

# EXAMINING EFFECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MEDIATION ROLE OF PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY

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## ABSTRACT:

Social media have gained traction in advertising campaigns for luxury and fashion clothes using influencers, who shape trends of photography. To remain competitive, however, influencers depend on how they convey authenticity, which largely relies on the key visual elements of the photographs they post in social media. The purpose of this study is to explore the visual elements of photography used by social media influencers and to compare the main photography trends in digital media. Specifically, it aims to shed light on how new photography trends such as urban background style and fashion models with large body sizes produce effects on consumers. To accomplish this objective, an online experimental setting was prepared to compare the effect of an urban versus a solid background and a fashion model with a large versus a thin body size on perceived authenticity and purchase intent. The research finds that urban background and large body size of model significantly increase digital engagement. These results are in line with the research hypotheses that allude to the perception of authenticity as the key construct behind the effects on digital engagement. The inquiry also evaluates the interaction effect of the urban background and large body size of the model on perceived authenticity. In doing so, the present research examines the mediation role of perceived authenticity on the intention to buy. The results contribute to update theory about the influencers' role on digital engagement and photography trends in social media. It also shows that perceived authenticity exerts a mediating role between visual elements on purchase intentions.

## KEY WORDS:

advertising campaigns, authenticity, digital marketing, influencers, social media

## 1 Introduction

Brands focus on producing different advertising that draws attention and causes a desire to acquire a certain lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to luxury clothes, advertising seeks to show fashion, exclusivity and sending

<sup>1</sup> See: SMITH, R. E., CHEN, J., YANG, X.: The Impact of Advertising Creativity on the Hierarchy of Effects. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2008, Vol. 37, No. 4, p. 47-62.

an aspirational message to its target segment.<sup>2</sup> Advertising investments have migrated from traditional media to digital media in an exponential way.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, fashion brands have made from social media a basic resource for the promotion of their products.<sup>4</sup>

“Influencers” are online individuals described as micro-celebrities, addressing a specific market *niche*, by exhibiting their personal lives and capturing the attention of significant audiences (followers) through social media such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *YouTube* or *Twitter*.<sup>5</sup> Due to the huge engagement that influencers generate, many luxury apparel brands have used them to promote their brands.<sup>6</sup> Influencers infer relevance by the number of views, followers, likes and comments.<sup>7</sup> During this process, influencers have drawn attention and accrued social capital through the relationship with their fans and followers; this has turned them into brand ambassadors. Fashion and luxury brands seek to attract consumers by offering organic content with photographs that portray authentic experiences and that are close to their consumers’ everyday lives. However, due to the excessive product and services offers on social media, consumers now tend to focus their attention on advertisements that look more authentic.<sup>8</sup> For example, the use of urban or city landscapes backgrounds to present luxury clothes models are becoming a trend to appeal to digital consumers replacing the traditional solid background in models’ photography.

Likewise, one of the essential patterns for publicists of luxury apparel brands has been to show skinny models or models that have small sizes in their advertisements based on occidental beauty parameters. Tiggemann and Zaccardo ran a study on social media in which the results show that the majority of the women’s images only show one type of body, which is really toned and skinny.<sup>9</sup> According to these aspirational figures, they found many women worried about having the ideal skinny body that is shown on social media such as *Facebook*. However, this pattern has been changing and has now incorporated models with bigger sizes in their advertising campaigns with the purpose of reflecting ‘real’ women features, establishing a connection with a broader area of the population, and promoting ethical actions by brands.<sup>10</sup> Thus, through the inclusion of urban landscapes and influencers with medium and large sizes for advertising photographs on social media, brands seek to improve identification with potential consumers, and at the same time, to offer a natural, genuine, and authentic environment. Therefore, before the modification of the promotion patterns of brands on social media and the consumers’ preferences on the election of advertising contents,<sup>11</sup> it may seem that the traditional scheme of skinny models and the assembled solid background of studios is beginning to lose relevance.

Nevertheless, after multiple searches, by the date of the writing of this study, the authors are not aware of the existence of empirical studies of the effect of the visual elements previously described. Thus, this study was created with the purpose of analysing in which way the perception of luxury clothes advertising has evolved for consumers, and to establish parameters to offer a better valuable proposal on social media.<sup>12</sup> This research

intends to empirically analyse the effect of the physical complexion of the model that promotes luxury clothes and the background used in the perception of authenticity of fashion advertising photographs. Also, so that the brands have a better idea of the type of influencer they can choose to represent their brand and to suggest a background that is considered more authentic.

