Keep It Real or Play It Real: Authentication Factors in Staged Labor

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Abstract

This paper follows a boundary-breaking approach in analyzing and connecting contemporary research and literature in marketing and sociology on consumer's construction of authenticity the during the consumption of reality television and following activities on social media platforms. The focus is placed on the behavior of the "actors" behind characters in both types of media, referred to as *staged labor*, and how consumers derive their interpretation from it to assess the authenticity of these actors and construct reality. This work engages in reviewing literature explaining consumers' appreciation and search for authenticity, theoretical conceptions of authenticity and how consumers negotiate reality and fiction in reality television and social media, referring to the concept of *hyperreality* and *parasocial relationships*. Additionally, a connection between both domains, reality television and social media, is drawn based on the findings, revealing similar mechanisms in the construction of authenticity by consumers, on which currently available literature has missed out to this point. Lastly, a general discussion including impulses for practical application and further research is given.

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List of Abbreviations

TV	Television
RTV	Reality Television
SM	Social Media
SMI	Social Media Influencer
SEM	Structural Equation Modeling

1 Introduction and Relevance of the Topic

"Having a reality TV show, everyone feels like they know you, but that's only 10% of my life. There's a whole other side of me that people don't see." (Fault Magazine, 2015). With this statement Kylie Jenner, well-known reality television and social media persona, points out what might be the essence of one of the most interesting phenomena of consumer culture: reality television (RTV). Since its rise in the early 2000s with shows like Big Brother or The Bachelor, RTV experienced a revival in the 2020s on streaming platforms like Netflix, being one of the most popular genres (Nielsen, 2022). Further, a merge between RTV and the usage of social media (SM), another contemporary phenomenon, can be observed. On the one hand, RTV participants instrumentalize SM to establish a future career there (Ouvrein et al., 2021, p. 20). On the other hand, SM finds its way into RTV as a core component of the show's concept (Netzwelt, 2022). The above-mentioned Kylie Jenner serves as a good example, being part of a show about her family, while being the second most followed person on Instagram (Statista, 2022). From the producer's side, fabricating RTV is very beneficial. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, RTV production was less of a hygienical issue due to fewer required actors than other formats. It represents a highly profitable show format, delivering high margins within a short time of production (Morning Consult, 2021). As consumers craved for more content to fight boredom during self-isolation, RTV with its variety of different programs seemed to be very appealing to them. But why do consumers specifically enjoy this type of entertainment, often referred to as "trash TV" (TV Digital, 2021)? And why do they follow the lives of strangers on platforms like Instagram? Many scholars emphasize that authenticity and thus the observation of real people and emotions is a key factor for the success of both RTV and SM (Aslama and Pantti, 2006; Ouvrein et al., 2021). Meanwhile, other research revealed consumers' preference for fictitious elements in the consumption of such media, negotiating paradoxes between reality and fiction and ultimately consuming *hyperauthenticity* (Rose and Wood, 2005). This paper gives a comprehensive analysis of recent literature on the construction of authenticity within *staged labor*, such as RTV and SM, whilst taking a more boundary-breaking approach (MacInnis et al., 2020, pp. 2-3). First, insights into the importance and understanding of authenticity are given. Then, a review of relevant literature and research is presented, covering how consumers negotiate reality and connect to media personalities from RTV and SM. Finally, a general discussion is brought forward, including recommendations for application in management and future research topics.

2 Conceptual Basis

2.1 The Quest for Authenticity

First, for the purpose of this paper, *staged labor* is defined as labor based on a presentation of the own personality, opposed to emotional labor, referring to employees managing and regulating their feelings during customer encounters as desired by the company (Gong, Park and Hyowon, 2020, p. 3). Before examining how authenticity is construed by consumers within staged labor, such as RTV and SM, an understanding of why consumers value and seek for authenticity, referred to as a quest for authenticity, must be ensured.

According to scholars, the demand for authenticity can be described as one of the most powerful movements in contemporary life and marketing, also influencing consumer behavior (Potter, 2010, p. 4; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003, p. 21). Contemporary literature explains this rise of the "authenticity industry" (Aslama and Pantti, 2006, p. 170) due to the movements of the postmodern era. Globalization and deterritorialization as well as a resulting "standardization and homogenization in the marketplace", caused a loss of meaning and self-identity, leaving consumers with the feeling of alienation and fragmentation (Beverland and Farelly, 2010, p. 839; Rose and Wood, 2006, p. 287). This manifested in consumers starting to actively search for authenticity in terms of the original and natural that has not yet been altered by modernity (Cohen, 1988, p. 374). Thus, it seems to be a key component lacking in our lives and our environment (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 3). In addition, the consequences of dealing with postmodernism contained what can be described as an overload of artificiality. Contemporary life is marked by a rising presence of pseudo-events and media-driven construction of reality; thus, a loss of depth, originality, and sense of place can be observed in social and consumption experiences (Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006, p. 481). Referred to as *hyperreality* or *hypercreation*, it blurs the line between reality and fiction, causing consumers to "question the plausibility of value" (Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006, p. 481; Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 286). To counteract this, consumers are highly occupied with expressing individual emotions to find their "authentic self" and meaning in their lives aligned with their personal goals (Aslama and Pantti, 2006, p. 170; Beverland and Farelly, 2010, p. 839). Therefore, they naturally favor the consumption of brands and experiences that strengthen their desired identity to authenticate themselves (Beverland and Farelly, 2010, p. 839). Hence, from a sales-oriented perspective it is not surprising that high attributions of authenticity for products increase consumers' (online) ratings and willingness-to-pay (Lehman, O'Connor and Caroll, 2019, pp. 22-23; Kovacs, Caroll and Lehman, 2013, p. 473).

