Profession: Full time social media influencer

An analysis of the constant development of working routines and
career paths in the world of fashion Instagrammers

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ABSTRACT

By sharing textual and visual narratives on social media, individual users have managed to attract remarkable audiences and move towards the status of social media influencers. As authentic intermediaries between consumers and advertisers, they have been shaping the marketing landscape of the of the fashion landscape during the past years. Moreover, working as an SMI has become a desirable profession because it seems to guarantee a glamourous, effortless life. The curated Instagram feeds often hide the numerous challenges that come with the job: adapting to platform algorithms, combining commerciality with authentic self-branding and the need of strategic, standardized approaches on content production. This study examines the working practices and career paths of five full time Instagram influencers, combining data from a visual and textual analysis of their Instagram feeds and Instagram stories (N=250) and in-depth interviews. The findings illustrate the influencer job as far more complex and labour intensive than the lifestyle displayed on Instagram implies. SMIs implement authenticity strategies through behind-scenes-content and how they strategically manufacture perceived interconnectedness with their audience in their Instagram stories. Sharing private life and posting consistently appear as the most relevant factors regarding their content production, which is likely to result in working hours above average. Due to the limited instructions on how to grow an audience and to find sponsors, influencers to be are often guided by other (aspiring) content creators or benefit from former professional experiences while they build their SMI career. Yet, the career paths of many SMIs seem to be characterized by frustration and disillusion about certain aspects of the job, such as being limited by platform algorithms. Unexpected situations contribute to the constant changes in the environment of Web 2.0: During the Covid-19 crisis, the studied SMIs have adapted their working practices by redesigning collaborations and coming up with new forms of content in order to deal with the uncertainty characterizing the economic and societal situation. Ultimately, the patterns in working practices show how creating content creation on social media has developed towards a *serious* profession from a form of expression, featuring strategies and principles around building a self-brand that attracts consumers and advertisers but also endangers the notion of authenticity.

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1. Introduction

Before the Web 2.0 emerged, content production was left to those who were trained for it. Video material was shot by cameramen and edited by cutters, both with highly expensive equipment and years of experience and knowledge. Nowadays, it appears that everyone can be a content producer. Just a few clicks and an Instagram story or post, including edited video or photo material, text and music, accessible from anywhere in the world, is online. Creating content on social media has become omnipresent for commercial actors, such as brands, but also for users engaging on these platforms for self-expression.

Jenkins (2006) holds improved access to networked media in the digital era accountable for encouraging users to share visual and textual content they created themselves. Consequently, user generated content (UGC) platforms like blogs, Instagram, Youtube or, most recently TikTok, have been significantly contributing to the shift of the dichotomy between users and producers over the last years (van Dijck, 2009). Combined with fast internet connections, high quality cameras integrated in smartphones and video and photo editing applications, these networks allow any user in the Web 2.0 environment to act as producer. Former limitations such as the lack of specific hardware, knowledge or skills in the field of content production have become less meaningful.

As certain social media users were soon able to attract audiences and influence purchasing decisions (Erz & Christensen, 2017), the concept of social media influencers (SMIs) evolved. Due to their personal and authentic approach on promotional messages, SMI's quickly reached the status of a marketing and advertising phenomenon. As explained by Erz & Christensen, the field of influencer marketing has become highly professionalized in the past years and working as an SMI developed towards a highly desirable career. This might be due to the glamorous lifestyle established SMIs appear to enjoy when being viewed from an outside perspective: receiving numerous gifts and high payments, being able to work from everywhere, attending the most exciting travels and events are only a few of the assumptions that derive their content (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Popular SMIs who reached a celebrity-like status, like Chiara Ferragni, who recently created an audience-driven Media Impact Value[1] of 36 million US-Dollar when she shared her wedding on social media (Ryan, 2019), function as role models for aspiring professionals. The fashion industry has been paramount in showing how SMIs can be seamlessly integrated in prevailing power structures. After some initial resistance, currently SMIs attend press meetings, sit in the front row of international Fashion Weeks, are being photographed for magazine covers and even launch their own

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[1] Media impact value (MIV) defines the amount of total media placements on all offline and online channels, including paid, owned and earned mentions.

clothing and accessory brands. However, only few individuals manage to achieve a stable career as an SMI and the resulting 'instafame' (Marwick, 2015). Being integrated into the system of the media and advertising industry, depending on the features and algorithms of social media platforms and constantly proving the authenticity of the own brand to their audience appear as key challenges for SMIs (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

One of the reasons why building a successful career as an SMI seems particularly difficult, might be the lack of information about the working practices of influencers. Although there are no exact numbers on how many SMIs work full-time producing content for their platforms, the fact that influencer marketing is expected to reach a market value of 10 billion US-dollars in 2020 (Childers et al., 2019) implies a number that is significantly increasing. Yet, there is few literature conceptualizing the job from an inside perspective and working routines are likely to change in a fast-developing environment as social media too. Previous research on SMIs mostly covered the intentions of creating content online and how to conceive the performed labour (van Dijck, 2009; Abdin 2006b; Erz & Christensen, 2017), self-branding and authenticity strategies (Whitmer, 2018; Audrezet et al. 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Craig & Cunningham, 2019) and the relationship between SMIs and their audience (Brake, 2012; Labrecque, 2014; Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2015). Despite the challenges a successful SMI-career seems to include, the evolution of users into professional tastemakers by engaging in UGC is mostly described as playful (van Dijck, 2009) and empowering (Jenkins, 2006).

The listed concepts build the framework for this exploratory study, which focuses on the unresolved or indistinct aspects of the working practices of full time influencers. This study primarily aims to analyze and explore the measures full time SMIs take in order act professionally. Among other aspects, the study will discuss the question whether authenticity is only manufactured in interplay with commerciality, as suggested by Audrezet et al. (2018), who conceptualized SMIs' authenticity strategies based on sponsored posts. Secondly, the audiences SMIs aim to reach in the ever competitive environment of Instagram will be examined. Is the relationship between influencers and their followers really as dialogical as the feedback mechanisms on social media platforms imply? Thirdly, the study aims to identify the ways in which SMIs were guided while building their career. How or from whom do influencers learn how and what to post or what to ask for a collaboration?

Besides the previous research questions, this study will also delve into a specific situation due to the unique moment during which it was conducted. The research took place at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (April-June 2020). The unique situation also allowed to explore and document how and if the social and economic measures imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic might change the working practices of SMIs.

In order to respond to all of these questions in the most thoroughly form, the researcher has used a combined qualitative approach. In the first step of the research, feed and story postings of the

Instagram accounts of five German fashion influencers were analyzed in order to unravel their working practices in relation to the objectives set by the literature reviewed. In a second step, semi-structured interviews with the same SMIs were conducted to further describe the SMIs' practices found in the previous analysis, as well as to understand their origin and their intentions better.

Despite the limited sample of five German fashion influencers, this study illustrates a relevant insight into the working life of full time SMIs. Moreover, it became apparent that the lack of accurate instructions on how to build a career as an SMI successfully often results in frustration. Lastly, it shows how their professional environment changed during their career and specifically during the Covid-19 crisis.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Social media influencers

Social media influencers are often characterized through their value regarding entertainment and marketing in the context of the Web 2.0. They usually combine "the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday lives" (Abidin, 2016b, p. 86) with covert advertisements or brand recommendations on social media platforms, for example blogs, Instagram, Youtube and TikTok. Their ability to attract audiences and influence purchasing decisions evolves from the concept of electronic word of mouth, called eWom (de Veirman et al. 2017). Similar to offline word of mouth, eWom is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company" (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39 in de Veirman et al., 2017), with the only difference that it is published and disseminated through the internet. Scholars have established that eWom has the potential to affect consumers' purchase decisions and attitudes towards brands or products more significantly than traditional advertising techniques (Childers, 2019; Lee & Youn, 2009).

One of the keys of their success is the perceived position in front of the audience. SMIs are often conceptualized by their followers as "'regular people' crafting new ways of claiming their own routes to both financial and symbolic power within existing structures" (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) and therefore less likely to be associated with advertising practices known from the mass media. Childers et al. (2019) emphasizes how SMIs can be perceived in numerous ways, as celebrities, micro-targeted professionals or even non-professional peers, while holding the potential to engage their audience commercially.

It appears that the supposed 'non-commercial' and 'real' nature of content generated by SMIs persuades customers (Childers et al., 2019; Senft, 2008 in van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Similarly, Craig & Cunningham (2019), who establish the existence of an "influencer economy", argue that the the SMIs' authentic ways of communicating and advertising are the reason why influencer marketing has become popular. In spite of these initial characteristics of SMIs, influencer marketing has become widely professionalized and standardized nowadays (Erz & Christensen, 2017, Audrezet et al., 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Their authenticity, for example, must be carefully managed by the SMIs in their exchange with their audiences (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Consequently, users who aspire to build a career in this field have to strategically structure their content in order to be able to monetize their social media accounts and, therefore, become full time SMIs.

2.2 The transition from social media user to social media influencer

In the context of the Web 2.0, the possibility to create UGC is often identified as the basis for shaping a new, empowering role of the user. Accordingly, Jenkins (2006) argued that better access to networked media in the digital era has been allowing users to act out their preference to share knowledge and culture in communities and established the term of a 'participatory culture'. The dichotomy between consumers and providers in the online space seems to be widely broken down which resulted in the development of hybrid concepts like 'co-creators', 'prosumers' and 'produsers' (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; van Dijck, 2009; Erz & Christensen, 2017). New mixed models of labour emerged and UGC platforms are seen as "intermediaries between amateurs and professionals, volunteers and employees, anonymous users and stars" (van Dijck, 2009, p. 53), platforms where effectively, any person could become a producer of content.

However, in practice not all social media users are equally active and willing to participate (van Dijck, 2009) and not everyone posting UGC content for self-expression develops towards a serious SMI career. In order to understand the process of a social media user turning into a social media influencer, the notion of digital labour must be discussed first. Van Dijck (2009) investigated the notion of digital labour in the relation to UGC and emphasizes the fact that UGC production at its early stage is often not conceived as digital labor, but rather as fun or play. According to her, the 'work as play' ethos has widely established throughout the digital creative industries: for example on Youtube, where profit is made from users while they act as volunteer content producers and consumers at the same time.

As UGC is widely embedded in the capitalist cultural industries system, the free labor conducted by individuals is likely to be exploited by commercial actors (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Labelled as an empowering combination of producing and consuming, consumer participation is often used as an excuse to outsource the work of marketing to consumers (2016). Consequently, van Dijck explains, the popularity of UGC sites like Youtube "stipulates a variable scale of labour relations, where many contractual forms can be pinpointed somewhere between the two poles of voluntarism and professionalism" (2009, p. 51).

Since digital labour is often not perceived as such, the distinction between amateurs and professionals becomes more complex. Often, the intentions of UGC producers are used to classify their activities. For example, Abidin (2016b) who studied social media users posting their OOTD's (outfits of the day) emphasizes how many of them did not think about their content creation as labour, and - if anything - strived for gaining cultural capital instead of financial rewards. De facto, the

majority of users who starts posting on social media on a regular basis does not necessarily consider creating or building an audience (van Dijck, 2009; Abidin, 2016; Erz & Christensen, 2017).

In accordance with that, most users who develop to be professional SMIs later appear to start out as hobbyists with an affinity to online self-expression, but often without initial (professional) experience in their craft, such as extraordinary photography or videography skills or knowledge (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The perspective of income and, in some cases, a stable full time job is mostly not even considered by social media users at the beginning (2019). Producing content with intentions like self-expression, entertaining others or sharing content with family and friends is therefore often identified as casual leisure.

Yet, at the point where these users start to "pursue an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity systematically", casual leisure eventually turns into a leisure career and therefore moves further in the direction of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2011 in Erz & Christensen, 2017). Van Dijck characterizes such individuals as 'career-driven' and 'aspiring professionals' (2009). Summarized, this leaves two indicators for the performance of digital labour on a professional level: a financial intention and consistency in posting UGC. In addition, increasing engagement in self-branding is listed as sign of a more career-driven, serious leisure performance (Erz & Christensen, 2017). At the point when they consider becoming professional SMIs, users might realize the relevance of engaging in self-branding, which requires " (...) that individuals think of themselves as products to be marketed to a broad audience in the hopes of becoming more economically competitive." (Whitmer, 2018, p.1).

Engaging in self-branding through digital platforms has become highly necessary in the creative industry in which one's reputation seems to determine success (Whitmer, 2018). In most cases, creative workers have to go beyond presenting their skills and must constantly develop their presence on social media (2018). The content creation industry in general shows how online identity presentation often results in unpaid, unstandardized digital labor (Craig & Cunningham 2019).

In the context of SMIs, self-branding entails establishing own rules and requirements in order to be able to work in a way that is perceived as "professional" by them and their stakeholders (Erz & Christensen, 2017). As SMIs realize their co-dependence with stakeholders, for example possible employers, they might start managing their content and partnerships more strategically (2017). Besides that, this process appears to be shaped by "moving back and forth through constant identity negotiation with a public audience, their peers and themselves in order to create points of reverence and validation" (2017, p. 70). Inconsistent or inauthentic self-branding strategies however might be at disadvantage for an SMI's career instead of providing control over one's image and employment prospects (Whitmer, 2018). Especially when lines between media work and personal identity start to blur, self-branding activities entail risks for one's professional and private development (Craig & Cunningham, 2019).

In connection to the fact that creative work in the new economy is often rather characterized by risks and unstable conditions more than by freedom and flexibility, Duffy and Hund (2015) criticize the undervaluation of female SMI entrepreneurs. They explain how "work that *doesn't seem like work*", for example photoshoots in exotic locations or working from home, often causes these misjudgements (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9). This clarifies how the, often envied, ideal of SMIs being able to work from anywhere actually entails the constant possibility of performing some sort of work (Gregg, 2008 in Duffy & Hund, 2015). In this context, Craig & Cunningham (2019) bring up the the high amount of (unpaid) time and effort another activity of users who aim at developing into SMIs requires: actions like replying on messages or comments in order to engage with the audience.

All in all, the distinction between social media users and social media influencers seems to be mostly characterized by their intentions of producing content, the consistency of their activities and the the development of their own brand. Nonetheless, differentiating casual and amateurish labour from serious and professional labour is a highly complex task considering the fact that digital labour is often conceived differently by the user performing it. It should be added that performing unpaid digital labour, for example in case of self-branding, often appears to be considered as ubiquitous in the context of the creative industry.

2.3 The (constructed) audience

Many amateurs proudly work on improving their skills in content production and self-branding (van Dijck, 2009) but ultimately only a few are able to turn their hobby into a profession. Often, the characteristics of their audience appear as crucial to an SMI's success. The number of followers of an SMI is characterized as one of the factors that determines their popularity among new audiences (de Veirman et al., 2017) and their influence within their own network (Perret & Edler, 2018) indeed. Reviewing literature on this issue confirms that becoming an SMI in fact requires the development of a sizeable network or community (2017) which, in turn, usually tends to require a certain amount of time and effort.

But the lack of a "specific measure of what constitutes a large number" of followers or other members SMIs are linked to in the network (Perret & Edler, 2018, p. 6) makes the distinction between social media users and social media influencers difficult. Some marketing agencies for example consider content creators valuable as soon as they have reached a number of 5000 followers (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015). Yet, the presence of so-called micro-influencers seems to prove that smaller audiences can be commercially valuable too: micro-influencers are SMIs who do not necessarily

interact with a significant online reach, but are either very passionate about a topic or are considered experts regarding that topic among their followers (Backaler, 2018). Brown and Fiorella, who recommend marketers to work with users with a smaller influence for certain purposes, characterize micro-influencers as a "business's opportunity to exert true influence over the customer's decision-making process" (2013, p. 90). Similarly, Craig and Cunningham state that there are cases in which "niche creators are up to six or seven times more valuable to advertisers than top creators" (2019, p. 102).

Ultimately, a large amount of followers does not seem to guarantee a business approach, meaning the intention to monetize the produced content, on UGC either: Marwick (2013) emphasizes that some bloggers with large audiences consider their blogs as small businesses while others don't.

Although the size of one's audience does not necessarily determine whether a user has become a professional SMI, researchers seem to widely agree on the assumption that it is affecting the practices of SMIs. Compared to traditional media, the relationships between SMIs and their communities appear to be relatively dialogical and intimate (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; van Dijck, 2009) due to the availability of feedback mechanisms (Labreque et al., 2010). The impression of social media users being "open to dialogue rather than engaging in one way communication" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1413 in Brake, 2012) is a given assumption quite widespread in academic discourse. Accordingly, Craig & Cunningham (2019) argue that the term 'influencer' might not be appropriate because it implies one-way communication with rather passive audiences.

In many cases, followers perceive their relationships with SMIs as friendships (Marwick, 2013). However, rather than based on dialogical interaction, SMI-audience-relationships might be based on the concept of parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction refers to the process wherein the individuals perceive a psychological relationship with media personalities while not being able to interact with them or having very limited interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956 in Labrecque, 2014). The possibility of direct interactions, and the resulting illusion to be developing a friendship with an admired SMI, is often mentioned as a reason why product placements in these contexts are particularly effective (Audrezet et al., 2018). Nonetheless, these *friendships* are likely to remain one-sided, as both Marwick and Audrezeta et al. argue. The relationships between SMIs and their audiences are therefore far less dialogical than the interaction features of social media platforms suggest.

