

Assignment Coversheet

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Assignment Title: Research Project

Unit Title: Research Project

Course & Year: BA(Hons) Public Relations Year 3

Due date: 5th February 2026

Individual Support Agreement (ISA): Yes

I confirm I have an ISA which has been agreed by the UAL Disability Support Team.

**Authenticity in Sponsored Luxury Beauty Content on
Instagram:**

How Gen Z Negotiates Meaning

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Riccardo Benzo, for his guidance and support throughout this research project. I am also thankful to the nine participants who generously shared their time and insights, making this study possible. Finally, I extend my appreciation to my family and friends for their encouragement during this process.

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Abstract

The research explores Gen Z consumers' negotiation of authenticity in sponsored luxury beauty content they view on Instagram in London. Extant literature has predominantly focused on influencer authenticity, through cross-sectional studies that operationalise authenticity as a construct. However, this means consumers' agency in determining what they perceive to be authentic in oppositional assessments of sponsored content is under-examined, especially within specific geolocated and cultural contexts.

Grounded in consumer culture theory, this paper suggests that negotiation of authenticity comprises a triadic process of wanting, suspicion and moral evaluation. An interpretivist approach underpins this study, which utilised semi-structured interviews with nine Gen Z participants in London. Interviews were accompanied by a scroll-back task, which acted as a visual elicitation method where participants chose Instagram posts they had seen on their feed. Posts chosen were sponsored luxury beauty content.

Results indicated users performed nuanced sense-making in their consumption of sponsored posts. Enthusiasm was generated through aspirational longing evoked by mood boards and atmospherics; however, this was tempered and not taken at face value. Suspicion was operationalised as learned algorithmic literacy specific to Instagram; users "fact-checked" the caption if they noticed it was sponsored. Lastly, users held ethical lines that both aspiration and suspicion had to negotiate. Additionally, place-based association with London functioned less as decor and more as an informative lens through which content was judged believable.

This research provides insight to influencer marketing research by suggesting authenticity is a form of sense-making negotiated between several persuasive forces. For luxury beauty brands looking to reach Gen Z consumers, this means brand content must both look sleek and believable; brands should avoid over-posting and demonstrate a nuanced understanding of Londoners and their pragmatic attitudes.

1. Introduction

Instagram influencer marketing is coming to dominate luxury beauty brands' communication with audiences. Through creators, brands assemble products around desirable-yet-relatable lifestyles to market to young consumers on visual social media platforms. The product of such coalescence, authenticity is promised as much as it is claimed as a moral high ground (Abidin, 2017; Jin et al., 2021). Upon encountering a sponsored Instagram post, audiences may experience desire, commercial recognition, and ethical judgements all at once. How are such forces reconciled, and to what ends?

Processes of authenticity have previously been examined as just that: performances that are relationally established. Consumer culture theory outlines how consumers “negotiate meaning and value in relation to marketplace-generated... symbols while also managing their relevance to self-identity projects and moral and ethical obligations” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Negotiation is particularly heightened within influencer marketing contexts, as sponsored content is necessarily expected to perform commercial and authentic registers simultaneously. Existing literature takes a largely quantitative approach to understanding audience attitudes around sponsored content, operationalising authenticity as a static quality measured with survey questions.

This paper contributes to this underexplored area by examining how Gen Z consumers in London, UK, understand and negotiate authenticity in the consumption of sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram. London is a theoretically important setting, serving as a global luxury capital with a young, ethnically diverse population that has shown high levels of engagement with prestige beauty brands (Walpole, 2024; Greater London Authority, 2024). Gen Z consumers, born roughly between 1997 and 2012, have been exposed to social media since their formative years and are characterized by high advertising literacy while still being influenced by hedonic and aspirational appeals (Park et al., 2023).

Conceptually, the study introduces a triadic framework that positions authenticity negotiation as the product of three forces: the pull of aspirational desire, the push of commercial scepticism, and the lens of moral judgement. The model resists staging the

three forces into a linear process, and instead suggests that audiences make these three types of evaluations simultaneously as they encounter a sponsored post. Philosophically, this study takes an interpretivist position and applies semi-structured interviews with visual elicitation to allow participants to verbalize their responses, explanations, and trade-offs in reconciling these three evaluations.

The overarching research question guiding this study is:

RQ: How do London-based Generation Z beauty consumers negotiate authenticity when engaging with sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram?

To address this overarching question, the study pursues three subsidiary research questions:

RQ1a: How do London-based Gen Z consumers interpret authenticity cues in concrete encounters with sponsored luxury beauty posts?

RQ1b: How do these consumers reconcile or prioritise aspirational desire, commercial scepticism, and moral judgement when evaluating sponsored content?

RQ1c: What are the implications for luxury beauty brands and influencers seeking to communicate credibly with Gen Z audiences in London?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Luxury Beauty Marketing and Instagram

Instagram's visual and interactive affordances shape how luxury beauty content is produced, stored, and linked. Visibility, persistence, editability, and association configure how posts circulate and accumulate meaning (Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Luxury beauty actors mobilise these affordances to manufacture 'accessible exclusivity', combining polished brand storytelling with platform-native formats such as Stories and 'get ready with me' routines that promise quasi-backstage views of beauty labour (Abidin, 2017; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2023). Authenticity is therefore organised not only through explicit claims but through how performances are staged, edited, and connected on Instagram.

Instagram's particular technical affordances, on the other hand, give form to performance of authenticity in material ways. For instance, Stories' 24-hour disappearing nature codes content as more immediate, and thus, more likely to be spontaneous and uncurated, even when it is in fact staged (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). The Reels afford multi-clip editing with transitions and music clips layered over video footage to produce content that might veer between polished production and amateurish authenticity. The grid might function as a portfolio where brand identity is expressed through visual consistency and cohesiveness across posts while Stories and Reels are performative spaces of 'being real'. Influencers exploit these affordances in their performance of authenticity by, for example, posting aspirational-looking photos on the grid, while posting seemingly candid content of their everyday lives on Stories. This multi-format structure of Instagram also means that there is not a singular standard against which an influencer's authenticity is judged but calibrated across spaces with different expectations.

The platform's algorithmic infrastructure also conditions these judgements. The visibility of content is algorithmically determined: high-performing content is given more weight and wider distribution. Algorithmic feedback loops mean that certain aesthetic conventions are normalised as indices of quality or trustworthiness. A visual grammar of luxury beauty content on the platform is naturalised over time, which conditions users to

expect certain forms of content. Posts that diverge from these conventions may be interpreted as refreshingly authentic or amateurishly unconvincing, depending on the context and execution. This points to the impossibility of authenticity assessment being untangled from a degree of platform literacy.

2.2 Generation Z as Digitally Native Consumers

London features prominently in this space. Industry analysis, for example, positions the city as a luxury capital that is distinctive for the ethnically diverse profile and high engagement with luxury brands among its young population (Walpole, 2024; Greater London Authority, 2024; WPP, 2023). The city's multicultural milieu creates distinct opportunities and challenges for luxury beauty marketing, in that consumers find themselves negotiating between the aspirational aesthetic of global brands and a local cultural identity. At the same time, much of the existing empirical research is based on geographically dispersed samples that tend to treat the global North as a culturally homogeneous monolith, with relatively little attention to specific urban markets or to luxury beauty as a distinct category (Jin et al., 2021; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2023). This lack of geographical nuance overlooks how authenticity is co-constructed at the intersection of brand meanings and local cultural contexts.

Generation Z (born approximately between 1997 and 2012) is considered the first generation to have been raised in networked societies (Seemiller and Grace, 2019). Generation Z experienced their media socialisation through smartphones, making them more likely to demonstrate patterns of visual literacy and platform fluency. They are thought to be more conscious of advertising conventions as they were introduced to advertising from a young age on different platforms (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). This is demonstrated as Generation Z have often developed a certain cynicism towards advertising, where they will recognise advertising and marketing content, but will still engage with it if it is delivering value. This is in contrast to previous conceptions of advertising scepticism which was seen as a form of resistance.

2.3 Theorising Authenticity in Sponsored Influencer Content

Authenticity is experienced as the sense that people, products, or brands are being true to

an identity, origin, or set of values, even when this truth is symbolically rather than literally grounded (Nunes et al., 2021). This experience is complex: consumers may simultaneously recognise that luxury marketing involves strategic construction whilst still finding certain presentations emotionally resonant. Within consumer culture theory, this sense is negotiated as consumers compare market-orchestrated symbolism with their own identity projects and moral commitments (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Beverland, 2006). Studies of craft, heritage, and luxury demonstrate that consumers rely on indexical cues such as provenance and artisanal labour, and on iconic cues such as consistent style, when deciding whether something feels real (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2005, 2006).

Goffman's dramaturgical model characterises social interaction as front-stage impression management supported by backstage preparation, whilst MacCannell shows how settings stage the backstage to satisfy desires for authenticity (Goffman, 1959; MacCannell, 1973). Influencers similarly stage their own backstage through low-fidelity angles, casual formats, and intimate routines. Abidin describes this as 'calibrated amateurism': content carefully produced yet coded as spontaneous (Abidin, 2017). Instagram's affordances make these performances highly visible and reproducible, producing an authenticity paradox: the more influencers claim realness, the more visible the underlying codes become, inviting sceptical readings. This paradox is particularly acute in luxury beauty, where high production values are expected yet can signal commercial control.

Disclosure itself creates its own paradox. The persuasion knowledge model of Friestad and Wright (1994) provides a generalisable baseline for how individuals react when they realise they're being persuaded. In it, consumers have developed a knowledge of persuasion tactics throughout their lives, and when they encounter a communication recognised as commercially motivated, they activate this knowledge, which in turn may influence their cognitive and affective response (Friestad & Wright, 1994). On that point, research shows that sponsorship disclosure in the influencer context specifically triggers the persuasion knowledge, with audiences recognising the message as an advertisement and modifying their meaning in response to it (Kim & Kim, 2021). Studies in the context of beauty gurus have shown that even if followers believe they use the product

themselves, disclosure can serve to cheapen the influencer's recommendation by foregrounding the sponsorship (Lou, 2021). The act of disclosure, then, creates a double bind: influencers must state they have been paid, which diminishes the authenticity their appeal is based upon, and yet not doing so may subject them to legal sanctions. Kapitan et al. (2022) assert that authenticity is best not thought of as a quality in influencer marketing, but an emergent judgement of perceived transparency, congruence, and creative control.

The literature offers solutions to this paradox: self-disclosure outside of official channels and the use of two-sided messages that admit product limitations (Lee and Johnson, 2022); types of disclosure formats that communicate an honest, legal-compliant brand (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022); integrating products into life narratives such that including commercial products in that narrative 'can appear natural' (Chen et al., 2023); 'being constantly different' to prevent repetition of tropes or creative types that signal sponsored content (Zniva et al., 2023). However, these studies measure the effectiveness of these strategies, rather than the ways authenticity is interpreted and negotiated by audiences in everyday life. The consumer is a black box.

2.4 Generation Z's Negotiation of Beauty Authenticity

Consumer culture theory understands consumers as members of culture-creating collectives who appropriate branded symbolic resources as part of identity projects played out in broader ideological fields (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002). Under this perspective consumption is understood as a process of meaning making through appropriation, resistance, and transcendence. Beverland finds consumers to reward brands they perceive have “meaningful stories and symbols to tell” rooted in consistent myths of origin, craft and scarcity and punish brands that excessively commercialise meaning (Beverland, 2005, 2006). Generation Z followers interpret luxury beauty influencer brand partnerships through informed lenses.

Work by Jin et al. finds parasocial interaction is a driver of follower trust. However, follower also punish influencers who display cues indicative of “commercial calculation” (Jin et al., 2021). This notion of trust is dependent on followers feeling consumers are not

being overtly manipulated and indicates perhaps a sense of “vigilant intimacy” that defines follower Influencer relationships. Lou refers to follower Influencer relationships as ‘trans-parasocial’, whereby followers also think of influencers as small business owners who have financial motives that should be questioned (Lou, 2021). Excessive brand control is uniquely able to elicit moral emotions like disappointment from Gen Z followers when content themes concern self-esteem and equality (Youn and Cho, 2021). Generation Z has also been considered cynical.

However, Gen Z are not straightforwardly disillusioned. When luxury messages deliver hedonic value through visual pleasure, escapism, or identity exploration, viewers can bracket their scepticism and engage positively with commercial content (Park et al., 2023). This suggests that authenticity negotiation involves multiple simultaneous evaluations rather than a binary real-fake distinction. Authenticity seeking is shaped by individual history and cultural background; demographically similar consumers can hold very different reference frameworks (Bartsch et al., 2022). A London-based consumer with roots in East Asian beauty cultures may evaluate content differently from one whose reference points are predominantly European.

2.5 Towards a Triadic Framework of Authenticity Negotiation

This study proposes a triadic framework for understanding how Gen Z negotiate authenticity in sponsored luxury content. The framework synthesises existing work on authenticity, consumer culture, and social media, conceptualising negotiation as a dynamic interplay between three simultaneous forces activated when encountering a sponsored post.

