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Going against the Grain?

Appraising the Aesthetic Labour of Male Beauty Influencers on Instagram*

Abstract

Despite the proliferation of scholarly studies on social media in recent years, not many have focused on male social media influencers in the beauty industry, which is often viewed as a feminine preserve with the vast majority of 'beauty influencers' being female. This study focuses on the discursive practices of two male 'beauty influencers' to examine how their visual self-portrayal contributes to their popularity and influence. A total of 752 photographs collected from their Instagram accounts were examined using a visual appraisal framework adapted from Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory, focusing on *normality*, *capacity*, and *authenticity*. Our findings show that both influencers, who are openly gay, portray themselves as gender norm transgressors whose performance of capacity and authenticity as social media celebrities is a highly contested and conflictual aspect of their identity construction as beauty influencers. These findings not only shed light on the visual discursive processes and practices through which 'beauty influencers' perform their aesthetic labour to enhance their popularity and influence. They also contribute to our understanding of how they perpetuate mediatized and marketized stereotypes of beauty and being as part of the broader sociocultural phenomenon of the celebrification of social media influencers in contemporary society.

Keywords*: male beauty influencers; Appraisal Theory; photos; Instagram; authenticity*

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Introduction

With 2.4 billion active users as of January 2024, Instagram ranks as the fourth largest social media network globally (behind Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp) (Demandsage, 2024). It thrives in a digital ecosystem that is increasingly visual with more and more young people using images rather than written texts to express themselves and connect with others. This is facilitated by advancements in smartphone technology with increasingly sophisticated cameras making photography ubiquitous within the everyday (Cook and Gaduño Freeman, 2011). This has allowed Instagram to both contribute to, and feed off, the visual nature of today's attention economy that valorises the capacity to attract 'eyeballs' in a media-saturated, information-rich world (Marwick, 2015). As a visual-centric platform adopting an online icon that takes the shape of an abstract camera, Instagram can be said to define the visual zeitgeist (Leaver et al., 2020).

Unlike other popular social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, or WhatsApp, users are drawn primarily to Instagram's visual aesthetics and suite of self-presentation strategies, making it a choice platform for aesthetic visual communication (Manovich, 2017). Although Instagram affords instant, on-the-go, as-they-happen posts, the photos and videos uploaded by social media influencers (SMIs) in fact materialize through "highly scripted, choreographed, staged, digitally manipulated processes, involving extensive architectures of digital labour" (Hurley, 2019: 3). They consist of multimodal semiotic resources of videos, images, sounds, speech, text, captions, and hashtags, which assemble to create social meanings that occur in combinations and change over time to constitute and reflect boundaries of sociality (Graham et al., 2011). Besides its suite of filters, Instagram's visual aesthetic with photo- and video-sharing as its focal point encourages users to choose from a whole gallery of banners, stickers, images, emojis and GIFs to augment their posts as part of 'doing it for the gram'. This 'visual vernacular' (Leaver et al., 2020) not only provides an additional layer of connectivity

and mediality for Instagram users, the shared visuals also act as a social connector, a common affective lingo, and a possible catalyst for physical meets (Serafinelli, 2017). Instagram's heavy emphasis on visual aesthetics has also made it an ideal marketing platform for beauty brands and beauty influencers (Chen and Kanai, 2022; Jin et al., 2019).

Beauty influencers are social media microcelebrities who utilise their skills in makeup to teach, review, partner with, and endorse cosmetics products and brands across various platforms (Forbes, 2016; Karjo and Wijaya, 2020; Lokithasan et al., 2019). Due to their ability to attract large numbers of followers, popular beauty influencers are increasingly courted by cosmetics companies to promote their products and services as consumers turn increasingly to social media to inform their purchasing decisions (Casaló et al., 2020; Lawson, 2021). Beauty has often been regarded as a prerogative for women and the use of cosmetics to enhance one's beauty a predominantly female-oriented industry. However, there is now an emergence of *male* beauty influencers who seek to challenge the female hegemony on beauty.

This paper casts the spotlight on two such influencers to examine how their self-portrayal on Instagram not only contributes to their online popularity but also shapes public perceptions of beauty. Specifically, the focus is on the photos posted by these influencers on Instagram, which are viewed and 'liked' by their legions of followers on social media. As Sontag (2005) observes, photos capture selected moments of one's life, actions and behaviours. What this study probes into are which moments have been selected by these influencers for public consumption and, more importantly, *how* these moments have been captured, curated and presented. Instagram has made it easy for anyone with a smartphone to incorporate photography into daily experience and fuse social networking with everyday communication – what Zappavigna (2016) calls 'social photography' – in effect blending the visual with the everyday, the private and the public, the personal and the social (Halpern and Humphreys, 2016). Thus, besides the visual performance of their identity as 'beauty influencers', we also

seek to shed light on how the two male influencers use their Instagram photos to connect and engage with their followers as they assert themselves in the digital social space saturated with the enactment of feminine beauty.

