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Arriagada, A. and Bishop, S. orcid.org/0000-0003-1028-8821 (2021) Between commerciality and authenticity: the imaginary of social media influencers in the platform economy. Communication, Culture and Critique, 14 (4). pp. 568-586. ISSN 1753-9129

https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcab050

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Between Commerciality and Authenticity: The Imaginary of Social Media Influencers in the Attention Economy

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Arriagada, A.; Bishop, S. (2021). Between Commerciality and Authenticity: The Imaginary of Social Media Influencers in the Attention Economy**.** *Communication, Culture and Critique,*

https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcab050

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Abstract

Influencers are highly visible tastemakers who professionally publish content on social media platforms. In their work, influencers are tasked with reconciling their contradictory positioning – they are both promoters of consumption, and marshals of ‘authentic’ sociality and community. Influencers thus organize their social world in ways that enable them to justify moving between two contradictory poles of commerciality and authenticity. In this paper, we argue that these navigations necessitate “influencer imaginaries”. This concept was drawn from, first, in-depth interviews with 35 Chilean social media influencers, and second, from participant observation with advertising agencies who hire them. The influencer “imaginary” sheds light on how individuals experience and justify the commodification of the self and forms of knowledge as subject to valuation in markets when they communicate their brands. Thus, the imaginary was shown to emerge from three intertwined narratives: to resolve information asymmetries in markets; differentiate influencers from celebrities and advertisers as average people; and negotiate self-definition with regard to agencies, audiences, and themselves.

Key words: Social Media, Influencers, Instagram, Consumer Culture, Authenticity, Chile

Between Commerciality and Authenticity: The Imaginary of Social Media Influencers in the Platform Economy

In 2018, *Business of Fashion* published a special edition, titled “The age of influence”, celebrating the impact of capable individuals who promote brands and construct audiences online. According to the magazine’s editor, “brands can now only hope to influence the conversations that people are having about them — and to do so, they are enlisting a growing army of professional influencers who have become a new staple of digital marketing around the world” (Amed, 2018). How influencers do this? Through a strategic performance showing themselves as professionals and amateurs (Hearn 2008; Abidin, 2017), moving across authenticity and commercialism of their content and themselves. Through this framing we can see that *industry* and *brands* see influencers as affording opportunities for visibility and authentic branding. However, in this paper, we ask how *influencers* imagine their activities, their community and their value? How does the nascent, yet growing, job of influencer, as professional and visible tastemakers, converge with histories of influencers as “every day, ordinary Internet users” who document their “personal lives” and “highly personal and opinion-laden promotions of products/services” (Abidin, 2016b, p. 3). In exploring this, we join a growing body of scholarship that looks at the commercial and professionalization of influencer economies (Duffy, 2017b; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

To more adequately address the complex function of authenticity as it underpins influencer economies, we build on Taylor’s (2003) concept of social imaginaries – modes of imagining our

social existence or relations and the “expectations, the images and norms behind those expectations” (p. 106). We propose the ‘influencer imaginary’, a subjectivity through which individuals organize their social world, enabling them to reconcile two seemingly contradictory poles: commerciality and authenticity. We ask how this branch of cultural producers makes sense of themselves and their activities as “ordinary and accessible” while promoting consumption; we focus on how, in an increasingly saturated influencer ecology, they imagine their roles and limits; how their participation in a highly-marketized context is influenced by their values, norms, and subjectivities; and how, in a global south context, the imaginaries of a group of Chilean influencers have developed. We focus on how influencers imagine their community and their value, their understanding and practice of their profession, and their position within the broader media landscape.

Chile represents a compelling context—within which to study this case—given the country’s high levels of social media use, burgeoning culture of influencers, and localized creative industry (Adimark-UC, 2016; Aspillaga, 2014). Indeed, with 17 million inhabitants, Chile has been in the forefront of Latin American internet penetration, embracing digital and social media platforms faster than almost any other country in the region. In 2009, 30% of Chilean households had access to internet connections; by 2017, this figure had ballooned to 87%, with smartphones as the main device for internet connections (Subtel, 2016; 2018). There are 6 million users of Instagram in Chile, with 65% between 18 and 34 years old (Satista, 2019). Social media influencers have also become an important part of these platforms, with 56% of Chileans stating they follow celebrities or influencers and 15% purchased based on recommendations (Cadem, 2019).