The notion of parasocial interaction itself affects audience-brand relationships too: a study by Labrecque (2014) describes how brands can create the impression of parasocial interaction with their audience through "crafting messages to include elements that signal that the brand is listening and responding to customers and by creating content that expresses openness in communication" which can result in consumers feeling more connected with the brand (2014, p. 145). Accordingly, this

method of "symbolic interactionism" appears as highly relevant when looking at forming relationships between SMIs and their audiences (Brake, 2012).

But the impression of a strong relation between SMI and audience is not only assumed to provide the possibility to offer persuasive product placements. Beyond that, many SMIs appear to define whether they can consider their content successful by the means of likes, comments and reactions. Next to their financial performance, SMIs seem to measure their own success in size and engagement rate of their community, their content catalogue, the brands they are partnering with and career opportunities in the offline-world (Craig & Cunningham, 2019).

These aspects of success appear to become particularly relevant when SMIs work towards a more established status of their profession (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). In order to produce 'successful' content, SMIs must consider how "their audience may potentially react" (Whitmer, 2018) to photos, videos, texts or sponsors. Here, the concept of constructed or imagined audiences is called into action because SMIs cannot possibly know all the individuals their audiences consist of. Per definition, an imagined audience is "a person's mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating" (Litt, 2012). Based on this subjective image of their audience, they approach their followers (and possible advertisers) with content strategies that are likely to appeal them (2020).

Litt (2012) explains how this form of audience conceptualization is shaped by environmental and structural factors, like the follower statistics Instagram is providing for business and creator accounts. These user-tracking technologies clearly distinguish social media platforms and blogs from the mass media (Brake, 2012), but often don't cover the audience as a whole (e.g. on Instagram, creator profiles are provided with information about their followers, but cannot see characteristics of people who view their postings). Additionally, 'cues' from individuals of the audience, such as particular comments or direct messages on Instagram, could contribute to an SMI's audience construction (2012).

Moreover, Litt (2012) mentions individual factors as relevant influences on one's audience construction: one's motivation and skills for conducting socially acceptable behavior are crucial to the process. SMIs or bloggers who are not interested in the characteristics of their audience at all (which also exists, according to Stern, 2008), are less likely to be able to construct an image of their audience and hence, to market their services to possible advertisers/ commercial clients.

Like this, the SMI's constructed image of their audience "affects the choices they make in their own self-presentation" because they feel the need to maintain the audience's loyalty (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p. 9). In order to meet the expectations of the audience, or at least their imagined expectations of the audience, SMIs selectively disclose personal information that aligns with their own brand (Marwick, 2014). Whitmer (2018) emphasizes how the self-brands, which SMIs tend to develop, are constructed through the dialogue with their audiences as well.

Yet, aiming for their content and online persona to meet the expectations of their (constructed) audience has the potential to create tensions for SMIs (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Even though their friendly relationship with the audience turns out to be mostly symbolic, authenticity and trustworthiness still appear as crucial to the perceptions of all the SMI's actions (2020). Additionally, algorithms of social media platforms represent a great threat by functioning as gatekeeper of the SMI's content (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Ultimately, the construction of the audience does not necessarily take place in all social media contexts. Additionally, the desire to reach audiences and the interaction with them can not always be considered central to blogging (Brake, 2012). However, bloggers and SMI's who don't engage with their audience are often perceived negatively, for example by their colleagues (Marwick, 2013). As audience construction appears to illustrate a simple way to strengthen audience relationship which is in turn, crucial to an SMIs value from the perspective of potential advertisers, many SMIs seem to engage in that particular working practice.

2.4 How to be authentic

Besides the size of SMI's audiences, authenticity often appears as a value marker (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015) or factor that determines whether SMIs are perceived as successful or not (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Researchers found the same for social media users, who, accordingly, aim "to be authentic and criticized others whom they believed were not" (Labrecque et al. 2010, p. 48), and non-human brands (Schallehn et al., 2014), in general.

Nonetheless, presenting an authentic persona seems to be significantly relevant for SMIs, because their messages are characterized as "one of the new forms of real, authentic communication" (Scott, 2015, p. 295 in Audrezet et al. 2018) within the marketing and advertising industry. Particularly at a stage where digital labor of bloggers is performed with the intention of an influencer career, Erz & Christensen highlight the relevance of how "levels of commercialism and authenticity" are "depicted or conceived" (2017, p. 78). Craig & Cunningham (2019) label authenticity and community as rules of social media entertainment, which shape the SMIs as much as their commercial environment. In the literature, authenticity appears to be approached highly strategically, implying that SMIs have to make the audience believe they are "being themselves" in order to monetize their online personas successfully (Marwick, 2013; Audrezet, 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

There are many concepts explaining how SMIs can achieve to be perceived as authentic by adjusting their self-branding strategies. Two of the most common of them might be the

implementation of transparency and honest communication, and emphasizing a close connection to the audience (Abidin, 2015; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Marwick, 2015; Audrezet et al., 2018).

Honest, transparent communication appears to be particularly important regarding brand engagement and sponsorships (Marwick, 2013). Aiming to reconcile commerce and authenticity, SMIs try to limit their sponsoring deals to brands who align with their own brand (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Additionally, the honest disclosure of partnerships seems to be one of the key criteria when it comes to authenticity of SMIs (Audrezet et al., 2018). Legal guidelines play a central role in these matters, providing the option to be transparent by declaring a post as an advertisement, but also risking the SMI's authenticity in cases of lacking consistency (2018). These guidelines however differentiate from context to context and have been developing constantly ever since influencer marketing became popular. The German government for example started working on legal guidelines on that matter only in 2019, which has been leaving SMIs other no other choice than to depend on ambiguous recommendations by non-governmental institutions so far (Rzepka, 2019).

Another concept aiming at honest and transparent perception includes objective product evaluations and opinions in the influencer's content (Audrezet et al., 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). In the case of fashion SMIs, this strategy also entails expressing their individual style regardless of trends, sponsored goods or partnerships (Marwick, 2013).

Since authenticity cannot be developed without engaging in dialogue with stakeholders (Craig & Cunningham, 2019), perceived interconnectedness between SMIs and their audiences defines another popular authenticity strategy (Abidin, 2015; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Addressing the audience in their captions is one of the possible implementations of this strategy (2020) by using the features provided by the social media platform (polls, open questions, live videos on Instagram illustrate other possibilities). Moreover, sharing backstage and everyday life snippets with their audience can contribute to the extent of closeness the audience perceives regarding their relationship with the SMI (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Abidin, 2015). Due to SMIs' tendency to "romanticize" their working practices and everyday life by posting mainly photos illustrating them in positive situations and moods (Duffy & Hund, 2015), sharing behind the scenes material could also add up to their perceived transparency.

Audrezet et al. (2018), who investigated authenticity strategies of SMI use regarding their sponsored partnerships, found *passion* as an additional option to express the authentic self. By emphasizing their affinity with a brand or product or connecting it with personal or emotional information, SMIs hope to achieve that impression (2018). Apart from the strategy SMIs choose in order to be perceived authentic, maintaining consistency in their self-presentations seems to be crucial to their success (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Labrecque et al., 2010; Whitmer, 2018). Accordingly,

combining several brand identities could cause being perceived inauthentic (Labrecque et al., 2010) and therefore not as a "genuine" self-brand.

As mentioned earlier, the successful implementation of authenticity strategies appears particularly difficult as soon as SMIs implement collaborations with brands on a regular basis. Then, authenticity has to be constantly validated by the audience (Craig & Cunningham, 2019), which can result in pressure, and possibly even existential fears due to the numerous competitors, for the SMIs. The opinions on the question whether commercialism might impact authenticity differ. On the one hand, commercialisation of influencers' online personas is often conceptualized as thread to their authenticity (Whitmer, 2018). SMIs know that the impact of their messages on their audience's consumer behaviour depends on their own credibility (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018, p. 1433).

They try to integrate sponsored postings into their regular content without letting it stand out too much (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) by structuring advertorial content similarly to their signature content (Abidin, 2016a). That could be, for example, a selfie that is almost identical in posing and editing style to the selfies a certain SMI has been posting for months, only with a product placement included this time. In cases where it seems like SMIs got "sidetracked by commercial opportunities to promote brands or products they would not be ordinarily interested in" (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 2), authenticity strategies automatically fail: they are labeled by the researchers as "fairytale, fake or disembodied" authenticity management (p. 8).

The consequences of a poor management of authenticity might be greatly taxing for SMIs. Craig & Cunningham (2019) describe how particular SMIs lost their businesses due to the lack of transparency or misaligning brand partnerships. Also, it is important to take into account that not everything lays in the hands of the SMIs. Algorithmic standardization of content could affect how authentic an SMI is perceived by his audience or other stakeholders: adjusting content according to a platform to pass the algorithms, which can function like gatekeepers (Whitmer, 2019), can change an SMI's brand in positive and negative ways (2019).

Banet-Weiser on the other hand does not agree with the simple idea of commercialism and authenticity being incompatible: according to her, "contemporary brand culture is characterized by the blurring between the authentic self and the commodity self" and therefore the connection of both is even expected (2012 in Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p.143). Gaden and Dumitrica (2014) argue that authenticity paradoxically becomes a strategic form of self-presentation when planned out in detail. Similarly, other researchers conceive the authenticity of SMIs as social construct, that is entirely calculated (Pooley, 2010; Duffy, 2015) and therefore the opposite of being honest and genuine. Craig & Cunningham (2019) however state that SMIs often establish an authentic self-brand in dialogue with their audience before they monetize their practices. According to the researchers, issues of inauthenticity have been present for SMIs before the professionalization of the industry (2019).

2.5 SMIs' working routines in practice

In order to become successful as described by Craig & Cunningham (2019, see 2.2), SMIs appear to follow different strategies to professionalize and standardize their content. The orientation within their own network defines one of these strategies: SMIs often emulate the practices of established colleagues (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). In the study of van Driel & Dumitrica for example, SMIs emphasized the increasing number of highly curated and over-edited postings, which they did not entirely aligned with, but considered the style within their own content production.

Moreover, the audience appears to be considered in many actions of SMIs and therefore often affects their working practices. Many SMIs appear to curate their content based on the audience's reactions (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2015). This can involve changing their style of photos or selecting brand partnership based on their expectations of the audience's preference because they want their content, including advertisements, to be valuable for the audience (2020).

Based on the relevance of authenticity in the context of social media (2.3), SMIs constantly think about their relatability too (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Content that only displays free products, global travels and event attendances and leaves out the less attractive parts of the job, like writing blog posts or replying to emails or comments, can however easily develop the impression of a glamourous, care-free life (2015). The fact that SMIs tend to invest in professional photo or video equipment (e.g. drones) as they take their practices more serious, contributes to this impression (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). In order to counteract the impression of an inaccessible lifestyle, it appears common to include more 'relatable' images, like a behind-the-scenes photo without makeup or in sweatpants, into their content to show that their lives don't represent a glamour and jet set all the time (2015).

Besides in the content of photos, videos and texts, professionalization also occurs in structuring these. As SMIs realize the constant need of fresh content in the form of regular postings, they eventually start scheduling what they upload at what time and day (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Craig & Cunningham 2019). By setting up such schedules, they automatically formalize their content production which is often necessary when partnerships with brands require deadlines (2019). Above that, SMIs aim to find the right moment for publishing their content: by analyzing their audience statistics, for example on Instagram, they choose time frames when most individuals from their community are likely to be online (2020).

When working SMIs with brands, influencer marketing agencies often take position in between the two parties. They play the role of pitchmen or spokespersons in setting up and closing SMI-brand-partnerships while financially benefiting from the deal (2019).

Ultimately, algorithms of social media platforms have become highly influential factors guiding the working practices of SMIs. Craig & Cunningham (2019) even establish the term of SMIs working in the context of an 'algorithmic culture', trying to consider a combination of platform statistics and qualitative feedback for their content production. Many SMIs follow multi-platform strategies in order to avoid an unstable working environment caused by algorithm shifts.

2.6 SMIs and the crisis

As this study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is necessary to look into literature investigating the role of social media influencers during crises. Wiederhold (2020) emphasizes the potential of social media to act as source of information and social support while lockdowns, social distancing and other measures dominate everyday life. Thelwall (2020), who analyzed tweets from March 2020 covering the crisis, found that users shared information about social distancing, their opinion about governmental statements and supported each other to cope with the isolation. Since social media users are expected to share their own point of view and reactions to a crisis (Lachlan et al., 2016 in Thelwall 2020), SMIs are likely to do the same. Next to supporting each other, these postings can also help the government or public health organisations to understand the situations of individuals and the majority of the population better (2020).

In spite of these positive aspects, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warns of a phenomenon called 'infodemic' on social media channels: "an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.". Informations spread by SMIs who tend to have a large audience, could contribute to that. The fact that the majority of countries closed their borders and banned events of any kind (Hopkins Tanne et al. 2020), is likely to require changes in the content of fashion influencers. While they are normally sharing their glamorous life, including travels and fashion events (Duffy & Hund, 2015), with their audience, the Covid-19 pandemic limits their production of new content significantly.

Moreover, the crisis might require adaptations for advertising and marketing strategies, including influencer marketing (DiResta et al., 2020). Accordingly, brands must "approach their marketing campaigns and scheduled content timelines with caution and carefully evaluate both the

language and imagery used in advertisements and marketing materials – with social media marketing in particular." (p. 1, 2020). The 'new normal', resulting from long term social distancing measures, enhanced hygiene regulations and travel restrictions, illustrates an uncertain environment for brands planning their marketing and advertising campaigns ahead (2020). Financial straits or reputation issues are risks occurring due to Covid-19 pandemic that could apply to SMIs too, considering they are conceived as brands. Apart from that, experts expect the negative economic impact to be worse than the financial crisis in 2008[2] which is likely to affect SMIs as well.

Despite that, DiResta et al. (2020) emphasize the immense increase of user activity on social media caused by the pandemic, which in turn, offers possibilities for influencer marketing to grow at the same time.

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[2] Retrieved from: https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/coronavirus-kosten-ifo-101.html

3. Methodology

3.1 Choice of Method

This study builds up on the use of qualitative methods, as these allow researchers to "discover and describe issues in the field or structures and processes in routines and practices" (Flick, 2013, p. 5). The visual and textual content analysis of the Instagram feeds aims to *discover* professionalization practices of SMIs while the in-depth interviews are supposed to contribute to further *describe* these SMI practices and their intentions. Snelson (2016), who analyzed social media studies published between 2007 and 2013, found that qualitative methods, for example interviews and content analysis, were especially common in the field of media studies, which implies their efficiency in that context.

To start with, a visual and textual thematic analysis of content included in the selected SMIs' Instagram feeds, including posts and the attached captions, as well as story snippets, was conducted. Thematic analysis of content analysis was chosen because it appears as particularly flexible due to the inclusion of deductive and inductive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the beginning, themes found in previously reviewed literature, for example signs of authenticity through passion or transparency determined by Audrezet et al. (2018), were included in the initial coding frame. However, themes from previous research are not necessarily likely to be sufficient in order to describe the entire data set. For example, the authenticity strategies discovered by Audrezet et al. (2018) only refer to sponsored content, which implies the evolution of new themes from the non-sponsored content that was included in the study. Moreover, the findings from the theoretical background are mostly based on other media content than Instagram stories, which played a significant role in this analysis. At this point, new themes particularly common in the Instagram stories of the SMIs were likely to be discovered. For that reason, inductive themes were added to the coding frame during the process of coding next to deductive themes from the theoretical background of previous studies.

By conducting the content analysis in the form of a thematic analysis, the data set can be thoroughly checked for professionalization strategies, adjustments of these based on the current situation and coherences already identified in previous research and allows the possibility of additional strategies at the same time.

As a second step of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with the same SMIs who were chosen to provide the Instagram content for the thematic analysis. This step aimed to further describe the SMI professionalization practices discovered in step one of the research. It was

expected to provide richer information on the intentions behind these actions, as well as the audiences SMIs want to reach with them. Semi-structured interviews were chosen since they are likely to allow the researcher to "explore the views and feelings that underlie descriptions of behavior, events or experience" (Legard et al., 2003, p. 150) which is particularly relevant in this step of the research. As Kvale (2007) defines in-depths interviews as a method to re-interpret established phenomenons, this step of the research additionally focused on further investigating concepts from previous research in practice as well. As a result, the topic list for the interviews was based on the theoretical background, as well as on the findings from the content analysis in step one of the research.

In order to analyze the material from the in-depth interviews, thematic analysis was chosen for similar reasons as in step one of the research. By coding the SMIs' responses into categories, quantifying how often specific themes were addressed could be made possible (Kvale, 2007). At the same time, the 'openness' of thematic analysis allowed to break down, compare and conceptualize the data provided by the interviews. Additionally, Smith et al. argue how the associative thoughts thematic analysis is making use of are "more spontaneous and less self-critical than self-report" and therefor "thematic apperception or other thought samples may reveal thoughts and feelings about which the subject is unwilling or unable to report" (1992, p. 6).