Social media research

In recent years, there has been a groundswell of research on social media particularly from a business marketing or advertising perspective. While many of these studies focus on the content material posted by SMIs (e.g., Cheung et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2022; Lee and Eastin, 2021), some direct their attention to the discursive processes that underlie social media content, in particular the self-presentation strategies adopted by SMIs. For instance, by examining lexical choices and representational strategies in the blogposts of influencers who collaborated with Swedish private companies, Arnesson (2023) uncovered strategic discourses they drew on to achieve the promotional and ideological outcomes of their collaborations. Strategies such as transparency, personal experience, intimacy, and relatability were used to construct a sense of authenticity that legitimate neoliberal policies by personifying and promoting a lifestyle that is at once inspirational, aspirational, and deeply ideological. Another is Sandel and Wang's (2022) study of popular microcelebrities or *wanghong* in the beauty and fashion industry in China and the multimodal strategies employed to enact interactivity and intimacy with their fans or followers. By examining their online activities, they found that they construct intimacy through the projection of various ordinary, sisterly, or even flirtatious identities. Additionally, their multimodal analysis also showed how the *wanghong* creatively use language, voice, sound, music, set design, props, actions, and digital affordances such as text, images, and icons to enact their identities and engage with their audiences, thereby enhancing their popularity and influence.

Few studies on SMIs focus on male beauty influencers, which both reflects and reinforces the hegemonic female dominance in the beauty industry. This is particularly true of the visual

content in online platforms, such as Instagram, where the aesthetic labour performed by beauty influencers contributes significantly to their popularity and influence. A recent study that does focus on male beauty influencers is Chen and Kanai's (2022) study of gay beauty influencers in a post-queer, postfeminist culture where the gay male influencer performs the role of an ordinary girlfriend to female followers in a heterosocial relationship as well as a novel, queer spectacle in a heteronormative social media culture. Thus, it is the fusion of their "maleness and gayness… that allows them to flexibly embody an authenticity, individuality and uniqueness" (Chen and Kanai, 2022: 113), which accounts for their cultural visibility and commercial success.

Authenticity

Authenticity has been identified as a crucial influencer characteristic that undergirds the success of SMIs (Cunningham and Craig, 2017; Hudders et al., 2021; Hurley, 2019; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Authenticity, however, is a highly contested and slippery concept that defies a straightforward definition (Banet-Weiser, 2012). To complicate matters, the various technological affordances inherent in a visual-centric platform like Instagram could interfere with – enhancing, attenuating, or otherwise (re)configuring – whatever visible traces of authenticity that might be performed by SMIs.

In the context of sociolinguistics, Coupland (2003) predicates the notion of (linguistic) authenticity on five attributes: *ontology* (something authentic has a real existence as opposed to a spurious or derived existence); *historicity* (has longevity, durability and may even be timeless); *coherence* (viewed as original in some important social or cultural context); *consensus* (invokes some form of authority through a high degree of acceptance within a community); *value* (has been ratified within a culture and therefore has cultural value). Among these attributes, *coherence*, *consensus*, and *value* relate most directly to SMIs and resonate most with social media users. These attributes highlight the cultural situatedness of authenticity

and the critical role of the community of social media users as ratifiers of authenticity through their 'likes'. The popularity of SMIs would then be an indirect reflection of their authenticity in the eyes of their followers. Moreover, the attribute of *value*, which Coupland considers most important, intersects with the existential perspective of authenticity (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006) which relates to identity construction: being authentic means being true to one's self. In the context of branding, authenticity could also refer to a brand's ability to serve as a resource for consumers to uncover their true selves or to allow consumers to feel that they are true to themselves by consuming the brand (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, authenticity does not only relate to the SMI but also their capacity to facilitate followers' recognition or validation of their true selves. This could relate to what Zappavigna (2016: 277) terms 'subjectification' where the SMI constructs a relationship with followers of 'being in fusion with' the image producer through selfies so that the viewer shares the perspective, and vicariously the represented experience, of the SMI.

Part of this capacity lies in the multidimensional construct of authenticity in SMIs that social media scholars have recognized. This comprises sincerity, humour, personality, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness, all of which have varying effects on consumers' evaluation of an SMI, willingness to follow an SMI, and intention to purchase products that SMIs recommend (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2018; Lee and Eastin, 2021). Chen and Kanai (2022: 101) make the additional observation that authenticity in the context of beauty influencers is "often only legitimised when it comes packaged in a body that corresponds with existing beauty norms". In other words, beauty influencers, male or female, can only earn their credibility and be perceived as 'authentic' if they also demonstrate and perform conventional standards of beauty.

Drawing on the literature, we adopt the view of authenticity where being "true to one's self" (and brand), being "true to one's audience" (Wellman et al., 2020: 69), and having the

capacity to support followers/consumers being true to themselves (Morhart et al., 2015) are key. Fundamentally, we adopt the constructivist position that authenticity is ultimately a projection of one's own beliefs, expectations, and perspectives, and is thus fluid and variable across contexts rather than an immutable and objective reality.