As for the consumption of authentic experiences, Rose and Wood (2005) explain the search for authenticity is very likely to be the reason for the interest in reality-based entertainment. They point out that since consumers are otherwise lacking authentic experiences in their daily lives, consuming RTV formats represents a sophisticated search for authenticity within the usually fiction-based entertainment domain (pp. 285-286). In line with Rose and Wood, Holmes (2004) notes that in the context of postmodernism, RTV is part of a "response to a cultural crisis in the concept of the real", meaning that RTV serves as a way to regain the status of the "real" (p. 160).

However, authenticity plays an important role for being a successful social media influencer (SMI) as well, functioning as a key factor in audiences' reception of SMIs and their content. Audiences are questioning the motives behind influencers' posts, especially when they are of promotional nature, affecting perceptions of their posts and the creator's authenticity and sympathy (Valsesia and Diehl, 2022, pp. 38-39). Nevertheless, research implies that authentic SMIs' posts increase the message receptivity, perceived (product) quality and purchase intentions, making authenticity a key factor for SMIs' brand endorsements (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard, 2017, p. 3)

Both forms of media gained enormous popularity, promoting technology-mediated self-presentation for the purpose of entertainment. Ultimately, we can observe a "cross-pollination" between RTV and SM in consumer culture (Dubrofsky, 2011, p.114). On the one hand, RTV participants have their own SM accounts, instrumentalizing SM for them. On the other hand, the consumption of RTV leads to audiences perceiving media characters as real and more approachable. As audiences often consume both, it motivates them to use SM to connect with their favorite RTV characters, strengthening their relationship with them (Dubrofsky, 2011, p. 113-114; Chung and Cho, 2014, p. 49). Further, we can observe an incorporation of SM in the concept of RTV shows, as for example Netflix' *The Circle* (Netflix, 2022). Contestants here are physically separated, their only way of communication being through a modified version of a SM platform. The goal is to either participate as yourself or to create an alter-ego to deceive others by acting authentic enough for them to believe your profile is real. Players are then rating each other, where the two best ranking players literally become *influencers* and the two lowest ranked ones are at risk to be banned from the game by them. The concept of this RTV format represents a manifestation of the merge between RTV and SM. Moreover, it demonstrates a fact about influencers that it often overlooked by the audience: Influencers are, to some extent similar to RTV participants, delivering a performance of themselves to their (online) audience to appear authentic.

2.2 The Concept of Authenticity

Before reviewing current research on crucial factors for the assessment of authenticity, a brief overview over the concept and different types of authenticity is given.

On a more superficial level, authenticity can be described as an entity of any kind being "genuine", "true", or "real" (Dutton, 2004, p. 258). This implies that to be assessed as authentic, an entity must go through a verification process based on evaluations of truth or facts (Newman and Dhar, 2014, p. 372). However, authenticity is not a property of a product, person, or place (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 4). The evaluation process is not based on facts per se but rather on their socially constructed interpretation, likely to vary across individuals and over time (Kovacs, Caroll and Lehman, 2014, p. 460; Lehman, O'Connor and Caroll, 2019, p. 21). Moreover, assessments of authenticity depend on the context and personal goals of the evaluator (Beverland and Farelly, 2010, p. 839). Nunes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021) describe authenticity as a "composite formative construct" (p. 4). They explain how consumers make their judgments of authenticity based on the assessment of six components: accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency (p. 7). Thus, authenticity is entirely formed by a composition of its components instead of existing as a construct on its own (p. 4). These components are no substitutes to each other and are not required to covary, since consumers are often trading off between them, especially in different contexts (pp. 4-5; Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 297). Matching this components-oriented conception, Lehman et al. (2019) describe authenticity as a "polemical concept", explaining how different research streams emphasize different underlying assumptions about this concept and how authenticity is attributed (p. 5). As a matter of fact, they categorize research on authenticity into three higher-level domains: authenticity as consistency, authenticity as conformity, and authenticity as connection (Lehman et al., 2019, pp. 6-8).

Authenticity as consistency refers to the extent an entity is consistent between its external appearance and its internal values and beliefs (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 12). Therefore, consistency-related research deals with the concept of the "true self", the presentation of oneself within social settings and whether this complements each other (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 15, p. 18). An exemplary question here would be whether an influencer is displaying their personal values and beliefs in their posts from their current vacation on Bali. These questions are furthermore examined in terms of organizations, brands and the congruence between their identity and actions (Lehman et al., 2019, pp. 24-25). Scholars also identified the concept of *moral authenticity* within this domain. It is a value-based conceptualization, defining a person's authenticity as "the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self" (Kernis

and Goldman, 2006, p. 294). This aligns with the component of integrity with the componential framework by Nunes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021), as they describe this component to refer to the source of authenticity to act from an intrinsic motivation, whilst being autonomous and consistent (p. 7). Since moral authenticity and the integrity-component capture the core idea of authenticity as consistency very well, they are the primary concepts of this domain.

