

The Value of Authenticity in Contemporary Music Industry

A qualitative study of how artists and listeners craft an authentic connection through
Instagram platform

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the concept of authenticity is crafted, performed, and interpreted within the contemporary music industry, considering the Instagram platform as the primary channel of interaction between emergent artists and active listeners. Drawing on affordances' theories and employing a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with both artists and listeners, the research investigates how Instagram's affordances, including its features, formats and types of content, facilitate or constrain authentic interactions within the digital music environment. The findings reveal that authenticity is not a fixed or inherent quality of an artwork, but rather a relational and co-constructed process, shaped by both artists and listeners and ultimately determined by characteristics of the platform. For artists, expressions of authenticity require a careful balance between personal expression and strategic practices, as they must continually craft and adapt their identity according to their own values, audience expectation, and Instagram's evolving affordances. Listeners, on the other hand, interpret authenticity through signs of spontaneity, perceived vulnerability, and the coherence of artists' identities over time. The research demonstrates that, rather than being passive observers, listeners regularly and mindfully engaged with artists' online actions. Even though they are capable of understanding the challenges artists face, their expectations for authentic content remain unchanged. Both groups are highly aware of Instagram platform's dual nature: while it offers democratized access to visibility and connection with others, it also imposes market-oriented strategies, performative expectations, and algorithmic pressures. Through the lens of existing affordances' theories, the study reveals that artists navigate a delicate digital ground where Instagram serves both as a portfolio of their work and a marketplace. In this context, they must strategically integrate their creative voice within the platform's logics and affordances. Listeners' interactions, even when indirect, play a pivotal role in constructing and validating both perceived authenticity and artists' career, providing emotional support as well as measurable engagement. Therefore, the research frames authenticity as deeply intertwined with economic and relational values. Within the context of today's digital music industry, authenticity becomes a commodified quality that, although perceived as genuine, must be carefully curated to be rewarded by the platform and accepted by the audience. Overall, this thesis argues that authenticity on Instagram emerges from ever-evolving negotiations between realness and representation, spontaneity and visibility, and creativity and strategy. It contributes to broader discussions on authenticity in digital environments by showing how artists' practices and listeners expectations intersect through platforms' affordances, shaping new forms of realness within the music industry.

KEYWORDS: *Authenticity, Music Industry, Instagram's Affordances, Artists, Listeners*

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1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the rise of digital platforms has reshaped music production, consumption, and distribution, reconfiguring the processes of value capture and creation within the business ecosystem (Geurts & Cepa, 2023, p.2). Artists have discovered new playing fields on streaming platforms and social media to perform their identities and engage with their audiences in multiple ways (Tofalvy & Barna, 2020, p. 12). By leveraging these digital environments, they have found innovative ways to market themselves and cultivate their brand image within an online community, achieving popularity and success without being linked to traditional record labels or gatekeepers (Kartik & Mishra, 2022, pp. 510 - 513). As a result, the center of power has shifted from the industry itself to individual artists and their communities (Kartik & Mishra, 2022, p. 513), facilitating more direct and reciprocal relationships between artists and fans across multiple platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 11).

Within this evolving landscape, digital platforms serve not only as content distributors but also as social spaces (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 32). These platforms are based on specific affordances, which are design features that enable or constrain user interaction (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 5), influencing the modalities used by artists and audiences to connect within each other. Despite the opportunities provided by these affordances, the tension between artists' economic goals and authentic self-representation has become highly debated among scholars. While some argue that commercialization inevitably undermines authenticity, others reject this binary logic, defining the contemporary brand culture as "characterized by the blurring between the authentic self and the commodity self" (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 153-154). According to this perspective, authenticity itself can become itself can be strategically constructed and employed for visibility and monetization (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 153-154).

At the same time, expressions of authenticity are often seen as a way to safeguard music from being reduced to a mere disposable product, preserving its emotional and cultural meanings (Askin & Mol, 2018, p.5). In this sense, authenticity can evolve into what Askin and Mol (2018) describe as "institutional achievement": a socially constructed and context-dependent process that helps determine what is worth producing, promoting, and engaging with (p.5).

For many artists, therefore, demonstrating realness, relatability, and transparency is not opposed to their branding activities, but rather in service of them (Duffy, 2017, p. 133). Especially, in the over-saturated online environment where users navigate constantly seeking content that feels genuine and authentic, these qualities function as important differentiators (Kartik & Mishra, 2022, pp. 513- 515). One platform where this tension is clearly visible is Instagram. Considering its visual and interactive characteristics, Instagram has emerged as a central platform for artists' self-promotion and distribution (Tofalvy & Barna, 2020, p. 12). Its affordances, which represent the main functions, formats and designs on which the platform is based, enable new forms of communication and self-presentation, blurring the lines between artists' personal expression and public presentation (Askin & Mol, 2018, p. 2). These blurred boundaries raise important questions about how authenticity influences the dynamics between digitalized artists and their online audiences, while being both performed and perceived by users.

Although authenticity has been widely studied, little research has examined it within the music industry (McDonald et. al., 2008; Rauf et al., 2023). Moreover, most existing studies focus on experts' perspectives, leaving unclear the position of ordinary listeners and emergent artists, key players in the music industry business. This thesis aims to address this gap by exploring authenticity in the contemporary music environment, specifically considering the impact of Instagram affordances on both audiences and artists. Instagram was chosen due to its centrality in contemporary music promotion and fan engagement, presenting features that afford the interaction between the two parts (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 36).

Drawing from some of the most influential theoretical perspectives on authenticity and three different affordances theories, this study links the first concept to the practical dynamics of the contemporary music industry in the current digital age. The investigation is based on ten semi-structured interviews with five listeners and five artists. This dual sample enabled the connection of multiple perspectives, allowing for a clear comparison between artists, who produce specific music content, and listeners, who engage with it.

This study aims to address the following research questions: *How is authenticity crafted and perceived by both artists and listeners on Instagram in the contemporary music industry through platform's affordances?*

To address this general question, the study considered two sub-questions:

SQ1: What are the affordances that most enable artists to market themselves on Instagram in an authentic way?

SQ2: How the same Instagram affordances shape listeners' perceptions of authenticity in their interaction with artists' content?

The first sub-question explores what specific affordances of Instagram most enable artists to market themselves and their content in a way that feels authentic. This requires an examination of some of the platform-specific features and how they are strategically used to maintain a sense of transparency, emotional connection, and artistic integrity, or as Graham et. al. (2011) claimed, to construct and deconstruct cultural identities (p.89).

While, with the second sub-question, the study investigates how the same affordances shape listeners' perceptions of authenticity in their interaction with artists' content. Since perceptions and social meanings are inevitably mediated and influenced by platform logics and aesthetics (Hurley, 2019, p. 2), it becomes crucial to understand how authenticity is not only produced but also interpreted and negotiated within the platform.

This research is socially relevant for several reasons. First, it addresses how digital platforms, particularly Instagram, have reshaped the traditional structures of the music industry, empowering artists' agency with new self-promotion possibilities that allow them to bypass institutional gatekeepers and connect directly with their audiences. Second, this study explores how platform affordances influence what is seen and perceived as "authentic" and emotionally valuable within the music industry. Understanding this dynamic helps clarify the complex relationship existing between human and more abstract traits, such as emotion and creativity, and the digital context of social media platforms, where multiple identities unite through various modes of expression. Specifically, this study investigates how technological design mediates visibility, engagement, artists' online identity construction, and listeners' perceptions. Finally, it provides insights into how authentic connections have become both a personal value and social expectation, as well as a strategic marketing tool for self-branding and audience engagement.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter Two explores the theoretical frameworks on which the research is based. Here, the concept of authenticity is first generally investigated under different perspectives and scholars and then connected to key aspects of today's music industry. The second part of the literature review focuses on relevant theories of affordances, which employed within the Instagram platform will inform the rest of the research to investigate users' relationships and ways of connection. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, including sampling selection, data collection procedures and an explanation of the thematic analysis used. Chapter Four presents the results obtained through semi-structured interviews with both artists and listeners, highlighting key insights coming from each group. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion chapter aims to generalize the findings of the research and link them to previous theories.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to explore the key concepts of this research, beginning with a broad and complex conceptualization of “authenticity” and moving towards its definition within the context of today’s music industry and digital environment. Finally, the chapter looks at various theories of affordances, focusing in particular on three of them that better align with the exploration of authenticity on the Instagram platform.

2.1. Defining Authenticity

The concept of “authenticity” has evolved significantly over time and has been explored across multiple disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies (Nunes et al., 2021b, p. 1). Derived from the Greek word *authentes* (Serazio, 2023, p.5), authenticity can broadly refer either to the idea of originality and uniqueness or to the fidelity to one’s authority. While the former denotes something of unquestionable origin or invention, the latter signifies accuracy, relatability, and truthfulness in self-expression, aiming for congruence between internal identity and external presentation (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023). Despite scholars’ efforts to uncover the deeper meanings of authenticity, no single definition prevails over others due to its inherent complexity and multifaceted nature (Zhou et al., 2022, p.46).

The meaning of authenticity can be classified into three distinct theoretical approaches: objective, constructive, and existential (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1461). Although they all aim to define authenticity in general terms, each theoretical framework offers a unique lens and specific insights through which to explore its value and multifaceted nature in the digital context of the contemporary music industry.

The objective approach views authenticity as an intrinsic quality that exists independently of any perceptions, interpretations, or external factors, and regardless of social context (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1461). A central figure in this perspective is Walter Benjamin, who, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1969), argues that technological advances in art reproduction diminish the original "aura" of an artwork. This leads to the proliferation of mass-produced art and the inevitable loss of its authentic values and original presence in time and place (Benjamin, 1969, pp.3-4). Benjamin’s concept of technological reproduction remains highly relevant in the contemporary music

industry context, where streaming services, file sharing, and social media blur the boundaries between an original product and its reproductions, obscuring its native meaning and origins, and raising critical questions about its authentic value (Valverde, 2022, p. 195). In the specific context of this thesis, Benjamin's theory (1969) suggests that deep and authentic meanings risk being lost in Instagram's saturated environment, where affordances, such as the constant creation of content and the brief and momentary nature of its consumption, may disconnect the content from its original temporal and special context.

In contrast, the constructivist approach defines authenticity as the product of social processes and interactions, closely tied to one's sense of identity (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1461). As Charles Taylor argues in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992), an individual's feeling of authenticity is shaped by their identity, which in turn is formed through community interactions and broader social norms and values (pp. 34, 41). In the music context, this perspective emphasizes how notions of authenticity are often determined and regulated by societal expectations and cultural backgrounds (Askin & Mol, 2018, pp. 7-8). In response to the industry's digital transformation, artists have begun to adapt to platform-specific formats, trending content, and followers' expectations, while simultaneously balancing their public personas with personal expression. This "platformization" of identity allows artists to self-promote and monetize on their content while incorporating a social dimension into the user's experience of music consumption (Geurts & Cepa, 2023b, p. 15). In this research, this point anticipates an important relation between artists' identity construction and performance and their followers, suggesting that the meaning of authenticity may be both subjective and shaped by personal interpretations, as well as broader community preferences and Instagram's characteristics.