Beauty

Aside from *authenticity*, an integral concept that this paper draws on is *beauty*. It is a truism that the aesthetic appraisal of beauty is mired in subjectivity and relativity: what is considered beautiful is relative to culture, historical period, and importantly, the interpreter. To semiotician Kalevi Kull, the aesthetic is always semiotic, and semiosis is necessarily an act of interpretation involving not only the signified and signifier but also the one who interprets the sign. Drawing on Peircean semiotic theory, Kull (2022) advances the idea that beauty grows out of an iterative semiotic process of interpretation and adaptation or what he calls 'semiotic fitting' – the process of finding harmony and coherence (and removal of incompatibilities) both internally and with the environment. To him, "beauty is a rich, perfect semiotic fitting" where something (nature, animal, or human being) "is internally fitted, and it is also fitted with its surrounding, with its umwelt" (Kull, 2022: 12). He further notes that the process involves choice between values (and hence bias) and can be temporal and short-term. From this perspective, one could interpret the 'beauty' performed by beauty influencers, male or female, as labour directed towards constructing (and perfecting) a physical image defined by symmetry, proportion as well as alignment with social conventions and expectations.

Focus and purpose of study

In this study, the analytic lens is trained on the *visual* mode to examine how the identity of two male SMIs is visually realized in and through their Instagram photos to perform and index their appeal and influence as 'beauty influencers'. In probing into their aesthetic labour, a key

focus is on how authenticity is discursively constructed as a means of building para-social relationships with the audience. While Chen and Kanai's (2022) study of male beauty influencers focuses on the performance of femininity by gay beauty influencers in a post-queer, post-feminist cultural space, the focus of the present study is on the visual performance of SMIs who have earned their place among the most popular 'beauty influencers', and how their appeal is visually crafted and represented in their Instagram photos. After all, as Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015: 79) observe, "images play an important role in how we experience being in the world and increasingly, due to the ubiquity of online interaction, how we 'shape' our world". This echoes what Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006: 2) view that "visual structures … point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction".

By focusing on the visual performance of 'beauty influencers', we seek to contribute to the growing pool of knowledge on the specific discursive strategies that SMIs deploy to create and curate an online persona that best serves their interests. By focusing on the Instagram photos of two male beauty influencers, we hope to gain unique insights into how men evaluate and position themselves in the congested online space of beauty influencers that has traditionally been dominated by women. In so doing, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the discursive mechanisms through which male beauty SMIs perform aesthetic labour to index their celebrity status in the world of beauty and social media.

Materials and Methods

Data collection

Table 1 shows the top five beauty SMIs in the world in 2022 according to Cosmetify (a beauty product comparison platform) (Cosmetify, n.d.). The earnings they generate per Instagram post reflect the prominence and leadership in the beauty community, while the number of followers reflects their popularity and extent of the market reach they command (Wies et al., 2023).

Table 1. Top five beauty SMIs in the world

Rank	SMI	Number of Instagram Followers (in millions)	Estimated Earnings in US$ per Instagram Post
1.	James Charles	22.8	265,000
2.	Mari Maria	20.1	235,000
3.	Bretman Rock	18.4	222,000
4.	Nickie de Jager	16.3	194,000
5.	Camila Coelho	9.8	116,000

As our focus is on male beauty influencers, we have selected James Charles and Bretman Rock as the subjects of our study, who also happen to be among the top three beauty influencers. James Charles is a gay beauty influencer from America who started posting on Instagram in 2015. His popularity sky-rocketed after he landed a spot as the first male ambassador of CoverGirl in 2016 at the young age of 17 (Freeman, n.d.). Today, the self-taught makeup artist is regarded as holding "first place among beauty influencers" by Vogue France (Claudel, 2019: para. 2). Bretman Rock is a Philippines-born beauty influencer who rose to fame in 2015 on YouTube and Vine (a now-defunct social media platform) for his comedic commentary in his makeup videos (Yang, 2022). His popularity peaked in 2021 as he became the first openly gay man to be on the cover of Playboy (Lavietes, 2021) as well as to star in his own MTV series – 'MTV's Following: Bretman Rock' (MTV, n.d.).

An initial sample of 892 photos were collected from Charles and Rock's Instagram posts between January and December 2022. As we are interested in how male beauty SMIs portray themselves, photographs which did not feature the SMIs were excluded. The final sample size of the data stood at 752 photos.

Analytical framework

The data were analyzed using a framework inspired by Martin and White's (2005: 1) Appraisal Theory, which is concerned with the language of evaluation in terms of "how writers/speakers approve and disapprove, enthuse and abhor, applaud and criticize". The appeal of their framework is seen in its application to a variety of texts, from traditional print media (e.g., Belmonte, 2010) to social media posts on Facebook (Palomino, 2018) and Weibo (Yao and Ngai, 2022). Others have extended their framework to analyze visual texts, including news images (Economou, 2008, 2009), and prize-winning photojournalism (Fawzy, 2019). By adapting Martin and White's framework to analyze the visual self-portrayal of SMIs, we hope to further extend the applicability and value of their framework to the growing field of social media research.