In spite of growing literature on influencer economies in Asia (Abidin, 2016a, 2016b; Shtern et al., 2019), there have been few South American and Spanish perspectives (Backaler, 2018; Karhawi, 2020; Tomasena, 2019). As a case study, Chile has a sizeable social media market, with influencers who work with local brands and global campaigns such as *Swarovski*, *H&M*, and *Tommy Hilfiger*, among others. We analyze in-depth interviews with 35 Chilean social media influencers and supplementary participant observations at an advertising agency and at an influencer-led workshop, titled 'Successful branding strategies'. Our findings shed light on how individuals experience and justify the commodification of the self and forms of knowledge as subject to valuation in markets. Thus, the imaginary was shown to emerge from three intertwined narratives: a subjectivity oriented to resolve information asymmetries in markets; differentiation from celebrities and advertisers, instead emphasizing their roles as average people; and the negotiation of self-definition with regard to management and branding agencies, audiences, and themselves.

AUTHENTICITY AND INFLUENCER MARKETS

Authenticity is a complex and contradictory concept; in this paper, we avoid seeking a singular definition of authenticity. In examining how influencers *imagine* they are being authentic, we explore the "drama of contingency" (Ahmed, 2010 p.22) or, how proximity to the concept of authenticity shapes influencers' perception of themselves and their work. Indeed, we examine how the relationship between individuals, commodity culture, media, and digital technologies, *is configured as authentic* (Banet-Weiser 2012, p. 14).

Cultural workers have historically been impelled to negotiate the tension between authenticity and commercial as a binary – in which the authentic or the *real* is highly fetishized. Developing and maintaining an authentic artistic identity is central to commercial success in creative industries, but at the same time commercial success can jeopardize a perception of artists as real. For example, Hollywood stars have historically communicated an "escape from their [star] image", or a personal inner authenticity through promotional activities, in which communicating their real and vulnerable selves (outside of their 'star' identity) is central to growing their commercial viability (and thereby growing their 'star' identity) (Dyer, 1979, p.61). Scholars have also shown how film industries are animated by perceptions of authenticity in other ways, for example through reconciling representations of the relationship between identity and nationality in local film markets. For instance, Brannon Donoghue shows how intermediaries in Brazilian film markets embodied "cultural capital" from being "authentically home grown", allowing them to then access lucrative commercial partnerships with international investors such as Sony (2014 p. 179).

In television, the early 2000's wrought a much-discussed *demotic turn*, in which those who successfully undertook a "performance of ordinariness" became a rich source of value (Turner, 2006 p. 157). Scouts for reality television look for participants who do not have a "too-obvious desire for celebrity" with "motivations for participating other than media exposure" (Grindstaff, 2014 p. 166). Producers must do the cultural work of defining authentic motivations to participate, and applying these to production processes. Perceptions of authenticity have also underscored production and distribution in music industries. Commercial genres such as country music are bound up in notions of authenticity; record companies look for evidence that country musicians have a "shared interest, lifestyle or mutual understanding" with fans (Negus, 1999, p.128). Peterson describes the process of creating successful country musicians as "fabricating authenticity" – in which authenticity means contextual, socially and culturally constructed values, influenced by "law, technology, careers, markets, and industry structure" (1997, p.8). In each example cited here, industry intermediaries' complicated and contextual sense of what authenticity is heavily shapes the production process along myriad seams. To return to the political economy of the influencer imaginary, we similarly follow authenticity to emphasize what it *does*. In the following section we examine how these tensions play out in the existing literature on influencer industries along three lines: amateur authenticity, strategic authenticity and emotional authenticity.

In their pivotal introduction to YouTube, Burgess and Green (2018, p. 39) identified an "ideology of authenticity", intrinsically connected to the *amateur* nature of online media production. Extending this observation, Andrew Tolson argued that authenticity stemmed from *ordinary* performances, given off through colloquial language and transparency about a lack of

expertise (2010). In such definitions, platform work is *authentic*, because those creating work are inexperienced, outside of the professional hierarchies of Hollywood. Cunningham and Craig coined the term Social Media Entertainment (SME) referring to the social and economic exchanges where creators develop content-based businesses across different social media platforms and in relation to different actors (e.g., intermediaries, audiences). They synthesize such debates by arguing that "there can be no denying the centrality of SME's freshly minted claims to authenticity. These arise from millennials and other young people's rigorous differentiation of SME from established professional media" (Cunningham & Craig, 2017 p. 74). Home-grown content creation for social media platforms is hereby seen as more authentic by design.