Finally, the existential approach views authenticity as an ongoing (McDonald et. al., 2008, p. 3), context-dependent process (Golomb, 1995, p. 1). Serazio (2023) further complicates this notion by defining authenticity as a "quasi-religion" that aims at self-discovery. For Serazio, authenticity represents a way of coping with external pressures and conditions in the contemporary world by embracing the illusion of profound purpose and inner meaning (p.2). Similarly, Golomb (1995) suggests that authenticity is most clearly revealed in "extreme situations", which, by defining the human experience, generate authentic moments of self-idealization (p. 144). For self-made artists, this approach is reflected in their online exposure of more vulnerable and intimate moments, which often

resonate deeply with listeners due to their raw and unfiltered nature (Corlett et al., 2019, p. 560). With such personal expressions, artists encourage a more authentic perception of themselves, fostering stronger emotional connection and greater engagement (Corlett et al., 2019, pp. 561-562). Within this study, the existential perspective clearly suggests that a less staged exposure of human traits and performance of vulnerability play a significant role in shaping authentic listeners' interpretations of artists online.

2.2. Authenticity in the Music Industry

The music industry has long debated the idea of authenticity, especially considering the growing commercialization of music and the rise of digital platforms (Nunes et al., 2021, p. 6).

Historically, the notion of authenticity was linked to artists' creative integrity and ability to convey a genuine and distinctive voice among mainstream productions and commercially driven trends. Especially, genres like punk rock, blues, and folk music were normally associated with authenticity due to their roots in marginalized communities and their inherent rejection of popular sounds and corporate music production (Serazio, 2023, p.82).

However, streaming platforms and social media, such as Spotify and Instagram, have transformed the music industry, presenting both challenges and opportunities for understanding and maintaining authenticity within the evolving digitalization of the music industry (Winkler et al., 2024, p. 1). On one hand, these platforms offer unprecedented shareability and democratization of both music production and distribution, allowing independent artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers like record labels and radio stations and reach global audiences through self-promotion and consistent online exposure (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 12). This shift suggests an empowerment of artists' freedom of self-presentation, enabling them to create their own narratives and connect with listeners on a more personal level. In this scenario, digital platforms can be seen as a fostering channel for expressions of authenticity.

On the other hand, some of the main affordances of digital platforms introduce new obstacles for authenticity. By operating on engagement-driven metrics, such as likes,

followers, and shares, they often prioritize content designed to generate user buzz over more real content grounded in artistic uniqueness and originality (Jones, 2019, p. 30). These dynamics can lead to the creation of a culture of homogenization and mainstream trends, where uniqueness ends up being sacrificed in favor of virality and mass approval (Serazio, 2023, p. 14). In such an environment, the search for authenticity becomes increasingly complex, as artists must be able to navigate the tension between being real to themselves and their artistic identity while adapting to certain platform's rules and using specific affordances to reach visibility and economic success (Serazio, 2023, p. 14). Within the context of this research, the pressure of having to conform to popular trends to be heard anticipates several difficulties in the expression of artists' authentic and genuine voices.

2.2.1. Social Media & The Tension Between Commercial and Creative Voice

As this tension has been amplified by social media platforms and their affordances, the line between personal authenticity and strategic branding becomes increasingly blurred. Whereas talent and storytelling skills were once key elements for success, the digital landscape through which the contemporary music industry is developing, places increasing value on personality exposure, visibility and constant engagement (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p.13). Audiences now seek realness, expecting artists to be accessible and to regularly share unfiltered glimpses of their personal lives, while, simultaneously, managing commercial expectations that often require a carefully curated image (Tofalvy & Barna, 2020, p. 53).

As a result, authenticity itself becomes a commodified tool, framing social media activities as individualized and creative self-expression (Duffy, 2017b, p.119). Artists' emotions, experiences, and identity are now marketed as strategic elements of self-promotion, contributing to what Findlay (2019) calls “aspirational realness”. Through carefully crafted discursive and aesthetic representations, aspirational realness aims to create the illusion of the ordinary life, reducing the distance between artists and their audience and promoting a more intimate, pure, but purposefully curated, exchange of interactions (Findlay, 2019, p. 7).

The process of self-presentation, therefore, becomes conflicted, as described by Jones et.al. (2005), who identify the tension between an artist's “manufactured voice” and

“creative voice”. While the manufactured voice aims at commercial success and represents the entrepreneurial and strategic identity of the artist, the creative voice looks at their genuine self-expression and personal storytelling (Jones et.al., 2005, pp. 893-894). Only those who successfully navigate this balance can cultivate a loyal following, creating relationships grounded in trust and reciprocal interaction. Conversely, those who fail to manage these pressures may find it difficult to maintain meaningful connections with their audience (Kucharska et al., 2020, p. 816). As Banet-Weiser (2012) notes, today’s brand culture is marked by an increasing blurring between the authentic self and the commodity self. This phenomenon, while rejecting the simple binarity that associates the commercial with inauthenticity, is becoming more widely expected and accepted among users and creators (Banet- Weiser, 2012, p. 14).

Based on these statements, this study expects to find a certain degree of acceptance from listeners towards the strategic positioning of artists, as personal and commercial identities must be combined within one another in order for independent artists to self-develop their careers online.

2.3. Instagram Affordances

Artists' exposure and promotion are made possible by platform-specific affordances, unique features and formats provided by digital platforms that enable creators to develop self-made business models and generate various revenue streams, such as merchandise revenue and branded partnerships (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 5). Specifically, within the context of this research, these platform-related affordances are expected not only to facilitate greater artists independence from traditional gatekeepers in the construction of their own creative identity but also to enhance their interactions with their audiences and deepen their understanding of them.

Furthermore, the identification and analysis of affordances help explaining the evolving practices of social media creators and their complex relationship with authenticity (Hurley’s, 2019, p.3). This connection between affordances and authenticity has become increasingly central as digital environments require the construction of idealized identities performances, where notions of self are carefully and strategically curated to appear more genuine and relatable (Hurley’s, 2019, p.5). This suggests that by understanding what

platforms can afford or constrain, artists can better understand how to negotiate their public personas, successfully navigating the previously motioned tension between personal expression and strategic identity. Constructions and perceptions of authenticity, therefore, are expected to be revealed as shaped by platform's related affordances and by how artists utilize these affordances based on both personal choices and audience preferences.

2.3.1. *Definition of Affordances*

The notion of “affordance” has been largely discussed in media research to investigate the relationship between technology and its users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 3). Originally introduced by Gibson (1979) to describe what the physical environment “offers, provides, or furnishes” to an organism (p. 127), the term “affordance” is here seen as a relational property between the two elements, not intrinsic to the environment itself but emerging through possible actions and interpretations it enables (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 4). In this view, “an affordance cannot be measured in physics” (Gibson, 1979, p. 128) but rather in relation to specific organism’s needs, behaviors and experiences.

Later, Norman (1988) extended the term into design studies, emphasizing how the design of objects either encourages or constrains specific actions, moving the focus away from Gibson’s organism’s direct perception and interpretations (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 6). While arguing that “an affordance is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (Norman, 1988, p. 27), Norman’s presentation of “affordances” become a “prescriptive concept”, inherently incorporated in the object (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2).

These two fundamental definitions encapsulate the ambivalence that the notion of “affordance” has gone through over time while being reused and adapted across different contexts and situations (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 6). In media studies, this tension is evident in the exploration of the relationship between technology and its users. While some scholars focus on what technologies directly afford, allow, or constrain certain actions through their inherent features and properties, such as Gaver’s (1991) concept of *technology affordances* (p.79), others emphasize users’ perspectives, attributing greater agency to them in shaping and influencing the technological and digital environment they navigate. Examples of this approach include the theorization of *social affordances* (Wellman, 2001),

which refer to how technological changes “afford for social relation and social structure” (p. 228), and *communicative affordances* (Hutchby, 2014), which highlight how communication and interpersonal relations are increasingly dependent on and mediated by technological features (p. 86). This perspective also incorporates Katz and Aakhus’s (2002) concept of “perpetual contact”, describing mobile media’s continuous demand for user availability (p. 308).

However, within the evolution of social media ecosystems, these perspectives have become increasingly limited in capturing the complexity of the relationships between digital environments and their users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 14). As a result, more nuanced and multifaced definitions of affordances have emerged. Among them, the concept of *imagined affordances* (Nagy & Neff, 2015) “better incorporates the material, the mediated, and the emotional aspects of human–technology interaction” (p. 2), validating more users’ perceptions and expectations in their engagement with technologies. Similarly, *vernacular affordances* (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) explore how users themselves interpret and make sense of affordances at various levels of abstraction through everyday practices (p. 5).

These evolving approaches on affordances highlight the increasing importance of looking at both the technical structures and designs of platforms and their users’ interpretive and individualized agency. As digital spaces, especially social media, play a bigger role in people’s identity expression and connection with others, it becomes crucial to adopt frameworks that better align with their multifaced and complex nature.

2.3.2. *Multimodal Affordances*

Inspired by these more nuanced approaches, Hurley (2019) introduces a triadic affordances model to analyze Instagram’s use within its technological architecture, sociocultural contexts and meanings, and globalized commercial practices (p. 1). By categorizing affordances in material, conceptual, and imaginary dimensions, the author analyses the multimodal semiotic resources of videos, images, sounds, speech, text, captions, and hashtags offered by Instagram, sustaining that together they create social meaning, ultimately shaping, facilitating, or limiting the communication (Hurley’s, 2019, p.2).

Material affordances refer to the specific actions and functions enabled by the platform’s design; *conceptual or symbolic affordances* address the cultural meanings and semiotic

codes that inform different usages and interpretations of content; and *imaginary affordances* relate to users' aesthetic and creative practices of self-presentation (Hurley's, 2019, p.2).

Overall, a multimodal approach of social media affordances enables to embrace the "bricolage identities" shared online by individuals and communities, highlighting the fluid, strategic, and layered nature of digital personas (Hurley's, 2019, p.13).

2.3.3. A Relational and Multi-layered approach to Affordances

Starting from Gibson's relational ontology (Gibson, 1979), Bucher & Helmond (2018) define the concept of affordances following a "more relational and multilayered" approach. Instead of focusing on what technology does to users, they delve into what end-users afford or do to technology, simultaneously preserving "a sense of platform-sensitivity" by considering the specific features of the medium (p. 16). With their approach, they include both non-human and human agency, with the first referring to the ways in which 'things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on' (Latour, 2005, p. 72), and the second relating to the various stakeholders and users involved in the digital exchange (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 19).

By adopting a relational and multi-layered perspective, therefore, they extend beyond identifying whose action possibilities are enabled, rather considering how these actions emerge through the interplay of varied and, at times, conflicting entities that shape new forms of meaning (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 18).

2.3.4. Value Affordances

With a similar focus on relations and everyday users' interpretations and perceptions, Scharlach & Hallinan (2023) introduced the concept of *value affordances*, defining them as a "set of ethical, aesthetic, and relational principles that emerge from the interaction between different stakeholders and technological infrastructures" (p. 2). In their study, they specifically analyzed the values that users associate with some engagement features of the platform such as the Like, Comment, and Share buttons, concluding that these options transform social interactions into data that fuels platform's algorithm, economy and relationships between individuals (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023, p. 2). Thus, value

affordances reveal how technological environments shape perceptions of emotional resonance, community, belonging, and authenticity, by being interpreted through users' emotional and ethical lenses (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023, p. 4). In this sense, the most typical interactions afforded by platforms such as commenting, liking, and sharing content foster new ways to express oneself and build or support social communities (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023, p. 8).