The first is the force of aspiration. Luxury beauty advertising beckons self-actualisation (Taylor, 1991; Holt, 2002) as its products become tools for building a true self (self-presentation 2.0). Brand mythologies and influencer personas are armories of symbolic resources for projects of identity. On Instagram, heightened production values and narrative transportation mechanisms redouble the seduction effect (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023). Sensory language and dreamy visual scapes of atmosphere evoke the imaginary scenes of experience, thereby endowing content with affective pull

prior to any cognitive consideration.

The second force is commercial scepticism. Gen Z are fluent in advertising conventions and scan endorsements for evidence of mitigated commercial logic. Audiences depend on indexical and iconic cues when determining whether endorsements “feel authentic” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Sponsorship disclosures can either amplify scepticism or be interpreted as honest transparency, depending on how well they are integrated and what level of trust had been established previously (Kim and Kim, 2021; Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Scepticism is not simply the presence of doubt; rather, it is an active interpretive practice through which audiences decipher commercial intent.

The third force is moral judgement. Influencer practices are held to normative standards of creative freedom, truthfulness and social responsibility. For Gen Z especially sensitive to corporate responsibility, luxury beauty content playing on insecurities or "performative activism" of progressive causes without substantive action risks moral inauthenticity (Lou, 2021; Youn and Cho, 2021; Park et al., 2023). Moral judgement may be based on both the current post as well as historical record; past transgressions by the brand or influencer are likely to condition present judgements.

The above forces are played out through Instagram's affordances and how they structure visibility, editability and linkability of posts (Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Following consumer culture theory, this framework approaches authenticity as a reflexive, situated achievement, not a quality (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Do not presume these forces operate serially or to exclude one another, they can be simultaneously evoked in complex states of evaluation.

2.6 Research Gap

Nevertheless, some gaps are still visible. Despite the conceptual advances towards a clarification of what authenticity is and how it might be signaled, a rather shallow understanding of the actual dynamics through which audiences negotiate authenticity in situ is still present (Nunes et al., 2021; Kapitan et al., 2022). Empirical research, then, has either been centered on the performance on the supply side or on outcome measures, like purchase intention or brand attitude. Here, what is still needed, is research putting

consumers' interpretive labor at the center of analysis with respect to specific posts, over time and in context.

Methodologically, survey-based, cross-sectional studies have also been critiqued for providing little understanding of situated meaning-making (Kim and Kim, 2021; Lee and Johnson, 2022). They present respondents with de-contextualized stimuli instead of their own feeds, which may fail to capture the influence of the factors that naturally co-occur with or underpin evaluation in the wild. Moreover, sampling approaches that blend respondents from multiple countries have been shown to result in thin understandings of the influence of cultural context on judgements (Jin et al., 2021). This means that luxury beauty campaigns directed at Generation Z Londoners are under-researched, despite the city being a key luxury multicultural market with tensions between global brand aesthetics and localised identity work (Walpole, 2024).

In the absence of an understanding of how authenticity is negotiated rather than evaluated, brands and practitioners have little data to inform the content and creative strategy that will most effectively win over a savvy, discerning audience; and scholars have few models beyond ones based on media content that may not engage consumers as fully as they do in the wild.

There is scope for interpretivist, qualitative research that explores how London-based Generation Z consumers of beauty products and services negotiate authenticity when encountering sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy: Interpretivism

The philosophical approach underpinning this study is interpretivist. Interpretivism views reality as a social construction, which is subjective and not objectively measurable (Stokes, 2013). Interpretivism privileges the extraction of meanings from texts and participants' accounts. It is consistent with consumer culture theory's foundational assumptions about consumers' agency in sensemaking and the active appropriation of market offerings in relation to identity projects and moral obligations (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). By adopting an interpretivist approach because this study is focused on subjective experience: what participants do with sponsored content is inextricable from how they feel about it.

The three-sided framework proposed in the literature review indicates that Generation Z consumers experience aspirational desire, commercial scepticism and moral judgement in response to sponsored content, and these experiences are often mutually exclusive. The nature of the negotiation between them, and how they are balanced or prioritised, can only be understood through an account of participants' subjective experience. How they interpret the content and how they reason about it. A positivist approach would involve measuring authenticity, as a dependent variable, using a predetermined scale. It would not reveal the process of negotiation, which is the object of this study. If positivism would ask 'how much authenticity do consumers perceive? ', interpretivism would ask 'how do consumers construct and negotiate authenticity?'. The latter question better aligns with this study's objectives.

3.2 Research Design and Strategy

The study uses a qualitative methodology, appropriate for exploratory projects that attempt to identify how and why a process takes place, rather than measuring the size or frequency of its occurrence (Stokes, 2013). Qualitative research methods are also well suited for identifying nuance, contradiction, and contextual details, all of which play a role in the negotiation of authenticity. The project fits into Stokes's (2013) categories of key sites of meaning-making, the research being most at home in the Audiences space, as

access to Gen Z Instagram users is necessary to ask them about their interpretive processes. Elements of Texts are also present, as the study's participants are asked to provide examples of sponsored content they have encountered. Finally, the Context of London serves as the project's framing backdrop.

The research also includes a visual elicitation method built into the semi-structured interview, in which the researcher is able to capture the participant's real-time reactions to a visual prompt, in addition to their reflective commentary on this or a similar post. The benefit of this design to validity is that it allows the observation of the authenticity negotiation process in an attempt to simulate a naturalistic setting, rather than asking participants to discuss this process in the abstract. Verbal interview data are combined with visual screenshot data, to triangulate.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The main source of data is one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured format allows flexibility to pursue emergent topics while remaining focused enough to address the aims of the research (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). This style of interviewing is also consistent with the idea of the 'active interview' – that meaning is created through the process of encounter between interviewer and interviewee. Interviews ranged in length from forty-five to seventy minutes, with this amount of time being adequate for rapport-building, the scroll-back task and detailed discussion.

An interview guide was developed, organized around the triadic framework. The interview starts by warming up the participant to the topic, with more general 'grand tour' questions asking about the personal significance of beauty, and general Instagram use (e.g. 'What does beauty mean to you personally?' 'Can you walk me through how you typically use Instagram?'). With some common ground and comfort established, the interview then progresses to more focused lines of enquiry, related to the three lines of enquiry: trust, aspiration, and ethics. Probing questions were then used to encourage elaboration, and in particular to explore further when participants brought up tensions between different evaluative frames.

3.3.2 The 'Scroll-Back' Task

A limitation of retrospective self-report, and surface emotional associations which are challenging to externalise via abstract questioning, is addressed by a projective component using stimuli to prompt participants to project subjective feelings (Pich, Dean and Yu, 2023). In this case, a 'scroll-back' task served as visual elicitation with interviewees to ground discussion in concrete examples rather than abstract hypotheticals.

Participants opened Instagram on their personal accounts and either scrolled through their feed or 'saved' folder to identify instances of sponsored luxury beauty content which they had recently seen. Participants then selected one or two posts that stood out to them (positively or negatively) as visual cues to discuss the language and qualities they read as 'authentic' or 'inauthentic'. They took screenshots to share with the researcher for analysis of both visual text and participant's negotiated interpretation. Use of participant-selected content, as opposed to researcher-selected stimuli, approximates the kind of content encountered by the algorithmic feed as part of participants' naturalistic diet.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

The population of interest is Generation Z consumers, estimated as people aged roughly eighteen to twenty-seven, living in London and consuming beauty content on Instagram. The sampling method used was purposive sampling, where participants are “judged to be particularly appropriate for a study” based on predetermined criteria (Stokes, 2013, p. 77). The inclusion criteria for this study were active Instagram users, following several beauty accounts and having recently seen a sponsored luxury beauty post in the past month. It was a snowball sample where participants were sourced through personal contacts who shared the research invitation with people they knew that met the criteria.

The sample includes nine participants, seven female and two male, ranging in age between twenty-one to twenty-five. All were living in London during the interview, but not all had been born or had grown up there, with one participant from East Asia, two from continental Europe and others from different regions of the UK. The sample size was nine to achieve data saturation in qualitative interviews, a number supported by

research which suggests a typical sample for thematic analysis falls between five and twelve (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Qualitative research is not concerned with sampling being statistically representative, but rather thematically rich in a context of theoretical interest, not necessarily to be generalised at a global level.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analytical strategy was thematic analysis, which is appropriate to finding patterns across qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is compatible with interpretivism in that it allows an interpretive interaction with meaning, but is also a systematic approach. Interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim. The nine transcripts amounted to approximately 85,000 words in total.

The six-phase method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was followed. The first phase, familiarisation, involved multiple readings of the transcripts and viewing of screenshots. Notes were made of initial impressions and any potential patterns. The second phase of initial code generation was both deductive and inductive. Deductive codes were based on the triadic framework so as to identify instances of aspirational desire, commercial scepticism, and moral judgement. Inductive codes captured anything of interest which was unanticipated. For example, many of the participants mentioned something unique to London. In the third phase, codes were collated into candidate themes. The fourth phase involved reviewing these themes to ensure that each theme was internally coherent and externally distinct from other themes. The fifth phase involved defining and naming the themes. The sixth and final phase of the analysis was producing the final report, with illustrative extracts which show examples of each theme.

Transcripts were colour-coded using a four-colour system: yellow for aspirational desire, blue for commercial scepticism, red for moral judgement, and green for mentions of London and Gen Z context. This approach of domain-coding was used to organise the data, but also to let themes emerge across multiple domains. Visual stimuli were analysed for compositional features (framing, lighting, text overlays, sponsorship labels) to see if any of these corresponded to responses by participants.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical practice was aligned with the University of the Arts London Code of Practice on Research. All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet which detailed the purpose of the research, that participation was voluntary and provided details on how the data collected would be managed. Written informed consent was taken which included consent for the interview to be audio recorded. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research without penalty up to two weeks following the interview. Pseudonyms P01-P09 have been used to ensure that participants remain anonymous. Screenshot images were cropped to remove usernames and identifiable third-party information, prior to analysis. Audio recordings were stored in a secure location and will be deleted following the assessment process.

3.7 Reflexivity and Limitations

Reflexivity is related to the position that the researcher's identity can affect the research (Wiles, 2013). As a Gen Z Instagram user with an interest in beauty content, the researcher's identity was that of an insider, which might have supported rapport and sensitivity towards platform conventions, and which is likely to have enabled the participant to feel comfortable speaking openly about their own media use practices. However, this epistemological position also brings the potential for the researcher to assume or infer things onto participant accounts, or to understand responses in relation to their own normative or moral categories. Notes were taken after interviews, in which moments were written down when the interviewer's own response to a piece of content may have affected how they asked questions or understood a response.

The study is not statistically representative. The London sample enables depth of understanding, but any claims about other contexts are limited; Gen Z consumers in other cities and countries may have different resources to mobilise when negotiating authenticity. The reliance on interview data also means that it is possible that some responses to sponsored content, where engagement is habitual, are not available for recall and description. However, this methodology does allow an in-depth account of how a theoretically important consumer group is mobilising its resources in a more commercialised social media environment.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

This chapter reports on nine semi-structured interviews with Gen Z consumers in London. Findings are presented in four themes identified using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that describe how participants negotiated authenticity after encountering sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram. In each theme, participant voice is woven together with the triadic framework, interpreting authenticity as a socially constructed and negotiated process rather than an inherent property (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). The nine screenshots chosen by each participant served as an anchoring visual reference point for this discussion, and allowed for an exploration of how compositional choices made within the micro-genre of social media advertising can elicit authenticity evaluations.

The number of domain codes applied in each transcript is presented in Table 1 below, indicating that the four-colour coding system was applied systematically across the sample, and that each of the evaluative domains was present within each participant. This distribution is shown for methodological transparency, and not for quantitative analysis purposes as would be appropriate in reflexive thematic analysis.

Table 1: Domain Coding Distribution Across Participant Transcripts

Participant	Desire	Scepticism	London/GenZ	Moral	Total
P01	1	7	4	6	18
P02	7	4	6	3	20
P03	6	10	7	2	25
P04	3	8	5	2	18
P05	8	6	8	1	23
P06	3	4	4	3	14
P07	3	3	3	1	10
P08	2	8	9	1	20
P09	8	9	9	10	36

Note: Numbers indicate coded extracts per domain. Distribution shown for auditability, not quantification.

4.1 Theme 1: Aspirational Desire as Provisional Authenticity

Before mentioning the commercial awareness of luxury beauty content, participants used affective language to describe their first impression of the luxury stimulus. Visual aesthetics appeared to be the point of entry into engagement, what could be described as a 'provisional authenticity' (Brady, 2020). Participant P03, when asked for her first impression of a luxury influencer bathroom with dim lighting, marble and designer objects (Stimulus P03_S1) responded: "My first impression is it just looks luxury... it's golden. It looks shiny. It gives a feeling of luxury." The *mise-en-scène* of this influencer stimulus could be described as cinematic, with candles, branded objects, and text reframing staying at home as an aspirational lifestyle. The response of the 'feeling of luxury' came before a mention of the sponsored nature of the post.