Since the consumer’s attention is very limited in the digital environment,<sup>13</sup> the perception of authenticity is key to succeed in digital campaigns with photographs that strengthen the intention to buy the product.<sup>14</sup> The understanding of the perception of authenticity becomes crucial to understand the intention to buy the product. In social media, where the product cannot be touched or smelled and does not have textures, the focus lies on the things that can be visually perceived. Being able to predict the relationship between visual elements, the perception of the advertisement’s authenticity, and the intention to buy the product is highly important because this helps obtain better results from digital campaigns.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the present research proposes research hypotheses based on the literature review of the main visual elements identified and evaluates their interaction effect on perceived authenticity.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### *Advertising Photography*

For years, ‘traditional’ advertising has centred on performing visual and creative designs to promote products. When advertising wants to be done for products and/or services that show a certain lifestyle, such as luxury cars, luxury accessories, gastronomy, and luxury clothes, among others, photography acts as an ally; especially when people interact with such articles. The demonstration of that moment through photograph is highly important to lure potential customers to enjoy an aspirational lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> The style of this type of photograph widely varies among industries: for example, photographs that promote food will seek to emphasise its health benefits by showing the products in a colourful and organised way, while the automotive industry will emphasise the benefits that reflect a status as its essential purpose. Even when there are different styles for each industry, the efforts of advertising photography are centred on drawing the consumer’s attention by presenting the products in an attractive way.<sup>17</sup>

In the fashion industry, the styling of advertising photography has gone from being a formal, static, or rigid style to a style in which casualness and naturalness are more relevant. Everything is more informal in the photography scene: make-up, poses and even models, who are no longer professional models, but rather influencers that were chosen based on their popularity on social media. These advertising trends create open and credible contents, which attract consumers and invite them to put more attention on social media platforms, so they can choose new fashion styles, brands and create more connectivity between the consumer and the brand.<sup>18</sup> Nowadays, advertising is not only showing a product, but also influencers acting in everyday scenes where the consumer sees themselves reflected and feels so identified that they have a bigger connection to the brand.<sup>19</sup>

2 See: PHAN, M., THOMAS, R., HEINE, K.: Social Media and Luxury Brand Management: The Case of Burberry. In *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 213-222.

3 See: PÉREZ CURIEL, C., SANZ-MARCOS, P.: Estrategia de marca, influencers y nuevos públicos en la comunicación de moda y lujo. Tendencia Gucci en Instagram. In *Prisma Social: Revista de investigación social*, 2019, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 1-24.

4 See, for example: CHOI, A.: Fashion Photography on Social Media: Insights from Hong Kong Fashion Image Producers. In *International Journal of Management and Applied Research*, 2016, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 130-144.

5 See: CHAE, J.: Explaining Females Envy toward Social Media Influencers. In *Media Psychology*, 2018, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 246-262.

6 See: ETTER, M. et al.: Measuring Organizational Legitimacy in Social Media: Assessing Citizens’ Judgments with Sentiment Analysis. In *Business and Society*, 2018, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 60-97.

7 For more information, see: OKAZAKI, S., RUBIO, N., CAMPO, S.: Do Online Gossipers Promote Brands? In *Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking*, 2013, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 100-107.

8 See: BROWN, S., KOZINETS, R. V., SHERRY, J. F.: Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning. In *Journal of Marketing*, 2003, Vol. 67, No. 3, p. 19-33.

9 TIGGEMANN, M., ZACCARDO, M.: Exercise to Be Fit, Not Skinny: The Effect of Fitspiration Imagery on Women’s Body Image. In *Body Image*, 2015, Vol. 15, No. 9, p. 61-67.

10 See: ANDERSEN, K., PAAS, L. J.: Extremely Thin Models in Print Ads: The Dark Sides. In *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 2012, Vol. 20, No. 6, p. 447-464.

11 For more information, see: BUG, P., HAUSSMANN, N.: Using Social Media for Luxury Fashion Management. In CHOI, T. M., SHEN, B. (eds.): *Luxury Fashion Retail Management*. Singapore: Springer, 2017, p. 121-144.

12 See: WU, M. S. S. et al.: Luxury Fashion Brands: Factors Influencing Young Female Consumers Luxury Fashion Purchasing in Taiwan. In *Qualitative Market Research*, 2015, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 298-319.

13 See, for example: CHI, H. H.: Interactive Digital Advertising vs. Virtual Brand Community: Exploratory Study of User Motivation and Social Media Marketing Responses in Taiwan. In *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2011, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 44-61.

14 See: YOUN, H., KIM, J. H.: Effects of Ingredients, Names, and Stories about Food Origins on Perceived Authenticity and Purchase Intentions. In *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 2017, Vol. 63, No. 5, p. 11-21.

15 See: MOULARD, J., BABIN, B. J., GRIFFIN, M.: How Aspects of a Wine’s Place Affect Consumers’ Authenticity Perceptions and Purchase Intentions: The Role of Country of Origin and Technical Terroir. In *International Journal of Wine Business Research*, 2015, Vol. 27, No. 1, p. 61-78.

16 For more information, see: WARD, M. K., DAHL, D. W.: Should the Devil Sell Prada? Retail Rejection Increases Aspiring Consumers Desire for the Brand. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2014, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 590-609.