Content analysis and in-depth interviews were combined for this research because they complement each other: while the analysis of the Instagram feeds showed the image SMIs present from an external view while the interviews provided insights into how they try to define their brand-identity. The mixed-methods approach is significantly necessary here for two reasons: a simple content analysis of the Instagram profiles would only provide results on how the professionalization of the content is perceived, excluding intentions and strategies of the implementations. By working with interviews only, the results would exceptionally cover how the professionalization of content is planned and structured by the SMIs. Combining both, an analysis of professionalization structures that are visible and an analysis of the professionalization structures laying behind the content, involves all levels of the business approaches of the SMIs.

3.2 Sampling of Data Set

Following the mixed methods approach, the data for this study derived from two different sources: the Instagram accounts of five SMIs and the interviews with them, which were conducted after the content analysis. The data source for the content analysis in the first step of the research design was the textual and visual content posted during February 28 and May 1 of 2020 on the Instagram accounts of the selected SMIs. The social media platform Instagram was chosen as context for this research because of its current popularity among fashion influencers and followers, since it

was the first one to offer unique video and photo sharing possibilities which enable users to promote (fashion) brands visually (De Veirman et al., 2017) in a simple, accessible way.

Fashion influencers are perhaps one of the most professionalized niches of influencers, visible through the way fashion influencers have effectively colonized a part of the offline media in the industry (e.g. their now indispensable presence in Fashion Weeks all over the globe), which qualifies them for this study. Aiming at a data set that represents their content in general, the most recent 25 postings published before May 2020 by the selected influencers were considered. This results in a number of 125 postings in total (n=125). The analysis was conducted with both visual content, including videos and photos, and text in the form of captions of the postings. Due to the relevance of the connection between influencers and brands in relation to the professionalization of their content, so-called 'tags' (e.g. tagged brands) in the visual and textual content were also noted.

Next to their feed postings, a selection of their story content was analyzed. Instagram stories entail short video and photo snippets which stay online for a duration of 24 hours and are deleted automatically by the platform afterwards. For this reason, story content is produced regularly by most influencers, by some of them daily. During April 15 and May 1, the stories of the selected SMIs were recorded daily by using a screen-recording tool. The Instagram stories published by the selected SMI's during this time frame were highly dissimilar regarding regularity and length, which required a selection of individual story snippets per SMI. Finally, 25 snippets from different days between April 15 and May 1 were chosen per SMI through purposive sampling, which results in a total amount of 125 (n=125) story snippets to be analyzed. The Instagram story snippets include photos, videos and any kind of tags, filters and tools provided by Instagram.

The data source for the second part of the research design were semi-structured in-depth interviews with the same SMIs. Due to the social distancing measures caused by the Coronavirus, the interviews were conducted via the video call platform 'Zoom' and had a duration of 53 to 78 minutes. Except one interview, which could only be recorded as audio file because of technical difficulties, all interviews were recorded as video. Afterwards, the interviewee's responses were transcribed verbatim and, in the case of one interview which was conducted in German, translated.

Due to sensitive information about brand and agency partnerships, the data was completely anonymized for this study by adding identification codes to the influencers. In total, there were 250 research units that derived from the content analysis (n=250) as well as a total of 87 pages that derived from the interviews.

The five SMIs from whom the data samples derived were sampled purposively. They had to meet a list of criteria in order to be considered for this study. As explained in the literature review (2.2), the size of the audience cannot be considered a reliable measure of how much an SMI is involved in the professionalization of his or her online activities. Therefore, there was no specific

number of followers included in the criteria, but the fact that the SMIs had to be full-time involved with their blogs or social media accounts. This was assessed by the help of their Instagram 'bios' (the profile section under a user name, usually containing designated information about the user or the account) in which some influencers state their full-time activity. For the cases in which their full time activity was not confirmed in the Instagram bio or other professions were mentioned as well (e.g. "model"), they were asked which of these professions they consider their full-time job via direct message on Instagram. Accordingly, the selected personalities worked full-time in their profession as social media influencers and had between 10.000 and 200.000 followers on Instagram.

Considering fashion as one of the main subjects regarding their content creation was identified as a second criterion for the influencer selection. In order to detect the fashion affinity, their Instagram bios were searched for indicators. Since the five selected SMIs all include the word 'fashion' in their bio, it can be assumed they would identify fashion as one of their main subjects to cover. Additionally, the SMIs had to be based in Germany to be considered for this study, which is the case for all selected influencers. They stated in their bio to be based in Berlin (4) and Augsburg (1). The search for the SMIs was done by browsing the postings connected to the hashtag #fashionblogger_de. To get familiar with their content, the researcher followed all five SMIs for a while before the research was conducted. The influencers were contacted via direct message on Instagram, followed by emails with further on the interview taking place.

Ultimately, five German fashion SMIs between the age of 21 to 36, based in Berlin and Augsburg, one of them male, four of them female, with 10.000-200.000 followers on Instagram were selected to be part of this study.

Table 1. *Overview of recruited influencers*

identification code	male/female	age	based in	Instagram followers[3]	working as an SMI since
SMI 1	male	21	Berlin	87,400	2016
SMI 2	female	36	Augsburg	201,000	2016
SMI 3	female	26	Berlin	10,300	2018
SMI 4	female	26	Berlin	54,800	2016
SMI 5	female	27	Berlin	100,000	2018

[3] Retrieved from their Instagram accounts on May 9, 2020

3.3 Operationalisation

In order to investigate the ways in which German fashion influencers professionalize their working practices, four sub-questions were determined. The first sub-question aims at discovering and describing the measures SMIs take in order to professionalize their working practices. Guided by the second sub-question, this study tries to define which audiences SMIs attempt to reach with these measures. Finally, the third sub-question focuses on the matter of how, by whom or what SMI are guided during this process of professionalizing. Additionally, there is a fourth question dealing with whether the current social and economic circumstances resulting from the Covid-19 crisis affects the issues thematized in the first three questions.

The research design was developed to provide answers to these four questions and therefore ultimately aims at describing ways in which German fashion influencers professionalize their working practices, during the Covid-19 outbreak as well as before that. All steps of the research design address these questions. However, the content analysis of the Instagram accounts was expected to give information about the measures SMIs take in order to professionalize their working practices and the audiences they are aiming to reach for the most part Since the media or persons providing guidance for SMIs during their process of professionalizing were expected to be less visible in the content, this question is particularly addressed during the interviews. In order to be able to describe the intentions behind the findings from step one of the research, all other sub-questions were made subjects of the interviews as well.

3.3.1 Content Analysis of Instagram Feeds and Stories

After sampling the data for the content analysis in the first step of the research, the coding frame was built to categorize the postings. As the objective of analyzing the SMI's Instagram content was to discover traces of their professionalization practices, the coding frame included deductive and inductive themes. For the development of the coding frame, the phases of thematic analysis emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2006) were considered: the final themes were created through immersing into the data set, building initial codes and summarizing them in larger categories.

Existing themes, for example authenticity through perceived interconnectedness with the audience, discussed by Abidin (2015) and van Driel & Dumitrica (2020), were included in the initial coding frame. In order to be given that particular classification, certain criteria had to be found in the

data set. For this particular theme, addressing the audience in the caption of the Instagram posts with questions or requests, or trying to suggest an emotional connection between SMI and community by approaching them with heart emojis were considered such criteria. For the data that derived from the SMI's Instagram stories, asking for the community's opinion through polls or question tools, sharing content from individuals of the audience as well as directly speaking to the community classified for the particular theme.

The same coding frame was applied on data that derived from the Instagram feeds and Instagram stories of the influencers but the criteria slightly differed due to the characteristics of the content. For all themes, whether they were initial or added during the analysis, such criteria were determined. To make clear what kind of postings were assigned to which themes, the tables in appendix A and B show examples of feed and story posting for the respective themes.

As mentioned earlier, new themes were likely to evolve from the non-sponsored content that was analyzed in this study. Due to the exceptional circumstances of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, inductive themes appeared particularly relevant. In order to find out whether and how SMIs had to adjust their working practices to the social distancing regulations in Germany, new themes were added to the coding frame during the content analysis. Supporting a good cause or charity, for example, appeared as a frequent subject of the SMIs' stories during that time, even though it was not explicitly mentioned in previous literature in connection to the self-branding of influencers. For that reason, inductive themes were added to the coding frame during the process of coding next to deductive themes from the theoretical background of previous studies. Therefore, the units of the data sample were individually examined and compared to each other. By conducting the analysis in that way, the data set could be thoroughly checked for professionalization strategies and coherences already identified in previous research and allowed the possibility of additional strategies at the same time. The final themes were applied on both feed postings and stories, including all textual elements, audio tracks, tags and features provided by the platform such as the inclusion of filters, music and feedback tools (such as polls or Q&A's).

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

For the second step of the research, that aimed to further describe the SMI professionalization practices discovered in step one of the research, in-depth interviews with the SMIs were conducted. During the preparation of the interviews, an introduction and concluding section, as well as a topic list was created based on the theory and the coding frame.

The first section of the interview included a general introduction of the research. Therefore, the researcher stated the goal of the interview, exploring the professionalization of the working practices of the SMIs. Moreover, the participants were informed about the fact that a content analysis of their Instagram accounts was conducted beforehand in order to prepare them for references from these findings during the interview. Besides that, the researcher, once again, confirmed that the responses would be integrated in the research without stating names but by using an identification code. In order to prevent the SMIs from skipping describing certain experiences due to language skills, they were encouraged to make use of their native language, German, whenever they would prefer it during the interview. One of the participants chose to conduct the entire interview in German, which required the translation of the interview questions beforehand.

To start with, the participants were asked to introduce themselves. After a dialogue, the researchers chose questions from the topic lists in different order, structured along the development. The topic list entailed six different subjects based on the core concepts introduced in the theoretical background. For every section two to five key questions were assigned which were followed by one to five sub-questions that aimed at describing the key questions more in detail, as required for in-depth interviews (Hermanowicz, 2002). In many cases, not all sub-questions had to be asked since the participants elaborated on the subjects automatically.

The section of digital labour covered the intentions of starting to engage in regular content production for Instagram, the SMIs working routines as well as their definitions of work and professionalism in connection to the influencer profession. In the section about their professional network, SMIs were asked to describe their relationships with brands, agencies and other influencers. Another important group of stakeholders is covered in the section of audience relationship. Questions assigned to this section aimed at further exploring the interactions between SMIs and their audience. For example, whether the concept of SMIs constructing an image of their audience (Litt, 2012) applies is investigated by asking the SMIs whether they have the feeling that they know their audience.

Another section consisted of questions about self-branding and authenticity strategies. Here, the participants were asked to elaborate on their USP and quality standards, their idea of authenticity in the Instagram environment in general but regarding their own brands as well. The section of success as an influencer was added to the list in order to provide information of the SMIs reflection on their profession in general, while questions in another section covered the platform Instagram itself and how the participants deal with its limitations and changes.

Additionally, individual findings from the content analysis in step one of the research influenced the structure of the interviews. SMI 1 for example declared almost all his posts from the data set as advertisements, whether he was paid or not, and therefore was asked about this finding in

the middle section of the interview. SMI 5 on the other hand shared lots of content including her husband which resulted in a more in-depth question about privacy during the interview.

The second section included open questions about all subjects covered in the coding frame from research step one. Finally, the topic list ended with a third section in which the main points emphasized by the SMI were concluded by the researcher and any ambiguities could be clarified.

All questions were tested beforehand on part-time influencers (because they appeared as easier to access) as Hermanowicz (2002) emphasizes the relevance of that step. The interview data was then analyzed using the same coding frame that helped classifying the photo and video data before during step one of the research. Once again, the coding frame remained open for inductive themes.

Finally, all results, those from the Instagram feed and story analysis as well as those from the interview data analysis, were compared with and connected to each other and the theoretical concepts.

3.4 Methods of analysis

This sub-chapter aims at describing all steps of the analysis more in detail in order to prove that the research was done in a systematic way.

For the content analysis of the Instagram feeds in step one of the research, the data sets were organized in PDF documents (screenshots of the Instagram feed postings) and video files (Instagram story snippets). The thematic analysis on the regular Instagram postings was conducted first. Therefore, the postings, which were gathered in PDF documents organized per SMI, were analyzed one by one. All of the postings were given a letter following the identification code of the influencer. Since the data set held 25 postings per SMI, the capitals A-Y were used here. In a spreadsheet table, it was noted which themes applied to which influencer's posting.

When, for example, a tag of a professional photographer was discovered in one of the postings, the respective identification code of SMI and post (e.g. 1U) was added to the column of the theme 'increasing workload and quality standards'. In order to make this process more clear, the table in appendix C shows examples for every defined theme in the coding frame.

The findings were organized that way in order to be able to trace back the postings in case of ambiguities developing during later stages of the research. Moreover, cases that stood out or appeared likely to be described in the results chapter were noted in a separate list stating the necessary information. When SMI 4 for example described her attempt to adjust her content creation to the current situation in her caption in posting 4R, the identification code was not only added to the matching theme in the table, but the statement was added to the list too.

Conducting the thematic analysis like this provided an overview of the general applicability of the themes and more detailed information regarding individual data as well.

The second part of the data set, the Instagram stories, were analyzed similarly. Here, every story snippet was identified with the respective code of the SMI and the letters a-y. For the reason that the findings from both data sets were combined afterwards, there was a separate excel table and list created for the Instagram stories. However, the same coding frame was used. After conducting the thematic analysis for both data sets, the findings were compared. Again, outstanding differences were noted in a separate document. These findings were integrated in the in-depth interviews later.

The interview data was analyzed in a similar way. Again, excel tables including the themes from the coding frame were created. In this case it was one table per interview due to the amount of information. Bullet points summarizing the statements of the SMIs and direct quotes were assigned to the themes. During that process, many themes were added to the coding frame in order to not exclude information that was not expected based on the theoretical background or the content analysis. However, not all material was added to the tables because many sections were either repetitive or not connected to the research questions.

Finally, it was possible to compare all the findings per theme, per influencer, per data source.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

There has been a scholarly debate whether and in what ways the aspects of validity and reliability are applicable to qualitative research. Critics find fault with qualitative research lacking scientific accuracy, transparency and being dominated by personal opinions of the researcher (Noble, 2015). Stenbacka (2001) for example argues how " (...) the concept of reliability is even misleading in qualitative research. If a qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is rather that the study is no good" (p. 552, in Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). In contrast to that, other researchers define validity and reliability as a prerequisite of every step of academic research (Patton, 2001 in Golafshani, 2003). As, indeed, qualitative research requires "some kind of qualifying check or measure" (2003, p. 602), the notion of reliability and validity were considered while planning and conducting this study too.

Validity, which is defined as "precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data" (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34) concerns the description, interpretation and conceptualization of the data. In order to guarantee descriptive validity, data is often collected and interpreted by different researchers (Weber, 1990). Since the scale of this study didn't allow such validation, there is no proof of the classification procedure being entirely consistent (1990). However, the study included several

mechanisms in order to improve its interpretive validity. Since the research design included two different steps, the findings from the content analysis in step one could be considered for the interviews in step two. To accurately portray the meanings deriving from the data of the SMI's Instagram feeds, some findings were questioned during the interviews.

When SMI 1 for example stated the importance of appearing "real and relatable" on his account through sharing behind-the-scenes material, he was asked why he exclusively realized this on his Instagram stories and not on his Instagram feed. By questioning the findings from research step one, the misinterpretation of meanings and viewpoints deriving from the visual data was avoided. Moreover, the researcher constantly paid attention to check whether the meaning of the statements was clear: rephrasing the statement and asking for confirmation from the interviewee assured the correct representation of their viewpoints. After SMI 2 talked for four minutes about the relevance of trust and willingness to help each other regarding brand and agency relationships, the researcher ensured whether she understood her statement correctly: "So it's like, a bit like co-depending on each other?".

Regarding theoretical validity, it was made sure that there was data collected from an extended period of time. The data sets for the content analysis in step one for example included data produced before the Corona outbreak as well as during. Furthermore, multiple theoretical concepts and perspectives were included in the methodological structure of the study. The coding frame for example consisted of themes standing in contrast to each other: while Duffy & Hund (2015) conceptualized the activities of bloggers as "work that doesn't seem like work", Craig & Cunningham (2019) emphasized the increasing workload of SMIs with their popularity which appears to be thematized in their content as well.

Next to the integration of different theoretical viewpoints, the research design consists of different kinds of qualitative methods. In order to improve the quality of the research and lower the chance of measurement errors, this study made use of "multiple methods of data collection and data analysis" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604) or, triangulation. Analysing a combination of social media data and interview data from the same initial source (i.e. the SMIs) is more likely to result in a comprehensive set of findings (Noble & Smith, 2015) than using only one method.

Patton (2001, in Golafshani, 2003) considers reliability a consequence of validity in a study, which implies the direct correlation between the two factors. One of the biggest concerns regarding reliability in qualitative research however are researcher bias and the lack of objectivity resulting from them. Kvale (2007) however argues that it is possible in qualitative research, for example during in-depth interviews, to avoid subjectivity by focusing on "reliable knowledge, checked and controlled, undistorted by personal bias and prejudice" (p.2).

In order to avoid being biased, the researcher tried to be aware of the existence of particular bias during all steps of the research. This was particularly relevant in the case of this research since the researcher had engaged in working as an influencer before and therefore was even more likely to have certain expectations of the outcome. To further minimize the effect of bias, negative case-sampling was included in the research, meaning that the researcher attempted to include and examine cases that contradicted with initial expectations of the research. While, for example, the interview was expected to provide rather negative statements regarding the economic effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the SMIs' businesses, the findings showed that the circumstances worked to their advantage as well regarding their engagement.

Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to entirely remove bias, which is not necessarily problematic: the researcher's subjectivity can also be considered as a resource in the case of thematic analysis. In the case of this study, the researcher constantly reflected on the development of the analysis by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps, and therefore used a reflexive approach on thematic analysis. Kvale (2007) mentions the factor of reproducibility as precondition for the consistency and trustworthiness of a study. Regarding the content analysis of the Instagram feeds, it is not clear whether other researchers would have coded the data similarly. During the interviews however, it was made sure that the entire set of questions was asked, without adjusting to the individual participants. Moreover, the interviews were transcribed verbatim which does not allow any differences in how it was transcribed and how it might have been transcribed by different researchers.

When it comes to generalization of the findings the fact that the data sample analyzed remains small and focussed on Germany. Therefore, it is too limited to create an image that can be generalized but provides significant insights on the working practices of influencers and the changes they experience due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Summarized, there are possibilities to improve the validity and reliability of this research, such as working with different coders or extending the number of interview participants.

4. Results

This chapter contains the most significant findings from the research. The findings are structured by themes that appeared frequently throughout the data set. Additionally, this chapter discusses whether the findings connect with the concepts explored in the literature and, if not, how and why they might differ from these concepts. Firstly, findings revealed which measures the selected SMIs have been taking in order to work professionally, for example sustaining consistency in posting or implementing authenticity strategies in their Instagram stories. Secondly, their relationship towards their audience as well as towards brands and agencies could be illustrated with the help of the findings.

Thirdly, the findings, especially those from the semi-structured interviews, helped understanding how the SMIs learned perform in the influencer business and who taught them. Lastly, the findings gave insights about how the Covid-19 pandemic affects their content, partnerships with brands and finances.

4.1 Measures of professionalization by SMIs

4.1.1 From hobbyist to professional

To answer the question which measures German fashion SMIs take in order to professionalize their activities on Instagram, it is necessary to consider how and with what intentions they started sharing social media content on a regular basis. As emphasized earlier, the majority of SMIs starts out without necessarily considering their social media accounts a prospective business (van Dijck, 2009; Abidin, 2016; Christensen & Erz, 2017). This was confirmed by the findings of this study: three out of five influencers started using the platform on a regular basis without the initial intention of monetizing their account. In the latter cases it is particularly interesting at which point they started perceiving their activities as digital labour. The findings show how the 'work as play' ethos (van Dijck, 2009) applies on the SMIs' content production during their early careers. Four turning points of transitioning from a hobbyist to a professional were discovered: winning an influencer contest, registering a business, monetization and scheduling as well as structuring working practices.

SMI 1 started posting regularly on Instagram because he wanted to share content with his friends and felt that he found more people understanding him, a boy interested in fashion who was

growing up in the German countryside , on the internet. Working on his online persona, for example by having an own website, made him feel special. However, 'becoming famous' didn't appear as an option for him. He defines the turning point of his Instagram account and blog becoming professional as following:

> And then in 2016 I moved to Berlin after doing my A-levels. And therefore I got to win a contest from H&M and Grazia, which is a German magazine, and they were searching for the next German influencer. And I got to win the contest and since then I'm working as an influencer.

For SMI 4, who started her blog in 2010 already, monetizing social media content was not as common yet. After discovering a blog from Sweden created by a girl sharing everyday life, fashion and beauty tips, she started her own website and added an Instagram account in 2014. When she was asked about the point in her Instagram journey that marked the transition from a hobbyist to a professional, she said:

> I would say, since I'm self-employed. I think starting from the moment you earn money with something like this, it's not just a hobby anymore, it has become a business and professionalized.[4]

SMI 5 had been working as a model when she realized that a lot of people with a similar amount of followers as her actually worked as influencers full time. As soon as her process of content creation changed, she felt she was approaching her Instagram account more professionally:

> So it started being less spontaneous and more of planned shoots and it actually evolved in me being like "Okay, today I'm actually gonna shoot six outfits, these would be the locations" and it started, I started seeing it, yeah, more as like a planned shoot, where I would go to certain places just with the intention of taking pictures for content.

Later in the interview, she explained how she thought that monetization distinguishes professionals from non-professional influencers on social media.

On the contrary, two out of five SMIs approached the regular creation of content on Instagram from a business perspective from the beginning. Consequently, they conceived their activities as digital labour right away. SMI 2 explained clearly how she didn't start creating a digital brand around her persona "for fun" but with the plan of monetizing it. SMI 3, who had worked in PR agencies before and wanted to be self-employed, built up her website and Instagram in order to earn money with the platforms as well. All factors that characterized the turning points from hobbyist content

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[4] Original quote: "Ich würd' sagen, seitdem ich mich selbstständig gemacht hab. Also ich glaube sobald man mit etwas Geld verdient, ab dem Moment ist das 'n Business und ab dem Moment ist es professionalisiert und nicht mehr ein Hobby."

creators to professional SMIs mentioned by SMI 1, SMI 4 and SMI 5 were targeted by the SMI 2 and SMI 4 ever since they started posting content on a regular basis.

This finding might point towards a change in the fact that the majority of SMIs start out as hobbyists (van Dijck, 2009; Abidin, 2016; Christensen & Erz, 2017): as the popularity of influencer marketing increases and more individuals manage to build a profitable career as SMIs, more users might get motivated to attempt becoming an influencer in turn. For the remaining two SMIs it was clear from the beginning that they wanted to turn their Instagram accounts into businesses.

4.1.2 Consistency in posting

As SMIs reach the point of considering themselves as more than a hobbyist content creator, they seem to engage in certain practices structuring their working routine. According to van Driel & Dumitrica (2020) and Craig & Cunningham (2019), influencers start scheduling and structuring their content as they realize the constant need of fresh postings. The Instagram account analysis as well as the interviews clearly revealed how crucial the consistency in postings appears to an SMI's success. The interview responses implied that the 'algorithmic culture' (2019) on Instagram might reinforce the pressure to constantly publish new content. Moreover, the consistent need of new content seems to result in working hours above average, as most SMIs stated that they work every day of the week. Due to the workload, the selected SMIs tend to combine their professional with their private life, which, in turn, could make their working life seem more effortless and glamorous than it is (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

The fact that the practices of SMI 1 aimed at consistency was illustrated through the findings in the data set: he posted 25 new photos or videos to his feed within 10 days, other SMIs spread the amount of 25 postings over 38 days. He explained these actions during the interview:

> So posting on a daily basis, and having kind of a concept or a regularity for your followers. (...) Like having something regular day by day that followers can rely on. That's professional in… like for me.

As the quote implies, this principle does not apply to his feed postings only. The Instagram stories in the data set of SMI 1 clearly implied a similar principle: it usually starts early in the morning with the influencer getting up and ends with him going to bed. Through the time period of ten days, SMI 1 had published several story snippets every day. His clarification during the interview reveals how he makes use of the Instagram algorithm in order to display his content to as many of his followers as possible:

So that's the first thing I do in the morning, posting a picture. And then, I immediately start with stories. So that followers who see the pictures directly see new stories, because you always have to post one story each hour so it's the first [gesturing] story symbol of your account the follower sees when he goes on his Instagram feed.

SMI 2, who is the only one of the selected influencers who can keep up with SMI 1's consistency of feed postings (25 posts within 10 days as well), talked about how she adjusted the amount of postings to the Instagram algorithm in order to achieve the constant growth of her audience she had experienced before. The power relations between platform and creator, however, seem to be imbalanced, she implies:

And this is when it started to get a bit tiring, because at the end of the day you can't change the system. They always say, like Instagram, ehm, "Be creative, upload IGTV, do stories, post a lot of pictures" and I did all of that and, ehm, still I didn't grow anymore. I did, but really, really, really slow. Then I started to question everything and asked myself whether I see myself in this business, plus, it's super superficial.

Since publishing content in such quantities requires producing it first, SMI 2 has to plan ahead in order to stick to her routines. Especially when she has travels planned, she has to shoot photos in advance with her husband, who works as her photographer next to his actual job as professional soccer player. Shooting 17 outfits in a row before a 10-day trip wouldn't be unusual, she explained. In the beginning she had to work 24/7, now, she says, she tries to cut back in the weekends because she struggles with staying creative otherwise:

So I do work seven days a week, however (...) I do take the weekends now a little… let's say not as serious as I used to be. Because I used to be super driven and super crazy about everything and I kinda changed that now that I take the weekends to get some rest as well.

Working seven days a week appeared as a matter of course during all five influencer interviews. SMI 3, who posts stories on Instagram every day, has a clear answer to the question whether she works all week:

It's definitely not an eight-hour-day job. So nine-to-five? No. I think I mean I, I'm selling my life, so.

What SMI 3 means by 'selling her life' was clarified when she talked about how she combines private and professional life in her daily routine:

And on other days I'm meeting friends, we're having coffee, we do… maybe we cook something, bake something and also, that's the fun part but we try to make content out of it. So work-life. But then we take pictures and yeah, we are having a fun time but we're also productive…

The line between the private and public life of SMIs are blurry, especially when traveling, SMI 3 explains. There, a combination of coffee, lunch and parties on the one hand and shooting campaigns and creating content daily on the other, can easily make a vacation appear as "super fun", when it's actually work, SMI 3 stated. These messages relate to the phenomenon of 'work that doesn't seem like work' described by Duffy & Hund (2015). As SMIs often tend to show more of the 'fun' parts of their job, the actual workload is likely to be underestimated by outsiders.

The longest Instagram stories in the data set (up to five minutes long) were found on the account of SMI 4. Consequently, she considers herself working everyday too, but makes a distinction between the activities for her business she just does because it is necessary and those she enjoys doing: Insta stories feel less like work to her because she can be creative, she explained. Replying to mails, doing taxes or writing the captions for her postings are things she enjoys less and therefore feel more like work to her. The content analysis showed that SMI 4's feed postings were far less consistent than her story postings (25 postings in 20 days) and, for this reason, underline her preference of certain working practices.

Interestingly, SMI 5 states that she does not always work seven days a week but "does something for social media every day". Here, the concept of perceiving certain activities the influencer job requires more as work than others, comes into play again. This could also correlate to the fact that identity presentation online in form of unpaid, un-standardized digital labor has established in the creative industry (Craig & Cunningham 2019) and therefor feels less like work for SMI 5, who used to work on her online presentation during her model career without getting paid for it as well.

Often passion is used to legitimize the workload that results from the consistency in producing and posting new content. A statement by SMI 1 illustrates that:

> I think seven days a week. But, ehm, because it's my passion and what I, I just love doing what I do, so it doesn't really feel like work, yeah.

Moreover, he explains how he, when he struggles with the workload and self doubts that come with the job, focuses on the fact that he "loves what he does". Other influencers seem to struggle with the immense working conditions too: SMI 2 emphasizes her necessity of passion by talking about phases in which she had lost it and weren't able to do her job sufficiently anymore.

> Because what I realized doing these paths I'm actually doing, that I get less creative. Because I've been travelling non-stop and you can just get tired of everything and I think, once you lose passion for what you're doing, you start to struggle. And, ehm, this is what I experienced twice in four years.

Perhaps the SMIs' passion for sharing social media content contributes to the fact that they tend to only conceive the digital labour they perform as work when they had noticed a significant turning point, like earning money, before. Assuming that the majority of content creators perceives digital labour like the SMIs in this study do, this would explain why free labor conducted by individuals is so likely to be exploited by commercial actors, for example advertisers who make unpaid deals with micro-influencers or hobbyists.

4.1.3 Building and sustaining relationships with brands and agencies

Next to consistency in posting and working passionately, SMIs seem to take certain measures to make a more professional impression when it comes to working together with agencies and brands. Craig & Cunningham (2019) describe the task of influencer marketing agencies as "traditional practices of marrying advertisers and brands with potential spokespersons and advocates". The SMIs interview responses on the contrary define their relationship more as a power play.

SMI 1, whose data set displayed several PR agencies tagged in his feed postings, explains his relationship to them as following:

> (..) I feel like I have to be the nice guy and be almost over nice and kind to the agencies and people behind brands. So, in return they like me and book me for different collaborations.
> I feel like the agencies and people want to talk about themselves, yeah, and then being on time with all the collaborations, approvals, and payments and stuff. Or sending invoices. You have to be there for them 24/7 and send everything on time.

SMI 4 experienced a positive effect on the willingness of agencies to collaborate with her when she makes a friendly impression in her mails and at press events, but she doesn't consider becoming friends with them as professional:

> (...) I have to negotiate with these people. That's why I find it important to keep a certain distance, because when it gets too friendly and nice, it can be negative. Then, for example, you don't get the prices you'd actually want.[5]

SMI 3 stated that PR agencies might not be the "most professional scene ever" and seemed to have a rather negative attitude towards them. From her experiences in working at a PR agency herself,, she assumes that the power play between agencies and influencers derives from jealousy:

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[5] Original quote: "Deswegen finde ich halt auch mal wichtig so eine gewisse Distanz zu haben, weil wenn es zu freundschaftlich und nett wird dann kann das halt auch negativ sich auswirken und man kriegt dann zum Beispiel nicht mehr die Preise, die man eigentlich haben wollen würde."

> PR agencies have five clients and you can't focus on five clients. Sometimes I just think it's bullshit what they are doing, really. And I mean, I can talk like that because I worked for two years at agencies and it's what I have experienced (...) there is always a negative energy in house so everyone is like, there is so many jealous vibes. (...) they are all so often not willing to pay you for something because they think "I'm working here a month for 1000€ (...) and she gets 1000€ for an event, why though?". (...) So I did not understand that they do other things for that and a lot of work and was just like, why that's not fair but actually it is fair. But, yeah, that's why I also not wanted to work in agencies anymore because this was a vibe I did not wanna live.

After all, maintaining a friendly, but not too close, relationship with agencies and brands appears highly relevant in order to close collaboration deals.

4.1.4 Multi-platform strategies

The more popular influencer marketing becomes, the more the competition in the SMI community increases (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). In order to avoid being financially dependent on one platform, many influencers spread their content on different channels. Multi-platform practices, in this case meaning the linking and promoting of content on other platforms than Instagram, were discovered at the majority of the analyzed accounts. The video platform TikTok occurs as one of the most popular platforms in this matter.

SMI 1, whose Instagram stories included several linkings to his TikTok account explains what makes the vastly growing[6] platform so interesting:

> Actually TikTok to me feels like the old Instagram. Because the old algorithm on Instagram was way different than it is today. So special about TikTok is that you can actually grow from posting content and the chance to build a community is way bigger than on Instagram. And that's something that is very charming to me because I already feel a growth on Instagram through TikTok. So I have daily direct messages on Instagram from people who are coming from TikTik and tell me "Hey, saw you on TikTok, love your profile, want to get to know more about you" and that's actually the best thing. So building up a platform here and transferring the followers to Instagram and growing over there. Yeah and then in general I think it's always better to have different possibilities to grow communities or earn money (...)

In spite of all advantages multi-platform strategies provide, Craig & Cunningham (2019) also mention the exhausting labour conditions resulting from the additional content production. Besides that, SMI1

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[6] According to Forbes, TikTok is the most downloaded non-gaming app worldwide. Retrieved from:
https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccabellan/2020/02/14/tiktok-is-the-most-downloaded-app-worldwide-and-india-is-leading-the-charge/#4344bb2c7266

explained how he needed time to understand TikTok as a platform and only learned by trial and error which kind of content performs well.

The difference between the platforms Instagram and TikTok appears to be challenging for other SMIs too: SMI 5 made an attempt at creating and posting TikTok videos as well, but is not sure yet whether she will continue:

> And then I also started getting mails from brands asking "Hey, are you on TikTok? We're trying to collaborate." and I'm like "Maybe I should like hop on that bandwagon.". Then I was really active for about ten days and now the last month I haven't done anything because I don't know, I'm not sure if it's the right platform for me.

SMI 2 states that she doesn't know whether the possibilities of creating content on TikTok match with her brand yet and therefore rather focuses on her website and online shop. SMI 3's feed postings were the only ones in the data set that linked or referred directly to her website regularly. Consequently, she mentions different platforms as premise for an ongoing business:

> And always like doing podcasts, watching webinars, Pinterest is super helpful for me. I tried to not focus too much on Instagram. Because I wanna have a business forever with it. And not just be something an influencer on Instagram at the moment.

4.2 Guidance through the ever competitive Instagram environment

4.2.1 Other influencers: mentors, colleagues or competition?

Next to the measures SMIs take in order to do their job professionally, the findings of this study provide information about who or what guides them during this process. Depending on the intentions the SMIs started creating and posting content on Instagram with, they were taught and guided by different experiences, individuals or environments. Van Driel & Dumitrica (2020) found that influencers often orientate themselves by established colleagues and adjust their content accordingly. The findings of this study show additionally, that the network of aspiring professionals appeared as one of the most relevant sources of guidance.