However, as influencer ecologies have professionalized, authors have increasingly viewed authenticity as an *intentional strategy*, rather than a generic quality. These charges can be located within long histories of creative economies; Alison Hearn demonstrates that, under Post-Fordist capitalism, subjects are impelled to craft an authentic persona through a number of "purely instrumental behaviors" which in fact craft a "potent *image* of autonomous subjectivity" (2008, p. 206). In influencer economies specifically, Abidin identified how family YouTubers levy intentional demonstrations of ineptitude, amidst the inclusion of everyday filler content (for example, trips to the supermarket) that support an intentional "calibrated amateurism" (2017). Beauty vloggers similarly draw from laborious techniques to communicate amateurism, including shaky camera-work, intentionally maintained background noise, and uneven natural lighting (Bishop, 2018). When merged with performed amateurism, authenticity has also been identified as *spontaneous* performances of love and self-enterprise through content creation – influencers

must avoid charges that their activities and behaviors are constructed and *planned* (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2018; Duffy, 2017b; Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

Passion is deeply nested within strategic authenticity, creating a driving force for influencers' activities (Baym, 2013), underscoring their entrepreneurial selves and social mobility trajectories (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017). Influencers must evidence that they are *doing what they love* (Duffy, 2017a); such displays must be impromptu, but must also be "consistent", meaning perpetually promoting steady values (Marwick, 2013, p. 120). The fine lines demarcating authenticity are heavily policed by audiences; as Salisbury & Pooley (2017, p. 2) note "the 'authentic' is always relative to something else, and therefore susceptible to the charge of phoniness—especially if strategy and calculation can be identified."

Lastly, authenticity is attained through *emotional performance*. As Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests, the "labor of authenticity" involves communicating " failure, pressure, depression, tears, vulnerability" (2021 p.143). Similarly, Aziz observes that authenticity is achieved through "labour in displaying a vulnerable self" – related to the previous points, this is only successful once "evaluated and validated by a relevant audience" (2018, p. 132). Authenticity demands an intimate style of accessible communication with audiences – a practice that Abidin (2015) calls "perceived interconnectedness".

In each of these threads, it is important to recognize that authenticity is a highly gendered concept. Authenticity labour tracks with definitions of "emotional labour", in which feelings are "evoked or suppressed" along lines of commercial femininity (Hochschild, 2012, p.111). Women

suffer deeper risks of visibility on social media platforms (Duffy, 2019); their behaviors are more likely to be surveilled and policed by audiences when they err. Women's bodies are sexualized and subject to increased platformised moderation (Are, 2020). Particularly female influencers are monitored, to ensure they are commercially friendly role models (Bishop, 2021). Feminine authenticity encompasses deep expectations and pressures - a bricolage of intimate confession, aesthetic labor shared with audiences, and discourses that sustain relatability. As authenticity means being both ordinary and real, this quality promotes individualized pathways to success and explicitly sidestep structural inequalities, representing an "entrepreneurial attitude (adopted by neoliberal capitalism) and a postfeminist ethos of feminine achievement and sexual subjecthood" (Genz, 2015, p. 547). Furthermore, within feminized fashion and beauty influencer economies, simply growing a sizable audience is not sufficient. In this vein, we recognize the pressures for influencers in fashion and beauty contexts to be at once strategic, entrepreneurial, aspirational, ordinary, amateur, and consistent.

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The above overlapping spheres are understood by individuals – who act and make sense of their actions, as well as their relations with others – through shared imaginaries, a key resource in configuring social, economic and political life. Such social imaginaries are defined by Taylor (2003) as the expectation of our social existence and the norms and images behind those expectations. Contrary to theories that attempt to give objective accounts of the social world, imaginaries are "first-person subjectivities that build upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices" (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 4). Once imaginaries are produced and shared, they are negotiated among actors (Carpentier, 2011, p. 116) such that, although often

contested, they are achieved by individuals promoting one imaginary over others through their practices. Similarly, first contested, then socially agreed-upon, theories on information society and the digitalization of different aspects of our lives are Hegelian notions of the world, “influencing policies and our everyday lives” (Mansell, 2012).

Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated how people construct social media imaginaries, to help them negotiate algorithms (Bucher, 2017), to avoid being seen as spam (Myers West, 2018), or increase follower interaction (Cotter, 2019). For example, Scolere et al. (2018) view creator activities as based on imaginaries of platform affordances, their audiences, and their sense of themselves. Further imposing a hierarchical structure, Bucher (2017) describes how Facebook users experience the “algorithmic imaginary” as “moods, experiences, and sensations” (p. 39). Imaginaries are shared and social. Bishop (2019) termed the concept “algorithmic gossip”, referring to strategic knowledge exchanged by influencers about how platforms’ algorithms work, revealing how perceptions of algorithms inform content production.