From the perspective of a consumer who attributes high importance to moral authenticity, a person would be judged to be more authentic the more they are consistent between their identity and their actions. Applying this to the authentication factors in staged labor, it implies that personalities in RTV and SM are regarded as more authentic if they appear consistent and therefore real.

Chung and Cho (2014) point out that studies found the majority of RTV viewers to perceive the interaction on the formats to be real, but also that the number one reported reason by viewers to watch RTV was perceived reality (p. 48). Core to this perceived reality and crucial to viewing pleasures is catching a “moment of truth” within an unreal environment (Allen and Mendick, 2012, p. 461; Hill, 2004, p. 324). Aslama and Pantti (2006) describe that such moments are usually the revelation of true emotions, most likely disclosed in a form of confessional monologue (p. 168).

As for SMIs, Pöyry et al. (2019) explain that influencers on SM need to constantly negotiate between staying credible for the audience and being economically profitable. The outcome of these negotiations, presented to the audience, are connected to the degree of authenticity of their self-presentation, which Pöyry et al. define as “aura of authenticity”, either possessed or performed by the influencer (p. 338, p. 346). Examples of such outcomes contain posting creative and original content, shooting videos concepted as a dialog and direct interaction with followers to project an authentic appearance to followers (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard, 2017, p. 2). In conclusion, contemporary literature gives strong implications that authentication factors within staged labor at least partly rely on the concept of authenticity as consistency.

Another authenticity concept proposed by Lehman et al. (2019) is authenticity as connection. It can be described as an entity being evaluated as authentic “to the extent it is connected to a person, place, or time as claimed” (p. 37). One could ask whether an influencer’s video talking about a specific event they attended is an accurate portrayal of their experience at the event. While this refers to the provenance-oriented research stream, dealing with how consumers are looking for indexical cues that guarantee the genuineness of an object (Beverland,

Lindgreen and Vink, 2008, p. 8; Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 298), there is also a research stream based on transference. Although close to provenance research, authentication here comes not from the genuineness of the object itself. It rather comes from perceived evidence of a connection to a person, place, or time of significance that might be important to the audience (Lehman et al., 2019, pp. 42-43; Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 302). The component of connectedness as presented by Nunes, Ordanini and Giambastiani (2021) is representative of this concept, as they refer to the concept as having feelings of engagement and at times also of transformation (p. 7). The third and last stream, symbolism, focuses on how audiences process an entity's aimed symbolic connection to a person, place, or time (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 44). Defined as *approximate authenticity*, consumers look here for "stylized links" or "iconic cues" (Lehman et al., 2019, p. 44; Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 298). Iconicity builds on the idea of authentic reproductions or recreations which are supposed to resemble and symbolize the original and therefore still can be perceived as authentic as well (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 298).

For consumers viewing authenticity mainly from this perspective implies that they will attribute more authenticity to a person if they can connect with this person and their personality. This connection is usually based on shared experiences and values represented by the person's displayed characteristics and decisions, as consumers then perceive this person to represent them well (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 290). The more consumers can connect and identify themselves with those personalities, the more connected consumers feel to them and the more authentic those personalities are perceived by consumers.

Rose and Wood (2005) indicate in their analysis of their interviews with audiences that viewers appear to enjoy RTV the most when they are able to recognize goals and tasks that are relevant to them and symbolic to their daily lives (p. 289). Furthermore, in their study viewers' favorite characters on the format were almost without exception the participants viewers identified with the most (p. 291).

Concerning SM, as influencers directly interact with their audience, they give their followers the feeling of being honest with them, as if having a direct conversation. This develops a connection between the influencer and audience members, for example among females, being compared to an idealized relationship between sisters (Ouvrein et al. 2021, p. 2). Another aspect, according to Ouvrein et al. (2021), might be that influencers have the appeal of average people in contrast to celebrities, encouraging the formation of a connection to and authentication of the influencer even more (p. 7).

3 Review

3.1 The “Realness” of Authenticity?

As explained in the last chapter, audiences are keen on getting to know the true self of media personalities. RTV provides two main ways in which the audience gets the chance to do so. One, moments of participants talking alone e.g., in a confessional booth, interviewed by producers or recording a video diary, and two, moments captured by the camera in a voyeuristic manner and taken from unseen points. Both situations establish a moment of intimacy between the participants and the audience, giving them access to the observation of real people (Aslama and Pantti, 2006, p. 172-173; Chung and Cho, 2014, p. 47). Viewers seem to believe the participants possess a pre-determined, underlying self and expect them to reveal it at some point, maintaining their authenticity despite the presence of cameras and the public setting (Couldry, 2008, p. 9; Mast, 2016, p. 10). Such *moments of truth* are almost always a guarantee for real and authentic emotions and very crucial for consumers as they seem to mentally draw a connection between universal emotions and authenticity (Holmes, 2004, p. 158; Beverland and Farelly, 2010, p. 846). Surveillance thereby acts as a key factor here: the more one is willing to reveal to surveillance, the more they can appear real and the more authentic, therefore using surveillance as a tool of verifying one’s authenticity (Dubrofsky, 2011, p. 114, p. 117). To evaluate if participants act and remain authentic, viewers are looking for possible discrepancies in the behavior of RTV participants which would expose them as being ingenuine and performing, rather than being themselves (Mast, 2016, p. 10). Further, viewers value the resistance of the true self against external influences, such as other contestants or the producers trying to change them. They even perceive it as failure if contestants do not succeed in this mission (Allen and Mendick, 2012, p. 469).