The framing of luxury as material for identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002) is also found in consumer culture theory. In line with the latter's assertion of the authenticity of consumer practices, participants did not see the content they consumed as simply objectively true or not. Instead, content could be considered true to an aspirational version of life or way of living. P05: "It's my way of showing self-love, and I think it's good for my self-esteem. Doing my beauty and makeup also gives me a sense of accomplishment and confidence at once." Beauty consumption practices are, therefore, a self-realisation practice and luxury content serves as templates for these ideal identities (Taylor, 1991). P01 reiterated this by articulating the appeal of the Dior "jelly cake" unboxing she chose (Stimulus P01_S1) as rooted in novelty and playfulness of luxury: "The vlogger just like open a... like cake box. And there are some cosmetics in... inside the cake box. And um, I think it's not usual for... for usual cosmetics advertising. So... um... and the color is mostly is pink. It connects to the reality cause we can buy the product."

Contributing to this affective draw were sensory affordances. In talking about a fragrance insert showing ingredient overlays (Stimulus P02_S1), P02 stated: "There's a perfume, there's a lemon skin, and also a text about the perfume flavour... the lemon skin is adding the sense of the flavour." The still shot a hand-held bottle with a text display of aromatic notes. Readers were asked to imagine bodily in a non-literal sense. This aligns with

findings about sensory language use as making products feel more experientially proximate (Casio Rizzo et al., 2023). P02 also expressed a curatorial affect: "I'll hire a film director or a curator to relate the four sense or five sense with the perfume." Respondents understood multi-sensory appeals as signals of creative investment and not manipulation.

P07, on her chosen blush application reel (Stimulus P07_S1), appreciated the technique demonstration: " I think when she put her makeup, like putting on the blush and lipsticks, she put too much. I think it's a little bit waste. I mean, if you buy it yourself, you won't use that way. " Brush movement on glossy skin in the stimulus was therefore proof-of-process making product outcome achievable. A 'proximate authenticity' that relied on a viewer being able to imagine replicating the effect.

Fundamentally, desire was not naive but conditional. P03 recognised: "I do enjoy watching it, but I wouldn't imagine I would have a life like this. After 15-20 seconds, I felt disconnected because I definitely won't have a life like this." Desire was strategic engagement with aspirational imagery, a practice of what may be termed 'contained aspiration' in which viewers enjoyed but didn't fully believe.

4.2 Theme 2: Commercial Scepticism as Interpretive Labour

Sponsorship disclosure functioned as an 'evaluation switch' reorganising reading practices. P04 articulated this habituated literacy: "I do notice it instantly because it's sort of a habit I picked up... every time I check out a new post, I check if it's sponsored. Generally, if I see something is sponsored and I'm not interested in the product, I'm just going to scroll it away." This confirms sponsorship triggers persuasion knowledge activation (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Kim and Kim, 2021), yet the response was critical reframing rather than automatic rejection.

P09 offered the clearest articulation of how disclosure affected trust: "When I know it's an ad, it makes me trust the person promoting it less and their opinion. It makes me more critical. Because they're getting paid for it. They're not being genuine." However, scepticism was conditional: "I appreciate the videos, but I don't look at it and think this is something I want to achieve in life because I know it's not real." This captured the dual

consciousness characteristic of Gen Z engagement: aesthetic appreciation coexisting with commercial awareness.

The participants made use of specific heuristics to assess plausibility. P04 (reading a men's grooming routine, Stimulus P04_S1), reported distrust engendered by a perceived over-staging of the video: "Everything in the video just looks way too clean. Everything just looks brand new, the bed sheets, the shoes, the mask. Probably doesn't strike me as he uses it everyday." The visual analysis of this stimulus identified the presence of an LED mask prominently displayed on the bed, with 'MEN' printed on its side. This constituted, for participants, advertising theatre rather than lived practice. This finding demonstrates a disconnect between indexical cues (signals of actual use) and iconic cues (constraints of aesthetic coherence) (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). P01 expressed distrust of content in which entire collections are on display: "I believe a person will like some several products in a collection, not all of them."

P08, viewing a La Mer night cream stimulus (P08_S1), expressed similar concerns about plausibility: "I think... my personal opinion is it's very difficult to trust if anyone actually uses the products that they push... The key thing is, for an ad, whether or not they use it I think is a little bit irrelevant." The jar-in-hand composition functioned as ownership proof, yet the routine framing invited scepticism about sustainability of such elaborate practices.

Frequency also eroded trust. P01 explained: "If I find there are many videos advertising about the product, the brand will lose my trust." P05 noted that "if the advertisement shows everywhere, it just lowers up the tone. It makes the product feel less useful." P02 described unfollowing an influencer whose content shifted: "At first, they were showing technique about the makeup. But later it became more like selling products. There's a trust issue, so I unfollowed." Scepticism was directed at the platform's broader commercial infrastructure, not only individual influencers (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). The algorithmic persistence of sponsored content across feeds intensified this awareness.

Deviant Case: Acceptance of Brand-Owned Content

Commercial disclosure did not evoke a unitary response from all participants. The Rhode brand posting (Stimulus P05_S1) appeared to evoke less scepticism from P05 than did influencer content: "The caption for this post is just three words... I could tell right away it was just an advertisement because the brand name is being there obviously. But knowing this is an advertisement doesn't change how I feel about the photo at all." The stimulus had a casual 'mirror selfie' aesthetic despite being from the brand's own feed, indicating that transparency of commercial intent might actually make an ad feel more authentic by lessening the sense of disguise. The brand speaking as brand was experienced as more honest than the brand speaking through a supposedly independent voice.

The same logic appeared in play with P04, whose responses to influencer content had otherwise indicated scepticism: "I have never unfollowed any influencer I watched because of a sponsored post. I understand it's part of their job." P06 had a similar line: "I know they need to make money. As long as they're upfront about it, I can respect that." These deviant cases indicate that audiences might not necessarily disengage on account of commercial awareness; rather, it shifts the parameters of evaluation. Audiences may draw a line between palatable and problematic commercial relationships based on whether they are transparent and proportionate, or hidden and excessive.

4.3 Theme 3: Moral Judgement as Boundary Condition

Moral evaluations operated as a threshold overriding both desire and scepticism. When participants perceived ethical breaches, engagement ceased regardless of aesthetic appeal. P03 described unfollowing Dolce and Gabbana after controversial cultural comments: "D&G made a lot of negative comments about China. They posted an advertisement regarding some chopsticks, just offensive stuff about China. So I unfollowed that brand and never bought any product from that brand since then." This illustrates how brand histories accumulate moral weight that can instantly devalue present content. Moral judgement functions as a superordinate condition capable of terminating relationships entirely.

P05 articulated how plagiarism constituted a moral breach: "Plagiarism is such a

disrespect to other people's hard work, and it also means that she didn't put any real thoughts into her design. As soon as I heard this news, I just directly unliked her post and unfollowed the brand right away." Moral authenticity required evidence of creative integrity. P07 generalised: "If I found some influencer lied to their fans, or use some product of some brand that have scandals or moral issues, I will not follow them anymore."

P09 described disengaging when influencers responded dismissively to criticism: "Instead of addressing the situation, if they make shady remarks and act like they're better, stuff like that makes me second guess them." The participant valued genuine values signalling: "I like when they do show diversity, but it shows that they're doing it out of being genuine, not just because they have to." This distinction between performative and genuine diversity signals sophisticated moral reading. P01 expressed environmental concerns about sponsored excess: "Sometimes I think about whether this is environmentally friendly... all that packaging for products I might not use." Moral authenticity thus extends beyond honesty to encompass broader social responsibility.

These findings extend the literature on moral emotions in Gen Z responses (Youn and Cho, 2021) by demonstrating moral judgement operates as a boundary condition rather than a parallel consideration. Participants could tolerate commercial scepticism whilst maintaining aesthetic engagement, but moral breaches triggered categorical withdrawal, reconfiguring the entire evaluative landscape.

4.4 Theme 4: London Context as Interpretive Frame

London as an active filter, informing the standards of judgement, not just a demographic context. Respondents tested the plausibility of content in relation to experience of the city, using specific knowledge of London to verify or disprove authenticity. This extends the literature on geotargeting in influencer marketing, such as the recent call for "location-sensitive" research in the space (Walpole, 2024), as well as the theoretical framework for how place conditions desire, cynicism and judgement.

Temporal Rhythms and Routine Plausibility. For P08, urban temporalities in London

made certain content “not plausible”: “The everyday reality of London, London life in general, is that you commute to work, you work, you commute back home and you go to sleep.” In relation to a luxury morning/evening routine on a skincare account (Stimulus P04_S1), the participant considered: "I find it hard to believe that they have the luxury in the morning everyday to spend all that time doing skincare, body care, cleaning up their beds, cooking their own breakfast." The incongruence of this content’s mythology with London’s pragmatics generated cognitive dissonance that impeded their aesthetic investment. London’s infrastructural and cultural rhythms of life (40+ minute average commute times, long hours, small housing etc.) shaped the benchmark of ‘reality’ against which the performativity of such routines could be determined as ‘inauthentic’. The temporality of place and content has been an under-explored area in influencer studies, which tends to treat time as unmarked and universal.

Diversity as Baseline Expectation. The diverse appearance of the city engendered particular expectations that uniform content did not satisfy. P08 stated: "It's a type of cultural mixing pot that you can't find in very many other places." P04 said: "London is more diversified than the place where I came from. You can definitely create your own style of fashion, and it's encouraged here as an atmosphere." P06 commented: "If a brand only shows one type of person or lifestyle, it feels really unrealistic." For the London-based participants, diversity was an observable fact of city life rather than an aspirational value. It was experienced first-hand on public transport, in workplaces and on the street. Singular representations of beauty appeared incongruous with this multicultural reality. The city therefore served as a backdrop against which to evaluate brand content. As such, its heterogeneity emerged as an implicit criterion of authenticity for luxury content.

Expressive Permission and Individuality Norms. London afforded a level of expressive permission that ironically created a higher bar for content originality. P09: "In London it's just way less judgemental for people to be more expressive with their look... no one actually really cares about the way you dress. So, do whatever you want". P05: "You can see many loud and standout looks on the street here. I can see lots of Gothic looks at Brick Lane. But back in Asia people dress a lot more conservatively." P07: "London provides me a more environment to be myself. I have more freedom here to put

my makeup". This permission resulted in a point of tension: if London affords permission to be oneself, content that enforces a norm felt inauthentic to the city's values. The participants in this study expected luxury beauty content to recognise and celebrate expression of different aesthetics instead of prescribing singular norms of appearance. This finding implies that the cultural conditions of London create particular expectations for authenticity that may be specific to the city.

Material Conditions and Practical Calibration. Material conditions of daily life were also relevant to how products were assessed. In terms of tube etiquette and its impact on product use P08 noted: "You've got to avoid anything too strongly scented. There's no sense ruining the journey for other people." This was mirrored by P06: "The strong perfumes can feel uncomfortable, especially on the tube." Weather also had an impact: P08 highlighted: "Sometimes it's quite rainy, so making sure you carry your moisturizer in case you get caught out by a shower." Material constraints (crowded public transport, variable weather, shared urban spaces) thus established certain calibration points for content plausibility. Material realities of life in London thus functioned as an implicit (external) calibration factor. Content that did not "ring true" with these material constraints was disconnected from people's everyday realities. The city here is thus a calibration device. Authentic content must account for the material, practical conditions of life in London, not just aesthetics.

Hence, the trinity of factors is not all equally, or always in play, but the environment of London can condition them. In this case, desire is subject to temporal limitations. The more complex the promised regimes of use are, the more scepticism creeps in, if people do not see how they could manage these in the time structures of London life. Scepticism about the brand can be increased by lack of attention to London's demographic variety. People's moral judgement can be provoked if they experience content as not in tune with the cosmopolitanism of London. The city therefore becomes not the scenery of the stage, but part of its frame: it conditions the three forces.