17 See: PÉREZ-LATRE, F. J., PORTILLA-SÁNCHEZ, B. C.: Social Networks, Media and Audiences: A Literature Review. In *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 2011, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 63-74.

18 For example, see: DUFFY, B. E.: The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labor in the Digital Culture Industries. In *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2016, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 441-457.

19 SCHROEDER, J.: Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination InVisible Culture. In *Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, 2013, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 1-5.

## Perception of Authenticity

Due to the huge amount of advertising messages that circulate around communication media, especially the ones that have not been requested or looked for, consumers avoid receiving this kind of information or they delete it as soon as they receive it. Some studies have shown that online consumers are more likely to rely on information generated by other consumers than those generated directly by brand ads. Given the scepticism caused by this oversupply, the contemporary consumer needs bases that are more solid or aspects that are substantially different from what is offered, which is why there is a greater focus on advertisements and publicity that are perceived as authentic.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of “authenticity” originally refers to reality or truth; just like innocence, honesty or originality.<sup>21</sup> “Authenticity” is defined and experienced by consumers, which in turn is influenced by the consumer’s own interests and their knowledge of a specific subject. In the case of an advertisement, authenticity could be considered as the degree to which consumers perceive the advertisement as truthful and real. Some authors state that the authenticity of the advertisement includes the singularity, refinement, and originality of the ad.<sup>22</sup> Other authors consider authenticity as the interpretation of a product’s reputation regarding its quality and the level of trust from consumers, which evolves into commercial value.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, authenticity is also approached from a direct evaluation of the brands, which tend to focus on the credibility of the spokesperson that appears in the ad or of the company that sponsored it.<sup>24</sup> Authenticity should be viewed as an opportunity to maintain a trustworthy relationship between brands and consumers.<sup>25</sup>

On social media, an inherent part of authenticity is also the current scepticism towards advertising, especially among young people who have more refined search tools from what can be called “authentic publicity”.<sup>26</sup> This kind of publicity (or the lack of it) stands out, among other things, from the digital manipulation of visual elements contained in each audio-visual product. Online consumers perceive other consumers’ generated content as more genuine than content from advertisers.

There are studies that have verified that photography manipulation is sometimes not seen as real and authentic.<sup>27</sup> For example, in the study made by Cornelis and Peter,<sup>28</sup> it was noticed that participants evaluated advertisements in which models appeared with no digital touch-ups as more authentic and trustworthy, as opposed to those advertisements in which the touch-ups were obvious. On the other hand, it is important to consider that according to studies performed by Christell and Dull,<sup>29</sup> the average female size in the United States is large/medium-size, not smaller, as could have been thought. More than 50% of American women are a size 14 or bigger, while designers today show models that are a size 10 or 12.<sup>30</sup> Based on the above, it is important to prove the authenticity of the ad being presented.

20 For more information, see: GOLDENBERG, C. J., MAZURSKY, D.: Advertising Creativity: Balancing Surprise and Regularity. In TELLIS, G. J., AMBLER, T. (eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Advertising*. London: SAGE Publications, 2007, p. 283-299.

21 See: FINE, G. A.: Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art. In *Theory and Society*, 2003, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 153-180.

22 See: BEVERLAND, M. B., LINDGREEN, A., VINK, M. W.: Projecting Authenticity through Advertising: Consumer Judgments of Advertisers Claims. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2008, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 5-16.

23 See: VAN DEN BOSCH, A. L. M., DE JONG, M. D. T., ELYING, W. J. L.: How Corporate Visual Identity Supports Reputation. In *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 2005, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 108-116.

24 Compare to: KATES, S. M.: The Dynamics of Brand Legitimacy: An Interpretive Study in the Gay Men’s Community. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2004, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 463; TILL, B. D., SHIMP, T. A.: Endorsers in Advertising: The Case of Negative Celebrity Information. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2000, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 72.

25 PETERSON, R. A.: In Search of Authenticity. In *Journal of Management Studies*, 2005, Vol. 42, No. 5, p. 1083-1098.

26 ESPARZA, L., DÁVILA, D.: *A New Generation of Service Customers: The Use of Brand Experience to Seduce Them, but What about Scepticism?* Paper presented at International Symposium on Service excellence in Management. Karlstad, presented on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

27 See: OZANNE, J., MOSCATO, E., KÜNKEL, D.: Transformative Photography Evaluation and Best Practices for Eliciting Social and Policy Changes. In *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 2013, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 45-65.

28 See, for example: CORNELIS, E., PETER, P.: The Real Campaign: The Role of Authenticity in the Effectiveness of Advertising Disclaimers in Digitally Enhanced Images. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2017, Vol. 77, No. 8, p. 102-112.

29 See: CHRISTEL, D. A., DUNN, S. C.: Average American Women’s Clothing Size: Comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1988 – 2010) to ASTM International Misses and Women’s Plus Size Clothing. In *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 2017, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 129-136.