Regarding SM, realness is a common requirement for consuming pleasure as well. Influencers are required to deliver informative and honest content while at the same time being passionate about it by producing original visuals and texts (Ouvrein et al., 2017, p. 12; Audrezet, de Kerviller and Moullard, 2017, p. 6). They share very personal information with their audience, giving them a glance of their private life and enabling them to get to know them up close. Engaging in frequent communication with their audience, they create a feeling of “digital intimacy” and bonding by providing confessional messages, thereby disclosing themselves (Chung and Cho 2014, p. 47, p. 49). Looking at both forms of staged labor combined, we can observe a shift of the concept of displaying yourself through surveillance from RTV to SM (Dubrofsky, 2011, p. 114). While RTV provides surveillance through recorded

film data with the help of a TV production team, SMIs submit themselves to surveillance. RTV participants are surveilled only for the time of the show, while SMIs integrate surveillance in their daily life. Nevertheless, the core concept is the same for both forms of media (p. 119).

However, it is still evident that viewers are also skeptical about the degree of reality in RTV formats (Montemurro, 2008, p. 86). Holt (2002) describes how consumers behave in a reflexive manner when encountering marketing messages. He refers to the fact that consumers reflect on marketers' incentives, accounting for their persuasive nature and consequently, adapting their consumption behavior by being more skeptical (p. 72). This picture of a reflexive consumer seems to apply to staged labor as well. Some research streams take the position that RTV viewers in fact do not see a pre-existent self in the participants, waiting to be discovered. Opposed to the picture of a naïve consumer, they rather see participants as "essentially performative, malleable and transformative" (Mast, 2016, p. 12). In their work on SM, Dubrofsky and Wood (2014) point out, talking about controversial pop-star Miley Cyrus, that although she publicly admits that her "actions are not authentic and spontaneous expression of her feelings" and premediated, fans still judge her statements on SM and at public attendances as authentic (p. 285). In addition, Allen and Mendick (2012) describe how RTV audiences do not seem to lose joy in consuming the shows, although they know that it is scripted. Rather, this ambiguity between real and fake provides even more space for viewing pleasure (p. 466). Taking these findings into account, consumers are aware and reflect on the presence of staged elements, but those do not seem to have a negative influence on their assessment of authenticity.

Looking at other forms of experiential consumption, Grayson and Martinec (2004) examined visitors' assessments of authenticity of tourist sites, representing the place of origin of real-life persona Shakespeare and fictitious character Sherlock Holmes. They found that although visitors clearly realized the fiction behind Holmes' site, they still spoke of it as if it was real and Holmes had lived and worked there (p. 300). Furthermore, their study showed that the fictitious site had the strongest associations with authenticity, despite Shakespeare's site being a real, historical site (pp. 306-307). This indicates an influence of imagination on perceptions of authenticity, where people can temporarily take the fictional world as a real one (p. 307, p. 301). Similarly, Cohen (1998) explains how touristic attractions and trips are usually staged and decorated to look authentic for tourists, thus creating a surrogate for real authenticity, called "staged authenticity" (p. 372). He argues that if tourists would think rationally about what is real and what is not, the plausible conclusion would be for them to

decline staged authenticity and its products (p. 374). But there seem to be cases where fake objects become real and authentic ones (p. 375), complementing Grayson's and Martinec's research. Cohen proposes, it might depend on the requirements one has for authenticity. He explains that individuals who are less concerned with it and do not long for a deep experience are keener to accept fictitious objects as authentic, than others who demand a higher degree of authenticity (p. 376). Thus, for them, a few authentic elements already are sufficient for the whole experience to be perceived as authentic (p. 383).

Transferring this to staged media, these findings imply that consumers account for the fictitious implications of RTV and SM but enjoy the formats not to satisfy their claims to authenticity, but merely for entertainment. While for consumers who require a higher degree of authenticity, this rather implies that there must be some underlying process where consumers are managing an ongoing interaction between authenticity and reality (Aslama and Pantti, 2006, p. 171).

3.2 Negotiating the Real

As their viewing time progresses, audiences enter a form of "reality contract", containing an involved and reflexive negotiation between what is subjectively real and what is fictitious. This negotiation happens within a wider cultural and personal context, influenced by mass media and marketers' efforts, in order to satisfy their claims to authenticity (Allen and Mendick, 2012, pp. 461-462, p. 465; Rose and Wood, 2005, pp. 286-288). Interviewing several RTV viewers, Rose and Wood (2005) identified three types of negotiation paradoxes: the situation, the identification, and the production paradox (see Appendix 1 for graphical illustration of their conceptual framework) (p. 288).