2.3.5. From Affordances to Authenticity Construction and Perception

Following the frameworks of *multimodal affordances*, *relational and multi-layered affordances*, and *value affordances*, this study explores how artists and listeners co-construct and interpret the notion of authenticity on Instagram.

Building on Harley's *multimodal affordances* model, the analysis considers how Instagram's material, conceptual, and imaginary affordances mediate the self-representation of artists' identities. As the author points out, these online identities are often grounded in idealized form of authenticity, what Asking and Mol (2018) might describe with "institutional achievement", a social constructed and context-dependent process that helps determine what is worth producing, promoting, and engaging with (p.5). This idealized and crafted authenticity, however, while fostering strong connections among users online, is often neither easy to genuinely attain nor necessarily desirable in offline settings (Hurley's, 2019, p.5). Based on that, the study investigates how artists' self-construction of identity on Instagram shapes listeners' perceptions of their authenticity and affects their level of engagement within their online character and music. The research suggests that authenticity is crafted, experienced, and perceived differently online, taking on multiple forms and meanings and leading a diverse set of social and interpersonal responses and consequences.

In line with Bucher & Helmond's (2018) *relational and multi-layered approach*, the analysis of Instagram affordances accounts for both human and nonhuman agencies: artists and listeners are considered in terms of their different platform purposes and practices, while platform specificities are examined for how they enable or constrain in the exchange between the two parts. Building on this idea, the study aims to clarify the highly debated, and often conflicted, co-existence of artists' "manufactured voice", fostered and allowed by Instagram commercial features and artists' economic goals, and artists' "creative voice",

based on the genuine and passionate divulgation of their music and unique expression (Jones et.al., 2005, pp. 893-894). However, as Banet-Weiser (2012) suggests, today's brand culture is marked by an increasing blurring between the authentic self and the commodity self, becoming more widely expected and accepted among users and creators to integrate the two different personalities, without necessarily being perceived as inauthentic (Banet- Weiser, 2012, p. 14). This study expectations follow the last statement, suggesting that today's listeners perception of authenticity is not negatively influenced by artists' economic strategies but rather integrated as part of it.

Finally, drawing on Scharlach & Hallinan's (2023) theorization of *value affordances*, the research explores how Instagram-specific practices, options, and formats such as liking, commenting, and sharing translate into social and psychological values. As Charles Taylor (1992) argues, an individual's sense of authenticity is shaped through their identity, which emerges in relation to community interactions and broader social norms and values (pp. 34, 41). Therefore, value affordances are considered in this study as a means that link the infrastructural values of the platform to people's personal values (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023, p. 2), shaping all the digital identities involved and the relationships between them. In order to explore the concept of authenticity through value affordances, the research anticipates finding relevance in values such as identity exposure, visibility, and constant engagement (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p.13), and regular share of unfiltered and real aspects of artists' lives (Tofalvy & Barna, 2020, p. 53) as these are elements that encourage a more authentic perception of public figures, fostering a stronger emotional connection and greater engagement (Corlett et al., 2019, pp. 561-562).

Overall, the aim of the study is to link the concept of technological affordances to broader users' interpretations, emphasizing the daily, reciprocal and co-constructed relationship between human agency and platform architecture in shaping notions of authenticity.

3. Methodology

This chapter aims to provide an outline of the methodological approach employed to address the research questions guiding this study. The research investigates the notion of authenticity in the digital realm of Instagram, specifically within the context of today's music industry.

The chapter begins by explaining the reasoning behind the employment of a qualitative research design, highlighting its suitability for examining subjective experiences and personal views and opinions concerning the topic. Further, it delves into the explanation of the various stages involved in the research process, such as samples selection criteria, recruitment strategies used in approaching participants, and additional steps that guided data collection. Particular attention is given to the development of semi-structured interviews, which served as a central tool to foster in-depth insights from both artists and listeners. Following this, the operationalization section illustrates how the guidance of specific theoretical frameworks, mainly related to the digital meaning of authenticity, has informed the empirical research by being used for the formulation of the interview questions. This theoretical grounding allowed for more structured interpretations and explanations of how authenticity is being crafted and perceived within the Instagram platform, maintaining certain level of flexibility to better explore the different experiences of the two selected samples. Finally, the chapter critically reflects on the reliability and validity of the research. It considers how methodology choices contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings. It also addresses the potential limitations of the study by reflecting on sampling strategy, data interpretation, and researcher positionality. Overall, the chapter aims to inform about the methodology employed to demonstrate the robustness and integrity of the analytical processes.

3.1. Research Design

In order to investigate the online experience of authenticity in the contemporary music industry, a qualitative approach was employed. This methodology was chosen to capture the subjective and personal experiences through which authenticity is perceived and values by individuals engaged in both Instagram content production and consumption.

Quantitative methods in this research would have resulted in mere generalizable measurements, leaving aside respondents' diverse online experiences and neglecting the different and nuanced facets of the notion of authenticity.

Furthermore, the simultaneous examination of both artists and listeners' perspectives allows for a better comprehension of the reasons behind certain ideas of authenticity, identifying the different modes in which the two groups address the concept, as guided by different purposes and interests. As qualitative research is intended to analyze and understand individuals' or groups perceptions and experiences on the specific context in which these exist (O'Brien et al., 2014, p. 1245), Instagram platform was selected as such. In this case, different users' practices and preferences determine or constrain the use of specific affordances over others that, unconsciously or strategically, could shape the interaction between the two groups. A consistent evaluation of these platform-related affordances and users' preferences is also supported by a qualitative method of investigation, as the experience of the same environment might differ from organism to organism (Gibson, 1979, p. 128).

This research is specifically rooted in in-depth interviews as seen as the best tools to explore respondents' insights on their experience of authenticity (Rauf et al., 2023b, p. 750). Semi-structured interviews were selected as an appropriate means of data gathering for addressing more complex social-behavioral investigations (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361), offering flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews and facilitating the analysis. This approach leaves the discussion open to personalized digressions and follow-up questions and allows the clarification of possible ambiguities, encouraging participants to express their thoughts and perspectives more fully (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360).

3.2. Sample

To explore fully the online experience of authenticity in the current music industry, the sample included two groups of respondents. The first was made of five emergent artists, while the second comprised five music listeners. The individuals from both groups were recruited through purposive sampling, meaning that they were intentionally selected by the researcher based on certain criteria considered important for the research goals (Rai &

Thapa, 2015, p. 5). This method of research was employed in order to obtain more reliable results and relevant experiences within the music field.

All participants are quoted using pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity. The only relevant sampling information concerns their belonging to one group or another, as indicated in Table 1.

Artists	Listeners
Aurora	Raffaella
Luigi	Adriano
Francesco	Daniele
Matteo	Chiara
Mara	Barbara

Table 1. Overview of Participant Group Belonging

3.2.1. Sampling the Artists

The first sample was composed by five emerging artists, referring with this definition to small-scale music artists who are crafting their career independently, by marking themselves in the industry and actively trying to be recognized (Nwagwu & Akintoye, 2023, p. 1). The research focused on those emerging artists who use Instagram as the main tool to self-promote and engage with their audiences. The first three participants were part of the researcher's social network, whereas the other two were found through the employment of snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019), by being recommended by the first interviewees (p. 3). Three respondents were singers, one of whom was in a band, while the other two were musicians playing in bands too.

All participants were recruited between the end of April and the beginning of May 2025 through a friendly and self-explanatory message: the first three via WhatsApp, while the other two via Instagram directs. The message included a brief explanation of the research in order to introduce the topic and justify the upcoming request for participation as emerging artist:

Hi X it's Sofia! I hope everything's fine! I'm working on my thesis about the concept of authenticity in the music industry, focusing on how it's perceived by listeners and crafted by artists through Instagram. Considering that you're an artist and you're active on this platform, I would really like to interview you to have some of your insights about the topic! Would you be interested in helping me out with that?

Let me know:)

Sofia.

All five artists responded to the request with enthusiasm, showing a strong interest for the research itself.

3.2.2. Sampling the Listeners

The second sample included five music listeners. They were selected through the interviewed artists' Instagram profile and selected among their followers, ensuring a meaningful link between artists' experience and their audiences. By leveraging the existing connection between the two groups, the research better investigates the Instagram's affordances that most foster this relationship and their intertwining within the concept of authenticity.

For the listeners sample, following at least one of the five recruited artists was the only requirement for the participants of the second group. The listeners were also recruited through a self-explanatory message, in which the research was presented, and the request of engagement was justified by their role of listeners and follower of the selected artists.

Hi X it's Sofia! I hope you're doing well! I'm reaching out because I'm working on my thesis about the concept of authenticity in the music industry, focusing on how it's perceived by listeners and crafted by artists through Instagram. As I'm recruiting some music listeners among the Instagram followers of the selected artists, I would like to interview you to have some of your insights about the topic! Would you be interested in helping me out with that?

Let me know:)

Sofia.

All the five listeners accepted to participate and be relevant for the research.

3.3. Operationalization

As the goal of the research was to investigate the value of authenticity on Instagram from both the perspectives of listeners and music artists, the operationalization process involved the creation of two distinct interview guides: one for the artists and the other for the listeners (Appendix A & Appendix B). Each guide consisted of 16 questions, grouped into four thematic sections. The first two themes were shared across both groups, while the remaining two were tailored to the specificities of each group in order to capture the distinct experiences and perspectives associated with their respective roles. Each theme was representative of a key concept of the research and was grounded in previous studies and theoretical frameworks.

The first section of the interview explored participants' general understanding of the notion of authenticity, providing a solid foundation for the rest of the discussion. Respondents were asked to reflect on key concepts such as "originality", "reproduction", and "digital identity", while recalling relevant episodes of their lives. These questions were mainly grounded on contemporary interpretations of Benjamin's (1969) theory of technological reproduction, Taylor's (1992) theory of the social construction of identity, and Golob's (1995) framework of self-idealization.

The second section examined participants' social media habits and experiences within digital environments. It focused on their preferred platforms, the influence of these platforms on their self-perception and behaviors, and their spontaneous attitudes to commercialized pieces of content.

The third section delved into the intersection between social media and the music industry, highlighting how digital platforms shape artistic practices and audience engagement. Artists were guided to discuss themes such as online self-perception, self-representation, and self-promotion, exploring deeper the blur between their personal and public lives. Listeners, in turn, were asked to describe their expectations of artists' online presence and the ways in which they engage with both the artists themselves and their music. The second and the third sections were mainly inspired by Duffy's (2017) concept of "commodified authenticity", Findlay's (2019) theorization of "aspirational realness", and Cunningham & Craig's (2019) analysis of social media engagement.