In this vein, recent critical approaches center user agency in the making of a culture around content creation. In her scholarship on cultural producers, Duffy (2016) explores the gendered forms of content creation, describing how female bloggers remain in the “highly feminine” realm of consumption through their entrepreneurial enactment of creativity (p. 3). Bloggers are moved by a form of “aspirational labor” to convert their digital and cultural capital into economic capital, looking to become “one who will (hopefully) get paid to do what she loves” (Duffy, 2017b, p. 44). We join the growing body of theorists focusing on the commercial relations among content creators, brands and agencies. We seek to understand the influencer perspective, how these actors

define and experience their characteristics, despite limited access to information about the technologies they interact with.

METHODS

The first data set (2017, January to November) came from in-depth interviews with 35 social media influencers (fashion, lifestyle, travel, and beauty) based in Santiago, Chile, whom we identified through snowball sampling across three stages: first, groups of advertising and fashion experts were interviewed, and asked about important influencers. We selected a group of 10 experts in the fields of advertising and fashion (fashion designers, advertising executives, retail managers, and famous influencers) to interview; members in that group were asked to identify other relevant important influencers and we invited the people named for a second wave of interviews. The people they named were contacted (n= 50) by e-mail, and 35 agreed to be interviewed. The sample of influencers interviewed had between 1,000 followers to 166,000, and their topics varied across beauty, fashion, lifestyle, and travel. A few of them work directly with their recommenders. While all participants were connected to agencies (receiving products and participating in small campaigns, paid or unpaid), only half were consistently paid for their work as influencers. Except one interviewee, all participants were active on Instagram. Additional details on the interviewees—each of whom was given a pseudonym to protect their privacy—are provided in the Appendix.

Our sample, all college-educated, was mostly women (n= 26) and a few men (n= 9). Interviews were conducted in-person and recorded with participant consent. Interview topics

included participant backgrounds and expertise; processes of content creation, distribution, and promotion; self-presentation strategies; and their relationships with brands and advertising agencies. We also reviewed participant Instagram posts and discussed their self-presentation and content creation practices. Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach, i.e., analyzing data as it was collected and contrasting interview topics (Glaser & Strauss, 1969). Initial codes included general topics like content creation practices, relation with platforms, personal trajectories, and commercial exchanges with agencies and brands. Then, those codes were refined into specific topics that are described in the results section.

The second source of data came from participant observation at two different sites. The first site was an advertising agency in Santiago, where we observed for three months (December 2017 to February 2018) campaign meetings (8) with executives and a group of social media influencers for an overview of branding campaigns and criteria for branded content. The second observation took place at a one-day workshop titled 'Successful branding strategies', which was organized by a social media influencer through a digital branding and marketing academy based in Santiago (September 2017). Participant observation (in the agency and at the workshop) took place at the same time interviews were made, allowing us to discuss some of the topics observed with influencers.

The data provided, first, a broad understanding into the criteria established by advertising executives to hire influencers, the definitions and expectations for their activities, and the type of knowledge agencies are looking for; and second, laid the groundwork for analysis into how influencers negotiate their sense of being involved in commercial networks of exchange while

managing their identity as cultural producers in highly marketed contexts (as Craig & Cunningham's (2008) description in their SME conceptualization). Triangulation of data (from participant observation and interviews) allowed us to understand in detail how influencers produce their content, as well as negotiate with brands and agencies to promote it.

FINDINGS: UNPACKING THE INFLUENCER IMAGINARY

Interviews and observations demonstrated that influencer activities are sustained by three intertwined narratives: resolving information asymmetries in markets through building ties of friendship with their followers; differentiating themselves from celebrities and advertisers, as *average people* who can create an affective connection; and imagining and sustaining the contours of professional behavior with advertising agencies and audiences. These arose from the tensions and contradictions they experience by commodifying different aspects of their everyday lives to reconcile their activities as promoters of consumption with a performance of themselves. This ongoing negotiation —with themselves, and with advertising agencies, brands, platforms and audiences— is sustained through the "influencer imaginary". Thus, individuals use their positioning as cultural producers to negotiate commerciality and authenticity.

BUILDING TIES OF FRIENDSHIP WITH FOLLOWERS (TO RESOLVE INFORMATION ASSYMETRIES)

Firstly, interviewees articulated that they perceived of their followers as "friends", their activities as "helping", specifically articulating their expertise in brands for potential consumers to make informed decisions under the guise of friendship. They described feeling a "closeness" with their audiences and seem themselves as knowledgeable and empowered consumers of the products

they promote (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Baym & Burnett, 2009). As Denisse, a beauty influencer explains:

> We give valid opinions from better knowledge, like semi-experts, and help people with information when buying a product. We are a channel between brands and consumers, but closer because we are just normal people. We're not celebrities, but we're knowledgeable, or experts, about certain topics.