The paradox of situation refers to a negotiation between the explicitly fictitious setting of such formats e.g., beautiful, tropical island, or luxurious hotels, and the resonance with mundane themes and tasks within those settings, which are self-relevant to the viewers. For once, respondents reported their appreciation for foreign environments and implicitly stated, settings should be beyond day-to-day life. Yet on a deeper level, they looked beyond the superficialities of the show and identified problems, tasks, and goals they recognized from, or related to their daily lives (pp. 288-289). Mast (2016) argues here that while the settings seem far away from daily life, RTV shows are nonetheless conceptualized to come down to mundane matters, as the usual set-up is taking an ordinary situation and giving it an interesting twist (p. 6). When viewers could negotiate this situational duality successfully, finding self-relevant topics within a fantastic setting, they reported the strongest degree of enjoyment

for the RTV format (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 289). Thus, for highest possible enjoyment, audiences required settings that were new and therefore entertaining, but still familiar enough, so it would stimulate them to imagine their participation in the show (p. 290).

The second paradox was revealed the negotiation between "people like me" and storybook-like characters (p. 290). For once, viewers enjoyed extraordinarily attractive cast members and ones they found annoying or uncomfortable for entertainment and dramatic purposes. Especially the disliked characters, the "bad guys", rather increased involvement in the shows than decreased it. At the same time, respondents connected to and identified with cast members they perceived as real and with whom their values matched most closely (p. 291). As viewing time passed, the cast and their world became more authentic and self-relevant to the audience, as they were getting to know them, started to define social relations among them and to develop a personal, friend-like connection to them (p. 291). One reason for developing such a connection could be that participants appear mostly like ordinary people and thus, viewers may feel connected due to their common experiences and behavior on the show (Montemurro, 2008, p. 93). In contrast, Mast (2016) argues that mere ordinariness is not sufficient. Producers need candidates who can present themselves and project their personality well but do so seemingly naturally without giving the audience any signs of self-awareness of their performance. They must function as "social actors", who transport the idea of being from viewers' everyday-life and for whom participation in the RTV format is an extraordinary experience (p. 8).

In any case, viewers started to identify themselves with certain players by comparing and contrasting themselves with them, thus defining their own self-concept. Interestingly, viewers subconsciously even projected their own thoughts and feelings towards certain players onto participants which were similar to the viewers on a superficial level e.g., in terms of demographics or certain characteristics (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 291). Examining the effects of RTV consumption, Kühne and Opree (2020) found evidence that viewing time correlates with wishful identification, in terms of not just becoming the characters but rather participants function as a role model, with viewers desiring to be or act like them (p. 116). Ultimately, viewers opposed ordinary traits, like being genuine and relatable, and extraordinary traits, like being overly attractive, while referring to cultural discourses e.g., imperatives of beauty and youth, and their personal life themes and goals (Rose and Wood, 2005, pp. 291-292). Here, RTV provided a form of testing board, a cultural context, within viewers could refine, test, and reinforce their self-identity, although not necessarily forming their identity within it (p. 295).

In their study Kühne and Opree (2020) found evidence that RTV viewing was not only a significant predictor of adolescents' wishful identification but also of narrative engagement, merging with the characters, and parasocial interaction (p. 125). As authenticity gives people a feeling of being closer and more familiar to media personalities, it increases their identification with them and therefore the possibility of a parasocial connection (Ouvrein et al., 2021, p. 1). Such a parasocial connection or parasocial relationship can be defined as an anticipation of a friendship, where audiences think of media personalities as a part of their inner circle or peer group. Through repeated viewing and interpretation of those personalities' actions, audiences get the feeling of knowing them like a close friend, thus building such a relationship (Chung and Cho, 2014, p .48). Conceptualizing RTV formats, cast members are selected with audiences in mind, choosing them in a way that each viewer should have at least one character to connect with and build such a relationship with. Mostly this is enabled by the classical confession booth scene in RTV, where participants are sharing private confessions with the viewer, thus intensifying the connection (Kühne and Opree, 2020, pp. 114-115).

Complementary, Chung and Cho (2014) identified self-disclosure, in the form of a direct, personal, and private conversational style as a central element of parasocial relationships. Further, they found perceived TV reality to influence viewers engagement in the use of SM, and both factors to influence perceived self-disclosure, and therefore perceived parasocial connection to SMIs (see Appendix 2 for graphical illustration of SEM analysis). Even more, a cross-pollination between RTV and SM (see 2.1) is also evident here, as RTV leads to people perceiving media characters as more approachable, which in turn motivates people to connect with them on SM, strengthening this connection on both forms of media (p. 52). Ouvrein et al. (2021) complement this view, as they describe two dimensions of authenticity of parasocial connections on SM. First, perceived similarity in terms of the resemblance between audience member and SMI, as it increases identification and therefore parasocial connection. Second is perceived realism, described as the extent to which audience members can relate to experiences from SMI's narrative, as this increases the power of this narrative and poses the story as representative of audiences' lives (p. 17). Both dimensions can be tied to paradoxes within RTV as posed by Rose and Wood (2005), with the first dimension tied to the identification paradox and the second one to the situation paradox, thus revealing parallels between RTV and SM.