30 KINTZIOU, E. et al.: Validity of Self-Reported Body Mass, Height, and Body Mass Index in Female Students: The Role of Physical Activity Level, Menstrual Cycle Phase, and Time of Day. In *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2019, Vol. 16, No. 7, p. 1-7.

## Visual Elements in Advertising Photographs: The Urban Background

The photograph’s background sets the environment in which a consumer uses a product.<sup>31</sup> These backgrounds are key to draw consumer’s attention in luxury fashion photographs. For example, traditional luxury advertisements used to show supermodels on a solid background made in a professional studio because this combination transmitted elegance and formality.<sup>32</sup> However, during recent years, this trend has been modified and publicists have chosen to offer a more casual style in their ads. For the millennial generation, which is the most active on social media, the fresh backgrounds that reflect experiences, are more relevant as well as scenes where people can be seen enjoying and living everyday life.<sup>33</sup>

As a result, the proliferation of using urban spaces has become a trend in publicity. Some researchers have validated the great impact of capturing the city life through photography.<sup>34</sup> Even so-called influencers, for example, show most of their photographs in casual scenes and natural environments, sometimes with the purpose of promoting their products.<sup>35</sup> As for the luxury fashion products area, the use of ads using city landscapes that show iconic and historic monuments, distinctive places of a city or just street views or random construction sites are the most frequent styles. That is, photography uses metropolis streets or avenues as a background, trying to achieve artistic photographs that capture the real urban lifestyle of the people and the complex dynamic of the city life.<sup>36</sup>

Fashion brands use social media to compete against other established brands with materials that characterise special pages as *Face Hunter* and *Sartorialist*, advertising campaigns from brands such as Gap, Burberry and DKNY Jeans, highlight everyday scenes on the streets of New York. Photographs of urban environments increase the sense of belonging, the identification with the product, as well as the credibility and relatability to the brand as some authors suggest.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** An advertisement showing a photograph with an urban background generates a higher perception of authenticity in the advertisement than an advertisement presented on a solid background.

## Visual Elements of Advertising Photographs: The Large Body Size of the Model

Images in the luxury fashion industry have the fundamental target of representing lifestyles that reflect beauty, prestige, and social status, using aspirational models for potential consumers. This way, one of the most used strategies of advertisers is the models’ physical complexion, specially using skinny complexions as an attention factor.<sup>38</sup> Over the last few decades, the traditional publicity of luxury fashion has used skinny models or models with small sizes according to the beauty patterns from Occident.<sup>39</sup> However, the emergence of social changes and campaigns against anorexia and bulimia during the 1990s caused changes to the beauty

31 See: KUMAR, A.: Interference Effects of Contextual Cues in Advertisements on Memory for Ad Content. In *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2000, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 155-166.

32 See: PFEIFFER, M., ZINNBAUER, M.: Can Old Media Enhance New Media? How Traditional Advertising Pays Off for an Online Social Network. In *Journal of Advertising Research*, 2010, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 42-49.

33 For more information, see: DITTMAR, H., HOWARD, S.: Professional Hazards? The Impact of Models’ Body Size on Advertising Effectiveness and Women’s Body-Focused Anxiety in Professions That Do and Do Not Emphasize the Cultural Ideal of Thinness. In *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 2004, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 477-497.

34 See: MOORE, G. et al.: The Photo-Survey Research Method: Capturing Life in the City. In *Visual Studies*, 2008, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 50-62.

35 See: BATCHEN, G.: Seeing and Saying: A Response to Incongruous Images. In *History and Theory*, 2009, Vol. 48, No. 4, p. 26-33.

36 See: MORA, G.: *Photo Speak: A Guide to the Ideas, Movements and Techniques of Photography 1939 to the Present*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1998.

37 See also: BRUMBAUGH, A. M., CRIER, S. A.: Insights from a “Failed” Experiment – Directions for Pluralistic, Multiethnic Advertising Research. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2006, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 42.

38 See, for example: DIEDRICHS, P. C., LEE, C.: GI Joe or Average Joe? The Impact of Average-Size and Muscular Male Fashion Models on Men’s and Women’s Body Image and Advertisement Effectiveness. In *Body Image*, 2010, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 218-226.

39 See: HALLIWELL, E., DITTMAR, H.: Does Size Matter? The Impact of Model’s Body Size on Women’s Body-Focused Anxiety and Advertising Effectiveness. In *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2004, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 104-122.

standards of the female body.<sup>40</sup> For example, let us consider the cases of the models Ana Carolina Reston, Hila Elmalich and Isabel Caro, who modelled for brands such as Armani, and who passed away due to their eating disorders, resulting in severe criticism of the brand for promoting such small sizes or extremely thin bodies.