4.5 Synthesis: Authenticity as Negotiated Process

The findings validate the triadic framework whilst refining its operation. Participants

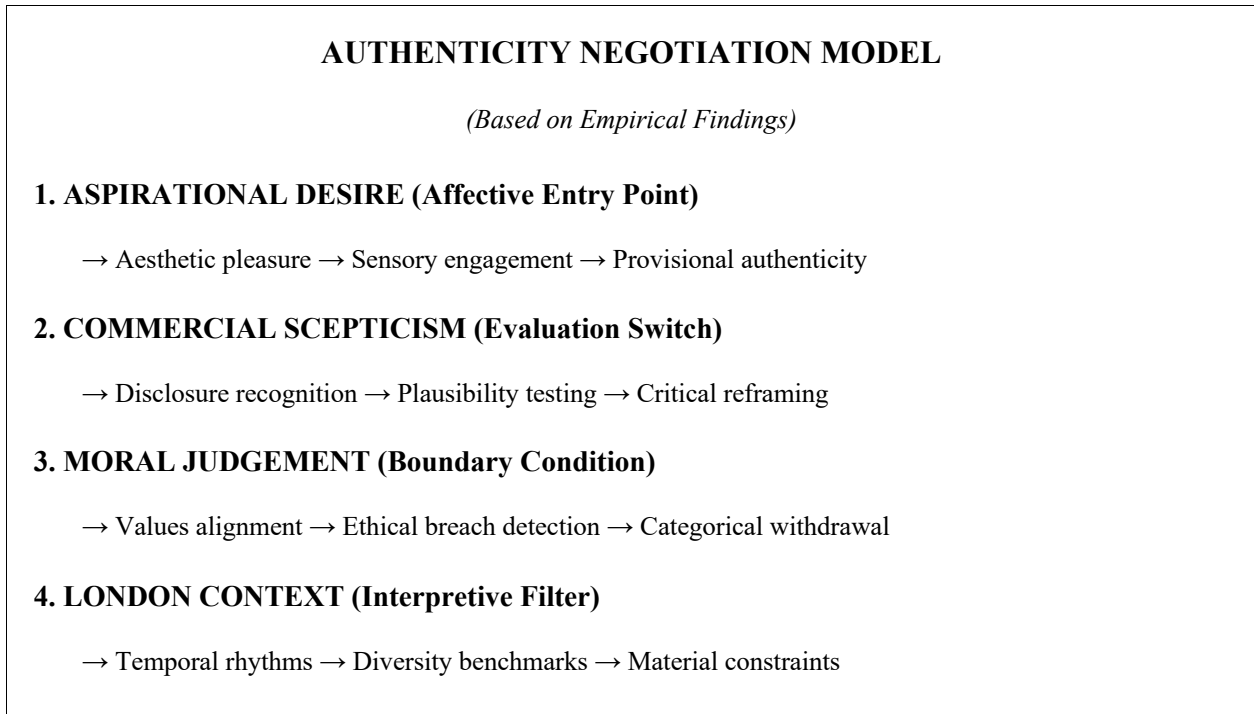
moved fluidly between aspirational desire, commercial scepticism, and moral judgement within single viewing episodes. P03 captured this multiplicity: a post could be "attractive" whilst still not feeling "real". P09 described enjoying content whilst bracketing belief: "The videos are aesthetically pleasing. I appreciate them, but I don't look at it and think this is something I want to achieve because I know it's not real."

The screenshot analysis revealed how specific visual cues triggered different triadic responses. Sensory imagery (P01_S1 swatch sparkle, P02_S1 lemon peel) activated desire. Disclosure tags and excessive staging (P04_S1 pristine bedroom) triggered scepticism. Campaign aesthetics suggesting corporate control (P09_S1 collection framing) activated moral evaluation about authenticity of endorsement.

Participants' accounts suggested three implicit criteria for positive authenticity judgements: content respected their intelligence by being transparent enough for placement within the commercial ecosystem; respected their desire by offering genuine hedonic value rather than manipulative pressure; and respected their values by avoiding tone-deafness or moral insensitivity. These connect to the literature's emphasis on transparency and congruence (Kapitan et al., 2022), disclosure functions (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022), and moral emotions (Youn and Cho, 2021).

Importantly, participants described themselves as neither naive nor cynical. P04 exemplified: "I have never unfollowed any influencer because of a sponsored post. I understand it's part of their job." This matches Lou's (2021) concept of trans-parasocial relations, where followers evaluate influencers simultaneously as relatable figures and entrepreneurial actors. Authenticity negotiation thus functions as consumer competence: a skill of living within a commercialised social media environment whilst maintaining both pleasure and critical distance.

Figure 1: The Triadic Framework of Authenticity Negotiation in Practice



Note: Forces operate simultaneously and are filtered through London context.

Limitations and Reflexivity

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The sample comprised nine London-based participants with active beauty engagement, potentially representing higher platform literacy than the broader population. The purposive recruitment through social networks may have attracted participants who are particularly articulate about their media consumption. Retrospective interview accounts may differ from real-time scrolling behaviour; participants may have rationalised post-hoc reactions they would not articulate in the moment. Screenshots captured single frames from dynamic content, potentially missing temporal elements of authenticity judgement.

As researcher, my position as a Gen Z individual with interest in beauty content may have shaped both interpretation and participant rapport (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The interview encounter was itself a site of co-constructed meaning where participants may have performed 'savvy consumer' identities. These limitations do not invalidate the findings but situate them as contextual insights rather than universal claims.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate how London-based Generation Z consumers negotiate authenticity when encountering sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram. The research was motivated by a gap in the literature: whilst considerable scholarship has addressed authenticity in influencer marketing, most studies treat authenticity as a measurable variable rather than a dynamic process, and few attend to specific urban and cultural contexts.

The study has yielded several important insights. First, authenticity negotiation was seen to be a complex interpretive endeavour where the three forces of aspirational desire, commercial scepticism and moral judgement coexist and must be managed simultaneously. The three forces are not deployed in a step-by-step manner but are blurred in the viewing experience. There may be conflicting affective responses such as admiration and distrust or pleasure and reservation occurring in a single viewing instance. This lends support for the triadic view that was theorised in the literature review and goes beyond it to argue that the force of moral judgement also operates as a boundary condition that can cancel out the other two when a violation is detected.

The following three contributions to knowledge from the study were identified. First, Generation Z consumers appear not to be so many believers or rejectors of sponsored content as – to use a theoretical term – ‘conditionally engaged’. In other words, they bracket or suspend evaluative judgement about the commercial nature of the content in question, accepting that the market-reality is what it is, while choosing to focus on other aspects. This would map onto Lou’s (2021) idea of trans-parasocial relations and suggests a need for influencer marketing research to take more account of the interpretive work that audiences do.

Second, the study shows that the London context is not a passive backdrop against which consumption takes place, but an active frame of interpretation. Participants use their own knowledge and experience of city living (commute routines, weather, space constraints, multiculturalism) as a baseline against which they assess the plausibility of content. This has resonance with recent calls for more location-sensitive research in influencer

marketing studies (Walpole, 2024; WPP, 2023) and suggests the risk that global sampling strategies may miss important variation in how audiences negotiate authenticity.

Third, the study shows that moral judgement acts as a threshold rather than a third parallel category of concern. The participants in the study are happy to aesthetically engage while being commercially sceptical but saw moral transgressions as a point they would not go past. This hierarchy of categories has important pragmatic implications: brands can survive consumer suspicion about commercial intent if they are seen as on-brand and do not overdo sponsorship appearances, but a moral mistake cannot be counterbalanced by good aesthetics.

Authenticity findings present several practical implications for luxury beauty brands and influencers, who may seek to be deemed authentic by London Gen Z audiences. In summary: as well as avoiding polished facades, authenticity requires style and substance to be believable within the same frame. Products should be worn into routines rather than posed as prizes. Sponsorship should be infrequent enough not to seem transactional. Above all, brands should show they are attuned to London's diversity and pragmatism.

This is not a general manual for influencer authenticity. These are particular expectations that are negotiated at the specific convergence of a global city, a commercial platform and a cohort socialised into reading advertising both as culture and as commerce. The more helpful point may be that authenticity is, inherently, a process of negotiation, and not a fixed quality to be simply had or lacked. This more dynamic understanding may ground influencer creative strategy in an ethically sensitised, empirical basis.

Authenticity judgements could be further contextualised and tracked over time through longitudinal research. Comparative studies across other urban areas are recommended, to explore how these London findings relate to other contexts, as well as studies which integrate real-time methods, to complement the retrospective recall inherent to this design. The scroll-back visual elicitation method developed here was useful in accessing participant situated logics and could be adapted in future influencer qualitative work.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Participant Information

ID	Gender	Age	London Residence	Primary Beauty Category
P01	Female	22	Central London	Makeup
P02	Female	24	East London	Fragrance
P03	Female	23	South London	Skincare/Makeup
P04	Male	25	North London	Skincare
P05	Female	21	West London	Makeup
P06	Female	23	East London	Fragrance
P07	Female	22	Central London	Makeup
P08	Male	24	South London	Skincare
P09	Female	22	East London	Makeup

Appendix B: Stimulus Log

Stimulus ID	Participant	Type	Description
P01_S1	P01	Reel	Close-up luxury swatch with glitter, PR abundance background
P02_S1	P02	Reel	Perfume bottle with ingredient note overlay
P03_S1	P03	Reel	Luxury bathroom scene, candles, designer objects
P04_S1	P04	Reel	LED mask men's grooming routine
P05_S1	P05	Post	Rhode brand mirror selfie with lip product
P06_S1	P06	Reel	Cinematic perfume with rain/leather mood
P07_S1	P07	Reel	Blush application on glossy skin base
P08_S1	P08	Reel	Night cream jar with routine framing
P09_S1	P09	Reel	Black cherry blush/lips multi-use demonstration

Appendix C: Interview Guide

<https://smgonthebeat.github.io/participant-guide/>

Appendix D: Ethical Review Form

Description and justification of proposed project:

In this section insert a short description of your proposed project. Explain why the project requires human participation.

This research project explores how and to what extent Gen-Z consumers in London negotiate authenticity in the context of coming across sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram. Theoretically, this study addresses these questions through semi-structured interviews with visual elicitation method (scroll-back task), and empirically, it maps out the nuances of negotiating authenticity along the continuum between aspirational desire, commercial scepticism and moral judgement, in young consumers' encounters with influencer marketing.

The research requires human participation because it is an investigation into the subjective interpretive practice of 'making sense' of social media content. The concept of authenticity is socially constructed, and the elicitation of what this means to consumers is not the business of content analysis or other passive research methods, but rather requires direct access to participants' thoughts, emotions, and interpretive reasoning processes. The study is based on an interpretivist epistemology which holds that reality is subjective and needs to be explained through participants' own accounts (Stokes, 2013). The negotiation of authenticity in social media is best elicited and accounted for by the researcher using qualitative interviews, with all their potential to map the nuances, the contradictions and the context of the participants' lived experience.

Ethical issues:

In this section discuss the ethical considerations of your project, addressing the following (and any other relevant) areas.

Explain how you selected participants

Explain steps you took to ensure that your research was conducted with free and informed consent

Explain steps you took to ensure that you protect anonymity and confidentiality during and after the research process

Explain how you make participants aware of their rights when taking part in your project.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The population of interest is Generation Z consumers (ages 18-27) who live in London and follow beauty accounts on Instagram. Eligibility criteria for participation in the study include: (1) using Instagram multiple times per week; (2) following beauty accounts; and (3) having been exposed to sponsored luxury beauty content on the platform within the last month. Participants will be recruited through snowballing and personal networks, that is, asking people the researcher knows to participate in the study and, if not eligible, to share the study invitation with eligible people they know.

Discuss steps undertaken to ensure free and informed consent:

Before participating in the study, all potential participants were given a Participant Information Sheet which described the purpose of the study, the procedure and participants' rights. Potential participants were given enough time to read the Participant Information Sheet and ask any questions before they consented to participate. All participants provided written informed consent by signing a Consent Form prior to the interview starting. The consent process ensures participants are aware that participation is voluntary and they may withdraw at any time, for any reason, without having to provide an explanation and without any negative consequences.

Explain steps undertaken to protect anonymity and confidentiality during and following on from the research process:

To maintain anonymity, all participants will be given alphanumeric codes (e.g., P01, P02) to substitute for their real names in the transcripts and final report. Potentially identifying information (i.e., names of places, workplaces or friends mentioned in the interviews) will be removed or anonymised in the transcripts. Audio recordings will be stored on password-protected devices and deleted once transcription has been completed and transcripts are uploaded. Transcripts (stored in anonymised format) will be stored securely and only be accessible by the researcher. Screenshots sent by participants as part of the scroll-back task will not be used in the dissertation beyond analysis for the visual content, so as to not reveal the identity of the participants and influencers.

Describe how you communicate to potential participants their participants' rights when taking part in your project:

Participants are reminded of their rights by the Participant Information Sheet and at the start of each interview, they are told they have the right to: (1) withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason and without providing an explanation, (2) to not answer any questions they do not wish to answer, (3) to request that the researcher remove their data from the study up until the point of final anonymisation and (4) to ask questions about the research at any time. The researcher's contact details will be given to participants should they wish to follow up after the interview.

Through the completion of this form you confirm that the proposed project follows the University of the Arts London ethical guidelines as set out in the 'University of the Arts London Code of Practice on Research available at:

https://www.arts.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/43328/UAL-Code-of-Practice-on-Research-Ethics-February-2017.pdf

Only commence with the research after your supervisor has confirmed you can proceed with your research strategy (data collection).

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

I am a undergraduate student conducting a research dissertation for my BA Public Relations at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London.

What is the purpose of this research?

This study is an investigation of authenticity negotiations among Gen Z consumers of sponsored luxury beauty content on Instagram in London. Utilising semi-structured interviews with a visual elicitation task, the researcher will examine how participants manage desire, commercial cynicism, and moral evaluations of sponsored luxury beauty posts by influencers on Instagram. The study will contribute to theoretical knowledge of consumer culture and the practical field of influencer marketing.

How will the study be conducted?

The method of one-to-one semi-structured interview will take place for approximately 45-70 minutes, either in person or through video call. The interview will include:

1. Discussion of personal relationship with beauty and use of Instagram
2. Scroll-back task of using Instagram account to search for examples of sponsored luxury beauty content
3. Screenshot of chosen posts as visual stimuli
4. Discussion of reactions to these posts and how participants know when content is authentic or inauthentic to them

The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed with the participant's consent.