Claims to expertise are often negotiated: Denisse describes herself as a 'semi-expert', drawing upon the threads of amateurism and authenticity, similar to other cultural producers and their uses of digital technologies like musicians and their uses of social media to communicate with fans (Baym, 2015), fashion models and the "glamour labour" deployed on social media (Wissinger, 2015), and sportsmen building reputation online (Dumont, 2015). As semi-experts, influencers justify themselves as actors that maintain a role in the operation of markets by giving information to consumers to make more informed decisions through genuine expertise. Cristian, a fashion influencer, describes: "I want to create conversations with people to let them know what they are buying… to know if they are paying a fair price."

The consciousness of influencers as orienting consumer decisions also reveals their self-positioning as "real influencer" vs. "sell-outs". The latter are imagined to not be "critical" in their reviews, while the former give relevant information to consumers. This supplements the moral distinction between influencer and celebrity in their imagined role. Similarly, in Cecilia's imaginary, her influencer work is "real", ethically and critically recommending products, so brands

"can improve the qualities of products" and will have more "information based on people's comments and consumption experiences".

Natalia also – a successful influencer within the imagined influencer ecology in Chile, with 148,000 followers – sees herself as a tastemaker, giving real information about fashion trends and quality of products to average people, as democratizing otherwise "elitist" taste and fashion. Natalia describes the process:

> One of the keys to success [as an influencer] is using the brand as raw material to make another point. I mean, this t-shirt I'm wearing has stripes, right? So, it's part of a trend, I don't know, "navy". The brand that gave me the t-shirt gets a mention, but the final point of my post on Instagram is to talk about the "navy" trend, not to say literally 'buy this t-shirt'.

Through interviews, it became obvious that Natalia imagined fashion magazines to present "bad information" about the latest trends, specifically about luxury brands and fashion designers that are not affordable for common people or information presented without creativity for audiences. Instead, she sees her online content as an opportunity to "break their monopoly". Influencers define themselves as able to 'translate' the values of a brand and to bestow their own status (as trendsetters or fashion experts) on brands.

Next, in a form of self-presentation to engage their audiences and create a sense of intimacy and friendship, influencers show a contradictory 'luxury-ordinary' lifestyle. Being 'natural' and

'authentic' provides context for their recommendations as ordinary consumers that happen to recommend brands and products (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Some influencers choose a friendly, relatable tone, using everyday language (e.g., "friends", "we", or expressions like "this happens to me as well") to construct intimacy with their online followers. Gesturing towards intimacy with followers, Macarena, an influencer with 14K followers, describes:

> I try to be super informal and friendly… I want [my followers] to identify with me. I treat them as if I were treating my friend, I say "hello friends… you can find this product at this place… kisses". My tone is informal, but close.

However, independently of the tone of their recommendations, they are driven by a free-market ethos where consumers may freely make informed decisions, a basic imperative of neoliberalism. As Hearn (2008, p. 213) suggests, influencers can be "product, producer, and consumer", creating content about themselves, for their own benefit and for the brands that are behind them, playing the game of being "ideal" and "honest" consumers.

BEING AVERAGE PEOPLE: DIFFERENTIATE FROM CELEBRITIES AND ADVERTISERS

Influencers must stay within a certain threshold of "calibrated amateurism" (Abidin, 2016b), a form of contrived authenticity in order to establish affective communication with their followers. As discussed in the previous section, this often means influencer reviews are composed in the tone of advice from a close personal friend rather than of traditional advertising. This aspect of the imaginary works to offsets power imbalances among actors in this relationship; a casual tone

allows the audience to feel as if they are chatting with a colleague, an even-sided dialogue, with an average person. This also suggests that influencers image themselves as distinct from professional fashion workers.

Although technical knowledge and expertise is important to sustain, more so is the ability to connect affectively with followers via a coherent *personal* narrative as a common person. This effort to come across as average is often unstable. At an industry workshop on how to create branded content led by a successful fashion influencer, we observed that aspiring social media influencers wanted to learn about empirical, tested, successful approaches to creating online branded content. We observed a palpable tension in the discourse about how to be a good influencer (e.g. 'you have to communicate brands to people') and strategies backed by 'hard fact' (e.g. statistics, infographics, and consumer profiles), undercut by the simultaneous acknowledgement that there is no successful formula. The instructor insisted brand communication was "an art", but also insisted that "this isn't complex: you're in front of a computer, and there's someone at the other side too". The instructor did acknowledge the importance of affect in communication: she stated that current social media platforms often rely on image- and video-based communication, and that user time is scarce and the chances for influencers to connect with their audience are few. Given this information, the speaker explained, "the best kind of posts are those that achieve an emotional connection within a screenshot". These rapid emotional connections, which help build and maintain a community, can be created through content that followers feel reflects them and enables them to express themselves by reacting to it.