For our study, we chose to focus only on the domain of *Attitude* in Martin and White's tripartite framework as it concerns the positive or negative appraisal of "emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and evaluation of things" (Martin and White, 2005: 35). Out of the three semantic regions in *Attitude* (*Affect*, *Appreciation* and *Judgement*), we focused only on *Judgement*, which involves our attitude toward the behaviour and character of people, which is most germane to our study on the two SMIs. Specifically, we trained our analytic lens on *normality* and *capacity*, as these emotional and behavioural categories are more traceable or retrievable through visual cues in photographs compared to categories such as *inclination*, *tenacity*, *veracity* or *propriety* in Martin and White's framework. Both *normality* and *capacity* relate to what Martin and White (2005: 59) call "judgments of esteem" – how special or unique someone is and how capable or successful they are.

To these two existing categories in Martin and White's framework, we added a third category of *authenticity* subsumed under *Judgement*, as *authenticity* captures the parameters of judgement at stake in people's reception and appreciation of talk (and text) (Montgomery, 2001). Although we adopt the view of authenticity as a quality that ultimately emerges from

perceptions of abstract impressions related to the SMI's 'realness', there are nevertheless cues communicated by the SMI that encourage such perceptions and impressions and it is these cues that constitute the focus of our analysis. If authenticity is linked to validity or, more precisely, the degree of commitment to the validity or truthfulness of a representation, it can be considered as a special kind of modality from a social semiotic perspective (van Leeuwen, 2001). If so, authenticity could be investigated by interrogating the extent to which something is represented (in a photo) as though it really exists or has happened (Coupland's attribute of *ontology*), and endeavour to identify the visible cues on which such a judgement is made. Guided by the theoretical conceptions of authenticity discussed earlier and empirical work in social media, we operationalise *authenticity* in terms of two main aspects of *naturalness* and *individuality*. *Naturalness* is associated with the photo being 'real', natural-looking and 'untouched', indexing spontaneity, candidness and sincerity, whereas unnaturalness is associated with SMI posing for the camera and the photo being staged. Naturalness can also be partly reflected in the resolution of the photo: low-resolution (positive) or high-resolution (negative) or the clarity/focus on a represented participant (i.e., SMI) in the photo, whether he is out of focus or sharply focused in the photo. *Individuality* is associated with a person being personable and unique, often conveyed through the incorporation of, and emphasis on, personal elements (e.g., humor, hobbies, and quirks) into their media content. This aligns with the attributes of sincerity, humour, and personality highlighted by other social media scholars (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2018; Lee and Eastin, 2021). On the other hand, the lack of individuality suggests a lack of personality or originality, which are often consequences of sponsorships, where the product/service may have to be promoted in a particular way as aligned with sponsors' expectations. As such, it is the product/service's essence and qualities that take center-stage in the photograph over the SMI's.

Data analysis

Each of the 752 Instagram photos was coded to identify visual cues pertaining to the *Judgement* categories of *normality*, *capacity* and *authenticity*. Following Martin and White (2005), each photo was assigned a *polarity*, which refers to the valence of the category in terms of whether it is positive or negative; atypical or ambivalent cases were singled out for discussion and disagreements resolved by the two authors. What needs to be highlighted is that though Martin and White's framework focuses on how language is used to evaluate others through the inscription or evocation of emotive reactions and ethical judgments, we are applying it to evaluate how the SMIs' Instagram photos can be used to appraise or adjudge the SMIs themselves as the represented participants in the photos. As such, we also drew on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual semiotics framework, which focuses on the creation of meaning in and through visual images. While Kress and van Leeuwen's framework backgrounds evaluative meanings and instead takes interactive meanings as their point of departure, Martin (2001) highlights evaluation, in particular attitude resources, as the more promising point of departure to examine photos. As Fawzy (2019: 70) argues, images have the ability to engage viewers emotionally and position them ideologically, which reinforces the argument to apply the *Attitude* resources of *Affect* and *Judgment* to the analysis of photos. Although the Instagram photos posted by the SMIs differ substantively both in content and technical quality from the professional, award-winning photos in Fawzy (2019), aspects of visual affordance, such as colour, framing, light exposure and camera angle, and concepts, such as 'portrait' versus 'snapshot' and 'demand' versus 'offer', in Kress and van Leeuwen's framework were recruited in the process of determining the *Judgement* values of *normality*, *capacity* and *authenticity* encoded in, and expressed by, the SMIs' photos. In addition, we also referenced Ledin and Machin's (2018) work on visual analysis of photographs, which we found

useful in providing metalanguage associated with specific photographic techniques on top of Kress and van Leeuwen's conceptual framework.

Results

Table 2 below presents the results of our analysis of the collective photographic posts of the two SMIs in terms of *normality*, *capacity* and *authenticity*, which will be illustrated and discussed in turn.