What are the implications or risks of taking part?

Participation is voluntary. There are no major risks in this study. The most you could experience is some inconvenience because of the time you need to provide. You have the right to:

- Withdraw from the study at any time for no reason
- Refuse to answer specific questions that you do not want to answer
- Request to have your data removed from the study until the data anonymisation takes place.

Your well-being is of primary importance.

Use of information

All data gathered during the course of this study will remain confidential. Codes (i.e., P01, P02, etc.) will be used to de-identify the participants and any personal information that is gathered during the course of the study will not be included in the final report. The data will be stored securely and used only for academic purposes (i.e., the research dissertation, conference presentations, journal publications). Audio recordings will be deleted after transcription. The results may be published in academic settings, but your identity will not be revealed in any way.

Should you have any further question about the study, please contact:

Name: Annie

Surname: Ting

LCC email address: y.ting0720231@arts.ac.uk

Mobile number: 07568989049


**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. By signing the consent form,
you agree to participate in this interview with full and informed consent.**

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form Template

Participant Consent Form

Title of project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the aforementioned study;
2. I understand that it is my right to ask questions about the study at any point during the interviewing process;
3. I understand that my participation is on a voluntary basis, and that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason;
4. I agree / ~~do not agree~~ (delete as appropriate) to the interview being audio / ~~video~~ / ~~audio and video~~ (delete as appropriate) recorded;
5. I understand that my name will not appear in the report arising from this study;
6. I agree to being referred to by a pseudonym; and
7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: 

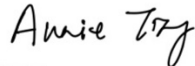
Signature:

Date: 18/01/2026



Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature:




Date: 18/01/2026

Participant Consent Form

Title of project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the aforementioned study;
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Name of Participant: 

Signature: 

Date: 19/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature: 

Date: 19/01/2026

Participant Consent Form

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7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: 

Signature: Vicky Xu

Date: 17/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature: Annie Ting

Date: 17/01/2026

Participant Consent Form

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Name of Participant: 

Signature:

Date: 17/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature: 

Date: 17/01/2026

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7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: ██████████

Signature: *Annon Shao*

Date: 20/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature: *Annie Ting*

Date: 20/01/2026

Participant Consent Form

Title of project:


1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the aforementioned study;
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7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: 

Signature: 

Date: 20/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451


Signature: 

Date: 20/01/2026

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7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: 

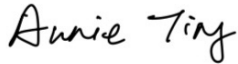
Signature:



Date: 14/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature:




Date: 14/01/2026

Participant Consent Form

Title of project:

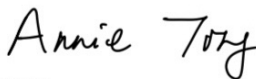
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6. I agree to being referred to by a pseudonym; and
7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

Signature: 

Date: 18/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature: 

Date: 18/01/2026

Participant Consent Form

Title of project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the aforementioned study;
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7. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: 

Signature:

Truck Yang

Date: 14/01/2026

Name of Researcher (and ID): Annie Ting 23045451

Signature:

Annie Ting

Date: 14/01/2026

Appendix G: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Section A: The "Grand Tour" (Context & Identity)

1. **Opening:** "To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?"
 - *Probe:* "Has this changed since you moved to/started living in London?"
2. **The London Lens:** "London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?"
 - *Follow-up:* "In what ways, if any, does the city itself (the commute, the weather, the social scene) influence your own beauty style?"
3. **Platform Usage:** "How are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?"
 - *Probe:* "How often do you come across sponsored content or ads when you are scrolling?"

Section B: The "Scroll-Back" Task (Visual Elicitation)

Instruction to Participant: "I'd like to do a quick activity. Could you please open Instagram on your phone? I'd like you to scroll through your Feed (or your 'Saved' folder) and find a recent post from a luxury beauty brand or an influencer promoting a luxury product that stops you in your tracks.

Take your time. Once you find one, please take a screenshot and send it to me/share your screen, but keep looking at it on your phone."

1. **First Impressions:** "Looking at this image/video together, talk me through what is happening here. What was the specific visual element—the colour, the

lighting, the person—that made your thumb stop scrolling?"

2. **Decoding Disclosure:** "Looking at the caption and the tags, how did you figure out that this was a sponsored post?"
 - *Follow-up:* "Did you notice the [Paid Partnership / #Ad] tag immediately, or did you realize it later? How does knowing it's an ad change the way you view the image?"

Section C: The Deep Dive (The Triadic Framework)

Theme 1: Aspirational Desire (The "Dream" vs. Reality)

1. **Distance & attainability:** "Luxury marketing often sells a 'dream.' When you look at this post, how does the lifestyle shown compare to your daily reality in London?"
 - *Probe:* "Does it feel like a fantasy you enjoy watching, or does it feel disconnected and unattainable?"
2. **Aesthetic Value:** "How 'polished' is this content? Do you generally prefer it when luxury content looks cinematic and perfect, or do you prefer it to look raw and messy? Why?"

Theme 2: Commercial Skepticism (The "Deal" vs. Trust)

1. **Staged vs. Real:** "Influencers often try to make ads look natural. What specific clues in this photo/video make you trust—or distrust—that she actually uses this product?"
 - *Probe:* "Is it the way she holds the product? The background? The caption?"
2. **The "Friend" Test:** "Imagine a close friend posted this exact same photo/video, but without the #Ad tag. How would your interpretation of the product

change?"

Theme 3: Moral Judgement (Values vs. Exploitation)

1. **Representation:** "Gen Z is often spoken about as a generation that cares about inclusivity. When you look at this post, does it represent the diversity you see in London every day?"
 - o *Follow-up:* "If it doesn't, how does that affect your feeling toward the brand's authenticity?"
2. **Ethics & Tone:** "Have you ever unfollowed an influencer or 'cancelled' a beauty brand because a sponsored post felt morally wrong or 'tone-deaf'? Can you describe what happened?"

Section D: Closing & Implications

1. **The Creative Director Scenario:** "If you were hired as a Creative Director for a luxury beauty brand and wanted to genuinely connect with your friends in London, what is the **one thing** you would do differently in a post like this to make it feel 'authentic'?"
2. **Final Thoughts:** "Is there anything else about how you judge beauty ads on Instagram that we haven't touched on?"

Appendix H: Interview Transcripts

Interview Transcript: Participant 03

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Participant: They aren't essential for me, but I would like to do makeup if I go out or hang out with my friends in a club, or if I need to take photos with my friends. I would spend some time putting makeup on. But it isn't essential for me, because for some people, they need to wear makeup when they go out, otherwise they just won't go out.

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved to London?

Participant: Yeah, I think after I came to study in London, I started to wear makeup more often than before compared to my A-level times [in Cardiff].

Interviewer: London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Participant: In London, generally people care more about their outlook and their outfit when going out. I studied in Cardiff, which is in Wales, and people there don't really wear makeup as often as people here. In London, people care more about fashion in general, like in Paris. They care about their outfit, their haircut, their clothes, and their makeup.

Interviewer: In what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Participant: Definitely not the weather, because the weather here is really bad! I think it's the social scene. For example, when I go to Central London or places like Selfridges, people are all dressing up pretty. Even the guys, their outfits are so cool. After seeing this, when I go to places like that, I would dress up as well.

Interviewer: How are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Participant: Even though I came here a long time ago, I don't really use Instagram to contact friends; I use Snapchat or WeChat. **For Instagram, I use it generally for finding inspiration and killing time because there are a lot of influencers posting their lifestyle, their makeup style, and OOTD (Outfit of the Day). There are also a lot of makeup tutorials made by those influencers.**

Interviewer: How often do you come across sponsored content or ads when you are scrolling?

Participant: Two or three years ago there weren't that many ads. **But from probably this year, for every 10 posts, there will be 2 or 3 ads.**

Interviewer: [Scroll-Back Task Instruction] Could you please open Instagram... and find a recent post from a luxury beauty brand or influencer?

Participant: [Scrolling] Okay, this is a post by an influencer called Lucy Jane on Reels. It has 700,000 likes. She has 530,000 followers, so I assume she's really famous.

Interviewer: Looking at this video together, talk me through what is happening here. What were the specific visual elements—like the color, the lighting, the person—that made your thumb stop scrolling?

Participant: **My first impression is it just looks luxury. She is really pretty and looks gorgeous with her blonde hair. It's the general atmosphere... it's golden. It looks shiny. It gives a feeling of luxury.** The video just looks glowing. I can see she's in her bathroom, and everything looks gold, shiny, glory.

Interviewer: Looking at that caption and the tags, how did you figure out that this was a sponsored post?

Participant: **It literally says "Paid Partnership" on the top left corner. If I didn't see this tag, I wouldn't think this video is sponsored by the makeup brand included in this video.**

Interviewer: Did you notice the paid partnership tag immediately, or did you realize it

later? How does knowing it is an advertisement change the way you view the image?

Participant: I didn't notice the tag immediately because I was so attracted by the general atmosphere and the product inside. **But after I saw the sponsorship tag, I started to think: Is this real? Is this an atmosphere she produced on purpose? Or was it actually her lifestyle?**

Interviewer: Luxury marketing often sells a dream. When you look at this post, how does the lifestyle shown compare to your daily reality in London?

Participant: This just looks like a heavy luxury marketing post. Not most people have this luxury lifestyle. **Even though I'm an international student studying here for 10 years, I don't see as many people as I would think having a luxury lifestyle like her. Most people are struggling, working really hard in London to make a living.** They sometimes buy luxury beauty products like Chanel foundation or Dior lipstick, **but it wouldn't look as luxury as this video presents.**

Interviewer: Does this feel like a fantasy you enjoy watching, or does it feel disconnected and unattainable?

Participant: **It does look fantasy to me. I do enjoy watching it, but I wouldn't imagine I would have a life like this. After 15-20 seconds, I felt disconnected because I definitely won't have a life like this.** I can't really afford how she presents it.

Interviewer: How polished is this content? Do you generally prefer it when luxury content looks cinematic and perfect, or do you prefer it to look raw and messy? Why?

Participant: This post is definitely polished. **Everything looks perfect. I would think she made this up on purpose. To me, I would prefer to look at a video like this because it could provide me hope that someday, when I make enough money, I will have the chance to live like her.**

Interviewer: Influencers often try to make ads look natural. What specific clues in this video make you trust—or distrust—that she actually uses this product?

Participant: The part that makes me trust she actually uses it is because she put those luxury beauty products on her face. And I've checked her personal page; those products often appear in her videos. Even if I scroll down two or three pages, I could still see she uses the same products, like La Mer and Christian Dior.

Interviewer: Is it the way she holds the product, the background, or the caption?

Participant: I think it's the general atmosphere. For example, for the perfume, she would hold it and press out the perfume... show her face before makeup and after makeup. And also the music background—she used some classic violin music, and it sounds really classic, really luxury.

Interviewer: Imagine a close friend posted this exact same video but without the advertisement tag. How would your interpretation change?

Participant: If my friend posted a post like this, I would believe more that this is not an advertisement. I might text her asking, "How do you think about this product? Is it actually good or not?" If she said yes, I would definitely trust her more than trusting an influencer on Instagram.

Interviewer: Gen Z is often spoken about as a generation that cares about inclusivity. When you look at this post, does it represent the diversity you see in London every day?

Participant: Since London is a place that has many people from different cultures and backgrounds, the diversity here is huge. I do believe some people in London, for example, people who live in One Thames City (luxury flats) or South Kensington, might have a life like this. But definitely not all people in London have the same life.

Interviewer: Have you ever unfollowed an influencer or cancelled a beauty brand because a sponsored post felt morally wrong or tone-deaf?

Participant: I did unfollow a brand called D&G (Dolce & Gabbana). Because 3 or 4 years ago, when there was a trade war between the US and China, D&G made a lot of negative comments about China. They posted an advertisement regarding some chopsticks... just offensive stuff about China. So I unfollowed that brand and never

bought any product from that brand since then.

Interviewer: If you were hired as a creative director for a luxury beauty brand and wanted to genuinely connect with your friends in London, what is the one thing you would do differently in a post like this to make it feel authentic?

Participant: I would find the balance between luxury and people's general life in

London. **You can't just focus on the wealthy people; it becomes such a niche**

market. For luxury beauty products, they aren't like luxury bags. You can't sell a beauty product for £5,000. So the profit depends on volume. I would construct an

advertisement generally talking about how even if you are a general person, if you work hard, you can achieve enough money to live a lifestyle you want. **Start to buy some**

luxury beauty products, dress yourself up... it's a way to give a general person hope.

Interviewer: Is there anything else about how you judge beauty ads on Instagram that we haven't touched on?

Participant: **I think for some beauty ads, they just promote really bad products. I**

saw that not on Instagram but on TikTok. There are some influencers... I believe

they never use them and they just promote it because of the money. For those

makeup YouTubers (from 10 years ago), they actually knew how to do proper makeup and tried the products. **Nowadays, it's too easy to become an influencer. There are**

so many people who don't really know how to do makeup... they just haven't used the product before they recommend it.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Interview Transcript: Participant 05

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Participant: For me, beauty and makeup are an essential part of my daily routine. **It's my way of showing self-love, and I think it's good for my self-esteem. Doing my beauty and makeup also gives me a sense of accomplishment and confidence at once.** When I get dressed up, the whole day feels special. For example, putting on lipstick only takes a minute, **but that one-minute investment is nothing compared to how much better you feel throughout the day.**

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved to London?