Interviews further showed that influencers try to anticipate successful posts based on previous performance using metrics and direct feedback. For example;

> I think it might become dangerous if you exclusively start focusing on [metrics], because I think that ultimately, what we do is a naturalness that brings likes, not the other way around. Not looking for likes, and then making it seem natural.

A focus on numbers is often rationalized: influencers emphasized that they prioritize their unique personal voice and avoid contrivance, even though they are aware of the measurements. Influencers aim to keep their content 'organic', which implies a calculated display of spontaneity. As confirmed by another female influencer, they often try to intuit what their followers will respond to using empathy.

Interviewee discourses of naturalness work as a resource to justify their roles as promoters of consumption. Influencers imagine a positioning as experts, as 'ideal consumer[s]' who understand how products are meaningful. According to interviewees, the main quality of a 'good' social media influencer is honest communication with their audiences, which builds credibility. As Ignacia, a fashion influencer explains:

> "The appeal of influencers is that they do what they like. That's what distinguishes [an influencer] from a television celebrity. A celebrity might promote a product she doesn't use, and it doesn't matter because she doesn't need to have that kind of credibility".

Yet despite the calculation that underlies these decision-making processes, there is often real concern about authentic alignment, and decisions about what to promote often reflect

influencer ethical values. For example, Josefina began to feel guilty about promoting products to her followers that she herself did not use. She shifted her model and began promoting vegan food and fair-trade products through online videos—products that were more in line with her 'authentic' beliefs. Patricia promotes only makeup products that are not tested on animals. Thus, the production of brand value is sustained by the imagined barriers of personal beliefs that differentiate them from 'fake' celebrities with no real emotional attachments.

MOVING ACROSS COMMERCIAL NETWORKS

Interviewees discussed negotiating their perceptions, expectations, and imaginations about what? the influencer job is. These negotiations emerge in encounters with advertising agencies (Abidin, 2016b; Abidin & Ots, 2016; Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Snickars & Vonderau, 2010). Agencies incorporate the work of influencers into their brand value chains (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2019), and, depending on their career stage, influencer networks may converge with the real world at live marketing activities or private parties, sponsored by brands and organized by agencies. Here influencer work becomes closer to that of advertising agencies, sharing information or images about these events with their followers, presenting themselves online as participating in this larger, more professional network.

Advertising agencies also seek out influencers who can connect their own knowledge with the brand values and communicate the combination to their online followers (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2019). Ricardo, an advertising executive with vast experience working with influencers explains, influencer value lies in their ability to show brands and products as part of their everyday activities, and to affectively connect those brands and products with their audiences:

> What an influencer does… is in them binding [the brand] to their lifestyle. That's what a brand wants. When you send a press release, you give every technical value [of a product], but they can't get people to imagine that value. Instead, when you see the photo of the influencer, you understand that you want that life concept. They are like visual press releases, because you get to see all the technical specifications of a product captured in a real situation, in a real context.

A process of negotiation also takes place when advertising agencies enter existing influencer networks, negotiating terms of the 'collaboration' on a specific campaign, either with payment, or more often, free products; and so, influencers must calculate investment and return. In this sense, some influencers consider the 'impact' of the campaign, e.g., for global brands like H&M or Zara, as opportunities to promote themselves and to create bonds with agency executives that might result in paid future collaborations.

Similarly, advertising imaginaries also shape the wider influencer ecology. Agencies suggest influencers to their clients for a particular campaign – or are suggested influencers by their clients – and so mobilize interpretations about possible connections between products and consumers (Ariztia, 2015). Agencies choose influencers based on how they imagine their potential connections to be (e.g., healthy lifestyles, glamorousness, proximity to audiences, level of engagement, and reach of their content).

There are thus multiple levels of negotiation, between influencers and agencies, regarding campaign participation; between agencies and clients, regarding which influencers to hire; and between agencies and influencers, regarding content, communication, interaction, and engagement around the brand. Juan, who works at an advertising agency, explains how their imagination of influencers lines of flight supersedes a focus on hard data such as metrics:

> “Clients only want engagement [working with influencers], they don’t know what to expect, or what is good for their brand or not. However, we, as an agency, don’t have the resources to justify our decisions around influencers. Metrics have some limitations, but we know who works and how to produce engagement around brands by working with influencers”.