Finally, the fourth section focused specifically on Instagram, investigating how its usages and affordances might enable or hinder authentic exchanges between artists and listeners. It explored themes such as users feedback, interaction, and the tension between strategic self-presentation and personal exposure. This final theme drew upon Jones et. al. (2005) and Banet-Weiser's (2012) distinction between the “manufactured voice” or “commodity self”, and the “creative voice” or “authentic self”. Additionally, the analysis of Instagram’s characteristics was conducted through the lens of three different affordances theories: Harley’s (2019) model of multimodal affordances, Bucher & Helmond’s (2018) relational and multi-layered approach, and Scharlach & Hallinan’s (2023) concept of value affordances.

The interviews were organized with the aim of creating a comfortable and friendly environment. Questions were phrased in a very colloquial way, avoiding specific technical terms to encourage a more natural and spontaneous discussion. The interview’s conversational flow was further enhanced by their semi-structure design that, by leaving the discussion open to additional, follow-up questions, improved the depth of respondent’s insights (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360) while maintaining consistency among respondents.

3.4. Data Collection & Analysis

3.4.1. Data Collection

Data for this research were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten participants: five emerging music artists who actively use Instagram for self-promotion and five music listeners selected among the artists’ profile followers.

Given the different cultural backgrounds of the participants, all ten interviews were conducted in English. With those who are based in Rotterdam, the interview was conducted in person, whereas with the rest of the respondents, the interviews were scheduled as an online meeting on Zoom. Each interview lasted on average 60 minutes, with the longest interview lasting 1 hour and 40 minutes and the shortest 40 minutes. It was noted that interviews with listeners tended to be slightly shorter than those with artists, although the number of questions was the same.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents, transcribed using the online platform Dovetail, and manually refined for clarity and accuracy. Throughout the conduction of the interviews, two of the 16 questions of the interview's guide were slightly rephrased as they had caused some uncertainty among the first participants. The new wording resolved the issue without altering the purpose or the meaning of the investigation. In addition to the core questions, specific and context-related follow-up questions distinguished each interview from the others, exploring diverse facets of both artists' and listeners' experiences. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation: when similar experiences and opinions began to emerge consistently, data collection was considered over (Hennink et al., 2016, p. 592).

3.4.2. Data analysis

The data collected from both samples were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Riger and Sigurvinssdottir (2016). This method involves the inductive identification of recurring ideas or themes within the data set (p. 33) and was selected due to the study's objective of capturing subjective interpretations, opinions and experiences around the phenomena of authenticity, considering Instagram's affordances and features as determined factors in the online relationship between artists and listeners.

To facilitate the analysis of interviews transcripts, the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was employed. This tool provided a space where to better organize large amounts of qualitative data, enabling the identification of patterns and themes across interviews through the creation of codes and categorizations. The use of ATLAS.ti not only fostered the transparency of the analysis but also contributed to the credibility of the findings.

Specifically, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-steps guidelines: transcription of interviews, generation of initial codes, identification for potential themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and the production of the final report (Riger & Sigurvinssdottir, 2016, p. 34).

As previously mentioned, transcripts were automatically generated using the online software Dovetail and subsequently refined and polished manually (Stage 1). In the second

stage of the analysis, both inductive and theory-driven codes were identified and developed. Inductive codes emerged directly from participant's transcripts, while theory-driven codes were informed by relevant theoretical frameworks and literature expectations (Riger & Sigurvinssdottir, 2016, p. 35). Once the data had been analyzed into different codes (Stage 2), potential themes began to take shape through the grouping of similar codes (Stage 3) for then being refined into more established themes that better addressed the research questions of the study (Stage 4). In stage five, the themes were named and clearly defined, emphasizing the distinct meanings and patterns they represented (see Coding Book in Appendix C). Finally, the sixth stage consisted of the development of a comprehensive report aimed at uncovering fundamental meanings, perspectives, and recurring patterns across the two samples.

With this objective, the findings from the two sets of interviews were ultimately compared to determine whether artists' strategies for conveying authenticity online align with listeners' expectations, preferences, and platform-related behaviors.

3.5. Ethics, Reliability & Validity, and Limitations

3.5.1. Ethics

Given the qualitative nature of the research, particular attention was paid to ensuring ethical integrity throughout both data collection and analysis processes. At the beginning of each interview, a brief introduction to the research was provided. This opening paragraph was meant to shortly explain the purpose of the study, encouraging participants to feel comfortable and open in their responses. At the end of the introduction, the need to record the conversation was addressed, along with the request for consent. It was clarified that the recording would be used only for research purposes and would not be shared outside of the project.

Furthermore, participants were informed that none of their responses would be connected to their identities. Anonymity was an essential consideration throughout both the analysis and the reporting of the data. This was ensured through the employment of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying demographic information, evaluated as non-essential to the research.

Overall, the introduction also served as a friendly icebreaker, helping the participant feel more at ease and less pressured:

“Hi, thank you so much for being here today! I’m Sofia, and I’m currently working on a research project that explores how authenticity is crafted and perceived in the music industry, with particular focus on Instagram. Our conversation is going to be quite informal. There are no right or wrong answers, but I’m rather interested in hearing your thoughts and personal experiences regarding the topic. Additionally, your responses will be analyzed and reported anonymously, so feel free to answer the way you prefer! If it’s okay with you, I’d like to record this interview for research purposes. The recording will only be used to help me analyze the responses and will not be shared outside of the project”.

3.5.2. Reliability & Validity

Given the qualitative approach adopted in this study, it is particularly important to delineate the relevance of the analysis processes through the concepts of reliability and validity. According to LeCompte and Goetz (1982), qualitative research can be considered reliable when the interpretations derived by different researchers are sufficiently congruent, generating similar results in similar contexts (p. 32). In this case, the reliability of the study was ensured by the employment of semi-structured interview formats and a systemic approach throughout data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the support of existing theories in the creation of the question guides helped ensure consistency across interviews and alignment with previous studies in the results.

With regard to validity, it refers to the accuracy with which research findings reflect empirical reality and effectively represent meaningful aspects of the human experience (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 32). In this study, validity was strengthened through the use of semi-structured interviews with two different samples. This approach allowed for a broader collection of perspectives by leveraging the distinct roles of artists and listeners to capturing multiple opinions, experiences, and behaviors related to the phenomenon of authenticity within the online environment of Instagram. This methodological choice enhanced both the credibility of the research and the depth of the findings.

3.5.3. Limitations

Despite the richness of the research, the results were collected started from small samples. For this reason, findings may result inappropriate for a generalization as considered not representative enough of the wider population (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 3).

Finally, it is essential to reflect on the researcher positionality, referring to the influence of the individual's personal point of view and social and political position (Holmes, 2020, p.1) on the research process and the interpretation of the findings, especially considering the subjective nature of authenticity interpretations.

This study was driven by a profound interest and passion for the music industry which, influenced by the rise of social media, has developed new facets and ways of expression. The personal engagement with the topic likely enriched the depth of the investigation while representing a potential interpretive bias, as the researcher's personal assumptions and values may have influenced the way data were collected and interpreted.

Therefore, regular reflections on researcher's positionality and the engagement with the theoretical framework aimed to reduce potential biases, ensuring the focus on participants' voices and previous studies.

Furthermore, the researcher had pre-existing connections with some of the participants selected for the research. On one hand, this sense of familiarity fostered a more comfortable environment and encouraged more open responses. On the other hand, certain elements mentioned during the interviews or some interpretations in the analysis, might have been influenced by prior knowledge about the participants. For this reason, a more professional and neutral stance was adopted throughout the research process, ensuring equal treatment of all respondents regardless of any existing connections.

4. Results

This chapter reports the results of the thematic analysis conducted to address the research questions of the study and to explore how authenticity is perceived and crafted through Instagram's affordances in today's music industry.

The Results section is divided into five sub-chapters, each identifying a key theme emerged from the interviews conducted with both artists and listeners. The distinction between the two groups was constantly taken into account throughout the analysis, and the representation of the results also aims to compare and connect their opinions, habits and preferences regarding Instagram usage.

The first sub-chapter explores the definition of authenticity in general terms, highlighting its subjective and multiple interpretations across interviewees. The concept is further examined through a contemporary adaptation of Walter Benjamin's theory of technological reproduction (1936), which enabled the researcher to better understand respondents' valuation of the origin of a cultural product and its connection to authenticity. The second sub-chapter investigates the contemporary role of social media in offering a new space of identity expression, addressing both its positive and negative aspects. The third theme focuses on artists' use of Instagram as a "portfolio". While many of its features were appreciated for self-promotion, its performative nature was criticized, especially by listeners who described Instagram interactions as parasocial relationships. The fourth sub-chapter explores how artists navigate the tension between authentic self-expression and strategic branding on Instagram, with both artists and listeners acknowledging the various complexities involved. Finally, the fifth theme examines how Instagram's affordances influence authentic connections between artists and listeners, highlighting artist's strategic use and preferences of the platform and listeners' meaningful engagement with their content.

4.1. What is Authentic?

This theme explores the multifaceted and subjective nature of authenticity, emphasizing how participants conceptualize it through the closely related idea of "originality".

Many associated “authenticity” with being true to oneself, one’s values, and one’s personality by stating its opposition with the pursuit of external validation and mass appreciation. Aurora, for instance, described originality as “sticking to your own norms” while Daniele framed it as “doing something that really represents yourself.” Matteo further developed this idea, explaining that “you should never do something for the sake of getting the love or trust of other people” for then saying, “you have to be genuinely yourself [...] that’s what attracts other people”.

Other participants defined originality through the act of creating something that has never been seen before, something completely fresh and new. Barbara defined it as “something that has not been thought by someone else”, while Adriano added that “being original means standing out in a specific field”. For him, authenticity in music comes from artists who “bring their own spirit into the music, [...] and a unique visual element by creating a specific aesthetic.”

A smaller portion of participants viewed originality as a balance between innovation and influence from existing works, tradition, or specific training. As Francesco put it, originality lies in “trying to find the balance between replicating the past and do something new” admitting in the end that “there is never something completely new”. Luigi reinforced this idea by describing originality as a “spectrum” where “you can’t never be 100% original because [music] is about striking this balance between your inspirations, training, and your personal skills, to finally do something that’s genuinely you”. Mara and Chiara expanded on this, arguing that inspiration does not necessarily undermine originality. As Mara stated, “in the end you’re also readapting the inspiration to something that makes sense to you” while Chiara noted “it depends on the person and the context in which something is being reproduced”. Originality, then, is not merely about novelty but also about reinterpretation and personal touch.

Finally, one participant shifted the focus from creation to reception, arguing that authenticity can reside in how and from who art is consumed. Barbara argues that originality “is not for the masses” but rather “something niche, something special and very intimate”. This view highlights that authenticity is not only embedded in production but also in the selective, subjective ways in which it is perceived and interpreted by the audience.

Overall, these insights align with scholar difficulties in the theorization of the concept of authenticity (Zhou et al., 2022, p.46). Rather than a fixed and objective notion, authenticity reveals itself as a dynamic and subjective element that, according to people's interpretations, can assume different meanings and shapes.

These multiple understandings of authenticity set the stage for a deeper discussion around a contemporary adaptation of the phenomenon of "technological reproduction". To better understand participants interpretations, the research engaged with Walter Benjamin's theory, explained in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). In this essay, Benjamin argues that the technological replication of artworks diminishes their "aura", described as the uniqueness that links the work to its original time and place, turning it into a commodified object (Benjamin, 1969, pp.3-4).