Participant: Actually, beauty and makeup have become even more important to me since I started living in London. **You can see many bold, eye-catching looks on the street here, and people will never be shy about complimenting your style.** I can remember once when I was shopping at Selfridges, a shop assistant came over and told me my makeup was great and asked about the products I used. **It really made my day. It was just an ordinary day, but that compliment made me feel totally unique and different.**

Interviewer: London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Participant: I think people here express themselves in a much more direct and bold way. **I feel like people in London won't care about what others think when they get dressed up. I'll take Brick Lane as an example. I can see lots of Gothic looks there. But back in Asia, people dress a lot more conservatively, and they won't go for such bright and bold colors.**

Interviewer: In what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Participant: The thing that shaped my beauty style the most in London is the weather. The rainy days and low temperatures are basically London's signature. I want to dress in light and cool outfits here like I used to [in China], but I started buying lots of coats, scarves, gloves, and other accessories since I moved to London. It actually gave me tons of new beauty ideas because where I lived in China, it's hot all year round, so I never needed any of these things.

Interviewer: How are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Participant: Right now, I use Instagram to keep up with my friends and also to follow a lot of non-Chinese beauty influencers. Their posts always give me so much inspiration for new beauty styles and let me experience different cultures.

Interviewer: How often do you come across sponsored content or ads when you are scrolling?

Participant: I get a lot of sponsored advertisements on my Instagram when I'm scrolling through posts and stories. But about 60% of them actually will catch my eyes very often. I think it's because Instagram sends me advertisements based on the content I follow and which I gave a like. So I don't mind the advertisements at all.

Interviewer: Could you please open Instagram... and find a recent post from a luxury beauty brand or an influencer promoting a luxury product?

Participant: *[Finding Post]* This is an interactive post from the beauty brand Rhode Skin, and the picture is showing the model, Hailey Bieber, holding their products.

Interviewer: What was the specific visual element—the color, the lighting, the person—that made your thumb stop scrolling?

Participant: In the picture, Hailey Bieber is taking a selfie with Rhode Skin's iconic products. What drew me in first was the perfect color coordination. The products and her outfit match so well. Hailey was wearing a black puffer jacket and holding a black Rhode phone case with their iconic lip gloss attached to the back. The lip gloss is

the only pop of color in the whole shot, and it's so eye-catching to me. That's also the brand's unique design—combining the lip gloss with the phone case. It makes people feel it is very stylish but also super useful. So I absolutely love this picture.

Interviewer: Looking at the caption and the tags, how did you figure out that this was a sponsored post?

Participant: **The caption for this post is just three words: "Rhode on hold." I could tell right away it was just an advertisement because the brand name is being there obviously.** But knowing this is an advertisement doesn't change how I feel about the photo at all. **I still think this picture is gorgeous, and it is totally worthy of a like and all the attention it gets.**

Interviewer: Luxury marketing often sells a dream. When you look at this post, how does the lifestyle shown compare to your daily reality in London?

Participant: **In this post, Hailey Bieber is clearly doing an outfit check before heading out, and that's something I do pretty much every single day living in London.** To be honest, these kinds of pictures make me want to dress up even more and spend more time experimenting with different beauty styles.

Interviewer: How polished is this content? Do you generally prefer it when luxury content looks cinematic and perfect, or do you prefer it to look raw and messy? Why?

Participant: The content doesn't make me feel overly polished. Obviously, it's not a professional studio Photoshop with a fancy camera. **Honestly, I prefer luxury beauty brands to make people feel more casual, like what this picture shows. It makes me feel like the product is something I would actually use in my everyday life, and that makes me feel like I would be more likely to buy it.**

Interviewer: Influencers often try to make ads look natural. What specific clues in this photo make you trust—or distrust—that she actually uses this product?

Participant: **This picture makes me believe that she will actually use the product herself in her daily life.** Firstly, the background makes me feel real because it's shot at

home. Secondly is the caption. As people know, many brands will make their caption very long and fancy. **But a simple caption will make people believe and trust that the product is actually very useful and high quality, so no fancy words needed to sell it**

Interviewer: Imagine a close friend posted this exact same photo but without the ad tag. How would your interpretation change?

Participant: If a close friend posted the exact same photo, **it would make me believe that the product is more "ordinary" (accessible) and useful.** It just confirms what I already thought: this is a practical product worth buying.

Interviewer: Gen Z is often spoken about as a generation that cares about inclusivity. When you look at this post, does it represent the diversity you see in London every day?

Participant: When I saw this post, I felt like it is a reflection of the diversity I see everyday in London. **Because Rhode's product is very famous because of their iconic design... seeing it made me realize how creative you can get by combining two everyday items, like the phone case and the lip gloss.** They turn these two basic things into a trendy new fashion accessory.

Interviewer: Have you ever unfollowed an influencer or cancelled a beauty brand because a sponsored post felt morally wrong or tone-deaf?

Participant: **This question reminds me of something that happened not long before. The American singer Ariana Grande launched her own beauty brand (r.e.m. beauty). I even wanted to buy her products at first... but then it came out the news about her products that her design was plagiarized. Plagiarism is such a disrespect to other people's hard work, and it also means that she didn't put any real thoughts into her design. As soon as I heard this news, I just directly unliked her post and unfollowed the brand right away**

Interviewer: If you were hired as a creative director for a luxury beauty brand and wanted to genuinely connect with your friends in London, what is the one thing you

would do differently in a post like this to make it feel authentic?

Participant: If I were creating this advertisement, I would make it more ordinary. I

would shot the pictures in the places that people went a lot, like a Chain

Restaurant or a busy street in the City Centre, or also like Chinatown. I would also

style the product with other everyday items that people use, like a tablet, laptop or

notebook. I think this would grab people's attention more easily, as they will

recognize the streets and places that they go very often.

Interviewer: Is there anything else about how you judge beauty ads on Instagram that we haven't touched on?

Participant: One more thing I want to mention is the frequency of the advertisement.

Getting the frequency right is so important to the brands. If they show up the

advertisement in an enough frequency, the brand might not be so likely to get

attention from the clients. But if the advertisement shows everywhere, even in the

stories, it just lowers up the tone (quality). It makes the product feel less useful.

Interview Transcript: Participant 08

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Participant: It's definitely routine and self-care. As you get a little bit older, you need to look after your skin to make sure that you maintain it well.

Interviewer: Has this changed since you moved to London?

Participant: I think after I moved to London, the air quality is not as great, and it's a lot more busy. There's a lot of cars and my life's been a bit more stressful. So I've been focusing more on making sure that I keep my skin up to date and moisturized. Been spending a lot more time outside as well, so sunscreen's been a lot more important as well.

Interviewer: London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Participant: I think there's a great mix of styles that you can see in London. Everyone's got their own way of presenting themselves. I think it's a type of cultural mixing pot that you can't find in very many other places.

Interviewer: In what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Participant: Since I take the Underground quite often, you've got to be careful with what you're using. You want to avoid anything too strongly scented. There's no sense ruining the journey for other people while you're there. Other than that, making sure that you're choosing the appropriate skincare for the weather in London. Sometimes it's quite rainy, so preparing yourself for that is important. Making sure that you carry your moisturizer with you in case you get caught out by a shower while you're out.

Interviewer: How are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Participant: Oh, it's largely just killing time. Who uses Instagram nowadays for keeping up with friends? It's just a time-killer, ain't it?

Interviewer: How often do you come across sponsored content or ads when you are scrolling?

Participant: I think every three to four posts? If not more? I think the vast majority of Instagram is essentially sponsored content. Though I haven't paid too much attention anyway.

Interviewer: *[Scroll-Back Task]* ...Find a recent post from a luxury beauty brand or an influencer promoting a luxury product.

Participant: *[Finding Post]* Yeah, this one will do.

Interviewer: What was the specific visual element—the color, the lighting, the person—that made your thumb stop scrolling?

Participant: So the key thing with this one is really... it's the moisturizer that they're promoting. I've used this one before funnily enough actually. I think it's really quite functional. I think it really does embody the type of city lifestyle that you see a lot in London. Both a combination of your urban lifestyle as well as some of the natural beauty that you get in the parks nearby.

Interviewer: Looking at the caption and the tags, how did you figure out that this was a sponsored post?

Participant: It says "Ad" right at the bottom left-hand corner, so it's difficult not to notice. And it's not exactly a post from one of my friends, so it was most likely an ad of some form or another.

Interviewer: Did you notice the ad tag immediately, or did you realize it later? How does knowing it is an advertisement change the way you view the image?

Participant: I think I knew it was an ad straight away, so I don't think it changed my view of it. **I know what the product is; I think it works well. If I hadn't known or used the product before I saw this ad, I'm not sure it would have necessarily pushed me to purchase it.** But certainly I would have looked into it perhaps in a little bit more detail.

Interviewer: Luxury marketing often sells a dream. When you look at this post, how does the lifestyle shown compare to your daily reality in London?

Participant: **Yeah, the daily reality in London is you commute to work, you work, you commute back home and you go to sleep. So it's very different.** But that's okay.

Interviewer: Does it feel like a fantasy you enjoy watching, or does it feel disconnected?

Participant: Call it disconnected. I mean, any montage of multiple images of a person walking around is always going to be a little bit disconnected. But it shows you the highlights of your life and it's not like those highlights aren't there. Anyone can take a walk in the park and enjoy their time. **But to say that that's going to be a day-in-day-out associated with the product... I think I'm a bit skeptical.**

Interviewer: How polished is this content? Do you generally prefer it when luxury content looks cinematic and perfect, or do you prefer it to look raw and messy? Why?

Participant: Depends what you're looking for. I think especially with skincare brands, you're looking more for—at least certainly in my style—something that's more cinematic. **It needs to be polished. It shows time, effort, care into the advertisements, which you hope translates into the product that they use.** I suppose if you're more into subcultures, grunge and the like, then you'd be looking a little bit more raw and messy. **But for the stuff I use, it's got to be... you've got to match the product quality.**

Interviewer: Influencers often try to make ads look natural. What specific clues in this video made you trust—or distrust—that he actually uses this product?

Participant: **I think... my personal opinion is it's very difficult to trust if anyone**

actually uses the products that they push in any form of influencers. I think there's many examples of influencers not using what they are pushing. But the key thing is, for an ad, whether or not they use it I think is a little bit irrelevant.

Interviewer: Imagine a close friend posted this exact same video but without the ad tag. How would your interpretation of the product change?

Participant: First, I'd hope they be getting paid a good amount of money, for one! But the other side of things, if it didn't have the ad tag, then I'd be more likely to believe that it was a good product that they enjoyed using. And I might be more inclined to use it myself.

Interviewer: Gen Z is often spoken about as a generation that cares about inclusivity. When you look at this post, does it represent the diversity you see in London every day?

Participant: No, it's a white guy walking around. It's not exactly diverse in London, is it now? So if it doesn't [show diversity], how does that affect your feeling towards the brand's authenticity? For this, it doesn't. I think skincare... it depends what you're using in skincare. I think there's a lot of bias in skincare anyway towards people of lighter skin shades, especially white skin. Although there's been more of a push to be a bit more inclusive. But in this case, it's a moisturizer. I think moisturizers are universal. So whatever their skin color, I don't mind. But if you're talking more about foundation, shades, etc., then it's really important that you're inclusive in your marketing and in your product development as well.

Interviewer: Have you ever unfollowed an influencer or cancelled a beauty brand because a sponsored post felt morally wrong or tone-deaf?

Participant: Yes, I suppose so. I can't quite remember the ad, but it's technically Apple rather than anything makeup related. But they posted that one about destroying a whole bunch of instruments, and then said something about AI coming in or whatever nonsense it was. I thought that was not exactly the best way of pushing their products. So I stopped buying Apple. I've never been into their

ecosystem in the first place, so there you go.

Interviewer: If you were hired as a creative director for a luxury beauty brand and wanted to genuinely connect with your friends in London, what is the one thing you would do differently in a post like this to make it feel authentic?

Participant: I think having more people rather than just one person pushing it. I think if you can figure out a way to make it feel cohesive but have more real life into it... showing more people involved from a wide variety of diverse backgrounds who are encouraging or theme-ing to enjoy the product. I think it would be a little bit more universal and appeal to have a wider consumer base.

Interview Transcript: Participant 09

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Respondent: For me, beauty and makeup are really important part of my daily routine.

It helps me feel put together and more confident, especially when I'm going out or starting my day. It's not something I see as a chore anymore. It's something I enjoy doing now. Because over time it just became part of how I get ready. And I notice now that **when I don't like... put myself together and I take care of myself—meaning like my beauty and my makeup—I feel slightly less of myself.** I don't feel as confident and I don't feel as put together.

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved in London?