Although the imaginaries of some unexperienced influencers are molded by agencies (e.g., through ‘instruction manuals’ on content or engagement), experienced influencers often negotiate the branded content they will present according to their own understandings and logics. These negotiations enable influencers to keep their content ‘organic’ while doing their job. Maria, an influencer who has been paid for work with agencies for two years, describes how she negotiates with agencies to present branded content organically, adapting it to her own style of communication with followers:

> “A brand might hire you to do a piece, but what I do is, like, make that bit fun for my followers. That brings the brand closer in the most natural way possible and isn’t as aggressive as saying to […] my audience, ‘hey, buy this’”.

Influencers engage in cultural and economic calculations that place their ideals around resolving information asymmetries in markets in conflict like the beauty or the fashion industries. They understand their activities as a possibility to provide information to consumers, not only in promotional terms, but also in a comparative sense of price products, their quality and efficiency. As Valentin, a lifestyle influencer explains, “is to live my experience with the product, and then I communicate my opinion with my followers”. In the same vein, Josefina, a beauty influencer, compares her content about beauty products to the information provided by Google when you want to buy a product. However, contrary to the commercial and algorithmic logic of Google, she as a content creator, can share an experience with the product, which is expressed in the form of a review. It is the review that works as the best example of a “professional influencer” who produce value for itself and the brand (or the product) he or she promotes, in contrast to a creator that only share press releases or promotional content without an experience with it:

> “When you go to buy something, I don't know a vacuum cleaner or a TV, what's the first thing you do? You look on Google to see what's up with the product, if it works, if it doesn't. In the beauty industry it's the same thing, if someone sees that there's a new face lotion in the market, and follows several influencers, they go to see if they put something about that lotion and what do I know”.

In this process of resolving information asymmetries, influencers face another tension in patronizing the commercial relationship they have with agencies. Val, who receives products from agencies in exchange for promoting them on her Instagram, used to be very honest about product

qualities (‘At the beginning, I criticized everything’). Now that she has entered the value network, however, she is ‘a little more careful,’ omitting products she doesn’t like rather than review them negatively. Fluctuations in influencer capital gives them flexibility with the roles they have imagined for themselves.

For Romina, an ex-model and now a well-known beauty influencer, working with agencies as an influencer or as a model is similar, in practical terms; the main difference, however, is in relation to a sense of power:

> “Before, (advertising) agencies were in charge of producing a fantasy; now, I build that fantasy for them. I have the power”.

However, as a result of her established commercial relationships with advertising agencies, she engages in commercial exclusivity in the form of editorial decisions. She avoids sharing her political positions or value judgements about public issues, and publishes only positive product reviews (even when she must invite several people in order to get positive comments):

> “We don’t talk about negative stuff in general, we don’t say, for instance, ‘this product was awful’. In cosmetics and beauty products, personal experiences are very different, because each body is different and reacts in diverse ways. If one member (of my team) has a bad experience with a product that’s paying us for making a review, then we switch the reporter so to get a [positive] experience”.

Influencers also struggle with agencies in defining the value of their labor, in presenting their self-definition. This is partly due to the nature of the work, which agencies perceive as a part-time activity or a hobby. Influencers, however, generally see their labor as demanding, involving production, uploading content, and developing and maintaining communities. They expect to earn money for the time they spend promoting clothes, food, or accessories on their online spaces. Interviewees complained of agency hypocrisy in treating this form of exposure as ‘amateurish’, rather than just another kind of media publicity. This leads to situations where the exchange between agencies and influencers isn’t perceived as a fair deal by influencers.

Some agencies have even suggested that they are doing influencers is a favor, looking to impose their own imaginary to where influencers are the ones benefitting by getting exposure from brands. While it is unclear if this is a sincere sentiment or a cost-reducing strategy, this approach can come off as condescending. When influencers perceive that agencies see them as the last part of a brand’s value chain - as free work, in what Duffy (2017, p. 4) describes as “not getting paid to do what you love” - they establish boundaries in campaign involvement. As Josefina describes, “I rejected a lot of content that has nothing to do with me, or maybe the way agencies try to do things”.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite recent research on the activities of digital cultural producers (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Rocamora, 2018), the focus has been on their identities and the strategies of self-promotion to convert their digital and cultural knowledge into economic capital (Scolere et al.,

2018). The highly commercial activities displayed on social media and as part of commercial networks of exchange with advertising agencies also have been studied through frameworks regarding communicative styles as forms of strategic authenticity (Abidin, 2016). Building on such studies, the narratives and reflections in our interviews have revealed that the “ideal type” of authenticity is a communication that ironically requires lots of hidden work (Duffy, 2017). Influencer ‘authenticity’ is, then, a product of subjectivities and practices aimed at constructing affective relations with audiences in order to present brands in as ‘natural’ a manner as possible.

