject.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: This study suggests that the emerging micro-dynamics of relationship building are positioning authenticity as the primary output for companies collaborating with DIs. In unpacking our findings, we make three main contributions to the literature.

First, our essay contributes to research on authenticity in the field of sociology and in fashion studies by looking at this construct from the angle of the 'creators' or suppliers of this much-needed authenticity.

Second, unlike previous contributions to the domain of digital influencers, this study illustrated that influencers cannot be analysed as an isolated force.

Finally, we propose the new construct of co-fabricated authenticity, which extends current knowledge on the commodification of authenticity by showing how its construction takes place at the crossroads between a company's commercial needs and influencer grassroot narratives and practices.

Keywords: digital influencers, fashion companies, authenticity, cultural intermediaries, trust

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