Table 2. Analysis of Bretman Rock and James Charles' photographic posts

Categories	**Positive**	**%**	**Negative**	**%**	**Total**
Normality	226	30.1%	526	69.9%	752
Capacity	341	45.3%	411	54.7%	752
Authenticity	209	27.8%	543	72.2%	752

Normality

The most striking feature in the category of *normality* is that the majority of the photos (69.9%) depict the SMIs engaging in gender-atypical behaviour and/or appearance. Normality is a highly subjective and normative quality that is both audience dependent and socially constructed. Nonetheless, based on Martin and White's (2005) conceptual framework, normality is linked to the modality of usuality, i.e., how frequent or common a practice is. As such, since we are looking at male influencers, we opted to use the norming reference for males in terms of appearance, posture, clothing and accessories. For instance, we consider Fig. 1 below to exemplify negative *normality* with Charles in a wig and heavy makeup and wearing tight-fitting, revealing clothes more commonly associated with feminine fashion (Lower, 2018). Additionally, he is adopting a typically feminine posture with both hands placed over his chest and one leg placed over the other, creating an 'hourglass' look. Given that cosmetics

advertising is presumably targeted at mainly young, female audiences, this performance of conservative femininity is at odds with contemporary mainstream advertising which tends to portray an empowered and confident femininity. But as Chen and Kanai (2022) have argued, rather than being viewed as regressive, such a portrayal reflects and reinforces Charles' uniqueness and authenticity due to his identity as an openly gay man.

Turning our attention to Rock, Fig. 2 depicts him in a wig and heavy make-up wearing a torso-baring red top and matching skirt adopting a similar posture as Charles. In contrast, Fig. 3 represents a positive evaluation of *normality* with a display of masculine appearance and posture. Rock is depicted sans makeup and wearing only a pair of baggy jeans commonly associated with masculine fashion (as opposed to tight-fitting jeans, which would be more commonly associated with feminine fashion) (Lower, 2018). Rock's display of masculinity is further accentuated through his well-defined abdominal muscles and masculine posture as demonstrated by his legs being spread open ('manspreading'). As such, this photo can be said to perform an exaggerated or hypersexualized masculine posture expressing a confident, laid-back attitude. This is consonant with his "sassy personality, quirky sense of humour, and confident style" (Dixon, 2023). Such a portrayal can also be construed as a 'thirst trap' (or thirst for attention) by channeling his attractiveness and sexiness as a strategy to garner more 'likes'. Whether to seek validation or an ego boost, or provide a visual hook, the aesthetic appeal of 'thirst traps' is key to engaging the audience (Lorenz 2018, cited in Leaver et al., 2020). More broadly, that Rock's photographic representations freely traverse the boundaries between the performance of feminine excess and hypersexualized masculinity could index a neoliberal sensibility of individual freedom, choice and autonomy as a gay man, which Chen and Kanai (2022) construe as a kind post-queer authenticity.



Fig. 1 Example of normality (–)



Fig. 2 Example of normality (–)



Fig. 3 Example of normality (+)

Capacity

Capacity is more evenly distributed between positive (45.3%) and negative (54.7%) evaluation, although there is a slight tendency towards negative *capacity*. Positive evaluation of *capacity* is indirectly demonstrated through the settings in which the SMIs are depicted in the photos. It was Barthes (1977) who pointed out the important connotations that settings carry in an image, which can frame not only the participants in an image but also viewers' reading of what the image represents or symbolizes. For instance, Fig. 4 shows Charles formally dressed in a suit at a formal event, The People's Choice Awards, which connotes prestige and glamour and indexes Charles' celebrity status and success as an influencer.

In stark contrast, Fig. 5 presents a negative evaluation of *capacity* with Rock sitting on the floor of an untidy room (presumably his own) with unkempt hair, performing a decidedly 'unglamorous' look and suggesting that he does not have his act together. Negative *capacity* is further evidenced in his pouting lips and frown, conveying frustration and incapacity and perhaps contributing to an image of vulnerability. It should, however, be noted that such a facial expression could be part of a repertoire of canned or learned poses, such as the pursed lips known colloquially as 'duckface', to project a certain look and evoke a certain affective

response from viewers. Self-deprecation or mocking of one's embarrassing moments could be interpreted as feigning 'ordinariness' in order to create what Tolson (2010: 283) calls a "hybrid discourse of the 'ordinary expert'", whose expertise stems from their experience as 'ordinary' users of products and not from being sponsored ambassadors.