Several participants aligned with Benjamin's perspective. Luigi declared that the constant availability of cultural products on digital platforms facilitates their accessibility and consumption but leads, at the same time, to oversaturation, reducing the depth of engagement with each content. As Francesco put it, content is now "hard to really digest" because "everything is being consumed quickly". Luigi connected this phenomenon to the influence of gatekeepers who use audience data and trending content to shape artists' career. Despite higher opportunities for success, this shift prioritizes marketability over individuality, making cultural products increasingly standardized and easier to mass-produce, and leading to a loss of one's authenticity. He critically concluded by stating that, nowadays the artists that follow the rules of the market opting for the "easy way" are many, sacrificing their personal expression and originality. Similarly, Adriano described how social media virality can dilute the uniqueness of a cultural product, arguing that once something becomes too accessible, it risks losing its distinguishing traits. Focusing on artists, he also stated that "it's their job and priority to maintain their authenticity [...] and constantly evolve within their music and style". Echoing even more intensely Benjamin's theory, a more radical perspective came from Barbara who used the Greek terminology "parthenogenesis" to admit that "there's nothing new anymore", implying that digital platforms offer nothing but the "repetition of the same thing".

However, not all participants were pessimistic. Raffaella, for instance, argued that technological reproduction "spread the uniqueness" of the reproduced product to "broader

audiences” by increasing access and visibility. Chiara expanded this view, suggesting that originality does not depend on total novelty and invention rights, but can also emerge through transformation. She noted that “even if you are using some parts of an artwork that had been made before, sample it or take inspiration from it, you can still make something original”. What she valued is not whether something is reproduced or not, but how and why it is reproduced. She stated, “it's more about how they make use of that inspiration”, for then adding: “It depends also on the context in which something is being reproduced.”

These two perspectives challenge Benjamin’s binary between what is the original product and its copy or reproduction, suggesting that authenticity can be seen as a more relational concept: something can be considered authentic if it adds personal or contextual value, even when it “borrows” elements from previous creations.

4.2. Role of Social Media and Online Presence

This theme considers the transformative power of social media, employed by individuals for various purposes, ultimately contributing to a new virtual dimension of their identity. Both artists and listeners showed high levels of awareness related to digital platforms, acknowledging their negative and positive sides.

A central insight emerging from the interviews is the accessibility of social media, generally seen as a key driver of democratization in today’s music industry by significantly extending opportunities for self-promotion and talent sharing compared to the past. As Francesco noted: “If you don't have social media, it's almost like you don't exist in a certain field”. Among listeners, Raffaella argued that social media offers “bigger opportunities to promote themselves”, explaining that she often discovers new music through these platforms; while Adriano added: “It was much harder for an artist to stand out without social media,” describing the past music scene as an “elite world.” Social media also seem to reshape how artists recognize and connect with their audiences. Luigi described it as a shift from adapting to labels demands to adjusting to platforms’ logics and audience expectations: “Now [artists] are more inclined to format themselves to either their audience or the design of the platform in their artistic and personal expression”.

As Cunningham and Craig (2019) state, digital platforms offer new levels of shareability and democratization of both music production and distribution, releasing independent artists from the constraints of traditional music industry gatekeepers and providing them with new opportunities for self-expression (p. 12).

While all participants recognized social media as a useful tool for promotion, often this admission came with new pressures and difficulties. Aurora said: “It helps me to create that image of myself and to make people see me. But I feel like it’s beyond of what I signed up for”. Matteo admitted, “I’m not good at dealing with that. It’s too much for me sometimes [...] I honestly just love to play.”

Others, especially musicians, raised concerns about the increasing value of social media metrics, often more considered than talent. Mara, for instance, noted, “now it’s a lot about their following on Instagram or how they’re doing on Tik Tok [...] Whether you want it or not, it’s become like your portfolio”. She then added: “The algorithm probably rewards people who post consistently”. Aurora echoed this frustration: “When you want to get signed, all they look at is your numbers on social media. They don’t listen to your music”.

Artists also described practical challenges in their relationship with social media, such as the pressure of having to be consistent, delivering content of quality, and missing the “business skills”. Luigi explained, “Usually the main reason I’m not posting is because I’m independent. I do almost everything myself [...] It takes money and time [...] I don’t have the time to build the skill to do that”. Aurora mentioned the pressure to produce high-quality content, that not always are possible: “If I’m in a dark studio and I film with my crappy phone camera, it doesn’t look glam and it’s not going to be high quality content. We’re probably not going to post it.” Francesco added, “The responsibility of promoting yourself is becoming more stressful because you need a lot of business skills”. Mara also feels similar pressures, especially, when you’re doing all the work by yourself: “When I’m releasing music I start promoting actively, but I feel like I should do it more continuously. [...] when you don’t have a team it’s tough”.

These comments reflect concerns raised by several scholars. By operating on metrics and numbers, social media platforms often prioritize high-visibility content over more original and genuine expressions (Jones, 2019, p. 30), potentially undermining the authenticity of these digital spaces in favor of virality and mass approval (Serazio, 2023, p.

14). In this context, artists seem to feel forced to having to adapt to certain platform's rules and affordances to reach success and economic gain (Serazio, 2023, p. 14).

4.3. Artists' New Portfolio

Given the increasing importance of social media, many artists gave up to its power, recognizing that these platforms now serve as their primary “portfolio” for music promotion and audience expansion. Among them, Instagram has clearly emerged as the preferred channel for building a promotional strategy. It was especially appreciated for its ability to foster deeper, more authentic connections worldwide (Chiara, Daniele, Matteo), its aesthetic appeal (Adriano, Mara, Raffaella) and its versatile mix of formats and features (Luigi). Many artists referred to Instagram as a curated “portfolio” of their work (Luigi, Francesco), offering a space to share album covers, tour dates, and song releases, engage with the audience, and stay up to date with each other's music. As Francesco put it, “it's where all the musicians are.”

Despite Instagram's recognition, several listeners expressed awareness of the “filtered reality” it often presents. Some respondents showed confidence in their ability to recognize inauthenticity on social media, stating that it is not something that, generally, people appreciate. Raffaella commented, “You can always judge if someone is sincere through a phone,” and later, referring to an artist she follows online: “I don't know her. This is only what I see from her profile.” Daniele echoed this view, saying: “If something is not authentic, people are not going to consume it [...] social media is just an imagine. It's not like the real personality.”

Some listeners mentioned the term “parasocial relationship” to describe their online connections with others, admitting being the first not to present their most authentic and complete selves online. With this regard, while calling social media an “extension of himself”, Adriano warned: “We are not just what we show to other people [...] it's a very parasocial relationship [...] What we post on social media is a little percentage of who we are.” Barbara followed the same line of thought, highlighting the promotional purposes behind crafting a specific online identity, which often emerges as clearly inauthentic: “Artists must build this parasocial relationship to make us say I dig them as a people [...] But it's just promotion. You cannot be authentic 100% [...] You're going to present the best

version of yourself. No human is picture perfect.” This awareness of performativity sometimes evolved into direct criticism, particularly towards trends and mainstream content. Barbara expressed strong disapproval: “I feel artists have gotten faker. Everyone is randomly trend-hopping, doing social listening to find out what the audience wants instead of what they want to do.” She concluded: “Social media are negative from an ethical perspective, and positive from a selling perspective.”

These insights perfectly represent Findlay’s (2019) idea of “aspirational realness”. As audiences increasingly seek for realness (Tofalvy & Barna, 2020, p. 53), artists began using it as a strategic tool, creating only the illusion of the ordinary life rather than a transparent representation of it (Findlay, 2019, p. 7).

Listeners also noticed that social media are influencing not just how music is promoted, but how it is produced as well. As Adriano remarked: “Now some artists create songs specifically to go viral on Tik Tok, songs that can be dubbed, or lip synced for memes.” Barbara offered a similar example: “The funniest thing is when people know a song from TikTok, then go to the concert and have no clue what the rest of the song sounds like.”

The shift toward trend-following and adaptation raised concerns about standardization in music and personal self-expression. When asked to name someone whose way of expressing feels truly unique, Mara responded: “Nowadays it's hard to say because there's a lot of trends, so people end up expressing themselves in very similar ways.” Some respondents emphasized the ephemeral nature of today’s mainstream music by contrasting its fleeting nature with the legacy of “old school” artists. Daniele claimed: “Even when a song goes viral, people are going to forget it afterwards. Then there are artists like Michael Jackson who still has 60 million listeners on Spotify.” Supporting his words, Barbara added: “If I have to think of an artist who’s truly authentic, I will immediately go to someone who is old school [...] To me it's a bit difficult to think of original artists right now because even if you're trying to be authentic, you can never be as authentic as they used to.”

4.4. Artist's Personal Expression and Strategic Authenticity

This theme explores how artists navigate the complex interplay between personal expression and strategic identity on Instagram. In this context, authenticity is not simply about being “real”, but rather a dynamic and sometimes conflicting performance shaped by artists’ personal values, professional ambitions, audience expectations, and platform characteristics. The interviews revealed that this tension is not only commonly experienced among artists but also widely recognized by most of the listeners. However, these experiences were frequently described through difficulties and criticisms, suggesting that while authenticity remains a central value, its pursuit on Instagram is delineated by emotional and strategic complexity.

All interviewed artists admitted to struggling with balancing personal exposure with their curated, strategic identity. Aurora captured this tension, noting that “the line between the professional product and a private person easily blurs,” even though social media allows for a free self-presentation. She described a sense of internal conflict due to her manager’s marketing technique of initially keeping “all [her] private out” to build a “glam music persona image,” planning to reveal more once her music gained more attention. “I wasn’t 100% convinced,” she admitted, “cause for me being an artist was always being approachable, authentic and a normal person.” Aurora’s reflections suggest that focusing solely on the development of a crafted persona makes her feel “weird” and inauthentic, especially when her manager tries to imitate her voice: “It has to sound like me, but at the same time, I feel like I’m playing the people cause it’s not me.”

Mara described this negotiation between personal identity and curated persona as the artists’ “dilemma”. Francesco also acknowledged this dual mindset, describing it as “chaotic”: “I make art, and that’s what I want to do, but at the same time, I have to look at it with a cold mindset of a business.” Similarly, Luigi reflected on the shift in his Instagram profile from a private space for friends to a more public one: “I used to be and feel way more authentic and also not as serious.” But the broader the audience, he confessed, “the more I stopped showing that side [...] that disconnected me actually with my audience [...] I feel like I’m less free to show 100% of me.” Mara also emphasized the pressure to stay consistently active on Instagram, especially when unmotivated, describing her approach to Instagram as a “love-hate relationship”. To cope with this tension, some artists created private digital spaces: Aurora opened a second, private account to connect with closer

friends, while Luigi began using the “close friends” feature to share more personal parts of himself.

From the listeners’ perspective, these tensions are not only perceived but often anticipated and critically interpreted. Rather than passively consuming content, listeners actively evaluate some of the strategic choices artists make, showing awareness of the business pressures while still demanding and looking for sincere and genuine expression. Many listeners reported valuing simplicity, spontaneity, and imperfections in artists’ posts, considering them as indicators of a more real self-presentation. For instance, Raffaella, emphasized: “They should just be themselves and just go with the flow,” while Adriano criticized overly crafted personas, describing them as evident “industry plans,” highlighting that when they include everyday life posts, “it resonates more with me rather than just seeing a bunch of promotional pictures.”