Since SMIs are sharing very personal information with their audience, showing their private life, and creating a personal and friend-like parasocial relationship, audiences wish to get

advice from SMIs as from a friend and buy products the influencer recommends. This poses parasocial relationships as the base for brand endorsements for SMIs (Chung and Cho, 2014, p. 48, p. 52). But as Chung and Cho (2014) explain, although parasocial connections resemble personal relationships, they are not reciprocal like personal ones. Usually, from the media characters' side, there is no obligation to maintain the relationship, therefore it is mainly carried by the audience members' side (p. 48). Ouvrein et al. (2021) are picking up this aspect and point out that although influencers have regular contact to their audience, the relationship remains in this parasocial and un-reciprocal state. If influencers then gain following, this imbalance in involvement can cause audiences to gradually lose connection to an influencer, thus threatening their authenticity and therefore success on SM (p. 17). Thus, the point of parasocial connections being the base of SMIs' endorsements is questionable.
Finally, the last paradox negotiated by viewers is dealing with the production of RTV formats. Based on the first two paradoxes, viewers are seeking balance between a naturally occurring narrative coming from spontaneous and real reactions of the participants, and a narrative manipulated by producers or based on acted performances by cast members (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 292). Interviewing RTV production members, Mast (2016) reported how story editors are approaching story telling on RTV. Usually, they only provide the setting and narrative arch, while the rest comes from the participants interacting and dealing with themselves in those prepared situations (p. 5). Those stories themselves ultimately do not exist in real life, but they are symbolic for an example of real life, creating a "virtual reality" (Stern, 1994, pp. 388-389). Talking to their respondents, Rose and Wood (2005) underpin this aspect by reporting how viewers prefer some editing or manipulation of the show. Viewers point out that total empirical reality is not necessarily better or desired and acknowledge the importance of generating suspense by smart casting and intervention by producers (p. 293). Connected to the paradox of identification and parasocial connections, producers are usually creating specific characters by editing and casting, reinforced by media portrayal of those characters highlighting their special and staged characteristics. These characters often resemble specific stereotypes but nonetheless appeal to viewers, causing them to use those stereotypes to establish their own ordinariness (Montemurro, 2008, p. 94; Allen and Medick, 2012, p. 467). Still, audiences emphasize that they would not want producers to script everything, declining a total control of producers as they regard this as a loss of authenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 293). Producers describe their role in scripting not as outlining dialogs, but more of a skilled anticipation and management of probable and expectable scenarios in terms of human emotions and reactions which they refer to as "emotional journey"

(Mast, 2016, p. 5). Consequently, producers do not have total control over what participants say and while parts might be edited, it enables an illusion or the feeling of reality much appreciated by viewers, thus a production of reality. While competing in games and engaging in interactions, the participants' experiences in such situations become real, and "the game becomes their reality" (Montemurro, 2008, p. 93). Therefore, we can describe RTV as a "catalyst for a social dynamic to develop spontaneously within the contours of the format" (Mast, 2016, p. 7). As Dubrofsky (2011) points out, the mechanism of produced reality can be observed on SM as well. The only difference here is that while in RTV producers are shaping reality with their intervention, on SM users or influencers are mediating it on their own without third-party intervention (p. 115).

Conclusively, viewers are negotiating a juxtaposition between artificiality and spontaneity that influences their attraction to the format (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 293). Interestingly, regarding the fact that some participants' behavior may be influenced by social settings on the show and not aspects of their personalities, this inauthentic behavior did not necessarily decrease viewers' enjoyment of the shows. On the contrary, they regarded this as a source of entertaining irony or comedy (Montemurro, 2008, p. 95; Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 293). Rose and Wood (2005) identified this as a key tactic in negotiating the paradox of situation, approaching the formats more playfully, such as forecasting or criticizing the actions of participants, to preserve the loss of authenticity (p. 294).

Another reason for the appeal of performed behavior and drama might be the desire to gossip about the zany storylines and plot twists within the show, enabling viewers to enjoy and chat with others about them (Kühne and Opree, 2020, p. 112). Beverland and Farelly (2010) describe that watching the same RTV formats as others from your peer group or even watching together, allows people to connect on shared experiences, providing content for casual daily conversations (p. 846). Rosnow (1977) describes this form of gossip as "gossip for entertainment", the goal of which is to primarily deliver satisfaction and amusement (pp. 158-159). Especially in the context of celebrities, which to some extent applies to RTV celebrities as well, gossip provides a feeling of being a "privileged insider" about the ups and downs of celebrities' lives (p. 161). Additionally, gossiping can be seen as an important part of friendship to maintain good relationships, as part of getting to know someone well is gossiping with them about others (Thornborrow and Morris, 2004, p. 249; Yerkovich, 1977, p. 193).