SMI 2 explains why it was helpful, particularly in the beginning, to connect with influencers who already had experience with the influencer business:

> I didn't have any experience in the business, but what I did in the beginning is, I spoke to a lot of people. (...) I was so curious about everything, so what, the first thing that I did is, I remember: I drove to Vienna and I interviewed two girls, two Austrian bloggers who had been blogging for like five years before me already, so they had a lot of

experience. So I just asked them. Asked them about pricing, asked them about how to… how to approach clients and stuff.

However, since she got to know how the business works, she avoids spending too much time with influencer colleagues, she says. The reason for that seems to be a lot of complaining and negative energy in the influencer scene. SMI 1 shares a similar opinion when he was asked to explain whether he thinks it's important to connect to other SMIs:

> I think it's important, definitely. But it used to be more important than it is now because the scene is… influencer scene is so fake that if you really connect with people, it's always about who has more followers, who has more likes and collaborations and stuff.

The finding from Perret & Edler (2018), that a higher number of followers indicates a more influential position in the SMI network, contributes to the assumption of influencers exploiting each other. SMI 1 thinks one of the reasons for that development might be the fact that the influencer business got more professional, and therefore more competitive, over the years.

Still, the data set showed that SMI 1 and SMI 2 were connected with other influencers through their content. SMI 1 for example tagged a fitness influencer whenever he published his workouts in his Instagram stories. Additionally, according to his stories, SMI 4 appeared to be one of the few people he still met during the period of social distancing in which the data set was sampled which implies a friendship. SMI 2 supported another influencer's fashion brand in her story by tagging and introducing it to her audience. SMI 1 implies how connecting to other influencers appears to be a common method to affect one's performance on Instagram:

> Because people feel when someone wants to have their followers or their reach because the influencer scene is getting older and people are more clever, and, yeah, know their worth.

SMI 3, SMI 4 and SMI 5 made the impression of being more convinced of the positive effects of being well connected among influencers. SMI 3, who sees other influencers as her colleagues and friends, values the possibility producing content together:

> Always other influencers helping each other, so if we need something we shoot each other and I think that's amazing because otherwise you have to pay for a photographer (...)

Teaming up with other influencers is the only way to be successful in the influencer business, in her opinion. In a dialogue with other SMIs she discusses, for example, prices for postings:

> Yeah, I think that is the only way to be in the scene, branche or whatever. Because, not because of your reach or your followers, but… we don't have an office where we go and can talk to our colleagues, so this is our kind of office, workspace we have to inspire each other and talk about the business. (...) We also talk about prices, so "What are you taking for a post?".

On top of that, SMI 3 even states that the friends she found in the influencer scene determined her photography style .

For SMI 4, her influencer friends play a role in her working practices too. She mentioned likewise how she compared prices for postings with other SMIs at the beginning and adds how she and other influencers experimented with taking photos at the start of her career:

> So of course we learned by watching others, or maybe not by watching, but we tried different things together. Which photos we took of each other we liked best, which editing styles and apps worked best.[7]

Until today, she appreciates that about 50 to 60 percent of her friends work as influencers too. Mainly because it seems easier and more convenient for her to take photos, especially during vacations where it needless to say among influencers that free time and content production are being mixed. The findings from her Instagram stories aligned with these statements: the only other people visible in SMI 4's data set (i.e. tagged in the story snippets) were other influencers.

SMI 5 explained that her business only started growing when she decided to join forces with two other influencers. When she was asked if she had the feeling they taught each other how to work as influencers, she replied:

> Yeah, yeah. And we also all actually ended up making way more money when we worked together. I know that sometimes it's not so easy because a lot of instagrammers, or influencers, work on their own or they work with their partner, but we all actually had the experience that it worked better when we were working together because everybody could focus on their strengths. And we would also sometimes pitch to clients together. So we would take couple, partner pictures or like, even create stories that would involve the three of us.

Not only brands seemed to become more interested in them, their audiences too: SMI 5 explained how their story views increased when they would go on blogger trips together. However, SMI 5 stated that she did team up with other influencers more often in the beginning. Consequently, her Instagram content shows only one link to another influencer (in the form of a feed posting where she poses with another SMI and tagged her in photo and caption).

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[7] Original quote: Also man hat sich natürlich abgeguckt wie, oder beziehungsweise nicht abgeguckt aber vielleicht so'n bisschen auch zusammen sich ausprobiert. Welche Bilder einem am besten gefallen, die man gegenseitig von sich schießt, ähm, oder man tauscht sich aus was Bildbearbeitung oder andere Apps angeht.

Lastly, the working practices of fashion SMIs are not only influenced by other SMIs they know, but also by those they daily see on Instagram. SMI 1 and SMI 4 state that they consider the platform as one of their main sources of inspiration which constantly affects their sense of style and aesthetics. SMI 1 explained why the content on Instagram has had an influence on his working practices, for example on his photo editing style:

> So, I love scrolling through Instagram, I love being a consumer of the platform, not only being a content producer.

In general, all influencers agree on the fact that it is advantageous to connect with other influencers. This reflects in the findings from the content analysis of their profiles which showed that, again, Instagram stories feature more links to other influencers than feed postings. Connecting with SMIs appears to be highly relevant at the beginning of an influencer career, where the prospective SMI is not fully aware of the rules and structures of the business. These guiding SMIs can be established colleagues, as suggested by van Driel & Dumitrica (2020) or other individuals who are interested in working as SMIs and willing to experiment and test different working practices together.

As the SMIs learn more about the influencer business, the connection to other influencers does not necessarily becomes less valuable. Producing content with other influencers can be more efficient, financially (because no photographer must be paid) and time-wise (because SMIs are more used to taking pictures compared to individuals who do not engage in the business). Moreover, the interviews implied that the connection to other SMIs can push the own business, especially when one of the SMIs has access to a larger audience. This however might result in faked friendship relations among influencers which, in turn, makes the SMI scene less attractive to influencers who have a large following already.

4.2.2 Guidance from former professions and other media

Nevertheless, other SMIs and the Instagram environment did not appear as the only factors providing guidance and orientation while the selected SMIs were developing their businesses. Their former professions as well as media outside of the Instagram cosmos played a role, as some of them explained.

Since two of the five selected SMIs consider their activities on social media their first full-time job, only SMI 2, SMI 3 and SMI 5 mentioned skills and knowledge gained before their influencer career as still valuable. Working in influencer marketing at a PR agency did not only made the job 'on the other side' attractive to SMI 3, it also prepared her for it:

> Actually I learned most because I worked in PR agencies for two years and in a start-up. And there I got to know how to pitch something, how to do a presentation, a media-kit, something like this and this is super helpful inside of this business. Because when I'm talking to people who just started and had no idea about the job or just studying and have no idea about the business behind, they always… it works out because clients come to them but they don't know how to go to clients and present themselves.

> When I came to Berlin, I actually, I didn't know what bloggers are doing. And when I started to work in agencies I got an idea of it. And then I was like "I can do that. Maybe. Let's try!".

SMI 5 comes from a different background: she started her career as a model and worked on improving her Instagram account only because her agency told her it would give her an advantage at castings. Her experiences as a model, and the fact that she is married to a photographer, has not only been helping her to create high quality content for her Instagram, it helped her with negotiating prices too.

> (...) I know how much usually a production is. And I think that's also something where, sometimes, it makes me a little bit upset when people sell themselves too cheaply. When they're "Yeah, okay 100 bucks" and I'm like "Okay, if you had to, if like the client had to do this production, they'd have to book location, photographer, makeup artist, assistant, stylist, model, agency." And like now they're getting this for a fraction of the price already so that's making me more confident in my pricing for sure.

Another example for jobs that might make the first steps in the influencer business easier is SMI 2's former profession: presenting. She explains how her experience with presenting for big brands in different branches worked as an advantage when she started her career as an SMI:

> Because you have to be authentic, but you're not the best in bringing this across, then it's hard. But for me it was never a problem because as you can see I like to talk.

Additionally, SMI 2 was offered to combine her old and new job several times. During Copenhagen Fashion Week, she was booked last minute to host an event by one of the biggest e-commerce companies, which she would have only attended as guest, initially. Since SMI 2 already started working together with a management when she had only 20.000 followers on Instagram, she was taught a lot by them, especially her current agent, as well.

Apart from that, the selected SMIs were asked to think about other sources of inspiration, guidance and learnings. SMI 3 and SMI 5 explain how they try looking for inspiration outside of Instagram, for example on other social media platforms like Pinterest or fashion magazines, such as Vogue or the German women's magazine 'Brigitte' that features non-fashion-related topics as well. SMI 3 elaborates on how she thinks trends established in high fashion magazines affect her Instagram postings:

In the beginning I was, I tried to be super editorial. Because, I'm going back to being natural. But (...) I think this is also not just my movement, also a movement in Vogue. So being Vogue super-editorial like in the… yeah, like ten years ago maybe. Now it's like Vogue being more natural.

Finally, SMI 2, who started her blog and Instagram with the intention to turn it into a business right away, talks about additional people she learned from in the beginning. She started her website together with a graphic designer who was responsible for corporate design and blog design while SMI 2 embodied the spokesperson of their brand. Another field she needed guidance in was the financial part of the business, since she was always employed before. Here, she looked for help in her family and found it in her brother who overlooked figures for her and gave her advice on how to manage finances as an employer.

As the findings show, skills from former professions in the creative industry might be helpful for SMIs, especially when starting their business. Since working at a PR agency includes direct communication and negotiation with influencers, it can be considered one of the most advantageous professional backgrounds. But also jobs that seem more distant from the social media influencer scene can provide advantages, as SMI 2 and SMI 5 who worked as presenter and model, proof. Furthermore, other social media networks like Pinterest or print media, like Vogue, can influence the working practices of influencers. Lastly, individuals in the SMIs personal environment might be able to contribute to their businesses as well.

4.4. SMIs and their audiences

As emphasized in the literature, the relationships between SMIss and their audiences appear more dialogical than those between traditional media and their audiences (Labrecque, 2010, van Dijck, 2009, Craig & Cunningham 2019), but are in practice often characterized by symbolic and parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014; Marwick, 2013). The content analysis of the Instagram accounts showed how the majority of the influencers designed their content to appear interactive towards the audience while the interview responses identified the limitations of these interactions. To provide a feeling of perceived interconnectedness, which might work to the advantage of their perceived authenticity (Abidin, 2015), they do not only seem to engage with individuals from their audience, but share their feedback a regular basis too. Moreover, the interview responses revealed the workload resulting from interacting with the audience and community management emphasized by Craig & Cunningham (2019).

The implementation of the concept of audience construction (Litt, 2012) was notable in the sense that the majority of influencers had a clear vision of their audience but did not clearly state they would adjust their content to this image. However, they all seem to value audience feedback and willing to adapt their content to a certain extend.

4.4.1 Perceived interconnectedness

In general, the SIMs described the relationships with their audience as "close", "personal" or "important" and "playing the biggest role". Their responses explain how and why they have been working on their relationship with their audience and how it can be characterized. SMI 1 thinks that his relationship with his audience became more personal through sharing personal experiences in his stories. While the content analysis of his feed postings revealed that only three of 25 directly addressed his audience in the caption, his stories seem more personal indeed: in the daily photos and videos, he directly talked to his audience everyday, shows himself with face-masks or records himself during cleaning the apartment. He enjoys to communicate with individuals from his audience by making use of the feedback mechanisms provided by Instagram:

> I love sending voice messages to my followers, or even videos and also always tell them if they have any problems with what they wanna do in the future or how they design their rooms or like interior questions or something, so that they can always write me. So the relationship is very, very close. And I think for some of them I'm kind of a… kind of a friend. Not really friend, but a person that they really put trust into.

Addressing the audience in his stories and communicating with them via direct messages are not the only ways in which SMI 1 works on his audience relationship. The data set included several Instagram stories in which he reposted other stories tagging his account. These story snippets showed individuals from SMI 1's audience sharing a screenshot of his profile or a particular post in their story, stating he inspires them. These were then reposted and commented with heart-emojis by SMI 1, thanking his audience for the support and compliments. While these findings imply a rather dialogical relationship, another statement points out the interaction between SMI 1 and his audience remain parasocial most of the times:

> But some people forget that I'm still not their best friend, and still have an own life. And at the point when people write me every day it's a bit too much. But some people are just very kind and write some messages, one time a week and then it's also for me kind of a… kind of a 'friendship-relation' [gestures quotation marks] because I already saw some of them in real life at festivals or something and then it's always nice to talk to them or give them advices.

SMI 4 emphasizes the same balancing act. She states that she tries to appear as a "good friend" and approachable to her audience in her content. After mentioning the fact that many of her followers send her long, personal direct messages on Instagram, she was asked why she thinks her followers seem to feel so connected with her. Thereupon she explains that she designs her content in an interactive way on purpose:

> Because I try to give them the feeling of being connected through my content. How stupid, this sounds completely manipulative![8]

Afterwards she mentioned what the content analysis of her Instagram stories had shown as well: she tries to keep her stories interactive by asking questions, by integrating content her followers can identify with, by using polls and question tools and by talking to her audience as she would to her friends. Another aspect that stood out during the analysis of her stories was that she constantly addressed her audience as *Leute* which can be roughly translated to *guys* and implies a rather personal relationship when used in German language. Moreover, her analyzed posts usually involved long captions including personal experiences and thoughts in the caption. 11 of 25 posts address the audience directly, for example by wishing them to "Stay healthy! Not just physically but also mentally.". By expressing openness in communication through these actions, her audience might feel more connected to her, as Labrecque (2014) argued it would be the case regarding traditional brands. However, SMI 4 is aware of the fact that these actions identify as what Brake (2012) describes as symbolic interactionism:

> (...) nevertheless I have to say that it is more anonymous than what my followers would wish for, I think.[9]

In general, the content of all five SMIs included signs indicating that they aim at perceived interconnectedness with the audience. Instagram stories appeared as the more common place to involve audience feedback and interaction than Instagram posts. Four of five SMI's stated during the interview that they find it relevant to communicate with their audience but cannot provide friendship relations or a constant, reliable dialogue to them. SMI 3 was the only interviewee not mentioning any aspects of her relationship with the audience being shaped by parasocial interaction. She defines the dialogue with her audience as the part the likes most about the platform Instagram and explains the direction she is working towards:

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[8] Original quote: Weil ich versuche durch meinen Content denen das Gefühl zu geben. Voll blöd! [lacht] Klingt voll abgekatert so. [lacht]

[9] Original quote: "(...) obwohl ich auch sagen muss, dass es schon anonymer ist als sich die Follower das glaube ich wünschen."

(...) I wanna build a community that feels the same so we're not alone with struggling or being honest or issues with *Verhütung* [Engl.: birth control] or whatever.

The findings from the content analysis underline her intent: the data set did not only include Instagram stories with screenshots from follower messages, question tools and reposts of the responses on these. One of her analyzed feed postings even included a screenshot of a comment, presumably from her blog, asking for tips on how to become a blogger. She directly referenced this comment in the caption of the post: "Comment all your questions about blogging (emoji) I work on my podcast every day and in one episode I will answer all questions that are frequently asked. Is it still a good idea to start a blog? Can you live off it? How much money can you make as a blogger/influencer? Let me know, I will write down everything and keep you updated regarding the launch of my podcast (emojis).".

The fact that she describes her relation to her audience as the most dialogical could also be connected to the size of her audience. Three SMI's, all of them with larger audiences, described how time-consuming replying to all direct messages they receive is. Like SMI 2:

(...) because I do get like a lot of messages a day, it's always 99+ whenever I get down, as long as, even if I reply to 50 messages, it's still 99+ but for me, it's really important.

Therefore it can be concluded that the majority of SMIs has limited interactions with their audience, which implies a parasocial relationship according to Horton & Wohl (1956, in Labrecque, 2014). Considering SMI 3 has the smallest audience, she could be more likely to manage replying to all messages and audience feedback and therefore perceive her interaction with the audience as rather dialogical than parasocial.

4.4.2 Audience construction via direct message

As discussed in the theoretical background, audience construction helps the SMIs to meet the expectations of their audience, or at least what they think their expectations are. SMI 2 explains how the audience's feedback affects her content:

(...) I always try to ask as well what they, what they wanna see differently or what they would prefer (...) there are certain things I just never ever gonna do but if it's, like, if those things they wanna see are manageable, I try to integrate them into my postings.

SMI 4 is more likely to think about her audience's preferences before she publishes stories than before she uploads postings in her feed because she usually receives more negative feedback there. Regarding particular topics, she expects negative feedback beforehand and then decides from case to case whether she is willing to publish the content anyway. If she receives too much negative feedback and the content is "not that important", she just deletes the content from her profile, she explains.

SMI 5, who's husband tested positive on Covid-19 at an early stage of the crisis, reacted right away to audience feedback: She published an IGTV (featured as feed posting as well and therefore added to the analysis) with the description: "Living with Corona - You guys had a lot of questions regarding the virus, the symptoms, getting tested and life in quarantine, so we decided to answer them all in an IGTV video!". During the interview, she states that she is afraid that audience feedback affects her working practices too much and emphasizes how difficult it can be to find a balance between her own style and her audience's expectations:

> Because I've also gone through phases where I created content that I knew would perform well but then I realized that it's not really me.