Despite the challenges, some artists approached strategic self-presentation more positively. Francesco described Instagram as a tool to reinforce his natural being: “I’m trying to keep it as close to the reality as possible, but also to make it look more confident that what I actually feel in real life.” Matteo, on the other hand, naturally embraced the division between personal and professional content: “If you see my profile, all there is on it is what I’m doing musically.” He accepted this duality, revealing his pragmatic approach towards the platform: “You can’t be a free soul in the business world [...] you have to sort of cater to the rules.”

Interestingly, some listeners echoed this pragmatic understanding. Daniele, for instance, observed: “Now an artist has not only to be an artist, [but] also to be an influencer. They have to do much more than they used to,” recognizing that authenticity is often limited by expectations that artists face. Chiara also noted: “Now everything is more about the person itself [...] You have to be also a humble, caring, funny, handsome, smart person.” However, despite a possible comprehension, listeners clearly expressed a preference for artists who manage to blend personal content with promotional material. Referring to a duo of artists she follows on their individual accounts, Barbara pointed out: “I love that I can see them [...] They’re humans, they’re not just like stars”.

These comments strongly reflect the tension between artist's "manufactured voice" and "creative voice" (Jones et.al. (2005). While the former is driven by commercial success, the latter represents a more genuine expression (pp. 893-894). However, listeners' critical awareness, expectations, and ultimate acceptance suggest that the reality of today's brand culture is more of a blurred mix of authentic self and commodity self, rather than a binary divide that associates the commercial with inauthenticity (Banet- Weiser, 2012, p. 14).

Despite adopting strategic approaches, all artists emphasized the centrality of authenticity in their online creative identities. For Aurora, authenticity was rooted in genuine passion: "If you like the art you're creating, then you will be able to convey it in a very authentic way". This belief translated in the integration of different aspects of her identity into her visual branding: "I'm trying to put my personality into the videos that we film, with my expressions, my movements [...] trying to combine the deep feminist and political part of me with the nice person I normally am." Mara conveyed her uniqueness through her multilingual skills: "I always try to mix the languages that I speak. I sing in French, English. Sometimes I sing in Korean also". Whereas Matteo reflected on the sense of individuality, stating: "I'm me and they are them. Each one is their own, and we all do what we think is going to get us to the goal that we are intending for in different ways." His words suggest that while strategies may vary, staying grounded in one's own path is key to maintaining integrity.

Listeners too, placed high importance on ethical values and sincerity, especially when referring to monetized content. While some appreciated brand collaborations that felt "natural", others criticized partnerships, especially when there is a mismatch between the artist and the brand. Adriano, for instance, reported with disappointment the collaboration between Vivianne Westwood and Taylor Swift: "I've always loved Vivianne Westwood [...] It's a brand based on activism for the environment. And recently they collabed with Taylor Swift, one of the celebrities that consume more CO2 with her private jet," admitting that this collaboration changed his perception of the brand. Daniele extended similar critiques to political contexts, while Barbara described these types of content as manipulative: "It's like I'm being scammed. [...] I feel like a sheep in a farm. And the artist is the dog that is guarding me." Even with a lot of criticism, many listeners acknowledged that authenticity and monetized content are not necessarily incompatible, as long as the promotional content aligns with the artist's identity and values.

4.5. Instagram Affordances and Co-Construction of Authenticity

This theme explores how Instagram's affordances, including different formats, features and content, enable authentic interactions between listeners and artists. On one hand, Instagram's design influences and shapes artists' strategies for engaging with audiences, expressing their identities, and sustaining a sense of creative integrity. On the other hand, it provides listeners with many possibilities of interaction, in order to connect with and support their favorite artists through the platform. Overall, the interviews revealed the complex interplay between Instagram affordances, user behavior, and emotional engagement, highlighting a relational and co-produced understanding of authenticity.

From artists' point of view, Instagram affordances deeply influence their strategies for expressing themselves, engaging with audiences, and promoting their music. When asked about their favorite platform's feature to connect with their audiences, many artists mentioned Stories, describing them as the most intimate and authentic tool for interaction. Aurora, for example, justified her choice, admitting: "I can be really personal [...] When I reply to comments and reactions, I can talk to them and be nice, and kind of be in contact with them." Matteo highlighted their spontaneous nature, describing Stories as "the closest thing on social media that reflect what's the moment feels like, like in real interactions [...] they're more spontaneous maybe." He also showed appreciation for the multiple editing possibilities offered by this format: "You can do all the colorful stuff, you can put filters, colorful bouncy text [...] Sometimes I use random pictures to promote my gig. [...] you can put like a song." Luigi echoed this enthusiasm, emphasizing their ease and emotional immediacy: "I feel like stories are easier and more spontaneous. [...] I like when they add a like with the heart button [...] sometimes you just don't want to DM the person, but you just want to show that you appreciate the content."

By encouraging informality, spontaneity, and emotional transparency, Instagram Stories were the most appreciated platform's feature to connect authentically with audiences. However, for some other artists the time-limited visibility was seen as a limitation to their strategy. For this reason, Francesco expressed his preference for Instagram Reels, noting that, "Stories are good if you want to promote something, you know, more like spam, but with them it's just temporary, I can't find them anymore after 24h."

Both Luigi and Mara described their Instagram experience of connection as an evolving process, constantly adapting to new user habits and platform's updates. Luigi explained: "When I started promoting my music, I was just posting my song on a post and say like share like comments, listen, link in my bio [...] now, since people are watching more reels than actual posts when I promote a song, I try to post a reel." Mara, who initially engaged in periodical Q&A sessions through Stories, remarked: "Now I think it's just posting pictures and reels [...] I like posting short videos of me singing. I think that's one way I like to connect."

These experiences illustrate how artists regularly adjust their strategies in response to platform's affordances evolution and audiences' expectations, all cooperating in giving meaning to authenticity. These results reflect Bucher and Helmond's (2018) theorization of relational and multi-layered affordances, where meaning is constructed through the interaction of both human and non-human agencies (p. 18).

Feedback, both online and offline, emerged as another essential dimension of authentic connection. Aurora described the emotional validation coming from being perceived as she planned since the beginning: "That makes me feel really seen and like I'm doing the right thing." She also emphasized the connective power of audience reactions on Instagram, such as comment, reposts, and tags, claiming: "It's like they can show people they were there." Similarly, Matteo reflected on how online audience response can have an impact on the offline experience: "When a lot of people show up, that's when I understand that it was seen." Whereas Francesco described a moment of recognition following a gig in Belgium: "People looked for us on YouTube and commented you have fans in Belgium [...] It definitely boosts your self-esteem." He also highlighted the value of critical feedback from fellow musicians, a sentiment Luigi shared: "Some are going to be like, I love it, you're a genius. Some are going to be more critical. [...] You always think you can do better [...] for me songs are always like abandoned projects in a way." In this case, feedback is seen as a tool for artistic growth and self-reflection, rather than a mere affirmation.

When discussing monetized content, brand collaborations, and sponsorships, artists expressed more ambivalence. Aurora viewed them as a neutral, professional opportunity, stating: "When I see people team up with a brand, I feel like, oh, wow, they're getting good publicity [...] I don't think it lowers their authenticity in any way or something. I just

perceive it as like a job thing.” Matteo agreed, highlighting the strategic benefits of hashtags and brand tags, stating: “I know a lot of people that just got endorsements from just hashtagging their favorite equipment and posting videos of them using them.” Francesco noted that, even though rare in the jazz world, “it’s not the worst thing in the world. [...] If it works for someone and makes them make money without struggling with doing additional jobs, for me, it’s definitely okay.” On the other hand, Mara expressed discomfort, criticizing most sponsored content as “staged”: “Most of the time it’s doesn’t feel authentic [...] It doesn’t feel true to the person,” suggesting: “I think it’s important to try to look for an innovative and quirky way to put it to integrate it in your content.” In this sense, monetization is not necessarily seen as negative, but rather as something that must be approached carefully and creatively to remain consistent with one’s artistic identity.

While artists actively design their content to engage audiences, listeners interact with platforms’ affordances from a more observational position, evaluating how content is presented and performed and using it to build a more complete image of the artist.

When asked which Instagram affordances made them feel closer to artists, all listeners mentioned Stories. Daniele highlighted their immediacy as a tool for a more direct connection: “With posts artists represent themselves. But stories can be for something that is happening right now.” For Barbara, Stories were the preferred affordance because of the everyday insights they provide. She talked specifically about Q&A sessions, claiming that they offer “genuine funny moments” and foster “spontaneity in the answers to the followers.” Raffaella mentioned the same feature, emphasizing artists’ addition of music stickers to their visuals, claiming: “Sometimes I like the song and I’m like uh, that’s fun.”

Listeners also connected with artists through moments of human mistakes or informality. Adriano, for instance, recalled Ariana Grande struggling to use a Story function, stating: “I feel like that’s what resonate with me the most.” He also mentioned a similar moment with another artist, Lady Gaga: “She was promoting one of the products of her make-up brand, and she faked the boomerang with the video [...] it’s such an authentic way [...] It’s a proof that artists can also use social media as a natural and human way to connect to the fans.” These examples of “authentic failure” enhanced relatability and authenticity by deviating from hyper-staged norms and content.

Barbara brought up the news group chat Instagram feature, describing it as an intimate space for artists and listeners interactions, developing a stronger sense of community. She explained: “They shared the link on their stories, and I joined the group. It's basically like a group chat in the DMs. It's like a community [...] I like it because it's more raw, you know, it's not as staged as their feed.” Although she acknowledged that artists might not respond directly, she valued the sense of participation: “It's still nice to know that I was part of it [...] It feels like I had a role, even a small one.”

The diversity of appreciated affordances and their role in the creating authentic connections is perfectly described by Harley's (2019) concept of multimodal affordances, where different types of semiotic resources, by affording interactions on these platforms, generate social meaning among users (p.2).

Even though the possibilities for interaction emerged across interviews were many, all listeners defined themselves rather passive in their engagement with artists. Raffaella admitted: “I never comment anything from artists or people that I don't know [...] usually I'm a passive user”. Similarly, Chiara said: “I'm not super active. I rarely comment to anything,” adding: “If I'm really impressed, I might leave a comment [...] I might repost it on my story or send the post to friends”. Following the same though, Adriano argued: “Sometimes I repost something that I like on my Instagram,” stating that when younger he used to comment a lot under his favorite artists' posts. He also mentioned the notification function as a way to stay up to date to artists news, “especially on concerts or stuff I really care about.” Barbara also defined herself as more of a passive user, explaining: “I don't feel like my comment has any power [...] I feel like they will never see it.”

Overall, these insights highlight the fact that some features, such as Instagram Stories or group chats, afford for a more authentic connection than others, due to their spontaneous and temporary nature. Furthermore, these reflections also suggest that even though direct interaction is limited, especially coming from the audience, indirect gestures like reposting, joining community group chats, and activating artists' account notifications, enhance artist's visibility and general success, while contributing to the co-creation of an authentic relationships between the two parts. Both artists and listeners develop their connection according not only to personal motivations and interests, but also by following and adapting to platform design and format opportunities.