Putting this into the context of staged labor, gossip may not only be an entertainment aspect between viewers, but also important for the relationship between the audience and players on RTV or influencers. As explained, audiences build friend-like connections with media

characters. Therefore, in moments of monologues on either form of media, where a respective character is gossiping about other people, it may even reinforce these connections. Supportive of this argument, Thornborrow and Morris (2004) identified how RTV players are using gossip between each other but also directed at the viewer in moments alone to influence them and build relationships and finally, to win the show. This way, viewers find out what participants are thinking about each other and in turn talk to their friends about it (pp. 248-249), creating two levels on which gossip is influencing viewers within RTV.

Conclusively, two main processes from the negotiation of the three paradoxes proposed by Rose and Wood (2005) can be derived. Once, we can observe the creation and appreciation of *hyperauthenticity* by consumers. A key part of the negotiation of authenticity in RTV as a viewer is to draw one or several interpretations within all possible meanings intended by producers, that lead to a satisfying judgement of authenticity. Further, this consumption of authenticity usually emerges out of active discourse e.g., wondering, critique, or sympathy about the RTV content, where viewers "who reveled in the in the contradictory aspects" of RTV enjoyed it the most and satisfied authenticity claims well (p. 294). Ultimately, consumers did not only account for hyperreality in terms of not merely dichotomously distinguishing between fantasy and reality but "recognized that all realities are subjectively constructed and evaluated" (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 306). They even went beyond merely accounting for hyperreality, as a form a non-reflexive substitution of the seemly real for the actual real, by switching to reflexively consuming hyperauthenticity in terms of an "individualized blend of fantasy with the real" (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 294). Thus, Rose and Wood (2005) oppose the view of authenticity as mere realness, but explain that both dimensions are needed interacting, truth, and fiction. Second, consumers did not find authenticity embedded in the RTV formats but co-produced it as a form of a self-authenticating and authoritative act to consume a *hyperauthentic* product, despite the obvious commodification of RTV (p. 295). In line with this, Beverland and Farelly (2010) explain that consumers are co-creating value in experiential and material consumption as part of self-authentication. Further, they engage in authoritative performances, described as cultural and collective displays of what consumers deem to be important, usually aiming at (re-)inventing traditions (p. 839; Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 287).

4 General Discussion

The aim of this paper was to analyze how consumers of staged media, such as RTV formats and SM platforms, construe authenticity by performing a literature review on this and related topics. Evidence was found that in contrast to the traditional understanding of authenticity as the ultimate realness or genuineness, consumers appreciate fictitious elements in those formats, negotiating paradoxes between reality and fiction to satisfy their claims for authenticity. During an emergence of hyperreality, blurring the lines between what is real and what is not, consumers are actively seeking for authenticity. Especially for the consumption of staged labor, authenticity plays a key role as it is based on showing interactions between allegedly real and ordinary people, similar to people from our daily lives. Based on the definition of authenticity as consistency between self-concept and self-presentation, consumers appreciate the display of true emotions and real characters. However, they also reflect on and account for the entertainment value, acknowledging that for such formats a certain level of fiction is required to satisfy entertainment claims. Thus, they are negotiating three types of paradoxes within a reality contract with themselves. Besides negotiating the situation and production paradoxes, which account for most of the entertainment factor, the paradox of identification seems to play the major role for the authenticity factor. Footed on the understanding of authenticity as connection, identification with cast members on RTV and influencers on SM seemed to lay the foundation for forming friendship-like parasocial relationships which were crucial for involvement with the formats and its characters. Especially for SMIs, such connections are crucial since they are the base for brand endorsements and their own economic success. Further, identification with those characters enabled consumers to evaluate their own identity, revealing staged media as a source for self-conceptualization. Finally, a picture of a reflexive and active consumer was drawn who does not passively find authenticity in consumption, but rather co-produces authenticity as part of a self-authenticating act in order to leverage beyond hyperreality and consume hyperauthentic products.

In conclusion, this paper is contributing to academic discourse in two ways. First, it draws a broader picture of the construction of authenticity in reality-oriented formats. Taking literature from domains of marketing, consumer research, and sociology on RTV and SM, this paper creates an overview of authentication factors and their effects on audiences across different domains. Second, it connects research on two, at least in academic discourse, mostly distinctly treated types of media, RTV and SM. For once, a broader picture of authentication mechanisms within consumers of both media types on their own is presented.

Further, this paper also demonstrates parallels in the construction of authenticity between both types, connecting them to each other, which to this day is rather rare in contemporary literature.