However, social media influencers are driven by complex values, expectations and stories – which take the form of ‘imaginaries’ (Taylor, 2003) – that justify their activities in highly marketized contexts. They are not only entrepreneurs that display self-branding online to gain status in different fields of cultural productions (Marwick, 2013). Rather, they feel compelled to circulate their experiences as a resource for consumers to make more informed decisions. Similarly, they occupy an authoritative space in promoting consumption naturally, contrary to advertisers or celebrities. Thus, they negotiate these imperatives in the form of commercial and editorial decisions when interacting in commercial networks or exchanges with advertising agencies. These three cultural producer imperatives are packed into what we have called the “influencer imaginary” – which, as we have seen, is flexible and shapes the work of producers unevenly.

In highly marketized contexts, then, the “influencer imaginary” enables cultural producers to justify moving between the two seemingly contradictory poles of commerciality and authenticity (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). This imaginary helps influencers reconcile their

consumption-promoting activities with their sense of themselves. If branding is managing communication surrounding brands to "add" or "reproduce" the "particular qualities that the brand embodies" (Arvidsson, 2006, pp. 41–94), then the influencer imaginary works as a lens through which influencers may differentiate themselves from branding experts and advertisers. However, influencers, like professional advertisers, mediate brand values and product qualities, framing goods as part of their lifestyle and working alongside professional advertisers within the same network of value.

The power of social media influencers to shape consumer opinions is a function of affect (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Hearn, 2010): the value they produce comes from themselves and is transferred to brands, products, and advertising agencies. In the value network among influencers, advertising agencies, and audiences, is the empowered consumer the targeted audience, exposed mostly to positive reviews of brands and products? Who capitalizes this value? These questions call for further research into how value is capitalized in social media networks, not only from the perspective of influencers, as we have done here, but also from the perspective of the consumers who follow them.

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Appendix. Participant information

	Influencer	Gender	Age	Starting date	N° of Followers on Instagram	Topic
1	Alejandra	F	37	2007	2067	Fashion
2	Andrea	F	36	2011	13.9k	Lifestyle
3	Bastián	M	32	2014	10.9k	Lifestyle
4	Bernardita	F	35	2010	9491	Beauty
5	Carlos	M	34	2011	11.9k	Lifestyle
6	Carolina	F	33	2010	22.3k	Fashion
7	Catalina	F	35	2011	13.8k	Lifestyle
8	Cecilia	F	26	2012	9215	Beauty
9	Cristián	M	32	2016	1068	Lifestyle
10	Cristina	F	31	2011	2831	Fashion
11	Denisse	F	34	2010	No Instagram	Fashion
12	Diana	F	38	2002	1021	Lifestyle
13	Fernanda	F	40	2015	23.4k	Fashion
14	Francisco	M	33	2011	3177	Lifestyle
15	Ignacia	F	17	2011	18.5k	Lifestyle
16	Isabel	F	38	2008	10.7k	Lifestyle
17	Isidora	F	32	2015	38k	Fashion
18	Javiera	F	34	2013	64.3k	Fashion
19	Josefina	F	31	2015	45.2k	Lifestyle
20	Lucas	M	31	2015	30k	Fashion
21	Macarena	F	33	2010	14.1k	Lifestyle
22	Magdalena	F	34	2012	9164	Fashion
23	Manuel	M	22	2015	5593	Lifestyle
24	Mariana	F	27	2015	8710	Lifestyle

25	Natalia	F	29	2014	149k	Fashion
26	Patricia	F	33	2011	6511	Fashion
27	Ricardo	M	34	2015	4417	Fashion
28	Romina	F	34	2011	102k	Travel
29	Sandra	F	38	2007	6851	Fashion
30	Susana	F	35	2011	9166	Lifestyle
31	Valentina	F	32	2012	17.6k	Lifestyle
32	Valeria	F	24	2010	8584	Lifestyle
33	Vicente	M	30	2015	232k	Fashion
34	Victoria	F	27	2014	166k	Travel
35	Leonardo	M	43	2012	14.5k	Fashion