5. Discussion & Conclusions

This thesis explored how authenticity is crafted and perceived by both artists and listeners within the contemporary music industry, analyzing Instagram as the primary environment in which the two groups interact with one another. Specifically, the research aimed to identify which affordances of the platform, including different formats and features, best allow for an authentic connection.

Through a combination of theoretical frameworks and semi-structured qualitative interviews, the study addressed the following research question: *How is authenticity crafted and perceived by both artists and listeners on Instagram in the contemporary music industry through platform's affordances?*

In attempting to answer this question, the research found that authenticity on Instagram is not a fixed notion but rather a performative and relational element co-created by artists and audiences, and closely dependent on platform's design and affordances. Artists must be able to navigate the delicate balance between personal expression and strategic branding, tailoring their content to better represent themselves, resonate with their audience, and adapt to Instagram's rules and characteristics. Listeners, on the other hand, interpret authenticity mainly through genuine and spontaneous content, direct and indirect interactions, emotional vulnerability, and coherence in personal values and crafted strategies.

The main research question was than specified into two sub-questions:

SQ1: What are the affordances that most enable artists to market themselves on Instagram in an authentic way?

SQ2: How the same Instagram affordances shape listeners' perceptions of authenticity in their interaction with artists' content?

To address these questions, the study found that, according to both artists and listeners, the Instagram's affordances that most foster a genuine and authentic connections with their listeners are the formats of Instagram Stories and Reels, as well as spontaneous and less staged content that delves deeper into artists' personal lives, emotional vulnerability, and the performance of more human traits. The immediacy and temporality of

Instagram Stories particularly afford for these types of content, thereby promoting stronger emotional connections between artists and listeners.

5.1. The Multifaced Nature of Authenticity

In order to understand how authenticity is interpreted and experienced, the study first employed conceptual theories that better address the multifaced nature of authenticity (Zhou et al., 2022, p.46), connecting them to the contemporary music context. These frameworks, supplemented by the conducted interviews, highlighted that authenticity is simultaneously a subjective and socially constructed concept, as it resonates with individual values and beliefs (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1461) while being shaped by interpersonal relations and socio-cultural norms and expectations (Taylor, 1992, pp. 34, 41).

Most of the participants defined originality, treated in the research as a synonym of authenticity, as “being true to oneself”, including one’s personality, values, preferences and tastes, affirming its opposition with mass appreciation. These results widely aligned with the constructive approach that states that authenticity is closely linked to one’s identity (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1461) and framed by both personal belief and broader social norms and values (Taylor, 1992, pp. 34, 41). In the music context and, specifically, in Instagram self-representation, artists are perceived as authentic when they exposed themselves in more personal, spontaneous and less-staged ways, leading to a more “human” representations of their online identity.

Regarding digital reproduction, some participants revealed that, regardless of whether the final project is rooted in existing works through inspirations or even copying, as long as a personal reinterpretation is expressed, it remains authentic to the creator. In contrast, other participants defined originality through the creation of something completely fresh and never seen before. The last perspective aligns with the objective approach, which, grounded on Walter Benjamin’s (1969) theory of technological reproduction, views authenticity as an inherent characteristic of an artwork, independent from any other external factor (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1461).

Benjamin refers to this intrinsic quality as “aura”, arguing that when an artwork is reproduced and detached from its original time and place, its unique aura is lost (Benjamin, 1969, pp.3-4).

Echoing similar ideas, some participants stated that the constant availability and easy reproducibility of cultural products on digital platform have led to oversaturation and standardization, especially when referring to music content. Additionally, some other respondents specified that not only does digital reproduction threaten authenticity, but it also reduces the depth of engagement with the content itself, which, due to the speed of content creation and consumption, becomes “hard to digest” (Francesco). Other participants connected this theory to social media trends and virality, arguing that when something becomes too widely available and visible, it loses its initial appeal and distinguishing traits.

However, some respondents challenged Benjamin’s (1969) theory, stating that the reproduction of an artwork enhances and “spreads its uniqueness” (Raffaella), becoming accessible to broader audiences. Similarly, others noted that the focus should be on how something is reproduced rather than on the reproduction itself.

5.2. The Platformization of Artists’ Identity

Across the interviews, all respondents showed a high awareness regarding the pivotal role of social media in hosting and shaping artists’ identities and their interactions with audiences. The democratizing power of digital platforms, in particular of Instagram, was widely acknowledged among both artists and listeners. On one hand, these platforms offer new opportunities for artists to self-promote their music without the support of record labels or additional stakeholders (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 12); on the other hand, they constrain users with specific rules and modalities necessary to monetize their content, that often can undermine artists’ originality and natural expression (Jones, 2019, p. 30).

This binarity of social media representation aligns with what Jones et. al. (2005) defined as tension between creative voice and manufactured voice. While the first represents one’s true and genuine personality, the other is the result of structured strategies that aim to better position the artist in the market (pp. 893-894).

This tension was highly present across interviews. Artists, while embracing social media opportunities and using them as a their primary “portfolio”, expressed the several challenges they face in leveraging Instagram’s potential. These challenges included performativity, consistency in posting, business skills, and struggles with self-exposure. Meanwhile, listeners showed their understanding of artists’ struggles and their awareness of the platform’s nature but still demanded for more genuine and real content.

These insights resonate with Banet-Weiser’s (2012) theory, which argues that today’s brand culture increasingly blurs the line between the authentic self and the crafted self (p. 14). Rather than resisting commodification, authenticity itself becomes an integral part of it, something that artists are expected to perform, and audiences are eager to receive and interpret.

In many cases, artists demonstrated the ability to remain true to themselves by intentionally including personal values, emotions, and creative styles in the way they position and market themselves online. On the other hand, listeners do not expect unfiltered content all the time but still demand a certain degree of coherence and the expression of more human traits within the economic ecosystem surrounding the platform. Duffy (2017b) echoes a similar idea, arguing that authenticity on social media is often a strategic performance, marketed as individualized self-expression (p. 119).

As a result, digital platforms become dynamic spaces where personal expression, strategic branding, and audience engagement intersect into a complex negotiation where authenticity is simultaneously desired, performed, and commodified. Therefore, as Findlay (2019) affirmed, artists’ and users’ emotions, experiences, and identities become strategic parts of self-promotion, contributing to the so-called “aspirational realness” by proposing a more intimate, but curated, exchange of interactions (p. 7).

5.3. Instagram’s Affordances

This study investigates the concept of authenticity specifically on Instagram, examining which affordances, including platform’s features, formats and types of content, better allow for an authentic connection and interaction between artists and listeners.

From the analysis of the interviews, authenticity on Instagram emerged as a dynamic and relational process, co-constructed through ongoing interactions between artists, audiences and the platform's evolving affordances.

Drawing on Harley's (2019) concept of multimodal affordances, the analysis reveals that artists and listeners collaborate in shaping their interactions through Instagram's visual, textual, and sound options, especially within features like Stories and Reels. As Harley's (2019) argues, the semiotic resources of videos, images, speech, text, captions, and hashtags offered by Instagram, collectively construct social meaning by shaping the communication occurring on the platform (p. 2). Participants echoed this perspective, expressing a preference for Stories and Reels, as these formats afford the creation of narratives that feel spontaneous and immediate. They not only satisfy listeners' demands of realness but also give artists the opportunity to express themselves with fewer filters and less pressure to produce highly curated content.

Bucher and Helmond's (2018) framework of relational and multi-layered affordances is especially useful in understanding the co-constructive interaction between artists, listeners, and the platforms itself. With this regard, the study demonstrates that authenticity emerges through ongoing exchanges between users and platform's affordances, rather than existing *per se* as a fixed element. Artists and listeners construct their relationship based on an evolving digital context, where constant adaptation and listening of each other's voices are regularly requested. Artists frequently reported having to adjust to platform's updates, algorithms and audience requests, redefining their practices on a regular basis to remain marketed. Listeners, similarly, navigate these affordances, sometimes more passively through reposting and liking content, and at other times more actively by joining group chats or participating in Q&A sessions. Together, artists and listeners engage in a co-created, dynamic, and context-dependent interaction. While their interactions are shaped by the platform's design and affordances, the platform itself is also influenced by user's behaviors, especially when it comes to algorithms and trends. This reciprocal influence highlights the interplay of both human and non-human agency occurring through the relational and multi-layered affordances elaborated by Bucher & Helmond (2018). While the human agency includes listeners and artists as active participants, the non-human one refers to all the elements that constitute the platform, such as specific features, the design, or content-related

characteristics (p. 17). As Bucher & Helmond (2018) argue, it is through this interplay that social meanings are created (p. 18).

Finally, Scharlach and Hallinan's (2023) concept of value affordances, defined as a "set of ethical, aesthetic, and relational principles that emerge from the interaction between different stakeholders and technological infrastructures" (p. 2), helps to clarify the ambivalence surrounding the complex interplay between authenticity, visibility, and monetization.

In the context of this research, Instagram's affordances do not simply enable connection; they are rather embedded in broader economic structures that decide for the reward and success of artists. As artists navigate the tension between self-expression and marketability (Jones et.al., 2005, pp. 893-894), they also need to face with platform's rules and patterns using their identity to generate revenue (Serazio, 2023, p. 14). At the same time, listeners' direct and indirect gestures, such as likes, shares, or comments, though often seen as "passive", are themselves commodified to some extent, as they contribute to the artist's visibility and general success (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023, p. 2). Value affordances, therefore, highlight the dual role of authenticity on Instagram: while being perceived as "real" is strategically essential for building trust and connection, that authenticity must be appropriately crafted in order to remain reliable and accepted by listeners (Duffy, 2017b, p.119).

Ultimately, authenticity on Instagram does not emerge as a fixed attribute but as a co-constructed, dynamic process shaped by the platform's affordances and social relations between listeners and artists. Instagram becomes a virtual environment where face to face interactions are translated into immediate and genuine content, that merged with a strategized and curated imagine, construct the complex interplay between the two parts. Both artists and listeners contribute to this ever-evolving negotiation, constantly navigating between realness and representation, intimacy and publicity, and artistry and marketability.

The findings of this research are socially relevant, as they shed light on the highly debated and abstract topic of authenticity. By focusing on Instagram as a field of investigation, the study challenges the oxymoronic view that, in everyday discourse, contrasts notions such as realness, genuineness, honesty, and authenticity with the virtual

dimension of social media, that is often perceived as superficial, fake, and lacking emotional and sensory depth. By combining these two seemingly opposite dimensions, this study reveals that authenticity has not disappeared within social media spaces; rather it has transformed by adapting to new forms of communication, different user intentions and ever-evolving platforms' affordances.

Moreover, by relating the concept of authenticity to the context of the music industry, the research highlights how the desire for genuine self-expression is still present among artists who, driven by passion and love for music, are finding their way through these always new mediated spaces.

A first limitation of this research is the relatively small sample size. The study was based on ten interviews, five with artists and five with listeners. While this sample selection offered diversity in insights and interpretations, allowing for a rich comparison and nuanced understanding of the topic, it does not permit the generalization of results to a broader population. Future research should aim to include a larger number of participants, potentially offering additional insights based on factors that were less explored in this study. For instance, it would be interesting to examine the topic by focusing on a single music genre to assess whether a more specific investigation might lead to different results.