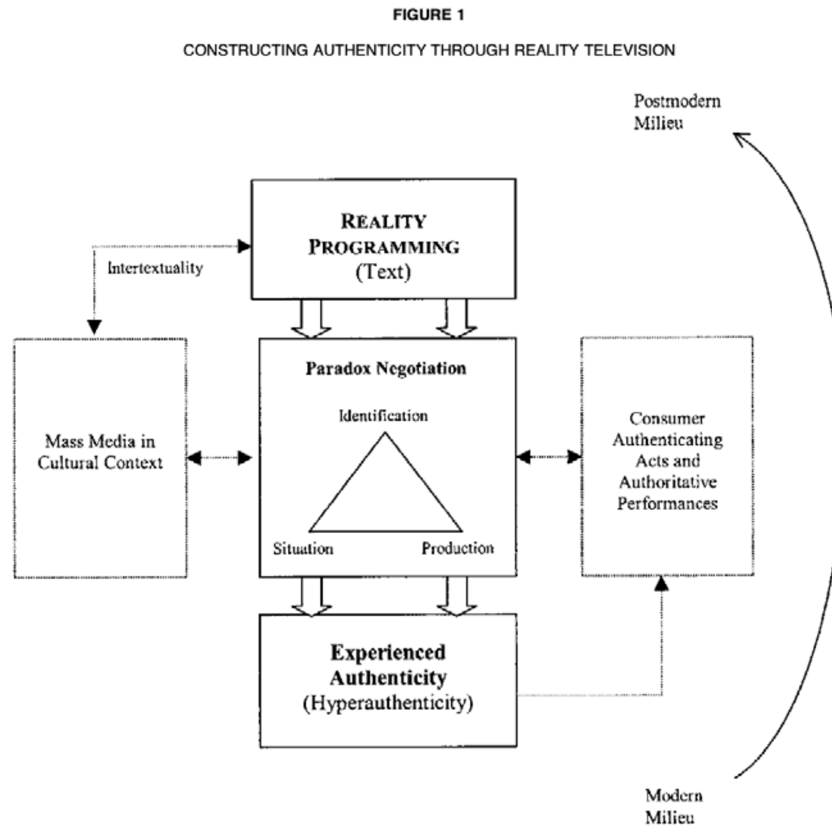
Nevertheless, the implications stated in this paper have their limitations and must be considered with caution. First, as for every conceptual paper, there cannot be a claim for completeness regarding the vast amount of academic research on authenticity. Second, the vast majority of the work referenced is either conceptual itself or is based on research conducted by a hermeneutic, interpretative analysis. As this commonly includes interviewing respondents, such analyses' findings cannot be easily generalized. Firstly such interviews mostly contain only a small number of respondents due to financial and capacity reasons and secondly, as these interviews are often personal, the risk of respondents being influenced by the interviewer should not be underestimated.

The implications of this paper can also be applied to managerial practices. As they are currently highly popular, the findings summarized in this paper can be used for an improved conceptualization of future RTV formats or some other reality-based experiential consumption to maximize audiences' entertainment and authenticity requirements and therefore their enjoyment of such formats. As for SM, influencers and marketers working with them can develop effective brand endorsement strategies based on these findings in order to optimize audiences engagement with and connection to the influencer and their content. Ultimately, brand endorsement can be conceptualized as more authentic and thus more attractive for audiences.

Finally, some recommendations for potential future research are given at this point. As explained, most of the literature referenced is based on qualitative analyses. Thus, future research could support the statements made by interviewees in a more quantitative form, providing further robust evidence. Then, some research should be dedicated towards the relationship between RTV formats, the usage of SM, and the role of influencers. As some RTV formats are either incorporating SM in the concept of the show or at least engaging in public discourse about the show on SM and vice versa, many RTV participants are becoming SMIs. Research defining how audiences are consuming both forms of media in combination would be of great value. Lastly, RTV and SM were evident to have an influence on evaluating self-identity but no observable changes of it were evident, most likely due to the limited time scope of those studies (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 295). Therefore, long-term effects of RTV consumption, but also in combination with SM consumption, on self-identity would contribute vastly to academic discourse.

5 Appendix

Appendix 1: Conceptual framework by Rose and Wood (2005, p. 288)



Appendix 2: Outcomes from SEM analysis by Chung and Cho (2014, p. 52)

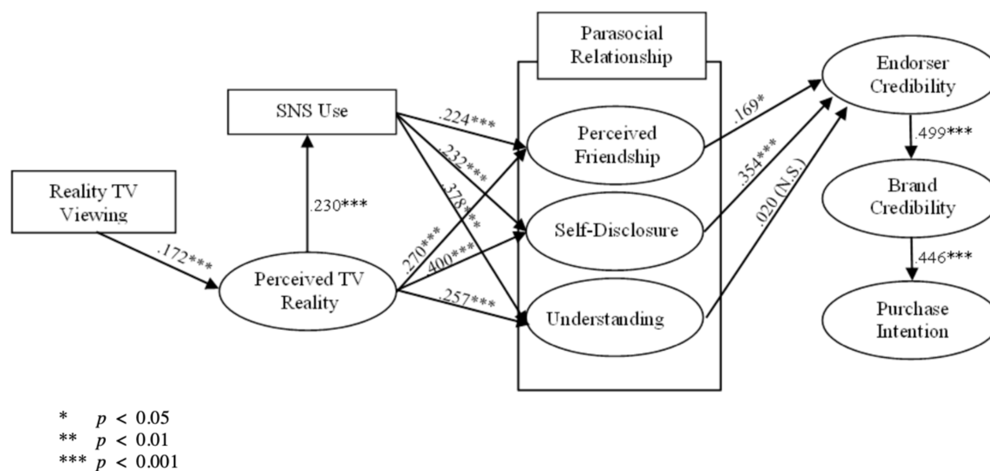


Figure 1. Results of SEM Analysis

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