Medium-sized models such as Ashley Graham, Iskra Lawrence and Hunter McGrady lead another model pattern in the luxury fashion world. One of the fundamental reasons for the acceptance of these new standards is that the millennial generation is really worried about health and well-being: young people are aware of the consequences of anorexia, bulimia and other diseases related to the stress experienced by women who always want to have a smaller size and have been witnesses to negative examples and history behind this quest.<sup>41</sup> Other authors state that exposure to advertisements with models that do not wear small sizes causes a certain relief, reducing the anxiety related to a perfect body upon consumers of luxury clothes, and creating a more positive impact on audiences by promoting a more 'realistic' and healthier image which young consumers can relate to.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the following hypothesis foresees the following:

**H2:** An advertisement that shows a photograph with a model with a large body size will be perceived as more authentic than an advertisement that shows a model with a small body size.

Because of the multiplicative effect of combining visual elements in photography, suggesting that there is a positive interaction effect originated by the combination of visual elements such as the background and body size, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

**H3:** An advertisement showing a model with a large body size with an urban background will be regarded as more authentic than an advertisement showing a model with a small body size with a solid background.

### Perceived Authenticity and the Purchase Intentions

The authenticity perceived from advertisements is key to position luxury fashion brands since it constitutes a differentiating factor on the market.<sup>43</sup> There is multiple evidence of the relationship between differentiating strategies and authenticity of advertisements and the positive effect on pricing and sales.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, other perspectives suggest that even the advertisements' authenticity can also have a negative impact on sales volume. For example, when authenticity is related to high price, such a BMW car, and ends up discouraging consumers to buy the product.<sup>45</sup>

While in several industries prices constitute a natural indicator of the position of a product on the market,<sup>46</sup> the luxury fashion industry where products are aspirational, reflect a certain status and set themselves apart; so, the authenticity perceived from the advertisement turns into a necessary step before the intention to buy, even when it doesn't affect sales volume. According to previous predictions, this study assumes that an advertisement will be perceived as more authentic when it shows a large size model with an urban background, and that this perception of authenticity will become more relevant than the perception of price, therefore the intention to buy will become stronger. Thus, the following is predicted:

40 See: GRABE, S., WARD, M. L., HYDE, J. S.: The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies. In *Psychological Bulletin*, 2008, Vol. 134, No. 3, p. 460-476.

41 See: MCGLADREY, M. L.: Becoming Tween Bodies: What Preadolescent Girls in the US Say about Beauty, the "Just-Right Ideal," and the "Disney Girls". In *Journal of Children and Media*, 2014, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 353-370.

42 For more information, see: KIM, A. J., KO, E.: Do Social Media Marketing Activities Enhance Customer Equity? An Empirical Study of Luxury Fashion Brand. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2012, Vol. 65, No. 10, p. 1480-1486.

43 CHEN, J., STALLAERT, J.: An Economic Analysis of Online Advertising Using Behavioral Targeting. In *MIS Quarterly*, 2014, Vol. 38, No. 2, p. 429-447.

44 See: GRAYSON, K., MARTINEC, R.: Consumer Perceptions of Iconicity and Indexicality and Their Influence on Assessments of Authentic Market Offerings. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2004, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 296-312.

45 See: KAPFERER, J. N., LAURENT, G.: Where Do Consumers Think Luxury Begins? A Study of Perceived Minimum Price for 21 Luxury Goods in 7 Countries. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2016, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 332-340.

46 See, for example: STEENKAMP, J. B., VAN HEERDE, H. J., GEYSKENS, I.: What Makes Consumers Willing to Pay a Price Premium for National Brands over Private Labels. In *Journal of Marketing Research*, 2010, Vol. 47, No. 6, p. 1011-1024.

**H4:** The bigger the perception of an advertisement's authenticity, the higher the purchase intentions.

**H5:** The perception of authenticity mediates the combined effect produced by the urban background and the large body size of the model on the purchase intentions.

## 3 Methodology

The study uses an online experiment to test the research hypotheses. Based on a 2x2 experimental design (background type, model's body size type), the method first validates the manipulation of the two independent variables before running the main study testing the hypotheses.

### Manipulation Check

To validate manipulation of the independent variables, a preliminary sample was made with 212 participating women ( $M_{age} = 32, SD = 10$ ). This study used four advertisements with variations of backgrounds and models' sizes in each photograph. Finally, before verifying manipulations, there was verification that the treatment groups were equivalent ( $p > .1$ ) regarding demographic variables of participants such as their education level, age, income level, ethnic origin, etc.

### Photograph's Background

This manipulation consisted of showing a model with an urban background and with a solid background. Based on the literature, we proposed a reliable ( $\alpha = .87$ ) Likert scale with three items to measure the perception of the urban background and verify its manipulation. Participants considered that the photographs had an urban background when they had street elements in the background as opposed to traditional solid backgrounds ( $M_{Street} = 6.84, SD_{Street} = 2.61; M_{Solid} = 4.47, SD_{Solid} = 2.11; t(211) = 6.30, p < .001$ ), confirming a successful manipulation (see Figure 1 for items detail).