Fig. 4 Capacity (+)

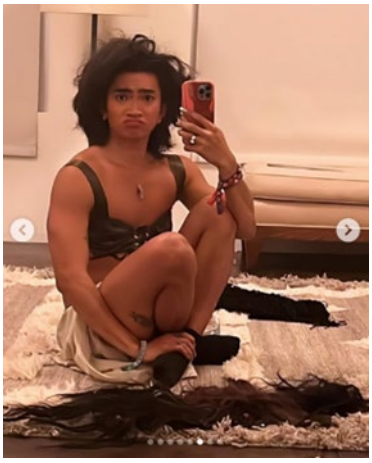


Fig. 5 Capacity (–)

Authenticity

Given that authenticity has been identified as a key influencer characteristic, it is surprising that the majority of photos (72.2%) show negative evaluation of *authenticity* as the two SMIs are largely depicted in an unnatural, staged or posed manner or lacking in individual personality. For instance, Fig. 6 shows a negative evaluation of *authenticity* in terms of candidness. The photo appears to have been taken in a studio with an artificial background and props. The high-resolution image is shot in strong lighting, providing a clear focus on Rock, his clothes, accessory, and high platform shoes, striking a pose with one of his arms resting on the prop and his body tilted to one side. All this suggests that the photo is 'staged', 'unnatural' and hence inauthentic. In contrast, Fig. 7, which shows Rock apparently in mid conversation, presents a more positive evaluation of *authenticity*. It appears to have been taken in a naturally occurring setting (possibly a restaurant) rather than a studio with artificial backdrops and props.

The presence of a second man in the background and a third person whose arm 'intrudes' into the photo suggests that the photo was unedited. In this low-resolution 'snapshot' capturing an activity in a specific spatio-temporal context (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), Rock is not gazing at the camera or striking any pose, unlike Fig. 6, thereby demonstrating spontaneity and candidness. The image of his arm in the foreground is also blurred suggesting motion, which further reinforces the 'snapshot' quality of the photo. Yet another point of contrast between Figures 6 and 7 is the use of colour. Figure 6 has a heightened colour saturation and 'reduced modulation' (Ledin and Machin, 2018), where the unevenness caused by the play of light and darkness is reduced or modulated, thereby making Rock's white clothes and accessory stand out, whereas the latter is cast in a reddish hue (perhaps due to the dim lighting conditions) with increased modulation, resulting in a more muted, mellow colour tone and natural-looking image.



Fig. 6 Authenticity (–)



Fig. 7 Authenticity (+)

Besides candidness, *authenticity* can also be demonstrated through the projection of a sense of individuality and personality. This personal branding can sometimes be in tension with the corporate branding that SMIs are paid to promote. A case in point is Fig. 8 depicting Rock in a professional photo shoot for a magazine. The name of the magazine – 'The WOW' – is seen

superimposed over Rock's image, creating an ambivalence where 'WOW' could simultaneously refer to the magazine name and the affective response to the glamorous image of Rock wrapped in multi-coloured fur. This melding of meanings, however, attenuates Rock's own personality or identity as his individuality is subjugated and subsumed under a corporate brand. This may lead to the perception of Rock being less genuine and true to himself, hence inauthentic. In contrast, Fig. 9 depicts Rock in more 'natural' settings at a public car park wearing a tracksuit and face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic and holding a watermelon, while Fig. 10 shows him sitting on the lawn in front of a house (presumably his) posing with his pet dogs. Although both photos are posed with Rock looking at the camera, the setting, attire, and other represented participants (objects, cars, animals, houses) included in the images collaborate to project a more authentic, almost domestic portrayal of Rock in contradistinction to his glamorous online persona as a microcelebrity. According to Ledin and Machin (2018), objects are an important carrier of connotative meaning. In Fig. 9, the sliced watermelon indexes 'everydayness' as if Rock has just purchased the fruit from a neighbourhood grocery store or market (possibly depicted in the background). Even the broad smile with the 'victory' hand sign in Fig. 10 reflects an unsophisticated amateurism that makes Rock appear more down-to-earth, relatable and, hence, authentic to social media users.

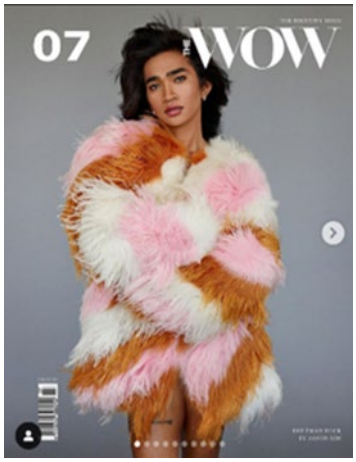


Fig. 8 Authenticity (–)



Fig. 9 Authenticity (+)



Fig. 10 Authenticity (+)

Depicting oneself in 'everyday' settings or situations appear to be a favoured way for the two SMIs to perform authenticity. Fig. 11 depicts Charles underwater, where he seems to be leisurely relaxing underwater. By presenting himself engaging in presumably his hobby of swimming, he is incorporating a personal element to the post, allowing himself to be perceived as someone 'real' and relatable with his own interests and hobbies. Furthermore, Charles is depicted with a crooked smile and his head slightly tilted downward in an unflattering or unglamorous manner. His awkward expression with a crooked smile is perhaps intended to elicit humour by portraying himself in a 'goofy' way. This projects Charles' personality as an easy-going person who is fun to be with, thereby adding a touch of 'genuineness' to his online persona. In a similar vein, Fig. 12 shows him in a somewhat comical situation which most people can relate to. Despite the heavy make-up and professionally coiffed hair, the anxiety in his eyes conspire with the text above the image to invoke the script of someone caught in a faux pas. This allows viewers a peek into a more vulnerable and unguarded/unscripted side of Charles, calculated to enhance his relatability and strengthen his para-social relationship with his followers. Social media in this way can be seen as transforming the para-social into the potentially social and reinforce the emotional ties between microcelebrity and follower (Marwick and Boyd, 2011a).