Respondent: Yes. Since moving to London, my relationship with makeup and beauty changed a lot. Um, I think part of the reason of that is because **when you're in London, it feels way less judgmental to be more open with your style... um... compared to other places.** And that's just because you see... like you go on the Tube, you walk on the streets, you see everyone with different styles of makeup, hair, outfits. And you realize **no one actually really cares about the way you dress. So, do whatever you want.** And that helps me be like more confident. It changed the way like I go about my day to day. I experiment with my style, my hair, my makeup. And it... it made me feel more comf... comfortable and confident. It... **instead of copying trends, I do whatever I like and do whatever makes me happy.**

Interviewer: So London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Respondent: I would say, um, London has a very distinctive energy... um... when it comes to speaking about how people present themselves. If you compare to other places, I think **people here are more individualistic and they experiment a lot with**

their style and their makeup. Like... it could be 8 a.m. in the morning on the Tube and you'll see someone with full glam, full makeup, their hair done, stylish outfit. And then sitting right next to them will be the complete opposite: someone with no makeup, their hair isn't done, they don't care about the way they dress. **Which shows that there isn't like a pressure to fit into a certain stereotype or standard. It makes you feel free.** No one really cares about the way you look. No one is gonna judge you. Just do whatever makes you comfortable. It makes people more comfortable, confident, and free to experiment.

Interviewer: So in what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Respondent: Living in London, it has influenced my beauty style a lot compared to when I used to live at back home. Especially cause because **the weather here is so unpredictable.** Like back home, it was always hot, barely any rain, always sunny and bright. So, you know, you dress in more freeing clothing, shorts, tank tops, crop tops. Whereas here, the weather is so unpredictable, so you have to fit into that... um... dress to fit that. You don't know if it's gonna rain, you don't know if it's gonna be windy. You don't know... sometimes the day starts sunny and then it changes. So for me, it has definitely changed the way I dress. Um... I wore clothes I've never thought I would wear before. And it also changed the way I style myself. **I wear stuff that makes me feel more comfortable. Um... I wear... I don't like wearing heavy makeup or doing anything too complicated** because if I'm out and about all day and I don't know how the weather is gonna be like, I want to wear... like... I don't want anything too complicated.

Interviewer: So how are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Respondent: I use Instagram for multiple reasons. Part of it is to stay connected and like text my friends, see what's going on in their lives—my people who live abroad, my family. Um... you don't need to have a constant conversation with them, you could just

see from their stories and posts. Um... another main reason I use Instagram is for inspiration. I follow makeup pages, fashion pages, anything related to beauty. So it allows me to scroll, see ideas, inspo, learn new stuff, see what's trending. Rather than just using it to text my friends or... you know. Also, another reason I use it is to scroll, scroll, scroll endlessly.

Interviewer: So how often do you come across sponsored content or ads when you are scrolling?

Respondent: Um, very often. I think it depends on what you watch. So I think because I look at a lot of fashion influencers and beauty influencers, I get more sponsored makeup posts. Uh... especially when you liked other sponsored posts. So it appears quite frequen... frequently for me. Almost every few posts or every few stories a sponsored ad comes up. And it's... **mean it's impossible to miss** Especially when it's beauty or luxury. I feel like as a girl who's really into that, anything you see comes up. That's new or trending, whether it's an ad or not, you just want to stay and watch and see what is there if you could learn something new.

Interviewer: So I'd like to do a quick activity now. Could you please open Instagram on your phone? ... *(Instructions)* ...

(Respondent finds a post)

Interviewer: Okay, so looking at this video together, talk me through what is happening here. What was the specific visual element—the color, the lighting, the person—that made your thumb stop scrolling?

Respondent: I think it was a mix of everything. So she... because she got really up close and personal, so you could really see the product working... um... and how good it is. It made me stop and scroll to watch because this product... **she's using it in multiple ways as well. She's using it for her lips, for her blush... um... which keeps me very interested** because if you're into makeup, like I am, and you see, okay, someone is using one product for multiple different reason... reasons. You take an interest to that.

You don't really see that often. So because of the mix of everything, it just looked like something I would be very inter... interested in. **The way the product was placed, the background, everything felt balanced.** And it was also really quick. And I have a really bad attention span. So I like to watch quick videos, which I think works really well. No one really wants to sit around and watch a 10-minute video when you could see what it does in a few seconds.

Interviewer: So looking at the caption and the tags, how did you figure out that this was a sponsored post?

Respondent: The only reason I realized it was a sponsored post was because of the caption and the tags. In the video, she didn't say much. Um... on the caption on the video, she didn't put that it was an ad. **So you would never really be able to tell sometimes that it is an ad.** Um... until you go look at the caption for more details and they put it like hashtag ad or sponsored in the caption. Um... you most of the times I usually don't notice because they don't usually say it in the video. Unless you go look for it. **I feel now they try to keep it very lowkey and make it seem like they're really interested in using the product or they actually use it. Um... I feel like it's really hard to tell now if it's an ad or not. You have to really look into the post.**

Interviewer: So how does knowing it's an ad change the way you view the image?

Respondent: When I know it's an ad, it makes me **trust the person promoting it less and their opinion. It makes me more critical. Because... I mean, they're getting paid for it. They're not being genuine. It's not something they've said they genuinely used before. So you can't really trust their opinion.** Now people will say anything once they get the money for it. Um... even if the video looks like aesthetic or the visuals in the video are pleasing, anything like that. It doesn't really matter anymore because **if you want to buy this product, you can't even trust this person's review because they're not saying it because they genuinely mean it. They're saying it because it's their job to.**

Interviewer: So luxury marketing often sells a dream. When you look at this post, how

does the lifestyle show compare to your daily reality in London?

Respondent: I think for me... um... I don... I don't think it represents actual day-to-day life in London. At least my reality. **What you see on social media is all meant to be relatable, but it's not actually real or relatable. They only cut the good parts and put good stuff together. Make it seem like everything is flawless, calm...** they're doing it so effortlessly... effortlessly perfect. **But it's not. Because everything is planned. They find the perfect lighting. They take the time to record what they're doing.** They plan what they're gonna do. Whereas on your everyday day-to-day basis, you don't do that. Things happen and you can't predict it. So I don't think it's relatable because it's not everyone's actual day-to-day life.

Interviewer: Does it feel like a fantasy you enjoy watching or does it feel disconnect and unattainable?

Respondent: I enjoy watching it. Because... it's not something... even though I know it's not realistic, it's still enjoyable to watch. **I mean, the videos are aesthetically pleasing. It's the type... if it's something like I'm interested in—luxury, beauty, fashion, anything like that—I do sit down and watch it.** I appreciate the videos, but **I don't look at it and think, oh like this is something I want to achieve in life because I know it's not real.** Um... yeah.

Interviewer: So how polished is this content? Do you generally prefer it when luxury contexts look cinematic and perfect, or do you prefer it to look raw and messy? Why?

Respondent: I prefer when it's a mix of both. I mean, **take your time and put the content together and make it look good, but don't force it and make it fake.** Record your everyday day-to-day life real and raw, but of course **you could edit clips properly, make the content look well. You could record your day-to-day basis with well... perfect lighting and your hair and makeup and everything looking perfect.** But what you're doing should actually be real. So it's more relatable rather than a fantasy.

Interviewer: Influencer often try to make ads look natural. What specific clues in this video made you trust or distrust that she actually uses this product?

Respondent: For me, I think it's the way they use the product. So if they're promoting... um... like this product in the video I watched, it was used for... um... lip gloss and blush and multiple reasons. So she knows what she's doing. You could tell she knows what she's doing. Um... so I trust that part. That she knows how to use the product, and she knows how to make it look good, how to apply it. But because the footage is cut and edited, **you don't know what she did in between those cuts. If she blended it with something else. If she fixed the product. So it's very 50/50 for me.** Like I trust that she knows how to use it, but **I can't trust that the results she's... um... is accurate and correct as to what is actually going on.**

Interviewer: So imagine a close friend posted this exact same video, but without the ad tag. How would your interpretation of the product change?

Respondent: If a close friend of mine posted that video, my view and interpretation would change completely. Especially if it's not an ad. **No one really promotes products just because... and lies about it if they're not getting paid. Especially if it's a close friend, I would take it like they're giving a good recommendation, it's genuine.** Um... which goes to show like how influencers could have like sort of a disconnect with the real world. Cause **you don't know these people personally. You don't know if what they're saying is real and true.** Whereas if your friend was to suggest something to you, you know they're doing it out... out of being genuine. And it's actually a good product and good recommendation, not just because they have to do it.

Interviewer: So Gen Z is often spoken about as a generation that cares about inclusivity. When you look at this post, does it represent the diversity you see in London every day?

Respondent: Um... not really. Uh... I don't think you should like base off posts... I don't think you should look for inclusivity and diversity. Um... especially if it's like a

promotional post or like an ad. **I don't think that's very reliable. Like I said, these people aren't exactly being genuine. I don't think they are. They're getting paid to say these things.** You can't rely off social media to see such things. You need to see it on an everyday basis, day-to-day basis.

Interviewer: So have you ever unfollowed an influencer or cancelled a beauty brand because a sponsored post felt morally wrong or tone deaf? Can you describe what happened?

Respondent: I have before. Um... **when they make very questionable comments, especially when it comes to diversity or it just seems tone deaf.** Uh... you know, when influencers are being called out for something that they said or did that was wrong, and instead of addressing the situation or apologizing, they make tone deaf posts for it. You know, like if someone called them out and said, "You did this to me while I was struggling," **instead of addressing the situation, if they make shady remarks and act like they're better and... you know... it's nothing... it's not that serious. Stuff like that makes me second guess them.** Um... only if someone or a brand seems out of touch or it seems like what they're doing is morally wrong and **you could tell the undertone of what they were promoting or saying is... you know... problematic.** Then yes, it makes them... it makes it very hard to support them and I don't want to be interested in that.

Interviewer: If you were hired as a creative director for a luxury beauty brand and wanted to genuinely connect with your friends in London, what is the one thing you would do differently in a post like this to make it feel authentic?

Respondent: Depending on what I would be hire... hired on to promote or to do. Um... I would use... to promote it or make a video on it, **I would relate it to my everyday life. I wouldn't just sit and say like good things about it. I would show me actually using the product or going to different places with the product or what I'm doing and use it in my day-to-day life.** In my real routine, in my everyday setting. Not removing the fact that it's a luxury item or a luxury product, but **showing just because it's luxury**

doesn't mean it has to be fake, I guess. Um... I want to make it seem real. Like this is something I really enjoy and something I actually do. **Something that shows that other people could relate to me, other people would enjoy... who enjoy doing the same thing as me would like it. I want to make it realistic.**

Interviewer: So is there anything else about how you judge beauty ads on Instagram that we haven't touched on?

Respondent: Um, I like when ads feel very transparent, inclusive. Uh... **I like when they do show diversity, but it shows that they're doing it out of being genuine, not just because they have to.** When they're inclusive of different communities. Um... when they show that... okay if they say they support mental health or they support this... **they show and prove that they actually do support it and they're not just saying it to have a good look or good reputation.** Things like that actually makes me interested in brands, especially when they stand for a good cause. Or I know they partake in like charities or big on mental health or anything like that. I like when it's, like I said, it shows like there's a reality behind it. It's real. It's authentic. It's not fake and planned. That's... that's it.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you.

Interview Transcript: Participant 01

Full Transcript is available on demand/if required

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it like a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Respondent: Well, I think for me is like a routine. *(Laughs, restarts)* Wait... can I say again? *(Laughs)* Um, well, cause um, I'm a girl, so I... um... so makeup for me is a routine. Because when I hang out with friends, I need makeup and I need, you know, take photos. So, yeah, it's a routine for me.

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved in London?

Respondent: No, I don't think.

Interviewer: So London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Respondent: Um, well, I think like, um, if compared to the Chinese mainland, I think **the people in London is more... like more energetic, and people wear like more special than the people living in the Chinese mainland.**

Interviewer: So in what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Respondent: Um... maybe is the city itself.

Interviewer: So how do you think the city influence your own beauty style?

Respondent: Like, um, cause in London, like many people are energetic and they show off like different ways. So **it's kind of like encourage us to try something like... special.** Or... the people will become like **more brave to try something they didn't try before.**

Interviewer: Okay, so how are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping

Interview Transcript: Participant 02

Full Transcript is available on demand/if required

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Respondent: Well, it's more like a way how I show this thing important or not. It's more like, **I only wearing makeup when I hang out with my important friends or going to some exhibition or important events.**

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved in London?

Respondent: No, like, I just do this since when I was young.

Interviewer: So London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Respondent: Uh, I feels like **London is... they can inclusive every style here. Like you can seeing different makeup here or different fashion style here. But if you compare to my home city, if you wearing like different style to the common people, others people will judging you.**

Interviewer: In what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Respondent: Um, I more feels like about the ages. Cause when you... when you become a teenager, you want to be more mature, then your makeup style will be like in more mature way. But **when you grow up and you turn like 25 or 30, and you want to looking younger, then your makeup style will turn to be like more cute way.**

Interviewer: How are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Respondent: Well, only use Instagram to contact with my friends and sharing some my life. And because **I'm an art student, I got some art news from Instagram.**

Interview Transcript: Participant 04

Full Transcript is available on demand/if required

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Participant: I'm going to describe it as a mix between self-care and something else. In terms of self-care, the things I mainly use are just skincare products; I don't really use perfume and makeup stuff that much. But in terms of "something else," I would mainly use beauty and makeup products as a gift, for example, to my parents.