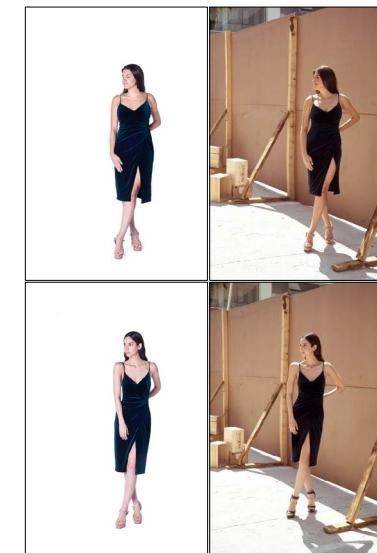


Figure 1: Stimuli: Solid vs urban background and small vs large body size, provided by the authors  
Source: Own processing

Two photographs of models with distinct body sizes served to capture the perception of normal body size by participants. One of the photographs showed a skinny model (small body, size 00), while another photograph showed a large size model (large body, size 6). Based on the literature, we proposed a reliable ( $\alpha = .85$ ) Likert scale with four items to measure the perception of normal body size and verify its manipulation. Participants perceived the large size model as more common and felt more related to her relative to the small size model ( $M_{Large} = 4.11, SD_{Large} = 2.09; M_{Small} = 2.82, SD_{Small} = 1.68; t(211) = 4.50, p < .001$ ), confirming a successful manipulation.

### Testing Effects of Visual Elements of Photography

The study included an experimental design between subjects of 2 (model's size: small vs large) x 2 (background: urban vs solid). All participants were randomly distributed on each of the four experimental conditions: (1) photograph with a small size model on a solid background, (2) photograph of a large size model on a solid background, (3) photograph of a small size model on an urban background, and (4) photograph of a large size model on an urban background. This inquiry employed a sample of American residents using the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform and followed a similar procedure to the one used in recent empirical studies on digital marketing<sup>47</sup> and electronic markets.<sup>48</sup> The final sample included 333 participating women ( $M_{age} = 35, SD = 11$ ) interested in the luxury fashion world because they are the target area of luxury fashion advertisers.

### Procedure

After accessing the platform and answering a series of questions about their demographic information, each participant was exposed to one of the four photographs for a minimum time of 5 seconds ( $M = 9.63s, SD = 6.3s$ ). Once the time concluded, the answer button was disabled, guiding the participants to continue with the survey and evaluating the authenticity of the photographs, as well as expressing the intention to buy the displayed clothes. At the end, a screen appeared thanking the participant and explaining how to redeem the amount for their participation. Before the analysis, the distribution of participants under the experiment's conditions as well as demographic variables of participants such as their education level, age, income level, ethnic origin, etc. were equivalent ( $p > .1$ ) for each group, validating the random assignment method.

To measure the authenticity perceived from the ad, an adaptation of the credibility scale of the brand employed by Erdem, Tulin, and Swait,<sup>49</sup> and Homer and Miles was used.<sup>50</sup> On a Likert measure of 9 points, participants answered the items "The photograph is authentic" and "I trust the photograph" ( $\alpha = .90$ ). In addition, the intention to buy was evaluated based on three items taken from Wang, Jian, Minor and Jie.<sup>51</sup> The items were the following: "After looking at the photographs in the survey, I intend to buy this dress immediately"; "After looking at the photographs in the survey, there is a chance that I will buy this dress immediately"; and "After looking at the photographs in the survey, I qualify the possibility of buying this dress immediately" ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

47 See: VAZQUEZ, E. E.: Effects of Enduring Involvement and Perceived Content Vividness on Digital Engagement. In *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 2019, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 1-16.

48 See: VAZQUEZ, E. E.: Effect of an e-Retailer's Product Category and Social Media Platform Selection on Perceived Quality of e-Retail Products. In *Electronic Markets*, 2021, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 139-157.

49 See, for example: ERDEM, T., SWAIT, J.: Brand Credibility, Brand Consideration and Choice. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2004, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 198.

50 See also: HOMER, P. M.: Relationships among Ad-Induced Affect, Beliefs, and Attitudes: Another Look. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2006, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 51.

51 Compare to: WANG, Y. J., MINOR, M. S., WEI, J.: Aesthetics and the Online Shopping Environment: Understanding Consumer Responses. In *Journal of Retailing*, 2011, Vol. 87, No. 1, p. 58.

## 4 Results

To test the formulated hypotheses, *t*-tests were used; such tests allow to observe certain differences between the mean of perceived authenticity produced by either urban or solid backgrounds. The result is not significant ( $t = 1.93, p = .05$ ), but shows a trend in the direction of **H1** regarding the existence of a background effect of the photograph on the perception of authenticity. On the other hand, the effect of the large size model on the perception of authenticity ( $t = 1.72, p = .08$ ) has a positive tendency. Although this result is not significant, it shows a trend in the direction suggested by **H2** about the effect of the model's large body size. Table 1 shows the results of the *t*-tests.