Fig. 11 Authenticity (+)

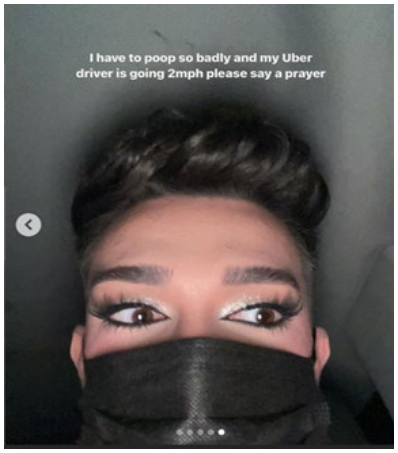


Fig. 12 Authenticity (+)

In sum, the visual appraisal analysis of over 700 Instagram photos of Bretman Rock and James Charles has produced an online persona of these two SMIs as disruptors of the beauty industry who are actively blurring, shifting, and rewriting the boundaries between traditional masculinities and femininities. These qualities may be seen as important factors that contribute to the considerable influence they wield over their followers on social media, thereby cementing their status as microcelebrities.

Discussion

The fruits of the aesthetic labour performed by James Charles and Bretman Rock as evidenced by their immense popularity as microcelebrities may be understood as a demonstration of power through creative deviance. The blatant disregard or violation of gender norms as performed by the Charles and Rock can be seen as a form of power that enables influence (Keltner et al., 2003). Norm violators may be perceived as being more powerful than norm conformers as their behaviors suggest that they are "unconstrained by normative pressures" (Stamkou et al., 2018: 277), which may reflect high social power. Both Charles and Rock were observed to frequently (69.9%) violate gender norms through their performance of femininity (wearing makeup, feminine clothes, posture, etc.) in a highly intentional and even

exaggerated manner. This high level of frequency and explicitness reflects clear intentionality on their part, which indexes power, which in turn contributes to their influence.

The deviance from gender norms may also be linked to the process of gaining taste leadership, which requires an individual to take risks to venture away from contemporary or conventional tastes (McQuarrie et al., 2012). In the contested and congested site of social media culture, "femininity has often been a means through which gay men have built their status in mainstream consumer culture as spectacularly transformative *tastemakers*" (Chen and Kanai 2022: 99, emphasis in original) and therefore the performance of femininity is a means by which they can demonstrate their authority and place within luxury consumer culture. However, it is important to bear in mind that culture has a distinct role to play in how behaviours and practices of SMIs are perceived and evaluated. For instance, violating norms in a collectivistic society may be more strongly frowned upon compared to an individualistic society. Both SMIs in our study are based in America, widely regarded as an individualist culture with a high premium on individual autonomy, valuing distinctive individual perspectives, and privileging individuals' needs and aspirations (House et al., 2004; Triandis, 2018). As such, their nonconformity coupled with a strong display of confidence may be met with greater approval and even approbation, resulting in them being perceived not only as gender norm transgressors or tastemakers but trailblazers in the beauty industry.

Our findings also suggest that the two SMIs walk the tightrope that balances the capacity and success they represent as leaders in the highly competitive beauty industry and having a relatable, 'everyday', and authentic persona to whom their multitudes of fans can identify with. On one hand, they need to project a poised, polished and professional image to accompany the glamorous beauty brands they represent and promote. On the other, they need to appear as 'ordinary experts' to consolidate the para-social relationship built on trust they have assiduously cultivated with their followers. One demands glamour, prestige, uncompromising

professionalism, and a larger-than-life celebrity persona; the other calls for an ordinary guy-next-door who is unsophisticated, amateurish, unguarded and vulnerable. The findings that Charles and Rock demonstrate strong negative *normality* and *authenticity* may reflect the perception that they have already attained and consolidated their status as the world's leading beauty influencers and hence the reduced need to appear authentic or relatable. But perhaps this a false dichotomy and an artificial binary that SMIs need not negotiate.

Banet-Weiser (2012) has famously characterised contemporary brand culture as the blurring between the authentic self and the commodity self, which suggests that one should do away with the binaries of commercial versus authentic culture. This means that just because something (or someone) is viewed as commercially vested does not necessarily mean that it is inauthentic, nor should an authentic evaluation preclude commercial interests. This is aligned with the post-structuralist view of performative identities (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1979), which dispenses with coherent or authentic notions of the self in the belief that identity is necessarily fragmented and multifaceted. Banet-Weiser's problematisation of authenticity in the context of brand culture also offers support for the claim that ways of being, as presented on Instagram or elsewhere, are not necessarily realist or authentic in terms of traditional conceptions, such as those tied to the idea of being "real" or "true to one's self" (Wellman et al., 2020: 69).