The interviews in particular revealed relevant insights into the process of the influencers constructing their audience. The majority of SMIs could describe their image of their audience, especially characteristics like gender and age which derived from the Instagram statistics. However, four of them explicitly mentioned that they are not in the position to know the whole of their audience. Additionally to the audience statistics Instagram provides for Business and Creator accounts, direct messages serve as what Litt (2012) describes as 'cues' from the audience. SMI 4 usually checks the Instagram accounts of users who send her messages:

> (...) but you see it, I sometimes look at people who message me and it really varies, I have girls who are 34 but also some who are 21.[10]

SMI 5 realizes that her knowledge about her audience might only apply to a fraction of her community:

> I have to say my audience is very… heterogeneous. So, it's not like one kind of person but I know the people that are more likely to engage with the stuff. So I think when it comes to the people actually liking and commenting on my pictures, I have a pretty, pretty clear vision, picture, yeah.

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[10] Original quote: "(...) also ich schaue mir halt auch manchmal die Leute an, die mir schreiben und das ist echt gemischt, also ich habe da echt so Mädels die dann 34 sind, die aber auch 21 sind."

Interestingly, SMI 3 seems to have a different approach on audience construction. She assumes her audience's characteristics and behaviour are similar to her own.

> Because you have to know who's your target audience and that took me a while because I really didn't know who I am to be honest.

> Because, when they are like me, I'm the same on Instagram, actually I do not watch stories, I do not watch accounts, so what will I expect from my audience?

The findings emphasized the high status of the audience in the working practices of SMIs. The findings in the following section show how aiming at perceived interconnectedness and other working practices are connected to the perceived authenticity of the SMIs.

4.5 How authenticity is manufactured

As emphasized in the theoretical background, working on improving their relationship with the audience can also be considered a strategy in order to achieve authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2018) and van Driel & Dumitrica (2020) explain how strategically SMIs approach the matter of making the audience believe they are authentic, and therefore, 'themselves'. The findings show that the SMIs engage in honesty and transparency in order to appear authentic. Secondly, passion occured as relevant factor regarding partnerships, which marks another strategy to appear authentic (2018).

Consequently, all the strategic approaches on authenticity conceptualized based on sponsored content (Audrezet et al., 2018) or part time SMIs (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) were applicable to the data set containing sponsored and non-sponsored postings by full time influencers too. However, there was a clear difference in the extends to which the strategies were implemented between Instagram feed and Instagram stories discovered.

4.5.1 Imperfections and emotions as evidence for authenticity

When asked about the role of authenticity on Instagram, the SMIs shared different opinions. SMI 2 defines her authenticity through sharing emotions and imperfect moments in her life:

> Hm, I think it's a way of how I present myself via social media and on Instagram stories because I'm not the one who always shows that everything's perfect. I show emotions. When I feel like crying because I'm overwhelmed

by a response of a certain thing, I cry. Because why would I hide my feelings? (...) so I always try to share. Not everything. But so that I'm still touchable and people still think that I'm a normal person.

SMI 5 has a similar opinion:

(...) I think it's really important to share stuff that's going wrong or like when you don't feel so well (...) sharing your vulnerability can really help others. So I think that's what I find authentic, when people do that.

Content covering personal and emotional moments was found throughout the whole data set. SMI 1 for example shared photos and videos during a visit at his parents' and grandparents' house in his Instagram story. SMI 4 talks in her story about her problems with herpes infection or her struggle to get rid of the weight she gained during her vacation. SMI 2 published an Instagram story in which she covered her face with her hand at the beginning, explaining "I look like shit today. I don't even dare to show you my face." because of some pimples and hayfever.

While Instagram stories contained a significantly higher amount of content that included personal information and expression of emotions, some SMI's shared these aspects in their feed as well. Next to 13 out of 25 captions featuring personal experiences or thoughts, SMI 3 published an IGTV called 'TO BE HONEST', in which she talks about being under pressure and failing. SMI 5 shares her personal thoughts in the captions of her postings as well. One of the 10 captions that included her personal thoughts was: "It's hard for me to stay focused at the moment, there's so much going on both in the world and my mind. But I'm trying to breathe, unwind and take it day by day.".

Another measure following the strategy of connecting with the audience in order to appear authentic is sharing backstage material and everyday life (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Abidin, 2015). Again, content where these themes applied seemed to be far more common to appear in Instagram stories than in Instagram posts.

The content by SMI 2, who only posts high quality street style photos in her feed, illustrates the different characteristics of the story and feed content perfectly. In one story consisting of two snippets, she stands in front of the mirror, only showing her upper body and explains: "I just filmed a jewelry tutorial for you. (...) and this was my outfit, which looks super cute. But wait for it, wait for what comes now.". Then, she takes a step back and shows the rest of her outfit: sweatpants and scuffs. She adds the comment "Behind the scenes, or from the category: fake it till you make it."

This, slightly humorous, approach on behind the scenes content can be found in other stories in the data set too. On another day, SMI 2 bakes a traditional German cake with lots of cream and sugar and jokes about the fact that it seems like everyone in the Instagram environment is only baking healthy banana breads. In keeping with her definition of 'being authentic', she also shows the messy corners of her apartment several times in her stories that were included in the data set.

SMI 4 addresses these kinds of imperfections in the captions of her postings: the description of a mirror selfie says: "(...) Okay, next time I definitely have to clean up the chaos on my desk before taking photos (laughing emoji).". In the stories from the data set, she shares even more insights from behind the scenes. She admits that she started tidying her room but stopped in the middle because she wasn't motivated anymore, she shows her face without makeup and with face cream on or she films one of her friends (who appears to work as an SMI too) while taking photos in uncomfortable positions to get the right angle.

The most significant difference of content that is posted to the Instagram feed and the content published as Instagram stories however, was found on the account of SMI 1. There were no elements of personal thoughts or behind the scenes found in the entire data set of feed postings, but SMI 1's stories did feature these content types frequently. He shared a TikTok video describing how he takes photos, recorded himself during working out, cooking or cleaning his apartment. In one story, he explained how we went grocery shopping while still wearing an outfit from a photo shoot and admits how he was embarrassed by people looking at him funny. After being asked about why he doesn't share this kind of content on his feed, he explains:

It's kind of my portfolio, my art page and I don't want to see like me being ugly on that portfolio [laughs].

Nonetheless, he seems to be happy about the option of sharing backstage content on his stories:

(...) I always loved being real, in earlier times on snapchat and now on stories. And I don't want to show a 'fake me' in videos. I just like being myself on video content platforms and interacting with my followers and I don't think that people interact with me if I'm not the real me and being top styled all the time. Because people can't identify with a person.

In general, the interviewed SIMs seemed to find it easier to talk about things that do not appear authentic in the Instagram environment. Especially "smiling all the time" or "fake smiles" were mentioned, besides being top-styled all the time or unnatural poses or ways of editing pictures. SMI 5 describes what Duffy and Hund (2015) identify as SMIs 'romanticizing' their practices:

(...) To the point where there's like roses and a braid and then like a pink ribbon and it just doesn't, that's not how real life looks to me, so that doesn't seem authentic. And also sometimes people are smiling too aggressively in every single picture. I find that sometimes a little bit disturbing [laughs].

4.5.2 Selecting and declaring partnerships authentically

Another aspect that seemed to be crucial to the question whether an influencer appears authentic or not are, according to the interviewed SMIs, collaborations and partnerships with brands. All five SMIs considered a similar set of aspects when selecting brands to work with.

Firstly, all five influencers mentioned "typical Instagram brands" like 'Smile Secret' or 'Hello Body' as absolute bad examples regarding potential collaboration partners. SMI 4 explains why:

> (...) I think their marketing is awful, which is why I did not work with them or other brands who do it similarly.[11]

Brand alignment is another important factor the interviewed SMIs check before agreeing on working together with a brand. Therefore, they compare the philosophy as well as the core values of a brand with these of their own brand, SMI 3 and SMI 5 explain:

> I always look what the philosophy of the brand is. And then I'm thinking about brand fit.

> So I try not to, for example if I know that a brand is like a total rip-off I would, I wouldn't work for them. Or if their quality is really bad, I wouldn't work with them, or like if they have bad practices or those kind of things. So I think those core values are really important.

Additionally, SMI 5 describes the importance of considering the rest of her partnerships and whether the new, potential collaboration aligns with them. This might be especially relevant in the case of long-term collaborations which appear, according to SMI 2 and SMI 3, more authentic than just collaborating with a brand for a single post because it shows brand loyalty. When it comes to the implementations of the sponsored postings, SMI 4 describes what Whitmer (2018) defines as authenticity thread through commercialisation:

> When I have collaborations where the briefing is very detailed and then I get upset about the advertisement being too obvious. (...) some things are just too promotional in my opinion and I don't want to hold a product next to my face while looking in the camera. That feels stupid and is just not authentic enough and too promotional for me. [12]

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[11] Original quote: "(...) aber ich finde deren Marketing ganz schrecklich, weshalb ich auch noch nicht mit denen zusammengearbeitet habe oder mit anderen Marken die das so machen."

[12] Original quote: "Ja, wenn ich Kooperationen habe wo das Briefing ziemlich genau ist und ich mich dann selber darüber aufrege, wenn die Werbung dann zu plakativ ist. (...) aber manche Sachen sind mir einfach zu werblich und ich will nicht 'ne Produktpackung so in die Kamera halten, neben mein Gesicht [hält sich eine Tüte Schokolade neben das Gesicht]. Also da komm ich mir dann einfach doof vor. Ja, deswegen, ähm, ja, das ist mir dann zu unauthentisch und zu werblich."

Even though the influencers consider 'typical Instagram brands', which usually distinguish themselves by requesting influencer advertisements that are immediately identified as inauthentic, they have to act transparent in declaring their posts as advertisements. All five SMIs believed that their audience could distinguish sponsored posts from non-sponsored posts despite the fact that most posts in the analyzed data set were tagged as advertisements, even when they were not sponsored. Since there are no clear guidelines for social media advertisements in Germany yet and several SMIs lost lawsuits over missing declaration, many German SMIs declare every posting with brand, location or other accounts tagged as advertisement. In order to still provide their audience with transparency of which postings are actually paid and which are not, some of them develop their own rules, as SMI 2 describes:

> So I made this really clear as well, from the start that everything what is (...) shown as *'Werbung'* (Eng.: advertisement) means it's just like a daily post where I'm not getting paid for and everything shown as an 'ad', *Anzeige* in German is paid. And I was, eh, totally open about that and I'm transparent from the beginning that I say "Okay listen, when it's *'Anzeige'* it's a paid post and when it's *'Werbung'*, it's *Werbung* (Eng.: advertisement).

The data set showed that SMI 1 seems to use a similar pattern of declaring paid posts differently than other posts with tags: in the case of partnerships, he adds *'Anzeige'* at the beginning of the caption, for all other posts, he adds it at the end of the caption. This authenticity strategy characterized by honesty and transparency is, however, often only implemented to a certain extend. SMI 1 states, for example, that he doesn't have particular tag or way of declaring whenever items are gifted. The data set didn't show any declarations of gifted items as well, which implies that the audience still cannot distinguish gifted from bought items, and therefore the SMIs aren't acting fully transparent.

Moreover, the audience often seems to not completely understand the individual declaration patterns of the SMIs: SMI 1 describes a collaboration he recently had with a fashion college, including a posting and story introducing their programs. After he published the post, many of his followers believed he would start studying there and even his mother called about the news. He explained their reactions as following:

> Like I didn't even say that I would go. There I just said it's a nice college to do things. Yeah. But in a personal kind of way and the story telling was good, so, that's why people thought it's not paid. And that's actually what every brand wants you to do.

Finally, the data set showed signs of passion, in form of emphasizing affinity with a brand or product, as authenticity strategy, conceptualized by Audrezet et al. (2018) too. In the description of an

IGTV about jewelry, SMI 2 states how she values her partnership with the respective brand and the fact that they have been working together for a long time. SMI 4 says that she is more likely to agree on a collaboration gifting basis, which she normally wouldn't do, when she has an affinity with the product or brand. SMI 5 has a similar view on that matter:

> And I think everybody has like a couple, I don't if it's like Chanel, Louis Vuitton, those kinds of things, where you're more likely to go in with a lower price. But I also have to say, one thing that I take into consideration, I've worked with a couple of start up brands and if I think they have a really cool product and I know they just can't pay the same as a huge cooperation, I'm willing to go down with my price if I actually believe in it.

4.6 How SMIs are bashed and admired simultaneously

The fact that working as an influencer appears as a desirable career (Erz & Christensen, 2017) for many social media users might be underpinned through the underestimation of the actual workload SMI's are confronted with. Consequently, many people, who miscalculate the amount of work SMIs engage in, appear to not take the profession seriously.

SMI 1 explains why he thinks, 'influencer bashing' is so popular and how he tries to counteract:

> That's kind of a trend that has developed during the last years I think. Because society has been not taking influencers serious and that's why influencers started filming themselves in front of their laptop or like having phone calls or like showing the the 'bad' [gestures quotation marks] sides from the business. (...) I want that people see that I actually do something every day. And not just sitting there and, yeah.

The data set showed attempts of SMI 1 emphasizing his work load: it included to-do-lists and insights from how he prepared and shot pictures and TikToks at home. SMI 2 occasionally withholds her actual full time job as an SMI in order to be taken seriously:

> I usually say "I'm a presenter and I have a little blog". Which is wrong, because I, it should be something to be proud of but I still struggle because even in my own family, they don't take it serious. My brother has got an Harvard degree and a big company and obviously, you have got this Harvard degree, you have got three different Masters or whatever, I don't have any of that, I still earn so much money, but people don't take it serious.

The reputation of working as influencer is described similarly by SMI 4 and SMI 5. They both think, that the concept of 'work that doesn't seem like work' caused this reputation:

I think it's caused by (...) so, I only show the positive things I enjoy but I don't show what's behind this. For example, when I cook something in the kitchen, I have put a tripod, check the light and record it three times because I tripped over my tongue and ultimately it results in a 15 second video and people think I just recorded something real quick, but there's lots of work behind that. [13]

I feel like there's a lot of social envy. And I think that that's also due to the fact (...), that a lot of people don't see the work behind the scenes. They don't think its work and then they don't think people deserve to get paid for it.

While all influencers seem to be aware of how their jobs are perceived in society, the data sets showed that only some of them actively counteract by emphasizing their workload in their content. SMI 3 for example tries to clarify what being a professional SMI entails in practice in blog posts and Q&A's on Instagram:

It's just a job. And I try to explain that to people. Because in the beginning maybe it was like you start with something and into the scene without knowing what you're doing but these times are over.

She states how many of her followers request instructions on how to become an influencer, which shows that the job might not be taken seriously one the one hand, but appear still desirable for many individuals on the the other.

4.7 Creating content during the crisis

Since this study was conducted during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the conditions under which the selected SMIs practiced their job were different to their usual working routines. Germany, and the majority of countries around the world, undertook a number of measures in order to curb the further spread of the virus. Among these measures were the closing of their borders as well as the ban of all sorts of events (Hopkins Tanne et al. 2020). This resulted in limited options for SMIs to produce content. Despite the significant amount of so called 'flashback' postings, showing impressions from past travels or events, in the data set, the majority SMIs did not seem to be afraid not to meet the expectations with their content produced during the crisis.

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[13] Original quote: "Ich glaube es liegt daran, weil man (...) wenn ich vielleicht in meiner Küche mir irgendwas koche beispielsweise, dass ich da extra mir ein Stativ hinstelle und gucke, dass das Licht gut ist und dass dann vielleicht noch mal dreimal aufnehme weil ich mich verquasselt habe und am Ende kommt da einfach nur so eine 15-Sekunden-Sequenz raus und die Leute denken, ich hab mal eben so mein Handy genommen und irgendwas gefilmt, dabei steckt da halt viel mehr hinter."

According to the estimation of the German Institute of Economic research, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic could have a more negative impact of the country's economy than the world financial crisis in 2008[14], which is also expected to affect influencer marketing. The interview responses showed how some SMIs seemed to be afraid of the uncertain future, but not necessarily financially affected to a significant extent yet. Furthermore, the crisis required to adapt particular sponsorships, as emphasized by DiResta et al., 2020), and seemed to arouse a sense of social responsibility for individual SMIs.

While fashion remains the main topic the selected SMIs cover with their content, traveling appears as another factor characterising their usual content, as a look on their postings before the outbreak of the Coronavirus shows. How essential the traveling aspect is to their brand shows the amount of postings published during the timeframe of April 15 and May 1 showing content from past travels, so called 'throwback' or 'flashback' postings. With 13 and 8 out of 25 analyzed feed postings, SMI 4 and SMI 1 featured content from their recent travels more than anyone else in the data set. However, SMI 1 stated that posting travel content is not necessarily the best choice to post considering the current situation because people cannot identify with it. In fact, he explains how the content he produces at home performs better:

> (...) my home content gets played out way better than my travel content. Or gets more likes and comments and stuff. (...) But after Corona travelling is possible again and then it's okay to see travel pictures and dream yourself to those destinations because it's possible to travel.

As DiResta et al. (2020) argues, the social distancing measure seem to contribute to increasing user engagement, as the case of SMI 1 shows:

> Yeah, well let's say it's a good time for creating content and communicating with your community because, actually, everyone's at home in quarantine so my insta story views and and my likes and my engagement on all my platforms is way bigger than before. So, that's actually quite a good thing for being an influencer and having a connection to your followers.