Table 1: Comparisons of treatment groups based on sampled data by authors

Groups	Background		df	p-value
	Solid	Urban		
Mean	5.75	6.12	331	.05
SD	1.84	1.71		

Groups	Size		df	p-value
	Small	Large		
Mean	5.76	6.10	326.8	.08
SD	1.74	1.83		

Groups	Solid background and small size	Urban background and large size	df	p-value
Mean	5.52	6.23	161.4	< .01
SD	1.74	1.70		

Source: Own processing

To test **H3**, only 2 treatment groups were compared on extreme cases; the group that had a solid background and a small size model against the group that had an urban background and a large size model. The result showed a positive and significant effect on the perception of authenticity when the large size model was shown with an urban background versus a small size model with a solid background ( $t = 2.64, p < .01$ ). Therefore, this analysis supports **H3**.

To test **H4**, three regression analyses were made, which supported that the perception of authenticity has a significant and positive effect on the consumers intention to buy the clothes ( $\beta \approx .40, p < .01$ ). Each analysis considered a control variable according to the following order: 1) background 2) model's size, and 3) joint effect based on the combination of the two previous items (background group x model's size group) following the interaction effect suggested in the literature. To validate these analyses, there was a revision of homogeneity of the dependent variable among the treatment groups ( $p > .1$ ) and that the variance inflation factor was lower than 2.19 in each model. The normal distribution of residuals through skewness coefficients (Skewness  $\approx .29$ ) and kurtosis (Kurtosis  $\approx -.69$ ) that had values close to 0 on the three regression analyses, indicating acceptable normality deviations. Therefore, these analyses support **H4**.

Table 2: Regression analysis based on sampled data by authors

Model	ANALYSED VARIABLES	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
1	Perceived authenticity ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ )	.09	15.79	< .01
	Photograph's background ( $\beta = .01, p = .92$ )			
2	Perceived authenticity ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ )	.08	15.78	< .01
	Model's size ( $\beta = -.01, p = .97$ )			
3	Perceived authenticity ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ )	.08	15.92	< .01
	Combined effect ( $\beta = -.27, p = .61$ )			

Dependent variable: Intention to buy

Independent variable: Perceived authenticity

Control variables: 1) Background 2) Model's size, and 3) Combined effect

\*Standardised coefficients, VIFs  $\approx 1.01$ , Skewness  $\approx .29$ , and Kurtosis  $\approx .69$  for all regression models

Source: Own processing

To test **H5**, we built three simple mediation models with an independent variable (i.e., background, model's size, or combined effect), a mediation variable (i.e., perceived authenticity), and a dependent variable (i.e., intention to buy). On the first mediation model, the independent variable is the background, on the second it is the model's size, and on the third the two independent variables were combined (background group x model's size group) to capture the combined effect of the independent variables. Following Chu, Lien and Cao,<sup>52</sup> as well as Vazquez, Davila and Garcia,<sup>53</sup> we used the Sobel test to assess the mediating role of perceived authenticity for each mediation model. Since the result of the third model, where the combined effect mediation is analysed through the perceived authenticity on the intention to buy, is positive and significant ( $z = 2.183, p < .05$ ), **H5** was supported.

Table 3: Mediation analysis based on sampled data by authors

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Photograph's background	Model's size	Combined effect
z value	1.821	1.648	2.183
p value	.068	.099	.029

Source: Own processing

## 5 Discussion

### Theoretical Contributions

The perception of authenticity has become the norm for digital consumers and the norm for influencers posing as models that promote luxury and fashion apparel.<sup>54</sup> Measuring the effect of new luxury fashion photography trends is important to update advertising theory and best practices as these trends have quickly changed due to the use of social media. Particularly with micro-influencers who have followers with similar

52 See, for example: CHU, S. C., LIEN, C. H., CAO, Y.: Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on WeChat: Examining the Influence of Sense of Belonging, Need for Self-Enhancement, and Consumer Engagement on Chinese Travellers' eWOM. In *International Journal of Advertising*, 2019, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 26-49.

53 See: VAZQUEZ, E. E., DAVILA, D., GARCIA, J. C.: Influence of Consumer Product Categorization on Digital Sales: The Mediating Effect of Conversion Rate. In *European Journal of Applied Business Management*, 2020, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 1-14.

54 WINSTON, A.: Luxury Brands Can No Longer Ignore Sustainability. In *Harvard Business Review*, 2016, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 1-3.

interests.<sup>55</sup> This study contributes to measure the perception of authenticity with a new model that shows the interplay between visual elements: background and model's body size, which has not been used before. We based this conceptualisation on previous studies about atmospheric cues to outline the relevance of photographic background as well as in marketing communication studies involving the body's size image.