Another limitation concerns the lack of consideration for participants' age ranges. Given that different generations approach social media in different ways, this absence may limit the contextualization of the findings. Future studies could focus on a specific generational group in order to better understand the topic within broader generational patterns of social media user behaviors.

Finally, another limitation of this research is its clear and solely focus on the Instagram platform. Despite Instagram's extended popularity among artists and music fans, the rapid emergence of TikTok may reveal new insights about the topic of authenticity. Future research could extend this analysis by exploring the affordances of other platforms, for example creating enriching comparisons based on differences in formats, content creation, and consumptions behaviors.

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Appendix A

Interview Guideline for artists

1. Definition of Authenticity

- What does it mean to you being “original”?
- Can you think of someone whose way of expressing themselves (through their work/behavior/language) feels truly unique? Why?
- Do you think that when things like music, books, films, or food are easy to copy or mass-produce, they lose some of their originality or authenticity?
- Do you view social media as a way to extend your identity into the digital space, or as a completely new representation of yourself?

2. Authenticity on social media

- Which social media do you use the most? Why? (e.g. to see others’ lives, to post, publish something?)
- When you scroll through your feed, what makes a piece of content stand out to you?
- Can you think of an example where the platform itself (its design, trends or audience) influenced what you shared or consumed?
- How do you think commercial intentions influence the way someone is perceived on social media? (e.g. promoting products, building a personal brand, monetizing content)

3. Authenticity in Music Industry

- How do you think the rise of social media has influenced the way artists present themselves compared to the past?
- How would you like to be perceived online and what do you do to be perceived in that way?
- How do you balance personal expression with the need to be strategic or marketable for your career?
- What do you do to stand out from mainstream music production? Is there something in particular that you feel distinguishes you from other artists?

4. Authenticity - Music Industry - Instagram Affordances

- Which Instagram features (stories, reels, lives, posts, etc.) help you feel most connected to your audience? Why?
- Do you ever feel tension between what you want to post and what you should post to grow your audience?

- Are there parts of you or things you would like to share with your audience that are harder to share? What holds you back?
- What kind of feedback or response makes you feel really “seen” and understood and what misunderstood?

Appendix B

Interview Guideline for listeners

1. Definition of Authenticity

- What does it mean to you being “original”?
- Can you think of someone whose way of expressing themselves (through their work/behavior/language) feels truly unique? Why?
- Do you think that when things like music, books, films, or food are easy to copy or mass-produce, they lose some of their originality or authenticity?
- Do you view social media as a way to extend your identity into the digital space, or as a completely new representation of yourself?

2. Authenticity on social media

- Which social media do you use the most? Why? (e.g. to see others’ lives, to post, publish something?)
- When you scroll through your feed, what makes a piece of content stand out to you?
- Can you think of an example where the platform itself (its design, trends or audience) influenced what you shared or consumed?
- How do you think commercial intentions influence the way someone is perceived on social media? (e.g. promoting products, building a personal brand, monetizing content)

3. Authenticity in Music Industry

- How do you think the rise of social media has influenced the way artists present themselves compared to the past?
- What makes you want to follow a music artist on Instagram? What do you expect from their presence online?
- Do you think the way artists share themselves influences the way you engage with their music? If so, how?
- When you think about artists who stand out from mainstream music, what makes them feel different or particularly memorable to you?

4. Authenticity - Music Industry - Instagram Affordances

- What types of Instagram content or features (stories, lives, posts, personal struggles, flaws) make you feel more connected to an artist?
- When you start following an artist you like on Instagram, do you feel like you get to actually “know” them better? Why or why not?
- How do you feel when an artist shares personal aspects of their lives or “human flaws” that aren’t directly related to their career?
- How do you usually interact with an artist you like online? How do you show your interest/support?

Appendix C

Codebook

Theme	Code	Description	Quote
What is Authentic?	Originality = being true to oneself	Authenticity comes from being true to oneself, one's values, and one's personality.	<i>“I would say being original is just being yourself and being true to yourself. Sticking to what you believe in, your values and just doing what you like.”</i>
	Originality = being unique	Authenticity comes from the act of creating something that has never been seen before, something completely fresh and new.	<i>“Originality to me is creating something [...] that is as close to new. Like something that has not been thought by someone else.”</i>
	Originality = mix of tradition and learnings and personal expression	Authenticity comes from the balance between innovation and the influence of existing works, tradition, or specific training.	<i>“Find the balance between personal expression and tradition [...] learning from the past but being able to combine all the influences in your music.”</i>

	Originality = "not for the masses"	Authenticity comes from how and by whom something is consumed	<i>"It's something that's not for the masses [...] originality is something niche to me, something special and intimate."</i>
	Technological reproduction (from Walter Benjamin's theory, 1936)	Investigates how technological replication of artworks influences their authenticity ("aura")	<i>"Now that you have everything available [...] it's really hard to really digest something."</i> <i>"It also helps to spread the uniqueness of it to broader audiences."</i>
Role of Social Media and Online Presence	Accessibility of social media	Social media democratize the music industry by allowing artists to share their work and connect with their audience, without needing additional industry support.	<i>"Being an artist is so much more accessible because everyone can have their own account and can just pretend, they're artists and people will believe it."</i>
	Social media as a useful tool	Describes how artists see social media as a helpful way to promote their music, grow their audience, and manage their career.	<i>"In some way it helps me to create that image of myself and to make people see me."</i> <i>"It's most usual way if you wanna have a portfolio [...] it's quite true that if you don't have social media, it's almost like you don't exist in a certain field."</i>
	Metrics over music	Artists' concerns about how today's music industry often values numbers (e.g. followers, likes, views) more than	<i>"When you want to get signed, all they look at is your numbers on social media. They don't listen to your music."</i>

		the actual talent or artistic expression.	
	Social media difficulties	Struggles artists face when using social media to build their career and artistic identity.	<i>“Now the responsibility of promoting yourself it's becoming more stressful because you need to have a lot of business skills to promote yourself.”</i>
	Dislike for social media	Artists' negative feelings toward social media. Most of them “just want to play” music.	<i>“I dislike social media [...] the only thing I want to do is produce music and not content that goes viral [...] on social media everything is so estranged [...] I feel like it's beyond of what I signed up for.”</i>
Artists' New Portfolio	Artists' platforms	Platforms that artists use to self-promote.	<i>“We use Instagram, TikTok, YouTube shorts, and Facebook.”</i>
	Favorite platforms	Platforms that artists prefer to use to self-promote.	<i>“The one I use the most is definitely Instagram [...] it's the one I started to use as a basic personal social media.”</i>
	Critiques towards contemporary music industry	Captures critical reflections on today's music industry.	<i>“There's nothing new. All these stimuli artists, all these images, platforms [...] at this point you kind of see repetition of the same thing.”</i>
	Instagram	How artists and listeners use Instagram, and how the platform affords them to build their image, develop their strategies, and connect with each other.	<i>“Instagram is kind of the glamorous social network where you want to create a good image and everything should kind of fit together and provide like, quality content.”</i>

	Mainstream/algorithm/trends	How artists and listeners experience or respond to algorithm-driven visibility, trending content, and mainstream styles or formats.	<i>“There's a lot of trends, so people end up expressing in similar ways.”</i> <i>“When a song becomes viral, people are gonna forget afterwards.”</i>
	Social media awareness of filtered reality	Participants' recognition that what is shown on social media often doesn't reflect real life.	<i>“It's right under our eyes, so inevitably feel more in contact with them, but at the same time it's a very parasocial relationship.”</i>
	“False authenticity”	Moments where authenticity is seen as staged or strategically performed	<i>“In certain ways authenticity can be like, marketed. [...] The more you market it and use it as like a profitable tool, the less it becomes authentic.”</i>
Artists' Personal Expression and Strategic Authenticity	Strategic identity vs personal identity	Tension artists experience between showing their true selves and crafting a more curated or strategic persona.	<i>“When I'm on social media I feel like I'm not fully my artist persona, but I'm not fully myself as well.”</i>
	Social media Manager involvement	Refers to situations where a social media manager handles artists' account.	<i>“She's trying to use my words, emojis [...] it has to sound like it's me, but at the same time, I'm playing the people. [...] it takes up so much time to do social media that I'm happy I don't have to do it by myself anymore. I can make much more music.”</i>

	Listeners' perceptions of an artist	How audiences interpret and perceive an artist's personality or authenticity based on their social media presence.	<i>"They should just be themselves and just go with the flow."</i> <i>"A lot of artists are famous only because we're in the social media era. [...] the people behind them construct specific personalities for them to stand out. [...] some artists are industry plans."</i>
	Listeners' expectations from artists	Assumptions or demands audiences place on artists	<i>"It's basically their job, their priority to maintain their authenticity and sticking to their true selves when they become popular."</i>
	Appreciation for storytelling/life experiences	How listeners value artists' personal stories or real-life experiences, seeing it as a sign of depth and authenticity.	<i>" [...] Now that I know the story behind it, it's just so much more enjoyable for me to listen to the song."</i>
	Improved identity online	How artists feel more confident and expressive in their online identity.	<i>"I'm trying to keep it as close to the reality as possible, but also to make it look more confident than what I actually feel."</i>
	How artist want to be perceived	Artists' intentions in shaping their public image, as well as what they hope audiences will think or feel about them.	<i>"It's elegant and professional, because I would like to consider that's how I am also. [...] I would like to also show more of that loose side, that's what the people who know me know."</i>

	Match between artists' personality and their music	Alignment between an artist's personal identity and their musical style and production.	<i>"Bob Marley and the way he did his reggae music. I would imagine it also very much matched with who he was as a person."</i>
	Artists' distinguishing factors	What makes an artist stand out.	<i>"What I like about my music is that I always try to mix the languages that I speak."</i>
	Perception of commercial/monetized content	How participants react to sponsored posts, branded content, or monetization.	<i>"If it's a brand that really goes with your understandings and how you present yourself, I think it would be an easy collaboration."</i> <i>"It's hard to make sponsored content look authentic. [...] It looks staged most of the time."</i>
Instagram's Affordances and Co-construction of Authenticity	Instagram's features for fostering connection	How and what specific Instagram tools (e.g. Stories, DMs, Lives, Q&As, ...) help artists connect more directly and personally with their audience	<i>"I think stories, because then I can just be really personal."</i> <i>"Because I feel like it's easier stories, it's more spontaneous. And lots of the times people reply or I like when they added a like button."</i>
	Listeners' feedback	Moments when listeners share thoughts, reactions, or emotional responses to an artist's content.	<i>"When they comment on my Instagram posts. Once, someone sent me a screenshot of their Deezer because I was on their top songs or top artists. I was like, what? That's crazy"</i>

	Appreciation when artists show spontaneity/human traits/vulnerability	Positive listeners' reactions to artists being real, unscripted, emotional, or imperfect	<i>"If they show certain aspects of their lives without overexposing themselves, it resonates [...] more than just promotional things."</i>
	Favorite content	Types of content that participants enjoy the most or find most meaningful.	"I like to see backstage stuff. [...] To me, even genuine funny moments are also like a plus. [...] I prefer it because it gives me more context on them."