Despite (or because of) the view by sociolinguists that authenticity is in crisis (Coupland, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2002), the need to authenticate oneself and others has never been more crucial for identification, participation, and membership in our postmodern and post-truth condition (Leppänen et al., 2015), although the interpretations and forms in which this assumes are more diverse than ever before. Abidin (2017) contends that SMIs have responded to the fascination with authenticity by contriving a 'calibrated amateurism' that crafts an amateur aesthetic of comedy or spontaneity reinforced by the affordances of social media tools and platforms. This is exemplified in the unglamorous, goofy and self-deprecatory 'candid' shots

of Rock and Charles we saw in Fig. 5, 10, 11 and 12. This may also account for the phenomenon in China known as '*jie pai*' (street photography) of microcelebrities apparently sauntering casually along upmarket shopping districts, inviting both amateur and professional photographers, who have been notified in advance, to photograph them and upload their photos onto social media so as to amplify their visibility and augment their 'authenticity'. Such practices contribute to the blurring of the commercial self and authentic self of microcelebrities, in which commercial practices surrounding the lifestyles, customs, and activities of SMIs are packaged, commodified, and consumed as idealised ways of being that dismantle the dichotomy of self/other (re)presentations. Just as there is nothing instant about SMIs' Instagram posts, ways of being presented and perceived as 'candid' or 'natural' are hardly ever spontaneous or authentic; instead, they are highly mediated and engineered through a range of technological, social, and cultural practices to make them *appear* candid and authentic. In this light, social media influencing can be viewed as a digitally mediated social practice involving men and women commodifying their private selves, authentic or not, as marketable public performances. Taking things even further are some SMIs creating illusions of their Instagram experiences through 'simulated aesthetics' (Leaver et al., 2020: 569) by using and editing stock images on their accounts and passing them off as their own.

These mediations of authenticity in social media contribute to the elusiveness (and illusiveness) of the term and how it might be manifest in, for instance, an Instagram post. As Goffman (1956) once observed, identity is not a natural or genetic state, but a series of idealised performances contrived to achieve, seduce, or even deceive. Social media, such as Instagram, provides an ideal digital stage for the experimentation and performance of this idealised identity, where users can mobilise various multimodal resources and technological affordances to enhance and transform their appearance to simulate authenticity (Hurley, 2019). SMIs can draw upon an assortment of filters, emojis, audio, video, and captions to conjure, create, and

capture self-presentations of idealised authenticity that are otherwise not easily realised or necessarily desirable in the offline world. These aesthetic representations of authenticity as idealised and mediatised performance can then be harnessed as part of their marketing strategy to attract followers (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2015). This element of authenticity also differentiates microcelebrities from traditional media celebrities, whose carefully crafted fantasies often contrast sharply with lived experiences of "real" people (Cotter, 2019: 897). The recent massification of artificial intelligence and proliferation of image generating software will further allow and even encourage individuals to (re)shape, re(configure), and even re(invent) their self-presentations that further blur or even negate the boundaries between the authentic and inauthentic. Moreover, the mosaic structure of Instagram, which offer the serialisation of visual posts (Hurley, 2019), enables a display of varied identity representations that further contributes to the fragmentation and multiplicity of identities being presented. In this regard, Instagram encourages audiences to view identity (re)presentations as a process of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), where SMIs act as digital bricoleurs mixing and meshing various identity constructs to create something new, different or unique. These resources and affordances facilitate the projection of multiple and multifaceted identities, thereby allowing SMIs to push the envelope of originality and distinctiveness.

Conclusion

By adapting an appraisal framework to examine the Instagram photos of two of the world's leading beauty influencers, we have probed into the discursive mechanisms through which their aesthetic labour is performed to index their celebrity status. By doing so, we have contributed to knowledge and understanding of specific discursive strategies linked to *normality*, *capacity* and *authenticity* that SMIs mobilize to create and curate visual personae that best serve their interests. In particular, our attempt to probe into the attribute of authenticity aspired by many a

SMI and desired by followers reveals a multiplicity of mediated constructions and performances on the techno-digital stage of Instagram that suggests that authenticity in the realm of social media is an idealized illusionary fraught with contradiction and complication. Additionally, by focusing on two male 'beauty influencers', we have provided insights into how men (in particular gay cisgender men) evaluate and position themselves in the congested online space of beauty influencers that has traditionally been dominated by women.

Our study has demonstrated that social media platforms, such as Instagram, constitute a confluence of cultural forces where "a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption" (Marwick, 2015: 139) converge. Those successful at gaining attention and amassing a sizeable following, such as Charles and Rock, sometimes do so by transgressing social norms to display their celebrity capital and to perform their power and privilege as 'taste leaders'. However, instead of pushing the boundaries of beauty or going against the grain of gender normative structures, their aesthetic labour appears to be pivoted on merely reproducing the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture and dominant ideologies of luxury, privilege, and celebrity. Instead of opening more spaces that might empower young men and women to erect and express their own identities and individualities, social media like Instagram might be construed as flattening self-presentations and funneling them towards mediatized and marketized stereotypes of beauty and being.

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