The results show that our first two hypotheses were not statistically supported. The urban background showed a tendency to outperform the solid background in perceived authenticity. On the other hand, displaying a large size model also showed a positive trend relative to that of the small size model in perceived authenticity. The latter may also suggest that traditional beauty standards are changing, as women feel identified to women with real bodies and the current trends seem to favour models with large body sizes. In any case, the most important finding is that the statistical support of the multiplicative effect of both visual elements of photography: background and body size on perceived authenticity. In doing so, this research empirically proves these visual elements indirectly affect purchase intentions through the full mediation of perceived authenticity.

### Managerial Implications

Fashion luxury advertisers may use the results of this study to improve the efficiency of their visual advertising material. Consistent with previous literature,<sup>56</sup> it is recommended to use a social media influencer because they are perceived as credible. Instead of choosing a solid background when using influencers for photographs, advertisers can move to urban backgrounds from city streets or iconic places that represent a certain lifestyle. Following traditional beauty standards when taking photographs with super skinny models may not be as effective as previously.<sup>57</sup> These results suggest the use of influencers whose bodies are large/medium-sized so that there is full identification between the consumer and the brand. Thus, the present study suggests frequent updates of photography trends is crucial to achieve the best performance from visual advertising.

### Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. It did not check face type, which was assumed to have a low impact on the variables under study since the stimuli used emphasises the bodies of models. A future study may use stimuli focusing on distinct facial features. The experiment's sample was greatly biased towards highly digitally literate individuals; therefore, the results of this study should be used with caution when extrapolating them to consumers with low digital literacy. As the study was conducted to examine only female consumers and models, the findings are constrained. New research may focus on examining male consumers and models.

Future studies may test other mediation variables that compete with the ads' authenticity on a new model to expand the implications of this study. Beyond the apparel product category, it is worthwhile analysing whether diverse product categories produce moderation effects on the relationship between urban backgrounds or large body sizes of models on perceived authenticity and intention to buy.<sup>58</sup> The study also sets a minimum exposure time to stimulus. In practice, it is not possible to set a minimum exposure time to stimulus; consumers in social media can spend less than the average time in this study viewing the influencers' photography. As the sample of this study was obtained in the United States, future research may consider

55 TAYLOR, C. R.: The Urgent Need for More Research on Influencer Marketing. In *International Journal of Advertising*, 2020, Vol. 39, No. 7, p. 889-891.

56 FENG, Y., CHEN, H., KONG, Q.: An Expert with Whom I Can Identify: The Role of Narratives in Influencer Marketing. In *International Journal of Advertising*, 2020, Vol. 40, No. 7, p. 972-993.

57 See, for example: COWLES, C.: *New Study Shows That Thin Models Don't Make Most Women Want to Shop: The Cut*. Released on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012. [online]. [2021-03-20] Available at: <https://www.thecut.com/2012/05/thin-models-dont-make-most-women-want-to-shop.html>.

58 VAZQUEZ, E. E.: Effect of e-Retail Product Category on Performance. In GRANATA, G., TARTAGLIONE, A. M., TSIKAKIS, T. (eds.): *Predicting Trends and Building Strategies for Consumer Engagement in Retail Environments*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019, p. 152-168.

examining whether the findings of this research are similar in different cultures and countries. Finally, as the stimuli in the present research only considers white Caucasian models, future studies may validate the results using models from other racial origins as well as models from ethnic minorities with distinct visual features.

## 6 Conclusion

The present research provides an overview of the evolving nature of digital photography used for marketing apparel in the fashion and luxury segments. Particularly, it shows the complexity of analysing new photography styles in digital environments revolving around recent trends of urban backgrounds and large body size models, also known as street backgrounds and plus size models. In doing so, this inquiry offers a guideline to analyse the visual elements of photography. First, it provides a systematic approach to interpret the state of the art in research of photography trends. In particular, it concentrates on examining photography backgrounds and human models.

Second, the study explores the implications of photographic evolution in the fashion context. In this, the literature review shows that authenticity is a relevant construct to analyse advertising photography as the trends of visual elements evolve. Third, the study develops research hypotheses connecting two photography trends identified in the literature review (urban backgrounds and models with large body sizes) with the authenticity construct and the intention to buy. This provided the basis to prepare the experimental setting. Although not all research hypotheses were empirically confirmed, the results of the study show a consistent trend in the direction of the rationales preceding the development of hypotheses. This entails, however, further research regarding the size of the direct effect resulting from each of the visual elements analysed in the empirical setting.

The theoretical contributions remark how the findings of this study provide extensive understanding of visual communication and its evolution that emerges from influencer marketing. Herein, the study outlines how visual communication permeates to marketing communication theory by updating the theoretical relevance of atmospheric cues and beauty standards in apparel and fashion retailing as the managerial implications describe the use of the findings to improve influencer marketing communications and visual advertising material. Overall, the study sheds light on how to identify and analyse new photographic trends effects on intentions to purchase apparel by means of authenticity perception.

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