Interviewer: Has this changed since you moved to London?

Participant: Yes and no. In terms of "yes," that aspect would be for self-care. Before moving to London, I didn't pay much attention to skincare or self-care. **After I moved to London, I started to pick up skincare items.** In terms of "no," the aspect of treating beauty products as a gift hasn't changed.

Interviewer: London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Participant: **From my point of view, London is more diversified than the place where I came from. People here could diversify in a lot of ways. Some people are more posh. If you want to take good care of yourself or create your own style of fashion, you can definitely do that, and it's encouraged to do so here as an atmosphere.**

Interviewer: In what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Participant: **As I previously mentioned, I think this city has an atmosphere to encourage you to create your own beauty style or fashion style. So it definitely encouraged me to try different styles of clothing or try to do some [skin] makeup.**

Interview Transcript: Participant 06

Full Transcript is available on demand/if required

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it like a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Respondent: Um, I think my relationship with perfume is quite personal. Before, I don't think um too much about it. I just... I just wore perfume because it was a part of my routine. But now I always use it. It really depends on my mood and like what kind of day I'm having.

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved in London?

Respondent: Um, yes. Um, since moving to London, I'm starting caring more about perfume. **London... um London is a busy city and people don't really talk to strangers. So perfume become a quiet way to express myself.**

Interviewer: So London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Respondent: Mm... living in London definitely changed how I choose perfume. Like people here usually pre... um... prefer some... um... some suitable things. **Like the strong perfumes can feel un... uncomfortable, especially on the tube or some somewhere. Because of that, I often choose some... some light one.**

Interviewer: Okay, so in what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Respondent: Mm, the weather also matters a lot. In winter I like some warmer one because they feel comforting. In summer I... I... I would like some fresher one.

Interviewer: So how are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Respondent: Um, I use Instagram mainly to relax and get inspiration. I follow friends,

Interview Transcript: Participant 07

Full Transcript is available on demand/if required

Interviewer: To start broadly, how would you describe your personal relationship with beauty and makeup at this stage in your life? Is it a hobby, a routine, a form of self-care, or something else?

Participant: It's definitely a hobby. I started makeup when I was in high school, and now even if I'm working now, I still put my makeup on every day.

Interviewer: London is often described as having a unique energy. How would you describe the way people present themselves here compared to other places?

Participant: Well, I lived in Beijing before, but now moving to London, I think people in London are more likely to express themselves through their outfit and their makeup.

Interviewer: So has this changed since you moved to London?

Participant: **No... I think London provides me a more environment to be myself. Like, I have more freedom here to put my makeup.**

Interviewer: In what ways, if any, does the city itself—the commute, the weather, the social scene—influence your own beauty style?

Participant: Yeah, I think so. I mean, **when I was in London in last fall, I used [the color] apricot often. Since the leaves are yellow and orange, I think it will influence my makeup styles.**

Interviewer: How are you currently using Instagram? Is it mostly for keeping up with friends, finding inspiration, or just killing time?

Participant: I don't use social media that much, and I use Instagram mostly for following my friends.

Interviewer: How often do you come across sponsored content or ads when you are scrolling?

Appendix I: Visual Stimuli (Screenshots)

The following figures present the anonymised screenshots selected by participants during the scroll-back task. Usernames, profile pictures, and identifying comments have been cropped or obscured. These visual stimuli are referenced in Chapter 4 using their Stimulus IDs (e.g., P03_S1).

Figure I1: P01_S1 — Luxury Swatch Reel Frame

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Close-up product swatch featuring glitter and shimmer, with a blurred background showing luxury PR packaging. Dominant cues include tactile texture, sensory immediacy, and luxury abundance.

Triadic Analysis: Activates aspirational desire through proof-of-texture; can also trigger scepticism due to staged PR setting.

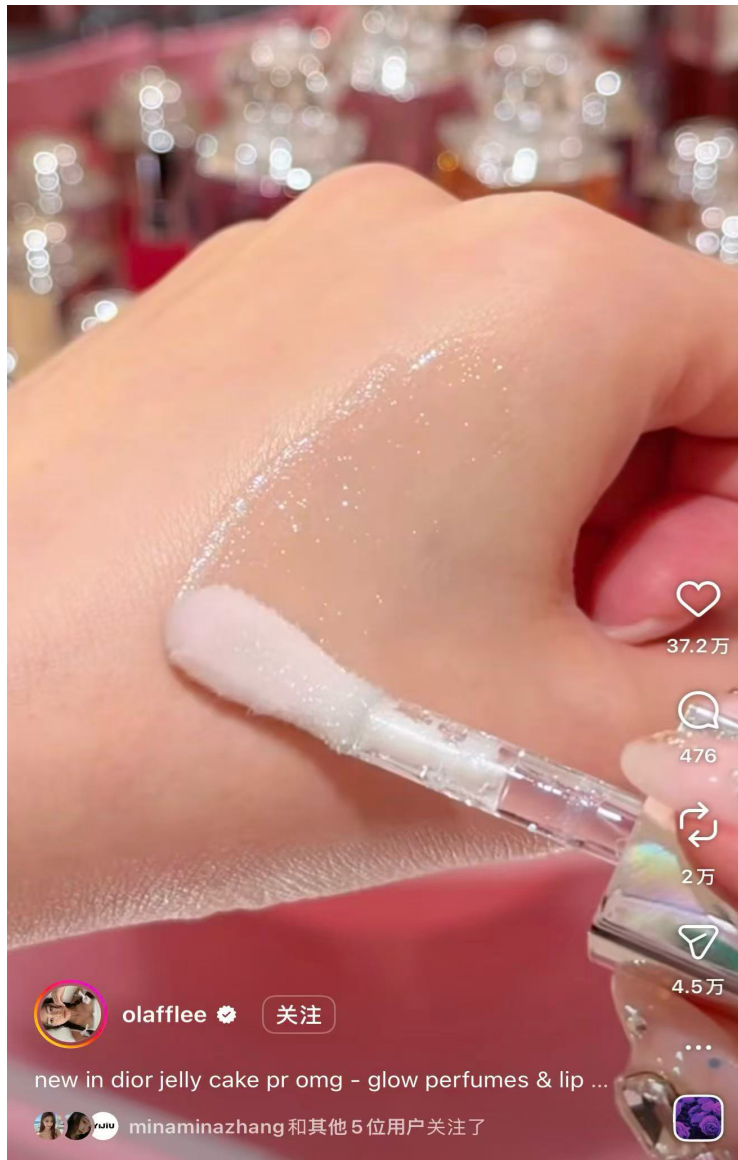


Figure E2: P02_S1 — Perfume with Ingredient Overlay

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Handheld perfume bottle with text overlay listing aromatic notes (juniper berry, tarragon). Creates multi-sensory suggestion through ingredient language.

Triadic Analysis: Activates desire through taste sophistication signalling; text overlays can function as persuasion props.



Figure E3: P03_S1 — Luxury Bathroom Scene

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Cinematic mise-en-scène featuring warm lighting, marble surfaces, candles, and designer objects. Text reframes staying home as aspirational. Tablet displays a face image, emphasising aesthetic performance.

Triadic Analysis: Strong desire activation through fantasy lifestyle; triggers scepticism when too staged or disconnected from London realities.



Figure E4: P04_S1 — Men's LED Mask Routine

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: LED skincare mask covering face with 'MEN' branding visible. Close framing suggests testimonial/results expectation. Setting appears excessively clean and staged.

Triadic Analysis: Activates scepticism through 'too perfect' staging; product covering face creates proof aesthetic but also raises plausibility questions.



Figure E5: P05_S1 — Rhode Brand Mirror Selfie

Type: Post (static image)

Description: Brand-owned content featuring casual mirror selfie style with lip product. Minimal copy ("on hold") suggests scarcity and drop culture.

Triadic Analysis: Brand speaking as brand reduces disguise; participants found this more honest than influencer-mediated ads.



Figure E6: P06_S1 — Cinematic Perfume with Rain Mood

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Rain droplets, leather gloves, and camera create cinematic masculinity and nostalgia. Perfume placed like film prop suggests lifestyle world-building.

Triadic Analysis: Activates desire through mood fantasy; London weather makes the rain aesthetic legible and contextually resonant.



Figure E7: P07_S1 — Blush Application Tutorial

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Brush applying blush on glossy 'glass skin' base. On-screen text indicates routine bundling (blush + lip combo). Technique demonstration functions as proof-of-process.

Triadic Analysis: Activates desire through transformation promise; over-glossy base can trigger scepticism about outcome replicability.

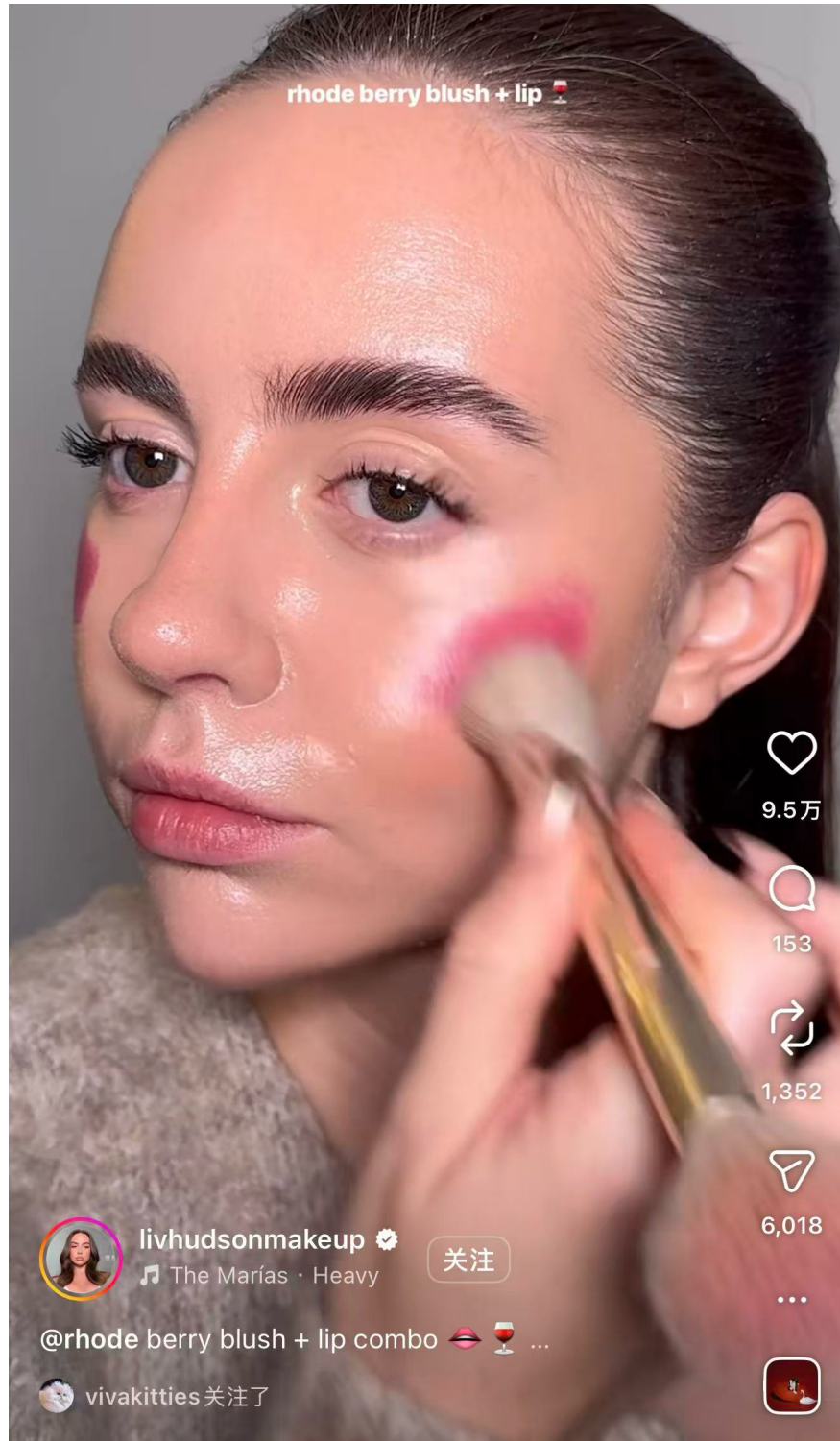


Figure E8: P08_S1 — Night Cream Routine

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Night cream jar held in hand, suggesting ownership and tactile proof. 'Day and night' routine framing emphasises discipline and self-care ideology.

Triadic Analysis: Ownership proof activates moderate desire; routine framing invites scepticism about sustainability of elaborate practices.



Figure E9: P09_S1 — Black Cherry Collection

Type: Reel (still frame)

Description: Heart motifs and 'collection' framing suggest seasonal drop culture. Saturated cherry colour signals playful youth identity. Visible sponsorship indicators.

Triadic Analysis: Activates desire through collectible trend energy; ad tag and campaign aesthetics trigger scepticism and moral evaluation.