SMI 3 and 4 are not necessarily afraid of lacking interesting content either. They stated, they would rather think about new topics to cover and believe that their content from their homes could appear more authentic and personal. For SMI 2, not being able to travel turned out as a rather personal challenge because her working routine entirely changed:

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[14] Retrieved from: https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/coronavirus-kosten-ifo-101.html

And now, obviously everything changed and now I do struggle with my daily routine because I'm not used to being home so long. (...). And at the beginning I was like struggling, you know, to find my daily routine and I still do, to be honest, because I'm all over the place.

The economic effect of the pandemic appears to be slightly noticeable in the sector of influencer marketing. The majority of the interviewed SMIs mentioned the uncertainty of the economic future or already experienced a decrease of collaboration offers. Especially, collaborations with brands that were planned in connection to travels or events had to be cancelled, as SMI 1 explains:

Some collaborations have been cancelled because of Corona, especially events and press trips and, in general, there are not so many offers right now in my… like in my mails as it used to be. So that's quite… not challenging for me because I have some long term collaborations with brands but I definitely see a difference, yeah.

SMI 2 seemed to be in a similar situation:

Well for me, I have to say, I'm in a really privileged position since I have got a lot of long-term collaborations. So, if you look at my partners, my brands, I'm, I'm obviously working with, I've got ten long-term, eh, long-term collaborations. And long-term meaning for an entire year. So my salary, my revenue or whatever you wanna call it is safe. (...) it's only the traveling what I'm missing out. And traveling meaning press trips where you get paid for, events where you get paid for but it's nothing, that I can't survive. It's more the other way. So I still got so much things to do, ehm, launching my new collection and all of that… And all my ongoing collaborations since I have got ten for the entire year. So I never get bored and I don't lose a lot of money, except of all those add-ons I would have had if we wouldn't have had Corona.

Since her charity projects temporarily dominated her content, she and the brand she works with decided to postpone some advertisements, perhaps in order to avoid reputation issues for both parties. She explains how the relationship she established with a brands she has been working with proved to be especially useful during the crisis:

And, there were the first company who approached when Corona started and they said "Listen, (...) we have got our monthly scope waiting, but if you don't feel posting now", because I did my charity things and all of that, "then don't". And I… I think this is how a partnership works, right? It's like a give and take. And I usually give all but at this time it wasn't just the right time, so they allowed me to like post it three weeks later or four weeks later, she even said if you don't wanna post this month, you still get paid, then just do it the next month. And I think this is, this makes me really, really happy and… I think in times like these you see how much they appreciate you and the other way around.

But not all influencers seem to be as busy as before. SMI 4 for example describes the situation as "the beginning of a financial crisis" and expects companies to choose marketing and PR budgets as

one of the first expenses to be cut. Especially the uncertainty of not knowing 'what comes next' seems to be difficult for the self-employed SMIs, as SMI 1, SMI 4 and SMI 5 emphasize.

The situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was also thematized directly in many parts of the content. SMI 4 for example explained in the caption of a photo that she had to improve her skills of taking photos using the self-timer on her camera or phone. Moreover, she used the situation to connect with her audience by sharing her thoughts about how social distancing measurements affect her personal life. By doing that, she made use of social media during the crisis as Lachlan et al. (2016) described in Thelwall (2020). SMI 5, whose husband tested positive with Covid-19, felt a responsibility to share her information with her audience:

> Yeah, usually I don't share very personal things on Instagram. But I could tell that there was a lot of misinformation out there and a lot of people were afraid. So I was like, okay, this is like my chance to… first of all to tell some people that it's actually real and to take it serious. But also to take away the anxiety, ehm, from some people and tell them that, most likely, if you're young, it's gonna be okay. And I thought, okay, there's not that much we can do now but that's something that we actually can contribute and it's like first-hand information. And I think there's a lot of, yeah, there's a lot of fake news and fake media and those people that, they seem, they seem to always be extremely loud on social media. That was where I saw my social responsibility to, that I would at least be one voice against that.

By that, SMI 5 used social media to provide her audience with information and support regarding the Covid-19 crisis, as Wiederholt (2020) suggests.

While SMI 5 explained how much engagement and feedback her 'Corona Q&A' received, SMI experienced another reaction. She launched a whole charity project, supporting small businesses and NGOs, on her website, even though her audience did not necessarily engaged more in this kind of content:

> It's just like so tiring but of course you engage more, but however, I did my talks, I did my charity, I did three posts today, I did stories and I'm still losing followers, so… because I'm just honest with you it's, it's, it's I wouldn't say it's, it's the key to success in times of Corona to do like charity.

To summarize, the situation caused by the Corona pandemic affected both, the working practices and the content of the selected influencers.

5. Conclusion

To begin with, this study confirms why becoming a full time SMI appears as such a desirable career: the workload of performing full time social media content creation seems to be widely underestimated. Following established fashion influencers on Instagram reveals how their content is mostly displaying the positive sides of the job. The fact that SMIs try to share imperfections and behind-the-scene sequences does not seem to avoid this reputation, as all SMIs experienced their job not being taken seriously by society. Assuming that fashion SMIs live a glamorous life determined by travels, events and free clothes and barely have to work for that, the job can indeed appear highly desirable. This outside perspective is likely to contribute to the increasing number of people attempting to build a career as influencer and the growing popularity of micro-influencers (Whataley, 2020).

In practice however, working full time as a fashion SMI entails the contrary: the job is challenging to enter and must be approached and sustained strategically. The analysis of five German fashion SMIs Instagram accounts and the responses from five semi-structured interviews illustrated the level of commitment and complexity their working practices and business strategies require.

As soon as a social media user develops the willingness to engage in professional, and therefor profitable, content creation within the scope of his own brand on Instagram, he must look for instructions on how to achieve this goal. Finding these instructions via established influencers is not sufficient because only the outside perspective of their working practices is accessible through following their actions on Instagram. In order to get more familiar with the internal structures of the influencer job, aspiring SMIs often team up. By benefiting from each others knowledge and skills, they are be able to boost their career. Having other SMIs as friends can be useful at later stages of the career too: traveling together allows influencers to combine their private and professional lives. Nonetheless, the influencer network does not necessarily work to one's advantage in all cases: competition among influencers might result in exploiting individuals with larger audiences or networks.

Certain professional experiences seems to lead to an easier access to the influencer job. Working at a PR agency, for example, trains aspiring SMIs to how to approach brands. Next to the obvious benefits of knowing how to pose in front of a camera, previous experience in modelling can provide a better position in price negotiations, as one knows about the costs of a traditional photo production.

But the majority of the measures SMIs take in order to professionalize their work must be explored step by step. One of the most relevant principles regarding content creation seems to be consistency. Pressured by algorithms, SMIs aim at posting to their Instagram feed and stories several

times a day, all week. Consequently, their workload appears to be above an average 9-to-5 job in most cases. Constantly working might also cause lines between the SMIs' private and professional life to blur. Regarding the management of their authenticity, sharing highly personal content can actually be beneficial: by following the strategy of appearing honest and transparent (Audrezet et al. 2018), SMIs work towards creating a relatable self-brand. Therefor, they share emotional moments of their private life, behind the scenes content and failures in their daily, un-sponsored content. This type of content however is likely to be shared only in the form of temporary Instagram stories, in order to preserve the aesthetics of the permanent Instagram feed, which is often considered as a portfolio of the SMI's brand.

As authenticity is often illustrated as counterpart to commerciality, SMIs are making a particular effort at justifying their sponsorships. Here, they tend to instrumentalize passion to prove their authenticity (Audrezet et al. 2018). By selecting brands and products that align with their own brand, i.e. with their affinities, they assure to stay 'themselves' and are perceived likewise.

Since the size and characteristics of an SMI's audience determine their value for potential employers in the form of advertisers, influencers must constantly work on their relationship with their community. While this relationship is, due to limited labour capacity of the SMIs, widely characterized by parasocial interaction, the consumers are more likely to be persuaded when experiencing a dialogue. Therefor, SMIs must invest a large amount of their time in community management, replying to direct messages and comments. Furthermore, the perceived interconnectedness with the audience might increase by actively requesting and sharing audience feedback, which, again, is primarily implemented on Instagram stories. Moreover, these types of feedback contribute to the image SMIs create of their audience in order to produce content that meets their expectations and results in good performances. The content performance in the form of likes, impressions or shares in turn function as relevant quality indicators for potential advertisers.

Because most SMIs do not want their careers to depend on a single platform, they implement multi-platform strategies by publishing content on different channels. Next to their own blogs and websites, TikTok appears as one of the most popular platforms in that matter at the moment. Conquering new platforms however requires new skills and content strategies which, in the case of engaging on multiple channels, often intensify the exhausting labour conditions of SMIs.

Having several sources of income seems particularly relevant during economic or societal crises, as the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic showed. SMIs have to switch from their usual ways of content production, including traveling, events and professional photo shoots to taking photos and videos on their own or with a small number of people, mostly at home. Street style photos are likely to be replaced with 'Quarantine looks' and the uncertain environment during the crisis seemed to demand taking social responsibility from the SMIs: engaging in charity projects, sharing

information about the virus and entering the dialogue with their audience about their personal thoughts and experiences on the situation were added to their to-do-list. Although these types of content did not necessarily seem to perform worse than their usual content, SMIs started to worry about being able to attract enough advertisers.

In practice, the lack of instructions on how to cope with these challenges is likely to leave the SMIs de-illusioned and frustrated from time to time. Compared to the theory, which describes the narrative of users professionalizing in the field of UGC as rather empowering (Jenkins, 2006) and playful, the interviews illustrated the extent of frustration that seems to accompany aspiring content creators who aim to establish in the ever competitive environment of social media. Within what Craig & Cunningham (2019) described as 'algorithmic culture', consistent strategic approaches on content production and the commitment to a remarkable workload are considered fundamental requirements but do not necessarily guarantee financial success. This can be especially disillusioning for SMIs who planned to establish a business on social media.

In relation to this, the development of SMI 4, who expected to be trained to to work as an influencer through her experience as a PR agent, showed that even users with advanced skills and knowledge in influencer marketing are not fully prepared for the requirements of the job. Although SMI 2 planned and structured her business beforehand, it became apparent that the lack of growth in followers led to her losing her motivation to keep going several times despite constant financial success. In contrast to that, the SMIs who followed the path of posting UGC for self-expression and then stumbled upon the option of monetizing their content encounter the same challenges but seem to be significantly less frustrated by the developments.

Ultimately the findings of this study provided a useful insight of the working practices and career paths of full time fashion influencers from Germany. Even though the findings are not necessarily generalizable due to the limited sample, they imply the need of consistent strategic approaches on social media content production and the commitment to a remarkable workload in order to be able to make a living as an SMI.

6. Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

Since the selected SMIs from which the data derived are all located in the the Western imaginary, working practices and viewpoints are likely to be influenced by their direct environment. Considering that the sample remains limited to the German fashion influencer scene, in four out of five cases the Berlin fashion influencer scene, findings from places with other cultural backgrounds might differ. Other cultural circumstances are likely to result in different findings regarding self-presentation or the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This limitation is connected to the recruiting process which appeared to be more feasible with influencers the researcher was already familiar with.

Although the sample includes one male fashion influencer and an age range from 21 to 36 years, the diversity of the sample could be improved by integrating individuals with different cultural backgrounds. The lack in diversity is also due to the size of the sample, which could be improved by expanding it significantly. Analyzing the content of different types of influencers for example might result in different findings regarding their working practices. It has to be noted that there are also different types of fashion influencers who could have contributed to this study: fair fashion influencers for example tend to attract audience with a mindful, minimalist consumer behaviour rather than with glamorous outfits and fast fashion hauls.

This study included SMIs with significantly different audience sizes on purpose, in order to consider smaller businesses in the form of self-employed SMIs, but also businesses at larger scale, including several employees and a management. However, including influencers with exceptionally large audiences might illustrate an even higher extent of professionalization of working practices. Besides that, it would be useful to look into the field of micro-influencers in order to reveal possible differences, or similarity in their working practices.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Coding Frame with Examples of Instagram Feed Postings

Theme	Posting visual	example	Caption	example	Tags	example
posting subject	outfit	SMI5S (picture showing SMI 5 in a field, wearing skirt, top, sunglasses and bag)	fashion	SMI5S: "Pastels for spring (...)"	fashion brands	SMIW: @jilsander
	details/products	SMI1H (picture showing a Prada bag next to a cup of coffee)	personal experience, emotional state	SMI4X: "Home is where your heart is (emoji) and that's definitely Berlin (emoji) Even though it is strange not to be able to travel, it's a nice feeling to know I have all my friends in town (...)" (translated)	other persons	SMI5K: @cati.schweyer
	repost	SMI3A (picture showing a quote)				
	travel	SMIP (picture of his Cartier watch, Eiffel tower in the background)	everyday life (e.g. weather)	SMI1M: "Happy Sunday y'all (emoji) try to enjoy this sunny day as much as possible (emojis) #Sundays"		
	at home	SMI2A (picture of her, laying on the sofa in sweatshirt)	quote	SMI3C: "Be the moon and inspire people even when you're far from full."		
	other subject	SMI4Q (picture of different kinds of food and a flower bouquet on a table)	traveling	SMI1N: "sunday dreaming of warm italy (...)"		
			Covid-19	SMI5G: "Hey are you freaking out yet? There seem to be two different reactions to the Corona pandemic (...)"		
editing style	pre-edited	SMI4O (filter)	-	-	-	-
	unedited	SMI1T (unedited video)				
language	-	-	German	SMI3M: "Durchhängen am Wochenende, ihr so? (emoji)"	-	-
			English	SMI1W: "From the archives (emoji) #Berlindays anzeige"		
			Both	SMI2V: "What uuuuup? Ich geh jetzt mal eine Runde an die frische Luft (emoji) before ich mich hinter den Laptop klemme (emojis) #constantlykstreetstyle Werbung"		

impression of a glamourous, care-free life (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9)	traveling	SMI1T (video of him biking in NYC)	traveling	SMI1T: "dreaming of this (emojis) #centralpark #newyorkcity #dreaming anzeige"	-	-
	working from home	-	working from home	SMI3J: "(...) Home office isn't new for me, so I'm used to problems regarding organisation and motivation. (...) (translated)"	-	-
	attending events (e.g. Fashion Week)	-			-	-
			attending events (e.g. Fashion Week)	SMI1U: "Missing those early mornings in Parigi (emoji) #ParisMemories #Streetstyle #ParisFashionweekMens anzeige"		
	luxury brands visible	SMI1S (holding Dior purse, brand clearly visible)	integrating luxury brands	SMI1B: "reflections (emoji) #newyorkcity #balenciagatriples anzeige"	luxury brands tagged	SMI2M (@bottegaveneta)
increasing workload and quality standards (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Erz & Christensen, 2017)	photos/videos taken with photo equipment better than smartphone	SMI5U	emphasizing workload	SMI1S: "I'm back in Berlin and can't wait to get all my to dos done (emojis) #BerlinDays anzeige"	professional photographers	SMI1U: @jeremy moeller
3 genres for influencer's posts (Abidin 2016)	advertorial dissemination (one way communication/posting)	SMI2Q	-	-	-	-
	advertorial aggregation (give aways, contests)	-		SMI5S: "(emoji) WIN A TRIP TO PARIS WITH ME! (...)"		
	advertorial instigation (encouraging users to repost or create own content)	-				

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authenticity through perceived interconnectedness with the audience	- suggesting emotional connection	- - SMI3O (second slide of post includes a note of her personal thoughts)	addressing audience with question addressing audience with request suggesting emotional connection	SMI2G: "How are you - be honest! (emoji)" (translated) SMI3X: audience is requested to send questions about blogging she can answer in her podcast SMI5S: "(...) I hope you all had a lovely Easter weekend, even though this year it looked different for so many of us! Stay safe and happy Easter!"	-	-
authenticity through honesty and transparency	more 'relatable' images, like a behind-the-scenes photo without makeup or in sweatpants (Duffy & Hund, 2015) sharing bloopers/ outtakes showing how a photo was taken objective product evaluations and opinions	- - -	addressing negative experiences/failure/imperfections hashtags/tags disclosure in case of paid partnership hashtags/tags disclosure in case of giftings disclosure without explanation	SMI3E: "(...) these times challenge us and many things feel like failing. Where this comes from and why I think failing is totally okay? (...)" (translated) SMI5V: "#werbung All dressed up (emoji) @soliverfashion (...) - SMI1Q (includes "anzeige" in caption but does not define for what brand)	- - -	- - - -
authenticity through passion (Audrez et al. 2018)	-	-	emphasizing their affinity to a brand or product connecting it with personal or emotional information	SMI2J: (...) I've been working with Pandora for 2,5 years (...) HUGE thank you to Pandora for the trust, the faith in me and the partnership (...)" (translated) SMI5Q (connects the a partnership with the deluxe products by @lidl with Easter and how important it is to at least celebrate with a friend if you cannot visit family)	- -	- -
multi-platform	sharing content	-	promoting/	SMI3K: "New beauty story up on fifteenminfame.com	linking to other	-

strategy	from other platforms		announcing content on other platforms	(...)"	platforms	
network	other SMIs visible in posting	SMI5K	other SMIs tagged in caption	SMI5D: "(...) I will be back at the end of the month for 5 full days with @cati.schweyer (...)"	other SMIs tagged in photo	SMI4Q (@erik tagged)
charity/good cause	-	-	organisations tagged in caption describing charity/good cause	- SMI5Q: "(...) and I are raising money and support for Frauenzimmer e.V., an organization offering refuge and protection to these women. (...)"	organisations tagged in photo	-
Covid-19 related content	presenting quarantine looks - -	SMI2R (poses at home, without shoes in a sweater and sweatpants)	presenting quarantine looks sharing feelings about situation providing information	SMI2R: "(...) current uniform (emoji) I live in my sweats. What's your favorite look at the moment?" (translated) SMI4N: "(...) How are you in isolation? For me it's day 13 and I'm okay. (...)" SMI5F: "(...) You guys had a lot of questions regarding the virus, the symptoms getting tested and life in quarantine, so we decided to answer them all in an IGTV video! (...)"	- -	- -
sharing private life	close friends, family or partner visible in posting	SMI2Q (selfie showing her and her husband)	close friends, family or partner mentioned in caption	SMI5G: "(...) I used to be one of you until my husband got diagnosed with the virus. (...)"	close friends, family or partner tagged in posting	SMI5M (husband tagged)

Appendix B: Coding Frame with Examples of Instagram Stories

Theme	Story visual + audio	example	Story tags	example
posting subject	outfit/fashion	SMI4a: standing in front of the mirror and describing her outfit of the day	brands	SMI5p: tagging @chiquelle during a haul
	repost/inspiration	SMI2u: repost of quote another SMI posted	agencies	SMI1g: showing PR package and thanks @gossippluspr
	product review/recommendation	SMI3h: showing her current favorite face care products, recommended a anti-pimple product	-	-
	everyday life (e.g. cooking, running errands)	SMI1o: filming his feet while walking "going grocery shopping for my acai cravings"	-	-
	blogger to do's	SMI1r + SMI1s: posting the same picture twice, first one unedited, second one edited	-	-
editing style	use of Instagram filter	SMI4c: using the Instagram filter "TAN & TIFFANY"	-	-
	use of gifs	SMI3p: using GIF "Free your mind" on a video of her yoga session		
	including music feature	SMI1u: video of sunset and wine glasses, playing ily (i love you baby by Surf Mesa in the background		
	pre-edited in another app/program	SMI4u: photo of her in bed, "Hallöchen" in font added that is not available in the editing features of Instagram		
language	German	SMI2l: speaking about a traditional German cake, adding text with accent "A guate oide Bisquitrollade (...)	-	-
	English	SMI5h: answers Q&A questions in English		
	Both	SMI1t: talking about his plans for the night in German, added text with the English translation		
"work that doesn't seem like work", impression of a glamourous, care-free life (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9)	traveling	SMI5f: states during Q&A how she misses Paris and would like to go there as soon as it is possible again	-	-
	working from home	SMI1l: repost of his feed posting stating "I got a bit creative on my balcony (...)" implying he was able to shoot a look there	-	
	attending events (e.g. Fashion Week)	SMI1d: shares posting from archives showing him standing next to a pool "Coachella time two years ago (emoji)"	-	
	luxury brands	SMIp: filming his outfit, which includes bag and necklace with clearly visible Dior branding	luxury brands tagged	
increasing workload and quality	photos/videos taken with photo equipment better than	-	professional photographers	-

standards (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Erz & Christensen, 2017)	smartphone			
	emphasizing work load	SMI1j: photo of him wearing a face mask, text added "some self care after another busy day at home haha"	-	
	showing how content is produced	SMI1m: shares TikTok that shows how he created his recent feed posting "how I did my recent Instagram picture"	-	
authenticity through perceived interconnectedness with the audience	talking directly to the audience	SMI5o: talking directly into the camera announcing a spring haul, text added in which audience is addressed as "lovelies"	individuals from audience	-
	asking the audience for their opinion	SMI1l: reposting of feed post, text added "let me know what you think (emoji)"	-	
	sharing content from the audience	SMI1c (shares story post of follower who had shared his IGTV as "morning inspo")	-	
	sharing personal information or thoughts	SMI3d: talking about anti-conception, how she deals with it and why she thinks it should not be tabooed	-	
	using interactive tools (polls, Q&A, open questions)	SMI13v: using open question tool in order to collect questions for live session about anti-conception	-	
authenticity through honesty and transparency	more 'relatable' images, like a behind-the-scenes photo without makeup or in sweatpants (Duffy & Hund, 2015)	SMI4e (puts up her new lighting equipment for the first time and talks about how everything is visible, including her greasy hair and pimples)	-	-
	hashtags/tags disclosure in case of paid partnership	SMI2f: talking about long-term collaboration with Dyson, "Werbung" added to right corner		
	hashtags/tags disclosure in case of giftings	SMI1f: showing PR package from RedBull, "Anzeige" added to right corner		
	disclosure without explanation	SMI4w: showing a Netflix show she wanted to watch and talking about the fact that it is not available in German yet, "Anzeige" added to right corner		
	objective product evaluations and opinions	SMI4f (recommends a stevia product to sweeten yoghurt in breakfast bowls, argues how it is yummy and does not have many calories)		
authenticity through	emphasizing their affinity to a brand or	SMI2h: talking about her collaboration with Dyson and how she ordered some of their products besides the collaboration and paid for them herself because she is so	-	-

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passion (Audrezet et al. 2018)	product	convinced of them		
		SMI5r: showing her sport bra in the mirror during haul video, states how she especially likes it because of the fact that it works for a bigger bust too, since she had problems with that before		
	connecting it with personal or emotional information			
multi-platform strategy	sharing content from other platforms	SMI3q: talking about her yoga practice, recommending to read her blogpost about it in case the viewer wants to get to know more about it	linking to other platforms	SMI1i (call to action to his TikTok account)
network	other SMIs visible in story	SMI4k: filming a influencer friend she went to the park with	other SMIs tagged in story	SMI4b (screenshot of direct message conversation with SMI1)
charity/good cause	describing charity/good cause	SMI2b: announcing talk with company that sells face masks and donates a certain percentage of their revenue	organisation tagged	SMI2b: @younity_official
Covid-19 related content	presenting quarantine looks	SMI2d: showing her look of the day including sweatpants because she does not have to leave the house	-	-
	sharing feelings about situation	SMI3x: tells about the podcast she just recorded with another influencer, emphasizes how she still cannot hug her and has to keep distance		
	providing information	SMI2b: announces talk with expert for face masks, demands to take responsibility in times like these		
sharing private life	showing or thematizing close friends, family or partner posting	SMI5b: photo of her and her husband, text added that states they have been married for 3,5 years	tagging close friends, family or partner posting	SMI4x (tags her mother while she shows a package her mother sent her for her birthday)

Appendix C: Coding Frame with Examples of Interview Responses

Theme	Posting visual	example
guidance while becoming professional	former professions	SMI3: "When I came to Berlin, I, actually I didn't know what bloggers are doing. And when I started to work in agencies I got an idea of it. And then I was like "I can do that. Maybe. Let's try!"".
	management	SMI2: "(...) so I had 20.000 followers and then my management approached me back then. Ehm, and I must admit that the first year and a half, I wasn't really overly happy with, like, how they managed me as a person. But it was good for, to, to, to start off with, right?"

impression of a glamourous, care-free life (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9)	traveling	SMI2: "When, ehm, before Corona, I wasn't home… a lot. So I was home for four days a month maybe, or five days a month. Ehm, maybe once a week or twice a week, that's it. And, and, the rest of the time I was traveling."
	working from home	SMI2: "And now, obviously everything changed and now I do struggle with like my daily routine because I'm not used to being home so long."
	attending events (e.g. Fashion Week)	SMI2: " (...) especially at fashion weeks and stuff where I'm, like, always attending in Spring and Fall, ehm, to have your people around yourself."
	luxury brands	SMI1: "I also used to have that kind of pressure on myself. To wear more designer items. But not because of my followers, because followers actually don't care about your nice pieces. Maybe some of them, but not the majority and why so many people follow you. So it's rather about, ehm, the other influencers recognizing you because of your nice pieces."
	highly staged photos	SMI5: "(...) To the point where there's like roses and a braid and then like a pink ribbon and it just doesn't, that's not how real life looks to me, so that doesn't seem authentic. And also sometimes people are smiling too aggressively in every single picture. I find that sometimes a little bit disturbing [laughs]."
increasing workload and quality standards (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Erz & Christensen, 2017)	content production on regular basis	SMI1: "So posting on a daily basis, and having kind of a concept or a regularity for your followers. (...) Like having something regular day by day that followers can rely on. That's professional in… like for me."
	emphasizing workload	SMI2: "Because I've been travelling non-stop and you can just get tired of everything and I think, once you lose passion for what you're doing, you start to struggle. And, ehm, this is what I experienced twice in four years."
	working 7 days a week	SMI3: "It's definitely not an eight-hour-day job. So nine-to-five? No. I think, I mean I, I'm selling my life, so."
	developing quality standard	SMI2: "But other than that, everything is taken with the best camera equipment, because this is my standard, I always compare it with Apple or compare it with Nespresso. It's like a promise I'm making to my company and to my followers that everything always looks the same."
authenticity through perceived interconnected ness with the audience	communicating with the audience on a regular basis	SMI1: "I love sending voice messages to my followers, or even videos and also always tell them if they have any problems with what they wanna do in the future or how they design their rooms or like interior questions or something, so that they can always write me."
	symbolic interactionism	SMI4: "Because I try to give them the feeling of being connected through my content. How stupid, this sounds completely manipulative!"
	conceptualizing audience as community	SMI3: "(...) I wanna build a community that feels the same so we're not alone with struggling or being honest or issues with *Verhütung* (Engl.: birth control) or whatever."
	audience construction	SMI5: "I have to say my audience is very… heterogeneous. So, it's not like one kind of person but I know the people that are more likely to engage with the stuff. So I think when it comes to the people actually liking and commenting on my pictures, I have a pretty, pretty clear vision, like picture, yeah."
	adjusting content to audience's preferences	SMI2: "I do listen to what they wanna see and, ehm, not every single time I can obviously… when people wanna see me cook, they never gonna see me cook because I just can't do it. So there are certain things I just never ever gonna do, but, ehm, if it's… like if those things, they wanna see are manageable, I try to integrate them into my postings."
authenticity through honesty and transparency	showing more 'relatable' images, like a behind-the-scenes photo without	SMI1: "I just like being myself on video content platforms and interacting with my followers and I don't think that people interact with me if I'm not the real me and being top styled all the time. Because people can't identify with a person."

	makeup or in sweatpants (Duffy & Hund, 2015).	
	sharing emotions and personal thoughts	SMI3: "When I feel like crying because I'm overwhelmed by a response of a certain thing, I cry. Because why would I hide my feelings? (...) so I always try to share. Not everything. But so that I'm still like, ehm, touchable and people still think that I'm a normal person."
	sharing downsides, imperfections	SMI5: "(...) I think it's really important to share stuff that's going wrong or like when you don't feel so well (...) sharing your vulnerability can really help others. So I think that's what I find authentic, when people do that."
	only implementing authenticity strategy on stories	SMI1: "It's kind of my portfolio, my art page and I don't want to see like me being ugly on that portfolio."
	critical selection of sponsorships	SMI4: So I try not to, for example if I know that a brand is like a total rip-off I would, I wouldn't work for them. Or if like their quality is really bad, I wouldn't work with them, or like if they have bad practices or those kind of things. So I think those core values are really important.
	clear disclosure of advertisements	SMI2: "So I made this really clear as well, from the start that everything what is (...) shown as *'Werbung'* (Eng.: advertisement) means it's just like a daily post where I'm not getting paid for and everything shown as an 'ad', *Anzeige* in German is paid."
authenticity through passion (Audrezet et al. 2018)	more likely to accept offer when affinity to the product exists	SMI5: "And I think everybody has like a couple, I don't if it's like Chanel, Louis Vuitton, those kind of things, where you're more likely to go in with a lower price. But I also have to say, one thing that I take into consideration, I've worked with a couple of start up brands and if I think they have a really cool product and I know they just can't pay the same as a huge cooperation, I'm willing to go down with my price if I actually believe in it."
multi-platform strategy	exploring new platforms (e.g. TikTok)	SMI1: "So special about TikTok is that you can actually grow from posting content and the chance to build a community is way bigger than on Instagram. And that's something that is very charming to me because I already feel a growth on Instagram through TikTok. So I have daily direct messages on Instagram from people who are coming from TikTik and tell me "Hey, saw you on TikTok, love your profile, want to get to know more about you" and that's actually the best thing. So building up a platform here and transferring the followers to Instagram and growing over there. Yeah and then in general I think it's always better to have different possibilities to grow communities or earn money (...)"
	investing in side projects	SMI3: "And always like doing podcasts, watching webinars, Pinterest is super helpful for me. I tried to not focus too much on Instagram. Because I wanna have a business forever with it. And not just be something an influencer on Instagram at the moment."
	feeling pressured to engage on other platforms	SMI5: "And then I also started getting mails from brands asking "Hey, are you on TikTok? We're trying to collaborate." and I'm like "Maybe I should like hop on that bandwagon.". Then I was really active for about ten days and now the last month I haven't done anything because I don't know, I'm not sure if it's the right platform for me."
platform Instagram	algorithmic culture	SMI 2: "And this is when it started to get a bit tiring, because at the end of the day you can't change the system. They always say, like Instagram, "Be creative, upload IGTV, do stories, post a lot of pictures" and I did all of that and, still I didn't grow anymore."
	differences in feed and story content	SMI1: "It's kind of my portfolio, my art page and I don't want to see like me being ugly on that portfolio."
influencer network	learning from other SMIs	SMI2: " I didn't have any experience in the business, but what I did in the beginning is, I spoke to a lot of people. (...) I was so curious about everything, so what, the first thing that I did is, I remember: I drove to Vienna and I interviewed two girls, two Austrian bloggers who had been blogging for like five years before me already, so they had a lot of experience. So I just asked them. Asked them about pricing, asked them about like how to… how to approach clients and stuff."
	working together as colleagues	SMI5: "Yeah, yeah. And we also all actually ended up making way more money when we worked together. I know that sometimes it's not so easy because a lot of instagrammers, or influencers, work on their own or they work with their partner, but we all actually had the

		experience that it worked better when we were working together because everybody could focus on their strengths."
	fear of being exploited by other SMIs	SMI1: "(...) the scene is… influencer scene is so fake that if you really connect with people, it's always about who has more followers, who has more likes and collaborations and stuff."
changes in working practices through Covid-19	higher financial pressure	SMI1: Some collaborations have been cancelled because of Corona, especially events and press trips and, in general, there are not so many offers right now in my… like in my mails as it used to be.
	changes in content	SMI1: "(...) my home content gets played out way better than my travel content. Or gets more likes and comments and stuff. (...) But after Corona travelling is possible again and then it's okay to see travel pictures and dream yourself to those destinations because it's possible to travel."
	more active users	SMI1: "Yeah, ehm, well let's say it's a good time for creating content and communicating with your community because, actually, everyone's at home in quarantine so my insta story views and and my likes and my engagement on all my platforms is like way bigger than before. So, that's actually quite a good thing for being an influencer and having a connection to your followers."
	integration of charity content	SMI2: "It's just like so tiring but, ehm, of course you engage more, but however, I did my talks, I did my charity, I did three posts today, I did stories and I'm still losing followers, so… because I'm just honest with you it's, it's, it's I wouldn't say it's, it's the key to success in times of Corona to do like charity."
	feeling social responsibility towards audience	SMI5: "And I thought, okay, there's not that much we can do now but that's something that we actually can contribute and it's like first-hand information. And I think there's a lot of, yeah, there's a lot of like fake news and fake media and those people that, they seem, they seem to always be extremely loud on social media. That was where I saw like my social responsibility to, that I would at least be one voice against that."
	changes in sponsored content	SMI2: "And, there were the first company who approached when Corona started and they said "Listen, (...) we have got our monthly scope waiting, but if you don't feel posting now", because I did my charity things and all of that, "then don't". And I… I think this is how a partnership works, right? It's like a give and take. And I usually give all but at this time it wasn't just the right time, so they allowed me to like post it three weeks later or four weeks later, she even said if you don't wanna post this month, you still get paid, then just do it the next month."
co-dependence with brands and agencies	sustaining relationship	SMI1: "(..) I feel like I have to be the nice guy and be almost over nice and kind to the agencies and people behind brands. So, in return they like me and book me for different collaborations. (...) I feel like the agencies and people want to talk about themselves, yeah, and then being on time with all the collaborations, approvals, and payments and stuff. Or sending invoices. You have to be there for them 24/7 and send everything on time."
sharing private life	work and private life blurring	SMI3: "And on other days I'm meeting friends, we're having coffee, we do… maybe we cook something, bake something and also, that's the fun part but we try to make content out of it. So work life. But then we take pictures and yeah, we are having a fun time but we're also productive…"
Sources of inspiration	Instagram	SMI1: "So, I love scrolling through Instagram, I love being a consument of the platform, not only being a content producer."
	other media	SMI3: "In the beginning I was like, I tried to be super editorial. Because, I'm going back to being natural. But (...) I think this is also not just my movement, also a movement in Vogue. So being Vogue super-editorial like in the… yeah, like ten years ago maybe. Now it's like Vogue being more natural."